

**‘How Others Bear Witness to Our Faith: Aquinas and *Lumen Gentium*’
Pim Valkenberg**

Jaarboek Thomas Instituut te Utrecht 33 (2013), p. 55-75

continued as
European Journal for the Study of Thomas Aquinas (2019 - ...)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

You are free to:

Share - copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format

The licensor cannot revoke these freedoms as long as you follow the license terms.

Under the following terms:

Attribution - You must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use.

NonCommercial - You may not use the material for commercial purposes.

NoDerivatives - If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.

HOW OTHERS BEAR WITNESS
TO OUR FAITH
Aquinas and Lumen Gentium

Pim Valkenberg

When Thomas Aquinas writes about faith as one of the theological virtues, he clearly distinguishes between Christians as members of a community that seeks to live in faith inspired by Christ, and others who do not live by this faith and even seem to reject it. In his own historical context Aquinas classified these others as not living by faith, or even stronger as actively resisting faith. So the language that he uses to classify them as unbelievers is undoubtedly negative, and in this respect there seems to be a wide chasm between his theology of unbelievers and our cultural reality of interfaith collaboration that seems to require a different theological approach. And yet, dealing with the question as to whether the rites of unbelievers should be tolerated, Aquinas indicates that there is something good in the fact that Jews publicly show their faith, since even if they are “our enemies” as Aquinas says, they still “bear witness to our faith, and that what we believe is set forth as in a figure.”¹ As the tension between “something good” and “our enemies” indicates, this remark does not lead Aquinas to an overall positive view of Jews, let alone of

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 10, a. 11: “Ex hoc autem quod Judaei ritus suos observant, in quibus olim praefigurabatur veritas fidei quam tenemus, hoc bonum provenit quod testimonium fidei nostrae habemus ab hostibus; et quasi in figura nobis repraesentatur quod credimus.” Text and English translation according to: *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiae*, volume 32: Consequences of Faith (2a2ae. 8-16). Latin text, English translation, Notes & Glossary Thomas Gilby O.P., London: Blackfriars, 1975; reprint Cambridge University Press, 2006, 72-73.

other unbelievers, but nevertheless this “unofficial view,” as Bruce Marshall calls it,² can be mined to partially bridge the hermeneutical distance between Aquinas and our time. In this article, I will use the Second Vatican Council and its dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium* as an interpretive lens to make Aquinas relevant for the way in which the Catholic Church bears witness of its faith in dialogue with religious others.

While I do not think that we can directly learn from Aquinas on this topic because of the enormous difference in the context between his time and ours, I do think that his theological approach – enlightened by the Second Vatican Council and *Lumen Gentium* in particular – can help us to think in a more theological fashion about the relation between Christians and members of the other two Abrahamic faiths: Jews and Muslims. Consequently, I will begin by exploring chapter 16 of the document *Lumen Gentium*, and I will subsequently turn to Thomas Aquinas in order to reach a theological hypothesis about the way in which we might speak about Jews and Muslims as living by a form of faith that somehow bears witness to the faith of Christians.

1. *Lumen Gentium* 16: different relations to the People of God

If we want to find out how the Second Vatican Council may be described as a normative event that may be a hermeneutical mediation between our approach to other religions and that of Thomas Aquinas, it makes sense to look at the institutional dimension first. How did the Church in fact apply its doctrines about its relationships with religious others? Again, we will see that there is a sizeable difference between our times and previous centuries, and again we will see how the Second Vatican Council seems to have a pivotal position in these changes.

In a time in which members of other religions were considered as unbelievers, the Church’s task was to bring them to faith and

² Bruce D. Marshall, “*Quasi in Figura: A Brief Reflection on Jewish Election, after Thomas Aquinas,*” *Nova et Vetera*, English Edition 7/2 (2009): 477-84, on 482.

therefore they would be addressed in an endeavour to promote the Christian faith, as was the objective of the *sacra congregatio de propaganda fide* between 1622 and 1988. Since then, the congregation is renamed *congregatio pro gentium evangelisatione*. Even though its aim is still the proclamation of the Gospel, the distinction between faith and unbelief is no longer that stark.

Fifty years ago, during the second Vatican Council, a separate organization for relations with non-Christians was formed by Pope Paul VI in May 1964, the *secretariatus pro non-Christianis* following the establishment of a secretariat for Christian Unity by Pope John XXIII at the dawn of the Second Vatican Council, in 1960.³ The term “non-Christians” can be seen as neutral in the sense that it does not denote others as unbelievers but as other than Christians, but it still is a negative denotation. This changed when the secretariat received its new name, *pontificium consilium pro dialogo inter religiones* (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue) by Pope John Paul II in 1988. This time, the common term is “religions,” and dialogue between them is what the pontifical council is supposed to promote.

