

NOSTRA AETATE

Edited version of a talk given at Stanbrook by Dame Agnes Wilkins OSB, October 2013

I find that when I look at *Nostra aetate* with the intention of saying something about Islam, I am always drawn back to what it says about Judaism, since if it were not for the Jewish question, the document would never have seen the light of day. In a way, what it says about Islam and the other world religions is no more than a footnote (albeit a rather long one), despite the fact that fifty years later it is what is said about Islam that attracts the most attention. For although our relationship with the Jews has been long and tortuous over the centuries, our relationship with Islam has been near catastrophic. As far as church documents were concerned, *NA* represents the first time anything positive has been said about Islam. In the past, on the rare occasions Islam was mentioned, it was normally to condemn its errors. Although very little is said in *NA*, the change in attitude has been profound and the way forward for dialogue seems at last to have opened up. As for Judaism, anti-Semitism has been part of the Church's attitude toward Jews from the beginning, based on a few misinterpreted biblical texts (to be looked at). It was so much taken for granted that it was probably not even in most people's consciousness any more. So, I would like to talk a little about Judaism before Islam, since what has happened here is nothing short of miraculous and gives the wider context for what the Declaration says about Islam.

It strikes me more and more that underlying what has happened here is the terrible event of the Holocaust. *NA* seems to me to be an indirect result of it, a prime example of God bringing good out of evil (Rom 8:28), and, unsurprisingly, it all began with Pope John XXIII, that 'old man' who was elected to the papacy as a 'stop-gap' till someone more suitable might emerge among the *papabile*. As to the Holocaust, Gavin D'Costa (Catholic theologian, Bristol University) says, 'Slowly, after the Shoah, there was profound shock amongst European Christians, that six million Jewish men, women and children were systematically exterminated in the heart of Europe by a Christian nation, while the largest Christian church in Europe, the Catholic Church, allegedly made no public condemnation of these actions.' It can be argued, he says, that the Catholic Church kept quiet for a greater good, but 'there is no question

that a long history of Christian anti-Semitism, especially from the thirteenth century, facilitated this horrific genocide.’¹ D’Costa also records that before the Council the Vatican conducted a process whereby all Catholic institutions around the world - universities, bishops, etc. -were consulted to ask for possible agenda items. The issue of the Jews featured in only two returns, these being eighteen professors from the Pontifical Biblical Institute who stressed the need to combat anti-Semitism and someone who requested that ‘international freemasonry, controlled by the Jews’ be condemned. However, many Jews and a few Catholic theologians had already pointed to Catholic doctrinal and liturgical anti-Semitism at the heart of the problem. The problems were these: the deicide charge, the fact that Judaism was considered null and void, and the infamous Good Friday prayer (‘perfidious Jews’), which amounted to a ‘teaching of contempt’. D’Costa’s comment on the first problem is that the Bible needs interpretation. There is certainly plenty there to back up the charge of deicide, such as Acts 3:15, when Peter addressed the crowd after he had cured a lame man: ‘It was you who accused the Holy and Upright One, you who demanded that a murderer should be released to you while you killed the prince of life’. There was a long line of tradition behind the way these texts had been interpreted, not easily overturned. However, it had to be acknowledged that the word ‘deicide’ could not be found anywhere in the NT; but a vociferous minority at the Council would not accept that Acts 3:15 was wrong. The majority were prepared to concede that it was only a limited number of Jews who were involved in the killing of Jesus, and, moreover, these did not *know* that the crucifixion was an act of deicide. Eventually, the term was dropped completely, at the express request of Paul VI. And in any case, the matter had really been clinched previously by an intervention of a certain Cardinal Ruffini (a neutral on the issue), who had said that the term ‘deicide’ should be dropped because no one could kill God anyway. Concerning the second point, the so-called ‘abrogation’ of Judaism by Christianity, the Council Fathers took another look at Paul’s letter to the Romans, especially chapter 11, which suggests that God has a purpose in Israel’s rejection, so it cannot therefore be attributed to their hardheartedness and perfidy, but to God’s plans. The other problem, the Good Friday prayer, will be commented on later.

