

The Church and Other Faiths

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“Humanity forms but one community” (*Nostra Aetate*, 1)

That sentence indicates the respectful attitude the bishops of the Second Vatican Council advocate toward people of other faiths.

In *Nostra Aetate* (*Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*), the Council noted the unity of all persons. “All stem from the one stock which God created . . . and . . . all share a common destiny, namely God” (1).

The document, promulgated on October 28, 1965, states that members of non-Christian religions have an awareness of a hidden power that results in a way of life “imbued with a deep religious sense.” Continuing, the bishops teaching is powerful: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. It has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines, which . . . reflect a ray of truth which enlightens all men and women” (2).

The Church sees the value and virtue of the truth in other religions, and the Church does not gloss over differences. *Nostra Aetate* states that the Church “is duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ” (2).

Nostra Aetate mentions Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism, but it concentrates on the latter two faiths. It is careful to show the connection of Christianity to Judaism: “Nor can it [the Church] forget that it draws nourishment from the good olive onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted” (4). In some respects, God nourishes both Jews and Gentiles who grow and bear fruit as they live according to God’s plan for each religion. *Nostra Aetate* then states that even though Jews did not accept the Gospel, they “remain very dear to God” and God still keeps the covenant with Jewish people, “because God does not take back the gifts he bestowed” to them (4).

Holding up the dignity of people of other faiths, the Church declares that it “deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-semitism levelled at any time or from any source against the Jews” (4).



The document encourages dialogue. This can be through faith formation, conversations, perhaps even collaboration between a parish and a synagogue in understanding one another’s faith and practices.

This same mutual understanding is encouraged in the relationship between the Catholic Church and Islam. Today, especially, this seems like a prophetic document. The document mentions twice the “high esteem” the Church has for Islam. Despite differences of theology, the Council urges that together, Muslims and Catholics “promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values” (3).

Other religions also promote peace, a life lived before a supreme presence, and a way to live ethically in a world of suffering. The final words of *Nostra Aetate* speak beautifully of true Christian discipleship and the need for better understanding of other world religions, especially during our time: “We cannot truly pray to the Father of all if we treat any people as other than sisters and brothers, for all are created in God’s image. People’s relation to God the Father and their relation to other women and men are so dependent on each other that the Scripture says ‘they who do not love, do not know God’ (1 Jn 4:8). . . .

“Therefore, the church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or any harassment of them on the basis of their race, color, condition in life or religion” (5).

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