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# The Council Fathers' Discussions and Controversies on the Inclusion of References to Islam in the Second Vatican Council Documents

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**Abstract:** This article presents a detailed account of the evolution of references to Islam during the Second Vatican Council. Analyses reveal systematic changes, beginning with the Council Fathers' narrow perspective at the Council's outset (related to differing interpretations of the principle *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*), continuing through preparations for Vatican II and the changes occurring during individual sessions. The dynamics of this process encompassed the activity of Middle Eastern bishops (especially the Melkite hierarchy) and Pope Paul VI, as well as the evolution of texts on Islam in the documents *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate*. It is significant that the theology of Louis Massignon, developed in the first half of the 20th century, became an acceptable basis for references to Islam in the Council's documents. Nevertheless, the path to the official recognition of the necessity of dialogue with Muslims, from the Council's lack of interest in non-Christian religions to the adoption of references to Islam, was long, difficult, and at the same time fascinating. Finally, in *Nostra aetate*, the passage on Islam (no. 3) is presented before the mention of Judaism (no. 4). The article shows how these concise Council mentions of Islam—due to their official character, their essentially positive content, and the direction of the Church's thought and action—ultimately paved a new path for Catholic communities.

**Keywords:** Second Vatican Council, Islam, *Lumen gentium*, *Nostra aetate*, Muslims, oriental Christians, Maximos IV, Paul VI

In the 1950s, no one in the Congregation of the Holy Office (*Sanctum Officium*) planned to make positive doctrinal pronouncements on Islam. Just two years before John XXIII (1958–1963) announced the Council, in 1957, Pope Pius XII (1939–1958) spoke critically of Islam in a veiled, descriptive manner in his encyclical *Fidei donum*. While he did not explicitly mention Islam or Muslims, the audience knew the reality he was referring to:

> Vobis sane haud ignotae sunt eorum religiosae vitae rationes, qui, quamvis Dei cultum profiteri contendant, multorum tamen animos ad aliam viam facile trahunt et alliciunt, quae Iesu Christi non est, cunctarum gentium Servatoris. Noster communis Patris animus ad cordatos homines universos patet; verumtamen, cum eius in terris vices geramus, qui Via, Veritas ac Vita est, summa cum aegritudine eiusmodi rerum condiciones non considerare non possumus (Of course, you know the religious tenets of those people who, although they are quick to profess that they worship God, nevertheless are easily


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> attracting and enticing the minds of many into another path which is not that of Jesus Christ, the Savior of all nations. Our heart, which is that of the common Father of all, is open to every man of good will; but We, who are the representative on earth of Him, Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, cannot contemplate such a situation without great sorrow [*FD* 19]).

We must therefore ask what happened between 1957 and 1965 that, just a few years after the promulgation of *Fidei donum*, the pessimistic tone of this encyclical of Pius XII was overshadowed by the documents *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate*.

## 1. Reasons for the Absence of Mentions of Islam in the Preparatory Stage and the First Session of the Second Vatican Council

During the preparatory stage (*vota*) and the first session of the Council, no proposals for a new approach to the relationship between the Catholic Church and Islam emerged. Robert Caspar (1923–2007) even suggested that this topic had been explicitly removed from the program proposed to the Council by the *Commissio antepraeparatoria* (Caspar 1976, 1). The legacy of turbulent Christian–Muslim and classical relations was likely still present, despite a certain evolution in the perspective on Islam (Unsworth 2008, 299–316). In the first stages of Vatican II, the thinking of most Council Fathers was marked by the legacy of the theological formulation of the principle *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* ("there is no salvation outside the Church"). This is not the place to present the development of the understanding of this idea from Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 30–ca. 107), Irenaeus (ca. 140–ca. 202), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–ca. 212), Origen (ca. 185–ca. 253), and many Church Fathers. It is only worth emphasizing that, from Augustine (354–430) onwards, this principle was gradually made more specific, excluding salvation for those who did not belong to the Church. Until the 20th century, the clergy's views on Islam were influenced by papal interpretations and the conciliar principle *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (Sullivan 1992, 63; Aydin 2002, 13–16). The canon of such rulings included the statement of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), which recognized that

> una vero est fidelium universalis ecclesia, extra quam nullus omnino salvatur (there is indeed one universal church of the faithful, outside of which nobody at all is saved [Fourth Lateran Council [1215] 1990, 230]).

Leaving aside the extreme view of Boniface VIII (1294–1303), who in his famous bull *Unam sanctam* (1302) went so far as to state that for salvation it was necessary to be a member of the Church and to recognize papal authority (Boniface VIII 1908, 385–86),

the Council of Florence (1442) expressed a very clear opinion. It had a decisive impact on the formation of the Catholic clergy:

> firmiter credit, profitetur et prédicat nullos extra ecclesiam catholicam existentes, non solum pagaio nos, sed nec ludeos aut hereticos atque scismaticos eterne vite fieri posse participes ([The Church] firmly believes, professes and preaches that all those who are outside the Catholic Church, not only pagans but also Jews or heretics and schismatics, cannot share in eternal life [Council of Basel–Ferrara–Florence–Rome [1431–1445] 1990, 578]).