¹ ‘Traditions and Reception: Interpreting Vatican II’s “Declaration on the Church’s Relation to Non-Christian Religions”’, *New Blackfriars*, 2010

First, I want to say something about Pope John, the main instigator of the profound changes in attitude that have come about over the last fifty years.

Cardinal Giuseppe Roncalli, as he was called before his election to the papacy, held the position of apostolic delegate in Bulgaria, where he had close experience of Jews during the time which spanned the events of the Holocaust. He was kept informed to an extent not generally realised of the horrors of the extermination camps and the anguish of Jews threatened with deportation. He struggled to ward off these dangers wherever and however he could. When reports of atrocities were brought to him, he received them 'with hands folded in prayer and tears in his eyes'.² He always wanted to know all the details about deportation orders and noted them down carefully. He never handed these matters over to members of his staff, but always dealt with them personally, and in this way often succeeded in preventing deportations from Slovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria, thereby saving the lives of thousands of Jews. When he was elected pope on the death of Pius XII, we know what happened: he stunned the Church, and probably the world, by summoning the second Vatican Council. He would not even live to the end of it. Nor did he live to see the document he was instrumental in bringing about, but fortunately Paul VI, though not so charismatic as a person, faithfully followed through what John had begun.

When Pope John summoned the Council his main concern was the inner affairs of the Catholic Church, which needed some *aggiornamento*. Other religions must have been far from his mind, at least very much on the 'back-burner'. There is no doubt that the great Constitutions, i.e. the most important documents, on Revelation, Liturgy, the Church, and the Church in the Modern World, have had a profound impact, but arguably the one that was not even thought of in those early days, on other religions, has had the greater impact, at least to date. So how did *Nostra aetate* come onto the Council's agenda? Pope John may have put the Jews to the back of his mind, of necessity, because of the burden of his office, but they had not forgotten him. However, he did make a point in 1959 of authorising the alteration of the Good Friday

² John M. Oesterreicher, 'Introduction and Commentary' (on *Nostra aetate*), p. 7, in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. III, ed. Vorgrimler, Burns & Oates/Herder & Herder, 1968. I owe most of what is said here to this commentary.

prayer for the Jews, which in those days was in Latin and began, *Oremus et pro perfidiis Iudaeis*. When this was translated into the vernacular of the various European languages, such words as 'perfidious' were understandably used. However, I have always found it difficult to believe that the Church could be so blatantly uncharitable and anti-Semitic, and in fact have discovered that the translation was based on a misunderstanding of the Latin of Christian antiquity.³ What *perfidia* meant was 'faithlessness', so the prayer really meant to pray for the 'faithless Jews', i.e. who did not believe in Christ. However, it still speaks volumes that this was translated without question into modern languages as 'perfidious'. After the visit to Pope John in the Vatican of a certain Jules Isaac, a French Jewish historian, a very important player in the genesis of this document (about whom I'll say more), the offending word was omitted from all translations. That prayer has undergone two or three metamorphoses since then, according to how our theology of Judaism has developed. Another important deletion was made in a prayer composed by Leo XIII dedicating humanity to the heart of Jesus. It said, 'Look, finally, full of pity, on the children of the people who were *once* your chosen people. May the blood that was once called down upon them flow over them as a fount of salvation and life.' That word 'once' strongly suggests, in fact takes for granted, that the Jewish religion is now abrogated. But in fact it is a mistranslation of the *Latin* word *tamdiu*, which means 'for so long'. It becomes the almost tender 'for so long your chosen people' - but it is not the same as Paul's reassuring words, 'For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable' (Rom 11:29). And the phrase 'His blood be upon us' (from the gospel accounts of the passion) is apparently historically doubtful, though it possibly came from a group composed largely of disappointed resistance fighters whose only aim was to throw off the Roman yoke, a cause Jesus refused to support.

