



Continuity and Reform in Vatican II's Teaching on Islam

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Abstract

How credible is the Catholic Church's teaching on Islam in the light of some modern appreciations of Islam? Does the teaching about Islam at the Council, welcomed by so many, represent a discontinuity of magisterial doctrinal teaching? This paper argues that Pope Benedict's hermeneutic for the Council can be tested using this question. It is argued that the discontinuity at Vatican II lies at the level of historically contingent circumstances, with continuity at a doctrinal level. Hence, the Church retains credibility in looking at a new issue and developing a "new" response, discerning the signs of the times, without contradicting previously held doctrinal teachings.

Keywords

Lumen Gentium, Nostra Aetate, Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, Pope Benedict XVI, Council hermeneutics, Islam, doctrinal development

Introduction

One of the constant challenges related to the issue of credibility in Church teachings is whether there is a continuity of teaching when there is a perception that there has been a serious change. This particular problem is especially germane to the teachings of Vatican II on other religions, and especially Islam. Archbishop Lefebvre was not alone in questioning whether the Council had introduced novel teachings and also contradicted previous magisterial statements about Islam. Hence I will look at the question of credibility in the light of the debate regarding continuity, discontinuity and reform within Vatican II. The need for continuity should not be viewed as an innate conservatism, but rather as a concern to preserve true teachings and transmit them in new situations.

With a change of culture questions of credibility arise as meanings are always culturally mediated. Vatican II was operating within what Bernard Lonergan called a paradigm shift in culture.¹ This shift related not only to methods in theology but also to a radical religiously pluralist culture in the modern period. No longer did Catholic civil powers have any significant authority over Muslim populations. In fact, quite the contrary state existed in the 1960s with Catholics living as minorities in Muslim majority countries. Further, after a long tradition where Islam was understood culturally as a Christian heresy, in the modern period many Catholic scholars began to treat Islam as a “different” religion and promoted the study of Islam in a rigorous scholarly fashion. It was evident that many Muslims never knew the truths of Catholicism, let alone rejected them or consciously misinterpreted them by following Islam.² And if they did know the teachings of Catholicism but not in their heart they may reject them in “good faith”, that is, not with a clear sense of sinfully rejecting what they know to be the truth. In major European cities Catholics would meet and even marry Muslims and many would enjoy good friendships with wonderful, challenging, and religiously impressive people. While 9/11 changed the landscape in many ways, the 60s enjoyed a different climate in Europe. All these factors required a serious rethink about the Church’s attitude towards Islam. Historically, with exceptions, earlier relations had been contextualised by military tensions, land disputes, and a theology of denigration regarding Muhammad.

I want to raise the question here whether *Lumen Gentium* 16 and *Nostra Aetate* 3, in which are the only two references to Islam in Vatican II, constitute a credible shift in Catholic teaching given the shift in circumstances and I want to also ask whether that shift represents a continuity or discontinuity from the traditions of the Church, or indeed both.³

¹ Bernard Lonergan, “Theology in its New Context”, *A Second Collection*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), pp. 55–67.

² See Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993 [1960]) and Hugh Goddard, *A History of Christian-Muslim Relations*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) give very good historical background to the shifts I am outlining. One cannot minimise the negative view of Islam or its socio-political consequences. Equally, it is difficult to stand in judgment over the past from a radically different viewpoint.

³ See Risto Jukko, *Trinity in Unity in Christian-Muslim Relations: The Work of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue*, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007) who takes the story up on this issue after the Council, as does the extensive review of literature after the Council presented by Christian Troll, “Changing Catholic Views of Islam”, in Jacques Waardenburg (ed), *Islam and Christianity: Mutual Perceptions since the Mid-20th Century*, (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), pp. 19–77.

This latter question can be framed in the light of the current debate related to the interpretation of Vatican II.⁴ The terminological state of the debate is both fraught and sometimes ambiguous. For example, Pope Benedict XVI has spoken about two schools of interpretation: one emphasising “continuity and reform” and the other emphasising “discontinuity and rupture”.⁵ Some commentators on this text have located ‘discontinuity’ as a critique of the Lefebvre traditionalists, while others have seen in this allocution a critique of Alberigo and the Bologna school, which has become associated with discontinuity.⁶ However, Benedict actually includes in the concept “continuity” a level of discontinuity in terms of contexts changing in radical ways, precisely as modernity constitutes a radical change of historical circumstance.⁷ He writes, with nuance: “It is precisely in this combination of continuity and discontinuity at different levels that the very nature of true reform consists. In this process of innovation in continuity we must learn to understand more practically than before that the Church’s decisions on contingent matters – for example, certain practical forms of liberalism or a free interpretation of the Bible – should necessarily be contingent themselves, precisely because they refer to a specific reality that is changeable in itself. It was necessary to learn to recognize that in these decisions it is only the principles that express the permanent aspect, since they remain as an undercurrent, motivating decisions from within” (xiii). The magisterium’s teaching can change in different circumstances, without making the previous teaching wrong, as long as one can show that the principles of continuity apply even to a teaching that at first sight seems at variance with an older teaching. Benedict is acutely aware that this applied to other religions, though he gives Judaism as the example, but Islam could count equally well (xiii).