Thus, during the preparatory phase and at the opening of the Second Vatican Council, the Church's theological approach to Islam was, in many respects, defined by the dogmatic pronouncements of the *Magisterium Ecclesiae*. Christian prejudices against Islam and erroneous interpretations of this religion, accumulated over centuries, were also significant. It is known that the Church first perceived Islam as a Christian heresy and, over time, as an aggressive religious system that encountered numerous polemics and criticism. Essentially, for centuries, the Catholic Church portrayed Muhammad as a false prophet (Esposito 1998, 14).

Thus, this legacy, along with the multiplying problems of the Catholic Church in a secularizing world, meant that during the preparatory phase of the Council, Church representatives generally did not express a need for specific mentions of Islam in the Council documents. This is evidenced by the so-called *vota* that began arriving after Pope John XXIII announced the need for an ecumenical council on January 25, 1959. Cardinal Domenico Tardini (1888–1961), who chaired the Antepreparatory Commission (*Commissio antepraeparatoria*), sent a letter to all those who, under the law at the time, had the right to be consulted and to propose topics they wished to discuss at the Council. The broad definition of Canon 223 of the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* was applied. As a result, in addition to diocesan and titular bishops, various nonepiscopal clergy, such as abbots, apostolic prefects, and others, were consulted. Furthermore, requests were also sent to every department of the Roman Curia and all Catholic universities and faculties. An analysis of the dozen or so volumes of folio responses contained in the *Acta et documenta Concilio Oecumenico Vaticano II apparando* (series Antepraeparatoria 1), commonly referred to collectively as *vota*, indicates that the need to address Islam was generally not seen. It is clear that at this stage, a Eurocentric model of the Church was clearly dominant. Antepraeparatoria comprises three volumes devoted to European responses (*ADA* II.1–3), while only one volume each is devoted to Asia (*ADA* II.4), Africa (*ADA* II.5), North and Central America (*ADA* II.6), South America (*ADA* II.7), and religious congregations (*ADA* II.8). A separate volume presents the responses of the Roman Curia (*ADA* III), and subsequent volumes present suggestions from Catholic universities (*ADA* IV.1.1–2; IV.2). Significantly, Islam is not mentioned in

the vota from Asia (*ADA* II.4) and Africa (*ADA* II.5), where the majority of the Muslim population lives.

These *vota* were harshly assessed by theologians and historians of the Second Vatican Council. In retrospect, they were seen as conformist and unoriginal proposals (Morozzo della Rocca 1989, 122), or even too timid and causing great disappointment (Fouilloux 1995, 121, 132). No bold solutions within the Church were proposed. It is therefore not surprising that the issue of Islam was not taken into account either at the opening of the Second Vatican Council or during the initial deliberations on the drafting of the declaration *Nostra aetate*.

It should be emphasized, however, that the preconciliar period witnessed a significant evolution in the understanding of the principle of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*. Paradoxically, some papal pronouncements from the 19th century weakened the radical understanding of this principle, paving the way for dialogue. For example, the traditional approach was corrected by Pius IX (1846–1878), who strongly emphasized God's mercy toward all people and the lack of responsibility on the part of non-Christians before God for the insurmountable obstacles to the full knowledge of Christianity. In allocution *Singulari quadam*, he emphasized:

> Tolga Iddio, Venerabili Fratelli, che Noi osiamo por termini alla misericordia divina che è infinita (Pius IX 2006, 1; "God forbid, Venerable Brethren, that we should dare to set limits to God's mercy, which is infinite" [translation by the author]).

and that

> Poiché si deve tener per fede che nessuno può salvarsi fuori della Chiesa Apostolica Romana, questa è l'unica arca di salvezza; chiunque non sia entrato in essa perirà nel diluvio. Ma nel tempo stesso si deve pure tenere per certo che coloro che ignorano la vera religione, quando la loro ignoranza sia invincibile, non sono di ciò colpevoli dinanzi agli occhi del Signore (Pius IX 2006, 2; "It must, of course, be held as of faith that no one can be saved outside the apostolic Roman Church, that the Church is the only ark of salvation, and that whoever does not enter it will perish in the flood. Yet, on the other hand, it must likewise be held as certain that those who are in ignorance of true religion, if this ignorance is invincible, are not subject to any guilt in this matter before the eyes of the Lord" [translation by Josef Neuner and Jacques Dupuis, in *The Christian Faith* 1996, 386]).

