Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cicm20

Muhammad Reconsidered: A Christian Perspective on Islamic Prophecy

by Anna Bonta Moreland, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2020, xi+178 pp., $45.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780268107253

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To cite this article: Axel Marc Oaks Takacs (2020): Muhammad Reconsidered: A Christian Perspective on Islamic Prophecy, Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations, DOI: 10.1080/09596410.2020.1802862

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2020.1802862

Published online: 06 Aug 2020.

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

BOOK REVIEW

Muhammad Reconsidered: A Christian Perspective on Islamic Prophecy, by Anna Bonta Moreland, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2020, xi+178 pp., $45.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780268107253

Anna Bonta Moreland's *Muhammad Reconsidered* is an exceptional contribution to the fields of Catholic–Islamic studies, Christian theology of religions, and Catholic theology of post-canonical revelation. Targeted readers may include Catholic theologians of religion, Catholic scholars of Islam, and Christian theologians, scholars, and organizers working in the fields of interreligious dialogue, interreligious studies and community engagement with Muslim communities. In this impressive yet pleasantly succinct book, Moreland begins from Catholic magisterial documents (from Vatican II and later) concerning the Church's general theology of religions and revelation; she underscores and analyses what they have to say about Muslims and their place in our de facto religiously plural world. Moreland then turns to Thomas Aquinas concerning postbiblical prophecy, and endeavours to construct a Catholic theology of revelation that could embrace Muhammad as a prophet, at least in an *analogical* sense (here she employs Aquinas's 'third way' of understanding language, between univocity and equivocity).

Overall, Moreland's book is inspiring reading for anyone seeking to navigate between the Scylla of Christian exclusivism and exceptionalism and the Charybdis of onto-theological pluralism and universalism (or even religious perennialism). She paves a Catholic way to accept (at least parts of) the divine revelations conveyed to the Prophet Muhammad via the angel Gabriel between 609 and 632 CE and later canonized, according to Islamic tradition, into the Qur'an around 650 CE. What follows is a summary that highlights praiseworthy contributions from Moreland's project, which is both academically rigorous and irenic. It ends with three brief points containing both amicable challenges and avenues of further interreligious theological exploration.

In Chapter 1, 'Setting the Stage', Moreland connects her Catholic proposal to the global and political context in which societies remain separated by the power construct of Christianity vs./over Islam, West vs./over East, and secular reason vs./over religious fanaticism. Of course, Moreland is right to challenge both this construct and the larger secularization thesis that birthed it, and then argues the converse, as it were: that encounters between communities of Muslims and non-Muslims in 'the West' are increasing rapidly, that the Catholic Church remains the (sole?) Western religious institution that 'is particularly equipped to engage with Muslims in theological terms and that this will lead to salutary political consequences' (7). She notes the contours of her theological proposal within the context of magisterial documents on religious diversity, which, while spilling ink on 'Islam' and 'Muslims', never once mention Muhammad. Her aim is to reread those documents with fresh eyes and put them into conversation with Aquinas's theology of revelation. Her argument? Her proposal that 'Christians become open to the theoretical possibility that Muhammad is a religious prophet' (8) is bolstered by the slightly more ambitious 'Christians might come to revere Muhammad as a prophet in a limited and relative sense, not one that Muslims would embrace, but one that Christians nevertheless should consider' (121). But Moreland's careful wording is indicative of the narrow straits she is navigating, for straying one way or another may lead her to crash against the rocks of being a 'globalizing syncretist' or 'colonizing traditionalist', or 'Christianizing [Muslims'] most revered founder' (9). With that, she moves

on to address how 'deep within the bosom of one tradition (Christianity) one finds a theological openness to another, later tradition (Islam)' (9).

