

SINE CULPA? VATICAN II AND INCULPABLE IGNORANCE

STEPHEN BULLIVANT

Lumen gentium no. 16's genuine optimism for the salvation of non-Christians is nonetheless a heavily qualified one. Among other things, it applies only to those "who are, without fault, ignorant [sine culpa, ignorantes] of the Gospel of Christ and his Church." This article examines (1) Vatican II's understanding of such "inculpable ignorance" and its relationship to the traditional concept "invincible ignorance" and (2)—more speculatively—the extent to which it might apply in modern, Western societies.

VATICAN II'S *LUMEN GENTIUM* NO. 14 reiterates the traditional Catholic teaching on the trifold necessity of faith, baptism, and the (mediation of the) church for salvation. This is an infallible, *de fide* doctrine. Yet, as the theological controversies of preceding decades had shown, it must "be understood in the sense in which it is understood by the Church itself."¹ Since the council, as *Lumen gentium* no. 16 proceeds to demonstrate, it

STEPHEN BULLIVANT received his D.Phil. degree from the University of Oxford and is now lecturer in theology and ethics at St. Mary's University College, UK. Specializing in the theology of unbelief, Catholic social teaching, new evangelization, and new Catholic movements, he has recently coedited with Lois Lee: "Non-religion and Secularity: New Empirical Perspectives," special issue, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (forthcoming in 2011); and authored several articles, among which: "Newman and Modernism: The *Pascendi* Controversy and Its Wider Significances," *New Blackfriars* 92.1038 (2011); "*Caritas in Veritate* and the Allocation of Scarce Resources," *Catholic Social Science Review* (forthcoming); and "The New Atheism and Sociology: Why Here? Why Now? What Next?" in *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal* (Brill, 2010). In progress is a monograph entitled "The Salvation of Atheists and Catholic Dogmatic Theology" (anticipated 2011).

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¹ Letter from the Holy Office to the Archbishop of Boston (1949), *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, 37th rev. ed., ed. Heinrich Denzinger and Peter Hünermann (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1991) no. 3866. See also Karl Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism*, trans. Justin McCann (London: Sheed & Ward, 1969; German original 1924) 188.

must be understood in a way that is compatible with the affirmation that Jews, Muslims, “those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God,”² and atheists, while remaining as such, are somehow able to be saved. In 1972, Joseph Ratzinger, commenting on the patristic axiom *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“no salvation outside the church”), observed: “The primary question is no longer the salvation of the ‘others,’ the theoretical possibility of which is assured; the actual guiding question is rather *how*, given this undeniable certainty, the absolute requirement of the Church and its faith is still to be understood.”³ It is this development that Francis Sullivan—in a monograph to which this article is indebted—regards as constituting a “radical change from pessimism to optimism”⁴ in the Church’s understanding of the salvation of non-Christians.

It must be said, however, that the council’s genuine optimism is nonetheless a qualified and restricted one. Two Latin words ring like a refrain throughout the council’s statements as to who may be saved: *sine culpa*, “without fault/blame.” *Ignorantia* and its cognates are equally prominent. *Lumen gentium* no. 16 thus refers to those “who are, without fault, ignorant [*sine culpa, ignorantes*] of the Gospel of Christ and his Church,” and to those “who, without fault [*sine culpa*], have not yet arrived at an express recognition of God.”⁵ Article 14’s stipulation of faith, baptism, and the Church as necessary for salvation is suffixed with the warning: “those men cannot be saved, who not being ignorant [*non ignorantes* (of the fact that)] the Catholic Church has been founded as necessary by God through Jesus Christ, are nevertheless unwilling either to enter it, or to persevere in it.”⁶ Significantly, the use of the awkward phrase *non ignorantes* was a deliberate decision by the Council Fathers: in several earlier drafts of *Lumen gentium*, referring to a single nonbeliever, the more natural *sciens* (“knowing”) is used.⁷ It seems that those drafting these paragraphs intended to highlight the importance of ignorance to the question of salvation, hence this apparent *inclusio* between

² Vatican II, *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II* (hereafter *AS*), 32 parts in 6 vols. (Vatican City: Vatican, 1970–1966) III/8 796.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Das neue Volk Gottes: Entwürfe zur Ekklesiologie* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1972) 153.

⁴ Francis Sullivan, S.J., *Salvation Outside the Church?: Tracing the History of the Catholic Response* (New York: Paulist, 1992) 9.

⁵ *AS* III/8 796–97.

⁶ *AS* III/8 795.

⁷ See Giuseppe Alberigo and Franca Magistretti, eds., *Constitutionis dogmaticae Lumen gentium: Synopsis historica* (Bologna: Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, 1975) 57, 72. The switch from *sciens* to *non ignorantes* occurred in the course of the Theological Commission’s revising of the unofficial draft text by Belgian theologian Gerard Philips (fall 1962), following the council’s rejection of the original schema. Like the rejected official draft, both Philips’s original and the modified version on which the Commission began work in March 1963, read *sciens*. By the time the Commission’s new version was sent to the bishops in May, *non ignorantes* had replaced *sciens*.

nos. 14 and 16. Elsewhere, in article 7 of *Ad gentes*, the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, the same point is reiterated: “God is able to lead men who are, without fault of their own, ignorant [*sine eorum culpa ignorant*] of the Gospel to that faith without which it is impossible to please him (Hebrews 11:6).”⁸ Vatican II’s extension of the possibility of salvation to non-Christians is thus predicated on the *sine qua non* of their being inculpably (*sine culpa*) ignorant of one or more of these realities: the Church, Christ and—in the case of atheists—the existence of God (or, perhaps more accurately, inculpably ignorant of their own obligations in light of these realities).