So much for continuity and discontinuity. The word “reform” is equally fraught. On the one hand there is good evidence that Congar’s

⁴ Literature regarding these different interpretations is well documented in the rather one-sided survey: Massimo Faggioli, *Vatican II. The Battle for Meaning*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2012).

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, “A Proper Hermeneutic for the Second Vatican Council”, (from AAS, 6 January 2006, 40–53, address given to the Roman Curia on December 22, 2005) in Matthew L. Lamb & Matthew Levering (eds), *Vatican II. Renewal within Tradition*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. ix–xv.

⁶ For the first reading see Gilles Routhier, “The Hermeneutic of Reform as a Task for Theology”, *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 77, 3, 2012, pp. 219–43; and for the second see Lamb and Levering, *Vatican II*, pp. 3–22.

⁷ Nicholas Lash mistakenly criticises Benedict’s speech as failing to deal with the historical and social context and working with “sweeping generalisations” and “papal polemic”, and attributes to Benedict a simplistic *either* continuity *or* discontinuity! *Theology for Pilgrims*, Darton, pp. 254–260, 256. Lash’s position is not unlike Benedict’s as I understand Benedict. See Nicholas Lash, “Revolution and change”, in *Change in Focus: A study of doctrinal change and continuity*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1973), pp. 168–82.

use of the term may have influenced John XXIII, and subsequently Paul VI, and may thus be in the background in Benedict's usage. Congar did not assume any change in the deposit of faith or authoritative doctrinal teachings through the necessary process of reform.⁸ On the other hand, "reform" is seen by some as the reform of doctrine that is irreformable. These voices are heard from both the radical left and right (if one permits such terms simply to make a point). Certainly among some who have been called "traditionalists", Vatican II was seen as heretical in its teachings on Islam.⁹

I summarise briefly what I take to be an acceptable hermeneutical approach to the Council texts. I will assume that there can be no change of dogma or a radical change in authoritatively taught doctrinal matters. The changes that normally take place are related to (a) using a doctrinal principle or teaching that may or may not have a venerable tradition and applying it in different contexts (e.g. once capital punishment was justifiable and now it is very difficult to justify)¹⁰ or (b) bringing to bear another second doctrinal principle that has not been related to the problem and thus affecting the application of the first principle. (e.g. "error has no rights" now being balanced, not rejected, in *Dignitatis Humanae* with the social doctrine of the civic freedom to follow one's religion, within limits).¹¹ If the teaching principle has no precedent then technically the question of discontinuity or continuity is inappropriate. The application of the teaching in different contexts is what might be termed pastoral, while not forgetting that the different contexts themselves will generate shifts in the understanding and grasp of the principle as it existed explicitly. It is thus inevitable that change will sometimes appear as discontinuous precisely so that a continuity of doctrinal teaching can be facilitated.¹²

⁸ See Congar's comment about Roncalli's comments on this book prior to the Council: Yves Congar OP, *True and False Reform in the Church*, translated with an introduction by Paul Philibert OP, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2011) (French edition: 1968 second revised edition), p. 2; and his own very cautious words about reform, continuity and discontinuity pp. 199–307. Paul VI's reading of *Vrai et Fausse Réforme dans l'Église*, is noted by Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI: The first modern Pope*, (HarperCollins, London, 1993), p. 232. Ratzinger was, of course, well acquainted with this as both were *periti* at the Council.

⁹ See: <http://www.catholicapologetics.info/modernproblems/vatican2/Privatican.htm>; and numerous blogs and websites.

¹⁰ See Avery Cardinal Dulles, "The Death Penalty: A Right to life issue?", in Dulles, *Church and Society. The Laurence J. McGinley Lectures*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), pp. 332–48.

¹¹ See Avery Cardinal Dulles, "Dignitatis Humanae and the Development of Catholic Doctrine", *Catholicism and Religious Freedom: Contemporary Reflections on Vatican II's Declaration on Religious Liberty*, Kenneth L. Grasso and Robert P. Hunt (eds), (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), pp. 43–67.