It seems that John XXIII, despite his openness to the need for change in the Catholic Church, did not make any references to Islam during the Council. On September 18, 1960, however, he suggested to Cardinal Augustin Bea (1881–1968) that, as part of the preparations for the Council, the secretariat under his leadership, in addition to ecumenical issues, should also develop a framework for a document on the Church's relations with the Jews. The framework, *De Iudaeis* [On the Jews], was

presented to the pope in November 1961. However, it was not presented at the Council's first session (Kubacki 2022, 113). All indications are that Oriental Christians' intervention contributed to this. Four months before the opening of the first session of the Council, the Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV (1878–1967), having learned by word of mouth about the project of referring to Judaism in the Council documents, stated the following in the "Note to the Central Commission," dated at Damascus, June 5, 1962:

> We understand very well the reasons that motivated proposing this "decree." The Church owes it to itself to acknowledge the glories, the promises, and the mission of the Jewish people. It also owes it to itself to eliminate from its liturgy, from the thoughts and actions of its faithful every trace of spite, vengeance, or racial discrimination against the Jewish people.
>
> We would suggest only that, in order to avoid any confusion tending to be of a political character, the text make a clear distinction between the Jewish people as a religious community—the only aspect which interests the council—and the State of Israel, which must be treated according to the same criteria that govern the relations between the Church and civil societies, without any privilege or special consideration on the part of the Church.
>
> We would equally wish that a similar decree be prepared relative to Islam and other monotheist religions. Christians who have frequent relationships with the followers of these religions would be pleased to know some positive teaching of the Church concerning them, beyond purely and simply rejecting them as "errors." (Maximos IV 1992b)

The Melkite bishops were particularly sensitive to the complex political situation in the Middle East, which influenced the work of the Second Vatican Council. The Synod of the Melkite Church held at Ayn-Trāz in Lebanon issued a communiqué on August 31, 1962, stating that

> In the meeting held by His Beatitude Maximos IV…, and the bishops of the Greek Catholic community … pointed out the attempts made by members of certain sects or by persons with political aims to stir up trouble among the Christians of Arab lands and induce them to doubt the right that their brothers the Palestinian refugees have to return to their country and to recover their land. (Synode of the Melkite Church in Ain Traz 1992a)

## 2. Louis Massignon's Theology as a Background to the Mentions of Islam in *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*

Pope John XXIII died on June 3, 1963, between the end of the first session on December 8, 1962, and the beginning of the second session on September 29, 1963.

The new pope, Paul VI (1963–1978), who belonged to the Badaliya community of the Islam scholar, Louis Massignon (1883–1962), began an exciting chapter in the Church's new understanding of Islam (Caspar 1970, 126–47). It is worth examining Massignon, who contributed to the Catholic reinterpretation of Islam, even though for many Catholics this religion seemed to have already been definitively qualified and evaluated by the *Magisterium Ecclesiae*. It was a great paradox that Massignon died on October 31, 1962, during the first session of the Council (October 11 to December 8, 1962) and three years before the issuance of the declaration *Nostra aetate*. Nevertheless, it is believed that his in-depth research largely paved the way for the positive vision of Islam presented by the Council Fathers in *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate* (Caspar 1970, 126–47; Robinson 1991, 182–205; O'Mahony 2008a, 169–82; Krokus 2012, 525; Buck 2017).

Due to his exceptionally prolific output, Massignon was described by François Angelier as *un savant à la production océanique* ("a scholar with an oceanic output") (Massignon 2009, 2:942). His output encompasses numerous books, articles, conferences, lectures, reviews, forewords, reports, overviews, translations, correspondence, poems, prayers, prints, notes, and maps. A complete bibliography of Massignon's works is contained in the edition of *Écrits mémorables* edited by Angelier, Christian Jambet, and Souâd Ayad (Massignon 2009, 2:942–97).

This article is not the place to discuss Massignon's extensive legacy. However, it is worth capturing his intuitions and suggestions, which were included in the Council documents. First, as a scholar of Sufism, Massignon, in the first two decades of the 20th century, discovered divine inspiration in the work and teachings of the Muslim crucified in Baghdad, Abū l-Muġīṯ al-Ḥusain ibn Manṣūr al-Ḥallāǧ (ca. 858–922). It was these analyses that allowed him to discern a common monotheistic basis and Christian elements in the work of this Sufi mystic. From then on, Massignon became a kind of "mediator," advocating friendly relations and reconciliation between followers of different religions, especially monotheistic (Abrahamic) ones, i.e., Christians, Jews, and Muslims (Massignon 1922).

Moreover, the entire context of the creation of *La passion de Husayn ibn Mansûr Hallâj* indicates not only the theoretical but also the practical experience of the author. "The Islamic Catholicism of Louis Massignon," to use Jerrold Seigel's term (Seigel 2016, 115–51), was grounded in a living relationship with the Baghdad Muslim family of al-Alūsī, who saved his life and allowed him to repeatedly experience the Arab hospitality that Massignon praised throughout his life. He studied Islam with members of this family in Iraq, and al-Alūsī also helped him gather sources for his great work on al-Ḥallāǧ (Waardenburg 2005, 312–42; O'Mahony 2008a, 176).

