

The Historical Development and Teaching of *Nostra Aetate*

By Don Johnson

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Two Men on a Mission

Jules Isaac was one of France's leading historians and intellectuals when World War II erupted in 1939. The German occupation of France cost him just about everything: He lost his position as the country's Inspector General of Education and then his wife, daughter, and son-in-law perished in the death camps. The evil perpetrated by the Nazis led him to focus his attention on the roots of anti-Semitism. How could the Jews be so despised, he wondered. By the end of the war his research had resulted in *Jesus and Israel*, a 600 page manuscript arguing that a particular strain within the tradition of Christian teaching was to blame. His ideas were later published in a simpler English version titled *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*.¹ In it he argued that three main themes within Christian tradition were responsible for anti-Semitism.

The first is the idea that the dispersion of Jews after 70 A.D. was God's punishment for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. The second is the notion that the Judaism of Jesus' time was a dead, legalistic religion without any true devotion to God. The third is the charge that the Jews were collectively guilty of committing "deicide" in regards to the crucifixion of Christ and as such have given up all rights to God's promise in the Old Covenant. Isaac argued against all three positions based on historical evidence and scripture. His conclusion, as he summarized in a later memorandum, was that "the teaching of contempt for the Jews, in essence anti-Christian, should be purified by being biblically Christian", faithful to the acts and teachings of Jesus.² In other words, there is a strong strain of anti-Semitism within the history of the Church, but that

teaching is not truly Christian. All three of the ideas supporting anti-Semitism are unbiblical and should be repudiated.

At the same time that Jules Isaac was wrestling with anti-Semitism, the Vatican's apostolic delegate in Istanbul during World War II, Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, helped save tens of thousands of Hungarian and Slovakian Jews from the Nazis by getting them transported to Palestine. He was also instrumental in saving 55,000 Jews in Romania. Charles Barlas, director of the Jewish rescue committee in Turkey later lauded Roncalli for his "heroic deeds" and for working "indefatigably on [the Jews'] behalf."³

Roncalli was elected Pope John XXIII on October 20, 1958 and very early in his tenure ordered the Latin word *perfidis* removed from a Good Friday prayer describing the Jews because many understood the term in a very pejorative sense. The next year greeted a group of American Jews with the words "I am Joseph your brother." Clearly Pope John XXIII had a heart for the Jewish people and desired that the family of God be united. On January 25, 1959 he announced the Second Vatican Council.

The Rough Road to Promulgation

Given the background of the two men, it is no surprise that a June, 1960 meeting of Isaac and Pope John XXIII was one of the driving forces behind the shortest and perhaps most controversial document of Vatican II: *Nostra Aetate*. During his audience with the Pope, Isaac presented a list of recommendations for the Church in regards to its relationship with the Jews and asked that the council address them.⁴ In response to this and other factors, the pope asked Isaac to discuss the matter with Cardinal Augustin Bea, S.J., the man the pope had already appointed as president of the newly formed Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (S.P.C.U.).

Bea met with Isaac and then recommended to the Pope that the S.P.C.U. should also address and reflect upon “the Jewish questions” during its preparation for the council.⁵ The pope agreed and by August, 1961, before the council opened, the Secretariat had prepared a brief schema title “On the Jews” (*De Judaeis*). However, the schema was never presented at the first session of the Council. It was withdrawn after it became a political flashpoint. The major tipping point came when the World Jewish congress appointed a counselor from its Ministry of Religion to be an observer at the Council. Arab diplomats fiercely objected over concerns that the process was leading to official recognition of the state of Israel by the Vatican.

Cardinal Bea then asked to have *De Judaeis* place on the agenda for the next session, noting that the schema “in no way will acknowledge the recognition of the State of Israel by the Holy See.”⁶ He also argued that the issue should be treated because Catholic preachers far too often accused the Jews of deicide and, in light of the Holocaust, the Catholic Church could not ignore any issue that may have promoted such evil.⁷ Pope John hand wrote a note back to Bea saying that the mandate of 1960 was still in effect and when Pope Paul VI took over in 1963 he renewed it.