¹² This point is well made in Nicholas Lash in "Revolution and Change".

All this is clear, although what is not so clear is identifying binding doctrine in the Council texts. Since the tradition of 'theological notes' has fallen away, grading the authority and nature of teachings is a more difficult task.¹³ And since the genre of the Council documents is quite radical, the difficulties are compounded.¹⁴ Finally, the Catholic Church in the modern period has been developing a doctrine related to the development of doctrine, so that the basic concepts of "change" and "development" are not at stake, or should not be. Presumably they are presupposed by most parties concerned as a fundamental Catholic idea.¹⁵

Continuity and discontinuity in the case of the Catholic Church's teachings on Islam

There is perhaps some humour when we look at the genealogy of this teaching. Initially when the Catholic Church had been canvassed regarding matters for the Council's agenda there were no responses suggesting Islam be addressed, other than to condemn it, nor much interest in addressing the question of other religions.¹⁶ It was perhaps the blessings of this non-democratic church that Pope John XXIII was friends with Jules Isaac, the Jewish historian. Isaac, if some accounts are to be believed, prompted John XXIII to request Cardinal Bea to address (and drop) the charge of deicide made against the Jews within the Christian tradition. This draft on the Jewish people caused an adverse response in the Arab Muslim world and generated requests from bishops in Arab countries that there be positive statement about Muslims. Hence, the Jews might be said to have helped the Muslims, as constructed by the Catholics. Another personal papal friendship also played an important role. Paul VI's friendship with Louis Massignon perhaps proved equally significant as Pope John's with Jules Isaac in pushing the Council in a certain direction.¹⁷

¹³ See Harold Ernst, *Theological Notes and the Interpretation of Doctrine*, *Theological Studies*, 63, 2002, 813–25, who argues that Vatican II maintained the tradition, but it fell away *not* because of the Council, but possibly because of its being intimately related to neo-Scholasticism.

¹⁴ See John W. O'Malley SJ, "Vatican II. Did Anything Happen", in *Theological Studies*, 67, 2006, pp. 3–33 who argues for the unique genre employed in Council teachings.

¹⁵ See Lash "Revolution and Change". The best guide is Aidan Nichols, *From Newman to Congar: the Idea of Doctrinal Development From the Victorians to the Second Vatican Council* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1990). Newman and Mohler are key here.

¹⁶ See Robert Caspar's commentary on this in "La religion musulmane", *Vatican II: Les relations de l'Église avec les religions nonchrétiennes*, (Paris: Unam Sanctam 61, 1966), pp. 201–02. Caspar notes some exceptions, but does not outline what they are.

¹⁷ See further Robert Caspar, "La vision de l'Islam chez Louis Massignon et son influence sur l'Église" in *L'Herne Massignon*, ed. by J-F Six, series Cahiers de l'Herne,

I will focus exclusively on what appears to be a matter of doctrinal teaching regarding Islam, which at face value is both novel and discontinuous. *Lumen Gentium* 16 says: that Muslims “nobiscum Deum adorant unicum”, “adore with us the one God”. The conjunction ‘nobiscum’ (with us) indicates that the Church’s teaching is not related to a phenomenological description of Islam, but affirms a theological assessment that Islam’s God is also the same God as worshipped by Catholics. So I will first briefly set out the Council’s teaching before then asking about the novelty and doctrinal status of this teaching.

Lumen Gentium, promulgated November 1964

Following the rules set out for interpreting the Council in the 1985 Synod, I will begin with the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church as illuminating the teachings in *Nostra Aetate*, a decree.¹⁸ It is clear from the *Acta* that the Council Fathers understood that *Nostra Aetate* was a further elaboration of *Lumen Gentium*’s comments. *Lumen Gentium* 16 says: “But the plan of salvation also embraces those who acknowledge the creator, and amongst these the Muslims are first; they profess to hold the faith of Abraham and *along with us* they worship the one merciful God who will judge humanity on the last day.”¹⁹ Four points are helpful in understanding the context of this remarkable and important sentence.

First, paragraph 16 occurs after the treatment of the relationship of the *Church* and other Christian bodies. It begins by noting that the gospel is related to the “people of God” in various ways, using the term *ordinatur* (related to, ordained towards) to distinguish a different level of relationship from the previous groups that have been denoted firstly as *incorporantur* (incorporated: Roman Catholics), *coniunguntur* (joined to: catechumens), and *coniunctam* (conjoined with: other Christians – they are *coniunguntur* with Christ in *LG* 15). The use of *ordinatur* clearly indicates a distinct difference between non-Christian religions and other Christian denominations, a distinction based on baptism and full incorporation into the Church.