Massignon deepened his understanding of the common monotheistic tradition of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam through analyses of Abraham's three prayers in the Book of Genesis (Massignon 1997, 20–150). He addressed these reflections to his friends, eminent thinkers of the era: Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961), Jean

Genet (1910–1986), Maurice Blondel (1861–1949), and Paul Claudel (1868–1955). Consequently, these ideas also influenced French thinkers from the circles of Catholic modernism (for more details, see O'Mahony 2006, 151–92). He aroused the interest of Thomas Merton (1915–1968) in his approach, who in 1960 wrote to Jean Danielou (1905–1974): "Louis Massignon strikes me as a grand person. He has been writing about all the causes in which he is interested." (Merton 1985, 134)

Massignon seems to have seized every opportunity to reinforce the need to revise the traditional approach to Islam. He developed his reflections on divine transcendence and its influence, boldly entering the realm of apophatic theology. He drew inspiration primarily from mystical figures and his studies of Islam. In *Réponse à l'Enquête sur l'idée de Dieu et ses conséquences* [Response to the Survey on the Idea of God and its Consequences], he addressed the impossibility of fully expressing God, because the Creator's transcendence surpasses all human thoughts and concepts. According to Massignon, God's existence stems from the recognition that thought is incapable of comprehending him, because thinking about God is already a limitation of the infinite God (Massignon 2009, 1:5–8). This broader perspective led him to embrace monotheistic transcendence in Islam.

It is worth emphasizing that Massignon, on the advice of an Egyptian feminist and Christian mystic, Maryam Kahīl (1889–1979), sometimes referred to as "the great lady of Egypt" (Keryell 2010), and with the consent of Pope Pius XII, adopted the Melkite (Arabic) Greek Catholic rite on February 5, 1949. This act allowed Massignon to better understand both Arab Christians and Muslims (Wilkins 2008, 355–73; O'Mahony 2007, 6–41; 2008b, 269–98). This "passionate friendships of Louis Massignon"—to use Brenna Moore's term—bore more fruit (Moore 2021, 94). Together with Kahīl, he founded the Badaliya community, a Christian association of the Eastern Rite, uniting everyone in prayer for dialogue with Muslims (Massignon 2011). The Arabic name *Badaliya* translates to "mystical substitution." (Dall'Oglio 2008, 329) It derives from the word badal (بدل), which literally means "exchange." Massignon understood it in many ways (Massignon 1987, 387–402), but primarily as "acceptance and bearing the suffering of another person." (Wilkins 2008, 355) The community was founded in 1934 in a former Anglican church in Garden City, renamed the Church of Our Lady of Peace. The foundation of the Badaliya community was inspired by the life of Jesus, Manṣūr al-Ḥallāǧ, the Trinitarian Fathers (Ordo Sanctissimae Trinitatis), and the Mercedarian Fathers (Ordo Beatae Mariae de Mercede Redemptionis Captivorum). At the same time, the community supported the Organization of Secondary Schools in Egypt and numerous social projects for women (Keryell 2010, 30–154; Moore 2021, 74–113).

Massignon was also influenced spiritually by St. Francis (1181–1226) and Anna Katharina Emmerick (1774–1824), and pursued his vocation in the spirit of Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916). Some scholars consider him the greatest fruit of de Foucauld's singular mission (Didier 2008, 337–53). Massignon was also a friend of

Gandhi (1869–1948) and a proponent of his ideas and values. The eminent orientalist, Henry Corbin (1903–1978), regarded him as a great teacher.

## 3. Subsequent Sessions of Vatican II: The Development of References to Islam

After the preparatory phase and the first Council session, which did not include any discussion of Islam, the issue arose during the second session (September–December 1963) in rather specific circumstances. The election of Cardinal Giovanni Battista Enrico Antonio Maria Montini (1897–1978) as pope on June 20, 1963, elevated to the apostolic see a cleric who, even as Undersecretary of State, had distinguished himself among the Curia for his interest in Islam. Cardinal Montini advocated prayer meetings aimed at reconciliation and building peace between followers of different religions. From his election, Paul VI advocated a more in-depth look at Islam. His influence was revealed, often discreetly and indirectly, in the drafting of Council texts on Islam (Borrmans 1978, 1–7).

However, it is worth noting all those who, between 1963 and 1965, contacted Pope Paul VI in developing references to Islam. The second session focused on developing frameworks on the Church and ecumenism. This latter framework included, among other things, the chapter "On the Relationship of Catholics to Non-Christians, and Especially to Jews." The text was drafted at the initiative of Pope John XXIII, who entrusted its development to Cardinal Bea. The first three chapters were the subject of lively discussion. Patriarch Maximos IV pointed out in particular that one cannot speak of Jews without speaking of other religions, especially Islam (Caspar 1966, 1; Borelli 2021, 11–15). This opinion was supported by many bishops of the Middle East (Sabra 2021, 245–64; Griffith 2021, 163–86). The position adopted was that either the issue would not be raised at all or, if it was, Muslims should be mentioned (Ellis 2021, 187–209). Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV was one of those who pushed for the latter position. It is worth emphasizing that the exclusion of non-Christian religions from the ecumenical schema was, among other things, due to the interventions of Melkite Arab bishops (Melkite Patriarchate of Damascus 1992a). In his intervention during the second session of the Council on November 18, 1963, Patriarch Maximos IV even stated that:

