

Reflecting on *Nostra aetate*, the Natural Law, and Conscience

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Abstract: Although the Vatican II declaration *Nostra aetate* (1965) fundamentally reshaped contemporary interreligious dialogue, it notably omits the concept of “conscience.” This paper addresses this gap in current theological literature by proposing a framework for interreligious engagement rooted in conscience, defined here as the subjective appropriation of the natural law. Utilizing a systematic theological analysis, the study argues that this framework allows the Catholic Church to affirm shared moral realities with other traditions—specifically the inherent value of human life, the teleological horizon of the human person, and the call to social solidarity—while fully maintaining its core Christological convictions and evangelizing mission. By viewing non-Christian religions through the lens of conscience and natural law, the Church can better recognize elements that are “true and holy” without dissolving doctrinal differences. Ultimately, this paper positions natural law not as a mechanism of salvation but as an anthropologically grounded platform for collaborative global ethics.

Keywords: *Nostra aetate* • Interreligious Dialogue • Conscience • Natural Law • Solidarity • Teleology • Vatican II

Introduction

Towards the end of the Second Vatican Council, *Nostra aetate*, or the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions was promulgated, which paved the way for contemporary interreligious dialogue. It states in its opening: “In her task of promoting unity and love among [people], indeed among nations, [the Church] considers above all in this declaration what [people] have in common and what

draws them to fellowship.”¹ Because of *Nostra aetate*, the relationships between the Catholic Church and non-Christian religions have significantly improved in the past sixty years. For example, the 1986 meeting of religious leaders at Assisi at the invitation of Pope John Paul II marked an unprecedented milestone in fostering camaraderie between religions. The same pontiff also prayed in the Umayyad mosque at Damascus in 2001, something his medieval predecessors would likely have found alarming.

However, more work still needs to be done. Consider the following points: nowhere in *Nostra aetate* is the word “conscience” found, and there is still room for more academic literature on the role of conscience in contemporary interreligious dialogue. I argue, therefore, that conscience vis-à-vis the natural law is a promising but not exclusive focal point around which the Catholic Church can engage more in interreligious dialogue in the spirit of *Nostra aetate*. To that end, an intertextual reading of the conciliar documents is helpful and justified partly by the workings of the Council. The Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity was tasked with three documents, namely: *Unitatis redintegratio*, *Nostra aetate*, and *Dignitatis humanae*. As will be seen later, a reading of the latter two together is warranted because interreligious dialogue is meaningless without recognizing religious liberty as a right. Furthermore, there are many ways to read the conciliar documents. One can read them chronologically, thematically, etc. The first way chosen here is to read them in terms of documentary hierarchy, with the four constitutions being the focal points for reading the other twelve documents. Hence, I

¹ *Nostra aetate*, “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” Vatican Archives, 28 October 1965, sec. 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

propose that complementary excerpts from two constitutions, *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, are essential hermeneutical lenses to understand the importance of conscience for *Nostra aetate* and its role in contemporary interreligious dialogue. These excerpts are *Lumen gentium* 16:

Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely 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. 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 or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel.²

And *Gaudium et spes* 16:

In the depths of his conscience, man [sic] detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths. In a wonderful manner

² *Lumen gentium*, “Dogmatic Constitution of the Church,” Vatican Archives, 21 November 1964, sec. 16, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor.³

Interpreting the two excerpts together, one can arguably infer that all human persons, regardless of religion, if any, and insofar as psychologically capable, are morally obligated to abide by the natural law according to their conscience to be disposed to receive the unmerited grace of salvation from God in manners proper to their life situations. While conscience is universal as a human capacity, its judgments are historically situated, vulnerable to distortion, and in need of ongoing formation; its universality therefore lies not in uniform moral conclusions but in the shared human orientation toward moral truth. Given the universal mandate of conscience within the human family, effective implementation of *Nostra aetate* over sixty years after promulgation could entail balancing between doctrinal issues and the question of conscience. In line with this, I lay out in this paper the following: (1) the economy of salvation, (2) how the natural law helps situate oneself in the economy of salvation, (3) how contemporary interreligious dialogue could find common ground in the natural law, (4) how the proper exercise of conscience is essential to live out the natural law, and (5) how the Catholic Church might dialogue and engage more with the consciences of those outside its formal membership.

