



The Notion of “Religion” in *Nostra Aetate*: Said, Unsaid, and Still to Say

TEREZA HUSPEKOVÁ 

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, tereza.huspekova@upjp2.edu.pl

Abstract: This article examines the understanding of “religion” in Vatican II’s declaration *Nostra aetate*, arguing that it reflects an intellectual climate characteristic of mid-20th-century theological reflection. The study is divided into three sections. First, it outlines what *Nostra aetate* explicitly *said* about non-Christian religions within the broader conciliar teaching, particularly in relation to fulfillment theology, *praeparatio evangelica*, and *semina Verbi*. Second, it identifies what remained *unsaid*—the tacit, implied assumptions about religion in *Nostra aetate*, which align with phenomenological and historical approaches prevalent among the Council experts. Finally, it considers what there is *still to say*, exploring how the interpretation of religion may shift if the historical-phenomenological framework is complemented by recent approaches that view religion as a human, evolutionary phenomenon. This third part proposes (1) a theological engagement with such naturalistic accounts of religiosity, (2) an expanded theological reflection that also includes “non-religion,” and (3) an alternative approach to patristic insights into human religiousness. The study is based on the analysis and interpretation of selected themes in *Nostra aetate*, in dialogue with relevant sources in religious studies. It concludes by stressing the contextual character of the Council’s approach and opening space for further multi-perspective inquiry.

Keywords: religion, *Nostra aetate*, Second Vatican Council, theology of religion, human religiosity

During the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Augustin Bea, president of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (SPCU), compared the draft of the document on non-Christian religions to a mustard seed that “has almost become a tree, in which many birds now find their nest” because “at least in some way, all non-Christian religions have their own place.” (AS IV.4, 649) Indeed, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* was not originally included in the Council’s agenda. In the *vota* sent to the Council, the topic of non-Christian religions appeared rather sporadically, usually in the context of missions.¹ Prior to the Council, Pope John XXIII had tasked the newly established SPCU with drafting

The content of this article is based on the development and synthesis of several selected themes outlined in the monograph: *Nostra aetate: Sobór Watykański II o religiach niechrześcijańskich* (Wąsek, Gilski, and Huspeková 2025), which is one of the outcomes of the project: “The Church as a Space for Dialogue: The Second Vatican Council Read Anew,” carried out by the Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow as part of the “Science for Society II” program of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.

¹ For related content in the *vota* submitted to the Council, see Wąsek, Gilski, and Huspeková 2025, 135–62.

a brief text on relations with Jews; however, the idea of a separate document was not initially considered. Only after a series of developments was the outline expanded to address other religions, ultimately resulting in a distinct declaration devoted to non-Christian religions.² The metaphor of a tiny, sprouting mustard seed is therefore particularly apt in this context.

Following the publication of *Nostra aetate*, some commentators voiced their dissatisfaction with its content. The first general secretary of the World Council of Churches, Willem Visser't Hooft, e.g., called the declaration “a disappointing document without much content, terming it not much more than a couple of courteous remarks about non-Christian religions.” (van der Merwe 2017, 18) However, given the turbulent history of *Nostra aetate*'s drafting, it can be considered a success for the SPCU that the text was produced at all and that the document passed the vote in the conciliar hall. The genesis of the declaration was shaped by many non-theological factors and by complex negotiations between what the experts sought to say and what the majority of the Council Fathers could agree on. Therefore, it can be assumed that the teaching of *Nostra aetate* contains aspects that are more permanent and universal, as well as those closely related to the specific historical context.

These circumstances constitute the starting point for this article, which focuses on a particular perspective on the notion of religion in *Nostra aetate* and on selected themes arising from this approach. In hermeneutic practice, scholars sometimes refer to the search for “the unsaid in the said.” On this basis, it examines what has been *said* in the declaration (i.e., what has been explicitly expressed in the text), what has been left *unsaid* (i.e., what has been omitted or only hinted at), and what there is *still to say* (i.e., what prompts further reflection or reevaluation today). Therefore, this article aims to highlight the specific approach to the notion of religion underlying the teaching of *Nostra aetate*, which, as argued here, is context-dependent, and to identify several issues that could be developed in alternative directions today.

Accordingly, this paper will first outline the key aspects of the Council's teachings on religion. Subsequently, it will try to show its convergence with tendencies in certain currents of religious studies. Finally, it will present three examples of themes that result from an alternative approach to the issues raised in *Nostra aetate*: (1) reflection on the possibility of applying theories that view religion as an evolutionary human phenomenon; (2) a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between religion and “non-religion”; and (3) the use of patristic sources. As a preliminary study, this article outlines the aforementioned topics rather than presenting them in detail.

² The context and primary impetus for the discussion of relations with Jews were the events of the Shoah and the Second World War; hence, the “heart” of the declaration is *Nostra aetate* (no. 4), which is dedicated to Jews. However, this article focuses on the significance of the declaration for reflection on non-Christian religions in general (for the genesis of the declaration, see Wąsek, Gilski, and Huspekova 2025, 124–55; cf. Tulej 2019).

