RESEARCH ARTICLE

FATAL EMBRACE: SECULARIZING FAITH VIA INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

This essay applies a biblical hermeneutic of faith to explore some of the key premises, presuppositions, and philosophical assumptions contained in the concept of interreligious dialogue. The etymological and historical roots of the 'dialogue' concept are discussed and some of the essential features of the core types of dialogue are presented. The concept of 'church' as a metaphorical heuristic device is then applied to the notion of 'interreligious dialogue' to describe the activities of the community of groups and individuals related to its support and advancement. The essay finds that its adherents and participants tend strongly to assume their activities not to be informed or infused by other institutional interests in contemporary culture and society such as political or economic. A brief historical review of Vatican I and II demonstrates that the church of interreligious dialogue (CIRD) actually began long ago, after which the Catholic theological wheels were set in motion to embrace secular culture unreservedly as a laudable goal without much consideration for the potential religious and socio-cultural downsides. The essay concludes that interreligious dialogue operates more to advance rather than to retard the process of removing Christian values from culture in modern society, contrary to biblical mandates. As far as unintentional effects, then, it turns out that secularizing faith means sacrificing faith in strict biblical terms.

INTRODUCTION

In order to provide even a rudimentary outline of what a Catholic approach to interreligious dialogue might look like, it is perhaps necessary from the beginning to treat this concept as problematic for analytical purposes. That is, first and foremost, it is the concept of 'interreligious dialogue' itself that needs to be suspected and questioned before arriving at any reliable conclusions about its social functions, institutional and cultural effects, and associated problems, at the very least. Otherwise, we risk falling prey to temporal and cultural trends without rationally examining and questioning social causes and effects. Certainly, any informed but distanced and reflexive scholarly discussions about this concept and its meaning can hardly take place by taking for granted the legitimacy and social status of the presuppositions and premises contained within it. A steadfast hermeneutic of faith (1) is perhaps where the application of a genuine, biblically-grounded Catholic view of interreligious dialogue must begin. Arguably it is, in fact, an essential requirement for an authentic biblical interpretation of interreligious dialogue. After all, nowhere in the Holy Bible can we find any reference to this particular or similar concept, not explicitly nor implicitly. That is to say, there is no direct nor covert Gospel mandate for 'interreligious dialogue' no matter how it's defined by contemporary biblical scholars or theologians of any ilk. Unless contemporary criteria and standards of linguistic relativism are applied selectively to various biblical passages and concepts, such as 'mission' or 'preach', in order to force feed an interpretation into it broad conformity to the Scripture, the

idea of interreligious dialogue is nowhere to be found. It isa dubious scholarly enterprise at best. What appears to be the closest Bible passage that even remotely hints at dialogue at any kind of levelis found in Peter's exhortation about giving witness to the Faith: "Simply reverence the Lord Christ in your hearts, and always have the answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have, but give it with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience" (1Pet 3: 15-16). Therefore, treating as theoretically unproblematic a major theological conceptual development and related activities emerging from contemporary society at a specific historical juncture in time and space and under specific social conditions would surely be a questionable interpretative maneuver and grossly misleading, not to mention scholarly irresponsible. Further, it is highly likely that such an approach would result in blind no reflexive acceptance of and support for questionable cultural, intellectual, and ideological fashions masquerading as deep concerns for humanity or for the quality of human life or for the ecological conditions for human survival or for planetary well-being or for whatever other ideological trend might be culturally in vogue. Rather than using a broad who listic reading of the Bible as an information resource to approach an adequate understanding of the meaning and significance of interreligious dialogue as a specific cultural product, at least from a Catholic perspective, adopting a non-critical view towards it would tend to divert analytical attention away from a potentially viable biblical interpretation. It would also tend to cause over-dependence on the accepted validity and reliability of extra-biblical sources and materials such as scholarly tracts and theological