The council’s affirmation of *inculpable ignorance* as a precondition for a non-Christian’s salvation raises a great many questions—none of which, perhaps sensibly, it answered. Who would count as being inculpably ignorant? Must one never have heard of Christianity, or would a merely superficial acquaintance with the gospel also count? What about people brought up in historically Christian countries, who have been baptized and perhaps confirmed and communicated, who have attended Catholic schools, or even been married in a Catholic Church—might even some of these be inculpably ignorant? (This latter point is by no means purely hypothetical, since a significant proportion of atheists, especially in the West, would have been, as they still are, in precisely this situation.) Matters are further complicated by the fact that Pius IX, in his 1854 allocution *Singulari quadam*, introduced the Thomistic principle of *invincible* ignorance into the Church’s magisterial teaching on salvation. There he stresses the abiding truth of *extra ecclesiam*, and yet qualifies it by saying:

But equally, it is to be held for certain that they who labor in ignorance of the true religion, if this ignorance is invincible, are not bound by any fault in this matter in the eyes of the Lord. Now truly, who would arrogate so much to himself, as to be able to designate the limits of this kind of ignorance, because of the reason and variety of peoples, regions, natural dispositions, and a great many other things?⁹

This teaching was repeated in the Holy Office’s 1949 letter to the Archbishop of Boston, which is itself, in turn, cited in a footnote to *Lumen*

⁸ AS IV/vii 677.

⁹ Pius IX, “*Singulari quadam*” (1854), in *Pii IX Pontificis Maximi Acta: Pars Prima*, vol. 1 (Rome: Bonarum Artium, 1864) 620–31, at 626. The teaching was reiterated in his 1863 encyclical *Quanto conficiamur moerore* (*Pii IX Pontificis Maximi Acta: Pars Prima*, vol. 3 [Rome: Bonarum Artium, 1867] 609–21, at 613–14), and was also included in the draft schema *De ecclesia* prepared by the First Vatican Council. Since the council was (permanently) adjourned due to the Franco-Prussian War, the schema was never ratified (see Sullivan, *Salvation Outside?* 120–22). See also Ilaria Morali, “*Fides e influxus gratiae nell’uomo che ignora il vangelo: Lettura di LG 16, 20–22 nel quadro della Storia del Dogma*,” in *Sapere teologico e unità della fede: Studi in onore del Prof. Jared Wicks*, ed. Carmen Aparicio Valls, Carmelo Dotolo, and Gianluigi Pasquale (Rome: Gregorian University, 2004) 172–206, at 201.

gentium no. 16. Is inculpable ignorance, then, the same as invincible ignorance? If not, what material difference do the two terms signify? The issue is still more problematic in view of the fact that “invincible” ignorance was retained elsewhere in the conciliar corpus,¹⁰ and continues to be used in magisterial pronouncements on moral issues.

The Council Fathers’ reticence on these questions is understandable. Indeed, as Henri de Lubac once remarked, “It is neither useful nor desirable for a council to concern itself with technical theological discussions.”¹¹ More puzzling, however, is contemporary Catholic theologians’ seeming lack of interest. Recent major works on the salvation of non-Christians by, for example, Jacques Dupuis, Gerald O’Collins, and Gavin D’Costa offer no sustained expositions.¹² This is, I contend, a significant lacuna, and one to which considerably more theological attention should be paid.

I intend this article to be a modest contribution toward this end; only some of the questions raised above will be broached. My argument proceeds in four, relatively brief movements. First, I examine the classical, Thomistic understanding of invincible ignorance, its roots in Scripture, and its subsequent employment by Pius IX. Next, I consider how, following the discovery of the New World in 1492, the application of the Thomistic understanding was significantly reappraised. This *ressourcement* focuses on two 16th-century Spanish Dominicans, Francisco de Vitoria and Bartolomé de Las Casas. My third section returns to Vatican II and argues that the new emphasis on *ignorantia sine culpa* significantly mirrors the Vitorian

¹⁰ See *Gaudium et spes* no. 16.

¹¹ Henri de Lubac, S.J., *De Lubac: A Theologian Speaks* (an interview by Angelo Scola), trans. Stephan Maddux, intro. Susan Wood, S.C.L. (Los Angeles: Twin Circle, 1985) 10.

¹² See, e.g., Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1997) 158–79; Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue*, trans. Phillip Berryman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002) 195–217; Gerald O’Collins, S.J., *Jesus Our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (New York: Oxford University, 2007) 218–37; and Gavin D’Costa, *Christianity and World Religions: Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009) 161–87. These are all places where one might have expected, or hoped for, such a treatment. To these, one may also add: Paul Knitter, *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1985) 120–44; and J. A. DiNoia, O.P., *The Diversity of Religions: A Christian Perspective* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1992) 94–108. More attention has been given to these issues by Protestant writers, although typically without reference to Catholic dogmatics. See John Sanders, *No Other Name: Can Only Christians Be Saved?* (London: SPCK, 1994) 15 n. 2; Daniel Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002) 33–35; and Terrence L. Tiessen, *Who Can Be Saved?: Reassessing Salvation in Christ and World Religions* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004) 126–36.