The Economy of Salvation

Christianity teaches that salvation is a trinitarian grace, wherein Jesus Christ is the sole mediator of

³ *Gaudium et spes*, “Pastoral Constitution of the Church,” Vatican Archives, 7 December 1965, sec. 16, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

salvation for humanity, in the Holy Spirit, and to the Father. According to the Gospel of John, the Father sent his only beloved Son, the eternal logos or Word of God, to become flesh and dwell amongst us (John 1:14) “so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life (John 3:16).”⁴ Understanding the role of Jesus Christ has resulting implications for Christianity. Sacred Scripture proposes the sole mediatorship of Jesus Christ in 1 Timothy 2:5, which states: “For there is one God. There is also one mediator between God and the human race, Christ Jesus, himself human.” Jesus Christ, as the incarnate Word, is the foundation of Christianity. Therefore, Christianity maintains that it has a special privilege concerning divine revelation and so making it *sui generis* among the world religions.

If Christ is the sole mediator of salvation between humanity and the Father and the Church is the body of Christ, as per Ephesians 1:22-23, which states: “And he put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way,” does it necessarily follow that the central mediatorship of Christ operates within the Church? The question is pressing in light of the vast majority of people throughout history who were, are, and will not (be) part of the Church. Sacred Scripture holds the universal salvific offer of God in 1 Timothy 2:1-4: “First of all, then, I ask that supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgivings be offered for everyone, for kings and for all in authority, that we may lead a quiet and tranquil life in all devotion and dignity. This is good and pleasing to God our savior, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth.” It is counterintuitive, then, to suppose that God would situate an individual outside of the universal

⁴ All scriptural references are taken from the New American Bible Revised Edition.

offer of salvation. So, how can we understand the Church in the economy of salvation? The Church contains within herself the revealed means of grace for salvation, above all baptism (Mark 16:16; John 3:5). Effectively, the sacraments and sacred scripture are tributaries of the sole mediatorship of Jesus Christ. For this reason, the Church takes upon herself the responsibility to invite all into her care by means of evangelization and witnessing.

But what about practicing other religions? *Nostra aetate* holds:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.⁵

It is curious how we must interpret the phrase “reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.” One plausible way to interpret this phrase is through the succeeding biblical verse of Christ as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. To be clear, the declaration mentions John 14:6 to confirm the unique role of Jesus Christ in the economy of salvation, in contrast to any notion of the equality of religions. I do not intend to undermine the intention of the Council. Rather, I apply a reflective reading of the texts to unpack the conciliar documents in ways not necessarily contemplated by the Council at the time of promulgation but still consistent with Catholic

⁵ *Nostra aetate*, sec. 2.

teachings overall. As such, I claim all three identities complement each other. The Way is a Life of Truth, the Truth is a Way of Life, and Life is the Way of Truth. Christ embodies all three. Regarding the second, if Christ is confessed as Truth incarnate, then the reception of truth is not merely cognitive but existential, shaping concrete patterns of life and ethical conduct. From this perspective, those elements in non-Christian religions that guide adherents toward ethical integrity, self-transcendence, and concern for others may be understood as reflecting a participation, however partial and analogical, in a way of life ordered towards truth, which Christians believe finds its fullness in Christ. Accordingly, the text could be reread as:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that [Way of Life] which enlightens all men.⁶

How is the Truth a Way of Life? Another document of the Second Vatican Council may help in arriving at an answer. *Dignitatis humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Liberty, notes that:

It is in accordance with their dignity as persons - that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility - that all [people] *should be at once impelled by nature* and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth. They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and *to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth.*

⁶ *Nostra aetate*, sec. 2.

However, [people] cannot discharge these obligations in a manner *in keeping with their own nature* unless they enjoy immunity from external coercion as well as psychological freedom (*Italics added*).⁷

Understandably, the respectful attitudes toward other religions in *Nostra aetate* depend on the anthropological claim in *Dignitatis humanae* that the religious search for truth is a natural human act that is grounded in dignity. While religions do not have equal relationships to divine revelation, that same declaration still affirms that all people, by virtue of their human nature, are impelled towards religious truth that, for Christians, finds completion in the Truth. If my reading holds weight, this Truth can be a Way of Life. Thus, I lay out in the subsequent sections how the natural law in the Christian Tradition can help frame the Way to live out the Truth.