> We must say very clearly—and this is very important—that Chapter IV of the schema, which has recently been distributed to us, is absolutely extraneous. Ecumenism is an effort for the gathering together of the whole Christian family, that is to say, the consolidation of all those who have been baptized in Christ. It is thus a strictly intimate family affair. Non-Christians are thus not involved. One cannot see what the Jews are going to do in Christian ecumenism, and why they have been introduced into it. (Maximos IV 1992a)

Maximos IV's argument also:

> Then, if one speaks of the Jews, it is also necessary to speak of the other non-Christian religions, and above all of the Muslims, who number 400 million, and among whom we live as a minority.
>
> Let us then be just and logical. If we wish to disavow anti-Semitism—and all of us disavow it—a short note condemning both anti-Semitism and racial segregation would be sufficient. It is useless to create harmful agitation in the world. (Maximos IV 1992a)

It is therefore not surprising that Karl Rahner (1904–1984) even wrote about the "Arab lobby," that is, representatives of the Arabized Oriental Uniate Churches who insisted that the Council address Islam in some distinct way (Rahner and Lapide 1987, 4). Otherwise, the Council's ecumenical activities would have been perceived as a "Zionist conspiracy."

A note from the Bulletin de Presse of the Melkite Patriarchate of Damascus, dated December 31, 1964, titled "The Jewish Problem at the Council and Arab Reactions," strongly emphasized that

> The reaction of Arab countries to the conciliar declaration on the Jews surpassed in violence the most pessimistic expectations. Like any popular reaction, it at times went too far, above all because of the public's ignorance of the exact tenor of the conciliar text, which, as we know, was still only a draft. But, even independent of all passionate exaggeration, the reaction of the Arabic peoples, Christian and Muslim, Orthodox, Protestant or Catholic, should be an eye-opener. (Melkite Patriarchate of Damascus 1992b)

Pope Paul VI decided to follow the path recommended by Maximilian IV and therefore established commissions to introduce references to Islam into the Council documents, in *Nostra aetate* and *Lumen gentium*. Intensive work and consultations were undertaken during the recess between the second and third sessions of the Council (i.e., between December 4, 1963, and September 14, 1964). In January 1964, Cardinal Bea informed Cardinal Amleto Giovanni Cicognani (1883–1973), chair of the Council's Coordination Commission, that the Council Fathers wanted the Council to pronounce on the great monotheistic religions, including Islam. Cardinal Bea believed that this topic fell outside the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity's competence. At the Coordination Commission meeting on April 16–17, 1964, Cardinal Cicognani announced that it would be necessary to address the Muslim question and that special commissions would be needed to do so. Two commissions were simultaneously instructed to insert a paragraph on Islam into individual texts. The Commission for the Schema of the Church introduced it in Chapter II, "The People of God," in paragraph 16, concerning the relationship of "those who have not yet received the Gospel" with the People of God. After four verses

referring to the Jews, the text of *Lumen gentium* continued, "The sons of Ismael are not alien to the Revelation given to the Fathers, who, recognizing Abraham as their father, also believe in the God of Abraham." A footnote was intended to clarify that the term "sons of Ismael" refers to Muslims. In turn, the Commission for the Ecumenical Schema decided to separate the former Chapter IV from the schema text and transform it into a "Declaration on Jews and Non-Christians," annexed to the schema along with another declaration on religious freedom. A subcommittee composed of eminent Arab specialists (e.g., Georges Anawati) was tasked with drafting a special section on Islam. The document included the following statement:

> Guided by love for our brothers, we treat with great respect those views and doctrines which, though differing from ours in many respects, often reflect a ray of Truth that enlightens every person who comes into this world. This is how we understand Muslims above all, who worship one God, personal and fulfilling, and who are closer to us through religious feeling and the multifaceted exchange of human culture. (Caspar 1966, 2)

The texts were discussed during the third session of the Council, from September 14 to November 21, 1964. The debates during this session were influenced by three important events outside the Council, initiated by Paul VI in 1964, which powerfully drew the world's attention to the problem of non-Christian religions, particularly Islam. First, from January 4–6, 1964, the pope made a fruitful pilgrimage to the Holy Land, during which he took every opportunity to express his fraternal feelings toward them, including the famous *Le message adressé de Bethléem aux Chrétiens et au monde* ("Message to the World") from Bethlehem, January 6, 1964 (Paul VI 1964b, 178–82). This statement was essentially a "prototype" of the Council's references to Islam:

> We address this reverent greeting in particular to those who profess monotheism and with us direct their religious workshop to the one true God, most high and living, the God of Abraham.… May these peoples, worshipers of the one God, also welcome our best wishes for peace in justice. (Paul VI 1964c)