and Lascasian developments of the doctrine of *ignorantia invincibilis*. My fourth and final section unites the foregoing analyses, elucidating Vatican II's understanding of inculpable ignorance as both a rediscovery of elements already present in the tradition, and (in light of insights from the sociology of knowledge) as justifying a wide-ranging "presumption of ignorance"¹³ on the part of contemporary non-Christians. My examples focus principally on atheists (understood here in the broad, value-neutral sense of those without a belief in the existence of a God or gods), since these have most to be inculpably ignorant *about*. But the general thrust of my argument also applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to members of non-Christian religions.¹⁴

INVINCIBLE IGNORANCE

In general terms, support for the mitigating nature of ignorance may ultimately be derived from Scripture. Note, for instance, Jesus' gloss on the parable of the watchful slaves in Luke: "That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating" (12:47–48).¹⁵ A similar idea is behind James's admonition: "Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin" (4:17)—the implication being, of course, that sin is not committed by someone who fails to do the right thing out of ignorance. Strikingly, 1 Timothy imputes to Paul the belief that, "even though I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor and a man of violence . . . I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief" (1:13). Paul's speech at the Areopagus states that "God has overlooked the times of ignorance" (Acts 17:30). And at Romans 10:14 he famously asks, "But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" The fact that Paul apparently

¹³ See Sullivan, *Salvation Outside?* 151.

¹⁴ The bearing of these reflections on members of non-Catholic "churches or ecclesiastical communities" (*Lumen gentium* no. 15) is open to discussion. Certainly, non-Catholic Christian groups cannot simply be lumped together with the non-Christian religions, and the generally laudatory *Lumen gentium* no. 15 passes no direct comment on the question of salvation. That said, *Lumen gentium* no. 14 clearly implies that non-Catholics can be saved only if they are inculpably ignorant of their obligation to belong fully to the Catholic Church: "Therefore those men cannot be saved, who, not being ignorant [of the fact that] the Catholic Church (*Ecclesiam Catholicam*) has been founded as necessary by God through Jesus Christ, are nevertheless unwilling either to enter it, or to persevere in it." Given the complexity of the issues involved, no further comments will be made regarding the situation of non-Catholic Christians.

¹⁵ All translations from Scripture are from the New Revised Standard Version.

does believe that “all” have heard (see 10:18), does not nullify the importance of the question. Elsewhere, the grave warning in Mark 16:16 that “the one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned”—a favored proof text of the dogmatic tradition for affirming the absolute necessity of faith for salvation (e.g., *Lumen gentium* no. 14; *Dominus Iesus* no. 3)—is dependent on the previous verse’s command, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (16:15). Thus this stark condemnation of nonbelievers assumes that they have heard the gospel, and (culpably) rejected it. Finally, the Johannine Jesus says even of those who actively persecute the church: “If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin. . . . If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not have sin. . . . But now they have seen and hated both me and my Father” (Jn 15:22–24). Once again, Christ’s condemnation explicitly presupposes a lack of ignorance and hence a culpable rejection.

Much later, these biblical precedents became crystallized in the moral theology of Thomas Aquinas. He writes in the *Summa theologiae*:

Now it is manifest that whosoever neglects to have or do those things that he is obliged to have or do, sins by a sin of omission. Thus because of negligence, ignorance of those things which someone is obliged to know, is a sin.

However, negligence is not imputed to a man if he is not able to know those things which he does not know. Thus ignorance of these things is called invincible: because it obviously cannot be overcome [even] by effort. Because of this, this kind of ignorance is not a sin, since it is not voluntary, and it is not in our power to repel it.

Thus it is obvious that invincible ignorance is never a sin: vincible ignorance is a sin, if it is of those things which someone is obliged to know, but not if it is of those things which he is not obliged to know.¹⁶

Aquinas draws an important and influential distinction between two kinds of ignorance. *Vincible* ignorance is such that a person both could and should have overcome it. Such ignorance, born from negligence, does not excuse sin. Conversely, *invincible* ignorance is such that the person is not able, even by diligence, to overcome it. Hence there is no sin to excuse. In the *Summa*, this consideration is presented as a general principle and is not applied to the question of salvation. In his *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, however, Aquinas had already considered the situation of someone being invincibly ignorant (although the precise phrase is not used) of the gospel. It is noteworthy that Aquinas, writing in the mid-1200s, was able only to envisage this scenario in terms of someone having been

¹⁶ *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) 1–2, q. 76, a. 2; translation from *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 25: *Sin* (1a2ae. 71–80), trans. and ed. John Fearon, O.P. (London: Blackfriars, 1969) 148. The Blackfriars edition gives the Latin and an English translation, but the translation here, as elsewhere, is my own from Fearon’s Latin.

brought up “in the woods or among brute animals” (the assumption being that the gospel had, by now, been preached throughout the whole world). Given the exceptional nature of this case, Aquinas is justified in positing an exceptional solution:

For if someone was brought up in such a way, provided that he had followed his natural reason in seeking good and avoiding evil, it is certainly to be held that God would either reveal to him by an internal inspiration the things which are necessarily to be believed, or would direct some preacher of the faith to him, just as he sent Peter to Cornelius (Acts 10).¹⁷

