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Nostra Aetate:
Religious Literacy for Today's Catholic Students

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In this article, I take the opportunity of the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council to reassess one of its major products, the declaration Nostra Aetate ("In Our Time"). Following a brief introduction to Nostra Aetate, I describe my experience teaching an undergraduate course on Jewish-Christian Relations built around the document's recommendations for interfaith dialogue. Through open dialogue about religious beliefs, prejudices, and stereotypes, students made great strides in developing religious literacy, defined by Prothero (2007) as "the ability to understand and use in one's day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions" (p. 14). I explore the concept of religious literacy and Nostra Aetate's potential as a tool for fostering interfaith dialogue. I pair this theoretical discussion with some specific implications for Catholic educational settings, and show the continuing relevance of Nostra Aetate as a theological and philosophical basis for Catholic education today.

One is the community of all peoples.

—Nostra Aetate 1.2

The beginning of [Nostra Aetate](#) ("In Our Time"), or the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (Vatican Council II, 1965) states:

In our time, when day-by-day mankind is being drawn closer together, and the ties between different peoples are becoming stronger, the Church examines more closely her relationship to non-Christian religions. In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship. (1.1)

Composed during the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), *Nostra Aetate* reflects the bishops' and *periti's* serious engagement with the varied cultures, religions, and experiences of the world's peoples. As such, it is an expression of the *aggiornamento*, the term used by Pope John XXIII (1962) in his address

Gaudet Mater Ecclesia (“Mother Church Rejoices”), with which he opened the Council to signify a call to “bring up to date” the Church’s self-conception and relation to the world. Specifically, *Nostra Aetate* was an expression of the Council’s desire to meet people, including those of other faith traditions, in their lived realities and to assist them with their spiritual needs and desires. Within Catholic educational settings, the document poses the challenge of reaching out to others, whatever their cultural or religious foundations, in ways that draw all together in fellowship, based on genuine acceptance and dialogue.

Although official church documents can signal a change in the relationship Catholics have with people of other faith traditions, the most likely obvious fruit of such work is the personal encounters people have with those of various faith backgrounds. Fifty years ago when Vatican II began, it would have been unlikely that a course on “Jewish–Christian Relations” or on “Interreligious and Interfaith Dialogue” would have been taught at a Catholic university. I recently had the privilege of teaching such undergraduate courses at Marian University. In one “Jewish–Christian Relations” course, the students were a mix of Roman Catholics and Protestants (mostly members of the Lutheran and Dutch Reformed churches).

Early in the semester, as we discussed prejudices and stereotypes surrounding Judaism and Jews, I saw the degree to which Christians harbor similar sentiments about each other. I halted one class so that we could talk freely and ask questions about our religious beliefs and prayers. For example, the Protestant students asked the Catholic students why they “worship” statues and Mary, the Mother of God; the Catholics inquired as to why the Protestants know so much about the Bible. The conversation was lively and exciting, breaking down biases, stereotypes, and ignorance. Ultimately, the students wrestled with the question, “What does it mean to be a religious person?” In pondering this question, they confronted some of the great theological issues raised in the following passage from *Nostra Aetate*:

Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment, and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going? (Vatican Council II, 1965, 1.3)

Although this particular discussion was among Christians (dialogue with Jews came later in the semester), I was nevertheless aware of and inspired by the teaching of *Nostra Aetate*:

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men. (Vatican Council II, 1965, 2.3)

As my students engaged in dialogue with one another—and later with Jews at a synagogue—they inevitably opened themselves to the grace of conversion (from the Latin *convertere*, “to turn around”). “Conversion,” as understood here, departs from the historical Catholic understanding of the term, whereby the Church claimed exclusive ownership of the truth and “converted” others to its religious tradition, insisting that other belief systems were both incapable of helping humans to attain salvation and deficient or inferior. Such historical atrocities as the Holocaust have taught us the disastrous and death-dealing results of such thoughts and behavior. In particular, *Catholic Teaching on the Shoah: Implementing the Holy See’s “We Remember”* (Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, 2001), has pointed out how some Nazi atrocities can be linked to both Catholic and Protestant anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic teachings.

