Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate*: Its Impact on the Church’s Theological Self-Understanding

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Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate* was a complicated and contentious document during the conciliar discussions. It was complicated because, after Pope John XXIII decided to add something on the Church and the Jews to the conciliar agenda after a historic meeting with the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac, uncertainty developed as to where a statement on the Church and the Jewish people might be placed. A number of the advocates of such a statement, mostly biblical scholars and Catholics connected with resistance movements against the Nazis, favored incorporation of such a statement in what eventually became *Lumen Gentium*, the dogmatic constitution on the Church. For various reasons, however, this proposal was not accepted. In turn, the conciliar leadership decided on a separate statement. Eventually, because of the situation faced at home by the bishops from the Middle East, it was decided that the document should be expanded to include reflections on the Church’s relationships with Islam and other non-Christian religions. The heart and soul of the document, and its most developed section, nonetheless remained chapter four, which dealt with the Christian-Jewish relationship.

Let me first focus on the first three chapters, which briefly cover Catholicism’s basic approach to all non-Christian faiths and introduce the Church to a far more positive outlook on non-Christians than had been generally the case in Christianity for centuries. While these three chapters remain very underdeveloped in comparison to chapter four on the relations with the Jews, they did open the door and lay the groundwork for a far more expansive treatment of interreligious relations, including relations with specific traditions such as Islam and Hinduism in follow-up ecclesial documents.

The first three chapters of *Nostra Aetate* fundamentally refocused Catholic attitudes towards non-Christians. While it did not solve some basic questions, such as missionizing people of non-Christian faiths, nor reflect in any significant ways on possible theological links with these religious traditions (Islam in particular, where some biblical links exist), it did acknowledge some truth in these religious traditions and affirmed the value of dialogue with their religious leaders. This represented a marked contrast with the longstanding outlook within the Church which spoke of these religious communities with negative, sometimes even contemptuous, language and basically regarded them as “enemies” of the Church.

The obvious challenge still remaining for Catholic Christians today is whether we can build on the groundwork laid in *Nostra Aetate*. Despite some lapses, even at the papal level, Catholics and their leaders now speak of other religious traditions in a positive vein and often stand ready to cooperate with them in the social sphere. But any
implications of this fundamental perspectival shift to a positive mode for theological understandings, including Christian theological self-understanding, have been largely been ignored, except by individual theologians. Ecclesial documents such as *Dominus Iesus*, issued by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger as President of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, have tended to cast a chill over such efforts. But questions about Christian “exclusivity” in terms of salvation and the consequent meaning of “evangelization” in the global interreligious context in which Christianity finds itself today remain. It is highly unlikely they will be buried. At some point Catholicism, and Christianity overall, will need to address the issues involved. Hence while the fundamental shift in perspective towards other world religions, introduced in Nostra Aetate, may appear rather simple and undeveloped, it nonetheless set the Church on a fundamentally new course that sooner or later will alter some of its traditional theological self-understandings.

Turning now to chapter four of *Nostra Aetate*, we need to take very seriously what the Canadian theologian Gregory Baum (who may have written a very early draft of this chapter as a Council expert) said in 1986 at the annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America in Chicago. In a plenary address, Baum termed chapter four of *Nostra Aetate* the most radical transformation of the Church’s ordinary magisterium to emerge from Vatican II.¹

So why did Baum make this strong assertion? In order to appreciate its full significance, we must look back at the classical theology of the Church and Judaism. A major part of that classical theological tradition, particularly in the patristic writings, understood the meaning of Christology and ecclesiology as involving the displacement of the Jewish people from any covenantal relationship with God after the Christ Event. Jews were now viewed as rejected people who never would have a homeland of their own. This situation was viewed by ecclesiastical writers both as a punishment for having rejected Jesus and putting him to death and as a warning to Christians of what would happen to those who refused to accept Jesus as their savior. This came to be known as the “perpetual wandering” theology and Jews, following the lead of St. Augustine, became seen as “witness people” in terms of divine punishment. However, Christian theology did not argue for the extermination of the Jews in the same way as subsequent Nazi ideology. It wanted to insure the continuity of the Jewish people because of their “witness value,” kept in a miserable state on the margins of society. We see clear evidence of this theology in such places as the papal states.²