Note that, in this thought-experiment, the subject literally could not even have heard of Christ. Aquinas does not, for example, pick a pious Muslim or Jew who, despite having heard of Christ and the Church, has no particular reason for wanting to find out more about them.¹⁸ Rather, this person’s ignorance is “invincible” in a very strong sense of the word. When, several centuries later, Pius IX adopted Aquinas’s terminology in order to qualify his robust defense of *extra ecclesiam*, it is therefore tempting to assume that he had in mind a similarly narrow frame of application. This interpretation would gain support from the pessimistic position, evinced in his 1864 *Syllabus of Errors*, impugning the opinion that: “Good hope at least is to be considered regarding the eternal salvation of all those who are not in the true Church of Christ.”¹⁹ Yet in *Singulari quadam*, Pius’s application of the principle is conspicuously wider than that apparently envisaged by Aquinas. Indeed, as I have noted, Pius resolutely refuses to set definitive limits to its application: “Who would arrogate so much to himself, as to be able to designate the limits of this kind of ignorance, due to the reason and variety of peoples, regions, natural dispositions, and a great many other things?”²⁰ This is a startling admission, and constitutes a major landmark on the road to *Lumen gentium*. But, as so often with the development of doctrine, to move forward one must first look backward. For, as I will show, such a nuanced comprehension of invincible ignorance’s possible extent was by no means a 19th-century innovation.

VITORIA AND LAS CASAS

Christopher Columbus discovered the Indies in 1492 and promptly claimed them for the Spanish crown (ratified the following year by Pope

¹⁷ *De veritate* q. 14, a. 11, ad. 1; translated from Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae ad fidem optimarum editionum diligenter recaeus* . . . , 3 vols., new and exp. ed., ed. Pierre Mandonnet, vol. 1, *De veritate* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1925) 409.

¹⁸ These possibilities would not seriously be entertained until the 16th and 17th centuries (see Sullivan, *Salvation Outside?* 80, 95).

¹⁹ *Syllabus errorum* (1864), in *Pii IX Pontificis Maximi Acta: Pars Prima*, vol. 3 (Rome: Bonarum Artium, 1867) 701–17, at 705.

²⁰ “*Singulari Quadam*” 626.

Alexander VI's bull *Inter caetera*). The ensuing gold rush was disastrous for the Continent. The population of the Indies fell precipitously within 30 years, primarily from disease, but also from, as Nathan Wachtel puts it, "murderous oppression."²¹ Las Casas, writing 50 years after Columbus's discovery, observed:

The pattern established at the outset has remained unchanged to this day, and the Spaniards still do nothing save tear the natives to shreds, murder them and inflict upon them untold misery, suffering and distress, tormenting, harrying and persecuting them mercilessly.²²

His indictment is confirmed by Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo, appointed official historian of the Spanish Crown in 1523, and no friend to either Las Casas or the indigenous people: "If all were written in detail as it was done, there would be neither time nor paper to enumerate all that the captains did to destroy the Indians and to rob and ravish the land."²³ It is against this background that the Vitorian and Lascasian developments of invincible ignorance must be understood.

As the destruction of the Indies continued unabated, members of the Spanish intelligentsia began to question whether or not these overseas campaigns constituted "just wars." Francisco de Vitoria (ca. 1492–1546) broached the issue in his professorial "relection" *De Indis (On the Indies)*, delivered in Salamanca in 1539. He counters the opinion that war against the Indians is morally and legally justified because "they refuse to accept the faith of Christ, although it has been proposed to them, and they have been insistently admonished to accept it,"²⁴ arguing instead that, due to certain mitigating factors, the Indians remain invincibly ignorant of the Christian proclamation. He contends, on the authority of Romans 10:14, that "if the faith has not been preached to them, they are invincibly ignorant [*ignorant invincibiliter*], because they are not capable of knowing."²⁵ So far he agrees with Aquinas. But Vitoria goes further:

The barbarians are not bound to believe from the first announcement of the Christian faith, in the sense of sinning mortally by not believing due to this alone: because it is merely announced and proposed to them that the true religion is Christian, and

²¹ Nathan Wachtel "The Indian and the Spanish Conquest," trans. Julian Jackson, in *The Cambridge History of Latin America*, vol. 1, *Colonial Latin America*, ed. Leslie Bethell (New York: Cambridge University, 1984) 207–48, at 212–13.

²² Bartolomé de Las Casas, O.P., *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, trans. Nigel Griffin (1542; London: Penguin, 1992) 11.

²³ Quoted in Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (1949; Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 2002) 34–35.

²⁴ *De Indis*, q. 2, a. 4; translated from Francisco de Vitoria, O.P., *De Indis recenter inventis, et De jure belli Hispanorum in barbaros*, ed. Walter Schötzel (1539; Tübingen: Mohr, 1952) 68.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 74.

that Christ is the savior and redeemer of the world, without miracles or any other proofs or arguments.²⁶

If unbelievers are preserved from guilt by never having heard of Christianity (as in Aquinas's thought-experiment), then equally for Vitoria: "they are not obligated by this kind of simple statement and announcement. Such an announcement is no argument or motive for believing." Moreover, as he quotes from Cardinal Cajetan, "it is rash and imprudent of anyone to believe something (especially in matters such as these, concerning salvation) unless one knows it to be from a trustworthy source."²⁷ Now of course, if Christianity is preached in a probable fashion, supported by rational arguments, and by people whose behavior concurs with what is taught, then the Indians are indeed "obliged to accept the faith of Christ under pain of mortal sin."²⁸ With regard to the current situation, however, "it is not sufficiently clear to me that the Christian faith has thus far been proposed and announced to the barbarians so as to obligate them to believe it. . . . It does not appear that the Christian religion has been preached to them suitably and piously, so as to obligate acquiescence."²⁹ Hence Vitoria insists that ignorance remains fully invincible (and therefore morally inculpable) when Christianity is presented only very superficially, unaccompanied by any more persuasive catechesis.³⁰

Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484–1566) concurs on key points with his Dominican confrère, railing in book after book against the *conquistadores'* failures to present Christianity in any remotely convincing manner. Due to the sheer volume of his writings on this topic, it is worth concentrating on his critique of one especially notorious example: the *Requerimiento*, devised in 1513 by the celebrated jurist Juan Palacios López de Rubos. This text, "one of the strangest documents in Spanish history,"³¹ was intended to be declaimed, in Latin, upon first contact with Indian nations. It outlines the history of the world from Creation, noting especially the establishment of the papacy and the pope's donation of the Indies to Spain. It then *requires* (hence its name) that those listening submit to the Church, the pope and the Spanish Crown, and that they allow the Christian faith to be preached to them; then comes the explanation of what will happen if they

²⁶ Ibid. 76.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid. 80.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ It is worth noting, however, that Vitoria is not at all concerned here with the Indians' possible salvation. Indeed, he is quite emphatic on this point: "The barbarians, to whom an announcement of the faith or the Christian religion has never come, will be damned on account of their mortal sins or idolatry, but not for the sin of unbelief" (ibid. 76). The same applies to Las Casas; see his *Short Account* 6, 126.

³¹ Stafford Poole, "'Are They Not Men?,'" in *Christianity Comes to the Americas: 1492–1776*, ed. Charles H. Lippy, Robert Choquetter, and Stafford Poole (New York: Giniger, 1992) 79–90, at 81.

do not so consent: "We shall take you and your wives and children and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their Highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods and will do all the harm and damage that we can."³² Las Casas, not surprisingly, confesses in his *History of the Indies* not to "know whether to laugh or cry at [its] absurdity,"³³ and asks, "What credit should a people who lived at peace in its territory without harming anyone be expected to give to such a bill of sale?"³⁴ Naturally, he does not dispute the *Requerimiento's* truth-claims concerning the Church and the papacy. Yet, importantly, he denies their authority for those who have only just been informed of the existence of these institutions, especially when delivered by "bearded messengers armed to the teeth with terrible weapons."³⁵ Indeed, as he quotes elsewhere from Sirach 19:4: "Being too ready to trust shows shallowness of mind."³⁶ Needless to say, such a skeletal presentation does not constitute evangelization in any meaningful sense and therefore does not nullify any hitherto-present invincible ignorance.

Yet the inadequacy of the proclamation was not the severest grievance of Vitoria and Las Casas. Rather, both object most vociferously to the defamation of the Faith by (in the latter's words) "the devils of the New World who masquerade as Christians."³⁷ Thus Vitoria complains that he hears "only of many scandals, cruel atrocities, and multiple impieties,"³⁸ and exasperatedly exclaims, "Would that the sins of some Christians were not much worse (the sin of unbelief notwithstanding) than those among these barbarians!"³⁹ And for Las Casas, the conduct of those who "are not warriors for Christ, but for anti-Christ"⁴⁰ have brought it about "that nothing is more odious nor more terrifying to the people than the name *Christian*."⁴¹ Such people have damned "those who grew to hate our faith because of the awful example you gave, grew to ridicule the universal Church, grew to blaspheme God."⁴² In his *In Defense of the Indians* (ca. 1550), Las Casas directly links this experience with invincible

³² Quoted from Lewis Hanke, *The Spanish Struggle for Justice in the Conquest of America* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 2002) 33. See also Gustavo Gutiérrez, O.P., *Las Casas: In Search of the Poor of Jesus Christ*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 110–25.

³³ Bartolomé de Las Casas, O.P., *History of the Indies*, ed. and trans. Andrée M. Collard (1552; New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971) 196.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 195.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 194.

³⁶ Bartolomé de Las Casas, O.P., *In Defense of the Indians*, ed. and trans. Stafford Poole (ca. 1550; DeKalb: Northern Illinois University, 1974) 134.

³⁷ Las Casas, *Short Account* 124.

³⁸ Vitoria, *De Indis* 68.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 90.

⁴⁰ Bartolomé de Las Casas, O.P., *The Only Way*, trans. Francis Patrick Sullivan, ed. Helen Rand Parish (1552; Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist, 1992) 144.

⁴¹ Las Casas, *Short Account* 82.

⁴² Las Casas, *Only Way* 150.

ignorance.⁴³ After asserting that the invincibly ignorant “are not obliged to believe unless the faith is fully presented and explained to them by suitable ministers,”⁴⁴ he declares: “A great many unbelievers are excused from accepting the faith for a long time and perhaps for their whole lifetime, no matter how long it lasts, so long as they see the extremely corrupt and detestable conduct of the Christians.”⁴⁵

Taking the writings of Vitoria and Las Casas together, it is possible to identify from them three interrelated reasons why invincible ignorance may endure *after* someone has not only heard of Christ and the Church, but has perhaps even been (objectively) evangelized. The first reason is that the proclamation itself may be intrinsically inadequate. At its most extreme, the simple assertion of the mere existence of Christ or the Church is not sufficiently persuasive to demand assent. The second reason is that certain social factors, while extrinsic to the proclamation itself, may undermine its claims to authority. (This “sociological” point, which Las Casas only hints at, will be explained in more detail below.) And the third reason—which is, properly speaking, a notably conspicuous example of the second—recognizes that the misconduct of Christians (acting either singularly or collectively) may so defame Christianity as to prolong invincible ignorance over a long period of time, and perhaps indefinitely. It will be recognized that these reasons constitute a considerable widening of invincible ignorance’s application compared to Aquinas’s “in the woods or among brute animals” thought-experiment (framed as it was by his reasonable, but nonetheless false, assumptions regarding the extent and adequacy of evangelization up to that point). On that note, I return to Vatican II.

