



Nostra Aetate – the moral heart of the Second Vatican Council

Michael Barnes SJ

The Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions was promulgated fifty years ago, on 28 October 1965. Michael Barnes SJ explains why the process of *Nostra Aetate's* development is as important as the text itself. 'Perhaps more than any other document, and despite its obvious weaknesses, it encapsulates the extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit that characterised the Council'.

I sit down to write this article fifty years to the day after the bishops of the Catholic Church voted on the text of *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican II's celebrated *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. The shortest of the Council's documents, it marks an extraordinary experience of real learning on the part of the Church.

What did the Church learn then – and what does *Nostra Aetate*

inspire today? Since those heady days many people of faith have come to see the Declaration as a *magna carta* for dialogue and have responded with generous and open statements of their own. In 2008 an initiative of the Anglican Communion, *Generous Love*, structuring mission in a pluralist world around a Trinitarian vision, acknowledged its debt to *Nostra Aetate*.¹ In 2000 over 150 Jewish scholars and rabbis published *Dabru Emet*, a series of statements about what Jews and Christians hold together.² In 2007 Muslim scholars responded to Pope Benedict's ill-fated Regensburg lecture with *A Common Word*, a much longer meditation on the theme of the love of God that unites Muslims and Christians.³

But what about the Declaration's effect on the Catholic Church itself? *Nostra Aetate's* amazingly prophetic imperatives to Catholics to 'encourage, preserve and promote' the spiritual values of other religions have certainly raised the profile of interreligious dialogue from a niche concern for a few specialists to something that everyone is expected to do – and *can*



Photo by Ned Trifle at flickr.com

do. Dialogues of common life and common action flourish as people get to know and appreciate their neighbours. What is often called the dialogue of spiritual experience is more muted – and controversial; yet plenty of people are deepening their faith by reading the texts of other religions, and even learning how to meditate by using yoga or Buddhist practices. The dialogue of theological exchange is yet more difficult – and not just

because *Nostra Aetate* left so much unsaid. In a thoroughly pluralist age, in which the curse of bad religion seems to outweigh the blessings of the good, the Declaration reads at best like a few worthy statements of the obvious, at worst a patronising summary of rich and complex sources of ancient wisdom. It would, however, be an enormous mistake to dismiss *Nostra Aetate* as a bland bit of 1960s optimism. Perhaps more than any other document, and despite its obvious weaknesses, it encapsulates the extraordinary outpouring of the Spirit that characterised the Council.

Small beginnings

In this article I make no apologies for telling the '*Nostra Aetate* story' again because stories of deep transformation always bear repetition. The fact that it also records another side of the Council – a debate with a sharp political dimension, hammered out at times in the full glare of media publicity – only adds to the significance of the lesson that *Nostra Aetate*

continues to teach people of good will everywhere, both inside and outside the Church.

The first sign of transformation went almost unnoticed at the time. On Good Friday 1959 Pope John XXIII spontaneously eliminated the expression ‘perfidious Jews’ from the liturgical prayers. The move, which was extended to the universal Church soon afterwards, was more than a gesture. A friend reminded me recently that the rubric for the altar servers had been to kneel during the prayers. ‘*Flectamus genua ... levate*’, intoned the deacon, and we all obeyed like clockwork. But during the prayer for the Jews, he said, ‘we were expected to stand, as if to ponder the tragic fate of people who had refused to recognise the coming of the Messiah’.

In 1959 no one expected a rapprochement with the Jews to become one of the major achievements of the Council, let alone a positive statement about the truths and values of other religions. The omission of a single word seems a small enough shift, but liturgy filters scripture into the religious consciousness, forming faith and generating thought – sometimes even among distracted altar servers. It was a small indication of what was beginning to happen elsewhere as a traumatised world began to take stock of the darkness of Nazi atrocities.

