

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Bristol		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 31) Theology and Religious Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Engaging the Religious 'Other': Building Best Practice and Setting National Standards in Interfaith Dialogue in Churches and Schools		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2009-2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Professor Gavin D'Costa	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Professor of Catholic Theology	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 1991-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 1 August 2013-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		

### 1. Summary of the impact

Professor D'Costa's research into Catholic doctrines regarding other religions has challenged fifty years of majority interpretations of the Vatican Council, leading members of the clergy and laity worldwide to reconsider their approach to the religious 'other'. The research has led to policy and curriculum changes in Bristol's Roman Catholic Clifton Diocese, and has set national standards for interfaith relations through the launch, in 2015, of the Clifton Diocese annual Catholic-Jewish-Muslim dialogue. His research into wider Christian approaches to religious pluralism was incorporated into the OCR A-Level syllabus, reaching approximately 50,000 students since 2014, and transforming their understanding of traditional approaches to religious pluralism.

### 2. Underpinning research

From 2009 to 2018, University of Bristol researcher Professor Gavin D'Costa examined Christian attitudes to other religions via two main research streams: (A) Roman Catholic rationale for interfaith relations and its goals; and (B) theological and philosophical presuppositions within Christian approaches to the religious 'other'. While the streams are closely linked, the principal beneficiaries of D'Costa's research are (A) church groups and (B) the A-level curriculum.

#### A: Roman Catholic doctrinal teachings regarding other religions

D'Costa has examined Roman Catholic formal doctrinal teachings regarding Jews and Muslims found in the Second Vatican Council documents ('Vatican II', 1963-65) [3.1] and subsequent official teachings [3.2]. Historically, Catholics have had mainly negative attitudes towards Jews and Muslims. The new teachings of the Council radically challenge these negative attitudes. The research shows these new attitudes do not entail changing underlying doctrine but a development in understanding and application of these doctrines. Many Catholics falsely understand the Council to teach the equality of religions and to have abandoned traditional doctrines. The research shows how the Church's teachings hold together traditional doctrines with a remarkably open and positive attitude to the 'other' – both in terms of salvation and in the positive value of their religious tradition. Thus, the research challenges fifty years of interpreting the Council. The research also shows that Judaism and Islam pose profound challenges to past Catholic practices and theological attitudes – in differing ways. The Catholic Church now teaches that all three religions worship the same God, all have a connection to Abraham, and all have shared ethical values. D'Costa's research asserts that these commonalities, despite serious doctrinal differences, can guide interfaith dialogue to explore each other's teachings and spirituality, and encourage working together for the common good.

#### B: Wider Christian approaches to religious pluralism

Within this stream, D'Costa examined twentieth-century Christian approaches towards other religions [3.3]. Unlike stream A, this research is not Catholic specific. The research develops three points that have been important for wider debate in the field.

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First, it has shown that while some influential modern liberal Christian approaches are commendable in seeking to welcome and affirm religious plurality, the underlying philosophical relativism in these positions is problematic. This relativism has strategically sought to minimise conflicting truth claims. The research shows that the religions in question are not taken seriously when this happens, thereby undermining genuine interfaith dialogue.

Second, the research has related this theological strategy to the way some modern liberal societies and theoreticians deal with religious pluralism by only accepting religious discourse when it conforms to the canons of secular discourse. While this strategy is well meaning and intended to encourage debate in a pluralist society, it has the unintended consequence of refusing religious discourse a public platform.

Third, the research has shown how faith and reason within more traditional Christian approaches can provide both positive theological and social approaches to religious plurality. There is a role for Christianity in the public square, especially in seeking the common good with those from any religion or no religion. The impact of these ideas upon schoolteachers and children is traced in this study. It has helped to challenge commonly held views in our culture in a constructive and positive manner.

### 3. References to the research

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#### Publications

3.1 **D'Costa G** (2014), *Vatican II. Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims*, Oxford University Press, Oxford [Available on request]

**Evidence of the quality:** two journal 'round table' reviews: *Nova et Vetera*, 1, 2017; and *Louvain Studies*, Fall 2017. Three international conferences on the book.

3.2 **D'Costa G** (2020), *Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People after Vatican II*, Oxford University Press, Oxford [Available on request]

3.3 **D'Costa G** (2009), *Christianity and the World Religions. Disputed Questions in the Theology of Religions*, Blackwell, Oxford (esp. chapters 2 and 5) [Available on request]

**Evidence of the quality:** AHRC Research Grant for Matching Study Leave Scheme to complete this monograph; inclusion of part in A-level syllabus recommended reading.

