



Nostra Aetate at 40: A Protestant Perspective

12.10.2005 | Sherman, Franklin

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Nostra Aetate is an epochal document also from a Protestant perspective. Partly this is due to the fact that relations between Protestants and Catholics, as well as between Christians and Jews, have improved during these past forty years (despite some setbacks on both fronts). This has created a sense of shared history, whereby what was achieved by Vatican II in its effort to overcome millennia of Christian enmity towards Jews is regarded as an achievement on behalf of Christendom as a whole. Partly it is due to the fact that Nostra Aetate served as an inspiration for the Protestant churches to craft their own statements of a similar nature. If even the Roman Catholic church, which regards itself as the pre-eminent guardian of unchanging truth, can admit its error in countenancing the “teaching of contempt” for so many centuries – so the implicit argument went – surely the Protestant churches should do no less.

We should be clear, however, that there were significant efforts toward this end well before Vatican II. Scholars like James Parkes in England and [A. Roy Eckardt](#) in the United States had taken the lead as early as the 1930"s and 1940"s in exposing Christian complicity in antisemitism. For the European churches, it was the shock of the Holocaust, which had taken place on their own soil, that motivated the change. Thus the famous “[Ten Points of Seelisburg](#),” issued by an international conference in Switzerland already in 1947, rejected “any presentation and conception of the Christian message which would support antisemitism under whatever form.” The statement set forth some deceptively simple, yet very potent principles, such as: “Remember that One God speaks to us all through the Old and the New Testaments”; “Remember that Jesus was born of a Jewish mother of the seed of David and the people of Israel”; “Remember that the first disciples, the apostles, and the first martyrs were Jews”; and, significantly, “Avoid presenting the Passion in such a way as to bring the odium of the killing of Jesus upon all Jews or upon Jews alone.”

The World Council of Churches, at its [founding assembly](#) in Amsterdam in 1948, declared: “We call upon all the churches we represent to denounce anti-Semitism, no matter what its origin, as absolutely irreconcilable with the profession and practice of the Christian faith. Anti-Semitism is a sin against God and man.” To this the Council’s [third assembly](#) (New Delhi, 1961) added the admonition: “In Christian teaching, the historic events which led to the Crucifixion should not be so presented as to impose upon the Jewish people of today responsibilities which must fall on all humanity, not on one race or community. Jews were the first to accept Jesus and Jews are not the only ones who do not yet recognize him.” Similarly, in October 1964 – exactly a year before Nostra Aetate – the [House of Bishops](#) of the Episcopal Church (USA)

declared that “antisemitism is a direct contradiction of Christian doctrine.” “The charge of deicide against the Jews,” the Episcopal bishops state, “is a tragic misunderstanding of the inner significance of the crucifixion.”

So the Protestant and Anglican awakening to these concerns was not initially dependent on the Roman Catholic example; but the latter did indeed spur them to continue and intensify their work along these lines. A multitude of statements followed, such as the United Methodist Church’s 1972 “Bridge in Hope: Interreligious Dialogue between Jews and Christians,” and its 1996 update, “[Building New Bridges in Hope](#).” The 1987 General Synod of the United Church of Christ affirmed its recognition that “God’s covenant with the Jewish people has not been rescinded or abrogated by God, but remains in full force.” A 1987 study paper of the Presbyterian Church (USA) likewise renounced the idea that Christians have replaced Jews as “the people of God” – a point that concerned Presbyterians have recently had reason to re-emphasize in protesting some local efforts to evangelize Jews.

In my own denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the most striking development of this nature was the 1994 “[Declaration](#) of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community.” In what was probably the first time an official Lutheran body has ever renounced a teaching of Martin Luther, the ELCA decisively repudiated the anti-Jewish views expressed in several of his treatises. “We reject this violent invective,” the declaration states, “and yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations. . . . We recognize in anti-Semitism a contradiction and an affront to the Gospel, a violation of our hope and calling, and we pledge this church to oppose the deadly working of such bigotry, both within our own circles and in the society around us.” Looking forward, the declaration states “our urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people.”

Protestants, then, join in celebrating the 40th anniversary of Nostra Aetate, viewing it as part of our own history. We note, too, that this brief declaration did not stand alone, but was followed by other important teaching documents both from the Vatican and from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, notably its 1988 publication *God’s Mercy Endures Forever: Guidelines on the Presentation of Jews and Judaism in Catholic Preaching*. From this we learn that the mere issuance of a statement, however authoritative, is not enough; it must be followed by a process of education and enculturation in the new point of view. We also learn, from following Roman Catholic developments, that the advances marked by even such epochal documents as Nostra Aetate can be thrown into question by retrogressive tendencies. Insofar as this happens or threatens to happen, we join in deep concern and in our desire to make common cause in defending – and, more than that, extending – the great achievements of Christian-Jewish rapprochement and dialogue in our time.

This article first appeared in *Midstream: A Bi-Monthly Jewish Review*, September/October 2005.