The Natural Law in the Christian Tradition

Natural law is a rich theory of insights discussed by philosophers since the ancient Greeks and theologians after them. Underlying it is the notion that we can draw moral responsibilities from a reasonable reflection on human nature. Nevertheless, there have been various interpretations of how the natural law manifests. According to Miroslav Vacura, three conceptual frameworks have influenced these interpretations.⁸ The first is the notion of the law of the strongest.⁹ Essentially, the

⁷ *Dignitatis humanae*, “Declaration on Religious Freedom,” Vatican Archives, 7 December 1965, sec. 2, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.

⁸ Miroslav Vacura, “Three Concepts of Natural Law,” *Philosophy and Society* 33, no. 3 (2022): 601–620.

⁹ Vacura, “Three Concepts of Natural Law,” 603.

normative comes from the will of those with the power to decide. Proponents of this notion include the likes of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose advocacy of the *Übermensch* is well-known. The second is the law of self-preservation.¹⁰ In this framework, natural law prioritizes self-preservation above all else. Thomas Hobbes painted a bleak picture of human nature as selfish and bordering on paranoia. John Locke is similar insofar as his social contract theory assumes the desire to optimize individual benefits with limited social resources. The third is the law of reason.¹¹ Arguably, it is the most influential. The ancient Greeks Anaximander and Heraclitus argued that morality is rooted in an inherent order in nature, while Aristotle proposed that the natural law is universal. The Stoics developed this view by articulating natural law as reasonable, immutable, and divine. Historically, the ancient Greek philosophical tradition would later influence the development of natural law in Christianity.

In the Christian tradition, natural law derives from the eternal law of God, the divine directive wisdom ordering each creature toward its ultimate end. Put differently, the natural law reflects the divine desires for the human person, whom God made with moral agency in the *imago Dei*. If true, the natural law requires careful discernment and understanding lest it propagates discriminatory attitudes and practices, as in the past. The scriptural basis for the natural law is Romans 2:14-15: “For when the Gentiles who do not have the law by nature observe the prescriptions of the law, they are a law for themselves even though they do not have the law. They show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even defend them.” Some Church fathers, like Origen of Alexandria

¹⁰ Vacura, “Three Concepts of Natural Law,” 605.

¹¹ Vacura, “Three Concepts of Natural Law,” 609.

and Augustine, remind that Christ sanctifies the natural order.

Thomas Aquinas, whose Aristotelian-inspired writings laid the foundations for the Catholic natural law theory, suggested that a law is a law because it is intelligible enough to be understood by the human mind.¹² In other words, a law must have a rational basis to be legitimate. As it is, the eternal law of God is beyond the complete comprehension of the human mind. However, the natural law translates the eternal law into moral precepts. The most fundamental precept of natural law is that good is to be done and evil avoided. Though theologians have expressed the natural law in the form of moral precepts, it is also accurate to view it as the rational capacity of the human mind to distinguish between good and evil. Natural law assumes that good and evil are objective realities. Yet Aquinas did not provide specific guidelines for moral action because he acknowledged that circumstances vary enough to require prudence from moral actors. Hence, prudence helps one to live out of the natural law.

In the Christian tradition, the four sources for reflection on human nature are scripture, tradition (patristic, theological, philosophical, and magisterial), reason informed by the natural and social sciences, and human experience, both personal and general. All four feed into each other and need the others to be effective as a source of reflection. Based on all four, one can develop a holistic understanding of human nature according to the Christian faith. But it is acknowledged in the context of this paper that a majority of people do not subscribe to the Christian faith. In this paper, the natural law is not treated primarily as a comprehensive moral system, but

¹² Helen Costigane, "Natural Law in the Roman Catholic Tradition," in *Christianity and the Natural Law*, ed. Norman Doe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017): 17-35.

as an anthropological grammar accessible to human reason that can function as a point of ethical and dialogical engagement across religious traditions. After all, human nature is common to all of humankind. Moreover, reason and human experience are accessible even to non-Christians, which could be a common ground for contemporary interreligious dialogue.