1. What Was Said: Religions and the Second Vatican Council

First, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of what the Council said and intended to say about the Catholic Church's approach to non-Christian religions. Although the key document on this subject is the declaration *Nostra aetate*, its concise and practical nature indicates that it can only be properly understood when considered alongside relevant passages from other documents. Accordingly, this section outlines the main themes and inspirations of the Second Vatican Council on religion in general.

The key text shaping the Catholic Church's view of non-Christians is *Lumen gentium* (no. 16), which concerns people "related (*ordinantur*) in various ways to the people of God." (LG 16) The constitution directly refers to Thomas Aquinas, who viewed the unbaptized as potentially belonging to the Church by virtue of the power of Christ and human free will (*ST* III, q. 8, a. 3, ad 1), and indirectly to Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi*, according to which non-Catholics can be related (*ordinantur*) to the People of God through "unconscious desire." (MCC 103) However, unlike *Mystici Corporis*, *Lumen gentium* reserves this *ordinantur* only for the unbaptized, while non-Catholic Christians are treated as "linked" to the Church through baptism (LG 15). *Lumen gentium* lists several categories of non-Christians, assuring that those who seek God and strive to do his will by following the voice of their conscience can attain salvation, and that Divine Providence does not deprive those who have not yet come to an explicit knowledge of God of help on the path to salvation. The constitution emphasizes that all the good or truth found amongst non-Christians "is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel." (LG 16)

However, *Lumen gentium* (no. 16) does not refer to religions themselves, but to non-Christians as individuals. The constitution views them as candidates for the Gospel and potential members of the Church. Accordingly, if Christians acknowledge valuable elements in non-Christian religions, they may, following *Lumen gentium* (no. 16), regard these religions as *praeparatio evangelica*, or environments in which their followers can prepare to accept Christ's grace. Nevertheless, this approach does not consider the role of religions in the salvation of their followers, nor does it address what constitutes a "religion." This "good and truth" refers to non-Christians in general, without specifying their attitude to religiosity.

Another important document is the decree *Ad gentes* on the mission activity of the Church. As expected, this text also treats non-Christians as potential followers of the Gospel. However, unlike previous eras, it does not view them as being deprived of God's grace but rather as individuals in whom the secret presence of God and the "seeds of the Word" are already evident (see AG 9, 11). The decree states that "whatever good is found to be sown in the hearts and minds of men, or in the rites and cultures peculiar to various peoples, not only is not lost, but is healed, uplifted,

and perfected for the glory of God.” (AG 9) This sentence is significant because it refers not only to non-Christians as individuals but also to their “rites and cultures,” and because it reveals a perspective sometimes referred to as fulfillment theology. According to this framework, non-Christian religions are not considered valuable in themselves but rather contain scattered elements of truth and goodness that may prepare their followers for the Gospel, which is fully realized only in Christ.

Also noteworthy is the teaching of the declaration *Dignitatis humanae*, which emphasizes the importance of freedom of conscience while also stating that “true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church.” (DH 1; cf. DH 3) The constitution *Gaudium et spes*, in turn, highlights the significance of Christ’s redemptive work, affirming that “the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery.” (GS 22) It can therefore be concluded that, while Vatican II adopts a benevolent view toward non-Christians, their religions are viewed only as settings in which those who do not know Christ may encounter his hidden grace, and which can be interpreted as a preparation for the Gospel.

Against this background, the teaching of *Nostra aetate* on non-Christian religions appears to align precisely with the perspective of fulfillment theology. Although it does not explicitly mention the “seeds of the Word,” *Nostra aetate* emphasizes that the Catholic Church “rejects nothing that is *true and holy* in these religions” (italics mine) and that their teachings and ways of conduct “often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.” (NA 2) This leads to an exhortation for members of the Church to “recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men.” (NA 2) While the purpose of *Nostra aetate* was to define a practical attitude toward non-Christian religions, rather than to present a systematic teaching on religion, the declaration nevertheless contains several strictly doctrinal themes. Firstly, it recognizes the existence of “true and holy” elements in religions (i.e., not only among non-Christians themselves). Secondly, it views these valuable elements within these religions as reflecting the rays of Christ the Truth, offered to every human being. Thirdly, the declaration emphasizes that the spiritual, moral, and sociocultural goods found among followers of other religions should be protected and supported, thereby recognizing their significance. Thus, despite some ambiguity, the declaration seems to value not only the “seeds” of goodness and truth present in non-Christians as individuals but also the religions themselves as sociocultural phenomena.

During the postconciliar period, the question was sometimes raised as to whether the Second Vatican Council had offered a theological evaluation of religions. According to theologians such as Karl Rahner, the Council affirmed the possibility of salvation for non-Christians but left open the role of non-Christian religions in the salvation of their followers. This would imply that the Council’s teaching also includes the perspective that, as sociocultural phenomena, religions can be seen as

de jure means desired by God for the salvation of their followers (cf. Rahner 1983, 290–291). This interpretation is supported by the fact that none of the conciliar documents set out to resolve this issue and that religions as such are addressed only in *Nostra aetate*, which takes a practical and pastoral approach. However, theologians such as Gavin D’Costa maintain that the Council’s “silence” was deliberate and that there was no intention to recognize religions as God-ordained paths to salvation (see D’Costa 2000, 102–9).³ From this perspective, defining religion in terms of *semina Verbi* and *praeparatio evangelica* would not only be a consequence of the pastoral nature of the Council’s teaching but also an intentional approach that is still valid today.