credentials. For example, quoting and relying solely upon documents or other materials from the Second Vatican Council or from various academic professionals simply won't do as substitutes for a genuine biblically-found edhermeneutic of faith. The point is that an authentic Catholic analysis must always be on guard not to passively or programmatically attribute a priori legitimate epistemological status to that which needs to be questioned and critically evaluated from a strict biblical point of view. Truly, that is precisely the starting point of a uniquely Catholic view of the emergence and development of interreligious dialogue in contemporary society, or at least that's what it should be. Although here is not the place to provide the historical details of such a culturally fashionable concept nowadays, nonetheless it is absolutely a required undertaking beforea suitable understanding of its social significance can be approximated. In fact, attributing the nomenclature of 'interreligious dialogue' to a specific subset of human activities strongly implies that it is a biblically acceptable and legitimate human activity when, in fact, it may not be at all from a strict biblical worldview perspective (Borelli, 2009; Cohen, 2017; Fults, 2013; Grung, 2011; Liu-Beers, 2011; Russell, 2011; Sazonova, 2004). Now let us begin by briefly examining some of the historical roots of the concept 'dialogue' to see if it can help us to achieve a better understanding of the contemporary concept of interreligious dialogue.

Interreligious Dialogue Almost Defined: The term "dialogue" is rooted in the Greek words 'dia' and 'logos', translating to 'through' and to 'meaning' or 'word' respectively, created as a useful tool for moving the plot of a story forward by defining and developing characters, providing information, and creating the tone, realism, and energy of a narrative (Bohm, 2004). Essentially, then, it can be viewed as a flow of meaning in which people think together in an interactional relationship (King, 2010). Generally speaking, Webster defines 'dialogue' in simple functional terms as the occurrence of a conversation between two or more people typically conceived as a characteristic of a theatrical play or cinematic movie or novel, or as the act of having such a conversation or discussion. It is not only interesting to point out the theatrical and narrative roots of this concept for personal reasons. It is also highly relevant to understanding the nature and dynamics of the Catholic paradigm. These unique historical characteristics will later serve to inform and illuminate several aspects about the origin and development of contemporary cultural concerns about interreligious dialogue. That is, it might also be instructive for uniquely 'Catholic' analytical purposes to treat 'interreligious dialogue' as theatrical drama in which the central analytical task is to decipher the script and characters to uncover the arguably hidden plot. The specifically Catholic point of view is to treat it as a sequence of main events linked by the principle of cause-and-effect to a master writer or narrator, devised as an interrelated sequence of events and not as a haphazard or coincidental set of human activities. Use of the term 'plot' here strongly implies organized, purposeful plans (i.e. 'plot') which have been devised and set into motion by a writer or narrator in the dramatic theatrical play under analysis. Therefore, the primary hermeneutical task of suspicion for a genuine Catholic perspective is to determine whether and to what extent the plot (always made in secret), although initially conceptualized to achieve laudable or noteworthy cultural goals, was in fact designed to later blossom into something socially harmful. This is a pivotal theoretical consideration when the Catholic paradigm approaches human existence as fundamentally rooted within an on-going struggle between the opposing cosmological forces of good and evil.

In any case, notice that there is nothing inherent to the concept of 'dialogue' at this point that implies any kind of effort must be expended to resolve problems or to reach some kind of albeit mutual understanding at any level or even that a 'problem' exists as such. Nor is it meant to purposefully achieve some kind of mutual transformation or growth within the belief or value systems of any dialogue participants. By the same token, there is nothing inherent to the original meaning of this term which logically dictates that a positive interaction between dialogue participants must necessarily take place in order for 'dialogue' to be present; nor does it need to be

cooperative or constructive. Indeed, 'dialogue' can still occur in its antagonistic form as negative interaction. What's more, defining a particular dialogue interaction as 'positive' or 'negative', or otherwise, presupposes the existence of independent criteria applied to evaluate, rank, and distinguish one from the other. In other words, these criteria would need to be placed into their cultural context before any firm conclusions could be drawn about the nature and significance of any particular episode of assumed 'interreligious dialogue'.