Then, on Pentecost 1964, at the pope's request, the Secretariat for Non-Christians was established, to which the Undersecretariat for Islam was later added (on March 1, 1965). The secretariat drew on the experience of missionaries, the expertise of specialists in Islamic studies, and the opinions of bishops from Asia and Africa (Borelli 2021, 9–34). Finally, on August 6, 1964, the epoch-making encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* was published, in which Paul VI applied his dialogue to non-Christian religions, in particular

> … deinde [mentionem scilicet] de iis, qui Deum adorant religionis forma, quae monotheismus dicitur, maxime ea qua Mahometani sunt astricti, quos propter ea quae in

> eorum cultu vera sunt et probanda, merito admiramur … (Then we have those worshipers who adhere to other monotheistic systems of religion, especially the Moslem religion. We do well to admire these people for all that is good and true in their worship of God [*ES* 107]).

For their part, the Melkites, as representatives of one of the most numerous Eastern Uniate churches, continued to work to place mention of the followers of Judaism in its proper place and "proportion," while not forgetting Islam. One such action was "A note on the undesirability of making special mention of the Jews in the general declaration on non-Christians." This note, drawn up by the Melkite Holy Synod, concerns the second draft of the "Declaration on the Jews and Non-Christians," dated September 3, 1964. It was sent to all the Council Fathers. Its main message is:

> In the various interventions at the beginning of the second session of the council, the Eastern patriarchs have particularly insisted on the undesirability of a special mention of the Jews in the general declaration on non-Christians, influenced by the highly excited sensibilities of the Arab states and the Muslims, who could not understand and interpret such a mention except as a political support that the Roman See and the whole council wished to give to Zionist claims against the Arabs. The consequences of such an interpretation would be serious for the Christian minority in the said countries. It is not a matter of promulgating a declaration of a speculative type, but of seeing if it is proper for the Church, at the risk of arousing fifty million Arab Muslims against the Christian minority of five to seven million living scattered in their midst, to make declarations that cannot be understood by the interested parties—Jews, Christians, and Muslims of the East except as expressing pro-Israel political tendencies. (Synod of the Melkite Church 1992b)

Extracts from an intervention at Vatican II by Archbishop Yūsuf ʾIlyās Ṭawīl (1913–1999), Patriarchal Vicar General at Damascus, on September 29, 1964, reveal the sensitivity of Arab Christians from the Middle East in order to present Judaism and Islam in a balanced manner:

> This Council has always considered with great diligence the repercussions of its acts and its declarations. Now, does not this declaration of sympathy with the Jews, in spite of all the precautions that have been taken, stir up a burning problem that has not yet been extinguished? Does it not risk the explosion of the powder keg that is unfortunate Palestine, where no less than a million Arabs have been unjustly and violently chased from their lands by those to whom the council makes advances? Doesn't it risk by the same action the alienation of all movement of sympathy by these same peoples to the Catholic Church? And from then on what value would there be in a declaration made by the council on the subject of the Muslims when it will have already lost their friendship? Now, is that what the council is seeking? And hasn't His Eminence Cardinal Bea declared from the

> beginning that it is necessary to choose the practice of the open door? And isn't action of this sort closing it? (Ṭawīl 1992)

Fearing political repercussions, the Melkites also proposed additions to *Nostra aetate*, the declaration on the Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions. They expressed this in a note presented by the Holy Synod in August 1964 titled "Observations on the Draft of the Declaration 'On the Jews and Non-Christians'":

> We do not have any fundamental objection on the theological level in opposing this draft of the declaration. But from a practical viewpoint, we maintain that there should be added to No. 32 a last paragraph, with the following wording:
>
> "This holy council insists on emphasizing that the present declaration—which is a purely religious act inspired only by theological considerations—has no political motive or any political aim. This holy council condemns in advance any tendentious interpretation that would try to give the present declaration any political meaning whatsoever in favor of anyone or against anyone." (Synode of the Melkite Church 1992c)

It is clear that the two texts on Islam presented at the third session (September 1964) elicited numerous, somewhat emotional interventions. The vote on amendments to the schema on the Church, chapter two, containing the section on the "sons of Ismael," met with strong opposition. There were 553 *modi* (proposed changes), of which about 230 favored the section on Muslims (Caspar 1966, 2).

## 4. The Final Form of References to Islam in *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*

The passage on Islam in the dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* aroused emotion and criticism from various quarters. It was questioned whether the expressions used therein prejudged the resolution of difficult and hotly debated issues, such as the historical descent of the Arabs from Ishmael and, in particular, the connection between Islam and biblical revelation. For this reason, numerous *modi* (changes) appeared opposing this text and proposing an alternative formulation, which was incorporated into the final text of the constitution *Lumen gentium* on the Church (Caspar 1966, 3). It was finally approved on November 18, 1964, by the Council Fathers and officially promulgated by Pope Paul VI on November 21 of that same year. The mention of Islam in it reads as follows:

> Sed propositum salutis et eos amplectitur, qui Creatorem agnoscunt, inter quos imprimis Musulmanos, qui fidem Abrahae se tenere profitentes, nobiscum Deum adorant unicum,

> misericordem, homines die novissimo iudicaturum (But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind [*LG* 16]).