In the following section, however, this paper will argue that the way we think about the meaning of non-Christian religions—and consequently how we interpret them—is closely related to our understanding of the phenomenon of religion itself. Therefore, it will try to bring out the understanding of religion that underlies the teaching of *Nostra aetate*. Consequently, we will consider not only what has been said explicitly but also what has merely been implied.

2. Unsaid Within the Said: *Nostra Aetate* and the Phenomenon of Religion

When describing the concept of religion as set out in *Nostra aetate*, it is important to bear in mind that treating religion and religions as distinct, easily defined entities is problematic. For religious studies scholars, the contemporary concept of “religion” is an ambiguous category that poses many difficulties, particularly in an intercultural context. Religious pluralism is an important factor in the globalized reality of the 21st century, influencing political affairs and social life. Consequently, religion and religions are widely discussed in the public sphere, and anyone with some knowledge of Western culture has at least a general understanding of the concept of “religion” and how it is used.

At the same time, religious scholars have been struggling for decades with the problem of defining “religion” and the multifaceted nature of their field of study (see Idinopulos and Wilson 1998). It would likely be easier to obtain a quick answer to the question about the nature of religion from a random passerby than from a religious studies scholar. While there are many theories about religion and its origins, most researchers agree that the category of “religion” is a construct that evolved within Western culture.⁴ While certain scholars have called for the complete abandonment

³ However, D’Costa’s approach is specific and does not fit into conventional patterns, as the author attempts to go beyond the traditional divisions of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.

⁴ On the discussion of the category of religion, see, e.g., Schilbrack 2012.

of the concept of “religion,” such an outcome appears improbable. It is therefore worthwhile to engage with the term reflectively and critically. One must be aware that behind every reflection on religion there is a theory, and that the adoption of a particular theory of religion in turn results in specific ideas about what is—and what is not—religion.

These observations can also be applied to the Second Vatican Council’s teachings on religion. Christian tradition has not developed any indigenous trend of religious reflection. Throughout history, theologians have rarely addressed non-Christian religions, except perhaps in connection with soteriological issues.⁵ Systematic theological reflection on religions and the phenomenon of human religiosity only began in the period preceding the Second Vatican Council.⁶ Some of the Council Fathers, particularly those from Japan, India, South Asia, and Africa, had personal experience of encountering the world of non-Christian religions and their followers. Nevertheless, the perspective of most Catholic theologians of that period was shaped by the theological formation of the time and the corresponding philosophical approach typical of Christian intellectuals with a Western education. This was also reflected in the wording of *Nostra aetate*.

The *Nostra aetate* declaration focuses on relations with non-Christian religions, and its key objective is to build peace and unity among people of different traditions (see NA 1a, 5b).⁷ This is evident, for instance, in the commission’s remark on the rejection of an amendment to the draft, which proposed the wording “[people] expect from religion (*a religione*) answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition” instead of “expect from the various religions (*a variis religionibus*).” The commission pointed out that the purpose of the document is not to engage in the philosophy of religion but to reflect on the “multiform religious phenomenon of the human race.” (AS IV.4, 699) However, in order to be able to describe this “multiform religious phenomenon,” one must have some idea of what the religions mentioned in *Nostra aetate* actually are; therefore, the authors of the declaration’s language must have been guided by a specific theory of religion on which its teaching was based. Certain features of this approach can be discerned “between the lines” of the declaration.

To begin with, it is worth noting that *Nostra aetate* addresses the attitude toward non-Christian religions; religions are therefore treated as autonomous entities toward which one can take a stance (see NA 1a). Paragraph of *Nostra aetate* (no. 1c) contains a phenomenological description of issues that the declaration presents as

⁵ On the development of approaches to non-Christian religions in the history of Catholic doctrine and theology, see Wąsek, Gilski, and Huspeková 2025, 23–134; cf. Kubacki 2005.

⁶ For more on the history of the development of reflection on religion in Christian theology, see Huspeková 2022, 36–55.

⁷ For greater precision, I refer to the declaration in its standard form (NA 1), indicating the paragraph of the relevant section (NA 1a, 5b, etc.) in which the discussed content appears, following the form used in recent commentaries on the Council documents (see, e.g., Vázquez Jiménez 2024).

characteristic of religious traditions. According to the passage already quoted, people expect religions to provide "answers to the unsolved riddles (*aenigmatibus*) of the human condition." (NA 1c) The declaration emphasizes that religions address matters concerning human existence. The commission rejected an amendment to replace *aenigmatibus* (riddles) with *quaestionibus* (questions), as the former sounded too intellectual and did not sufficiently express the connection with human life (see AS IV.4, 699). Nevertheless, these "riddles" are presented as questions addressing issues such as the meaning and purpose of human life, morality, and the problem of suffering and death. Thus, religions are primarily defined by areas of existential and philosophical reflection typical of major doctrinal religious traditions.

