Nostra Aetate after 40 Years: A Decisive Change

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Introduction

One of the easiest ways to assess the difference in relations between Christians and Jews in the forty years since 1965 is to examine a library catalogue. The number of books devoted to the historical, theological and philosophical dimensions of our relationship grows larger every year. Beyond the printed pages there are human encounters which encourage exploration of our religious traditions. There are dozens of symposia and many research centers that focus on the past, present and future of this relationship. If someone were to investigate this topic prior to 1965 they would discover only a few Jewish authors who explored the Christian tradition and even less Christian authors who examined Judaism with a measure of empathy.

What is the basis for this change both in attitudes and in activities? Is the new atmosphere of mutual respect based on sociological grounds alone? Has the awareness of the horrors of World War II and the decimation of the European Jewish population animated the change? Can we say that the end of the war brought about a kairos moment among Christians that imposed a deep examination of conscience? After such a period of destruction there would surely be a new optimism about the possibilities for behaving and thinking differently than prior to the war. We might also ask ourselves to what extent the post-war constellation of new centers for the Jewish populations in the United States and Israel have contributed to the growth of these interchanges. It is possible that all of these social and historical developments led to Nostra Aetate which was promulgated at the end of the II Vatican Council. Pope John XXIII's experience with helping Jewish communities during the war sharpened his awareness of the development of a new attitude toward Judaism. The meeting with Jules Isaac increased the pontiff's awareness of the connection between the Christian "teachings of contempt" and racial anti-Semitism. These "experiences" animated Pope John to turn to Augustin Cardinal Bea SJ who would become the person who persevered throughout the length of the council to guide the composition of a document on the Jews. By the end of the council and with the encouragement of a different Pope the Church's approach to Judaism had been transformed from a schema *De Judaeis* (On the Jews) to *De Ecclesiae Habitudine ad Religiones non-Christianas* (Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions). This declaration is known to us by its opening words, "Nostra Aetate" (In our times).

The title of the schema would seem to reinforce the proposal that Nostra Aetate was a product of the "optimism" of the Council Fathers in 1965 and their hopes that the Church could act as an agent of positive transformation in that world. Promulgated along with schemata such as *Gaudium et Spes* and *Dignitatis Humanae* it emphasized the importance of "our times" in contradistinction to eternal truths. The first sentence affirms the value of the contemporary world where "men are being drawn closer together and the ties between various people are being multiplied." The Church understood its task as "fostering unity and love among men and even among nations."

It might be sufficient to appreciate the benefits of Nostra Aetate on the basis of its positive evaluation of human society. Within the Jewish community, we value all efforts to participate in *Tikkun Ha-Olam*. However, we Jews want to repair the world precisely because of our deep belief in a truth expressed by the book of Psalms," The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." What animates us as Jews is the ability to restore the divine foundations of humanity and the world by our actions that lead to restoring what has been broken by arrogance or neglect. In writing an assessment of Nostra Aetate from a Jewish perspective I hope to demonstrate the combination of social and theological resources that are in that document. As we uncover theological elements in Nostra Aetate it will become clearer that the text reveals the tensions

of Israel. The Jewish communities of Germany and all of Europe were destroyed---and

how the it encouraged Catholics to develop an affirmation of Judaism and urged them to learn about Judaism as part of their lived experience of the faith. Judaism was no longer an object to be observed, but a living tradition—deeply related to the Church---that could provide nourishment for Christian identity.

In the very first sentence of paragraph 4 where Nostra Aetate speaks about Judaism we can observe a change of framework from the previous paragraphs. There are significant ideas put forth about other religions. Hinduism and Buddhism are "viewed with respect." The Church looks upon Islam "with esteem." However, in approaching the discussion of Judaism there is a shift of tone when we read the words, "As this sacred Synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it recalls the spiritual bond linking the people of the new covenant with Abraham's stock." The words "Mysterium ecclesiae" imply that the Council Fathers enter their discussion of Judaism as part of a theological search internal to the Church. The "spiritual bond" between Judaism and the Church is not an object fully known at the outset, but part of a continuing search of a "mysterium" a reality that is constantly open to the process of discovery. The new relationship between Judaism and Catholics is born in the Church's own theological search for its identity.

In the discussions after the Council there has been much attention to the later parts of the document that restrain Catholics from anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism. This is very important from perspective of the Jewish people who view the Catholic Church from the outside. However, these discussions have at times obscured the profound significance of the opening words, "Mysterium ecclesiae." These words open up the possibilities for Christians that a continuing relationship to Judaism is a positive and nurturing value and not only the removal of something negative. It provides them with an affirmation of Judaism as well as an injunction against anti-Semitism and hatred.

This distinction is re-enforced if we note the difference between the use of "mysterium" in Nostra Aetate and in Cardinal Faulhaber's advent sermon. The words mysterium Israel are used by Faulhaber to indicate the future integration of Israel according to the flesh into the Church. Put another way, "mysterium" is what will be disclosed in the future. In Nostra Aetate where the Jewish people are discussed as part of the "mysterium ecclesiae" the idea of mysterium looks back into Scripture. There is no "divorce" of the Jewish people from God. It was these inaugural words of "mystery" which animated Pope John Paul II to proclaim during his visit to the synagogue of Rome in 1986, "The Jewish religion is not extrinsic to us, but in a certain way is "intrinsic" to our own religion…You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers."[4]

The turn to Scripture is emphasized by the next phrase which emphasizes the importance of memory. "The Church cannot forget (*nequit oblivisci*) she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexhaustible mercy deigned to establish the eternal covenant." The description of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament as revealed in "inexhaustible mercy" subverts a tendency by the Christian tradition since the Epistle of Barnabas to read the covenant with the Jewish people as one of judgment rather than mercy. The memory of a merciful covenant between God and the Jews moves the Council Fathers to warn

[4] *Ibid*, "Historic Address to the Synagogue of Rome," 62-63.

that the Church cannot forget that it has been grafted as the wild olive branches into the good olive tree.

