

# Did Vatican II change the Doctrine of Religious Freedom?

In 1965 [Vatican II](#) published [Dignitatis Humanae](#). Ever since, there has been controversy about whether that document contradicted the Catholic Church's previous doctrinal teaching, about [Religious Freedom](#).

To explore this topic, we will look at what Dignitatis Humanae changed (section 1). Then we will see if it contradicts church history (sections 2 and 3). Finally, we will explore whether it contradicts the Church's views on the duties of a government (section 4 and 5).

I shall suggest that Dignitatis Humanae has changed Church policy, not doctrine.

## 1. What did Dignitatis Humanae change?

The story of Adam and Eve ([Genesis 3](#)) illustrates two types of freedom. Adam and Eve are free to choose to sin. Once they choose to sin, they are also free to take the fruit from the tree, as God does not *prevent* them from doing so. They are neither *forced* to sin, nor *prevented* from sinning.

Before Vatican II, the Church taught that no one could be *forced* to choose a faith. Dignitatis Humanae repeats this ([Paragraph 10](#)).

However, the Church rejected the idea of not *preventing* people from practising a faith. The Church thought that allowing non-Catholic faiths was allowing error or sin, which could mislead Catholics. So non-Catholic faiths were *prevented*. There could be occasional exceptions, if it were 'less bad' to tolerate a faith, rather than suppress it. For example, doing so might prevent a religious war.

Dignitatis Humanae changes the Church's approach. It says that people must have both types of religious freedom. They must not be *forced to*, or *prevented from*, practising their faith. This is even the case if people have a non-Catholic faith.

On the surface this looks like a contradiction in Church teaching.

## 2. The Exceptions solution

One solution to this problem has been argued by [Brian Harrison](#). He notes that *Dignitatis Humanae* lists some *exceptions* to religious freedom. For example, it says that religious freedom can be restricted when:

- 1) Public order requires it ([paragraph 2](#)).
- 2) Dishonourable persuasive techniques are misleading vulnerable people, like the poor and uneducated ([paragraph 4](#)).
- 3) Human welfare and morality may require limits ([paragraph 7](#)).

The 'Exceptions Solution' says that there is no contradiction between what the church used to say, and what it now says. This is because all the pre-1965 restrictions on religious freedom can be explained as instances of exceptions.

This approach makes some valid points. Medieval religion and politics were tightly interwoven. So, many medieval restrictions on religion did indeed have public order implications. This was also the case during the [Reformation](#).

It continued to be the case in the nineteenth century. When popes such as [Gregory XVI](#) (d.1846), [Pius IX](#) (d.1878) and [Leo XIII](#) (d.1903) rejected Religious Freedom, it was often against a backdrop of public disorder. During the nineteenth century France went through four revolutions. In Germany [Karl Marx](#) was trying to incite revolution. In Italy, Pius IX's minister, [Pelegrino Rossi](#), was assassinated; prompting the pope to flee for his life. Later, the [first Vatican Council](#) (1870) finished early because bishops had to flee from Nationalist armies marching on Rome.

When revolutionaries called for Freedom of Religion, popes often heard and rejected the idea of Freedom *from* Religion. *Dignitatis Humanae* also rejects that idea ([paragraph 5](#)).

Pius IX rejected religious freedom as an insane idea ([Quanta Cura](#)). But in a context where some of the people calling for it are also trying to assassinate his ministers, he had understandable '*public order*' reasons for his view.

The 'Exceptions Solution' explains much of Church history. But there is still a problem. Sometimes the Church restricted Religious Freedom for Spiritual reasons. For example, Leo XIII refers to the public order *benefits* of restricting Religious Freedom, but they are not the *reasons* for restricting it ([Libertas, 1888](#)). He restricts it because it is sinful, false worship.

This means that the 'exceptions' approach does not fully explain Church history unless there are *other* exceptions which *Dignitatis Humanae* does not mention. This intriguing thought raises the *ambiguity* issue.

### 3. Ambiguity issue

Dignitatis Humanae lists the exceptions which are relevant when a Human power (ie a Government) limits religious freedom. It repeatedly and explicitly makes the point that it is referring only to 'Human powers.'

However, the Catholic Church has never considered itself to be merely a *Human Power*. (For example, see [Libertas, paragraph 27](#)). Dignitatis Humanae does not talk about any limits or exceptions to Religious Freedom for non-human powers. So, it is possible that there are other *exceptions* to Religious Freedom, which Dignitatis Humanae simply does not mention.

This possibility is the ambiguity of silence. It is an issue about what the document does not say, rather than what it says.

A positive reading of the silence is that there are indeed additional exceptions to Religious Freedom. The Church used those exceptions prior to 1965 and it now chooses not to use those exceptions. This interpretation means that Dignitatis Humanae does not change doctrine. It merely coincides with a change in Church policy (on which see section 6 below).

A negative reading of the silence is that Dignitatis Humanae lists the *only* exceptions to Religious Freedom. As those exceptions do not explain Church history, then Dignitatis Humanae is not consistent with what the Church did and taught prior to 1965. On this reading Dignitatis Humanae has changed Church doctrine.

If there is, indeed, a positive and a negative reading of Dignitatis Humanae, then that means that the document is ambiguous.

When a document is ambiguous, people normally try to clarify its meaning by referring to the intention of the author. As it happens, Dignitatis Humanae clarifies its intention on this issue. It states that it '...leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine...' ([paragraph 1](#)).

