
Interpreting Silence: A Response to Miikka Ruokanen

Paul Knitter

With Miikka Ruokanen, I admit that the documents of the Second Vatican Council are silent about the issue of whether other religious traditions can be *viae salutis* or ways of salvation. But to interpret this silence, as he does, to mean that the council fathers implicitly *denied* that there can be authentic revelation and salvation through other religious paths is even less warranted than to conclude that they implicitly affirmed such salvific value. It seems to me that Ruokanen's analysis moves *beyond* the evidence of the texts themselves and *contrary* to the broader Roman Catholic theological context in which these texts were fashioned. Within this broader context of Catholic experience and tradition, there are, I suggest, even clearer and more persuasive reasons to interpret the council's silence in a *positive* sense and to conclude, with the majority (not just "many") of contemporary Roman Catholic theologians that Vatican II implicitly affirms the salvific potential of other religions.

1. Dualism between Nature and Grace

Ruokanen's main thesis seems to be based on his understanding of Catholic theology of creation and natural moral law. "The religious substance of non-Christian religions has no specific role as a medium of hidden salvation in terms of the theology of creation and natural moral law." But especially since the discussions of the "nouvelle theologie" during the 1950s and deLubac's revision of the "supernatural," together with Rahner's early writings on "nature and grace," Catholic theology, dur-

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ing the conciliar years and now, would have great difficulty seeing itself reflected in Ruokanen's overly dualistic distinction between the orders of creation and of redemption, or between nature and grace, or "human vocation" and "divine vocation." While nature and grace are clearly and necessarily to be distinguished, they cannot be neatly separated into "here and there" or "then and now." As Rahner puts it, there really is no such thing as *natura pura*—"only nature." Nature is imbued with saving grace, grace cannot work except through the natural. Therefore if "*gratia non tollit naturam sed perficit*," it is because God has already been active in nature and so the grace of Christ can perfect the grace within nature.

2. Revelation

Ruokanen, of course, recognizes the clear teaching of Vatican II that saving grace is operative beyond the visible confines of the

church, throughout creation. But because of his dualistic understanding of the orders of creation and salvation, he too neatly designates where "grace" is operative within creation and where "only nature" reigns. This is especially clear in the way he argues that, according to the council, the religions are bereft of authentic *revelation*. He would interpret the explicit statement of NA that within the religions there is "a ray of that truth which enlightens all men" to mean only that this is the "natural knowledge" of God that Vatican I said is available to all people. The religions are therefore only "expressions of the *human* search for truth" (emphasis mine).

Such conclusions are based, I suspect, on an incomplete reading of Vatican I. While the fathers of that council opposed the fideists and insisted that a natural knowledge of God is possible, they did not deny that a "supernatural knowledge" was also possible for all. In fact, to know God through reason is not yet to know the God who saves. Therefore, if Catholic theology affirms the genuine possibility of salvation outside the visible church, it also, *a fortiori*, affirms the possibility of authentic, "supernatural" revelation. For this reason, the "rays of truth" recognized by NA within the religions are more correctly understood as rays of the *Logos spermatikos*—"seeds of the Word"—as *Ad Gentes* and the 1984 Vatican Statement on "The Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" clearly state (AG 11, 15, see the 1984 Statement in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 9, no. 26 [1985] 187-91). Where the Divine Word is active, there is real revelation.

But Ruokanen may ask, if they were talking about authentic revelation in the religions, why did not the council fathers use the word *revelatio*? Why is this term reserved only for the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament, as is evident in *Dei Verbum*? Here a Roman Catholic *sensus theologicus* might help. The traditional teaching has been that revelation *sensu stricto* ended with the death of the last apostle. Within creation and within the religions we are speaking about another kind of divine revelation ("general" or "transcendental" as Rahner terms it). Out of a respect for tradition, official statements limit the term *revelatio* to its stricter, traditional meaning.

Ruokanen's straining to deny the council's recognition of revelation within the religions is evident, I think, in his comments on the individual traditions. To hold that Islam, "the austere book-religion" (that is *not* the language of NA) "is not recognized as a religion of divine revelation" contradicts NA's explicit recognition that Muslims "worship God" and "submit wholeheartedly to his inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham did" (NA, 3). One cannot worship the living God unless that God has been revealed. Were not the decrees that Abraham submitted to authentically revealed? Further, to say that in Hinduism there is "no acquisition of religious truth" is to miss the full content of NA's recognition that Hindus "*scrutantur mysterium divinum*." *Scrutantur* means not just to search for, but to explore more deeply what one grasps. If this were not the case, Hindus could not *exprimunt* (express) the divine mystery (NA 2). And to hold that Buddhists are only "seekers," not finders, of truth is to misread the Latin verb *valeant*. NA states that Buddhists are "able" to "reach supreme illumination."

