Nostra Aetate – 50 years on

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Nostra Aetate, published on 28th October 1965 towards the end of the Second Vatican Council, helped transform Jewish-Christian relations. Pope John XXIII had already received wide attention a year earlier for publicly greeting Jewish visitors with the words, "I am Joseph your brother".

According to Roman Catholic scholar Fr Edward Flannery, *Nostra Aetate* "terminated in a stroke a millennial teaching of contempt of Jews and Judaism and unequivocally asserted the Church's debt to its Jewish heritage."

It marked the beginnings of a fresh approach to Judaism when the Roman Catholic Church 'came in from out of the cold'. Although it omitted mention of the Holocaust or the existence of the State of Israel, Nostra Aetate was forceful in its condemnation of antisemitism. Most importantly of all, it ushered in a new era, fresh attitudes, a new language of discourse never previously heard in the Catholic Church concerning Jews. The concept of a dialogue now entered the relationship.

The Jewish Origins of Christianity

One consequence was a reawakening among Catholics to the Jewish origins of Christianity. They were reminded that Jesus was a faithful Jew and 'that from the Jewish people sprang the apostles', the foundation stones and pillars of the Church who 'draw sustenance from the root of that good olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles'.

The ramifications were manifold. Christians were taught that Jesus, his family and his followers were Jewish and the Jewish background to Christianity was stressed. Christians were taught that Jesus "had very close relations" with the Pharisees. They learnt that the final text of the Gospels was edited long after the events described which meant that the authors were sometimes concerned with denigrating those Jews who did not follow Jesus and equally concerned with vindicating the Romans, whose goodwill they were seeking. This was courageously admitted by the Vatican's 1985 document on the teaching of Judaism, which stated forthrightly:

'It cannot be ruled out that some references hostile or less than favorable to the Jews have their historical context in conflicts between the nascent Church and the Jewish community. Certain controversies reflect Christian-Jewish relations long after the time of Jesus. To establish this is of capital importance if we wish to bring out the meaning of certain Gospel texts for the Christians of today.'

Antisemitism and the Holocaust

As a result of a soul change, epitomised by *Nostra Aetate*, Christianity shifted from what was, for the most part, an inherent need to condemn Judaism to one of a condemnation of Christian anti-Judaism. This led not to a separation from all things Jewish but in fact, to a closer relationship with 'the elder brother'. In the words of German theologian Johannes Metz, 'Christian theology after Auschwitz must stress anew the Jewish dimension of Christian beliefs and must overcome the forced blocking–out of the Jewish heritage within Christianity'.

Yet, while condemning antisemitism, *Nostra Aetate* avoided the topic of the Holocaust, possibly because few leaders of the Christian churches did much to help Jews. Eugenio Pacelli, Pope Pius XII from 1939 to 1958, was (and remains) a controversial figure, with some claiming that he knew much and did nothing of importance to help Jews whereas others retort that he did what he could and encouraged others to do more. The impression of Vatican policy of the 1930s and 40s, indeed, of the two popes of that time, Pius XI and Pius XII, is hardly a positive one. Yet, it is essential to remember that in Nazi-occupied countries other than Germany, the churches were often targeted themselves, and were thus preoccupied with protecting their own flocks rather than by the fate of Jews.

However, individual Christian leaders did extend their support to Jews and one of the most honourable examples was Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli who, as Papal Nuncio for Turkey and Greece, made available baptismal certificates to thousands of Hungarian Jews in a bid to persuade Germans to leave them unmolested. He later became Pope John XXIII and initiated Vatican II.

In 1987 in the wake of the controversy over the Pope's reception of Austrian President, Kurt Waldheim, who had been an active Nazi, the Vatican promised to reflect on the Holocaust and *We Remember: Reflections on the Shoah* was published in 1998. It stresses the evils of antisemitism, concluding “we wish to turn awareness of past sins into a firm resolve to build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians or anti-Christian sentiment among Jews but rather a shared mutual respect.”

There remains a special European and a special Christian angle to dealing with the Shoah. It happened in the midst of a supposedly liberal, democratic and well-developed civilization. The vast majority of Europeans looked on while their Jewish neighbours were being taken away and murdered. As far as Christianity is concerned, and most Europeans were of course, at least nominally, Christians, the problem is even more serious: some nineteen hundred years after life of Jesus the Jew, his people were murdered by baptized pagans who, by their action and inaction, denied their baptism, while most other Christians, from the highest to the lowest, looked aside.

In my view, the Holocaust remains a threat to Christian self-understanding today, as it did at the end of World War II. It is perhaps no coincidence that it was John Paul II, the Pope whose pontificate witnessed more progress between Catholics and Jews than any other pope, was the first pope to visit a concentration camp, (Auschwitz), and to pray there (1979); the first to visit Yad Vashem in his pilgrimage to Israel (2000) and the first to place words of apology for antisemitism in the Church in cracks of the Western Wall.

Overcoming Supercessionism

One key feature of *Nostra Aetate* was its assertion that ‘Jews remain most dear to God’ who ‘does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues’. In other words, it stated that God's covenant with the Jewish people had never been broken, retained eternal validity; God did not renege on his promises. If Jews were not rejected, then Judaism was not a fossilized faith, as had been taught previously, but a living, authentic religion.

Few biblical concepts have been as troubling to Christian-Jewish relations than the Christian claim to be the successor covenant people, elected by God to replace Israel because of the latter’s faithlessness. Known as substitution theory or replacement theology, it argues that since the time of Jesus, Jews have been replaced by Christians in God’s favour, and that all God’s promises to the Jewish people have been inherited by Christianity.