Instead, when we understand the root meaning of conversion—*transformation*—we can aid those involved in discussion to commit more fully to their own religious traditions, to share personal and communal experiences as equal partners, to determine the use of shared belief for the common good, and to grow in their distinct relationships with God—all of which are supported by *Dominus Iesus* as part of the missionary activity of the Church (Ratzinger, 2000). Of this kind of dialogue, Jacques Dupuis (2001), for whom many theologians believe *Dominus Iesus* was promulgated as a means of refuting his theology of religious pluralism (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2001), has reminded us:

Neither on one side nor the other does it tend to the “conversion” of one partner to the religious tradition of the other. Rather it tends to a more profound conversion of each to God. The same God speaks in

the heart of both partners; the same Spirit is at work in all. By way of their reciprocal witness, it is the same God who calls and challenges the partners through each other. Thus they become, as it were for each other and reciprocally, a sign leading to God. (p. 383)

I witnessed great growth in my students during that and subsequent class sessions: no one claimed any longer to have total ownership of the truth. Inquisitiveness about each other's religious backgrounds continued. In the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, the students deeply and sincerely regarded all truths and differences and did not collapse truths into one universal way of thinking and believing. Students interacted with trust and did not look upon each other's experiences as deficient or evil. I interpret this change in my students' thinking and interactions as evidence that they improved their religious literacy through the open interfaith dialogue in my class.

Religious Literacy

Religious literacy draws people toward fellowship and assumes the existence of a common good, whereby "people must take account of all those social conditions which favor the full development of the human personality" (Pope John XXIII, 1961, p. 65). In *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*, Stephen Prothero (2007) has referred to religious literacy as:

the ability to understand and use in one's day-to-day life the basic building blocks of religious traditions—their key terms, symbols, doctrines, practices, sayings, characters, metaphors, and narratives... Religious literacy might also be divided into a variety of functional capacities; for example, ritual literacy (knowing how to cross yourself during the Catholic Mass or how to perform ablutions before Muslim prayers); confessional literacy (knowing what Christians affirm in the Apostles' Creed or what Muslims affirm in the *Shahadah*); denominational literacy (knowing salient differences between Episcopalians and Catholics or between Reform and Conservative Jews); and narrative literacy (knowing what Adam and Eve are said to have done in the Garden of Eden or how the Buddha came to abandon his palace for the life of a wandering ascetic). (pp. 14–15)

Religious literacy of the type Prothero described is urgently needed to push back against triumphalist and extremist religious thinking, which judges one religion or one path to God as superior to others—an attitude that is all too evident in the contemporary United States. As I witnessed in my Jewish-Christian Relations class—and in a subsequent “Interreligious and Interfaith Dialogue” course, too many Christians lack sensitivity toward the beliefs, books, and prayers of those of other faiths. My students and I found that overall, this type of religious illiteracy pushes people apart; it diminishes the religious traditions and practices that are extrinsic to the dominant culture and leads to a grandiose sense of religious superiority among people who make such judgments about other religions. Religious illiteracy thus shapes and often shuts down political discussions. This overall development makes the fundamental challenges raised by *Nostra Aetate* a half century ago more vital than ever. Specifically, it demands that Catholic educators determine how they can help students in Catholic institutions move from an exclusivist understanding of religion to recognizing both the deficiency and truth in all religions.

Nostra Aetate (and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger’s [2000] document *Dominus Iesus* [Lord Jesus] *On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*) have helped Catholics become more religiously literate by teaching the value of interfaith dialogue:

The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons that, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men. (Vatican Council II, 1965, 2.3)

The calls for interfaith dialogue seen in *Nostra Aetate* and *Dominus Iesus* are particularly salient in contemporary US society, in which religious pluralism is part of the lived reality of many people. For example, The Pew Forum on Religious and Public Life’s *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* (Lugo et al., 2008), for which researchers interviewed more than 35,000 people in the United States aged 18 and older, found that 70% of those interviewed “do not believe their religion is the only way to salvation” and that two-thirds of respondents believed “there is more than one true way to interpret the teach-

ings of their religion” (p. 3). Table 1, below, provides important information about the religious composition of the United States as reported in the *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* (Lugo et al., 2008):

Table 1

<i>Major Religious Traditions in the United States</i>	
Type of Religious Tradition	Adult Affiliation (%)
Christian ^a	78.4
Jewish ^b	1.7
Buddhist ^c	0.7
Muslim ^d	0.6
Hindu	0.4
Other World Religions	<0.3
Other Faiths ^e	1.2
Unaffiliated ^f	16.1

Note. Adapted from Ludo et al., 2008, “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey,” Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. Copyright 2008 Pew Research Center.

a Includes Protestant (evangelical, mainline, historically Black churches), Catholic, Mormon, Jehovah’s Witness, Orthodox (Greek, Russian, and other), and other Christian.

b Includes Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and other Jewish.

c Includes Zen, Theravada, Tibetan, and other Buddhist.

d Includes Sunnni, Shia, and other Muslim.

e Includes Unitarians and other liberal faiths, New Age, and Native American religions.

f Includes atheist, agnostic, and secular/religious unaffiliated.