Second, paragraph 16 in one broad stroke tries to encompass the entire “non-Christian” world, both religious and non-religious, to

no 13, Paris, Editions de l’Herne, 1970, pp. 126–47; and Hebblethwaite, *Paul*, pp. 225, 374.

¹⁸ See: http://www.saint-mike.org/library/synod_bishops/final_report1985.html for the Synod, and Dulles’ very helpful summary of its six hermeneutical rules, *Official Norms*. See my forthcoming: *The Hermeneutics of Vatican II and its Doctrinal Teachings on Other Religions*, (Oxford University Press, 2014).

¹⁹ All texts and translations are from Norman Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils Volume Two: Trent to Vatican II*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), unless otherwise stated.

show how they are all ordained, in different ways, towards the people of God. No one is left outside the scope of God's providential grace.

Third, within this amorphous mass of "non-Christians" it makes distinctions, possibly following Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964, 107), which is the only place we find such distinctions in previous magisterial teaching, between the Jewish people, who are closest to the Church, followed by Muslims, and then those who search for the unknown God in shadows and images. This latter shadowy group get a more clarified image and elaboration in *Nostra Aetate*. In *Ecclesiam Suam* they are said to be: "the followers of the great Afro-Asiatic religions". Non-religious persons for Paul VI are on the outer circle which corresponds to *LG's* structuring.

Fourth, this positive affirmation of Islam must be read within the dual context, on the one hand, of the Church claiming to be the unique means to salvation chosen by God and, on the other hand, the affirmation that God will leave no one without the chance of saving grace if, through no-fault of their own, they do not know the gospel (*LG* 16 repeats this teaching three times).²⁰

Fifth, the Council's teachings on other religions see all these religions within the category of *praeparatio evangelicae*.²¹ That means that the truth, goodness and beauty they may contain are all steps towards the fullness of the gospel but are not commensurate or equal to the truth of the gospel.

Sixth, the Dogmatic Constitution on Revelation makes it clear that "The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away, and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Dei Verbum* 4). This *a priori* rules out the possibility that Muhammad or the Qur'an could be understood within the category of public revelation. It does not rule out the possibility that both could in principle testify to the true revelation witnessed to in Jewish-Christian scripture. The Council Fathers would steer clear of this implied issue as there was no consensus on the status of the Prophet or the Qur'an amongst Catholic scholars.²²

²⁰ See Morali in Karl J Becker & Ilaria Morali, (eds) *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, (New York: Orbis, 2010), p. 126; and Stephen Bullivant, "Sine Culpa? Vatican II and Inculpable Ignorance" in *Theological Studies*, 2011, 72, pp. 70–86.

²¹ See Joseph Carola, "Appendix: Vatican II's Use of Patristic Themes Regarding Non-Christians", *Catholic Engagement with World Religions: A Comprehensive Study*, Karl J. Becker and Ilaria Morali (eds), (New York: Orbis, 2010), pp. 143–153; and Morali, op cit, pp. 127–130.

²² Some Muslims have understandably complained about this (see Ataulloh Siddiqui, "Islam and Christian Theology", in David F. Ford with Rachel Muers, *The Modern Theologians*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 663–82, 675–79), but these matters would not gain any consensus on the Council floor. See Caspar, op cit, and Georges C Anawati,

So what does this single sentence “*along with us they worship the one merciful God who will judge humanity on the last day*” amount to? To many, including Robert Caspar and George Anawati who were both enlisted onto the drafting committee of *LG* and *NA*, along with *Nostra Aetate* itself, it signifies a “radical change” in the attitude of the Church towards Islam. Caspar calls it a “revolution, in the Copernican sense of the word”²³; and Anawati, calls it an “advance in the Church’s attitude to Islam” after near “constant condemnation” of Islam up until the twentieth-century.²⁴

Yet there is a slight problem: these two experts are speaking about Islam, whereas the statement about God that I am focussing on is not *per se* about Islam but about Muslims. This distinction is contested, but worth noting. Catholic and Muslim scholars, with varying degrees of understanding or criticism, note that Islam is never mentioned in either *Lumen Gentium* or *Nostra Aetate*, only Muslims. Some cautious exegetes take this to indicate that Islam, *per se*, is not in any way being endorsed as a “religion” for as a religion it contains both truth and error, but pious Muslims are being affirmed as being oriented towards the one true God.²⁵ Others argue that Muslim believers cannot exist without Islam as a religion, so that the latter should be assumed in the reference to the former. (Caspar and Anawati both hold this position.) Others argue that Islam is actually affirmed in the texts by the choice of the word “submission” in *NA* 3, for the word denotes the translation of the Arabic, Islam, into English. Others argue that the Latin has been mistranslated and Flannery and Tanner have obscured the explicit reference to Islam.²⁶ I agree with the latter two groups. But, the distinction is useful to bring to mind the fact that institutional Islam was criticised by the magisterium in what Anawati calls a classical form: “Islam was necessarily condemned, Mohammed was a false prophet, the Koran was a collection of errors,

“Excursus on Islam”, in Herbert Vorgrimler (ed), *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. III, (London: Burns & Oates, 1969), pp. 151–155.

