

## "Nostra Aetate", the Vatican II document provided 'dramatic reversal' on church's views of Islam

Jesuit examines history, impact of 'Nostra Aetate'



Despite its brevity, "Nostra Aetate" marks a starting point for dialogue among Christians, Muslims and Jews that must be continued into the future, according to speakers at Jesuit-run and New York-based Fordham University.

"Nostra Aetate" ("In Our Time"), the Second Vatican Council's declaration on the Catholic church's relations with non-Christian religions, was the shortest of 16 documents promulgated by Blessed Paul VI in 1965.

Jesuit Father Patrick J. Ryan examined its history and impact in the annual fall McGinley lecture he delivered Nov 11. Father Ryan is the Laurence J. McGinley professor of religion and society at Fordham.

Father Ryan said "Nostra Aetate" was intended as a statement on the Catholic church's relation to Jews, but ultimately included "a relatively brief passage about Muslims and a vaguer paragraph about Hindus and Buddhists and the adherents of other religious traditions."

St. John XXIII, who convened the council in 1962, was inspired and encouraged by French Jewish historian Jules Isaac, whose family perished in Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration camp in Poland. Isaac asked the pope in 1960 to issue an authoritative rejection of Christian and Catholic anti-Semitic thought, Father Ryan said.

To shape the statement, Isaac collaborated with Cardinal Augustin Bea, a German Jesuit, and what was then the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, established in June 1960.

Father Ryan said "Nostra Aetate" is a theological document written for Catholics by people who understood it would be examined by Jews "to see how it treats them and their faith." It echoes another Vatican II document, "Lumen Gentium," the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, which recognized the historical understanding of the "unique priority of the Jews" over Gentiles in faith.

"Nostra Aetate" considers Islam a post-Jewish, post-Christian phenomenon that does not have the same organic relationship to Christianity that Judaism does, Father Ryan said. Nonetheless, the relationship among the three is genuine, long-standing, not always peaceful, not always hostile and includes some of the same "ancestors in faith, even if their understandings of those ancestors may sometimes differ," he said.

The seemingly bland statement in "Nostra Aetate" that "the church regards with esteem also the Muslims" is a dramatic reversal from earlier prayers that considered Islam a religion of idolatry, Father Ryan said.

Despite many differences, the common expectation of Christians and Muslims for the rising of the dead on a day of judgment "serves as a link between Christian and Islamic teaching," he said.

There is a long history of tension between Christians and Muslims. It has sometimes involved Jews, especially since the creation of the State of Israel, Father Ryan said. There are also examples of places where Muslims and Christians have lived together for a long time.

"Nostra Aetate," "especially its section on the faith of Muslims, marks a starting point for the process of dialogue between Christians and Muslims — perhaps even among Jews, Christians and Muslims — that must be continued today and tomorrow for the sake of humankind and for the glory of God," he concluded.

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