Thus, alongside the statements of traditional systematic theology, certain "apophatic" accents appeared, similar to the spirit of Massignon's theology. The passage in *Lumen gentium* following the mention of Islam states that

> Neque ab aliis, qui in umbris et imaginibus Deum ignotum quaerunt, ab huiusmodi Deus ipse longe est, cum det omnibus vitam et inspirationem et omnia (cf. Act 17,25–28), et Salvator velit omnes homines salvos fieri (cf. 1Tim 2,4) (Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is He who gives to all men life and breath and all things, and as Saviour wills that all men be saved. Those also can attain to salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church, yet sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience [*LG* 16]).

The impossibility of fully presenting and knowing God means that there is no shortage of people *qui in umbris et imaginibus Deum ignotum quaerunt* ("Nor is God far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God"). On the other hand, the classical principle *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* has gained an officially approved interpretation:

> Qui enim Evangelium Christi Eiusque Ecclesiam sine culpa ignorantes, Deum tamen sincero corde quaerunt, Eiusque voluntatem per conscientiae dictamen agnitam, operibus adimplere, sub gratiae influxu, conantur, aeternam salutem consequi possunt (Nor does Divine Providence deny the helps necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life [*LG* 16]).

Meanwhile, a lively discussion was underway on the new text of the "Declaration on Jews and Non-Christians." The Subcommittee on Islam reconvened to review numerous interventions and *modi*. A completely new text was produced, entitled "Declaration on the Church's Relations with Non-Christian Religions." This fulfilled Maximos IV's desire for a document independent of the ecumenical framework while remaining under the jurisdiction of the Secretariat of Unity (Cardinal Bea). The section on Muslims was significantly expanded. In 22 verses, it highlights the main features of the Muslim faith and worship and calls for the forgetting of past disputes, dialogue, and cooperation between Christians and Muslims for the common good of humanity. Although it was initially adopted on November 20, 1964,

it was promulgated on October 28, 1965, because several issues required clarification. During the next session, the subcommittee met for the last time in February 1965, and modifications to the text on Islam were introduced. First, formal issues related to terminology were addressed, such as the clarification of *musulmanus* or *muslimus*, *islamicus* or *muslimus*. The supplementary term *misericordem* ("merciful") was added after *viventem et subsistentem* ("living and subsisting") in reference to the God worshipped by Muslims. In principle, only the reservations concerning the mention of family morality were taken into account (*vitam familiarem aestimant*). It was agreed to retain the more general formula *vitam moralem aestimant* ("respect for moral life"). The main body of the text remained unchanged. The fourth and final session finally sealed the final stage of this long drafting process. The vote took place on October 14, and the official promulgation of the declaration took place on October 28, 1965, after a final vote of 2,221 in favor and 88 against out of 2,312 (Caspar 1966, 3–4). Finally, in *Nostra aetate*, the passage on Islam (no. 3) is presented before the mention of Judaism (no. 4). The final text of the section of *Nostra aetate* concerning Islam and Muslims reads as follows:

> Ecclesia cum aestimatione quoque Muslimos respicit qui unicum Deum adorant, viventem et subsistentem, misericordem et omnipotentem, Creatorem caeli et terrae (5), homines allocutum, cuius occultis etiam decretis toto animo se submittere student, sicut Deo se submisit Abraham ad quem fides islamica libenter sese refert. Iesum, quem quidem ut Deum non agnoscunt, ut prophetam tamen venerantur, matremque eius virginalem honorant Mariam et aliquando eam devote etiam invocant. Diem insuper iudicii expectant cum Deus omnes homines resuscitatos remunerabit. Exinde vitam moralem aestimant et Deum maxime in oratione, eleemosynis et ieiunio colunt. Quodsi in decursu saeculorum inter Christianos et Muslimos non paucae dissensiones et inimicitiae exortae sint, Sacrosancta Synodus omnes exhortatur, ut, praeterita obliviscentes, se ad comprehensionem mutuam sincere exerceant et pro omnibus hominibus iustitiam socialem, bona moralia necnon pacem et libertatem communiter tueantur et promoveant (The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God. Though they do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom [*NA* 3]).

Since its promulgation, *Nostra aetate* has become a point of reference for numerous authors examining Muslim–Christian relations (e.g., Sakowicz 1997, 19, 41, 115). However, it should not be forgotten that Massignon was a key figure, whose profound appreciation of Islam significantly influenced the theological content of the mention of Muslims in the Second Vatican Council's declaration *Nostra aetate*. Massignon's open recognition of Islam as an Abrahamic religion and the acknowledgment that Muslims worship the same God as Christians touch upon Massignon's theological vision, which emphasized a common heritage. He also acknowledged the possibility of the Holy Spirit acting in Islam, which ultimately paved the way for positive Christian–Muslim dialogue.