Today, as the United States becomes more religiously diverse, educators must help Catholic students become religiously literate; that is, as the Center for Religious Literacy has noted, to become “knowledgeable about religion, including its place in human experience and its impact on our world” (Center for Religious Literacy, n.d.). Religious literacy, however, is more than mere

tolerance of other religions—it is a commitment to engage in dialogue while acknowledging differences—to discover what is held in common and to work for the common good. It requires knowledge of what one’s own religious tradition teaches about a particular concept (such as the Covenant, salvation, Jesus, and Israel) so that one avoids trivializing the traditions of others and engaging in divisive debate. Most importantly, participation in honest dialogue is an embrace of God’s grace.

It is especially fitting during the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council for Catholic educators to reflect on how far the institutional Church (those within its organizational structure) and its members have come in their relationships with those of other faith traditions, including how educators teach about Catholicism and other religions. Such reflections can help Catholic educators more readily confront contemporary US religious illiteracy and help those within our Catholic educational institutions become more knowledgeable about the world’s diverse spiritual paths.

***Nostra Aetate’s* Relevance to Fostering Religious Literacy**

Nostra Aetate (1965) is the shortest of the 16 final documents of the Second Vatican Council and the first document in Catholic history to focus on the relationship that Catholics have with Jews. It reflects the Church’s determination at Vatican II to engage in both *ad intra* (“toward the inside”) and *ad extra* (“toward the outside”) dialogue to discern who and how it will be in the contemporary world.

While maintaining that salvation comes through Christ and that everything necessary for salvation subsists within the Catholic Church, *Nostra Aetate* acknowledges religions other than Christianity and reveres the work of God in all the major faith traditions, namely, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. It acknowledges the unique spiritual bond of the Church to Judaism and its link to Islam. The document rejects the charge that all Jews are guilty of deicide (the killing of Jesus), and denounces supersessionism (the claim that the New Covenant as expressed in Jesus Christ replaces the Old Covenant with Israel) and antisemitism (the belief in the theological or racial inferiority of Jews). Further, it recognizes the Church’s own historical shortcomings by asserting that some of its members have acted sinfully toward Jews in the past. *Nostra Aetate* thus indirectly challenges members of the institutional Church to speak up on behalf of Jews and to oppose political regimes anywhere that persecute them on religious or ethnic grounds. As Edward Cardinal Cassidy (2005) has noted:

In the first two millennia of the modern era, Catholic–Jewish relations were frequently part of a troubled area in the story of Christianity. Unfortunately, the history of these relations is not one of which the Catholic Church can be proud, since all too often it is a story of official oppression and discrimination, as the church gradually considered the Jewish people guilty of “deicide” and consequently rejected by God. In Christian tradition, the Jewish people were considered, with the coming of Christ, to have lost their special place as the people of God. This place had been taken over, as it were, by those who had accepted Christ as their savior, and Christians believed themselves to be the new people of God. (p. 126)

Additionally, the document falls short of taking any responsibility for atrocities and—when it speaks about Muslims,—“urges all to forget the past” (Vatican Council II, 1965, para. 3.2). It mentions neither the Holocaust nor specific examples of antisemitism throughout history. It neither asks forgiveness from Jews and Muslims nor takes responsibility for hateful actions against them in the past two millennia—persecution, prejudice, betrayal, and proselytization; however, it acknowledges some of the Church’s own failings in preparing for a new era of interreligious interchange. In this way, a reciprocal relationship may be developed among members of the three Abrahamic religions. Just as Judaism acknowledges the significance of the Incarnation for Christianity, the Church affirms:

According to God’s saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all who believe in Christ—Abraham’s sons according to faith—are included in the same Patriarch’s call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people’s exodus from the land of bondage. The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles. Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself. (Vatican Council II, 1965, para. 4.2)

Similarly, the document implies that Islam, which regards Jesus as a prophet and affirms important truths about God and his relation to humanity, is a revealed religion (divinely inspired rather than human-made), and many Muslims would say the same of Christianity. Appreciating this reciprocal relationship among the three Abrahamic faiths can help Catholic educators revere and teach the work accomplished by all those touched by God's grace.