The opposition to the document had exposed the need to expand its focus beyond a discussion of the Jews. When Bea presented the next version in the fall of 1964 it was still almost entirely about Jews and anti-Semitism, but it included a section about Muslims and was intended to be attached as a concluding chapter to the document “On Ecumenism.” This statement still drew opposition from several quarters. Middle Eastern bishops were still concerned from a political and pastoral perspective; they were worried for the safety of their clergy and congregations. Latin American Bishops were not convinced that the document lined up with scripture and tradition. And bishops from Asia and Africa wanted the other major world

religions addressed. After hearing suggestions to insert a short statement on the Jews into *Dei Verbum* as well as a statement on other religions into *Lumen Gentium*, the S.P.C.U. decided to take a shot at a longer schema that would stand alone and address other religions. They thought that to insert statements into other documents would weaken their position far more than they desired. Instead, they produced a five chapter document that included sections on Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and primitive religions and concluded with a condemnation of every kind of discrimination.

Cardinal Bea presented the statement for voting on specific questions on October 14-15, 1965 and, according to S.P.C.U. member Thomas Stransky, received a much better reception than the secretariat had expected.⁸ On October 28 the declaration was officially promulgated after a vote of 2221 bishops for and 88 against. For the first time in history the Church had made an official magisterial statement about its relationship to non-Christians.

The Teaching of *Nostra Aetate*

The Question of "Deicide"

One of the most contentious issues of *Nostra Aetate* was the charge that the Jewish people corporately were guilty of killing Jesus and as a consequence were rejected by God and no longer had any claim to his covenants. Cardinal Bea was adamant that this notion of "deicide" must be repudiated. However, he faced strong opposition, including from the pope, particularly over whether the Church should use that term in denying the guilt of the Jews. Maximos IV Saigh threatened to leave the council if the Jews were absolved of "deicide" and several theologians wrote articles in prestigious journals arguing that scripture and tradition clearly taught that the Jews corporately committed this offense. Along with the pastoral and political

worries, there was also a concern that if the Church taught that the Jews did not commit deicide, it could be taken as a denial of the divinity of Christ. After all, it was argued, if Mary was the Mother of God, killing her son can rightly be called deicide.

Finally a compromise was reached. While *Nostra Aetate* does not use the word deicide, the final document recognizes that the Jews were not corporately guilty of killing Christ and they were not eternally separated from God. “Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ, neither all Jews indiscriminately at the time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion.” As such, “the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture” (*Nostra Aetate* 4).

The “Good Olive Tree”

The idea that the Jews remain in covenant with God has since been made explicit many times, including by Pope John Paul II, who has been called the “twentieth century’s greatest papal friend and supporter of the Jewish people.”⁹ He taught that the Jews are “the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God,” and “the present-day people of the covenant concluded with Moses.”¹⁰ As Philip Cunningham and Eugene Fisher have pointed out, this was reinforced “when *Nostra Aetate* rendered an ambiguous Greek verb in Romans 9:4-5 in the present tense: ‘They *are* Israelites and it is for them *to be* sons and daughters, to them *belong* the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them *belong* the patriarchs, and of their race according to the flesh, is the Christ’”¹¹

In emphasizing that Jews still abide in covenant with God, *Nostra Aetate* also addressed the common spiritual heritage Christianity shares with Judaism. All faithful Christians, “who as men

of faith are sons of Abraham, are included in the same patriarch's call". The salvation of the church was mystically prefigured in Israel's history and now the Church receives nourishment from "that good olive tree onto which the wild branches of the Gentiles have been grafted" (*Nostra Aetate* 4). Again, John Paul II strongly proclaimed the teaching of *Nostra Aetate* as he emphasized the spiritual bond between Jews and Christians throughout his papacy. For example, during his visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome he explicitly referenced *Nostra Aetate* in saying that "the Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain way is 'intrinsic' to our own religion. With Judaism therefore we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers."¹²

Nostra Aetate has been a major force in healing and building the relationship between Jews and the Church. As Pope Benedict XVI (a German!) said in the same synagogue almost 24 years later, "The teaching of the Second Vatican Council has represented for Catholics a clear landmark to which constant reference is made in our attitude and our relations with the Jewish people, marking a new and significant stage."¹³ In that same speech Benedict went on to note that the various "important steps and gestures" that had been made in the previous forty years were driven by *Nostra Aetate*. It has truly been a blessing of God to the world.

Other Religions

The document has not only been a blessing in the area of Jewish Christian relations. As already mentioned, it speaks about other religions as well. Indeed, it does so first. Also, it does so positively. Rather than focus on what other religions have wrong, the Council focused on what

they have right, noting that the “Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions” (*Nostra Aetate* 2).