At a conference of the nascent International Council of Christians and Jews held at Seelisberg in Switzerland in July and August 1947, a group of Jewish, Catholic and Protestant theologians produced a series of ten points. Their deliberations were summed up as five calls to remember what Jews and Christians share (eg. that there is one God of Old and New Testaments, that Jesus was born a Jew, that the commandment to love God and one’s neighbour is binding on both Christians and Jews), and five to avoid certain anti-Jewish attitudes and actions (eg. ‘distorting or misrepresenting biblical or post-biblical Judaism with the object of extolling Christianity’, or teaching that ‘the Jewish people are reprobate, accursed, reserved for a destiny of suffering’). The conference participants were responding to the growing realisation that an unchecked history of anti-Jewish theology had created the climate in which anti-semitism could flourish. A year later the first general assembly of the World Council of Churches was a lot more blunt, declaring that: ‘The Churches in the past

have helped to foster an image of the Jews as the sole enemies of Christ which has contributed to anti-semitism in the secular world’.⁴

It’s important, of course, to distinguish anti-semitism from anti-Judaism. The former uses racial categories, the latter theological. The question is about the relationship between them and how certain theological presuppositions can hide the sort of anti-Jewish prejudice that breeds a much more virulent anti-semitism. Seelisberg did not take place in a theological vacuum. The issue was a subject of intense debate in the 1930s, not least among circles that included the likes of Jacques Maritain and Karl Barth. In Britain, the Anglican James Parkes drew attention to how a whole culture of anti-Jewish prejudice had infected historical and scripture studies.⁵ Seemingly innocuous phrases such as ‘late Judaism’ to describe the 1st Century world of Jesus were made to support uncritical supersessionist or replacement theologies. In the wake of the Holocaust his words seemed prophetic. It took the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961 for the full horror of the ‘Final Solution’ to be talked about openly. By that stage, many Christian theologians, especially in Germany, were beginning to reckon with the power of dismissive and uncritical language to destroy the delicate web of human relations – and much worse.

The politics behind the text

Only nine Catholics attended Seelisberg and to that extent *Nostra Aetate* represents a massive bit of catching up on the part of the Catholic Church. John Connelly, in his detailed study of Catholic anti-Judaism, notes the disappearance of overt hostility in the 1950s but ‘an absence of ideas of how to relate to Jews’.⁶ Only a handful of activists, many of them Jewish converts, kept up the pressure that began with Seelisberg. A year after Pope John’s ban on the word ‘perfidious’, a petition from the Jesuits at the Pontifical Biblical Institute, closely followed by another from the Institute of Judaean-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University, New Jersey, asked for the Council to address the implicit anti-Judaism of much traditional Catholic thought, especially as it affected the interpretation of scripture.

The Holocaust was hovering in the background. A little later that summer, on 13 June 1960, the great Jewish historian, Jules Isaac, author of *The Teaching of Contempt*, visited the pope.⁷ With the authority of the

Holocaust survivor, Isaac spoke about three interlocking dimensions of a negative account of Judaism: the diaspora as a punishment for Jewish lack of faith; the degeneracy of 1st Century Judaism; and the charge of deicide. Isaac traced this theology back to the pages of the New Testament or, rather, to tendentious exegesis of key passages that were read as stereotyping ‘the Jews’ as a corrupt opposition to Jesus and the first Christians.

At the meeting with Pope John, Isaac focussed on the deicide charge and quoted the *Catechism* of the Council of Trent. He drew attention to the section on the Fourth Article of the Creed, on the passion and death of Jesus. In that section of this monumental work, intended as a sort of theological *vade mecum* for parish priests, Jews are not mentioned except in combination with Gentiles who together are described as ‘advisors and perpetrators of the passion’. Who bears the responsibility for the death of Jesus? The answer is given in terms of human sin, the original sin of our first parents and the ‘vices and crimes which people have committed from the beginning of the world to the present day and will go on committing until the end of time’.⁸ Not a word about deicide; indeed hardly a word about Jews or ‘Hebrews’ in the entire text. Pope John, who as papal nuncio in Bulgaria during the war had been instrumental in rescuing many Jews from deportation to the death camps, felt an instinctive rapport with what Isaac was telling him. Soon afterwards, Cardinal Bea was asked to add ‘problems concerning the Jews’ to his in-tray at the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. It was, however, an odd ‘home’ and immediately aroused Jewish suspicions.

