

VATICAN II COUNCIL PRESENTATIONS – PART 6B  
NOSTRAE AETATE – THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CHURCH TO NON-CHRISTIANS

I. Nostrae Aetate began as a document specifically on the relationship of the Church with the Jewish people, but came to encompass a much greater field.

A. Given the historical persecution of the Jews, culminating with the Holocaust, and continuing in some countries afterward, Pope John XXIII himself called for the Council to draft a document on the Jewish people.

1. The Church herself had promoted discrimination against Jews, although she had never endorsed the popular persecution of Jewish people. This factor contributed to John XXIII's concern for a document with a more favorable view of the Jewish people.

2. Both Popes Pius XI and Pius XII had condemned in the strongest terms the Nazi persecution of the Jewish people and other attempts at oppressing them. See, e.g. Pope Pius XI, Mit Brennender Sorge (1937); Pope Pius XII, Christmas Message, 1942. But some Catholics, especially in conquered nations, had cooperated with these persecutions. And there was thus a need to clarify the condemnation of any such persecution or discrimination.

3. While most of the schemata of the Council were drafted by Preparatory Commissions, Pope John XXIII assigned to the Secretariat on Christian Unity the responsibility for this document. Under the leadership of its Prefect Cardinal Augustine Bea, this Secretariat drafted the basic document by August of 1961.

B. The document drew immediate opposition, both from within the Vatican and from the Arab world.

1. The main issues were not theological, but rather political. When the Arab governments received word about the document, they took it to mean that the Vatican was taking Israel's side in that nation's disputes with the Arab world, especially over the Palestinian issue.

2. As a result, both the Secretariat of State and most of the bishops from the Arab world strongly objected to issuing such a document on the grounds that it would alienate Arab governments and make things difficult for Christians in those countries. The Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Amleto Cicognani, who was also headed of the Central Preparatory Commission, thus removed the schema from the documents that the Council was considering.

C. During early 1963, Cardinal Bea and the Commission on Christian Unity brought his document back by having it included as a chapter in the document on ecumenism, along with a chapter on the religious liberty. During the Second Session, the Council fathers decided to break off the chapters on religious liberty and on relations with Jews and other non-Christians and make them separate documents. Time ran out in that session for debate regarding those issues.

D. On September 25, 1964, Cardinal Bea introduced the document on Jews and other non-Christians to Third Session of the Council. The response was favorable, but there was a great deal of concern.

1. Because the document was still primarily about the Jews, the bishops from Arab countries still opposed it.
2. Other bishops, such as Cardinal Ernesto Ruffini, said it was excessively positive about Judaism, not mentioning any problems with ignorance of Christ.
3. Other bishops, especially Americans and Asians, were favorable to the text, but wanted changes, especially with regard to including faiths other than Judaism.
4. The Commission heavily revised the text so that it included the five sections that would make it into the final document, with a broader focus. This revised draft was approved for continuing consideration on November 20, 1964, but a large number of the votes in favor also included “with reservations.”

E. Cardinal Bea presented the revised text, now simply called the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions to the Council for the Fifth Session. At first, there were 243 votes against it. The Secretariats of State and Christian Unity made further revisions to satisfy bishops from the Arab world. And then, on October 28, 1965, the final draft was approved by a vote of 2237-88.

II. The Declaration has five carefully drafted sections, which begin with general principles, proceed onto the religious situation in general, and then cover specifically relations with Muslims and Jews, and concludes with a condemnation of discrimination against people because of their faith.

A. Section 1 describes the common striving for unity and friendship among peoples generally, and then says that this striving is rightfully based upon the fact that we were all created by God and for eternal happiness with him. It thus describes different religions as all seeking answers to the most fundamental callings of human nature. This section is an implicit refutation of those who believe that religion causes mostly divisions among people.

B. Section 2 has a positive tone toward other religions, while still affirming the centrality of the Catholic faith.

1. It describes as central to the human person the natural striving for “awareness of a hidden power, which lies behind the course of nature and the events of human life.”

2. It then praises Hinduism for its emphasis on divine mystery, asceticism and focus on meditation. There is also praise for Buddhism for its recognition of the inadequacy of this changing world and call for harmony, liberation from worldly desires and illumination in greater realities. Other religions likewise express the spiritual longings of the human heart.

3. The next paragraph both praises what is good in other religions and also says that the fulfillment of human desires must be found in Jesus Christ. It thus calls for both discussion and cooperation and also courageous witness to the true faith.

C. Section 3 then focuses on relationships with the Muslim faith.

1. The first paragraph praises Muslims for their recognition of the power and mercy of God and the call to obey Him, and for their reverence of Jesus at least as a prophet and veneration of His mother.

2. The next paragraph then calls for an end to the strife that has so often marked relations between the Christian and Muslim world.

D. The lengthy section 4, which had originally been the centerpiece of the document, describes relations with the Jewish faith.

1. It begins with an outline of the strong connection between the two faiths, Christian and Jewish. The second paragraph describes how the call of the Jewish people both prepared the way for our salvation and still is a lesson for us. The third paragraph describes how it is that Christ Himself was from the Jewish people.

2. The fourth paragraph emphasizes that, while most of the Jewish people did not believe that Jesus was and is the Messiah, they are still people of a covenant with God, beloved by Him.

3. The fifth paragraph thus calls for greater understanding and appreciation between Christians and Jews. As a part of this understanding, the sixth paragraph

emphasizes that only those who specifically advocated the death of Christ can be blamed for that crime.

4. And thus, the next paragraph condemns all religious hatred and persecutions and especially anti-Semitism.

5. Lest anyone think, however, that respect for other people implies a downplaying of the truth of Christ, the concluding paragraph calls again for a proclamation of the faith in the saving death of Christ that leads to everlasting life.

E. Section 5 then concludes with an overall call to love and condemnation of any form of religious discrimination. It says that the faithful should act well among people of other faiths and “as far as possible” live at peace.