

# Rejecting Hatred:

**Fifty Years of Catholic Dialogue with  
Jews and Muslims since *Nostra Aetate***

**The Reverend Patrick J. Ryan, S.J.**

Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society  
Fordham University

RESPONDENTS

**Professor Magda Teter, Ph.D.**

Shvidler Chair in Judaic Studies, Fordham University

**Professor Hussein Rashid, Ph.D.**

Hofstra University, Hempstead, N.Y.

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# Rejecting Hatred:

## **Fifty Years of Catholic Dialogue with Jews and Muslims since *Nostra Aetate***

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A cousin of my father, a big Irishman named Tom Ryan, was ordained a priest in Rome in 1938. After his ordination he studied there for some years and made a mark for himself as one proficient not only in Latin and canon law but also in Italian. Working for the Secretariat of State, which supervises the papal diplomatic corps, Tom was eventually assigned in 1943 to Istanbul to become Secretary to the Apostolic Delegate to the Catholic bishops in Greece and Turkey. Monsignor Ryan, as he was by that time, worked very well with the Italian Apostolic Delegate, Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, better known in later life as Pope John XXIII. Roncalli liked Tom and wrote home to his family in Italy in 1943 that his new Irish secretary “comes from good farming stock like ourselves” and also “speaks Italian just like us.”<sup>1</sup>

Ryan worked for Roncalli from July 1943 to late November 1944, even teaching him some English, until Ryan was eventually transferred to Cairo and Roncalli shortly afterwards to newly liberated France, where he became the Papal Nuncio and dean of the diplomatic corps.<sup>2</sup> Bishop Ryan, as he later became, looked back on those months in Istanbul with some nostalgia. Neither Muslim nor Christian clergy were allowed to wear clerical dress in Turkey at that time. Tom—quite tall, red-faced and burly—found it hard it to look unobtrusive as he walked the streets of Istanbul in an open-collared white shirt and a baggy black suit. But it was thus outfitted that Tom Ryan carried secret messages from embassy to embassy—British, American, Russian, German—on behalf of Roncalli. The papacy was trying in 1943-1944 to negotiate a conditional surrender that would bring World War II to an end. Roncalli was the pope's point man for this project, and Tom Ryan the courier. Nothing came of their efforts.

During his years in Istanbul (1935-44) and earlier at Sofia in Bulgaria (1925-35), Roncalli had shown great compassion for the Jews of southeastern Europe in the era of the *Shoah*, supplying Jewish refugees with travel documents. In particular, he collaborated actively with the Jewish Agency for Palestine to enable a considerable number of Jews from the Balkans to migrate to British-mandated Palestine. Several sources later estimated that as many as 24,000 Jews escaped Nazi-occupied Europe because of Roncalli's interventions.<sup>3</sup>

I start with this historical prelude because Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli began a revolution in Catholic theological thought, a revolution that only came to fruition more than two years after his death on June 3, 1963. On October 28, 1965, just over fifty years ago and exactly seven years from the date on which Roncalli had been elected pope, the Decree on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, known by its opening words in Latin, *Nostra aetate*, was ratified by the vast majority of the fathers of the Vatican Council, 2221 to 88, and promulgated by Pope Paul VI. The completed document—1152 words in Latin, the shortest of the sixteen

documents issued by the Second Vatican Council—started off originally as a statement on the Catholic Church’s relation to Jews, but eventually came to include a relatively brief passage about Muslims and a vaguer paragraph about Hindus and Buddhists and the adherents of other religious traditions.

In some ways, it could even be said that *Nostra aetate* was written backwards, or at least edited backwards. The long paragraph on the Jews, the reason anything at all was written about non-Christians at the council, was begun first and redacted last. As *Nostra aetate* was finally published, what had originally started out in 1961 as the proposed “Decree on the Jews” composed by Augustin Cardinal Bea, S.J., appeared as section 4 of *Nostra aetate*, reduced by then to 433 words. Section 3 about Islam was 300 words shorter; between them those two sections constituted half of *Nostra aetate*. In this lecture I will comment only on the longer section on Jews and the shorter section on Muslims. Each section deserves careful analysis; each has a pre-history as well as a post-history with which we are living to the present day.