Reflections on Types of Dialogues

The very act of having a dialogue means it is typically an external dialogue. That is to say, it occurs in spoken language accessible to and understandable by the primary dialogue participants themselves. However, since it is an example of spoken language, it is also potentially accessible to nearby secondary participants NOT directly involved in the dialogue, of course. Furthermore, original spoken dialogue can also reach a wider audience when later converted to print or written form and published as a book or some other type of communication media. External dialogue, or dialogue accessible to the senses of primary and nearby participants, logically suggests the possibility of dialogue occurring only within one human being, or what can be defined as internal dialogue. It stands to reason that an individual can have an inner dialogue with one's self, indeed even with a dead person or an imagined being such as a divinity. Of course, it almost goes without saying that there are many different types of 'dialogue'. For example, spoken vs. written dialogue; individual vs. group dialogue; formal vs. informal dialogue; practical vs. theoretical dialogue; internal vs. external dialogue; official vs. unofficial dialogue; institutional vs. no institutional dialogue; and so forth (King, 2010; Fults, 2013; Sazonova, 2004). So then, beyond the individual level, dialogue can also occur at the group (small/large) or institutional levels, and even with inanimate objects such as computers. For the purposes of this essay, we are primarily interested in one type of dialogue, namely, 'interreligious dialogue'. The strong implication here is that this is a type of dialogue wherein the participants all derive from affiliations with one social institution, namely, the institution of religion, although they may come from different religious traditions or from different denominations within the same religious tradition and/or from religiously oriented academic activities. One of the key considerations here is the strong social significance of the fact that this kind of 'dialogue' is largely intra-institutional in nature. In this sense, at least, it is a 'dialogue' that takes place in an echo chamber, so to speak. To put it another way, from a Catholic perspective it tends to be a dialogue between different kinds of 'priests' in the 'church' of interreligious dialogue, so to speak*(2)*, and the same consideration applies to other types of religious participants in the process of interreligious dialogue. This is a highly significant point because it suggests that the new 'missionaries', Christian and otherwise, are speaking largely to themselves and not subject to any kind of independent scientific review, assessment, evaluation, or accountability for claims made, and subjecting themselves to much less. The ecumenical manifestation of this kind of missionary perspective is represented by the efforts of adherents to unify themselves worldwide rather than convert gentiles in the world community to Christianity.

Interreligious Dialogue in the Literature: Keeping firmly in mind the essential root meanings of the term 'dialogue' and other pertinent details mentioned above, now what needs to be done is to find some representative examples of how individuals within that church (that is, the IRD church mentioned above) or the institution of religion operationally define the central concept. The first point to make clear is that there is no overall definitive agreement within the church itself over what precisely constitutes a comprehensive operational definition or meaning of the term. In the literature, it tends to be presented in relative, uncertain, imprecise terms:"best defined as" (King, 2010, p. 1); "has many faces" or "a challenging process" (Fults, 2012, p. 2;)"possible to define" (Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 50);"can have different interpretations" (Sasonova, 2004, p. 180); an "impossibility" or at best "a hopeful way" (Cornille, 2008, p. 1); "in the

making" (Grung, 2011, pp. 31-32); "a means of doing before knowing" (Knitter, 1985, p. 205);or some other vague or imprecise form of expression. When it is defined or viewed in more precise terms, interreligious dialogue tends to be restricted to interactions between or among participants of different religions and/or within the same religious tradition. That is, the concept is viewed as largely denoting inter- or intra- institutional activity, NOT as cross-institutional interaction. From a genuine Catholic perspective, this is a monumentally significant issue that needs to be highlighted due to its serious hermeneutical implications. One of the major questions this claim gives rise to is: Why is it always assumed by participants in interreligious activities, including academics, that such activities are solely 'religious' in nature, conceptually stable activities emanating ONLY from within the institution of religion and NOT informed or infused by other institutions in contemporary culture and society such as politics or economics or even culture itself more generally? In other words, the concept itself appears to imply or present a false veneer of concrete status, one of solidity rather than an amorphous status of fluidity. From a social scientific point of view, at least, this would seem to be a rather tenuous conclusion to arrive at about the nature of any institutional activity. A few key examples will easily illustrate this point:

 "Interreligious dialogue is….an intentional encounter and interaction among members of different religions as members of different religions" (King, 2010, p. 1).

"…interreligious dialogue, defined as organized encounters between people belonging to different religious traditions…" (Grung, 2011, p. 25).

 "Interreligious dialogue is a challenging process by which adherents of differing religious traditions encounter each other in order to break down the walls of division…" (Fults, 2013, p. 1).

"Interreligious dialogue….is about people of different faiths coming to a mutual understanding and respect that allows them to live and cooperate with each other in spite of their differences. The term refrs to positive and cooperative interaction between people of different religious traditions (i.e. 'faiths') at both the individual and institutional level. Each party remains true to their own beliefs while respecting the right of the other to practice their faith freely" (Fults, 2013, p. 2).

"…(using) sympathetic understanding (to move) from (one's) own religion to other religions, and… back with new insight to (one's) own" (Dunne, 1972, p. ix).