The list of existential questions concludes with the issue of the "ultimate and ineffable mystery which enfolds our existence, from which we come and to which we are going." (NA 1c)⁸ This wording seems to presume that human religious quests always involve an intuition of the mystery of God (the idea that God is both the origin and the goal of the human race appears a few sentences earlier in NA 1b). This theme is echoed in the next paragraph, which refers to the religious experience of humanity:

From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power (*perceptio illius arcanae virtutis*) which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense (*sensu religioso*). (NA 2a)

As with the previous point, this is a phenomenological account of religion throughout human history. However, the passage suggests that the awareness of "power" is closely linked to religious experience, which is the source of *sensus religiosus*. The next sentence notes that religions address these existential questions through increasingly subtle concepts, employing the term *quaestiones* rather than *aenigmata*. Despite the initial intention, the emphasis thus shifts to the content and doctrine—religions are portrayed as expressions of a primal experience of "power" that imbues human life with a "religious sense," chiefly by offering ideas that respond to fundamental existential questions.

A detailed analysis of the authors' background would be necessary to determine the sources of inspiration for this passage from *Nostra aetate*, but this is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, it is possible to outline at least the essential features of the intellectual climate in which the text was written. Paragraphs of *Nostra aetate* (nos. 1–2) were mainly compiled during the work on the third draft, which was presented in the conciliar hall on November 20, 1964. A group of experts

⁸ The translation used is from the edition by Neuner and Jacques Dupuis (1981), which is more precise than the official version.

appointed by Cardinal Franz König, a specialist in religious studies and later president of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, was entrusted with preparing the text. This group comprised Charles Moeller, Yves Congar, Paul Pfister, and Joseph Neuner (see Borelli 2017, 19). Paragraph of *Nostra aetate* (no. 2), which contains passages on Hinduism and Buddhism, primarily comes from Neuner, who attended the Council as a *peritus* with the bishops from India, and Pfister, who accompanied the bishops from Japan (see Congar 2012, 649). The core content of *Nostra aetate* (no. 1), which includes the aforementioned list of “existential questions,” was drafted by Moeller, a Belgian theologian and literary scholar who had a significant impact on the discussion of *Gaudium et spes* at the Council (see Borelli 2021, 24).

Based on this information, it is possible to gain an overall picture of religion and religions present in the environment of the Council’s *periti* and trace their sources of inspiration. As early as 1951–1956, König edited the pioneering three-volume work, *Christus und die Religionen der Erde*, which is devoted to reflections on religion and religions from theological and philosophical perspectives. His preliminary study shows that König had extensive knowledge of various trends in religious studies, including the history and phenomenology of religion, as well as the works of authors such as Émile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud (see König 1951). However, he considered the latter to be too naturalistic, favoring approaches that we would today describe as comparative, historical, and non-reductive. These preferences are also evident in König’s recommended reading list for general religious studies research. He refers almost exclusively to historical–comparative religious studies or theological reflection with an apologetic focus, citing authors such as Cornelis Tiele, Nathan Söderblom, Henri Pinard de la Boullaye, and Alfred Bertholet, as well as those associated with the phenomenology of religion, including Rudolf Otto, Friedrich Heiler, Gerardus van der Leeuw, or Mircea Eliade (cf. König 1951, 15–16; 1956, 734).

König defines religion as a relationship between humans and a superhuman force in which they place their belief and feel a sense of dependence, or as a belief in the advent of a new, completely different reality into human life. According to König, religion consists precisely of belief in this “superhuman force” and the resulting order of life, whereby, in König’s view, this “force” is personal in nature (König 1951, 39).⁹ In his concluding study, König attempts to demonstrate through a comparison of various religious traditions that the world’s major religions with a founder emerged through human initiative, whereas only Christianity has divine origins; according to König, “other religions are steps of the journey towards this goal, [but] only the path [of Christ] leads to the goal.” (König 1956, 776) Thus, it appears that König’s vision of human religiosity was primarily influenced by historical–phenomenological trends

⁹ König refers here to the Protestant theologians Söderblom and Johann P. Steffes, using their definitions of religion as a starting point for his own reflections.

in religious studies and that he viewed non-Christian religions as imperfect manifestations of humanity's religious intuitions, which were fulfilled in Christ.

Moeller adopted a similar stance on religion, emphasizing the continuity of humanity's religious development and presenting religions as a preparation for the coming of Christ. In the first volume of his 1957 work *Littérature du XX siècle et christianisme*, e.g., he writes that "if the revealed Word takes up and crowns the best of non-Christian religions, it does so by correcting and, above all, *transfiguring* them" and that in Christianity there is a "promotion, *transfiguration* of the human, through supernatural revelation." (Moeller 1957, 18) For Moeller, religions thus represent a manifestation of human endeavor, stemming from the desire for happiness and meaning. This view corresponds to the aforementioned approach known as fulfillment theology, according to which non-Christian religions reflect human quests while containing elements of truth that can only be recovered through the Gospel.