This new name also signals that our cultural context is already different from the Second Vatican Council 50 years ago since the Council certainly did something new by issuing a declaration about other religions, but it did so in ecclesiological terms and in negative terminology: *declaratio de Ecclesiae habitudine ad religiones non-Christianas* (“Declaration about the relation between the Church and non-Christian religions”). Consequently,

³ The events leading to the establishments of these secretariats, and their accomplishments can be followed in the diaries of some of the bishops and theologians working for these secretariats. Among them are Johannes Willebrands and Yves Congar. See Theo Salemink, *You Will be Called Repairer of the Breach: the Diary of J.G.M. Willebrands 1958-1961*, Leuven: Peeters, 2009; Leo Declerck, *Les agendas conciliaires de Mgr. J. Willebrands, secrétaire du secretariat pour l'unité des Chrétiens*, Traduction française annotée, Leuven: Peeters, 2009; and Yves Congar, O.P., *My Journal of the Council*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2012; orig. *Mon journal du Concile*, Paris, 2002.

the document that was named *De Iudaeis* for years since it was to concentrate on Christian-Jewish relationships, ended up being named *De non-Christianis* which gives a considerably broader range but a negative terminology as well. As Gerald O'Collins remarks in his recent book, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, when the declaration would have been written thirty years later, the title would have been different.⁴ But the document was unprecedented in its own time, so much so that we get a lively impression of improvisations when we try to follow its prehistory that still has not been fully described as of yet. In the first instance the document was to address the Holocaust and the need for a better Catholic catechesis about Judaism as Jules Isaac requested in a private audience with pope John in 1960. Yet a complicated history of both Church politics and secular politics made it necessary that the document include the Muslims and by extension adherents of other religions as well.⁵ Prepared by the Secretariat for Christian Unity, the document was not immediately voted on because of the political circumstances, and later it was withdrawn and then re-introduced in different formats, as a chapter or an appendix to the text on Ecumenism, or as a chapter in the text on the Church.

This is not the place to discuss the sometimes sharp debates over the different forms of the text; it is more relevant to make an important point regarding the hermeneutics of the Council: the declaration on the relation between the Church and the non-Christian religion is derived from the Church's self-image, and thus *Nostra Aetate* could only have been written after the paragraphs in *Lumen Gentium* that speak about the Church as the

⁴ Gerald O'Collins, S.J., *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 84.

⁵ The best introduction to the history of the text is still Johannes Oesterreicher's commentary in the *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*: "Erklärung über das Verhältnis der Kirche zu den nichtchristliche Religionen," in: *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche (zweite Auflage)* XIII, Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1967, 406-478. The German text has been translated into English in his book *The New Encounter between Christians and Jews*, New York: Philosophical Library, 1986.

People of God and the ways in which others are related to or ordered (*ordinantur*) towards the People of God. Again, the pre-history of the text betrays an important shift of perspective, since the first draft of the document (1963) spoke about the non-Christians “who are to be led to the Church” while the final document talks more neutrally about an ordering.⁶ This shift of perspective did not meet much resistance according to Ralph Martin, author of a recent book in which he states that *Lumen Gentium* has been misinterpreted by theologians as saying that human beings can be saved without explicit faith in Christ, while in fact the document warns that the majority of humanity will not be saved. Martin is an eloquent representative of a recent theological tendency to interpret the documents of the second Vatican Council according to a hermeneutics of continuity rather than a hermeneutics of radical discontinuity. Even though I think that the linguistic shifts that I have indicated clearly show a large amount of discontinuity, I agree with the protagonists of a hermeneutics of continuity that one cannot consider declarations such as *Nostra Aetate* on its own but that they need to be subordinated to dogmatic constitutions such as *Lumen Gentium*. In a book on *Catholic Engagement with World Religions*, Ilaria Morali, for instance, states: “The most common trend among today’s theologians is in fact to assign *Nostra Aetate* a dogmatic value superior to that of *Lumen Gentium* 16 and of *Ad Gentes* (...) and often to omit so much as a mention of these last.”⁷ It is for this reason that I will concentrate not on *Nostra Aetate* but on the second chapter of *Lumen Gentium* that talks about the way in which God established a relationship between the Church as the

⁶ See Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*, Grand Rapids MI / Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2012, 18.

⁷ Ilaria Morali, “Salvation, Religions, and Dialogue in the Roman Magisterium: from Pius IX to Vatican II and Postconciliar Popes,” in: *Catholic Engagement with World Religions*, eds. Karl Becker & Ilaria Morali, Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis books, 2010, 122-142, quotation on 126.