"…the exchange of experience and understanding between two or more partners…" from different religious traditions

"…with the intention that all partners grow in experience and understanding". (Knitter, 1985, p. 207).

Interreligious Dialogue in the Catholic Community

By contrast, official Catholicism conveys a somewhat different understanding of the meaning of interreligious dialogue, at least different from its formal emergence in the Second Vatican Council:

"…an open attitude toward non-Christian religions…"; "…collaboration and peaceful coexistence with other religions" (Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 46).

"…contact with persons of other faiths…acknowledge, understand, and appreciate each other…" and to "…share the sacred conversations that celebrate diversity and lead toward the common good" (Russell, 2011, p. 1-2).

"…assumes for all religions and all believers…to collaborate so that every person can reach his transcendent goal and realize his authentic growth, and to help cultures preserve their own religious

and spiritual values in the presence of rapid social changes" (Pope Paul II, 1984).

"…a walking together towards the truth and collaboration in the service of humankind…" (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 1984, p. 13).

"The sincerity of interreligious dialogue requires that each enters into it with the integrity of his or her own faith….Christians must remember that God has also manifested himself in some way to the followers of other religious traditions. Consequently, it is with receptive minds that they approach the convictions and values of others" (Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, 1991, p. 48).

It should be noted that much of the contemporary Catholic Church community officially employs both the 'interfaith dialogue' and 'interreligious dialogue' concepts in similar ways to mean communication, dialogue, and cooperation between different faiths and religious groups. Many academics also tend to blur the etymological lines between these two different religious concepts(for example, see Fults, 2013, p. 2; Heft, 2012)). Since 1964, the Church has had a special council established to actively promote this kind of religious dialogue. More about this point later. For now, it suffices to know that this Council aims to promote respect and collaboration between different faiths and religions, otherwise supposedly known as 'interreligious dialogue'. At least, this is how it's presented to the sleeping public, and for the most part without much concern for the potential syncretistic effects (Borelli, 2009). At this point, it bears re-emphasizing that laity and officials of the Catholic community tend to use the concepts "interreligious" and "interfaith" rather loosely although, technically speaking, they are not identical in nature (Liu-Beers, 2011). 'Interfaith' specifically means relationships with members of the Abrahamic faiths – that is, the Jewish and Muslim traditions. 'Interreligious' refers to relations with other religions, such as Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism (O'Collins, 2013a; Fitzmaurice, 2007).

It is instructive to note here that the term 'ecumenical' denotes relations and prayer with other Christians in the hope of Christian unification, not unifying all the different religious members of society under one banner. Even according to the World Council of Churches, this is what the term means. It means 'intra-religious dialogue' or relations within the Christian religion – Catholic, Protestant, and all denominations thereof – not across different religions or communions (Russell, 2011). A few key statements about interreligious dialogue from various representatives and officials in the Catholic community as well as from various popes during Vatican II and pre-Vatican II have been provided largely to demonstrate the historical lineage of the interreligious dialogue church. However, it is reasonable to ask at this point in the present discussion to what extent any explicit or implicit references to interreligious dialogue (or a reasonable facsimile thereof) exists in the Bible itself especially since most Christian participants in these various activities tend to claim it as their authoritative source.

Interreligious Dialogue and the Bible

It may besomewhat perplexing to note that there are no absolute, undeniably clear and explicit references to such a concept nor to any of the other culturally fashionable terms bandied about in religious and academic circles nowadays such as 'interfaith dialogue', 'interfaith relations', 'interreligious encounter', 'interreligious contact', and a host of other formal and informal cultural and academic expressions. The closest approximation to anything biblical is Peter's advice on the manner in which one should give witness to others about one's faith and be ready to defend it. But when placed within its own specific historical and cultural context, it hardly represents a ringing endorsement.

"…sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for

the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame" (1 Peter 3: 15-16).