Opposition to a text that began as ‘*De Iudaeis*’ (‘On the Jews’) seems to have come from three directions: from the Roman curia and those within the Council itself who sought to defend the integrity of Catholic tradition; from bishops in the Middle East who were mindful of Arab sensitivities and feared any positive account of Judaism would make the life and mission of Christians there more difficult; and – politically the most difficult – from Jews themselves and the still very young State of Israel. Notorious in this regard was the ‘Wardi affair’ which blew up in the summer of 1962 over press reports that a senior Israeli diplomat, Chaim Wardi, was to be invited to attend the Council sessions. Powerful voices in the wider Jewish diaspora, such as orthodox Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik

in the USA, expressed concern at the Vatican’s motives, fearing that ‘ecumenism’ was code for a covert form of Christian proselytism.

The Declaration and the Council

Managing the unease felt by bishops on the Council floor presented its own problems. Gavin D’Costa’s meticulous outline of the debate that began with *De Iudaeis* focuses on three issues: Jewish collective guilt for the death of Jesus; the constancy of the God who calls Israel into a covenantal relationship; and – the issue that so exercised Soloveitchik – mission to the Jewish people.⁹ All of these touched on knotty issues of scriptural exegesis; finding a formula that satisfied a range of opinions, some of which insisted that serious matters of doctrine were being compromised, was not easy. But it’s easy to miss a more substantive issue, namely the role played by the process dedicated to the Declaration in the Council’s debates and deliberations as a whole.

Compared with shifting some well-entrenched positions, the question of where *De Iudaeis* should be situated in the scheme of work of the Council may seem trivial but it sheds interesting light on the status of *Nostra Aetate*, which is contested even today. The process began, as we have seen, as an addition to the Secretariat’s main concern, for intra-Christian ecumenism, then found a temporary place as an appendix to the document on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. Later suggestions for a ‘home’ included *Dei Verbum* and *Gaudium et Spes*. There was also an opinion that the whole thing be postponed until after the Council. Only at the end of the third session, in November 1964, did it assume the status of a Declaration in its own right.

It is certainly correct, as D’Costa points out, that as a Declaration dealing with specific pastoral issues, *Nostra Aetate* needs to be interpreted in accord with the theological teaching laid out in the Dogmatic Constitutions. But this is not to deny that a ‘pastoral document’ is also theological in the sense that it says something about the ways of God with human beings. Given the level of suspicion it occasioned in various quarters, the shift from sorting out a ‘problem’ to opening up a new opportunity for Christian witness in a pluralist world is nothing short of remarkable and carries its own moral authority within the life of the Church.

That prospect seemed unlikely at the end of the first session of the Council, in December 1962, when the original draft was withdrawn in the wake of the ‘Wardi affair’, and even bleaker the following year when a second draft suffered a similar fate. Pope John died in 1963 but his successor, Paul VI, committed himself to finish the major tasks the Council had set. In January 1964, he made an unprecedented and highly successful visit to the Holy Land where his speeches to Jewish and Muslim audiences prepared the way for a certain rapprochement. In August of that year he issued his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, a powerful evocation of the relationship of Church and World in terms of the concept of ‘dialogue’. It was this great meditation on the religions as so many concentric circles set around the central axis of the truth manifested in Christ, that is reflected in *Lumen Gentium* §14-16, where the religions are similarly ‘orientated’ to the Church.¹⁰