VATICAN II

As indicated above, neither *Lumen gentium* nos. 14–16 nor *Ad gentes* no. 7 explains quite what inculpable ignorance might entail. A revealing clue, however, may be found in *Gaudium et spes* no. 19. It avers, first of all, that “those who willfully try to drive God from their heart and to avoid religious questions, not following the dictate of their conscience, *are not devoid of fault [culpaе expertes non sunt]*.”⁴⁶ This is an important and necessary qualification to the council’s (and my own) salvific optimism: inculpability is by no means a foregone conclusion, and must not simply be taken for granted. Yet the very same sentence continues: “however, believers themselves often bear a certain responsibility for this.” More strikingly, this claim is soon elaborated with reference to both the first (“inadequate proclamation”) and third (“Christian misconduct”) of the Lascasian/Vitorian criteria: “believers can

⁴³ Las Casas, *In Defense of the Indians* 126–40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 133.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 134.

⁴⁶ AS IV/vii 743, emphasis added.

have no small part in the rise of atheism, since by neglecting education in the faith, teaching false doctrine, or through defects in their own religious, moral, or social lives, they may be said rather more to conceal than reveal the true countenance of God and of religion.”⁴⁷

The Council Fathers’ deliberations on this issue make for interesting reading. At the third session in 1964, Cardinal Leo Jozef Suenens urged that while

atheism is certainly a terrible error, . . . it would be too easy simply to condemn it. It is necessary to examine why so many men profess themselves to be atheists, and who precisely is this “God” they so sharply attack. Thus dialogue should be begun with them so that they may seek and recognize the true image of God who is perhaps concealed under the caricatures they reject. On our part, meanwhile, we should examine our way of speaking of God and living the faith, *lest the sun of the living God is darkened for them*.⁴⁸

Similarly, during the fourth session in 1965, Cardinals Franjo Šeper and Franz König expressed the opinion that Christians are largely to blame for the rise and spread of atheism.⁴⁹ The Melkite patriarch of Antioch, Maximos Saigh, went further, asserting that atheists “are often scandalized by the sight of a mediocre and egotistical Christendom absorbed by money and false riches.” He adds: “Is it not the egotism of certain Christians which has caused, and causes to a great extent, the atheism of the masses?”⁵⁰ While these statements were made during the discussions leading to *Gaudium et spes* rather than to *Lumen gentium*, they nevertheless shed light on what the council meant by *ignorantia sine culpa*. Furthermore, although referring especially to atheists, there is no reason why these considerations do not also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other groupings. The “egotism of certain Christians” may just as easily scandalize Muslims, Sikhs, and Buddhists—or, for that matter, other Christians (perhaps these most of all)—as they do atheists. If so, then this would also be a factor in maintaining their inculpable ignorance regarding Catholic truth-claims about the gospel and the Church, even if not necessarily with regard to the existence of God.

What Vatican II seems to have intended by inculpable ignorance is, therefore, in substantial agreement with what, in the 16th century,

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ AS III/v 271, emphasis added.

⁴⁹ AS IV/ii 436, 455. See Joseph Ratzinger, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: The Dignity of the Human Person,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, 5 vols., ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, trans. W. J. O’Hara (London: Burns & Oates, 1969) 5:115–63, at 144; and Ambrose McNicholl, “God, Man, and World,” in *The Church in the World: Essays on the Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World Today with Texts of Church Teaching on Social Questions*, ed. Denys Turner (Dublin: Scepter, 1968) 9–24, at 23.

⁵⁰ AS IV/ii 452; quoted from Peter Hebblethwaite, S.J., *The Council Fathers and Atheism: The Interventions at the Fourth Session of Vatican Council II* (New York: Paulist, 1967) 81.

Las Casas and Vitoria meant by invincible ignorance. That is not, of course, to ignore the major disparities between their respective *Sitze im Leben*: many of Vatican II's *ignorantes* would, presumably, have been brought up either within at least nominally Christian societies, or would have had at least some acquaintance, however superficial, with Christianity. Differences aside, however, both Vatican II and the great Dominicans accept that (1) inculpable/invincible ignorance prevents unbelief from being sinful; and (2) this kind of ignorance may be prolonged, even after acquaintance with Christianity and the Church's proclamation, if the latter is either intrinsically insufficient or if Christians themselves fail *scandalously* (in the full, scriptural sense of the term) to live up to the name. This latter consideration constitutes, as I have shown, a significant development over Aquinas's own, apparently restricted, application.⁵¹ Such broadening of application perhaps explains the Council Fathers' avoidance of the term *ignorantia invincibilis*. For those schooled in (neo-) Thomism, as were the vast majority of at least the Latin-rite Council Fathers and *periti*, the phrase "invincible ignorance" may well have carried overtones of its original, narrow application. Pius IX, however, had already departed from this application by acknowledging the "variety of peoples, regions, natural dispositions, and so many other things." Thus, with its doctrine of inculpable ignorance, Vatican II both authentically developed Pius IX's teaching on invincible ignorance and (apparently unwittingly) rediscovered an understanding of invincible ignorance already firmly present in the nonmagisterial tradition of the Church, while at the same time seemingly avoiding the phrase itself as something potentially misleading.⁵²

PLURALISM AND PLAUSIBILITY

Having clarified what the council itself appears to have meant by inculpable ignorance, then, insofar as it would be "useful for better understanding

⁵¹ Too much should not be read into Aquinas's single example; he is not necessarily committed to the view that *only* someone brought up "in the woods or among brute animals" could fulfill the criteria for invincible ignorance. The passage in the *De veritate* (written before his usage of the phrase itself in the *Summa*) might just as easily be read as offering, for didactic purposes, the clearest and most extreme example. To the best of my knowledge, nothing in either *De veritate* or the *Summa* suggests that, faced with the same situation as Las Casas and Vitoria, he would have found their applications of his principle inimical.