Clearly, then, there are no direct nor implicit irrefutable references Compelling orexhorting Christians to proactively engage in intentional organized and regularized institutional-level interactions or encounters or dialogues with organized institutional representatives from other religious traditions at the global level or otherwise FOR ANYREASON WHATSOEVER. This claim also applies to any of the modern culturally catchy buzzwords such as: achieving 'global unity' or 'the unity of humankind', promoting 'understanding', forging a 'human fraternity', uncovering "a hidden sea of goodness, building 'a civilization of love', creating 'a world of fraternity and peace', cooperating for the 'well-being of the whole human family', fostering 'peace, reconciliation, and forgiveness', hoping for 'a new and better world', promoting 'harmony, solidarity, and peace', dialoguing 'for personal growth', breaking down 'the walls of division', protecting 'human rights', and so forth. No matter how fruity sweet and good it might make anyone in the I Rchurch feel inside when they are playing their part in the IRD play. It literally boggles the imagination and taxes the brain beyond credulity that such vague flower-child expressions allegedly provided the motivations and rationale for initiating and engaging in various kinds of continual large-scale organized activities and dialogues between members of different religions and religious traditions. One step further, it is even harder to believe it was and is being done at tremendous, sustained expense of labor, money and other resources so costly in every sense to respective national economies and so damaging to the global ecological system, among many other concerns, especially given that ecological crises are rated so highly in the hierarchy of motivational fuels by IRD participants themselves.

The aboveis just a light dusting of the countless hippie-like expressions in favor of interreligious dialogue that are employed in the literature. Generally, they convey an amorphous desire or wish for all people of the Earth to live a happy life filled with peace and joy by following their own heart and passions expressed mostly through non-specific spirituality such as believing in 'higher powers' or 'the universe itself is God' or 'we are all gods' or 'Godis within all of us' or some other non-absolute divinereferencelargely at odds with anything biblical. The hippie and 'flower child'-like references above are not entirely as outlandish or inapplicable to the case at hand as some might be inclined to believe. The jury is still out on that claim since no one has ventured to undertake a scholarly investigation of the relationship between these two pivotal cultural events in American history. It is an unlikely coincidence that the actual Hippy Movement began in California in the early 1960sand spread rapidly eastward at roughly the same time that documents, discourses, and other materials about interreligious dialogue started pouring out of Vatican Council II, all of which cited identical or highly similar philosophical slang about the motivations and reasons for engaging incontinuallarge-scale organized activities and dialogues of various kindsbetween members of different religious traditions. From a strict scholarly viewpoint, it is rather shocking to consider that the interreligious dialogue movement, if you will, actually began in earnest mainly with a few obscure paragraphs (less than 6) in a document emerging from Vatican Council II, namely Pope Paul VI's "Nostra Aetate" (Second Vatican Council, 1965; Tornielli, 2020;Lamdan, 2007; Valkenberg, 2016). Now, it is thoroughly understandable, however patently unjustifiable it may be, that since there are literally no clear explicit biblical directives urging Christian leaders or members to engage in interreligious or interfaith dialogue/relations with members or authorities of other religious traditions at any kind of level, numerous members of the Christian ecclesiastical, denominational, and academic communities have taken it upon themselves to engage in wild biblical hermeneutics. That is, they have played fast and loose with interpretations of various biblical passages, attempting to twist meaning to fit contemporary cultural obsessions with "interreligious dialogue" ever since Vatican Council II proclaimed Nostra Aetate in the mid-1960s.

Here for practical reasons only one telling, closer-to-home example can be provided although hundreds more could be listed. This example refers to a published article by the Theological Advisory Commission of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. Since it is indicative of similar biblical interpretative gymnastics regularly practiced by so many others, it is worthwhile quoting at length from this example.

"…In presenting Christ as the "Word" mediating the mysterious reality of God's presence to the world, John is implicitly admitting the presence of God's self-revelation in other religious traditions. The fact that John presents the Christ-event as an experience which is not reduced to the compass of his individual and ecclesial experience but which transcends any form of expression and can be identified in the universe at large, shows that the Church was prepared to enter into dialogue with the surrounding religious traditions" (International Bulletin of Missionary Research, 1989, p. 108).

Here one would be hard-pressed to find any clear, direct, explicit biblical authority for establishing and maintaining any kind of regular organized contacts or encounters or relations or "dialogue" at any level with any member or official of "other" religious traditions. The First Letter of John can be scoured from alpha to omegaby the world's foremost biblical scholars, and still nothing to that effect neither explicit nor "implicit" would be recognized. In point of fact, nothing to that effect would be recognized from the alpha to the omega of the entire Bible. Furthermore, in the same biblical passage just mentioned, the First Letter of John, there are other passages which could easily be interpreted as a warning against establishing organized encounters or "dialogue" with members of other religious traditions lest they are masking attempts to deceive sleepwalking Christians by speaking from within a warm costume of palatable cultural slang and intellectual fashion. For example:

"…Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world…..Who is the liar but the one who denies the Jesus is the Christ? This is the anti-Christ, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also…..These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you". (1 John 2: 15-26).