The ideas behind the encyclical and Paul VI’s personal influence breathed new life into the *Nostra Aetate* project. A revised text came back to the Council in September 1964, still as part of the decree on ecumenism but now including a brief section on Islam. Two months later, Cardinal Bea presented the first completely independent text, with new introductory material about the history and phenomenology of religion, references to Hinduism and Buddhism, and an expanded section on Islam. The thorny issue of the charge of deicide against the Jews, which had been in and out of drafts since the process began, was finally dropped. The explicit line on mission to the Jews was replaced by a much more eschatological hope. The balance of the sections, following the order of the ‘concentric circles’ in *Ecclesiam Suam*, caught the mood of the moment. After a few more smaller changes, the text came back to the Council for the concluding session a year later. *Nostra Aetate*, the result of a process that at times seemed to be teetering on the verge of collapse, received overwhelming approval. ‘After that point’, comments Connelly, ‘it was impossible to portray hostility to the Jews as compatible with Catholic doctrine. Jews were not enemies of God or Christians.’¹¹

Pastoral and theological

I hope that even the briefest of overviews is enough to show how *Nostra Aetate* was subject to enormous pressures – not to say prejudice and political intrigue. This raises the question of its real significance. Is it a

pragmatic bit of theological realpolitik, reaching out to the Jews in order to make amends for the Holocaust? Or is it more the record of an extraordinary conversion of the Catholic soul, a coming to terms with a history of anti-Judaism? At one level the shift from the ‘Jewish problem’ to include reference to other religions gives support to the view that the Declaration grew in response to purely pastoral concerns, firstly to avoid a stand-off between Jews and Muslims in the Middle East by bringing a statement on Islam to complement that on the Jews, secondly in response to missionary bishops in Asia and Africa who argued that the religious communities which most concerned them should be specifically named. But in the theological vision the Council was seeking to build up are there any ‘purely’ pastoral concerns? Perhaps there is something else going on, something more richly theological?

This takes us back to the question of what I called above the ‘moral authority’ of the Declaration. *Nostra Aetate* did not say the last word, nor even the only word, on religious pluralism. Nor did it make any major doctrinal innovations. Even the most powerful statement about the Jews, that they ‘still remain most beloved of God’, does not say anything explicit about the continuing validity of the Covenant. That was to come some years later when Pope John Paul II, during a visit to the synagogue in Mainz, spoke about the ‘covenant that has never been revoked’.¹² Similarly, in the period since the Council, several magisterial documents have taken the initial promptings of *Nostra Aetate* forward. Judaism is recognised as a living tradition with its own integrity of faith and practice, not an ossified relic which stopped growing with the advent of the Christian Church. This, of course, is to say nothing of advances that have been made at the official level between the Catholic Church and other people of faith, such as Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists.

In other words, *Nostra Aetate* set in motion a process of learning in the Church. The voice of the Spirit does not only sound in drafting commissions and in the carefully related hierarchies of Vatican documents. This is where it is important to set *Nostra Aetate* within the wider framework of the Council’s overall vision and purpose. Behind all the great themes and ideas – revelation and the Word of God, renewal of the liturgy and sacramental practice, dialogue between Church and World, the Church as a people called to a life of

holiness – was a gathering insistence on a renewal of theology itself in more pastoral and dialogical terms.

A principle established itself early on at the Council: if age-old truths are to be *communicated* in today's world, then the Church needs to go back to the sources and rediscover the roots of its own inner life. Taking account not just of the content but of the *style* that the texts share, whether authoritative Constitutions or more pastorally inspired Declarations, is essential in understanding the spirit or 'mystery' of Vatican II. As John O'Malley convincingly argues, the primary literary genre is the inspirational meditation, not the juridical canon.¹³

My point is that *Nostra Aetate* made an enormous contribution to that spirit, not because it turned out to be a wonderfully innovative dogmatic treatise, but because it encapsulated in a few words something of the energy and passion of the people who made it possible. The influence of Jews on the genesis of the text was enormous. In the pre-war years it was Jewish converts to Catholicism who fought to have a true account of the faith of their forefathers recognised by the Church. Bea met a number of Jewish leaders and thinkers, sharing many lengthy conversations which had a profound influence on his own thinking. The great theologian, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, for instance, became not just a casual acquaintance but a trusted confidante who challenged much of the Cardinal's thinking about the inner life of contemporary Judaism. For the erudite [Bea](#), too, the *Nostra Aetate* process was a significant learning experience. Nor should it be forgotten that in the final revised text, the new Chapter 4 which took its stand on the necessary theological link between the Church and the Jewish people was the responsibility of a small group of theologians, Gregory Baum, Bruno Hussar and John Oesterreicher, all of whom were converts from Judaism.