Chapter 2, 'The State of the Question', is a fresh and analytically fascinating rereading of five magisterial documents of the Catholic Church: *Dei Verbum* (Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *DV*), *Lumen Gentum* (Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *LG*), *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican II document on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *NA*), *Dialogue and Proclamation* (published 25 years after *NA* by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, *DP*), and *Dominus Iesus* (Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 2000). Moreland underscores how *DV* redefines revelation from the more restrictive scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ to the more capacious 'set of complex historical events and developments', that is, 'all things that recall the Creator' (22). Revelation is 'cosmic in its reach and dynamic in its delivery' (22). While the public manifestation of revelation remains complete in Jesus Christ, its interpretation and the process of understanding it remain incomplete while in this historical plane. Here, Moreland makes her first logical moves to suggest that this openness includes learning from the Qur'an: 'The process of learning from the religious other becomes incorporated into the Christian's understanding of her own tradition, a process that will remain incomplete until the end of time' (26).

This move is reinforced by her reading of *LG*, a document that is just as taciturn regarding Muhammad, but which includes a curious line: 'Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, *along with us* [*nobiscum*] adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind' (27, citing *LG* 16). Moreland's interpretation:

> This is not a claim about coming to know the one God through reason. The God met in adoration is met in prayer, in religious ritual. This claim is then framed in eschatological terms, where both Christians and Muslims – together it seems – await the final day of judgment. (28)

Indeed, *it seems*. As *LG* continues, it mentions those who 'seek the unknown God' and 'do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church', yet

> sincerely seek God and moved by grace strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience … [and] who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God and with His grace strive to live a good life. Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel. (*LG* 16)

Do non-Christians, according to *LG*, have access to divine revelation and salvation *through* their prayer and rituals, or *despite* them? If *through* them, is it only because, through their human efforts, they have happened upon a beneficial practice? Moreland suggests that it is through them, for she ends this section with another reference to *LG:* Whatever good 'is found in people's hearts and minds, or in their particular rites and cultures [*propriis ritibus et culturis*], is not only saved from destruction but is made whole, raised up, and brought to completion to the glory of God' (29, her translation of *LG* 17). The problem for a Catholic theology of religions, it seems, is that other rites and cultures are salvific and revelatory *only through* the power Christ's grace, not through any merit they possess per se – but this is as far as any Catholic theology of religion can go lest it become pluralist. There is merit to Moreland's conclusion, but it is not definitive: 'the seeds of the Word are found not only in the minds and hearts of individual Muslims but also in their communal rituals and customs' (29).

The remainder of Chapter 2 engages *NA*, *DP* and *DI* with similar and admirable hermeneutics of openness and generosity. Moreland avers, inter alia, that *LG*'s and *NA*'s specific engagement with the Islamic tradition suggests an Islamic–Christian agreement over the divine

attributes: one, merciful, creator, judge, self-subsisting and all-powerful. Since 'Muslims do not claim to arrive at these attributes of God through the use of their natural reason' (31), there is at least an implicit recognition of divine revelation within the Qur'an. This is true enough for 'merciful' and 'judge', though the meanings of these attributes are so broad that averring their sole provenance within the religious and cultural context of seventh-century Arabia to be the Qur'an may be a stretch. The most relevant portion of her reading of *DI* concerns the following section:

> the distinction between *theological faith* and *belief in* the other religions, must be *firmly held.* If faith is the acceptance in grace of *revealed truth* … then belief, in the other religions, is that sum of experience and thought that constitutes the *human treasury of wisdom and religious aspiration*, which *man in his search for truth has conceived* and acted upon in his relationship to God and the Absolute (*DI* 7) … Nevertheless, God, who desires to call all peoples to himself in Christ and to communicate to them the fullness of his revelation and love, does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals, but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression even when they contain 'gaps, insufficiencies and errors'.[1] Therefore, the sacred books of other religions, which in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers, *receive from the mystery of Christ* the elements of goodness and grace which they contain. (*DI* 8)