People of God and others. After all, this is “the single most important document of the sixteen that the Council ratified.”⁸

The relationship between the People of God and others is characterized by a word, *ordinari*, that is used to indicate a relation and a hierarchy at the same time. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the Church is central and others are related to her in a certain way. As Gerald O’Collins indicates, the origin of this idea of “ordering towards the Church” can be found in the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis* by Pope Pius XII in 1943 that exhorts the faithful to pray for “those who have not yet received light from the truth of the Gospel.”⁹ The encyclical continues to discuss the relationship between the Mystical Body of Christ and those who are outside as follows: “Although they may be ordered (*ordinentur*) to the Mystical Body of the Redeemer by some unconscious yearning and desire ... yet they are deprived of those many great heavenly gifts and aids which can be enjoyed only in the Catholic Church.”¹⁰ So in this text from 1943 the language of a hierarchical relationship is formulated in negative terms: they have not yet received the light, they are deprived of the heavenly gifts. In *Lumen Gentium* 14-16, on the contrary, the relationship is positive but differently. First, the Catholic faithful belong to the Church in different ways. Second, the Church is in many ways related to those who are baptized but do not profess the Catholic faith.¹¹ Third, “those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God.”¹² The old language

⁸ Paul Lakeland, *A Council That Wil Never End: Lumen Gentium and the Church Today*, Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2013, xiii.

⁹ *Mystici Corporis* 101, quoted in O’Collins, *The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions*, 48.

¹⁰ *Mystici Corporis* 102 in O’Collins, *o.c.*, 49.

¹¹ *Lumen Gentium* 15: “Ecclesia semetipsam novit plures ob rationes coniunctam.” For the Latin text of *Lumen Gentium*, see *LThKXII*, Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1966, 202. For English paraphrases, see the official translation on the Vatican website.

¹² *Lumen Gentium* 16: “Ii tandem qui Evangelium nondum acceperunt, ad Populum Dei diversis rationibus ordinantur”, *LThK XII*, 204.

is still there (“they have not yet received the Gospel”) but at the same time the positive relationship is now highlighted.

Interestingly, the text of *Lumen Gentium* 16 has a footnote that contains one of the few references to Thomas Aquinas, namely to the third part of the *Summa* about the grace of Christ as head of the Church. Confirming that there must be a relation between Christ as head and all human beings, Aquinas states that unbelievers might not be actual members of the Church, yet they may be potential members.¹³ He adds that there are two reasons for this potentiality; the principal reason is the power of Christ (*in virtute Christi*) whose grace – which is the issue discussed here – is sufficient for the salvation of the whole of humankind; the second reason is human free will.

Aquinas suggests that this “ordering towards” the Church is not only a preparation for the Gospel, as is often suggested, but that there is already a potential relationship thanks to the power of the grace of Christ. So Christ is somehow potentially present in these relationships. One may see here a possible influence of two major models in the theology of religions of that time, as represented by Jean Daniélou and Karl Rahner who perceived other religions as preparations for the Gospel and in the case of Rahner also as containing a hidden presence of Christ.¹⁴ According to Gérard Philips “who perhaps more than any other single theologian was involved in the crafting of *Lumen Gentium* from its very beginnings,”¹⁵ the new texts that discuss the relationship between the Church as the people of God and those who are differently ordered toward the Church tried to show the universality of God’s saving will on the one hand, and the necessity of missionary

¹³ Thomas Aquinas, *STh* III, q. 8, a. 3 ad 1: “...illi qui sunt infideles, etsi actu non sint de Ecclesia, sunt tamen de Ecclesia in potentia.”

¹⁴ For a description of these two models and their influence on the Council, see Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997, 133-57.

¹⁵ Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 19.

endeavours on the other.¹⁶ As Philips indicates, articles 13-16 of *Lumen Gentium* followed quite naturally from the idea that human beings are ordered differently to God's universal saving will according to their different spiritual positions. As Msgr. Garrone mentioned in his *relatio* to the Fathers of the Council on September 17, 1964, the main idea was to prevent an extreme individualism and to clearly distinguish between the different non-Christians.¹⁷

One of the consequences was that *Lumen Gentium* 16 contains separate references to four different groups: the Jews, the Muslims, those who are seeking the unknown God, and those who do not know the Gospel of Christ. Of those four groups, the passage on the Muslims who are mentioned by name as *Musulmani* is most remarkable, since for the first time in history the Church describes this religion in positive terms. Even though Congar writes that the 553 votes *placet iuxta modum* were mainly related to this paragraph on the Muslims, *Lumen Gentium* 16 as such was relatively uncontroversial in comparison to the big debates about the idea of episcopal collegiality expressed in the third chapter of this dogmatic constitution about the Church.¹⁸ In comparison, the text about the first of the groups ordered toward the church is relatively short and unremarkable since the big debates about the relationship with the Jewish people were related to the fourth chapter of *Nostra Aetate*, the text that during the council was always referred to as *De Iudaeis*.¹⁹ Therefore the text of *Lumen Gentium* 16 limits itself to stating the theological nature of the relationship with the Jews, namely that they are "the people

¹⁶ Philips, "Die Geschichte der dogmatischen Konstitution über die Kirche 'Lumen Gentium'", in: *LFThK* XII, Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1966, 139-155, on 151.