In the preparatory stages of the Council several requests came from Jews for their case to be addressed, but the main one was from Jules Isaac, mentioned above, who had lost his wife and daughter in the Holocaust. He had already approached Pius XII some years ago, but without success. Since then he had written a book, *Jésus et Israël*, which went into the whole question of Christian anti-Semitism through the ages, demonstrating how endemic it was even

³ Oesterreicher, p. 4-5, and *Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin*, Leo F. Stelton, Hendrickson, California, 1995.

among some of our most well-known authors. He was now an old man and time was not on his side. He had to get past one or two stony-faced cardinals on his way to Pope John, but when he finally got there, he received a warm welcome. The Pope began the conversation by speaking of his great reverence for the Old Testament, but Isaac, believing he did not have much time, went straight to the point. He gave the Pope a dossier with corrections of all the false and unjust statements that had been made about Israel in Christian teaching, for instance, the theological myth that the scattering of Israel was a punishment for the crucifixion of Jesus. There was also an extract from the Catechism of the Council of Trent which showed that *all* sinners were responsible for Christ's death. This Catechism, which represented the official teaching of the Church, made the point that it was original sin that was responsible for the suffering of Christ, and the Jews, according to Paul, 'would never have crucified the Lord of Glory, if they had known him' (1 Cor 2:8). The point was also made that the Father *gives* the Son, after Isaiah 53:6: 'The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all'. And Paul says similarly, 'He did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all' (Rom 8:32). It was even said in history that it was Gentiles, as well as Jews, who executed Jesus. And, finally, the 'rulers of the world', that is, angelic powers hostile to God, would not have crucified the Lord of Glory, if they had known his wisdom, i.e. his plan of salvation.

In this context, I have been wondering about the so-called 'messianic secret', the phrase coined by W. Wrede in his study, *The Messianic Secret* (1971). Before Wrede, it was thought that Jesus wanted to reveal his identity gradually to the disciples, so that they could understand better who he was, but Wrede disagrees, arguing that, especially in Mark's gospel, this 'secret' is all pervasive: expelled demons are forbidden to say who he was, miracles are not to be published, sometimes his whereabouts is not to be made known. Then there is the whole idea of the parables, which veil the realities he was talking about. Once, during a session of shared *lectio* in the novitiate, we were looking at Luke's gospel for Sunday week 12, which began, 'One day Jesus was praying alone in the presence of his disciples'. Suddenly he turns to them and asks who the people think he is. He learns that people think he is John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the ancient prophets come back to life. When he asks the

disciples what they think, Peter says, 'You are the Christ of God', i.e. the Messiah. Rather than urging the disciples to enlighten the people as to who he really was, Jesus seemed content that they should remain in their ignorance and 'gave strict orders not to tell anyone' that he was the Messiah. He acknowledged Peter's act of faith; he *was* the Messiah, despite the fact that he was not quite what had been expected. This time he was the fulfilment of the prophecy of the suffering servant of Isaiah, but when he comes again, it will be rather different and the other aspects of the expected Messiah will be clearly visible. So why the secrecy? My own theory is that he made no attempt to publish his messianic identity, while at the same time not denying it, because he did not want the Jews to be blamed for his death, and the continuation of Judaism is somehow part of his plan, which to our limited vision is not yet exactly clear. So long as the Jews did not know his true identity they could not be blamed for his death. As Jesus said on the cross, 'Father, forgive them *for they know not what they do.*' We are in deep theological waters here, but however we see the paschal mystery – and there are many ways of looking at it – it was undoubtedly *meant*, as a direct result of the Incarnation, and was not just an accident of fate. As NA states after it has denounced all forms of anti-Semitism, 'The Church always held and continues to hold that Christ *out of infinite love freely underwent suffering and death* (italics mine) because of the sins of all men, so that all might attain salvation' (NA 4).