This shows that the intention of Dignitatis Humanae is to not-change-doctrine. This suggests that any ambiguous silence in the document should be read positively, ie as not implying a doctrinal change. Reading the document in this way means that Church history is consistent with the teaching of Dignitatis Humanae.

However, there is a second problem raised by Dignitatis Humanae. Before 1965 the Church used to teach that governments had a duty to suppress non-Catholic religions. Dignitatis Humanae rejects the idea of such a duty. So, this gives the appearance of a further contradiction.

### 4. The Powers solution

A solution to the problem of Government duties has been suggested by [Thomas Pink](#). He argues that when the Church asked the state to *prevent* religious freedom for *spiritual reasons*, the Church was also delegating the power to do so. In the modern world the Church is choosing not

to delegate that power. This means that states no longer have the power to *prevent* religious freedom, and so they can no longer have a duty to *prevent* religious freedom.

This means that there is no contradiction or change of Church teaching about the duty of the state. The Church has changed its policy about what powers are delegated to a state. In the absence of that delegation, the duty lapses.

To understand this idea, it is helpful to look at the difference between a doctrine and a policy.

## 5. Doctrine and Policy

A doctrine is a claim about what is true or false. “Jesus is God” is a doctrine, because it is claiming that “it is true that Jesus is God.” Doctrines cannot contradict each other, as contradictions cannot be true.

When doctrines deal with ethics, issues of truth become matters of goodness. This means that doctrines can also make claims about what is *morally good*.

A policy is a way of behaving which is *instrumentally good* (or ‘useful’) for achieving an outcome. For example, driving on the same side of the road is an *instrumentally good* way of avoiding vehicle accidents.

Until 1967 Sweden drove on the left side of the road, with the ethical goal of ‘avoiding accidents.’ Then they [switched to drive on the right](#). This is because neighbouring countries drove on the right. With increased amounts of cross border traffic, Sweden thought that driving on the right could be a better way of ‘avoiding accidents.’ The underlying ethical goals remained the same (avoiding accidents), but the policy (which side of the road to drive on) completely reversed.

The issue of doctrines and policies is much more complicated than this simple summary. However, all that we need for the moment, is the recognition that there is a difference between doctrines and policies.

This means that when it looks like a reversal, or contradiction, we must be careful in jumping to conclusions that a doctrine has changed. It could be the case that a policy has been reversed, with no doctrinal changes at all.

## 6. Dignitatis Humanae changes policy

The Church’s pre-1965 position can be summed up as an argument, which went something like this:

Doctrine: Governments must promote the Common Good

Experience: Regulating religious freedom promotes the common Good

Policy: Therefore, Governments must regulate religious freedom.

For 1500 years the Church has been asking governments to limit religious freedom as a *policy*; not as a *doctrine*.

This policy worked well for the Church in the medieval period, as the Church had a degree of equality with national governments. When governments over-asserted themselves, the Church could defend itself using sanctions like Excommunication and Interdict. That helped to preserve the parity necessary to an effective working relationship.

In the years preceding Vatican II, the Church's experience of Governments underwent a significant change. Fascism, Atheistic Communism and Totalitarianism threatened the Church in profound ways. Secularism meant that the Church could no longer defend itself against over-mighty governments by using Spiritual instruments such as Excommunication and Interdict. For the first time in 1500 years the Church needed a new policy for working with governments.

This is what occurs in *Dignitatis Humanae*. Previously, governments were delegated powers (see section 5) to work for specific spiritual goods within the Common Good. This meant Catholic Governments must protect Catholicism, for the sake of the Common Good.

After 1965 Church teaching remains the same. Government still has a duty to promote the Common Good. However, the Church now sees over-mighty government as a growing and serious threat to the Church. So, it has ended its delegation of spiritual powers to governments and has insisted that Government must have nothing to do with religious matters at all.

Changing its policy led to some undermining of the Church in constitutionally Catholic countries. But in a global context, it represented the best (or, perhaps, the least-worst) way of ensuring the global effectiveness of the Church's mission. On that note, we should not forget that the loudest applause for *Dignitatis Humane* came from Catholics around the world who were being persecuted by totalitarian regimes.

## 7. Conclusion

*Dignitatis Humanae* is consistent with Church History, because history can be explained in terms of *exceptions* to Religious Freedom (See section 2). *Dignitatis Humane* is consistent with the reversal of (Catholic) Governments' duties towards Catholicism because that reversal is a change of policy, not doctrine (See section 6).

There is much more to be said about why the Church would change its policy so radically, but that is a story for another day.

One issue raised by *Dignitatis Humane* is that there may be an ambiguity in the document (See section 3). That ambiguity has caused some Catholics to break with the Church and accuse it of doctrinal error. This is what Pope Benedict XVI referred to as a reading the document with a 'hermeneutic of discontinuity.' ([Christmas Speech](#), 2005).

However, the ambiguity in the document can be read consistently with Church doctrine. And modern over-mighty governments do indeed represent a new problem for the Church. If this is so, then it provides a coherent, consistent and plausible reading of *Dignitatis Humanae* which shows that it is in continuity with previous doctrine.

This brings us to perhaps the most significant question posed by *Dignitatis Humanae*. If there is no necessity to interpret it as a doctrinal change, then why do so?