Through these two admonitions of memory, Nostra

this short sentence, Nostra Aetate opened the gates to continuing discussions occupy both of our communities for many years to come.

The recommendation for continued study and dialogue may also be understood as a preface to the next section of the document that discusses the role of the Jews in the crucifixion of Jesus. The text of Nostra Aetate reflects the consensus of the Council Fathers that some of the Jews did participate in the crucifixion. This opinion, even at the time of the Council, was debated by Christian biblical scholars. Members of the Jewish community were disturbed by what appeared to be a "literal" reading of the Gospels which permitted the continued stereotypes of the Jews as "killers of Christ."

However, Nostra Aetate also suggests an important change in a one-sided view of interpreting the Passion narrative. It enjoins Catholics not to blame all the Jews who lived at the time of the Crucifixion nor upon the Jews of today. Furthermore, "the Jews should not be repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from the Holy Scriptures." To emphasize the importance of this point, the Council Fathers urge those who preach and teach to make every effort not to return to teachings "out of harmony with the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ." Once again, Nostra Aetate presents a significant turn toward greater esteem for the Jews. However, without continuing attention to dialogue and mutual respect it is likely that pre-conciliar preaching and teaching will continue. The very ambiguity of Nostra Aetate has created

After moving into new approaches toward reconciliation with Judaism, the Council Fathers proclaimed what “the Church has always held and continues to hold” as an assurance of faith to its Christian readers. This affirmation of continuity raised serious questions: If it is the duty of Christians to proclaim Christ, then what is the purpose of dialogue with Jews? Does a continuing “mission” to proselytize the Jews deny the latter their own religious identity? W

address to the synagogue of Rome. Benedict XVI framed the question of relationship between Christians and Jews under the rubric of "gifts of Abraham" (December 2000). Many documents produced by Christians reveal the desire to know more about how Jews understand themselves. Of course, there will be problems with translation Jewish self-understanding into Christianity. It is precisely in the development of this "translation" that the term "mystery" is most helpful. Because of the central difference between Christians and Jews in their understanding of how God enters into relationship with humankind there can be no reduction of one religion into the other. As Jews begin to trust Christian inquiry into the practice and celebration of Judaism are designed to deepen Christian faith rather than to convert Jews to Christ, they will enter more easily into dialogue.

-Patrimoniam.
For almost two thousand years the "inheritance" of the blessings of Abraham has been at the heart of a struggle between Jews and Christians. The more Christians assumed the identity that they were "Verus Israel," the true Israel; Jews resisted and turned the argument around. There was no possibility that the Abrahamic blessings could be shared—or even spread among other peoples---by both communities. Nostra Aetate uses the term "common inheritance" of these blessings. This phrase opens new possibilities for profound conversation between our communities. How will Christians interpret St. Paul's understanding of the two covenants in Galatians 3 and 4? How can Jews who developed a tradition that the blessings and merit of the ancestors—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob---mean the continuity of the people Israel and their ultimate inheritance of the land of promise (Eretz Yisrael) open the possibility to a mutually shared series of blessings? Perhaps it is better for now to speak about the responsibilities that we have in common as a result of understanding Abraham as our common ancestor---a patrimony we also share with Muslims. That responsibility is to be a blessing. Pope John Paul II repeated this idea throughout the years of his pontificate. Jews and Christians are inheritors of the blessing of Abraham. First, they must become a blessing to one another—and then, they can become a blessing to all humankind. What is the pathway to becoming a blessing to one another? The Sages of the Jewish tradition suggest that "Any blessing that does not contain the name of God and the Kingdom of Heaven may not be called a blessing." They further state that, "Any argument that is for the sake of Heaven is destined to endure." As Christians and Jews we must then ask, "Is becoming a blessing simply to learn not to hate, demean or mock the other? Does it require action? How can we move from tolerance to respect and honor for one another?" The notion that our disagreement may be an argument for the sake of heaven may lead us to understand that Nostra Aetate encourages a method of discourse that can lead toward an answer.

-Dialogue
By encouraging "dialogue" and biblical studies Nostra Aetate provided the golden path toward

-God is faithful to his covenant with the Church, but equally to his covenant with the Jewish people. Therefore, Christians and Jews are both called to understand themselves as “people of the covenant” and to be a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 49:6; Mt 5:14).

-No catechesis of the Christian faith without teaching the living tradition of Judaism.

-No reconciliation with God without acknowledging the history of the Church’s sin towards the Jewish people.

-No understanding of biblical revelation without reading the Old Testament and seriously considering the Jewish interpretations.

These two statements reflect the status of our relations forty years after Nostra Aetate. The aporia of that document have been steadily moved forward toward greater mutual respect between our communities. This progress has occurred because the Church set dialogue as the desirable form of discourse with the Jewish people. Through dialogue, a continuous movement back and forth, it has been possible to disclose deeper layers of connection between us and also to maintain respectful boundaries. There are many problems yet to be resolved both within our communities and between them. However, on the fortieth anniversary of Nostra Aetate it is appropriate to celebrate the courage of those who opened new doors and new paths toward a vision of Shalom, the reign of the Holy One among humanity.