The classical theology of perpetual wandering on the part of the Jewish people took hold within important sectors of modern biblical scholarship, a situation that persisted well into the twentieth century. Noted exegete Martin Noth, whose book *History of Israel* became standard fare in many theological programs, described Israel as a strictly “religious community” which died a slow, agonizing death in the first century C.E. For Noth, Jewish history reached its culmination in the arrival of Jesus. His words are concise and to the point in this regard:

Jesus himself...no longer formed part of the history of Israel, in him the history of Israel had come, rather, to its real end. What did belong to the history of Israel was the process of his rejection and condemnation by the Jerusalem religious community....Hereafter the history of Israel moved quickly to its end.³

*Nostra Aetate*, in chapter four, put forth three basic affirmations with regard to the Jewish people. The first, and the most fundamental, rejected the traditional deicide charge against the Jews. Jews could not be held collectively responsible for the death of Jesus. While some Jewish leaders may have played a secondary role, blame could not

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be extended to the entirety of the Jewish community then or now. This assertion totally undercut the basis for the perpetual wandering and witness people understanding of Jews and Judaism within Catholicism. Hence the second affirmation in Nostra Aetate: Jews remain in a covenantal relationship with God after the Christ Event and hence any Christology or ecclesiology in Christianity cannot base its perspective any longer on a notion of Jesus as the initiator of a totally new covenant with no ties to the ongoing Jewish covenant nor proclaim an ecclesiology without positive roots in Judaism.

The final major assertion found in Nostra Aetate is meant to fundamentally reorient the church’s theological understanding of its relationship with the Jewish people. It declares that Jesus and his disciples were profoundly influenced by parts of Jewish belief and practice at their time. Judaism was a very complex religious reality in this period with many internal disagreements. Jesus appears to stand closest to groups within the Pharisaic movement (as the 1985 Vatican Notes on teaching and preaching about Jews and Judaism asserted), though the Jewish scholar Daniel Boyarin recently claimed that Jesus argued against the Pharisees because he saw some of them as threatening the integrity and continuity of Jewish Torah.5

It is unlikely we will ever be able to precisely place Jesus’ relationships within the broad and complex Jewish community of his day. But with Nostra Aetate we have clearly shifted from an essentially negative view of those relationships to one that is fundamentally positive. The 1985 Notes, issued to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of Nostra Aetate, confirmed the about-face in Catholicism. Jesus was and always remained a Jew. Jesus is fully a man of his time and his environment—the Jewish-Palestinian one of the first century, the anxieties and hopes of which he shared.6

This about-face has been further confirmed by the late Cardinal and biblical scholar, Carlo Martini, S.J., who wrote in the same vein as the Notes:

> Without a sincere feeling for the Jewish world and a direct experience of it one cannot fully understand Christianity. Jesus is fully Jewish, the apostles are Jewish, and one cannot doubt their attachment to the traditions of their forefathers.7

The growing awareness of the deep-seated linkage between the first century Church and the Jewish community of the time has had a major impact on how Christian scholars view both the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, as well as the New Testament. While the issue of how to name the first section of the Christian Bible has seen considerable discussion in recent years, with some urging a change to “Hebrew Scriptures,” “First Testament,” or “Tanach” and others insisting that the traditional term “Old Testament” better reflects the different approach to these writings in the Jewish and Christian communities, no resolution of the disagreement is in sight. Nonetheless, most would admit that a major perspectival change is occurring in contemporary scholarship.

For centuries, the Hebrew Scriptures were generally seen in their better moments as a prelude to the New Testament and in their worse moments as a foil for supposedly superior insights in the New Testament. To a great extent, the selection of liturgical texts from the Hebrew Scriptures was based on this perspective. Interpretation of passages in the Hebrew Scriptures by Jewish scholars was generally ignored within the church. The belief persisted that correct interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures was possible only through the lens of the New Testament.

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6 Franklin Sherman, ed., Bridges, 208.
The “inferiority-superiority” model of the relationship between the two testaments affected Christian theology in many areas, one of the most important being that the “Old Testament” moral vision was inferior to the moral outlook found in the gospels and epistles. One still finds such a contrast in the writings of some progressive Catholic ethicists, such as John Coleman, S.J.

Slowly we are witnessing a significant change within biblical scholarship and, to a lesser extent, within the wider Christian theological community. A growing recognition is emerging that the Hebrew Scriptures need to be understood as a positive resource for Christian theology and not merely as a prelude or foil, in part because these writings exercised a profound impact on the teachings of Jesus. There is now an increasing willingness in Christian circles to include the interpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures by Jewish scholars in the construction of contemporary Christian theology and to regard these writings as an indispensable, ongoing resource for the understanding of key Christian theological themes, such as Christology and ecclesiology.