For educational purposes, *Nostra Aetate* encourages Catholics to "encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation" (Vatican Council II, 1965, para. 4) with Jews through "biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions" (Vatican Council II, 1965, para. 4). Such encouragement toward re-educating Catholics de-objectifies Judaism and Jews, helping to dispel prejudices and stereotypes and emphasizing the shared spiritual heritage between Catholics (and other Christians) and Jews. Such educational efforts can support an understanding of Christianity as "a Christ-centered Judaism" (Center for Christian-Jewish Learning, 2004).

In the years since the Second Vatican Council, continuing cooperation and dialogue have existed among Jews, Catholics, and other Christians both at the institutional and grassroots levels. The Church's commitment to *Nostra Aetate* is evidenced in much of its post-Vatican II teaching and practice. Thus, Fisher and Klenick's (1987) *On Jews and Judaism*, a collection of addresses by Pope John Paul II between 1979 and 1986, and Cassidy's (1998) *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*, reveals increasing openness toward, and respect for, Judaism. In 1979, Pope John Paul II visited the Polish concentration camp at Auschwitz; in 2000, he made a historic trip to Israel, where he lit the eternal flame at Yad Vashem and expressed sorrow at the Western Wall for Christian abuse of Jews. In 1980, in his address to representatives of the West German Jewish community, he talked about the relations between Jews and Catholics by emphasizing three dimensions of dialogue between these groups of faith-filled people: (a) "the meeting between the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God [cf. Rom. 11:29], and that of the New Covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within our Church, that is to say, between the first and the second part of her Bible;" (b) "the meeting between present-day Christian Churches and the present-day people of the Covenant concluded with Moses;" and (c) a call to both Jews and Christians to "committing themselves together for peace and justice among all men and peoples, with the fullness an depth that God himself intended us to have, and with the readiness for sacrifices that this goal may demand" (John Paul II, 1987, p. 35).

Pope Benedict XVI continued in Pope John Paul II's footsteps. He, too, visited Auschwitz in 2006, prayed at the Wailing Wall and went to Yad Vashem in 2009. He also visited a Roman synagogue in 2010, continuing a series of visits to synagogues in Germany (2005) and New York (2008), made prior to becoming Pope.

Finally, *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (Ratzinger, 2000), a document that many Jews, Catholics, and Protestants claim was a retreat from the welcoming tone and inclusivistic theology of *Nostra Aetate* (Pope & Hefling, 2002), reiterates the Church's overall commitment to dialogue. It asserts the need for Christians to engage in dialogue with people of other faith traditions, while affirming that Jesus Christ is "the way, the truth, and the life" (Ratzinger, 2000, para. 2.2; Jn 14:6). Although 50 years is not long enough to undo the hurt, betrayal, and denial of the previous 2,000 years, one may rightly say that some progress has taken place in developing more authentic relationships with those of various faith traditions. The work, however, must continue and must intentionally involve educating Catholics about the importance of relationships in our own self-definition and in our work at becoming more religiously literate.

Applying *Nostra Aetate* to Contemporary Catholic Education

With the general points raised about *Nostra Aetate* and the illustrations of the practical effectiveness of its approach in mind, we may now turn to the issue of how we, as Catholic educators, proceed in the ongoing spirit of *aggiornamento* to relate to others in novel and productive ways. The following recommendations highlight four ways in which the tenets of *Nostra Aetate* might be used to encourage those in Catholic educational settings to become more religiously literate: (a) educate students in multiple faith traditions; (b) facilitate encounters with people and practices from other religions; (c) promote interfaith collaboration; and (d) model and support activism for religious literacy. Each of these ideas is explored in turn.

Educate Students in Multiple Faith Traditions

As Catholics, it is important that we understand our own faith tradition so that we can engage more fully in dialogue with those who do not share it. Catholics in the United States also should be knowledgeable about the

mosaic of faiths practiced in our religiously diverse nation. Catholic educators must also move away from literal readings of the Gospel that perpetuate prejudices and stereotypes against Jews, particularly accusations that they killed Christ. All religions have their own truths and discrepancies, and we ought to address and teach the “dark side” of the Church’s history—for example, how some New Testament pericopes, such as Matthew 27:25, which suggests supersessionism; and John 8:42:44,47 and 1 Thessalonians 2:13–16, both of which promote the deicide charge against Jews.