Massignon's influence in *Nostra aetate* was also reflected in the reference to Mary. This "Massignonian *theologoumenon*" is considered crucial to the development of Christian theology of Islam (George-Tvrtković 2017, 768). We find it in the verse quoted above: *matremque eius virginalem honorant Mariam et aliquando eam devote etiam invocant* ("They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion") (*NA* 3). Certainly, the mere mention of the Marian cult in the context of Islam is not solely Massignon's merit. After all, the Council Fathers, such as Maronite Patriarch Moran Mor Naṣrallah Buṭrus Ṣufayr (1920–2019) and Archbishop of Izmir (Smirne) Joseph Emmanuel Descuffi (1884–1972), proposed the commemoration of Mary in *Nostra aetate* for doctrinal reasons (D'Costa 2014, 197–200). Researchers see Massignon's influence in *Nostra aetate's* emphasis on worship rather than doctrine. One can analyze Massignon's texts on the similarities between the Christian cult of Mary and the Muslim cult of Mary and Fatima (George-Tvrtković 2017, 768–69).

## Conclusion

The initial program of the Council did not include Islam. However, the second session, in which the so-called "Arab lobby" (i.e., the Oriental Christian lobby) gained a voice, along with the impressive influence of Massignon, led to a breakthrough, enabling the Church to view Islam from a new perspective.

The topic of Islam at the Second Vatican Council evolved from the unanticipated mention of this religion, through debates over the wisdom of including it, to the final inclusion of passages on Islam in the documents *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate* in 1965, and the continuing influence of Massignon's legacy. Massignon was the spiritual father of this approach, and at the Council, these mentions were sought by the Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV, the bishops of the Middle East, and Pope Paul VI. The discussions also contributed to the inclusion of the passage on Islam in *Nostra aetate* (no. 3) before the mention of Judaism (no. 4). The evolution

of the topic of Islam in the work of the Second Vatican Council is illustrated in the Table 1.

Table 1. Stages of introducing the topic of Islam into the discussions of Vatican Secundum

| | |
|---|---|
| Stage I:<br>by the end of 1962 | (a) A prevailing lack of interest in Islam: the influence of various interpretations of the principle of *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*;<br>(b) A lack of interest in the *Commissio antepraeparatoria/vota* of 1959–1962;<br>(c) The activity of Massignon from 1922 to 1962 to break down stereotypes;<br>(d) 1962: the first suggestions from the Melkite Patriarchate |
| Stage II:<br>1963 to October 1964 | (a) The activity of the "Arab lobby" with the Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV, starting from the second session of the Council;<br>(b) The involvement of Paul VI;<br>(c) The establishment of two commissions to edit references to Islam in the Council documents |
| Stage III:<br>November 1964–1965 | (a) Final editing of the passages on Islam in Lumen gentium and Nostra aetate;<br>(b) Acceptance of the mentions of Islam in *Lumen gentium* (no. 16) and *Nostra aetate* (no. 3) |

Source: author's own elaboration based on source analysis.

The process described above led to the Church's first official recognition of Islam as a religion that inherits the common Abrahamic heritage and the worship of one God. The inclusion of passages on Islam in the documents of the Second Vatican Council was facilitated as outlined in the Table 2.

Table 2. Elements facilitating and reasons for the implementation of the Islamic theme in the documents of Vaticanum Secundum

| | |
|---|---|
| I | Apophatic, Mariological, and moral elements in Massignon's perception of Islamic theology |
| II | Contexts of dialogue of the lives of Oriental Christians in the Islamic world (including political elements) |
| III | Paul VI's sensitivity to the status of Jerusalem and the peaceful coexistence of Christians with Muslims in the holy places of Palestine |

Source: author's own elaboration based on source analysis.

*Nostra aetate*, originally intended to focus solely on Judaism, also sparked political opposition in Arab countries, fearing the document would be used to support the "Zionist conspiracy." The decisive voice was the stance of bishops from the Middle East, where many Christians lived as minorities. The Levantine hierarchs firmly emphasized that since the Council discussed Judaism, it must also address Islam.

Pope Paul VI supported this position, seeking to promote dialogue and peace in the Middle East. Regardless of the political context (which, incidentally, accompanied all councils), diplomatic pressure alone did not determine the content of references to Islam in the Council documents. It is significant that Massignon's theology, developed in the first half of the 20th century, became an acceptable basis for mentions of Islam in *Lumen gentium* and *Nostra aetate*. The path traveled from the forerunners of dialogue with Muslims, the beginning of a Council uninterested in non-Christian religions, to the adoption of the references of Islam was immense and fascinating. These concise references, due to their official nature, essentially positive content, and the orientation of the thought and action of the entire Church, paved a new, indisputable path for all Catholic communities.

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