¹⁷ Philips's *relatio* to the Council fathers in St. Peter on *Lumen Gentium* 16 is reproduced in Martin, *Will Many be Saved?*, 211-12; English translation 213-14.

¹⁸ Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, 580; Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?*, 11 with reference to Richard Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making*, Mahwah N.J. Paulist Press, 2006.

¹⁹ See the council journals by Congar and Willebrands, *passim*.

to whom the covenants and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh.” Furthermore, this people “remains most dear to God, for God does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues.”²⁰ As has been recently observed, this theology of Judaism is basically derived from Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapters 9-11.²¹ The second group is the only group mentioned by name in this text, and it receives a remarkably full theological description, even though the text in *Nostra Aetate* 3 one year later will be a bit more comprehensive. Four elements can be distinguished: “The plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place among them 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 humankind.”²² The first element is of a more generic nature: the acknowledgment of God as creator. The second element is the claim to possess the faith of Abraham, a claim that is cautiously acknowledged. The third element is that they adore, together with the Christians, the one and merciful God. One hears here an echo of the *basmala* in which the oneness and the mercifulness of God are mentioned.²³ The fourth element is the faith in the last day when God will pass judgment.

²⁰ “... populus ille cui data fuerunt testamenta et promissa et ex quo Christus ortus est secundum carnem (Rom. 9: 4-5), populus secundum electionem carissimus propter patres: sine poenitentia enim sunt dona et vocatio Dei (Rom. 11: 28-29).” Text according to *LThK* XII, 204.

²¹ Matthew Tapie, contribution to this *Jaarboek*; for the important part of these Pauline chapters in the change in Catholic thinking about the Jews, see John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: the Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews 1933-1965*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

²² “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.” Text in *LThK* XII, 204.

²³ The *basmala* is the formula that introduces almost all *surahs* in the Qur’an: in the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate; in Arabic transliteration: *bi-smi llahi r-Rahmani r-Rahim*.

What unites Jews and Muslims in their being ordered towards the Church is their relation with the one true God. In the case of the Jews, the relation is characterized by the idea of the covenant and the promises (*promissa*) that God keeps; in the case of the Muslims, it is characterized by a faith like that of Abraham, a faith (*fides*) in the one and merciful God.²⁴ So the Council acknowledges that the Muslims adore the One and Merciful God together with the Christians. But with reference to the faith of Abraham, there seems to be an intentional ambiguity here. The text does not state that Muslims share the faith of Abraham, but that they claim to do so. The text in *Nostra Aetate* 3 is similar, so this cannot be a coincidence: it acknowledges that Muslims adore the One God, but it is circumspect with reference to the faith of Abraham: Muslims “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.”²⁵ Twice the Council mentions the connection between the faith of Abraham and the Muslim faith, and it uses the term *fides* in both cases, but it does not directly state that Muslims have the faith of Abraham; it only states that they like to refer to Abraham and his faith.

²⁴ In his commentary on this paragraph, Alois Grillmeier (LThK XII, 206) remarks that an earlier version drew a parallel with Jews by referring to Muslims as the “sons of Ishmael, who, recognizing Abraham as father, also believe in the God of Abraham.” The present version underscores the faith in one God as defining characteristic of Muslims, and in doing so it singles out what unites Catholics and Muslims: their stress on Abraham’s faith. See also Pim Valkenberg, *Sharing Lights on the Way to God: Muslim-Christian Dialogue and Theology in the Context of Abrahamic Partnership*, Amsterdam – New York: Editions Rodopi, 2006, 65.

²⁵ “Ecclesia cum aestimatione quoque Muslimos respicit qui unicum Deum adorant, viventem et subsistentem, misericordem et omnipotentem, Creatorem caeli et terrae, homines allocutum, cuius occultis etiam decretis toto animo se submittere student, sicut Deo se submitit Abraham ad quem fides islamica libenter sese refert.” Text in LThK XIII, 490. English translation from the Vatican website.

This indirect recognition of the faith of Muslims again seems to be halfway between Aquinas's negation of Muslims as faithful and our inclination to recognize their faith as true faith in the One God whom they adore together with us, as the Council affirms twice. In his commentary on these two texts on the Muslims, Georges Anawati O.P. mentions that the Council Fathers said something that was really new, so they had to proceed very carefully.²⁶ But where did this new language come from? Almost all scholars seem to indicate that it originated with pope Paul VI who was influenced in his view on Islam by Louis Massignon who explicitly talked about Islam as "the faith of Abraham."²⁷ Even though the Second Vatican Council did not follow him closely in this respect, since it did not adopt the questionable historical claim of the Arab people to be parts of the Abrahamic heritage through Ishmael, it seemed cautiously to endorse the idea that the Islamic faith shares theologically in the faith of Abraham. Gavin D'Costa recently pointed out that pope Paul VI had said similar things about Islam in his encyclical *Ecclesiam suam* (August 1964), where the pope distinguished several concentric circles around the church; the second of these circles consists of those who adore the one God, and in this respect pope Paul VI explicitly mentions the Jewish and Muslim forms of monotheism, referring to them as *religiones*.²⁸ D'Costa comes to the conclusion

²⁶ See Georges Anawati, "Exkurs zum Konzilstext über die Muslim" in: *LFThK XIII*, Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1967, 485-87. He speaks about "äußerste Vorsicht."