To return to the visit of Jules Isaac to Pope John. At the end of the meeting he asked the Pope if he could take away with him a little hope. He received the answer, 'You have reason for more than hope', but he was also reminded that the Pope was no absolute monarch. During this time of preparation for the Council (it was October 1960), John was very moved by a visit from a group of American Jews who were on a study trip through Europe and Israel and stopped off in Rome to thank him for all he had done for the Jews during Hitler's persecution. He greeted them with the words 'I am your brother Joseph' (Gen 45:4), Joseph (Guiseppe) being his baptismal name. He thus indicated that he wanted to break the chains that for centuries had divided Christians and Jews.⁴ Oesterreicher, in his commentary on NA, concludes that important as was the visit of Jules Isaac and other Jews, the 'decision for the

⁴ Oesterreicher, in Vorgrimler, vol. 3, p. 6.

Council to issue a declaration lay in the heart of John XXIII'.⁵ And so on 18 September 1960 he commissioned Cardinal Bea, President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, to prepare a draft declaration on the inner relationship between the Church and the people of Israel. He decided against setting up a separate commission, as some Jews had requested, because of the role of the Jews in the history of salvation. This eventually led to the document *Nostra aetate*, which included other religions, notably Islam, but which the Pope did not live to see. However, with regard to the Jews, in this document for the first time (rather belatedly!) the Church has publicly made her own the Pauline view of the mystery of Israel and gives glory to God for his enduring faithfulness towards the Jewish people (Oesterreicher, p.1).

Islam

Pope John XXIII died on 3 June 1963 with the work of the Council far from complete, but fortunately Paul VI, his successor, was able to bring to completion what he had begun. At the beginning of the Council Robert Caspar PB, one of the experts, suggested that there was no intention of speaking about Islam. In fact, such matters had been definitely eliminated from the programme by the preparatory commission, and all the indications were that the majority of those consulted would be in favour of a condemnation of Islam, if it was spoken of at all. Such an attitude was quite normal whenever Islam had been spoken of by the Church in the past.⁶ Up to the beginning of the twentieth century, ever since the seventh, the constant attitude of the Church was condemnation. Islam was a religion that sought to supplement Christianity and denied its principle dogmas of the Trinity, the Incarnation and Redemption. Moreover, the revelation completed with the death of the last apostle could not be further extended by a new prophet. In the Middle Ages, Muslim countries posed political dangers because of the exhaustion of secular powers in Europe; none had the strength to defend the frontiers of the Christian West single-handed, and so the popes made themselves the foremost champions of Christian countries and the instigators of the Crusades. With the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ Andrew Unsworth, 'Louis Massignon, the Holy See and the Ecclesial Transition from "*Immortale Dei*" to "*Nostra Aetate*": a Brief History of the Development of Catholic Church Teaching on Muslims and the Religion of Islam from 1883 to 1965', *ARAM Periodical*, vol. 20, 2008.

Renaissance, and especially by the nineteenth century, there arose a new science – ‘Oriental Studies’. The Qur’an was translated into Western languages and research carried out on Islam’s founder. At this time, too, the vast religious and secular literature of the Arabs became known. But, on the strictly dogmatic plane, attitudes were the same, i.e. ‘classical’, which meant Islam was condemned, Muhammad a false prophet, and the Qur’an a collection of errors; anything that was true in it had been taken from the Bible.⁷ Pope Paul VI was instrumental in changing all that.

How did the change in attitude towards Islam come about? After all the attention given to the Jews, some Council Fathers began commenting that other religions should be given consideration. One of these was the Melkite Patriarch Maximos IV, who said ‘If we are to discuss Jews, then we should likewise take up the question of Muslims, among whom we must live as a minority’. It happened providentially that Paul VI was receptive to this request, chiefly because of his intimate association with the person and ideas of Louis Massignon, especially when he was Archbishop of Milan before his election to the papacy. There had been in the years before the Council various movements and attempts at dialogue with Islam, but it seems certain that Massignon was the main catalyst for the change, even though he himself died in 1962, just before the Council began.