In part because of the enhanced recognition of the role played by the Hebrew Scriptures and some post-biblical Jewish materials from the first century on the mindset of Jesus and first century Christianity, a growing number of Christian scholars have begun to paint a transformed picture of the initial relations between the church and the Jewish community and their eventual separation. For most of Christian history, the prevailing view had been that Jesus fully established the church as a separate institution from Judaism in his own lifetime. But increasingly that traditional understanding is coming under severe scrutiny.

This process of taking a new look at Christian origins and how the church emerged out of Judaism is now several decades old. One of the first contributors was Robin Scroggs, who taught both at Chicago Theological Seminary and subsequently at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Scroggs emphasized the following points: (1) The movement begun by Jesus and continued after his death in Palestine can best be described as a reform movement within the Judaism of the period. There is little evidence during this period that Christians had a separate identity apart from Jews. (2) The Pauline missionary movement as Paul understood it was a Jewish mission that focused on the Gentiles as the proper object of God’s call to his people. (3) Prior to the end of the Jewish war with the Romans in 70 C.E., there was no such reality as Christianity. Followers of Jesus did not have a self-understanding of themselves as a religion over against Judaism. A distinct Christian identity only began to emerge after the Jewish-Roman war. (4) The later portions of the New Testament all show some signs of a movement towards separation, but they also generally retain some contact with their original Jewish matrix.

While not every New Testament scholar would subscribe to each and every point made by Scroggs, the consensus is growing that the picture he presents is basically accurate. Such a picture clearly contradicts the classical depictions of church-synagogue separation held by most people in both faith communities. It should be noted that the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, an episcopal pioneer in promoting constructive Christian-Jewish relations, basically endorsed the Scroggs perspective in his own writings.

The biblical scholar John Meier, in the third volume of his comprehensive study of New Testament understandings of Jesus, argues that from a careful examination of New Testament evidence, Jesus must be seen as presenting himself to the Jewish community of his time as an eschatological prophet and miracle worker in the likeness of Elijah. He was not interested in creating a separatist sect or holy remnant along the lines of the Qumran community. Instead, he envisioned the development of a special religious community within Israel. The idea that this community “within Israel” would slowly undergo a process of separation from Israel as it pursued a mission to

the Gentiles in this present world—the long-term result being that this community would become predominantly Gentile itself—finds no place in Jesus’ message or practice.\(^{10}\)

More recently, David Frankfurter adds further to the notion of significant intertwining between Christians and Jews in the period well after Jesus’ death. He has insisted that within the various “clusters” of groups that included Jews and Christians, there existed a “mutual influence persisting through late antiquity [and] evidence for a degree of overlap that, all things considered, threatens every construction of an historically distinct “Christianity” before at least the mid-second century.”\(^ {11}\)

Important Christian and Jewish scholars are now arguing that the actual separation between the church and the synagogue, while well advanced by 100 C.E., was not completed for several centuries after that. Scholars such as Robert Wilken, Wayne Meeks, Alan Segal, and Anthony Saldarini have uncovered continued ties between certain Jewish and Christian communities, particularly in the East.\(^ {12}\) Evidence of such continuing ties is apparent in the second, third, and, in a few places, even in the fourth and fifth centuries. And the ties were not just on a theoretical level. They also affected popular practice as well. John Chrysostom, for example, launched a harsh critique of Judaism partly out of frustration that Christians in his area were continuing to participate in synagogue services on a regular basis. What sort of role these Christians played in the synagogue services is unknown and likely will remain so unless some new documentation is uncovered. It would be terribly illuminating to have such information.

But short of this, we can say that on the Christian side, at least some believers in Christ did not regard such belief as necessitating a break with Judaism and its ritual practices. And on the Jewish side, this openness to Christians involved some recognition that they authentically “belonged” to the Jewish community since no evidence exists to suggest that the Christians had to fight their way into the synagogue for such services. One important collection of essays on this topic of the gradual separation of church and synagogue has the intriguing title of *The Ways That Never Parted*.

