THE RELATION OF CATHOLICISM TO OTHER RELIGIONS

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concentric circles

In his first encyclical, *Paths of the Church* (*Ecclesiam suam*, 6 Aug. 1964), Paul VI used the image of concentric circles to describe the relation of Catholicism to other religions: “We see the concrete situation [of religions in the world] very clearly, and might sum it up in general terms by describing it in a series of concentric circles” (§ 96). He then discusses four circles (moving inward): humanity (§§ 97-98), non-Christian religions (§ 107), non-Cath­olic Christians (§ 109), and Catholics (§ 113).

Paul’s image of concentric circles influenced Vatican II, as can be seen in its publication three-and-a-half months later, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* (*Lumen gentium*, 21 Nov. 1964). That document mentions three circles (moving outward): “there belong to [the church] or are related to it in various ways, the Catholic faithful, all who believe in Christ, and indeed the whole of mankind” (§ 13). It then treats the three groups in the next three sections. Catholics are discussed first (§ 14). Non-Catholic Christians are treated second, and the *Constitution* subdivides this second circle into two groups, “Churches” and “ecclesial communities” (§ 15).[[1]](#footnote-1) Non-Christians are treated third, and the *Constitution* subdivides this circle into four groups: religious persons (in the order, Jews, Muslims, and other); non-religious persons seeking God; non-religious persons unaware of God; and non-religious persons opposed to God (§ 16).

Vatican-II employed the image of concentric circles also in the *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (*Nostra aetate*, 28 Oct. 1965). There it delineated five circles (moving inward): primitive religions; polytheistic religions (in the order, Hinduism, Buddhism, and other); Islam; Judaism; and Catholicism.

If we now combine all of the circles distinguished in these documents, we arrive at the picture on the following page. (Imagine the lines as curving on both sides into concentric circles.)

truth, goodness, holiness

After describing primitive and polytheistic religions, and before describing non-Christian monotheistic religions, the *Declaration on* . . . *Non-Chris­tian Religions* says (§ 2), “The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is *true* and *holy* in these religions” (emphasis added). This means that truth and holiness are not possessed exclusively by Catholicism. Nor, for that matter, are they the exclusive possessions of Christianity, or of monotheistic religions. Truth and holiness extend into polytheistic and primitive religions.

i. humanity

non-religious persons opposed to God

non-religious persons unaware of God

non-religious persons seeking God

ii. non-Christian religions

a. primitive religions

b. polytheistic religions

other polytheistic religions

Hinduism

Buddhism

c. other monotheistic

religions

Islam

Judaism

iii. non-Cath­olic

Christians

ecclesial

communities

churches

iv. Catholicism

But Vatican II goes further: truth and holiness extend into irreligious humanity. Concerning non-religious persons who seek God, the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* says (§ 16), “Those also can attain to salvation who . . . seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.” Concerning non-religious persons unaware of God, it says (§ 16), “Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever *good* and *truth* is found among them . . . is given by Him who enlightens all men so that they may finally have life” (emphasis added). Concerning non-religious persons opposed to God, however, the *Constitution* says only (§ 16), “often men, deceived by the Evil One, have become vain in their reasonings . . . [or] are exposed to final despair.” Yet these are not completely without hope, since they too are included in a summary statement about all three irreligious groups: “[To] procure the salvation of all of these, . . . the Church fosters the missions with care and attention.”

fullness

Finally, in the *Declaration on Religious Freedom* (*Dignitatis humanae*, 7 Dec. 1965, § 1), Vatican II states that the “one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church . . .”

Dictionaries define “subsist” as “to exist” or “to live.” By itself, the statement that the “one true religion subsists” in the Catholic Church could be an exclusivist claim: the one true religion exists there and nowhere else.

But that is not what is meant, since the same *Declaration* also says (§ 2): in Christ “men find the *fullness* of religious life” (emphasis added).

The *Declaration on* . . . *Non-Christian Religions* (§ 2), as we saw, affirms that “The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions.” Since the “true” and the “holy” extend into other religions, the “one true religion [that] subsists in the Catholic [Church]” must also extend into other religions. Therefore, “subsists” must mean something like “especially exists in,” “finds its fullness in,” “has its root in.”

solar system

To summarize: The true religion subsists in Catholicism.

But it exists in decreasing degrees in other religions, and even into most of humanity.

The true religion is therefore like a center with concentric circles spreading outward.

By combining the statement on subsistence with the order in which religions are treated, a spatial metaphor springs to mind. That submerged (implicit) metaphor, consciously intended by the Vatican II Fathers or not, is the solar system.

sun

Perhaps the solar-system metaphor was also at work when the Fathers referred to “that Truth which enlightens all men” (*Declaration* . . . *on Non-Christian Religions* § 2). They were alluding to John 1:9: Christ is “The true light, which enlightens everyone” (NRSVue trans.).

The center of the solar-system metaphor depicting the relation of Catholicism to other religions is, it turns out, not Catholicism after all. Even it must make way for the true center: Christ, the sun that enlightens us all.

1. The difference is explained in the *Decree on Ecumenism* (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 21 Nov. 1964) (§ 22): churches have the sacrament of orders and therefore the fullness of the Eucharist, whereas ecclesial communities “have not retained the proper reality of the eucharistic mystery in its fullness, especially because of the absence of the sacrament of Orders . . .” The distinction between “Churches” and “ecclesial communities” also appears in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 819. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)