⁵² This latter claim is difficult to substantiate. However, given the fact that the traditional phrase *ignorantia invincibilis* was frequently used in theological writings of this time and is prominent in the Holy Office's Letter to the Archbishop of Boston cited in *Lumen gentium* no. 16, its absence is noteworthy. An explanation different from the one I am offering (suggested by an anonymous peer reviewer) is that this reflects the drafters' desire to avoid overly technical terms.

God's plan for salvation, and the ways in which it is accomplished" (*Dominus Iesus* no. 21),⁵³ the task remains for theologians to consider how and to whom "inculpable ignorance" might apply. As a tentative and speculative contribution to this task, I wish to consider an issue raised by modern, pluralist societies—especially, though not exclusively, those in Western Europe. In particular, I will suggest that Las Casas's remarks (quoted above) about the dubitable authority, due to certain extrinsic factors, of the *conquistadores*' proclamation, can be significantly elaborated and developed in light of insights from the sociology of knowledge, as first developed in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966).

Putting it very simply, Berger and Luckmann argue for the necessity of social "plausibility structures" for the construction and maintenance of any given "reality":

Subjective reality is thus always dependent upon specific plausibility structures, that is, the specific social base and social processes required for its maintenance. One can maintain one's self-identification as a man of importance only in a milieu that confirms this identity; one can maintain one's Catholic faith only if one retains one's significant relationship with the Catholic community; and so forth.⁵⁴

This need for plausibility structures is brought out most obviously when a person switches from accepting one "reality," or worldview, to accepting a different one—as, paradigmatically, in the case of religious conversion. Berger and Luckmann write:

To have a conversion experience is nothing much. The real thing is to be able to keep on taking it seriously; to retain a sense of its plausibility. *This* is where the religious community comes in. It provides the indispensable plausibility structure for the new reality. In other words, Saul may have become Paul in the aloneness of religious ecstasy, but he could *remain* Paul only in the context of the Christian community that recognized him as such and confirmed the "new being" in which he now located this identity.⁵⁵

This general principle does not, however, apply only in conversion situations. Rather, such "plausibility structures" (which, concretely, may simply be regular contact with "significant others" who share the same beliefs) are necessary for sustaining a person in a given worldview. To quote from Berger's follow-up, *The Sacred Canopy*, where he specifically applies this theory to the case of religion:

It can be said that *all* religious traditions, irrespective of their several "ecclesiologies" or lack of the same, require specific communities for their continuing plausibility.

⁵³ *Acta apostolicae sedis* 92 (2000) 742–66, at 762.

⁵⁴ Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) 174. See also Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (1967; New York: Doubleday, 1990) 45.

⁵⁵ Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction* 177–78.

In this sense, the maxim *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* has general empirical applicability, provided one understands *salus* in a theologically rather unpalatable sense—to wit, as continuing plausibility. The reality of the Christian world depends upon the presence of social structures within which this reality is taken for granted and within which successive generations of individuals are socialized in such a way that this world will be real *to them*. When this plausibility structure loses its intactness or continuity, the Christian world begins to totter and its reality ceases to impose itself as self-evident truth.⁵⁶

Importantly, Berger singles out pluralism as posing a particular threat to such structures: “the pluralistic situation *ipso facto* plunges religion into a crisis of credibility.”⁵⁷ His twofold justification for this claim is worth quoting at length:

The pluralistic situation, in demonopolizing religion, makes it ever more difficult to maintain or to construct anew viable plausibility structures for religion. The plausibility structures lose massivity because they can no longer enlist the society as a whole to serve for the purpose of social confirmation. Put simply, there are always “all those others” that refuse to confirm the religious world in question. . . . Disconfirming others (not just individuals, but entire strata) can no longer be safely kept away from “one’s own.”⁵⁸

Moreover:

The pluralistic situation multiplies the number of plausibility structures competing with each other. *Ipso facto*, it relativizes their religious contents. More specifically, the religious contents are “de-objectivated,” that is, deprived of their status as taken-for-granted, objective reality in consciousness.⁵⁹

Now, it is precisely pluralism that many sociologists identify as a key catalyst in European secularization.⁶⁰ In the words of Stephen Hunt: “The pluralist situation relativizes competing religious worldviews and their matter-of-fact acceptance. Moreover, the pluralistic situation where one can choose one’s religion is also a situation where one can choose to disbelieve.”⁶¹ A similar idea is behind Pope Benedict XVI’s comment on American Catholics’ drifting away from the Church: “Certainly, much of this has to do with the passing away of a religious culture, sometimes disparagingly referred to as a ‘ghetto’, which reinforced participation and identification

⁵⁶ Berger, *Sacred Canopy* 46.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 151.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Steve Bruce, *Religion in Modern Britain* (New York: Oxford University, 1995) 10, 130; Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (New York: Oxford University, 2002) 220–26. See also Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) 43; and Hermann Lübke, “Religion in kulturellen und politischen Modernisierungsprozessen—Zur Aufklärung über die Aufklärung,” in *Säkularisierung: Bilanz und Perspektiven einer umstrittenen These*, ed. Christina von Braun, Wilhelm Gräb, and Johannes Zachhuber (Münster: Lit, 2007) 43–59.