To gain an insight into the intellectual atmosphere among the periti, the writings of Jean Daniélou are also worth consulting. Although he was not part of the team working on *Nostra aetate* (nos. 1–2), he was one of the most active experts at the Council and participated in many discussions during the drafting process. In the introduction to the monograph *Introduction to the Great Religions*, Daniélou surveys various trends in religious studies. He remarks, however, that, in his opinion, the most noteworthy historians of religion are Otto, van der Leeuw, and Eliade—authors who influenced the development of the phenomenology of religion (with Daniélou drawing most heavily on Eliade's approach) (see Daniélou 1967a, 12 [1964]). This also aligns with Daniélou's theological perspective on religions:

Christianity, through Christian wisdom, completes and fulfils the imperfect truths which exist in the pagan religions. It takes up the natural values of the religious man, it recovers them in order to consecrate them. (Daniélou 1967b, 159 [1964])

Therefore, according to Daniélou, the doctrines of "pagan religions" contain imperfect, hidden truths that are yet to be revealed, fulfilled, and recovered by Christianity.¹⁰

These examples suggest that the fundamental inspirations for the Council experts' image of human religiosity came from the history and phenomenology of religion. Meanwhile, the theological perspective was part of the "theology of

¹⁰ Apart from the introduction to the monograph *Christian Revelation and World Religions*, I have not been able to find any texts by Neuner that describe his general approach to religion. In this introduction, Neuner briefly addresses the difficulties of applying the concept of religion to non-Western traditions, arguing that non-Christian religions should be treated as "pre-Christian," with their followers viewed as entering the path of Christ. Neuner's approach therefore seems close to the *praeparatio evangelica* perspective (see Neuner 1967, 13–18). However, I have not found any published works by Pfister concerning his approach to the phenomenon of religion.

fulfillment” approach. The themes described earlier in *Nostra aetate* (nos. 1–2) do indeed correspond to the concepts of phenomenologists and historians and comparatists of religion; Otto emphasized the *sensus numinis* of man and the experience of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, while van der Leeuw considered the category of “power” to be the key issue in the description of religious experience (cf. Otto 1924 [1917]; van der Leeuw 1938 [1933]). Eliade, in turn, viewed the diversity of religions as historical manifestations of the intuition of *sacrum*, and man as *homo religiosus*—essentially a religious being.¹¹ It is worth noting that some of Eliade’s key works, including *The Sacred and the Profane* and *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, were published shortly before the Council and were widely regarded at the time as seminal contributions to religious studies (Eliade 1958 [1949], 1959 [1957]; cf. Saliba 1976). The idea that Christianity is the highest, most exceptional of religions, and that this can be inferred from comparing different religious traditions, can be traced back, e.g., to Tiele (1897–99).

In this view, religions are primarily understood in internal, doctrinal, or affective terms, emphasizing the search for truth or answers to existential questions. The external expressions of human religiosity are regarded more as the outcomes of these primary intuitions. Consequently, more “mundane” aspects, such as the function of religion in human societies, rituals, or the relationship between religion and human survival in the natural environment, were considered peripheral to the concept of religion (however, anthropologists conducting field research often report that these aspects play a more significant role than content-related issues). This approach to religion also informs the theological perspective and vice versa. The view of religion as historical manifestations of reference to a “mysterious force” aligns with the theological vision in which Christianity reveals the true “identity” of this Mystery. In turn, the theological vision embraced by scholars shapes their attitude to religion and leads them to prefer phenomenological and historical approaches to religious studies.

Given this, it can be assumed that the conciliar documents reflect the intellectual preferences of the experts and the Council Fathers regarding the concept of religion. Of particular significance is the harmony between the conciliar teaching’s pastoral and missionary orientation and the historical–phenomenological trend in religious studies. The former views the history of non-Christian religions as “preparation for the Gospel,” while the latter perceives religions as historical manifestations of the universal human search for transcendence, or, as Eliade put it, as part of the “morphology of the sacred.” From this perspective, however, the way the Council’s experts engage with the phenomenon of religion can indeed be regarded as contextual.

The preferences adopted by theologians of the conciliar era come as no surprise, particularly in light of the period’s theological discussions concerning approaches

¹¹ It is worth noting that the phrase “*homo ens religiosum appellari possit*” (emphasis original) was later even included in the *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae* (see CCE 28).

deemed reductionist by Christian theologians and philosophers. In the decades preceding the Second Vatican Council, works by authors such as Bronislaw Malinowski emerged, who viewed religion as a practical coping mechanism resulting from the psychophysical needs of the individual (cf. Malinowski 1925), Freud, who described religion as the wishful fulfillment of human desires and the equivalent of collective neurosis (cf. Freud 1927), and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, who considered religion a system of practices and beliefs that serve to maintain the integrity of the social order (cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1945). Such authors frequently sought to explain away religion in purely natural or psychological terms, which, from the perspective of those aligned with the Christian worldview, was regarded as provocative and overly naturalistic.