²⁷ See Sidney Griffith, "Sharing the Faith of Abraham: the 'Credo' of Louis Massignon," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 8 (1997) 193-210; Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Juden – Christen – Muslime: Herkunft und Zukunft*, Düsseldorf: Patmos, 2007, 606f; Gavin D'Costa, "Continuity and Reform in Vatican II's Teaching on Islam," *New Blackfriars* 94 (2013) 208-222.

²⁸ Pope Paul VI, Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* nr. 107; Latin text quoted from the Vatican website: "Mentionem scilicet inicimus de filiis gentis Iudaeae, reverentia et amore nostro sane dignis, qui eam retinent religionem, quam Veteris Testamenti propriam esse dicimus; deinde de iis, qui Deum adorant religionis forma, quae monotheismus dicitur,

that the Second Vatican Council acknowledged more than simply natural knowledge in Islam, and that it even might have affirmed a partial truth of the claim that the Qur'an and Muhammad would have mediated some knowledge of the true God.²⁹

Yet things are different in Aquinas: he applies a similar idea of concentric circles as Pope Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*, but in his case these circles are not connected to the faith of the Church but to its opposite: unbelief.

2. Thomas Aquinas on Three Forms of Unbelief

It might be possible to find some texts by Aquinas on those of other faiths that look more promising than the way in which he discusses religious others in the context of unbelief as a vice opposed to the virtue of faith in the *Secunda secundae* of the *Summa theologiae*. When one digs deeper into the treasures of his commentaries on Scripture, one may – at least in the case of the Jews – find some texts that could form an easier bridge to the modern preoccupations with interfaith relationships. Yet even in the seemingly negative texts about Jews and others in the *quaestiones* concerning unbelief (or disbelief), heresy and apostasy, we may be able to find some suggestions that could help us to be faithful to the intentions of *Lumen gentium* 16 in the present time. The central *quaestio* here is ST II-II q.10 *de infidelitate in communi*.³⁰ What exactly is *infidelitas*? We would

maxime ea qua Mahometani sunt astricti, quos propter ea quae in eorum cultu vera sunt et probanda, merito admiramur.”

²⁹ D'Costa, “Continuity and Reform in Vatican II's Teaching on Islam,” 221-222.

³⁰ Latin text with English translation in Thomas Gilby, O.P., *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologiae*, volume 32: Consequences of Faith (2a2ae. 8-16). Latin text, English translation, Notes & Glossary Thomas Gilby O.P., London: Blackfriars, 1975; another English translation in Mark Jordan, *On Faith. Summa theologiae*, Part 2-2, questions 1-16 of St. Thomas Aquinas, Translated with an Introduction and Notes by Mark D. Jordan, Notre Dame – London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990.

probably tend to translate this word as “unfaithfulness,” as Mark Jordan does³¹ (1990: 20) but that would lead us to import moral connotations to this word that might lead us away from Aquinas’s view. We would associate it with someone who does not keep his promise, who is not reliable. Even though *infidelitas* can certainly have this meaning, Aquinas begins with a descriptive distinction: *infidelitas* can be considered as a simple negation of faith, or as an opposition to it. In the first case faith is simply absent, while in the second case there is a refusal to accept what has been heard. The presupposition here is that faith comes from hearing, so we may distinguish between “non-belief” as the situation of those who simply have not heard the Christian faith, and “un-belief” as the situation of those who have heard it but have decided not to accept it. In the first case, Aquinas speaks of a *negatio pura*, which means a mere absence of faith. In the second case, Aquinas speaks of *contrarietas*, an attitude of opposition to faith. Now only the second situation, properly speaking, involves the vice of unbelief as contrary to the virtue of faith, while the first situation does not in itself involve sinfulness. According to what Aquinas states elsewhere, such non-believers will not be saved, not however because of their nonbelief, but because of other sins.³²

Aquinas comes back to this matter when he discusses the peculiar case of Cornelius, the Roman centurion who is described by Luke in the book of Acts as “devout and God-fearing along with his whole household, who used to give alms generously to the Jewish people and pray to God constantly.”³³ This Cornelius who became the model of the “righteous among the heathen,” is called by an angel to meet Peter in order to listen to his preaching and be baptized. Peter, who first did not want to have companionship with this Gentile, now has changed his mind and

³¹ Jordan, *On Faith*, 20.