²³ Robert Caspar, “Islam According to Vatican II” in *Encounter. Documents for Christian-Muslim Understanding*, Vol 2, No 21, 1976, (Roma: Pontificio Instituto Di Studi Arabi e D’Islamistica), 1–7, p. 2. Interestingly this is the term Massignon uses to suggest that Christians should embark upon a “spiritual Copernican revolution” by turning to the origins of Muslim teaching – cited by Anawati, op cit p. 152.

²⁴ Anawati, op cit, p. 152 and 151 respectively.

²⁵ Morali, “Salvation, Religions, and Dialogue in the Roman Magisterium”, in Karl J. Becker and Ilaria Morali (eds), *Catholic Engagement*, pp. 122–143, esp. 126.

²⁶ Andrew Unsworth, *A Historical and Textual-Critical Analysis of the Magisterial Documents of the Catholic Church on Islam: towards a hetero-descriptive account of Muslim belief and practice*, PhD thesis, Heythrop College, London, 2007. Unsworth’s thesis should be published as it contains so many original insights and findings. I have learnt greatly from my reading and his work convinced me that my own earlier readings (2000) on Islam in the Council were incorrect.

the truths contained in it had been taken from the Bible, and so on".²⁷ But it is difficult to find any authoritative magisterial teaching saying that the one God in Islam is a false God and the most comprehensive study in this area supports this claim.²⁸

In fact there is an interesting prefiguration of this teaching in Pius XII's encyclical *Fidei Donum* (1957) where Pius speaks critically and descriptively of Islam. He says, without naming Islam or Muslims: "Of course, you know the religious tenets of those people who, although they are quick to profess [*profiteri*] that they worship God, nevertheless are easily attracting and enticing the minds of many into another path which is not that of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all nations" (19). The assumption here is that if they were professing the true God, then it would lead to Christ. But if we now insert the presupposition that a Muslim might profess to worship the one God and might not knowingly and intentionally deny the truth allied to this, namely: the incarnation, then Pius' statement need not be understood as a clear doctrinal statement that Muslims do not believe in the one God. The positive teaching is prefigured in the interesting way the Latin *profitentes* is now used in *LG* to refer to the fact that Muslims "profess to hold the faith of Abraham and along with us they worship the one merciful God . . ." So while there may be a historical shift in a positive attitude towards the "religion" Islam, there is no clear discontinuity in now affirming that the one God professed in the prayers of Muslims is the true God.

Before moving to *Nostra Aetate*, it is worth commenting on the curious phrase "and along with us" they worship the one merciful God. Andrew Unsworth makes a very convincing argument that this phrase derives from Paul VI, who used it first when speaking French in Bethlehem in January 1964, who said on that occasion that "those who profess monotheism and with us render religious worship to the one true God, the living and supreme God, the God of Abraham, the most high . . . May these peoples, adorers of the one God (*adoreurs d'un Dieu unique*), also welcome our best wishes for peace in justice".²⁹ Unsworth makes the argument that Paul VI was probably drawing from his close following of Massignon and secondarily from Jean Daniélou and Henri de Lubac, who were also dependent on Massignon. They all emphasise "adoration" and "prayer" as the

²⁷ Anwati, op cit, p. 151.

²⁸ Unsworth contains the most comprehensive analysis and he shows that the most vitriolic critics cite no texts showing condemnations of monotheism in Islam (pp. 56–182).