There were at least seven drafts of the Decree on the Jews (*Decretum de Iudaeis*) and its broader expansion that included passages about other faith traditions, all of them composed between 1962 and 1965.<sup>4</sup> It would exhaust both you and me to parse the drafts one after another. I would like to dwell first, and at greater length, on the finally approved section of *Nostra aetate* on Jews, to analyze what it says and what it doesn’t say and its contemporary relevance. Later I will attempt to do the same with the shorter section on Muslims, also analyzing what it says and doesn’t say and its contemporary relevance. I am hoping that PowerPoint will make it easier for you to follow this commentary, aware, however, of the warning I recently heard attributed to Professor Martin Marty of the University of Chicago: “Power corrupts; PowerPoint corrupts absolutely.”

## I. ENDING CHRISTIAN HATRED OF JEWS

On June 13, 1960, more than a year after he had announced the convocation of the Second Vatican Council for 1962, Pope John received in private audience a famous French Jew, the historian Jules Isaac, a man who had lost his wife and much of his family at Auschwitz. The author of *Jesus and Israel*, a book first published in French in 1959,<sup>5</sup> Isaac presented the pope with a dossier on elements of Christian and especially Catholic anti-Semitic thought that needed authoritative rejection. Isaac, speaking with Pope John in French, asked the pope if he could hold out any hope for something to be done at the council about the contents of this dossier: “*Vous avez droit à plus que de l’espoir,*” — “You have a right to much more than hope,” John responded.<sup>6</sup> Pope John then asked Isaac to make contact with Cardinal Bea and share his dossier with him and the newly created Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity. Isaac remained a consultant to Bea and his secretariat over the next three years. The finally approved section of *Nostra aetate* owes much of its final shape to the collaborative work of Isaac and Bea.

Let me begin with the first of six divisions I have made of section 4:

*As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham’s stock. Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, 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.*

I would like to make only two points about this passage, much of it redolent of New Testament imagery. *Nostra aetate* is a document written for Christians, especially for Catholics, and a theological document at that. It is not written for Jews, much less a general audience, but the authors and signatories also knew that Jews, especially, would peruse this section to see how it treats them and their faith. It is also a compromise document, the results of the work of many committees, subcommittees, and joint committees. Recall the description of a camel as a horse designed by a committee.

The first sentence links this section in a unique way to one of the two most important documents issued by the Second Vatican Council, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*) which had been completed just under a year earlier on November 21, 1964. That central document of the council, relying principally on the scriptural image of the Church as the People of God, tried to move Catholics away from a purely individualistic sense of what it means to be a Christian, a temptation that is peculiarly modern. Robert Bellah and his co-authors in the 1985 work *Habits of the Heart* remind us of the woman whom they interviewed named Sheila Larson whose faith she herself described as “Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.”<sup>7</sup> That is not the self-understanding of any corporate faith, and especially the faith of Israel and the faith of the Church. In the words of *Lumen gentium*, “God . . . does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness” (LG 9). At this point in *Lumen gentium*, the Church recognizes the unique priority of the Jews who belong quite literally to the People of God by their descent from Abraham: “He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto Himself. With it He set up a covenant. Step by step He taught and prepared this

people, making known in its history both Himself and the decree of His will and making it holy unto Himself” (LG 9).

*Nostra aetate* follows *Lumen gentium* by emphasizing that “the Church of Christ acknowledges that . . . the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets.” Jews might interpret this as Christian appropriation of their own faith tradition—something that has been going on for a long time—but what the passage really signifies is a rejection of any lurking Christian temptation to Marcionism, the thought of the second-century heretic Marcion who rejected everything that was Jewish in the Christian tradition, claiming that the God worshiped by Jews was not the God and Father of Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> The temptation to Marcionism has arisen in many periods in Church history, most notably in the anti-Semitic theories of Alfred Rosenberg, the first major creator of National Socialist ideology, a man who recognized the affinity between his own thought and that of Marcion.<sup>9</sup> The temptation to Marcionism continues to the present day incognito, without much thought being given to the unthinking generalization uttered by all too many Christians who contrast what they call the harsh and judgmental God of the Old Testament with what they call the merciful and loving God of the New Testament.