Catholic educators should reassert or recover past Christian teachings and practices that affirm the conviction that all people are made in God’s image. Educators can also help students criticize and correct prejudices, stereotypes, or propaganda that impede religious literacy. In *Declaration Responsibility in Today’s Pluralistic Society* (Central Committee on German Catholics, 2005), the discussion group “Jews and Christians” summarized recent key Catholic and Protestant teachings that can shape how and what we teach Catholics in the United States today: God is faithful to his covenant with the Church, but equally to his covenant with the Jewish people. Therefore, Christians and Jews are both called to understand themselves as “people of the covenant” and to be a “light to the nations” (Is 49:6; Mt 5:14).

- No catechesis of the Christian faith without teaching the living tradition of Judaism.
- No reconciliation with God without acknowledging the history of the church’s stance towards the Jewish people.
- No understanding of biblical revelation without reading the Old Testament and seriously considering the Jewish interpretations. (2005, 2.1)

Finally, Catholic educators ought to know and teach the ways that religious literacy historically has been fostered in the United States, as well as contemporary approaches to religious literacy. This instruction should include promoting awareness of organizations that foster religious literacy, such as the [Interfaith Youth Core](#) in Chicago.

Facilitate Encounters with People and Practices from other Religions

Nostra Aetate refers to the “common inheritance” of people of the Abrahamic traditions. How might educators best support Catholic students in experiencing and understanding this common inheritance of Jews, Christians, and

Muslims through Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael? One possibility is to visit a local synagogue, where students could learn more about Jesus's own Jewish religious background and about the significance of the Passover Seder, as part of students' preparation for the reception of First Eucharist. Another possibility is to present opportunities to discuss and partake in service projects with those who profess Judaism or Islam as part of preparation for the Sacrament of Confirmation.

Promote Interfaith Collaboration

To honor the work begun by *Nostra Aetate* (1965), the institutional Church and its members should serve as models of moving from mere tolerance to real collaborative engagement with people of various faith traditions. For example, when issues such as sexual ethics or eco-ethics arise, Catholic leaders ought to collaborate with Jewish and Muslim leaders and jointly issue statements. Also, leaders at Catholic universities and colleges could extend a collaborative spirit to Jewish and Muslim leaders who also serve in institutions of higher education to work on behalf of the students they serve, especially when issues of financial aid or academic freedom arise.

Model and Support Activism for Religious Literacy

Today's ever-changing communications technologies make it easy to stay informed about current events in the United States and around the world. Catholic educators ought to work collaboratively with members of the institutional Church and its members in utilizing these technologies to monitor international developments and to take an active stance against injustices fueled by religious illiteracy: when dictatorships rise to power; when religious freedom is obliterated; when faith traditions and their adherents are ridiculed, harassed, killed, or demonized in any way; when religious books or other documents are taken out of context, mocked, or destroyed; when people are excluded from society (for example, people of the LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered] community, cultural and religious minorities, or immigrants); when any acts of antisemitism arise; or when a fundamentalist approach to Biblical texts is used to justify acts of violence. Beyond modeling participation in social justice movements through technology, educators can present opportunities for participation and activism to students.

Conclusion

Nostra Aetate provides a theological and philosophical basis for Catholic education today by offering ample encouragement to Catholic educators, the institutional Church, and its members to understand other faith traditions and to dialogue with those who follow them. Particularly in the United States, our religiously diverse culture calls for Catholic education to be concerned not only with what students can learn not only about the rich heritage of the Catholic Church, but also about relating to those from other faith traditions in ways that are inclusive and hospitable. Helping students dialogue with people of various faith traditions and visiting their places of worship are good starting points. Most importantly, educators must help students open their minds and hearts to people of different religious backgrounds, demonstrating genuine concern for others. As part of supporting students' education and facilitating encounters with people of diverse religions, educators must model for students how to draw people of other religious traditions together in fellowship and interfaith collaboration. Finally, educators must empower students to take active roles in upholding the dignity all human beings possess, especially when that dignity is threatened in our churches and in our society. Guided by *Nostra Aetate* and encouraged by the progress made within the Church since Vatican II in promoting interfaith dialogue, Catholic educators have a marvelous opportunity to help students develop understanding and communication skills offering the potential to contribute to a more just and peaceful world. Such religious literacy is key to achieving the "one community" described in *Nostra Aetate*.

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