²⁹ See Francesco DeGoia (ed), *Interreligious Dialogue: the Official Teaching of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council to John Paul II (1963–1995)*, (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), p. 159; French from Vatican website: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/speeches/1964/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19640106_epiphanie_fr.html

traits that are to be valued highly in Islam, even though they all equally felt that Islam's fulfilment lay in Jesus Christ.³⁰ The expression then found its way into *Ecclesiam Suam*, 107 (August 1964): "there are those who, it is said, adore *God* [Deum adorant] according to a monotheistic form of religion, especially the Muslims who adhere strictly to this way". The drafting committee of *Lumen Gentium* would have had *Ecclesiam Suam* to hand and clear evidence of this is that Paul VI's concentric circles of closeness are employed by both *LG* and *NA*, with the latter providing more finesse. The certain influence of Massignon on Paul VI both intellectually and personally as well as on Casper and Anawati is significant, as is the fact that the two most decisive contributions from the floor of the Council regarding *Nostra Aetate* came from students of Massignon: Melkite patriarch Maximos IV (Saigh) and Archbishop Descuffi.³¹ It is significant in this double sense that Massignon saw in Islam's adoration of the true God a genuine longing for Christ (especially exemplified in the mystic Hallaj) and a clear recognition that conversion to Christ would fulfil the longing inherent with Islam.³²

Nostra Aetate, promulgated October 1965

NA finally leads us to the magisterial "tradition" in terms of judging the question of novelty and status of this teaching. It stacks the decks in one direction by providing a supporting quotation regarding a teaching from Pope Gregory VII in 1076! It indicates, despite Cardinal Bea's formal *relatio* to the document, that there *is* magisterial precedence in the Church's teachings.³³

Paragraph 3 of *NA* says: "The church also looks upon Muslims with respect. They worship the one God living and subsistent, merciful and Almighty, creator of heaven and Earth, [note 5] who has spoken to humanity and to whose decrees, even the hidden ones, they seek to submit themselves wholeheartedly, just as Abraham, to whom the Islamic faith readily relates itself, submitted to God". The note cites Pope Gregory VII in his letter to al-Nasir (1076), King of Mauritania.

³⁰ Unsworth, op cit, p. 167. Oddly, neither Anwati nor Casper mention this source as an influence in their commentaries.

³¹ Unsworth, *ibid*, 197–202.

³² My one criticism of Unsworth is that he does not emphasise Massignon's view of "fulfilment" in interpreting the Vatican II texts, although he attributes very significant influence from Massignon.

³³ See Bea's speech of 14 October, 1965, in Augustin Bea, *The Church and the Jewish people. A Commentary on the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, trans by Philip Lovetz (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), pp. 169–72, 169. Given that this is the sole note in the document referring to any magisterial teachings, Bea is not far from the truth.

There is considerable scholarly discussion as to the interpretation and intention of Gregory's letter³⁴ but the passage cited from Gregory's letter says the following: "God, the creator of all, without whom we cannot do or even think anything that is good, has inspired to your heart this act of kindness. He who enlightens all people coming into the world (John 1.9) has enlightened your mind for this purpose. Almighty God, who desires all people to be saved (1 Timothy 2.4) and none to perish, is well pleased to approve and asked most of all that besides loving God people love others, and do not do to others anything they do not want to be done unto themselves (Matthew 7.12)". So far, Gregory sounds like a modern Catholic liberal. The most important passage now follows, which makes Gregory sound like John Hick: "We and you must show in a special way to the other nations an example of this charity, for we believe and confess one God, although in different ways [*licet diverso modo*], and praise and worship him daily as the creator of all ages and the ruler of this world".³⁵

But rest assured Gregory was not a latter day Hick! Gregory had political motives for making peace with the king, who had just allowed him to ordain a bishop in his, the king's, territory. It is also clear that Gregory would have carried out a crusade if he had had half a chance. In a letter of 1073 Gregory spoke of the Saracens as "a horrible and perverse nation".³⁶ Kedar argues, contextually, that the concluding paragraph probably desires the conversion of the Muslim king to Christianity. Nevertheless, amidst all that, we still have a clear glimpse of a magisterial teaching that says that Christians and Muslims believe and worship the one God [*unum Deum*]. However, the actual status of the letter as magisterial teaching is unclear. It could be judged (anachronistically) as a low-level papal letter, now promoted by its inclusion in the twenty-first Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church, but nevertheless, only within a Decree. Most importantly, the Fathers of the Council accepted this letter as a precedent. There were no objections to its inclusion in the debate on the floor. It was accepted as affirming a link with positive magisterial teaching in the eleventh-century.

So was there continuity or discontinuity regarding this doctrinal matter? Nearly all magisterial statements on Islam prior to the nineteenth-century are negative in tone, but one must also remember that in this context nearly all assume: (a) that Islam is a Christian heresy such that Muslims knowingly have perverted the truth of the

³⁴ See for example, Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches Toward the Muslims*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 56–8; and the helpful discussion of critics found in Unsworth, op cit. pp. 66–72.

³⁵ Dupuis, *Towards*, pp. 102–03.