Within the overall “Parting of the Ways” scholarship, one of the most important results has been the significant re-examination of Paul’s outlook on Judaism. Traditionally Paul has been viewed both in popular and scholarly circles as, in many ways, Christianity’s founder. Pauline theology has played a crucial role in the formulation of Christological perspectives, especially in Protestant theology, as well as defined the foundation for Christian ethical thought. Paul has been “credited” with bringing about the decisive break between Christianity and Judaism through his supposed rejection of any Torah obligations for gentile converts in the first century at the so-called Council of Jerusalem. Paul has often been portrayed as espousing a view in which Christianity clearly holds a position of theological superiority over Judaism.

Much of this perspective on Paul as fundamentally anti-Jewish has been due to the dominance of a master narrative in Christian circles rooted in the book of Acts. This master narrative begins with Stephen’s decisive break with Judaism in chapter seven of Acts. So-called Jewish Christians then began to disappear from this master narrative until chapter eleven, when they are totally removed from the storyline following Peter’s revelatory vision whereby he becomes convinced to abandon his previous adherence to continued Torah observance. From that point onwards, the master narrative focuses exclusively on gentiles as the new people of God and moves the epicenter of


Christianity from Jerusalem to Rome. Thus in the account of Christian origins that has tended to dominate Christianity’s perspective, Judaism is superseded and even annulled, with Paul being viewed as the primary messenger of this teaching. This master narrative from Acts has been especially influential in the liturgy of the Easter season, during which the church celebrates its fundamental self-identity. Continued ties to Judaism play little or no constructive role in the presentation of this self-identity.

This classical perspective on Paul and Judaism was significantly reinforced in the mid-nineteenth century in the writings of F. C. Bauer. In his work, *Paul the Apostle*, written in 1845,13 Bauer argued for the existence of only two factions in the early church. One was the Jewish Christians whose leader was Peter, and the other gentile Christians, who looked to Paul for spiritual guidance. The Jewish Christians, in Bauer’s perspective, stood mired in a narrow legalism that blinded them to the universalistic elements in Jesus’ teachings that were supposedly championed by Paul.

Increasingly this classical perspective on Paul is being pushed aside by insights coming from “The Parting of the Ways” scholarship. Paul is now being portrayed as an integral part of the complicated Jewish-Christian scene of his time, rather than someone who completely repudiated Judaism and its Torah tradition. Shortly before his death, the noted New Testament scholar Raymond Brown said in a public speech in Chicago that he had now become convinced that Paul had a very high regard for Torah, including its ritual dimensions, and that if he had fathered a son, he would likely have had him circumcised. Even Paul’s more Christological reflections are seen by some scholars now as having roots in the Jewish mystical tradition of the day.

What is beginning to emerge in important sectors of Pauline scholarship is the picture of a Paul still very much a Jew, still quite appreciative of Jewish Torah, with seemingly no objection to its continued practice by Jewish Christians so long as their basic orientation is founded in Christ and his teachings, and still struggling at the end of his ministry to balance his understanding of the newness he experienced in the Christ Event with the continuity of the Jewish covenant. This is quite apparent in the famous chapters 9-11 of Romans, which Vatican II used as the cornerstone of its declaration about continuing Jewish covenantal inclusion in chapter four of *Nostra Aetate*. A few of the biblical scholars involved in this new Pauline research even go so far as to maintain that Paul regarded Torah observance so highly that he feared that if gentiles tried to practice it, they would only corrupt its authentic spirit. Such a view admittedly pushes the envelope of scholarly evidence a bit far, but it is presently under discussion in some scholarly circles.

The biblical and theological reflections that have emerged as a result, at least in part, of the fundamental reorientation on the Christian-Jewish question brought about by *Nostra Aetate* carry significant impact for various areas of Christian theology. I would include here Christology, ecclesiology, ethics, mission, and the Christian relationship with other religions.

In terms of Christology two new imperatives arise. Firstly, the reality of Jesus’ deep involvement in a constructive way with segments of the Jewish tradition must be included in any discussion of his divine sonship. While we can certainly continue efforts to present Christological understanding in multicultural ways, this should not happen at the expense of highlighting Jesus’ Jewish roots, particularly in the interpretation of his message. There is simply no way of properly interpreting Jesus’ three years of preaching without setting that teaching in the Jewish context of the period.