³² In the footnotes on pages 38-41 of his translation, Gilby clearly has some trouble accepting Aquinas’s position here, partly because of theological reasons (how can there be other sins when there is no knowledge of faith?) partly because of the hermeneutical distance that has been sketched at the beginning of this article.

³³ Acts 10:2 New American Bible.

says: “Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people, who have received the holy Spirit even as we have?”³⁴ So, Aquinas uses Cornelius as an example in the *sed contra* of ST II-II.10.4 to argue that not every act of a nonbeliever is sinful, since his almsgiving was acceptable to God even though he was not yet a believer. At the end of the article, Aquinas addresses this case by stating that Cornelius was not *infidelis* since without faith no one can please God – an implicit reference to Hebrews 11:6 – so he had implicit faith while the truth of the Gospel had not been made manifest to him.³⁵ These are words that remind us of the text from *Lumen gentium* in two ways. In the first place, there is a relation between a true non-believer and God, and this relation is characterized as “implicit faith” because of the text from Hebrews that says that no one can please God without faith. Since Cornelius obviously pleased God, he must have had some form of faith. Secondly, the relation can be characterized as “not yet,” a true *praeparatio Evangelii*, and that is why he was sent to Peter in order to be instructed in the explicit faith. But, as Peter confessed, the Spirit was already present in him.

Again, there is a clear sense of directedness or being ordered toward the Christian faith as its normative center, which we find in the documents of the Second Vatican Council as well. When he discusses the different kinds of unbelief or nonbelief, Aquinas shows that there is a double relation here³⁶. On the one hand, there is the dominant aspect of sinfulness since unbelief is a vice against faith, and in this way we can distinguish between those who deny the faith that they had accepted before, and those who never embraced the true faith. In this respect, the sinfulness of the heretics is the greatest since their rejection is more intense than

³⁴ Acts 10:47 NAB.

³⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 10, a. 4 ad arg.s.c.: “De Cornelio tamen sciendum est quod infidelis non erat; alioquin ejus operatio accepta non fuisset Deo, cui sine fide nullus potest placere. Habebat autem fidem implicitam, nondum manifestata Evangelii veritate.”

³⁶ Aquinas discusses this in *STh* II-II, q. 10, a. 5 on the “plures infidelitatis species”, and in q. 10, a. 6 “utrum infidelitas gentilium sive paganorum sit caeteris gravior.”

the rejection of those who have not accepted the Gospel, like the heathen, or those who have only accepted it *in figura* as is the case with the Jews. On the other hand, there is a secondary, more quantitative aspect that measures the number of tenets that the *infideles* have in common with the believers. In this aspect, the heretics are closest since they accept much of the Christian faith³⁷, such as the Gospels. Next come the Jews who accept part of the faith such as the Old Testament, and finally there are the nonbelievers with which we have least in common. Yet, Aquinas is quick to point out that real unbelief that implies culpability is only found in those who willingly resist faith, and less in those who only have nothing in common with faith.

Since he is dealing with theological virtues here, and with what is opposed to these virtues, the ethical notion of rejection or resistance against faith is so dominant that the notion of *infidelitas* immediately seems to connote the idea of someone who willfully resists the truth (*qui renititur fidei* is the formula Aquinas uses time and again) and thus there seems to be hardly any room for the notion of non-belief as a non-encounter with the Christian faith. It is my suggestion that this has not only to do with the situation in the Middle Ages in which the presupposition was that most people would have heard about the truth of the Christian faith in one way or another – so so that the famous case of the *nudus in silva* could be discussed as an interesting exception – but that it has mostly to do with the great commission as an apostolic heritage of the Christian faith. Someone who has not heard of the Gospel is always someone who has not yet heard it, as we read in the beginning words of *Lumen gentium* 16. This makes the situation of non-believers basically a deficient stage, like children who still need to learn what is good for them. Yet this situation tends to be sketched in moral terms, so that lack of knowledge becomes a refusal of what has not yet been heard. In ST II-II, q.10, a. 5 for instance, Aquinas says: “...in relationship to the virtue of faith, there are several infidelities determinate in number

³⁷ Regarding this quantitative aspect, the word “faith” refers to ‘fides quae creditur’, rather than ‘fides qua creditur’ as in the rest of the discussion.

and kind. For its sinfulness consists in resisting the faith, and this may come about in two ways: either the faith is fought against before it has been accepted, and such is the unbelief of pagans or heathens; or that is done after the Christian faith has been accepted, whether in figure, and this is the unbelief of the Jews, or in the revelation of the very truth, and this is the unbelief of heretics.³⁸