To do justice to Massignon and his contribution to the dialogue with Islam would require a longer paper than this, but to put the change of attitude into context a little background is needed. The first important thing about Massignon is his close association with Charles de Foucauld: he saw him as a possible successor as a Christian presence in the Sahara Desert. Massignon was very torn between joining him and pursuing an academic career. The latter won the day, but his heart was still in the desert, and he always felt he had a mandate from de Foucauld to live out his spirituality in a secular context, that is, ‘the sanctification of Islam through continual intercession before God in silence and prayer’. But his vocation was still more the ‘transformation of a

⁷ Georges C. Anawati op, ‘Excursus on Islam’, in *Commentary on Documents of Vatican II*, vol.3, p.151, ed.Vorgrimler.

mindset'.⁸ This transformation is what happened at Vatican II, although he did not live to see it. Massignon was brought up as a Christian (Catholic) by his mother, despite his father's opposition, but at a very young age, while still at school, he abandoned his religion. He was highly gifted intellectually, and while travelling in North Africa as a young man to prepare for a diploma (in archaeology?) he was betrayed by an interpreter who did not translate his words faithfully. He decided to learn Arabic for himself (he was 21 at the time), and went to Cairo to deepen his knowledge of the language. Here, he came across some writings of the Muslim (Sufi) mystic Al-Hallaj that intrigued him, and he chose him as a subject for his doctoral thesis. Hallaj was a Christ-like figure for Massignon. He died as a martyr by crucifixion and, in the course of his study, Massignon developed a personal relationship with him. When, in dire circumstances, he was converted back to Christianity, he was convinced it was Hallaj, among others, who had been interceding for him. His conversion happened in 1907, during an archaeological expedition that he was leading in Iraq. While on a journey on a Turkish boat on the river Tigris, where he was the only European on board, he felt threatened because he was suspected of being a spy. He tried to flee, but was captured. He felt he would be condemned to death and tried to commit suicide. He subsequently became very ill with a high fever and was reduced to praying to all who might protect him. He felt a presence – undoubtedly the God who is Love – whom Massignon called 'the Stranger'. God had indeed become a stranger to him at this stage in his life. He was taken to a hospital in Baghdad and subsequently cared for by a Muslim family, and this experience of Muslim hospitality was to be fundamental to his spiritual development. On his journey back to France he had a strong sense of the presence of God the Father and before arriving in France he made his reconciliation with the Church. Once back in Paris he dedicated his whole life to God. Thus, while a Christian again, he retained a deep love of Islam, which had been the 'matrix' of his conversion, and he spent his life studying all aspects of it deeply and trying to make it better understood in the West.

He became perhaps the foremost Orientalist of his day, and whilst not all of his ideas were accepted at the Vatican Council, some significant ones were. The

⁸ Guy Harpigny, doctoral thesis on Louis Massignon, in Michael L. Fitzgerald and John Borelli, *Interfaith Dialogue: A Catholic View*, Orbis Books, New York, 2006, pp. 230-1.

Council agreed with Massignon in its recognition that Muslims adore with us the same God; in the importance given to Abraham as a model of faith; and in the respect owed to Muslims (Fitzgerald, p. 232). It did not accept his emphasis on Ishmael, that Muslims are descended from Hagar and her son, nor on the reliability of the Qur'an or the prophetic credentials of Muhammad. Apparently, descent from Ishmael is historically doubtful, and in any case it was considered that historical descent is not important. Christianity insists that what is important is faith, rather than descent from Abraham through Isaac.