⁶¹ Stephen J. Hunt, *Religion in Western Society* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002) 19.

with the Church.”⁶² Arguably, therefore, Berger and Luckmann’s theories open up new vistas for the understanding of inculpable ignorance—at least with regard to pluralist societies (or subsocieties). Now the two sociologists, true to their discipline’s “methodological a-theism,” refuse to be drawn on the *actual* truth-value of the myriad (perceived) “realities” or “truths” that have, in one or another time and place, been accepted by social groups.⁶³ But I, true to my own “methodological Catholicism,” need not be so coy. Nevertheless, there is no reason to suppose that acceptance of “the Truth” (even when assisted by grace) is any less contingent upon appropriate plausibility structures than is the acceptance of mere “truths.” As such, inculpability becomes far more complicated. It is no longer simply a question of not having heard the gospel, nor even of not having heard an (intrinsically) plausible presentation of it. Rather, one must speak, with Karl Rahner, of not having been *existentially* confronted with the gospel.⁶⁴ But in a modern pluralist society, which relativizes all truth- (let alone Truth-) claims, it may be that a great many people, and perhaps even an overwhelming majority, are never so confronted (especially when considered in conjunction with the other factors identified by both Vitoria/Las Casas and *Gaudium et spes* no. 19). Moreover, those who are never existentially confronted by the gospel could well include a large number of baptized Christians. Certainly there is no a priori reason why a person could not be (nominally) brought up as a Christian, attend Christian schools, get married in a church, and live out his or her whole life within a historically Christian society, without ever truly *hearing* the gospel. In fact, one could even argue that in societies such as Britain many people are (to adapt a metaphor intended very differently by Richard Dawkins⁶⁵) “inoculated” against the “virus of Christianity” in much the same way as one is against real viruses—that is, by being subjected to small doses of “dead” Christianity in one’s youth, preventing one’s contracting a “live strain” later on. Thus acquaintance with fairly shallow aspects of Christianity (hymns in assembly, harvest festivals, evangelical youth clubs, generic and empty appeals to a “shared Judeo-Christian heritage”) make people believe that they *know* Christianity, making it

⁶² Benedict XVI, “Responses to the Questions Posed by the Bishops of the United States,” http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080416_response-bishops_en.html (accessed October 10, 2010).

⁶³ See Berger and Luckmann, *Social Construction* 14; and Berger, *Sacred Canopy* 179–80.

⁶⁴ See Karl Rahner, “Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions,” in *Theological Investigations* 5, trans. Karl-H. Kruger (1961; London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1966) 115–34.

⁶⁵ Richard Dawkins, “Viruses of the Mind,” in *A Devil’s Chaplain: Selected Essays*, ed. Latha Menon (1993; London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003) 128–45.

easier to ignore and dismiss later in life. *Lumen gentium* no. 14's warning is perhaps relevant here: "those cannot be saved who, not being ignorant [of the fact that] the Catholic Church has been founded as necessary by God through Jesus Christ, are nevertheless unwilling either to enter it or to persevere in it."⁶⁶ Although perhaps not the drafters' (primary) intention, this passage seems to allow at least the possibility of salvation for a baptized Catholic who fails to persevere in the Church, on the condition that he or she is ignorant of its divinely ordained necessity.

Of course, I certainly do not wish to imply that it is impossible in such societies to be confronted with the gospel in such a way that one is, on pain of damnation, obliged to enter the Church and to persevere in it. Nor am I implying that all those who have neither entered nor persevered are, as a matter of fact, inculpably ignorant (*Gaudium et spes* no. 19 is clear on this point). How many, if any at all, are in fact excused from premortem belief due to the above considerations is thankfully not something for theologians to judge. But what my interpretation does do is reinforce, on the basis of a strong theoretical foundation, what Sullivan has termed Vatican II's "presumption of innocence"⁶⁷ when encountering, or theologizing about, contemporary non-Catholics.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I have tried to attain several goals. First, I have emphasized Vatican II's criterion of inculpable ignorance for the Catholic understanding of "those outside," and suggested that more thought should be given to the subject within Catholic dogmatics. Second, I have explored the meaning of *ignorantia sine culpa* at the council itself and situated the phrase within its context in the history of doctrine and most especially within its relation to the prior term *ignorantia invincibilis*. Focusing on two major junctures (Thomas Aquinas and Las Casas/Vitoria), I have argued for the developmental continuity of the terms, and discussed how they have been understood within the Catholic tradition. Finally I have suggested—rather more tentatively—that certain insights from sociological theory may be useful to theologians in "fleshing out" how this dogmatic principle might apply in the real world, that is, to potentially billions of concrete human beings, past, present, and future. Berger and Luckmann's theory of plausibility structures, I have argued, justifies a very wide hope that many of today's unbelievers are indeed inculpably ignorant of the gospel, the Church, and perhaps even of God himself. "This teaching is hard; who can accept it?" (Jn 6:60) is an honest response to what is often sincerely, and perhaps inculpably, perceived as a scandalous proposition.

⁶⁶ AS III/viii 795.

⁶⁷ Sullivan, *Salvation Outside?* 151.