Admittedly, it would be quite a feat of imagination to arrive at a negative interpretation of interreligious dialogue between members of different religious traditions based on these passages from the Gospel. But that's precisely the point, not more nor less imaginatively farfetched than the original interpretation in question. So, then, the logical question arises: How did this interpretative recklessness come to be? Perhaps a more extended review of some of the essential historical elements of the IRD movement is called for in order to get a better sense for the part played by the Catholic Church. To begin with,it might be illuminating to view Pope Paul VI's Nostra Aetate, the Declaration on the Relations of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Second Vatican Council, as a continuation of the IR movement rather than as a definitive starting point. Let's look briefly at what was happening in the IR church prior to Vatican II (1962-65) to see what insights might be gleaned, if any.

From research, we learn that there had been many pressures placed upon the Catholic Church to resolve doctrinal debates or controversies, but no Councils set up to deal with them. Bishops and cardinals at the Vatican in Rome had been politicking and discussing and debating in closed circles for decades not only about religious issues, but also about various social, political, and economic issues emanating from the secular world around them. One of those hotly contested issues turned out to be the Church's relations to other non-Christian religions. It was only a matter of time before this issue would receive the attention of the presiding pope.

So, due to the secrecy of such discussions at the Vatican, it was with complete shock to the outside world that then Pope John XXIII announced very early in 1959 the planned assembly of Roman Catholic leaders to settle all doctrinal issues. The blueprint for the structure and purpose of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) was created, namely, to reconcile the Church with the modern world fully in line with widespread discussions that had already been taking place among Roman Catholic leaders at the Vatican (McCabe, 2014). As such, it was completely different in tone and goals from Vatican I about 100 years earlier, which was to declare and maintain solid church positions on nationalism, liberalism, materialism, and Scriptural inspiration. In other words, Rome officials have traditionally sought to steadfastly protect the Church, its doctrines, and its members from forces and influences operating within the secular cultural world founded upon explicit biblical directives. By contrast, Vatican II sought naively to embrace them while paying a great deal of lip service to the immutability of Scripture as the 'Word of God' simultaneous with engaging in sustained biblical hermeneutical gymnastics to progressively accommodate a so-called 'reconciliation with culture'.

Vatican I and II on Cultural Embrace

One of the first (innocent?) hugs in this cultural-embrace approach occurred in 1963 in an encyclical letter *Pacem in Terris*(meaning 'Peace on Earth') by *Pope John XXIII* generally addressed to "*all men of good will*" as well as to *Christian believers*. In this papal letter, the Pope by himself came to the realization that it was impossible to achieve a new world order of peace and justice without c*ooperation between Catholics, other Christians,* and "*men of no Christian faith whatever*, but who are endowed with reason and with a natural uprightness of conduct". Perhaps the second and certainly much more passionate embrace of secular culture came in 1964 when Pope Paul VI extended this understanding further in his own papal encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*. In it, he wrote that it is not the 'right' Church position "to *isolate itself from dealings with secular society*", nor simply to limit its role to "*pointing out the evils that can be found in secular society, condemning them and declaring crusades against them*", nor "t*o strive to exert a preponderant influence on it* or even to exercise a theocratic power over it."

Rather, the correct path for the Church to follow in its relations with the secular world "can better be represented in a *dialogue*…conceiving the relationships between the sacred and the secular in terms of the transforming dynamism of modern society, in terms of the pluralism of its manifestations, likewise in terms of the maturity of man, be he religious or not, enabled through secular education to think, to speak and to act through the dignity of *dialogue*".

There were at least two other highly significant contributions to this secular-cultural embrace becoming an integral part of the official 'Catholic' perspective. Both contributions were documents produced by Vatican II, of course, and published in December 1965. In the first document, the *Declaration on Religious Freedom,* there was a clear indication that dialogue was one way in which truth can be arrived at freely and without force, and conforming to the dignity of the human person (p. 1-3). The second document titled, *The Constitution on the Church and the Modern World,* was addressed to "the whole of humanity" about atheism. It indicated in no uncertain terms that the problem of atheism was in need of sympathetic understanding which could only be reached and resolved through dialogue on fundamental matters of concern to all human beings. As incredibly arbitrary as all of this might seem from a strictly biblical point of view, it was on this basis that Pope Paul VI established in April 1965what was at first named, The Secretariat for Nonbelievers*.* It should not be surprising at all that this "Secretariat" essentially produced the two above documents. But alas, the cultural embrace had only then started to ignite the Secretariat's passions for all things secular by engaging in two prominent activities. The first activity was to develop a more comprehensive understanding of both the method and the practice of dialog*.*