Religious traditions, though, inevitably shape the manner in which human nature is understood. As a result, natural law in the Christian tradition does not have exact parallels in other religious traditions, though this does not exclude overlapping or analogous concepts. In other religious traditions, moral normativity is articulated through distinct conceptual frameworks rather than through a single theory of natural law. Jewish and Islamic traditions, for example, locate ethical obligation primarily in divine law, expressed through *halakhah* and *shari'a*, respectively. Hindu and Buddhist traditions likewise articulate moral order through concepts such as dharma and liberation from suffering, respectively, neither of which function as direct equivalents to Christian natural law. For this reason, there are compelling grounds for contemporary interreligious dialogue to begin at the anthropological level, that is, from shared accounts of human nature, as a pathway toward ethical reflection. Such an anthropological point of departure is not neutral, exhaustive, or foundational, but rather is a provisional and critically revisable locus of dialogue, capable of accommodating, to varying extents, diverse metaphysical accounts of human nature and differing modes of relation between anthropology and ethics. At every point in such dialogue, real doctrinal differences should neither be denied nor obscured. I consider how to cultivate contemporary interreligious dialogue in this regard.

Cultivating Ground for Contemporary Inter-religious Dialogue

The doctrinal diversity among religious traditions is too much to form a single, robust theological worldview that would be equally acceptable to all. Nevertheless, through a flexible yet coherent moral framework rooted in natural law, there remains the possibility of a collaborative interreligious engagement centered on two shared commitments. First, the major religious traditions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism—affirm a strong moral valuation of human life, expressed through varying metaphysical and ethical foundations. While the grounding of this valuation differs across traditions, each recognizes the human being as possessing a worth that demands ethical respect and moral responsibility. Second, all five traditions emphasize the necessity of personal transformation, though the nature and ultimate aim of such transformation vary. Despite these differences, each tradition understands human existence as oriented beyond mere material or worldly fulfillment, toward a soteriological or teleological horizon articulated within its own doctrinal framework. Accordingly, adherents are guided toward this end through ethical conduct shaped by their respective metaphysical commitments and cultivated through disciplined practice. One can return to *Nostra aetate* with these points in mind:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those *ways of conduct and of life*, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth,

nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men (*Italics supplied*).¹³

One concern that may arise is whether “ways of conduct and of life” extend to religious practices particular to a given religion, such as dietary laws or prescribed forms of prayer. Put differently in the context of this paper, do such practices pertain to the natural law insofar as they are accessible to human reason? While the specific requirements of any religion are not morally obligatory for those who do not adhere to it, religious practices can nonetheless possess genuine virtue-forming significance when undertaken with the proper disposition. In this respect, they often serve to cultivate habits of discipline, self-regulation, and balance, features that correspond to fundamental aspects of human nature and are widely regarded as necessary for a dignified and purposive human life. Although the particular forms these practices take vary across traditions, their underlying moral orientation frequently converges. This convergence suggests that interreligious dialogue can put more spotlight on the shared ethical spirit these practices aim to foster. More broadly, religious practices, when properly conducted, aligns with an understanding of the natural law as dignified, purposive, and reflective of Truth.

Mindful of the natural law as a point of dialogue, the International Theological Commission (ITC), an advisory body to the magisterium, published *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law* in 2009.¹⁴ The ITC states: “The natural law thus responds to the need to provide a basis in reason for the rights of

¹³ *Nostra aetate*, sec. 2.

¹⁴ International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2012).

man [sic] and makes possible an intercultural and interreligious dialogue capable of fostering universal peace and of avoiding the ‘clash of civilizations’.”¹⁵ It also acknowledges that divergence in religious teachings makes such dialogue difficult, though not altogether impossible. I advance the notion that the inherent value of human life and teleological horizon of the human person, to the extent in which they are aspects of human nature that are open to rational probing, constitute promising starting points for interreligious engagement, thereby supporting the possibility of a universal ethic. While religions vary in their doctrinal claims, reflection on human nature offers broader grounds for shared inquiry. Human nature is metaphysically grounded, yet it remains accessible to reason.