However, significant developments have occurred in both theological reflection and religious studies since then. After the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church began to address interreligious dialogue and the possible directions for a theological approach to religious pluralism in various ways. John Paul II's teachings, while remaining within the perspective of the theology of the "seeds of the Word," placed greater emphasis on the action of the Holy Spirit in all human reality, including the cultures and religions of the world (see, e.g., *RM* 28). During the latter half of the 20th century, the role of non-Christian religions in the salvation of their followers was widely debated among Catholic theologians, although interest in this subject declined somewhat following the publication of the declaration *Dominus Iesus* (2000) by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which was accompanied by disciplinary measures against several Catholic theologians.¹² However, despite these events, the whole issue of the reception of Vatican II's teaching on non-Christian religions is not considered closed. Also, Pope Francis's position is perceived as unclear by certain groups, as evidenced by the recent controversy surrounding his statements on religion, which some have interpreted as a departure from Catholic orthodoxy (cf. *Pope Francis Stirs Controversy* 2024). Therefore, the question of how far the teachings on religion outlined at the Council can be interpreted remains relevant.

Concurrently, in recent decades, religious studies have increasingly converged with anthropology and other disciplines. Multi-method, multifaceted approaches have become predominant, while extreme, reductionist trends have declined (cf. Bennett 1996). Non-reductive religious studies has been criticized by anthropologists and field researchers, who have subsequently forced it to revise its assumptions, particularly in light of challenges related to the comparative method and the philosophical premise of religion's irreducibility (cf. Idinopulos and Yonan 1994). Naturalistic approaches, such as the Cognitive Science of Religion, which have at times been employed in a highly reductionist manner by "new atheists" like Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, have been criticized for their methodological

¹² On the debate concerning the declaration *Dominus Iesus* and later notifications of Dupuis, Jon Sobrino, and Roger Haight, see Tan 2013.

limitations in accounting for the phenomenon of religion, as well as for their lack of “epistemic humility” regarding the truth claims of various belief systems (cf. Barrett and Church 2013). Today, extremely reductionist approaches that completely ignore the perspectives of religious communities are rare, while “non-reductionist” approaches cannot ignore research in neurobiology, evolutionary theory, and other “harder” sciences.

In the current situation, theologians are free to choose an appropriate concept of religion, provided their approach does not explicitly contradict the fundamental principles of theology, such as the existence of God or the authenticity of religious experience. This is also the case in point when studying religiosity as a human phenomenon; it should be noted that describing, for instance, certain religious ideas as the product of specific cognitive patterns does not necessarily imply a denial of the reality of these beliefs. Contemporary religious studies offer theologians a wide variety of approaches; therefore, the next section is limited to one example.

3. Still to Say: “Religion” as a Human Phenomenon

Vatican II led to a significant period of theological reflection on religion and inter-religious dialogue, during which various approaches were experimented with. These included interreligious monastic dialogue and the dialogue of experience (see, e.g., the work of Raimon Panikkar and the activities of the organization Dialogue Inter-religieux Monastique / Monastic Interreligious Dialogue [DIMMID, n.d.]), as well as the practice of comparative theology (see Clooney 2010) and proposals emerging from postcolonial perspectives on the theology of religions (see Dagers 2013). Furthermore, certain issues discussed by the Council but not directly addressed in *Nostra aetate*, such as the situation of African religions, were addressed in official documents and in theological reflection. In systematic theology, the focus also shifted in various ways. Some authors developed the approach to non-Christian religions outlined during Vatican II in terms of Trinitarian theology (see, e.g., D’Costa 2000; or for interreligious dialogue, Barnes 2002, 205–29). Others attempted to ground their theology in the concept of revelation. This can be seen in the work of evangelical authors such as Daniel Strange (2014) and his theory of “remnantal revelation,” and in Catholic circles, for instance, in the theory of the “revelatory origin of religion” presented by theologians from the Catholic University of Lublin (see, e.g., Ledwoń 2006; cf. Rusecki 2007). Recently, there have also been attempts to engage theology in dialogue with the Cognitive Science of Religion (see Gornandt 2023), as well as attempts to apply naturalistic approaches to religion within theological reflection (see Henriksen 2023). These largely stem from non-Catholic thinkers. All such attempts offer inspiration for seeking alternative perspectives on religion, addressing what

remained *unsaid* during the Council period, and what there is *still to say* in contemporary discussions on non-Christian religions.

Building on the previous discussion of applying naturalistic theories of religion to theology, I offer a brief sketch of an alternative approach to the concept of religion in theological reflection, suggesting three directions for its development. As we have seen, the background to *Nostra aetate* and conciliar teaching on religion in general reveals a perspective that views religion as an irreducible phenomenon arising from the experience of a "mysterious power" and as an expression of the human search for God. I have attempted to demonstrate that this perspective is contextual. Consequently, we may consider what a theological narrative of human religiosity might entail if we were to replace the phenomenological–historical approach with an alternative vision—one that treats religion as a *human* phenomenon reducible to cultural factors and emerging through the evolution of the human species.