#### Funding information

**D'Costa G** (PI), *Catholic doctrines about Judaism after the Second Vatican Council (1965-2015)*, Leverhulme Research Fellowship, 2017-18, GBP18,000

**D'Costa G** (PI), *Christian doctrine and world religions*, AHRC Standard Research Grant, 2007-08, GBP23,000

### 4. Details of the impact

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#### **A: Shaped Catholic Policy and Teaching on Interfaith Matters – in the Clifton Diocese and Internationally**

##### **Clifton (Bristol) Diocese**

Since 2012, Professor D'Costa has acted as special advisor to the Bishop of Clifton and the Clifton Diocese Adult Education Director on interfaith matters. The diocese consists of 107 parishes and a population of roughly 200,000 Catholics (2013 figures). During this REF period, D'Costa's advice and input have helped shape and create an agenda that the Diocese has adopted and developed in its practices **[5.1]**.

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The Diocese Adult Education Director is charged with training priests, deacons, and lay catechists. Since 2013, D'Costa's research [3.1, 3.2] and expertise has shaped the curriculum for these training programmes [5.1]. For example, the doctrinal, not just pastoral developments are highlighted. Training attendees in 2019 noted the impact on their practice: 'Being able to apply Church teachings to present-day concerns in ways that are accessible but are rooted in the history, tradition and theology of the Church'; and their transformed attitudes: 'to build bridges' [5.3]. The Director notes that this training is 'seminal in transforming local parish life across the diocese, helping Catholics to be open and discerning about Jewish and Muslim communities ... and their religious significance' [5.1].

D'Costa has further advanced the teachings of the Catholic Church regarding Jews and Muslims by developing a new diocese policy, since 2015, of holding an annual interfaith dialogue with Catholic-Jewish-Muslim speakers during the UK's Inter Faith Week. This has established Clifton Diocese as a model of good practice in interfaith relations, as recognised at the national level by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales [5.2]. The Clifton Diocese Adult Education Director states: '[the annual programme] is ground-breaking in our diocese, and also nationally[...] Bristol is now one of the beacon-dioceses for developing and encouraging constructive interfaith meetings within a Catholic perspective' [5.1]. These interfaith meetings have involved about 400 people over the REF period. Laity and members of the clergy in Clifton report their attitudes towards Catholicism and Jews and Muslims have been challenged [5.3].

From 2019, this dialogue programme has been extended to include diocese sixth formers and their teachers in a half-day event. The student attendees reported very positively: they had not understood the Catholic Church's approach and found it deeply challenging and helpful and were also keen to engage further [5.6]. In the evening of the same day, the same panel engaged at Clifton Cathedral with a lay, clergy, and ecumenical audience. This will now take place annually and establishes a model of good practice for English Catholicism. The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has agreed to house the video of the evening event to share with other dioceses nationally and internationally [5.2].

#### International reach

D'Costa's research on 'Vatican II' [3.1] has had a significant impact on Catholic clergy and laity internationally. During this REF period, he has presented his research in Catholic dioceses and universities in Jerusalem, the US (three conferences), Ireland, Germany, Rome and Hungary, reaching over 500 people. Many attendees of these events reported that through this engagement they have come to appreciate better the Catholic Church's orthodoxy and its radical openness towards Jews and Muslims. The research has helped dispel negative and indifferent attitudes towards the 'other' and question any easy assimilation or equalisation. Many have discovered areas of social teaching and spirituality where the three faiths share common insights (for example: regarding prayer, attitudes to mercy and charity, regarding Israel/Palestine, and the role of women) [5.5].

A deacon who attended the Rome event in 2019 reported 'I will be ordained as a priest soon, and having a better understanding of a theology of Judaism will inform my preaching as well as any inter-religious work I take up', while another said D'Costa's research gave them 'ideas on how to cooperate in dialogue with the Jewish people and their religious heritage, which impels me to reflect on different initiatives when I go back to Chile' [5.5]. An attendee of the Dublin event in 2019 stated that D'Costa's 'work has inspired me to think anew about our Catholic engagement with Jewish scholars as opportunities for mutual enrichment and spiritual edification' [5.4].

Some report they have sought further interfaith education and pastoral experience and actively create such opportunities through their parish. For example [5.3], one priest has since hosted a joint Holocaust Remembrance Day with the local Jewish community and shared Eid celebrations with the local Muslim community.