In 1967, it produced another document in which it repeatedly emphasized the central importance of dialogue, *The Dialogue with Non-Believers*. In this document, again a general evolutionary perspective of culture and society was explicitly adopted:

"The dignity and value of human persons are always better recognized by our contemporaries within the framework of the general evolution of culture and society. In fact the intensification of human relations has helped man to realize that pluralism is a characteristic dimension of society. But true pluralism is possible only if men, communities, and cultures hold dialogue" (my bold)

In order to support this stated goal, the Secretariat established support and created structures to enable this kind of dialogue to begin taking place in a great variety of nations and locales around the world. The second phase of the Secretariat's efforts to embrace secular culture was the task of *undertaking and promoting scientific research* with regards to the roots of atheism and *communicating the results of that research to Catholics* in its periodical specialized for this reason, called *Ateismoe Dinlogo*.

During the span of its existence, the Secretariat consisted of up to 30 bishops from around the world and received the concerted professional assistance of more than 50 consultants and experts. In 1988, Pope John Paul's apostolic constitution, called *Pastor Bonus*, reorganized the Secretariat and renamed it as the Pontifical Council for Dialogue with Non-believers. Then in 1993 all of its functions and operations were incorporated into a new office aptly named, the Pontifical Council for Culture.

CONCLUSION

If these various formal apologetic embraces of secular culture had previously remained largely hidden from view by members of the average public and the general Roman Catholic community, Catholic officialdom now had nothing to fear by incorporating the designation 'culture' into the official name of the office. It became crystal clear to everyone in the world that the arguably teenage romance between the Vatican and secular culture had now blossomed in a full-blown passionate love affair. Catholic leaders probably thought there was everything to be gained and nothing to be lost by embracing secular culture, both for the culture at large and for the Catholic faith itself. To some degree, they probably still fall headlong into that naïve mold of thinking (Fitzgerald, 2006). However, the belief that there was no real theological price to be paid by embracing secular culture and no real threat to the cultural influence of the Catholic faith is not borne out by contemporary social and religious developments. The argument here is that the Catholic embrace of secular culture, following on the heels of the Protestant communion before it, has turned out to be a love affair pursued at the cost of a compromise deadly to biblical faith itself. The social effects of secularizing faith often in the hot ecumenical pursuit of interreligious dialogue has resulted unintentionally in sacrificing the Christian faith upon the altar of secularization. No matter. Us moderns have nothing to worry about. Really? So much for the warnings cited earlier in the First Letter of John (1 john 2:15-16) as well as the alarms soundedbyall of the other biblical passages in this regard.

Footnotes

(1)

As the counterpart to the hermeneutics of faith, the hermeneutics of suspicion is also a mode of literary interpretation originally conceptualized by Paul Ricoeur, 2008 (1965) in deference to what he called the three great "masters of   suspicion" (Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche – all three of which were avowed   atheists) who he insisted all shared the same belief that consciousness was   false, although none of the three great thinkers ever used the expression hermeneutics of suspicion. It views the straightforward appearance of any text,

or its explicit content, as operating deceptively to mask or camouflage deeper meanings and implications. Nevertheless, he contrasted this kind of hermeneutics with another kind which was called hermeneutics of faith. The distinction between the two modes of interpretation is relatively simple. The hermeneutics of suspicion attempts to un cover camouflaged or hidden meanings believed to be hidden beneath the appearance of text, while the goal of the hermeneutics of faith is to restore meaning to a text without assuming any hidden or false meanings (Gadamer, 2013 (1960); Josseson, 2004; Felski, 2011). This essay seeks to apply a biblically-inspired hermeneutics of faith to the modern cultural concept of interreligious dialogue while maintaining a biblically- inspired critical posture towards culture

As utilized in this essay, the lower case 'church' simply refers to the various activities and products of people WITHIN religious associations and organizations or to its metaphorical use as a concept to describe the community of individuals and groups participating in activities related to the support of interreligious dialogue- referred to sarcastically in this essay as the IR or IRD 'church'.

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