Let me continue with the next portion of section 4 of *Nostra aetate*:

*The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: “theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:4-5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church’s main-stay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ’s Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.*

“The Apostle” used as a title in this way refers to Saint Paul, the only person called an apostle who was not, in actual fact, one of the twelve apostles commissioned by Jesus in his lifetime (Mk 3:13-19 and

parallels).<sup>10</sup> *Nostra aetate* quotes from Paul a portion of a famous panegyric on the Jewish people written to the mixed Jewish-Christian and Gentile-Christian community in Rome around 56 or 57 CE, a community that Paul had not yet visited but which he planned to visit in the near future.<sup>11</sup> Word may have reached these Roman Christians, and especially the Jewish-Christians there, that Paul had admitted Gentiles into the Christian community in Galatia without these Gentiles first adhering to the halachic regulations of Judaism, especially male circumcision and the dietary laws. That was a controversial issue in first-century Jewish-Christian circles, and so Paul elaborated throughout his letter to the Roman Christian community his theology of the equal need of both Christian communities, Jewish-Christian and Gentile-Christian, to acknowledge the free gift or grace that was their shared faith in God, a grace imparted to them in Jesus by the Spirit.

Paul called on the mixed Roman community to recognize as well the fact that the Jews hold a unique priority over Gentiles in faith, because to them first belonged “the sonship” that was Israel’s unique adoptive relationship to God, “the glory” of God’s presence in their midst, “the covenants” given to Abraham, Moses and David, “the law and the worship” outlined for them in the Torah and “the promises” of messianic deliverance from their enemies. Theirs, Paul wrote, are “the fathers,” the whole genealogy of Jesus descended from Abraham or even from Adam as detailed in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Finally, for Paul, the acme of the faith experience of Jewish-Christians is attained in the fulfillment of messianic expectations in Jesus, “the Christ according to the flesh.” Not only was Jesus Jewish but so were his mother, his apostles, and most of the early disciples. This passage in section 4 borrows a great deal of its emphases on the Jewish origins of Christianity from the already cited 1959 book of Jules Isaac, *Jesus and Israel*.<sup>12</sup>

Let me continue with more words from section 4 of *Nostra aetate*:

*As Holy Scripture testifies, Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation, nor did the Jews in large number accept the Gospel; indeed not a few opposed its spreading. Nevertheless, God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues—such is the witness of the Apostle. In company with the Prophets and the same Apostle, the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and “serve him shoulder to shoulder” (Zeph 3:9).*

Once again it is important to emphasize that this is a theological document written for Christians, not a document meant for Jews, none of whom would be able to agree that Jerusalem in the early first century “did not recognize the time of her visitation” with the coming of Jesus. Jerusalem and the whole of Roman Palestine were much afflicted in that general era with multiple claimants to prophetic or messianic status. Even Luke’s Acts of the Apostles places words in the mouth of the teacher Gamaliel mentioning two of these revolutionary claimants: Judas the Galilean, who started a revolt against a Roman census in the year 6 CE, and Theudas, another anti-Roman “prophet” who led his followers in an attempt to cross the Jordan dry-shod in the middle forties of the same century. The last-named prophetic venture was undertaken nearly a decade after these words in the Acts of the Apostles supposedly uttered by Gamaliel.<sup>13</sup> In this portion of *Nostra aetate*, what is recognized is the simple fact that most Jews in the first century neither accepted the teaching of Jesus nor the teaching of his disciples. They also did not accept the teaching of figures like Judas the Galilean and Theudas.