It is evident that at this place Aquinas lets the moral dimension of unbelief as resistance against faith overshadow the notion of non-belief as not in itself sinful but a pure absence of faith. While it is problematic to speak of fighting a faith before it has been accepted, Aquinas is certainly right to point out that there is – theologically speaking – no place for a mere neutral non-belief if we accept the possibility of a virtual presence of the Spirit that is not yet recognized, as Aquinas admitted in the case of Cornelius. If this optimistic anthropology can be generalized by saying with Henri de Lubac or Karl Rahner that there is no pure nature without grace, it might be possible to harmonize what Aquinas says here with some of the statements in *Lumen Gentium* and in *Gaudium et Spes* that seem to imply a such an optimistic anthropology indeed. Yet, at the same time Ralph Martin has recently shown that such an optimistic vision might go against the long tradition of Augustine and Aquinas for whom the large majority of non-believers will not be saved.³⁹

The most important theological point that Aquinas wants to make, however, is not about anthropology but about Christology:

³⁸ *STh* II-II, q. 10, a. 5: “si infidelitas attendatur circa comparationem ad fidem, diversae sint infidelitatis species et numero determinatae. Cum enim peccatum infidelitatis consistat in renitendo fidei, hoc potest contingere dupliciter, quia aut renititur fidei nondum susceptae, et talis infidelitas est paganorum sive gentilium; aut renititur fidei christianae susceptae, et hoc vel in figura, et sic est infidelitas Iudaeorum; vel in ipsa manifestatione veritatis, et sic est infidelitas haereticorum.” Text and translation in Gilby, *Consequences of faith*, 52-53.

³⁹ See Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*, Grand Rapids MI / Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2012.

the virtual presence of the Spirit is an effect of the *virtus Christi*. It is the power of the grace of Christ that is effective not only in the Church but in the entire humanity, as Aquinas said in the text from ST III.8 that was quoted at the beginning of *Lumen gentium* 16. So, even if it is true that there is an aspect of sheer non-belief (*infidelitas secundum puram negationem*, *STh* II-II, q. 10, a. 1), there is no *natura pura* outside of the reach of the grace of Christ. Therefore, the theological aspect of unbelief as rejection (*infidelitas secundum contrarietatem ad fidem*) is predominant. And in this respect, there is already a relationship between Christ and his Spirit and non-Christians, whether that relationship be characterized negatively as Aquinas does in his analysis of unbelief, or positively as *Lumen gentium* shows in its idea of their being ordered towards the Church.

It might even be possible – albeit somewhat speculative – to say that there is no real inconsistency in Aquinas, but that he looks at the reality of faith and its opposite in two ways. Faith in its external dimension becomes public as organized religion – even though Aquinas did not use the word *religio* in this sense, but rather *cultus* or *ritus*, or *Lex* in the case of Jews and Muslims – and in this respect Aquinas recognizes the otherness of other religions since he realizes that the Church has no authority over them. Aquinas discusses this dimension several times, for instance: “The Church does not forbid the communion of the faithful with unbelievers who have nowise received the Christian faith, namely with pagans and Jews. Because she has no right to exercise spiritual judgment on them...”⁴⁰ The phrase “nowise received” (*nullo modo receperunt*) seems in clear contrast with the earlier text where Aquinas said that the Jews – differently from the pagans – denied the Christian faith after its acceptance *in figura*. Yet such a position makes sense when considering the external side of faith as institutionalized religion where there need

⁴⁰ *STh* II-II, q. 10, a. 9 (text and translation in Gilby, *Consequences of Faith*, 64-67): “...non interdicat Ecclesia fidelibus communionem infidelium qui nullo modo fidem christianam receperunt, scilicet paganorum vel Judaeorum, quia non habet de eis judicare spirituali iudicio...”

to be clear boundaries and responsibilities. Since the Church has no spiritual jurisdiction over Jews or pagans, it cannot force them to be converted or baptized.⁴¹ But when Aquinas considers the internal dimension of faith, he emphasizes that there are no boundaries to the power of the grace of Christ and of the Spirit.⁴² And in this respect, Aquinas is able to recognize the seeds of the Word in individual believers like Cornelius in a way that Jean Daniélou would make fruitful on the eve of the Second Vatican Council. Yet the Council itself seemed to go a little further by drawing attention to the communal aspect of faith, following Karl Rahner, both in *Lumen Gentium* 16 and in *Nostra Aetate* since in these documents the dominant metaphor is the Church as the people of God⁴³, so that the others in their being ordered towards the Church, are primarily seen in their corporate dimension as well; in the case of Jews and Muslims, this corporate dimension is even explicitly recognized as their religious identity. The fact that the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* 16 devotes a separate paragraph to the Muslims and mentions them by name is certainly new and different from how Aquinas deals with the Muslims and their divergence from the Christian faith.⁴⁴

⁴¹ See *STh* II-II, q. 10, a. 8 on forced conversion (“compelle intrare”, Luke 14:23) and *STh* II-II, q. 10, a. 12 on forced baptisms.

⁴² A similar distinction between a more “political” and a more “theological” aspect in Aquinas’s writings on the Jews is hinted at in Henk Schoot and Pim Valkenberg, “Thomas Aquinas and Judaism” in: *Aquinas in Dialogue: Thomas for the twenty-first Century*, eds. Jim Fodor and Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, Malden MA: Blackwell, 2004, 47-66.