Moreland acknowledges the limits of *DI* 7: faith is acceptance of God revealing truth to humanity, and belief is the experience of truth that humanity conceives in search of God. The former entails God's acting and revealing, the latter entails humanity's acting and conceiving; the former is divine activity, the latter human activity. But *DI* 8 suggests that this human activity is somehow sanctified by grace so that Christ's revelation and love is communicated therein. Moreland's engagement with magisterial documents 'leaves open the possibility that the messages emerging from Muhammad's encounter with the angel Gabriel might help Christians understand revelation more fully' precisely because these documents do not deny 'God's presence beyond the walls of the Church' (40). The limit, again, is that any 'goodness and grace' in the Qur'an would ultimately be from 'the mystery of Christ'.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn to the Thomas Aquinas's theology of biblical and post-biblical prophecy as a way to conceptually understand just how revelatory knowledge exists 'beyond the walls of the Church', given that the magisterial documents analysed in Chapter 2 remain silent as to *the mode* of this presence. This pair of chapters contains by far the most novel, constructive and insightful sections of the book because Moreland critically applies Aquinas's theology of prophecy to Muhammad's experience of divine revelation. Acknowledging that she is taking 'Thomas's work where he would not have taken it' (44), she suggests that 'what Christians have learned about Muslim belief and practice in the seven hundred years that separate us from Thomas is analogous to what we have learned of human biology, astronomy, or history, to name just a few examples' (45). Chapter 3 has four major takeaways regarding Aquinas's theology of prophecy. First, prophecy is one avenue to come to knowledge of God, alongside 'natural reasoning, hearing through faith, and seeing in the beatific vision' (48–49). Second, just as the light of nature, the light of faith or grace, and the light of glory illuminate the three other ways of knowing God, the prophetic light illuminates the prophet's intellect by Divine revelation (49); this prophetic knowledge often surpasses human reason and conveys a truth 'to a select person for the good of the wider community', directing them 'toward the end of all human living found in the beatific vision' (55). Third, the prophetic experience often involves an angel as intermediary, and this experience involves *both* the reception *and* the 'supernatural judgment' of corporeal, imaginative or intellectual forms (57); prophecy is the perfection of the intellect, not the will. Fourth – and most importantly – according to

Thomas, '*anyone* whom God chooses as an instrument to deliver a message to the community of faith can become a prophet' (61), be they evil and lacking charity or holy and replete with divine grace, be they before or after the coming of Christ, be they explicitly Christian or an unbeliever. Moreland concludes that 'each instance of prophetic revelation falls within the larger pattern of God's desire to manifest Himself in all of creation' (62–63).

To deploy Thomas's theology of prophecy as a tool to comprehend Muhammad as prophet, Moreland turns in Chapter 4 to unexpected scriptural figures whom Aquinas identifies as prophets; we can thus see Thomas's theology in action, embracing non-Christians and even non-humans as prophets. Caiaphas (someone who unwittingly speaks prophetically but who does not believe in Jesus; John 11.49ff.), the Roman soldiers (John 19.23–24 – though here it is unclear why either Aquinas or Moreland uses this example of figures who *fulfil* prophecy as opposed to experiencing prophecy), Balaam's ass (Numbers 22.21–35 – a curious but instructive case of a non-human animal experiencing prophecy), Balaam (as an example of how 'even a demonic prophet can participate – however partially – in the experience of prophecy' [79] – a way Thomas might have understood Muhammad's experience, but *definitely not* what Moreland is arguing), Solomon (who is uniquely granted supernatural judgement of things concerning natural reason, without supernatural reception of forms), and Christ (when 'He spoke as a wayfarer about things far from human reason' [82]). Moreland concludes that, for Aquinas, being a believer (or even a human!) is not within the criteria for labelling a person or experience prophetic. Furthermore, the goal of prophecy is to direct human activity, but it is also directed toward judgement. Accordingly, post-biblical prophecy, though *not* conveying *novel divine revelation*, may entail understanding, support, verification and elucidation of Christian revelation. These post-biblical prophets may include 'non-believers'. Since, according to *DV*, the process of understanding revelation remains incomplete on this historical plane, and since, according to other documents, other religious rites and cultures may provide insight into this dynamic process of revelation, Moreland tentatively offers the following:

> The substance of shared beliefs and the claim that Muhammad received these messages from the angel Gabriel lead us at least to consider the possibility that Muhammad was a postcanonical prophet who addressed pagans, Christians, and Jews of seventh-century Arabia. This theoretical openness means that Christians should take the Qur'an theologically seriously. (86)

I take Moreland's cautious language to be indicative of the limits, again, of Catholic theology of religions and extra-Christian revelation. A moment of recent history exemplifying this limit concerns the encounter of the well-respected Catholic theologian Jacques Dupuis with the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith after the publication of his book, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*. In fact, the analysis of *Dominus Iesus* that Moreland offers could have been slightly nuanced had she contextualized the formulation of this document as a response to Dupuis's Catholic theology of religious pluralism.[2]

In Chapter 5, 'Is Muhammad a Prophet for Christians?', Moreland situates her proposal within the context of the past and ongoing conversation about this very question. She engages four scholars who proposed various avenues to answer this question in the qualified affirmative: William Montgomery Watt, Hans Küng, Kenneth Cragg and David Kerr. Watt focuses on Muhammad's moral exemplarity as a sign of his prophetic status, Küng on his invocations against idolatry, Cragg on the praiseworthy messages of the Qur'an, and Kerr on Muhammad's political reforms and liberating praxis. Moreland differentiates her position from these four in a brilliant and thought-provoking way: 'Muhammad as liturgical prophet' (107). From *ṣalāt* to *duʿāʾ* and the recitation (*qurʾān*) of Islamic revelation – and to this I may add the many rituals of piety, devotion, fasting, charity and contemplative

practices that societies of Muslims, *ṣūfī*, *shīʿī*, or otherwise, have performed both historically and currently – Moreland recalls that Aquinas 'explicitly mentions divine worship as a practice that benefits from prophetic guidance' (107). But an unmentioned difference is that Moreland answers the question 'Is Muhammad a Prophet for Christians?' – for better or worse – from the Christian perspective (the theology of prophecy) and not, as the other four scholars do, from their experience, study and larger engagement with the Islamic traditions and communities of Muslims.

Moreland then engages two scholars who answer the question of Muhammad's prophethood in the negative: Christian Troll, SJ, and Jacques Jomier, OP. Their primary reason for this rejection is instructive to Moreland's constructive proposal: '[s]ince to Muslim ears a Christian assent to Muhammad as a prophet inevitably means that the Christian has in fact *become a Muslim*' (108). Indeed, a Christian who believes in the one God and also avers that Muhammad is a prophet has in effect performed the *shahāda*, or Islamic testimony of faith. To label Muhammad a prophet even in a limited sense would, to Muslims, likely be unacceptable at best, and meaningless at worst. A Christian cannot accept Muhammad as a prophet in the Islamic sense without 'rejecting fundamental claims of Christianity' (113). But the converse is also true: Muslims call Jesus a prophet in a way different from the way in which Christians understand Jesus as prophet. Throughout all of this, the meaning of 'prophecy' is shared but not identical between Muslims and Christians.

To resolve this impasse, Moreland turns in Chapter 6 ('Closing Arguments') to medieval, and specifically Aquinas's, analogical reasoning as a third way between equivocity and univocity of language to explain how a Christian might apply the term 'prophecy' to Muhammad's revelatory experience. Moreland maps 'traditionally minded Christians' onto univocal language, wherein emic religious language is meaningless outside Christian theological discourse, and liberally minded Christians onto equivocal language, wherein the religious categories, while different in form or externally, are ultimately the same in meaning or internally ('essentially'). She instead urges us to 'move from apologia to analogia' (116). This third way was crafted as a solution to the problem of discourse about a God who is both inconceivable mystery (the apophatic God) and the subject of truthful and meaningful speech acts (the kataphatic God). Univocal language renders God a creature among others in the universe and equivocal language renders our God-talk mere babble (117). To translate this to the topic of prophecy, we might say that univocal language would take the Islamic understanding of prophecy and either force it into our Christian terms or reject it if it does not fit; equivocal language would suggest that comparison of the term prophecy on a formal level is impossible, even if 'at the core' and 'essentially' all religions are the same. For Moreland, and drawing on the work of David Burrell, CSC, the Islamic and Christian traditions 'may become mutually illuminating [because] they share enough terms to enable reasonable communication' (119). Moreland suggests that 'Christians might come to revere Muhammad as a prophet in a limited and relative sense, not one that Muslims would embrace, but one that Christians nevertheless should consider'. True, the Christian and Islamic claim to universal significance (and subsequent conflict) remains, but 'the overlapping web of beliefs between the two traditions delineated by the conciliar documents means that we share a meaningful arena of discourse' (121). Christians may deem Muhammad a prophet *analogically* to how Muslims understand that term.