This approach is akin to explanations of the origins of religion as proposed, for instance, by evolutionary psychology. This field of study assumes that the brain, like any other organ, has evolved over time and can therefore be examined from an evolutionary perspective, which means the brain's outputs are also subject to evolutionary analysis (Liddle and Shackelford 2021, 2). The focus is therefore on evolved psychological mechanisms in which elements of religion, such as images, ideas, behaviors, social structures, and rituals, are rooted. According to this view, elements of religion arose in the human species in the context of changes related to the evolution of the human brain (either as a by-product or as an adaptation; this is a matter of debate among scholars). From this perspective, the notion of an "irreducible essence" of religion becomes irrelevant. Instead, what we encounter is a set of ideas, beliefs, and practices shaped by specific cognitive mechanisms that generate the phenomena collectively referred to as religiosity. In this way, religion can be studied as a phenomenon whose foundations are deeply embedded in our mental and physical structures, containing elements present not only in humans but also in animals (notably ritualization and behaviors indicating some form of mourning for deceased members of the species).

Such naturalistic approaches allow for more nuanced descriptions of religion, taking into account the complexity of human religiosity and phenomena that are sometimes referred to as pseudo-religious or crypto-religious. An example of a corresponding perspective of religion is provided by Christian Smith, who defines religion as a "complex of culturally prescribed practices, based on premises about the existence and nature of superhuman powers ... which seek to help practitioners gain access to and communicate or align themselves with these powers, in hopes of realising human goods and avoiding things bad." (Smith 2017, 22) This approach emphasizes the importance of practices rather than religious doctrines and ideas alone; here, religion is understood as a set of practices that may be linked to particular beliefs, together creating a highly dynamic picture of human religiosity. According to Smith,

“clusters of religious practices are always diverse, converging, and diverging, [t]he boundaries of religious traditions are porous,” hence the temporal continuities of religious traditions are relative (Smith 2017, 48). This means that “religious cultures and institutions are always located somewhere in the middle range of a spectrum between the extremes of absolute flux and permanent changelessness.” (Smith 2017, 48) Living, real religions are therefore not coherent, abstract systems of belief but rather complex matrices of elements that typically appear in religious contexts, yet may also emerge in secular settings.

When viewed from a theological perspective, these theories of religion may be employed to emphasize the anthropological aspect of human religiosity, viewing humanity as an “evolved image of God” (cf. Henriksen 2023). Against the background of conciliar teaching, which regards non-Christian religions as (merely) manifestations of natural human endeavor that must be perfected through supernatural revelation, this approach emphasizes that the world has been filled with God’s grace from the very beginning. Elements of what we call religion developed alongside the evolution of humankind as a species, and this entire process occurred in God’s presence and in relation to the work of the Holy Spirit. If we take seriously the belief that human beings are created in the image of God—or, according to the theology of some Church Fathers such as Gregory of Nyssa or Irenaeus of Lyons, in the image of Christ who is the true image of God—we must also recognize that the creatures becoming human through the process of evolution were shaped from the beginning in such a way as to reveal in themselves the image of the Son of God who was to become incarnate.

From this point of view, it is meaningless to determine at what moment—or whether it was a single moment—the elements that constitute religion became a means of communication between humans and God and among humans themselves. Nor does it seem reasonable to decide whether these “religions” were willed and established by God *de jure*, or whether religious pluralism exists only *de facto*, under God’s permissive will. If all of created reality is touched by grace, and the mechanisms that generate religion are inscribed in human cognitive mechanisms, bodily existence, social structures, and specific patterns of religious thought, then it is difficult to treat them merely as an “accident at work” (the more pressing issue is the problem of human nature being wounded by sin; however, this topic requires a separate discussion).

In this regard, various forms of the theology of religion following “Rahner’s line” appear to offer an appropriate theological framework. From this perspective, the turning point in the history of salvation for Christians is not an abstract supernatural revelation, but the coming of Christ. His advent is understood as the culmination of God’s self-giving and the enduring reality of the hypostatic union (cf. Rahner 1982, 157–58). The central category in this approach to the theology of religion is incarnation, not revelation. If we profess that, in the incarnation, the Son of God truly became man, we must recognize that, by expressing himself through the

human nature of Jesus of Nazareth, he also took on all the imperfect, “messy,” evolutionarily developed human tendencies and mechanisms that constitute the human condition. Furthermore, by incarnating at a specific point in history, the Word embraced all the human phenomena that shaped religion within that context, thereby initiating the tradition we now call Christianity. Firstly, this approach allows theologians to view Christianity in the same way as other religions and to draw on insights from non-theological disciplines to illuminate the human, “mundane” aspects of ecclesial life that might otherwise go unnoticed. Secondly, this seemingly naturalistic approach to religion paves the way for theological reflection on religions as anthropology. Reflecting on religions in this way means reflecting on human nature, in which various psychophysical mechanisms serve as a medium of communication between God and man.

A second theme that emerges from this naturalistic understanding of religion is the blurring of the sharp distinction between religion and “non-religion.” According to this perspective, non-Christian religions are no longer considered distinct, irreducible entities, separate from unbelief and atheism. Instead, they are seen as one possible manifestation of the human mechanisms that generate religious practices and worldviews, which are also present in non-religious settings. Consequently, the question of the Church’s relationship to non-Christian religions becomes, more broadly, a question of its relationship to the realm of human religiosity, which encompasses not only traditional religions but also diffused religion, secular religions, “non-religions,” and atheism.¹³

Even during the Second Vatican Council’s discussions on the draft concerning non-Christian religions, some Council Fathers suggested considering the situation of non-Christians who do not profess any religion. For instance, Bishop Walenty Wójcik recommended that the section on non-Christians, initially intended for the decree on ecumenism, also include those raised outside any religion as well as individuals who had abandoned the Christian faith (see AS II.5, 829). However, the issue of atheism was addressed in another draft, which ultimately became part of the *Gaudium et spes* constitution (cf. AS IV.4, 703; see GS 19–22). Despite their ambiguity, religions were regarded as a preparation for the Gospel; by contrast, the world of unbelief was perceived as a threat to Christianity, partly due to the political context of the Eastern Bloc. This approach remained present in the teachings of Paul VI and John Paul II and, in a somewhat modified form, in those of Benedict XVI.