³⁶ Kedar, op cit, p. 57.

gospel; (b) that Islam is a Christian heresy in claiming revelation after the closure of the canon; (c) that Islam is a pretender in claiming greater divine authority than that of Christ; (d) that Muhammad and the Qur'an could not be granted legitimate authority as this would contradict the gospel, specifically teachings on the incarnation and trinity; and (e) the expansion of Islam was a direct threat to Catholicism. After the nineteenth-century all but the last of these assumptions became historically problematic. One might say that the discontinuity was not in any doctrinal teaching on the one true God, but a discontinuity in the image of Islam before and after the Council. A doctrinal insight about Islamic monotheism present from very early on seems to be salvaged from the rubble of anti-Muslim rhetoric, rubbed clean and set forth for the world to see. As noted earlier, it is difficult to find criticisms from earlier popes against the doctrine of the one God, although there are lots of criticisms regarding Muhammad and the Qur'an (as one would expect, given the presuppositions held at the time).

One more comment on *Nostra Aetate*. I want to cite comments from Archbishop Descuffi's intervention, a Latin Rite Archbishop of Smyrna, at the Council on 29 September 1964 when the second draft of *NA*, which now included a reference to Muslims, was being discussed. Descuffi was an associate of Massignon. His speech on the Council floor contains a unique and radical suggestion: that Islam could be closer to Catholicism than Judaism – and not for anti-Semitic reasons! That comment was not included in the draft in any way, but Unsworth notes that his intervention led to major changes in the final text which includes phrases from his speech. Descuffi reflects the most appreciative assessment of Islam to be found, even while drawing upon the classical “borrowing” thesis, which, I would argue, still undergirds the Council's teachings.³⁷ Descuffi argues: “What is said here about their faith in a single personal God who rewards [the just], their religious sense . . . is undeniable. But let me add, to their credit, that in their religion there are found many elements in common with ours, from which they have borrowed.³⁸ Although they have no knowledge of the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Redemption, they nevertheless recognise Jesus Christ as a true prophet . . . they teach that he will come to judge the living and the dead, including Muslims. They affirm his many miracles, his miraculous birth. They recognise the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed

³⁷ Ary A. Roest Crolius, SJ, “The Church looks at Muslims” in René Latourelle (ed), *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives. Twenty-Five Years After (1962–1987)*, (New York: Paulist press, 1989), pp. 324–334 takes the borrowing thesis for granted, but does not see it as prohibitive.

³⁸ And here we clearly find the invincible ignorance supposition that has supplanted the presumption of heretical deviance.

Virgin Mary, her purity and virginity, her singular perfection, and, praying to her as their Mother with a sincere and devout heart, they confidently ask of and obtain from her remarkable favours, healings and even miracles. . . . What I am now saying is not a figment of my imagination or the product of exaggeration in the hope of some gain, but the fruit of ten years' experience, what I have seen for myself in Ephesus, in the place called *Panaga Kapula*, i.e., the House of Mary, our Lady Mary. For the last ten years I've seen about 100,000 Muslims throughout the year join the same number of Christians and together with them, and this is the only place in the world where this happens, venerate the Virgin Mary the mother of Jesus. . . . If we may add to these particular facts the fact that Muslims observe the natural law of the Decalogue, fasting, almsgiving and prayer, we can see that we find them closer to us than the Jews.'³⁹ I cite this to indicate the complex possibilities that are opened even by these cautious steps forward.

Tentative conclusions

Let me return to the original question: are the doctrinal teachings on Islam continuous, discontinuous, and reforming? I'm not entirely sure that the matter under discussion is an "authoritatively taught doctrine" Before *Lumen Gentium*, and even then, the level of its authority is not entirely clear. Is this now a formal doctrine with magisterial authority: Muslims worship the same God as Catholics? If it is, it is novel in one sense, but is neither continuous nor discontinuous with accepted formal teachings. But it does exemplify the rule I stipulated regarding doctrinal principles. The principle of continuity perhaps can be seen in terms of the affirmation that Muslims worship the true God, but previously this principle was also operative with the assumption that Muslims were heretical and had perverted Christian truths. Herein lies the discontinuity. With the latter assumptions being dropped, we can see that a principle that led to the claim of heresy is now a principle that leads to the claim of commonality in the worship and adoration of the one true God. The principle of continuity is at least linguistically registered by reference to Pope Gregory VII, even if there is some ambiguity about the overall teachings of Gregory VII about Muslims. By that citation we are given an instance of a textual claim that does bear signs of continuity in the teaching of the magisterium from 1076 to 1964! One might also argue that the discontinuity is implicitly acknowledged in paragraph 3b of *NA* when it says "considerable dissensions and enmities between Christians

³⁹ Unsworth, op cit, p. 201, relying on the translation of Paul Dean.

and Muslims have arisen in the course of the centuries” and urges moving forward to work together to “promote social justice and moral values as well as peace and freedom for all people”. Such discontinuity operates at the level of social context and historical circumstance. It is inevitable that change will sometimes appear as discontinuous precisely so that a continuity of doctrinal teaching can be facilitated. This is clearly illustrated in this case about adoring the same God: from heretical pretender to common ground. The discontinuity is the presupposition of continuity given the changed cultural conditions and the questions of credibility with regard to scholarship and experience. Benedict’s analysis of continuity and discontinuity certainly seem to hold in this particular case.