Moreland then concludes with a brief foray into the Catholic resource of 'private revelation' (most recently connected to Marian apparitions), which, according to an Apostolic Exhortation,

> can introduce new emphases, give rise to new forms of piety, or deepen older ones. *It can have a certain prophetic character* [cf. 1 Thessalonians 5.19–21] and can be a valuable aid

> for better understanding and living the Gospel as a certain time; consequently, it should not be treated lightly. (122, citing *Verbum Domini*[3])

This sort of prophetic revelation may also elucidate points of scripture, and in the medieval period the 'spiritual interpretation of the Bible and preaching' was associated with prophecy (125). Catholics are not obliged to believe in private revelation, but they are certainly permitted to. Moreland seeks to expand the purview of postbiblical revelatory experiences to include prophetic experiences in Islam; she notes that this semantic stretching is necessary in the new context of religious pluralism. Moreland more emphatically concludes:

> As a result, particular passages in the Qur'an could be explored without having to make any claims about the book as a whole. The argument of this book concludes with an invitation to read the Qur'an and take it theologically seriously, as it could very well contain messages of prophetic import. (132)

Overall, Moreland's arguments are creative and persuasive, and ultimately advance the Catholic theology of Islam ever so slightly. In my view, there are three principle challenges to her work that nevertheless do not take away from its import.

The first I have already alluded to above. In her interpretative analysis of Church documents, Moreland fails to address whether the Qur'an is merely part of a larger process of divine revelation that is found not just in religious traditions but also in all cultural, artistic and literary products of human societies. That is, is the Qur'an worthy of study for theological insights in the same way that, say, Shakespeare's plays and Husserl's phenomenology are? She attempts to answer this question, but the twofold danger innate to magisterial documents on religious pluralism remains: on the one hand, openness to revelation outside ecclesial walls may flatten the importance of the Islamic tradition as 'one cultural artifact' among many religious and secular discourses, and on the other, suggesting the unique importance of Islam relies on an outdated essentialist view of religion. I do not propose to have a solution to this impasse, though Moreland's employment of analogical reasoning is a brilliant move that addresses this issue in some way.

Second, Moreland's focus on the Qur'an to the exclusion of the larger Islamic tradition relies on a narrow (and arguably Orientalist) conceptualization of the Islamic tradition. Her 'invitation to read the Qur'an', while admirable, restricts the interreligious interlocutor to the *textual artifact* of Muhammad's revelatory experience. Shahab Ahmed (2016) has rightly proposed conceptualizing the Islamic tradition in terms of Pre-Text, Text and Con-Text of revelation, including both the qur'anic Text, the modes of encountering the revelation (Pre-Text), such as reason, experience (*dhawq*) and unveiling (*kashf*), and the body of meaning and collection of texts that are historically and currently the product of hermeneutical engagement with revelation, such as, inter alia, commentaries, philosophical, theological and mystical treatises, poetry, artwork and, closer to home, the Black Muslim American experience and discourses in the context of racism and white supremacy. Text, Pre-Text, and Con-Text have historically been mutually dependent on each other in societies of Muslims. To engage the Qur'an in a hermeneutical vacuum contravenes how it is predominantly encountered by Muslims historically and presently. It is unclear whether Moreland's proposal is valid *only if* Christians turn to the Qur'an *alone*, and if so, whether that is helpful, given that it would ignore the 1,400 years of rich and complex theological, philosophical, mystical, literary, social, political and artistic elaboration on the Qur'an. In other words, her commendable proposal nonetheless risks reproducing Orientalist understandings of the Islamic tradition in terms of *sola scriptura*; i.e. the possibility of reading and interpreting the Qur'an for theological insights rests on the individual's capacity to read the text *alone* and *removed from* the larger Islamic tradition, which had developed complex hermeneutics of the textual revelation.