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Some years ago, the prominent Asian theologian S. Wesley Ariarajah, who worked for many years in the inter-
religious office of the World Council of Churches, termed the effort to return Jesus to his Jewish context a “futile
attempt in terms of creating Christian faith expression in a non-European context.” He acknowledged Jesus’ posi-
tive connections with the Jewish community of his day. But this linkage carries no theological significance today
for Ariarajah. For him, relating Christology to the Buddhist tradition represents a far more important challenge.14

While I am certainly sympathetic to an effort to relate Christological understanding to Buddhism and other Asian
religions, we must first try to grasp what Jesus was actually saying. And that cannot be done, as the American Viet-
namese Catholic theologian Peter Phan has quite properly argued, apart from investigating its original setting.15
Doing proper contextual theology today requires doing contextual interpretation of its initial formulation in the
first century.

A younger Protestant theologian, R. Kendall Soulen, in contrast to Ariarajah, has got it right. Soulen sees the link
to Judaism in Christian self-identity as indispensable and an essential cornerstone. The fundamental link with Ju-
daism is important not only for interpreting Jesus’ specific teachings but also for the basic theological understand-
ing of the Christ Event. The permanent link to Judaism he regards as a constant check against ever present gnostic
tendencies in Christological interpretation. Soulen’s unwavering affirmation of this reality is one of his singular
contributions to the current Christological discussion within the Christian-Jewish dialogue.16

The second implication of the post-Nostra Aetate vision relative to Christology is the need to insure that in any
attempt to state a contemporary Christology, a salvific path for the Jewish people in and through their faithfulness
to their continuing covenant is clearly affirmed. This necessity was underscored by Cardinal Walter Kasper during
his tenure as President of the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.17 And any number of
theologians, such as Paul van Buren, Clark Williamson, Franz Mussner, and the contributors to the volume com-
ing from the joint European-American study group on Christ Jesus and the Jewish people have tried to work out
the specifics of Christology along these lines.18

With regard to ecclesiology, the implications of the “Parting of the Ways” scholarship are crucial for articulating
the understanding of the church today. Most of us grew up thinking that by the time Jesus died on Calvary, or very
shortly thereafter, the church had come into being as a separate institution apart from the Jewish community. But
clearly that is historically inaccurate in light of the new research. The church and the Jewish community did part
compny eventually. And this will remain the situation for the future, even if Meier’s contention that Jesus never
envisioned a totally new religious community is proven correct. But there is a need in ecclesiological presentations
to portray the separation for what it actually was—gradual and complex—and to ask what ties ought to be restored
to some extent, even within the separatist model. One possibility is to envision the church and the Jewish com-
community as two distinctive covenantal paths that remain connected in some measure; they are distinctive paths, but
not totally distinct.

On the ethical front, the primary learning from the post-Nostra Aetate scholarship concerns the foundation of
Christian ethics. That foundation has often been presented in a way that roots it in grace rather than law. The
so-called “Law of Christ” has been seen as standing in superior contrast to the inferior nature of the Jewish legal

Dialogue, Temple Emmanuel, New York, Co-sponsored by the Center for Interreligious Understanding and the Office of Interreligious Affairs of the
tradition. Much of the argumentation for such a perspective has come from interpretations of Pauline literature. Now that the perception of Paul’s outlook on Jewish law has been redirected in a positive direction by a growing number of biblical scholars, Christian ethicians will have to do a major readjustment of the Christian approach to ethical thinking.

Finally, post-Nostra Aetate scholarship forces us to raise some major questions about how we understand Catholic Christianity’s relationship with other world religions. Traditionally we have viewed Catholicism as fully complete as a religion with nothing fundamental to learn from any other religious community, Christian or not. There has been a sense of superiority over all other religious perspectives. Catholicism, and Christianity in general, in large measure defined their self-identity over against the Jewish tradition.

Now that the “over against” model has been shown as deeply flawed, there will be a need to rethink this self-definition, first and foremost relative to Judaism but also with respect to other non-Christian religious traditions. This also carries significant implications for evangelization.¹⁹ Cardinal Walter Kasper has argued that there is no necessity for organized evangelization of the Jews because they are in the covenant and have authentic revelation from the Christian theological perspective.²⁰ But that discussion will need to be expanded to Islam and even beyond.

In sum, Nostra Aetate and the scholarship it has generated have the potential for a major reformulation of Christian thought in the key areas outlined above. Obviously such reformulation must be undertaken with care and a respect for tradition. But it cannot be halted without undermining the process launched at Vatican II in its declaration Nostra Aetate, which defined it self-identity.

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