“Nevertheless,” the document insists, using words of Paul in the Epistle to the Romans, the Jews remain God’s Chosen People: “God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of their Fathers; He does not repent of the gifts He makes or of the calls He issues.” These may be the most important words about Jews in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, a rejection of centuries of anti-Jewish teaching that persisted despite the words of Paul to which this passage refers: “As regards the gospel they are enemies of

God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:28-29). Note how the first clause of these words of Paul (“As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake”) drops out in the way it is quoted in *Nostra aetate*. Paul aimed that first clause at the largely Jewish-Christian community in first-century Rome who possibly felt themselves excluded from the larger Roman Jewish community because of their adherence to Jesus, a situation unique to that time and place. That clause can be ignored as unimportant in our contemporary context. The second clause in Paul’s original sentence, however, has much more relevance in modern times because of the emphasis it places on the continuing love of God for the Jews: “[B]ut as regards election [the Jews] are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” Nineteen centuries of Gentile-Christian hatred of the Jews as enemies of Jesus, himself a Jew, are here clearly renounced. Instead of promoting a mission to convert Jews, something not unknown in Catholic history even as recently as the 19th century,<sup>14</sup> the Church from the time of Vatican II takes a different attitude towards Jews, looking forward to “that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice.”

Although some recent Catholic theologians have interpreted passages like this to mean that the Catholic Church has renounced the suitability of Jews converting to Catholicism, it would be truer to say that the Church offers its message about Jesus to all of humankind, not excluding Jews, but with due deference paid to the fact that the covenants offered by God to Abraham and his descendants have lost none of their import for Jews.<sup>15</sup> In this context *Nostra aetate* quotes not a New Testament passage but the words of the prophet Zephaniah who looked forward to a day when even Gentiles would “serve [God] shoulder to shoulder” with the people of Israel, as the Vulgate of the text puts it, or “serve him with one accord,” as both the Jewish Publication Society translation and the New Revised Standard Version render the phrase.<sup>16</sup>

Let me return again to section 4 of *Nostra aetate*:

*Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.*

Cardinal Bea was a scholar of the Scriptures, Jewish and Christian. As a scholar Bea had helped Pope Pius XII to craft the Encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* in 1943, a key teaching document that released Catholic scholars from the restrictions once imposed by the papacy on their work a few decades earlier during the pontificates of Leo XIII and Pius X.<sup>17</sup> In this 1943 encyclical Pope Pius XII recognized not only the need to make translations of the Scriptures from the original languages of the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament (rather than from the Latin Vulgate version), but also the need to recognize that historical-critical study must be made of specific biblical texts. Many of these texts are only intelligible in earlier historical contexts or as exemplifications of one or another literary convention.<sup>18</sup>

Affected by such sound scholarship and producing such scholarship themselves, Augustin Bea and his fellow Jesuits at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome as well as other Catholic scholars like the Dominicans of the *École Biblique* in Jerusalem had begun, even before 1943, to change the understanding of the Scriptures in the whole Catholic world. Understanding the writings of the New Testament as materials emanating from one of several first-century and early second-century Jewish-Christian settings—Aramaic-speaking Galilee and Judea, for instance, or Greek-speaking Egypt and the eastern Mediterranean—helped to illuminate not only the meaning of those New Testament texts but also the varieties of Judaism that could be found in those locales at the time of Jesus and his first followers. The stress in *Nostra aetate* on “the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews” began with the recognition by biblical scholars and historians of the earliest Christian centuries that

varieties of Judaism and of Christianity mutually enriched each other's histories.

Let me return again to section 4 of *Nostra aetate*:

*True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.*

The council finally compromised on the desire of many, Jewish and Christian, that the Church should renounce the historical charge of “deicide” leveled against the Jews in times past, in many instances an excuse for anti-Jewish pogroms of fearsome proportions. Caught between the desire to erase this heinous accusation against the Jews from Christian and especially Catholic memory and the felt need to recognize the basic historicity of the Gospel accounts of the passion and death of Jesus, *Nostra aetate* asserts that what happened to Jesus in Roman-dominated Jerusalem towards the end of the third decade of the first century cannot be blamed on Jews as a whole. What some “Jewish authorities” may have done—only with the permission and enabling force of the Roman colonial government—did not imply that all Jews in Jerusalem at that time nor any Jews at other times, as the council fathers deliberately emphasize, bore responsibility for what happened to Jesus.