The ITC adds that:

To give the notion of the natural law all its meaning and strength as the foundation of a universal ethic, a perspective of wisdom needs to be promoted, belonging properly to the metaphysical order, and capable of simultaneously including God, the cosmos and the human person, in order to reconcile them in the analogical unity of being, thanks to the idea of creation as participation.¹⁶

Unfortunately, the gradual deconstruction of religion in the public sphere for centuries, especially in the West, has challenged the idea that the human person has an inherent value with a teleological horizon. Hence, the role of religions today has taken on a renewed task of cultivating a sense of inherent value and teleological horizon in the minds and hearts of people. Regarding interreligious dialogue, this suggests that religions

¹⁵ International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law*, sec. 35.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, sec. 76.

should first discern together what human nature is for each of them. Afterward, they could discuss the conditions necessary for human nature to flourish. For example, Alexander González García proposes that human rights, as expressed in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR), are articulations of the natural law that enable an individual to flourish.¹⁷ Contemporary interreligious dialogue could be where religions promote the cause of human rights, especially the freedom of conscience of Article 18 in the UDHR.¹⁸ Given the natural law could be a basis for contemporary interreligious dialogue, how would an individual act according to the natural law? Through conscience. Referring to *Gaudium et spes* 16, “the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his [or her] heart,” I describe next how conscience helps one live out the natural law.

A Word on Conscience

Everyone has a conscience. On the one hand, conscience is an aspect of consciousness that recognizes the good and evil in a moral situation. On the other hand, as Elizabeth Sweeny Block remarks: “Conscience is not a thing that we possess, but a way of life.”¹⁹ Whatever the case, conscience does not generate moral truth

¹⁷ Alexander González García, “Natural Law and Human Rights: Catholic Proposal towards a Common Base of Interreligious Dialogue,” *Advocatus* 2, no. 29 (2017): 147–57, <https://doi.org/10.18041/0124-0102/advocatus.29.1710>.

¹⁸ “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, art. 18 (1948).

¹⁹ Elizabeth Sweeny Block, “Conscience,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Christian Ethics*, ed. Tobias Winright (London: T&T Clark, 2021): 71-82.

autonomously but appropriates, discerns, and applies moral norms, understood in the Christian tradition as grounded in the natural law, within the concrete circumstances of human life. To this end, individuals are morally obliged to form and inform their consciences as best as they can lest they fall into error. An erroneous conscience can stem from either vincible ignorance or invincible ignorance. The former refers to the negligence of someone to know enough of a situation to act morally, and the latter refers to the honest and unintended insufficiency of knowledge necessary to act morally. Despite the possibility of error, conscience is primary for an individual, meaning it is obligatory and inviolable. In the Catholic context, especially since the Second Vatican Council, conscience has taken on a more personalist dimension, by which theologians better appreciate it as the aspect of the human person that seeks, recognizes, discerns, and acts towards the truth. As such, the experience of conscience is a process that requires regular and responsible formation.

The precise relationship between conscience and the natural law is debatable. For example, there is contention about the natural law regarding the definition of human nature and the reasonable capacity of the human mind to derive moral obligations from human nature. However, there is general agreement among religions and outside them that human life per se has value and that moral choices determine whether or not to optimize that value through flourishing. In line with that, the proper exercise of conscience enables an individual to flourish. Nevertheless, religious traditions affect how one understands conscience. In the subsequent section, I will discuss how the Church could engage in contemporary interreligious dialogue in view of the points made so far.

Suggestions for Contemporary Interreligious Dialogue

There are three general ways to understand the relationship among religions: exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist.²⁰ In simple terms, the first way, exclusivist, pertains to the belief that there is only one true religion and all others are inherently erroneous; the second way, inclusivist, refers to the belief that one religion contains the fullness of revelation while others contain elements of it; the third way, pluralist, relates to the belief that all religions are equally legitimate and no one holds precedence over the others. The Church is not pluralist because of 1 Timothy 2:5, noted earlier. While it has been exclusivist for many years, the promulgation of *Nostra aetate* clarified that the Church, moving forward, is really inclusivist, which means that it maintains a privilege among religions but considers the true and holy in non-Christian religions. This paper suggests that what is true and holy in them may be those things that are rooted in the natural law, particularly the inherent value of human life and teleological horizon of the human person, which are enabled by the proper exercise of conscience in ethical conduct.