⁴³ See Herwi Rikhof, *The Concept of Church*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1981.

⁴⁴ Henk Schoot, “Christ Crucified Contested: Thomas Aquinas Answering Objections from Jews and Muslims” in: *The Three Rings. Textual Studies in the Historical Trialogue of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, eds. Barbara Roggema, Marcel Poorthuis and Pim Valkenberg, Louvain: Peeters, 2005, 141-62.

3. The good of Jews and Muslims living by their faiths

While it is true that Thomas Aquinas and *Lumen Gentium* may be in harmony in the theological awareness of the power of the grace of Christ in religious others, as exemplified by the quotation from the *Summa theologiae* in the latter document, there is still another way in which Aquinas might contribute to a better theological understanding of religious others, more specifically Jews – and Muslims. It is based on what seems to be an offhand remark about the usefulness of the rites of contemporary Jews. This text is significant because it clearly refers not to the use of Jewish rites and ceremonies in the period of the Old Testament, but to Jews living in his own days, and therefore it can be applied to Jews in the twenty-first century as well. With regard to the question as to whether the rites or religious ceremonies of the unbelievers should be tolerated,⁴⁵ Aquinas follows a well-known assertion by St. Augustine when he states that the rites of the Jews should be tolerated because there is a certain good in them that bears witness to our faith. Yet he adds something to it as well: "... from the fact that Jews keep their ceremonies, which once foreshadowed the truth of the faith we now hold, there follows this good, that our very enemies bear witness to our faith, and that what we believe is set forth as in a figure."⁴⁶ It is difficult to overlook the word *hostis* (enemy) here, because it evokes the history of anti-Judaism and supersessionism of which Aquinas is a part. So we are far from religious pluralism or multi-culturalism here. Yet at the same time Aquinas sees something good in the religious observances of the Jews because they represent what

⁴⁵ *STh* II-II, q. 10, a. 11 "utrum ritus infidelium sint tolerandi." I follow Bruce Marshall's analysis of this article in "Quasi in figura: A Brief Reflection on Jewish Election, after Thomas Aquinas," *Nova et Vetera* (English Edition) 7 (2009) 477-84.

⁴⁶ Text and translation in Gilby, *Consequences of Faith*, 72-73, "... ex hoc autem quod Judaei ritus suos observant, in quibus olim praefigurabatur veritas fidei quam tenemus, hoc bonum provenit quod testimonium fidei nostrae habemus ab hostibus; et quasi in figura nobis repraesentatur quod credimus. Et ideo in suis ritibus tolerantur."

Christians believe as in a *figura*: “It means that the Jewish people, just by being faithful Jews, by circumcising their sons and celebrating the Passover, (literally) worship the one true God, and (figuratively) his Christ, despite their literal rejection of him.”⁴⁷ I propose that the word *ritus* here needs to be taken in a broad sense: it does not just refer to certain ceremonies, but to the public display of institutionalized religious activities. This public side of religion is what we called the external dimension of faith before, but this time Aquinas distinguishes between the *ritus* of the Jews and those of the other unbelievers, since the Jews somehow represent what the Christians believe. In the quotation just given, Bruce Marshall shows the contents of this representation: worshipping the one true God. But if this reference to God is true, and if the word *figura* at this place lacks the usual temporal connotation of a prefiguration of Christ, then the same might be said for contemporary Muslims as well.

It is at this point that *Lumen Gentium* gives us a fuller picture of what this “representation *quasi in figura*” could mean, even though this brings us at a distance from Aquinas who would not hesitate to classify Muslims among the unbelievers whose rites should not be tolerated. In the case of the Jews, *Lumen Gentium* mentions the idea of the covenants and the promises made, the faith of the Fathers and their close relationship to God, and finally their relationship to Christ. In the case of the Muslims, the text mentions their claim to be part of the Abrahamic heritage, their worship of the one and merciful God, and finally their faith in the last judgment. As we know, *Nostra Aetate* would add to that their special regard for Jesus and his virgin mother Mary.⁴⁸ If all of this can be interpreted as being included in the *testimonium fidei nostrae*, we would have a very rich foundation for a Christian contribution to a future Jewish-Christian-Muslim theology.⁴⁹ It

⁴⁷ Marshall, “*Quasi in Figura*,” 483.

⁴⁸ Gavin D’Costa, “Continuity and Reform in Vatican II’s Teaching on Islam,” *New Blackfriars* 94 (2013) 208-222.

⁴⁹ David Burrell, C.S.C., *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

would stop short of recognizing Judaism and Islam as ways to salvation in a way that would not be faithful to the Second Vatican Council. But it would at least recognize essential elements of the Jewish and Islamic ways of living their faiths as something good that would somehow represent the faith of Christians.