The paragraph in *Nostra aetate* dealing with Islam is very short and less theological than the rather longer section dealing with Judaism that follows it. In fact, it has been said that the document says nothing about Islam, but only about Muslims. This is the text:

The Church looks upon Muslims with respect. They worship the one God living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to humanity and to whose decrees, even the hidden ones, they seek to submit themselves whole –heartedly, just as Abraham, to whom the Islamic faith readily relates itself, submitted to God. They venerate Jesus as a prophet, even though they do not acknowledge him as God, and they honour his virgin mother Mary and even sometimes devoutly call upon her. Furthermore, they await the day of judgement when God will require all people brought back to life. Hence they have regard for the moral life and worship God especially in prayer, almsgiving and fasting.

Over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen between Christians and Muslims. The sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all mankind, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values
(NA 3).

When a document such as this reaches its final form, one can be sure that there has been a long and agonising process leading up to it and that every word has been carefully chosen. It looks on the surface a very simple and straightforward text, and its revolutionary character is not really apparent.

However, I think that aspect of it can better be judged as we observe the impact it has had over the last fifty years. We have made enormous progress in our relationship with Islam, despite the fact that we still have a very long way to go. The first point to note is the opening words expressing respect for Islam – in itself extraordinary when one considers that nothing but condemnation had been expressed at this level previously, and that at the beginning of the Council there was no intention of saying anything at all about Islam. It was the personal initiative of Pope Paul that brought this about, by personally asking the conciliar commissions to prepare a text on Islam each time there was a mention of Jews, following requests from Eastern rite Catholic bishops. The next point to note is that this God whom we both recognise ‘has also spoken to men’. This is all that is said, in rather veiled language, about the Qur’an. It does not subscribe to the conviction that Islam was dictated word for word to an entirely passive prophet. The prophetic mission of Muhammad is not mentioned at all. These are both very sensitive topics for Muslims, and the Council decided, probably wisely, to deal with them by silence. We hold very different ideas about both Scripture and the nature of prophecy, which will probably take a very long time to unravel. The document then goes into ‘they’ mode, that is, it makes pronouncements about what Muslims believe, without passing any judgement on Islam as a religion. It captures the essence of Islam in the sentence beginning ‘They strive to submit themselves without reserve to his (God’s) decrees, even the hidden ones’. Islam means ‘submission’. This ‘submission’ is given in the spirit of Abraham, ‘to whom’, as the document says ‘the Islamic faith readily relates itself’. It is thanks to one of Massignon’s intuitions that Abraham has acquired enormous prominence as being somehow part of the foundation of the three major monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is not uncommon to hear of the ‘Abrahamic faiths’ today, but in my opinion the relationship to Abraham of the three faiths is so different that it has no real meaning apart from being a convenient unifying label. Next, there is the thorny problem of Jesus, who is greatly venerated as a prophet in Islam. I believe it is a sore point with Muslims that Christians do not venerate Muhammad in the way they do Jesus, but obviously there are non-negotiables on both sides here, and this is one of them, and so the document just uses as few words as possible without arousing controversy. Mary is happily mentioned, as she is greatly venerated in both Islam and

Christianity. The Qur'an states that Christians venerate her as God, one of the Trinity along with the Father and Jesus, but nothing is said about that contentious issue. (It is a complete mystery where this idea came from). Mary is a bond between us more than her Son. There is, then, a mention of the eschatological realities that we share, and some praise for the moral life of Muslims, and their prayer, almsgiving and fasting. Finally, we are exhorted to forget the quarrels and dissensions of the past and work together to achieve mutual understanding, for the benefit of all men (inclusive language not yet compulsory!), to promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values. These days, much more than at the time of the Council, Islam is everywhere present in Western society and those final exhortations could not be more timely.

Georges Anawati OP, the Dominican expert in the area of Islam, concludes his commentary on the document in words with which I wholeheartedly agree: 'The Christians of the West must arm themselves with inexhaustible patience, and live in the faith that moves mountains.'⁹

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⁹ Georges C. Anawati op, 'Excursus on Islam', in *Commentary on Documents of Vatican II*, vol.3, p.154, ed.Vorgrimler.