This raises a crucial question in today’s relationship – can Christians view Judaism as a valid religion in its own terms (and *vice versa*)? Directly related to this is the need, from a Christian

perspective, for reflection on the survival of the Jewish People and of the vitality of Judaism over nearly 2000 years – this is the ‘mystery of Israel’, upon which Paul reflected in his Epistle to the Romans. For Christians, the question is whether Christianity can differentiate itself from Judaism without asserting itself as either opposed to Judaism or simply as the fulfilment of Judaism.

Questions also need to be considered from the Jewish perspective. What was the divine purpose behind the creation of Christianity? What are the implications for Jews that as a result of the Jew Jesus, 2 billion Christians now read the Jewish Bible? Martin Buber suggested that Jesus was “my elder brother”.

Nostra Aetate (and many Christian statements) turn for help from St Paul in whose view, both Israel and the Church are elect and both participate in the covenant of God. For Paul, it was impossible to view the Jewish people as a whole could first have been elected by God and then later displaced. God would not simply elect and then reject. The Church’s election derives from that of Israel but this does not imply that God’s covenant with Israel is broken. Rather, it remains unbroken – irrevocably (Romans 11:29). For Paul the mystery of Israel is that their rejection and their stumbling do not mean that they cease to be accepted by God. Rather, they allow the Gentiles to participate in the peoplehood of Israel.

Indeed, so strongly does Paul make this point that he offers a severe warning that gentile Christians should not be haughty or boastful toward unbelieving Jews – much less cultivate evil intent and engage in persecution against them. Christians have remembered the Jews as “enemies” but not as “beloved” of God (Romans 11:28) and have taken to heart Paul’s criticisms and used them against the Jews while forgetting Paul’s love for the Jews and their traditions (Romans 9:1-5).

Romans 9 – 11 therefore provided *Nostra Aetate* and the Church the means to re-assess attitudes towards Jews and maintain the continuing validity of God’s covenant with his Jewish people.

One might argue against Paul by saying that, if Jews have not kept faith with God, then God has a perfect right to cast them off. It is interesting that Christians who argue this way have not often drawn the same deduction about Christian faithfulness, which has not been a notable characteristic of the last two millennia. Actually, God seems to have had a remarkable ability to keep faith with both Christians and Jews, when they have not kept faith with him, a point of which Paul is profoundly aware in Romans 9-11. He goes out of his way to deny claims that God has rejected the chosen people, and asserts that their stumbling does not lead to their fall.

Israel-Palestine

One topic not mentioned in *Nostra Aetate* but which causes more controversy than any other is the subject of peace and understanding between Israelis and Palestinians, or perhaps more realistically, conflict and misunderstanding.

Political factors alone do not fully explain why the state of Israel is such a controversial topic. For Jews, of course, the centrality of the land of the Bible, as well as the survival of over a third of world Jewry, is at stake. Christians, for their part, not only disagree as to the place of the People of Israel in Christian theology, but feel particular concern for Christians who live in the nation state as well as Palestinians. There of course are also many Christians and Jews who are deeply concerned about the ‘Other’, making this a complicated picture to understand. Political factors alone do not fully explain why Israel is such a controversial topic. Why do conversations brim with so much emotion and passion?

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Although there have been great changes in Christian teaching on Judaism, attitudes towards Israel continue to be difficult. Simply put, it has been easier for the Church to condemn antisemitism as a misunderstanding of Christian teaching than to come to terms with the re-establishment of the Jewish State. Once again, it was John Paul II who was not only the first Pope to visit a synagogue and to pray there with its congregation (1986) but the first to exchange ambassadors with the State of Israel (1994), making pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the millenium.

Some Christians are extremely critical of Israel, such as the authors of *Kairos Palestine*, a document issued by a number of leading Christians from the Holy Land in 2010, which depicts Israel as responsible for a complex conflict. When churches adopt divestment initiatives directed against Israel, a country whose policies they sometimes liken to the former apartheid regime in South Africa, many see these as attempts to delegitimize Israel's very existence, although that may not be the intention. The fact that the churches do not act similarly regarding human rights abuses and state violence in many other places, especially in the wider Middle East, add to the strain.

There is another complicating factor. For Christians in the Holy Land the relationship with Jews exists within a framework of a larger dialogue with Muslims. Christian Palestinians are concerned at the prospect of the gradual Islamisation of the nascent state and of a time when Hamas and other Islamist parties might take over completely. Nablus a city which once had a sizeable Christian population, now has almost none.

The significant reduction in the Christian population elsewhere in the Middle East adds to feelings of insecurity but there is one contribution Jews and Christians can bring from thousands of miles away: hope.

Conclusion

Nostra Aetate was a milestone in Christian-Jewish relations and began an immensely difficult but rewarding exercise - namely, to take the 'Other' as seriously as one demands to be taken oneself. In the words the Vatican's 1975 *Guidelines on Nostra Aetate*, Judaism and Christianity must be understood on their own terms, "Christians must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience".

It is clear today that many of the main divisive issues have been either eliminated or taken to the furthest point at which agreement is possible. The efforts of Catholics towards respect of Judaism project attitudes that would have been unthinkable half-a-century ago. During 5 decades Jews and Christians have witnessed a massive change and giant strides have been made but we are talking of a dynamic and relentless process. We will never be able to sit back and say, "The work is done. The agenda is completed." On many major issues, Jews and Christians find themselves on the same side of the fence, faced with the same challenges. The agenda is changing and new agendas are no less vital and pressing.

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