What of the development of doctrine? Subsequent to Vatican II, successive popes have reiterated the teachings of the Council on this point.⁴⁰ The God that Muslims adore is the one God that Christians adore. The significance and meaning of this claim have been developed in different directions by theologians and historians of religion – but the jury is still out. I will briefly mention four trajectories that have developed from this Council teaching. One line of interpretation emphasises that the knowledge of God in Islam is a natural knowledge available through the use of reason aided by grace. This would be in line with Vatican I, that natural knowledge of God was available to all.⁴¹

The second line of interpretation is that this special knowledge of God is dependent upon the Jewish-Christian tradition and not in any way an affirmation of the status of Muhammad or the Qur’an in terms of revelation or inspiration. However, this is not simply natural knowledge as it is reliant on inspired Jewish-Christian scripture, even if inadequately transmitted and improperly interpreted.⁴²

⁴⁰ See Jukko, *Trinity in Unity* and DeGoia, *Interreligious Dialogue* for numerous instances.

⁴¹ See Maurice Borrmans, in Becker & Moralli (eds), op cit, p. 500f. Borrmans was responsible for drafting the important *Guidelines* after Vatican II so his comment is particularly pertinent: “Consequently, whether a matter of the simply unique God of the Muslims (whom philosophy by itself could reach) or the Trinitarian unique God of the Christians (revealed gradually by the biblical history of salvation), both surely would have to affirm together, though differently, the oneness of essence .. oneness of worship The fact is that God is transcendence alone for Muslims, while he is transcendence and immanence for Christians. The difference therefore remains essential” (p. 500f.). I argued for a God of natural theology within Islam in the Council documents in *The Meeting of the Religions and the Trinity*, (Orbis Books, New York, 2000), pp. 102–08, but Unsworth has changed my mind. This natural theology position is also held by Mikka Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine on Non-Christian Religions According to the Second Vatican Council* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) pp. 75–9.

⁴² This is the position of Anwati, Caspar, and Troll and would be the position of Massignon. I would also argue for this position.

The third line of interpretation is a positive and discriminating appraisal of both the Qur'an and Muhammad as it is argued that the claim regarding the true God must implicitly affirm the partial value of the two mediating forms, although in very different ways.⁴³

The fourth group also develops a positive appraisal of Islam but to the extent of arguing that it must be a valid salvific religion – while not always specifying whether this claim is *de facto* or *de jure*.⁴⁴ The fourth has been ruled out by *Dominus Iesus* para. 4, 8; and the third would require careful specification. I would personally support the second and third and while there is mileage in the fourth, only at a level of *de facto*, the trajectory of this position is inevitably deeply misleading. It obscures the difference in kind of the self-revelation of Jesus Christ compared to any other form of knowledge of God.

I hope I have shown that Vatican II made important moves related to significant cultural shifts and that its teachings have a certain credibility and continuity. It shows that the Catholic Church was able to take difficult, complex and courageous steps, to retain credibility with integrity. That the steps were unplanned and probably hurried and were subject to all sorts of complex socio-historical factors on the Council floor, does not take away from the important advance. The single doctrine regarding Muslims worshipping the same God as Catholics is perhaps the first step in a significant development of doctrine. Its importance can hardly be minimized.

To give this proper attention, the question of the Jews would require exploration, as would the comments regarding Abraham to be found in the Council documents, as well as close attention to the other features of Conciliar teaching on Islam. This paper just touches the tip of a very large iceberg. Its conclusions are thus very provisional and we must also remember that icebergs have sunk ships.

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⁴³ This seems feasible for just as the Hebrew prophets got some things wrong, but could have been moved by the Spirit, a partial inspiration might be attributed to Muhammad and the Qur'an in so much as they convey both revealed truths and some valid deductions from them. I've tried to do this in 'The Holy Spirit and the World Religions', *Louvain Studies*, 34, 2009–10, 279–311.

⁴⁴ See the helpful categorisation and outline of these post-Conciliar moves in Troll, *ibid*; and also in David Marshall, 'Catholic views on Islam' forthcoming.