It notes that, in their attempt to answer life’s biggest questions, other religions have recognized a supreme being and tried to live accordingly. Hinduism expresses the divine mystery in myth and philosophy and tries to reach out to God in love through ascetical practices and meditation. Buddhism recognizes that this changing world is not adequate to ground our being and seeks liberation from it. Islam worships God, who is one and has revealed himself to man. They submit themselves to him and revere Jesus and Mary. These things are true and good.

John McDade suggests that

These positive evaluations are grounded in a sense that throughout human history there is a universal ‘awareness of a hidden power’: it is this awareness that the Council suggests comes to expression in the teachings, ethics and rites of the world’s religions. It is as though the religions of the world are ways in which human beings express and channel their orientation towards God the Creator, ways in which the ‘one community’ of humanity moves towards God who calls all to share his life. This movement of humanity towards God is something which the Council evaluates positively because our response to God and our search for the divine mystery are grounded in God’s self-gift: as Augustine saw, the search is already and partly the contact – ‘you would not seek me if you had not already found me’.¹⁴

However, that is not to say that that the council has a relativistic approach to religions or that Jesus is not the only way, truth and life. *Nostra Aetate* notes that the Church is duty bound to proclaim Christ, “in whom God reconciled all things to himself” and “men find the fullness of their religious life” (*Nostra Aetate* 2). The last part of that sentence is an important key to understanding the council’s approach to other religions: modern Catholic thought emphasizes that other religions must be understood in relation to Christ because he is the full self-revelation of God and as such is absolutely unique. Jesus is God himself; he is “of one substance with the father.”

Thus Christianity is the “absolute religion,” according to Karl Rahner, because only Jesus can bring participation in the divine life. He is not just another religious leader, but the one in whom all religions are judged and find their fulfillment. Rahner notes that Jesus is distinct because:

The actual self-communication of the infinite God, transcending all creaturely reality and any finite divine gift, is given in Jesus and in him alone, and is promised, offered and guaranteed to us through him. If this were not the case, then the reality of Jesus could perhaps be one religion, perhaps the best religion, namely the Jesus-religion. But it could not be the absolute religion solemnly pledged to all humankind, because the reality of Jesus and its message would remain in the realm of the finite and the contingent.¹⁵

Pope John Paul II speaks along these lines in answering the question of why there are so many religions in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. He refers to *Nostra Aetate* in noting that men turn to various religions to answer life’s biggest questions, but all men “have one ultimate destiny, God, whose providence, goodness, and plan for salvation extend to all” and that even as the Church can affirm the “*semina Verbi* (seeds of the Word) present in all religions” and a “common eschatological root present in all religions,” the “Church is guided by the faith that *God the Creator wants to save all humankind in Christ Jesus*, the only mediator between God and man, inasmuch as He is the Redeemer of all humankind. The Paschal mystery is equally available to all, and, through it, the way to eternal salvation is also open to all.”¹⁶

In that same book, the pope further clarifies what makes Christianity distinctive from Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. It seems he wanted to emphasize that, even though *Nostra Aetate* focused only on the positive aspects of other religions, this should not be interpreted as complete approval of those religions, or as a statement suggesting that all religions are essentially the same. One should not interpret *Nostra Aetate* to suggest that people should simply strive to be

“good Buddhists” or “good Muslims.” Indeed, the pope goes so far as to warn against uncritical acceptance of some of the ideas and practices of these religions.¹⁷

In his discussion of Buddhism he notes that, while Buddhism and Christianity are both religions of salvation, Buddhism has an almost exclusively “negative soteriology.”¹⁸ It sees the world as essentially bad and escape from this existence as the goal of man. Also, it is an “atheistic” system in that escape from this world does not involve union with God but nirvana: a state of perfect indifference.

Although attempts have been made to marry the spiritual process of Buddhism to Christian mysticism, it cannot be done because Christianity proposes detachment from the world not for its own sake, but in order to be united with God. The Pope argues that, for example, “Carmelite mysticism begins at the point where the reflections of Buddha end.”¹⁹ There is a fundamental difference between the two religions, then, in that Christianity, with its teaching of God as the creator who desires union with his creatures, “inspires a positive attitude toward creation and provides a constant impetus to strive for its transformation and perfection.”²⁰

John Paul II is also very clear in distinguishing Islam from Christianity. He notes that, rather than being the pinnacle of revelation, as Muslims believe, the Koran is actually a reduction of God’s revelation. It is a movement backwards, away from what God has revealed in the Old and New Testaments. Rather than the God who dwells immanently with his creation, the God of Islam is completely separate. He is a “God outside of the world, a God who is *only majesty, never Emmanuel*.”²¹ This and other problems make Islam a religion whose religiosity is worthy of respect,²² but whose teachings are fundamentally in error.