In general, when NA states that the religions "seek" (*ni-*

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tuntur) to know God, Ruokanen interprets that to mean that they never succeed. That is neither logically certain nor consistent with the evident positive tone of the text.

3. Salvation

Even more adamantly Ruokanen argues that according to the council, although grace is universally available, it doesn't operate through the religions; the religions contain only a natural search for God. Again, he fails to appreciate the bonds between grace and nature within Catholic theology. Grace must always have a medium in *nature* and history; it cannot operate, as Ruokanen seems to suggest, purely in an interior or individualistic manner. It has to take some natural or sacramental shape. And with Rahner and the majority of Catholic theologians, I ask, would not the religions provide one such sacramental mediation of grace? Unaware, Ruokanen suggests a positive answer to this question when he lists the three conditions for the operation of saving grace outside the church: besides not having really heard the Word of Christ, persons have to "sincerely seek the truth" and also "practice the moral good." These last two elements are precisely what the religions are about!

But then why didn't the council come out and say that the religions are ways of salvation? Again, I appeal to my Catholic theological "sensus" and suggest that the main reason may have been that such a statement represents a genuine change or "development" in the teaching of the magisterium. And because of our traditional notion of the "inerrancy" of the magisterium, all changes (like those concerning usury or religious liberty) are usually introduced cautiously, implicitly—*silently!*

4. Conclusion

I cautiously venture an interpretation of Ruokanen's assessment of Vatican II. A number of times, he points out something that is really not the issue of his study—namely, that the council did not intend to lessen "the urgency of the Church's mission." My sense is that this is the deeper concern of his analysis—to protect the urgency of the missionary mandate. I would strongly agree with him that any new theological view that jettisons or

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jeopardizes the missionary nature of the church runs contrary to Christian identity and must be abandoned. I would suggest, however, that in his further research, Ruokanen study not whether the council affirms the salvific potential of other religions but, rather, whether there is any validity to the claim made by the majority of Catholic theologians that to hold such a position does *not* lessen the urgency of the missionary mandate but, on the contrary, strengthens it by clarifying it. Here, I suggest, there would be an even more fruitful ecumenical dialogue between Christian neighbors concerned about mission and dialogue.

Comments on the Articles by Ruokanen and Knitter

William R. Burrows

Miikka Ruokanen's summary of the doctrine of Vatican Council II concerning the theological status of non-Christian religions and their role in salvation is, in my judgment, the most accurate account of that doctrine I have seen in print. As one who spent five years preparing a dissertation on the topic, I admire Ruokanen for getting to the heart of the conciliar teaching so concisely. Paul Knitter, though, has raised absolutely important issues, and no one should think the problems are solved because the conciliar teaching is elegantly laid out by Ruokanen.

Knitter's and Ruokanen's disagreement points to a need for the liberal and evangelical traditions they represent to continue the conversation. I believe that Ruokanen is right in his central thesis on the magisterium's teaching; but Knitter's development of the "silence" of the council draws on important currents in the formation of the magisterial teaching. Two things should be said. First, there simply *are* unresolved tensions in the Vatican II magisterium, and both authors employ the resources they are convinced are right. But official teaching since the council has tended to reinforce the conservative things that were explicitly

said in the documents instead of reinforcing ideas liberals find attractive. Second, the problem is deeper than who is winning.

In that connection, Ruokanen seems to me accurate in explicating: 1. the recourse of the council to the natural law tradition to locate salvation (outside of visible Christianity and faith in Jesus as Christ) in the depths of human conscience; and, 2. the council's "silence" about the value of other religious traditions as *means*

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of salvation or as *valid revelations*. Liberal Catholics have almost universally missed the first point and have interpreted the second as silence giving consent to viewing other traditions as such means. They should have been more cautious.

In the rest of this response, I want to try to unpack two insights that neither author attends to sufficiently: 1. a deep "theoanthropology of true conscience" inviting development; and, 2. ambiguity about what constitutes "revelation" in the light of the several major religiocultural characterizations of true

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