Based on this suggestion, how could the Church engage in contemporary interreligious dialogue in view of the points made so far? Firstly, mutual respect should

²⁰ Dexter A. Austria, "Christian Theologies of Salvation," *Philippiniana Sacra* 68, no. 143 (January-April 2013): 3-20. Eduardo Echeverria proposes a fourth way called accessibilism, which "recognizes the individual *possibility* that an adherent of other religions may access salvation." See: Eduardo Echeverria, "The Salvation of Non-Christians? Reflections on Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes* 22, *Lumen gentium* 16, Gerald O'Collins, S.J. and St. John Paul II: 'For by His Incarnation the Son of God Has United Himself in Some Fashion with Every Man.' *Gaudium et Spes* §22.8." *Angelicum* 94, no. 1 (2017): 93-142. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26392619>.

continue to imbue the relationships between different religions. Despite the doctrinal variance, Thomas Aquinas believes religions express the human inclination to the divine.²¹ If so, there is something natural about them. Afterward, the Church should seek to understand the bases of the value of human life and the teleological horizon of the human person in other religions and attempt to join them with the Christian understanding of inherent value and teleological horizon insofar as doctrinally permissible. Concurrently, since aspects of the moral theologies of non-Christian religions are not always as exhaustive as those of Christianity, the Church could dialogue on the relationship between ethical conduct and human nature to cultivate formative ideas in the consciences of those outside its formal membership. This task would be challenging without understanding conscience in non-Christian religions. Imposing a Christian understanding of conscience on others or operating on that without adequate contextualization could lead to a paternalistic monologue rather than an authentic interreligious dialogue. With this in mind, it would be helpful if the Church refers to how non-Christian religions view human freedom as enabling someone to act morally. From there, the Church could dialogue on their presuppositions of human freedom and see where it aligns with the natural law of Christianity.

This paper proposes that for natural law to be an effective means of contemporary interreligious dialogue, there needs to be an expanded understanding of it. Human nature is not an isolated node in reality, nor did God create each individual to be alone, both on earth and in salvation. I propose that we must hermeneutically expand our understanding of the natural law to include it being the law of solidarity, the law of kenosis, and the

²¹ Thomas White, "The Universal Mediation of Christ and Non-Christian Religions," *Nova et Vetera* 14, no. 1 (2016): 177-198.

law of love. The world today is mired in injustices and suffering. Religions are responsible for nourishing meaning in individuals and prompting them to work together towards a better world, despite differences in their doctrine and creed. Conscience, in this sense, should not just be “the most secret core and sanctuary of [an individual].”²² It should also push the self towards social justice in the spirit of solidarity, kenosis, and love. For natural law to be an effective means for contemporary interreligious dialogue, it should highlight the universal social dimension of human nature that transcends socio-cultural and religious differences. Turning to sacred scripture, when Jesus is asked by a scholar of the law “who is my neighbor” in Luke 10:29, it makes sense that Jesus replies with the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-35). The parable is a symbolic template for contemporary interreligious dialogue because it teaches us that the act of helping a fellow human being goes beyond religious affiliation, and that doing so is part of our human nature. This proposal does not replace the classical structure of natural law but instead offers a social-ethical hermeneutic for its contemporary application in pluralistic contexts. It seeks to articulate how the perennial insights of natural law may be received, interpreted, and lived out in current social conditions of religious diversity but without abandoning their metaphysical grounding.

Final Thoughts

The framework proposed here does not seek to dissolve doctrinal differences or diminish the evangelizing mission of the Church, but to articulate an anthropologically grounded mode of engagement through

²² *Gaudium et spes*, sec. 16.

which interreligious dialogue may proceed without compromising Christological convictions. The Church can appreciate more what is true and holy in non-Christian religions through the lens of conscience and the natural law and better engage in contemporary interreligious dialogue by emphasizing the role of religions in promoting the inherent value of human life and teleological horizon of the human person. There also needs to be a parallel promotion of the social dimension of human nature, which prompts the self to work with others of different doctrines and creeds to develop a better world. Additionally, this paper affirms the roles of divine revelation and the grace of God in salvation. Christian theology holds that grace perfects human nature. The natural law does not save; the grace of God does.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

About the Author

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