However, contemporary research on religion shows that it is impossible to clearly separate the religious and non-religious worlds, and that the landscape of human religiosity in the first half of the 21st century is becoming increasingly fluid and complex. More attention is being given to phenomena such as multiple religious

¹³ On the discussion concerning the phenomenon of “nonreligiousness,” see, e.g., Zuckerman, Galen, and Pasquale 2016.

affiliations, new religious movements, “nones” (people who do not profess any religion), and various types of “seekers.” The sociology of religion has long demonstrated that a lack of religious affiliation does not necessarily imply irreligiosity. Expanding theological reflection on human religiosity to include these difficult-to-define phenomena draws attention to topics such as the spirituality of seekers and dialogue with “secular spirituality.” It allows them to be seen as integral aspects of the human religious experience.

The third topic, which will only be briefly touched upon here, concerns the use of patristic sources for theological reflection on the phenomenon of religion. The Second Vatican Council’s teaching on religion generally refers only to patristic texts that fit into theologies of “seeds of the Word” and “preparation for the Gospel.” Thus, references are made to Eusebius of Caesarea (*LG* 16), Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus of Lyon (*AG* 3).¹⁴ *Nostra aetate* contains no references to patristic texts; the only footnote that referred to Irenaeus of Lyon’s idea of “the Word, who has been always present with the human race, by means indeed of various dispensations” (*Adv. haer.* IV.28.2) was ultimately removed from the draft as ambiguous (*AS* IV.4, 702). However, as Ireneusz S. Ledwoń notes, because the perspective of fulfillment theology resonated with the Council’s pastoral and missionary orientation, the field of interest was somewhat artificially narrowed to include only those patristic sources that fit within this framework (see Ledwoń 2012, 12). This approach to patristic texts was also linked to the specific attitude to religion noted above: in order to present religions in a positive light in the Council’s teachings, only certain specific themes that related directly to non-Christian religious phenomena were emphasized, above all, the idea of “pagan wisdom,” since pagan cults themselves were generally viewed negatively by the Church Fathers.

Nevertheless, when human religiosity is considered from an anthropological perspective, it opens the possibility of drawing inspiration in different ways. For instance, Ruth Gornandt, in her article on the dialogue between theology and Cognitive Science of Religion, refers to John of Damascus’s notion of knowledge of God as “naturally implanted in man,” as well as to Tertullian’s concept of the “naturally Christian soul.” (Gornandt 2023, 751–52) This inspiration could also extend to other themes, particularly *imago Dei* theology, reflections on the meaning of human corporeality, the relationship between nature and grace, and the creation and deification of human nature. In this context, the anthropology of the Antiochian school, including Irenaeus of Lyon, who sees the image of God in human corporeality, seems particularly inspiring. There have already been attempts to present theological narratives of God’s creation of the world and humanity through evolution, with the authors also

¹⁴ More information on patristic inspiration in the Council’s teaching on non-Christians can be found in footnote 38 to paragraph 10 of the second draft of the *De Ecclesia* schema, which was ultimately deleted. This footnote contains a detailed study of relevant themes from the works of the Church Fathers (see *AS* II.1, 228).

drawing on patristic sources in their reflections (see Edwards 1999; Haight 2019). Nevertheless, applying such a perspective to religion as an evolutionarily created human phenomenon remains to be explored.

Conclusion

The examples above represent just one way in which the ideas articulated during Vatican II can be developed further today. Examining the Council’s teaching on non-Christian religions reveals that its approach to religion was shaped by the intellectual climate of the time. This was characterized by a distinctive hermeneutics of religion, combining pastoral sensitivity with a philosophical–phenomenological understanding of humanity as *homo religiosus*. From today’s perspective, it can be said that the declaration *Nostra aetate*, together with the teachings on religion contained in other conciliar texts, opened the way and set the course, allowing for further creative theological reflection on religion and religions.

Bringing to light both the *said* and the *unsaid within the said* shows that, even six decades after the Council, there is much *still to say*. Applying contemporary theories of religion to the Council’s perspective opens the way to examine the links between theological and non-theological sciences of religion, the status of religion as a human phenomenon within salvation history, its connection to the world of “non-religion,” and the experiences of seekers. In this sense, reflection on the Council’s approach to the notion of religion is not a closed chapter, but rather a dynamic process in which theology, anthropology, and the empirical sciences can collaborate to develop a new language with which to narrate the story of humanity and the world: created by God, ordered by the Logos, and sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit from the very beginning.

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