Nostra Aetate was born out of a revulsion against discrimination and hatred of the Jews. The goal was to make sure that the Church was an example to the world of how to properly treat the children of Abraham. Over its years of development, God grew the document into something more: a statement about all peoples of all religions and an encouragement for us to fulfill God's desire for men to live at peace. Looking back forty years later, Stransky writes, "In recalling my personal experience of *Nostra Aetate*'s six-year journey, I favor the biblical image once used by Cardinal Bea: the tiny mustard seed of Jules Isaac's half-hour conversation with Good Pope John grew into the large tree that warmly hosts in its branches so many men and women of 'non-Christian religions.'"²³

In conclusion, I would like to note that, while some think that this document was a radical break with previous Church teaching and its goals present a Catholic act of reversal, in reality this was simply a call to be faithful to what scripture teaches. The document proclaims that "all must take care, lest in catechizing or in preaching the Word of God, they teach anything which is not in accord with the truth of the Gospel message or the spirit of Christ (*Nostra Aetate* 4).

This call to return to scripture and be faithful exegetes and preachers of the Bible has born much fruit in the decades since the council and been reinforced by later documents. For example, The Pontifical Biblical Commission's *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* states:

Clearly to be rejected also is every attempt at actualization set in a direction contrary to evangelical justice and charity, such as, for example, the use of the Bible to justify racial segregation, anti-Semitism or sexism whether on the part of men or of women. Particular attention is necessary, according to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council ("*Nostra Aetate*," 4), to avoid absolutely any actualization of certain texts of the New Testament which could provoke or reinforce unfavorable attitudes to the Jewish people. The tragic events of the past must, on the contrary, impel all to keep unceasingly in mind that, according to the New Testament, the Jews remain "beloved" of God, "since the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:28-29).²⁴

Returning to scripture and presenting the God that is found there to the world he loves is very much in line with the general spirit of Vatican II. Ultimately, the council was the tool God used to see Jules Isaac's desires fulfilled: Isaac had wanted to see the teaching of some Christians become purified by being made "biblically Christian and faithful to the teachings of Jesus" and I believe that has happened.

Notes

¹ Isaac, Jules. *The Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964)

² Stransky, Thomas “The Genesis of *Nostra Aetate*” *America*, October 25, 2005

http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=4431

³ Quoted in Dalin, David G. *The Myth of Hitler's Pope*. (Washington: Regenery, 2005), 95

⁴ O'Malley, John W. *What Happened at Vatican II*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 218

⁵ Stransky

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ O'Malley, 220

⁸ Stransky

⁹ Dalin, David. G. “John Paul II and the Jews” *First Things*, December 4, 2007

¹⁰ John Paul II, “Address to Representatives of the West German Jewish Community,” November 17, 1980.

Available at <http://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/297-jp2-80nov17>

¹¹ Cunningham, Philip “*Nostra Aetate*: A Catholic Act of *Metanoia*,” in Anthony Cernera, ed., *Examining Nostra Aetate After 40 Years: Catholic-Jewish Relations in Our Time* (Fairfield, CT : Sacred Heart University Press, 2007)

Text can be found at http://www.sju.edu/~pcunning/NA_Act_of_Metanoia.pdf

¹² John Paul II “Address at the Great Synagogue of Rome” April 13, 1986 Available at <http://www.ccsr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/roman-catholic/pope-john-paul-ii/305-jp2-86apr13>

¹³ “Papal Address of Pope Benedict XVI at the Synagogue of Rome” January 17, 2010 Available at <http://www.zenit.org/article-28074?l=english>

¹⁴ McDade, John. “*Nostra Aetate* and Interfaith Dialogue” *The Pastoral Review*, November, 2005 Available at http://thepastoralreview.org/cgi-bin/archive_db.cgi?priestspl-00113

¹⁵ Rahner, Karl “Experiences of a Catholic Theologian” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner*, ed. D.Marmion & M.E.Hines (Cambridge University Press, 2005), .301

¹⁶ John Paul II *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 80-81

¹⁷ For example, he warns against some of the “techniques and methods of meditation and ascetical practice” of some Eastern religions (Ibid. 90)

¹⁸ Ibid, 85

¹⁹ Ibid, 87

²⁰ Ibid, 88

²¹ Ibid, 92

²² Ibid. 93

²³ Stransky

²⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” IV, A, 3 Available at <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/pbcinter.htm>