Learning how to remember

Let me conclude by recalling that melancholy image of altar servers standing during the prayer for the 'perfidious Jews'. It is not, of course, inevitable that Isaac's 'teaching of contempt' will spring fully formed from the odd bit of anti-Jewish thoughtlessness. Nevertheless religious practices, beginning in well-meaning innocence, can become a breeding ground for the demonic if not properly discerned. That is one lesson to take from the Nazi Holocaust and from

more recent examples of barbaric fundamentalism. If there is one constant theme joining Jews and Christians together in the Biblical revelation it is memory. And memory has to be assiduously cultivated and renewed if it is not to turn the life-giving richness of human relations in which God is mysteriously present as its life-giving centre into chauvinist oppositions that reduce God to the talisman of the tribe.

Memory can be so selective, and sometimes we need someone else, someone overlooked, even ignored, to remind us of what we have forgotten. That other great Jewish prophet of *Nostra Aetate*, Abraham Heschel, would say that the only thing Jews want is to be taken seriously *as Jews*, not as candidates for conversion. To do that requires a commitment to remember – and learn. *Nostra Aetate* has reason to be considered the moral heart of the Council because it demanded – and got – real integrity from those who worked on it. There is, of course, a lot missing in the text: Hinduism and Buddhism feel like gratuitous asides; there is no mention of the prophet Muhammad; the more contentious issues between Christians and Jews are either played down or left out. There is a degree of implicit agnosticism about the status of the religions, whether they are ways of salvation or carry some truth or revelation to which Christians can assent. It is but a beginning, a 'pastoral document' that records a theological moment in the life of the Church.

What *Nostra Aetate* has inspired amongst people of faith has been quite extraordinary in terms of inter-religious dialogue at various levels. The lesson it goes on teaching the Catholic Church is to remain faithful to its inner spirit of collaboration and dialogue. Like all good theology, the Declaration does not aim to provide answers to every question that human endeavour throws up; rather it inspires a more humble yet creative speech that speaks with integrity of what God has revealed to God's people. That is by no means to counsel a hesitant silence but to commend a truth-filled remembrance of what is always Holy Mystery, wherever it is discerned.

Michael Barnes SJ is Professor of Interreligious Relations at Heythrop College, University of London.

¹ *Generous Love: an Anglican Theology of Inter Faith Relations*, published by the Anglican Consultative Council (London, 2008).

² *Dabru Emet* (Zechariah 8:16: 'Speak Truth'), was originally published as a full-page advert in the *The New York Times*, just before Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, 10 September 2000.

³ An open letter to Pope Benedict from 38 Muslim scholars, 13 October 2006, led to an expansion which was issued as *A Common Word* and published 13 October 2007. For text and responses from Pope Benedict and the Archbishop of Canterbury see the official website:

www.acommonword.com.

⁴ Held in Amsterdam from 22 August to 4 September 1948; see especially the report of Committee IV, 'Concerns of the Churches', chapter 3: 'The Christian Approach to the Jews'.

⁵ James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and Synagogue: a study in the origins of anti-semitism* (London: Soncino Press, 1934).

⁶ John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: the Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 181.

⁷ Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: the Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964).

⁸ *Catechismus ex Decreto Concilii Tridentini ad Parochos*, promulgated by Pope Pius V; 1566. It is worth noting that no reference is made to the notorious Matthew 27.25: 'His sins be upon us and upon our children.'

⁹ Gavin D'Costa, *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims* (Oxford: OUP, 2014)

¹⁰ *Lumen Gentium*, following Aquinas's idea, uses the word 'ordinantur' (§14).

¹¹ Connelly, *From Enemy*, p. 265.

¹² Mainz, 17 November 1980. See discussion in Norbert Lohfink, *The Covenant Never Revoked* (New York: Paulist, 1991).

¹³ John O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).