Engagement with the larger Islamic tradition provides the third challenge to her work. Moreland is explicit in her project: she is offering a Catholic theology of religious pluralism and postbiblical revelation that opens Christians up to the theoretical possibility that Muhammad is a religious prophet and that the Qur'an has theological insight. She therefore does not engage the larger Islamic tradition for insight into how Catholic theology might explicate such an openness, precisely because that is not her project. In doing so, however, she is perhaps illustrating why comparative theologians such as James Fredricks (directly) and Francis X. Clooney, SJ (indirectly), have called for a moratorium on theology of religions. The Islamic tradition has a rich resource for understanding how divine revelation occurs outside the verses (*ayāt*) of the Qur'an; it also possesses complex theological anthropologies and epistemologies for how post-prophetic *ṣūfī*s, *ṣūfī*-poets, commentators, philosophers saints/friends-of-God (*awliyāʾ*) and *shīʿī* Imams, inter alia, are granted revelatory knowledge that surpasses the Text of revelation (Qur'an) while not necessarily contradicting it. Here, I am thinking of the rich commentarial, theological, mystical and poetic traditions that take seriously Q41.53 ('We will show them our signs/verses [*ayāt*] in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth') to suggest that God continues to reveal dynamically through the human encounter with self, others and the world. I am also referring to the contested topic of the distinction between *walāya* (sainthood/friendship-with-God) and *nubuwwa* (prophethood) or *risāla* (messengership). Moreland's careful and creative engagement with the Catholic tradition of 'private revelation' corresponds to the distinction between prophetic *waḥy,* revelation unique to Muhammad and other prophets (*anbiyāʾ*), and other forms of revelation such as *kashf* and *ilhām* or divinely realized judgement of revelation such as *taḥqīq* granted especially to the saints/friends-of-God. These ideas were present early on, especially in the œuvre of al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. c. 869) and Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d. c. 890), and continued into the corpus of many Shīʿī thinkers as well as Rūzbehān Baqlī (d. 1209), Ibn ʿArabī (d. 1240) and Rūmī (d. 1273), and eventually coalesced into a the *ṣūfī*-philosophical amalgam from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century; recent and contemporary examples may be added to this list of Muslims with ongoing engagement with the Text, Pre-Text, and Con-Text of Islamic revelation in the Western or postcolonial context, such as, inter alia, Malcolm X, Farid Esack, Asghar Ali Engineer, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, Feryal Salem, Michael Muhammad Knight and Jerusha Rhodes. In general, within the Islamic tradition, prophethood and messengership have come to an end, but *walāya* and its revelatory fruits last forever because *walī* is a Divine Name, while *nabī* and *rasūl* are not.

While not explored by Moreland, this is one of the creative avenues of interreligious and comparative theological research opened up by her, for which scholars and theologians should be grateful. Her work situates constructive Catholic theology on solid ground to explore, interreligiously, how revelation occurs post-canonically (Christian) and post-prophetically (Islamic) and perhaps even extra-religiously. Her book should be necessary reading in any advanced undergraduate or graduate seminar dedicated to exploring Islamic–Christian studies, relations, and theology.

Notes

1. Here referencing John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio,* 55; cf. 56; and Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 53.
2. See Dupuis (1997); Dupuis and Burrows (2012). Dupuis's later work expands on his theology of religions (Dupuis 2001).
3. Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*. Accessed June 29, 2020. http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2020.1802862