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Additionally, D'Costa's 2020 monograph [3.2] has been selected for a panel discussion at the annual meeting of the Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology in November 2020 [5.10]; is being translated into Hungarian, Polish and Italian; and will be the subject of an international conference in Rome, 2021, at the Angelicum Pontifical University, and half-day events in Hungary (Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest) and Poland (the Pontifical University of John Paul II, Kraków) for Catholic clergy and laity in 2022.

#### **B: Research adopted in A-level syllabus, transforming students and teachers' understanding of religious pluralism**

The OCR A-level Syllabus is part of the Cambridge Assessment Group, Europe's largest assessment agency. OCR plays a leading role in developing and delivering assessments throughout the world, operating in over 150 countries. 13,000 centres internationally choose OCR A-levels.

The Chief Examiner of the OCR Board included D'Costa's research [3.3] in the new syllabus for A-level Religious Studies, published in 2014, on the basis that it requires students to critically examine often held common prejudices [5.7]. D'Costa is discussed in the Chief Examiner's textbook, *OCR Religious Studies for A Level Year 2* (2017), which sold 4,000 copies by 2019. The Chief Examiner reports: 'students think more deeply as a result of [D'Costa's] research', adding that they take this learning and apply it more widely outside their A-level studies when reflecting on debate in the public square [5.7]. Attendees of teacher events held over 2018-2020, including the Teachers Conference, corroborated this:

- 'I am going to approach this differently – emphasising the criticisms of other approaches as well as the strengths.'
- 'As ecumenical representative in my parish, I am encouraged in finding common ground with other faiths, particularly on addressing poverty and climate change.'
- 'We watched some YouTube clips of his teaching, which [*the students*] engaged with enthusiastically, and they were intrigued, and surprised, to read about his ideas on 'controlling beliefs'. They found this concept easy-to-access, and helpful in their overall studies.' [5.9]

D'Costa's research is also discussed in the other widely-used resource book for the syllabus: Libby Ahluwalia and Robert Bowie, *Oxford A-level Religious Studies for OCR* (2016).

In total, during this REF period, about 50,000 students have engaged with D'Costa's research, as approximately 8,000 students take the OCR Religious Studies A-level each year. The syllabus is employed in both faith based and secular schools.

Students report that it has challenged their attraction to 'liberal' Christian approaches, which they had previously favoured, sometimes causing them to neglect 'traditional' alternatives. D'Costa's research [3.3] helped them realise the difficulties with the possible unacknowledged relativism related to such approaches. One student reported: '[D'Costa's] writings have affected how I perceive others' faiths in that they have reminded me not to take an imperialist viewpoint' [5.8]. Students also reported a more sympathetic approach to traditional/orthodox Christian sources, which they had not appreciated previously, and which were more resourceful than they had imagined in understanding religious plurality positively. A number claimed that this field had become important and challenging to them, and some consider studying it further [5.8]. One student said: 'I have become aware of the fact that the threefold typology alone is problematic as pluralism is potentially also a form of exclusivism as it's secular and reflective of modernity' [5.8]. A teacher reported: 'it helped the students understand the syllabus better, both in terms of the issues Christianity faces in a pluralist society, and also with the Christian response to Judaism' [5.9].

Teachers report that they have used the research to challenge students in common prejudices and to view the field differently. One teacher said: 'it has helped me to look at the subject matter in a more critical way' [5.9]. Most importantly, several teachers reported that it challenged their own assumptions and changed their teaching approaches in this area, for example: 'I felt

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inspired to review my own teaching notes and consider issues in a more contemporary light' [5.9].

**5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

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- 5.1 Clifton Diocese – Corroborating letters (2018, 2020), Director of Adult Education
- 5.2 Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales – Corroborating letter (August 2020), Interreligious Adviser
- 5.3 Evidence from UK Catholic laity and clergy (2018, 2019)
- 5.4 Evidence from Ireland diocese – Dublin (2019)
- 5.5 Evidence from international talks – Rome, USA, Jerusalem, Hungary, Italy (2019)
- 5.6 Evidence from Clifton Diocese School event (November 2019)
- 5.7 OCR Board – Corroborating letter (December 2018), Chief Examiner for Theology
- 5.8 Student evidence (2019)
- 5.9 Teacher evidence (2019, 2020)
- 5.10 Society for Post-Supersessionist Theology video: [Book Panel D'Costa's Catholic Doctrines on the Jews](#) (23 November 2020)