It is important to keep in mind that Jesus found himself caught up in a historical matrix created by the unpopular Roman colonial administration in Jerusalem, headed by the notoriously anti-Jewish Pontius Pilate, a political protégé of the even more anti-Jewish Sejanus, the *de facto* ruler of the Roman Empire during the years of Tiberius

Caesar's decline. Whatever partial sympathy some of the Gospel writers in the late first century seem to manifest for Pontius Pilate as a literary character, that partial literary rehabilitation of Pilate says more about the situation of the Gospel writers and their communities after Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The historical Pontius Pilate had wreaked havoc on the Jewish community in Jerusalem for a full ten years (26-36 CE) before his recall to headquarters in apparent disgrace after a bloody confrontation with the Samaritans at Mount Gerizim in 36 CE.<sup>20</sup>

The Gospels were only reduced to writing at various locales in the Roman Empire in the last decades of the first century. The Jewishness of Jesus, his disciples and all of the New Testament authors, except possibly Luke, needs more emphasis today if we are to understand those four Gospels and the variants in the history of Jesus they narrate. The disciples of Jesus were neither "convert Jews" nor "former Jews." They remained Jews who had adhered to a teacher and wonderworker whom they knew and followed as disciples in the last few years of his lifetime, a teacher and wonderworker whom they did not entirely understand while he was alive but whom they finally and firmly experienced after his execution by the Roman authorities as uniquely one with God, risen from the dead and working in their midst through what they called the outpouring of God's Spirit.

Let me return once again to *Nostra aetate* and its concluding words on the Jews:

*Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone. Besides, as the Church has always held and holds now, Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation. It is, therefore, the burden of the Church's*

*preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's all-embracing love and as the fountain from which every grace flows.*

The final session of the Second Vatican Council took place just after the 20th-anniversary of the conclusion of World War II, 20 years after the post-war revelation of the full extent of the genocide directed against Jews by the Nazis. Another 50 years have passed since Vatican II, and in those 50 years other notable genocides have occurred in a world that seems to have learned nothing from the history of the *Shoah*, just as the generation that experienced the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews had learned nothing from the history of the Armenian genocide of 1915.<sup>21</sup>

Even if the official Church was often silent in the face of the crimes of the Nazi era, the Church at Vatican II pledged itself to join with Jews in rejecting “persecution against any man.” A somewhat weak word is used in Latin—*deplorat* (“decries”)—for the Church’s rejection of “hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.” The Church is said to do this decriing “moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love.” Neither the word “Israel” nor, *a fortiori*, the State of Israel is mentioned in *Nostra aetate*, even though the State of Israel had been in existence for 17 years by 1965. The Bishops from the Christian Churches of the Middle East in union with Rome, participants at the council, feared that their situation would worsen if Israel were to be mentioned. It was not until the papacy of John Paul II that the Holy See and the State of Israel established diplomatic relations with each other, just as it was only earlier this year that Pope Francis extended diplomatic recognition to the State of Palestine. Is there some hope we can discern in these developments, where the Church follows Egypt and Jordan in recognizing Israel, but still precedes Israel and the United States in recognizing Palestine? I do not know the answer to this question.

The most theological note in section 4 of *Nostra aetate* comes at the end: “Christ underwent His passion and death freely, because of the sins of men and out of infinite love, in order that all may reach salvation.” Even

if in the historical concrete, some Jewish authorities in first-century Jerusalem may have enlisted the cooperation of their Roman overlords in bringing about the public execution of Jesus, the guilty party is much larger: all of us. Whoever has rejected love and embraced hatred for a fellow human being has crucified Jesus. He is crucified again and again in every crime against humanity. The flesh and blood Jesus shared with his Jewish contemporaries in Roman Galilee and Judea he also shared with the victims of the *Shoah* in a unique fashion. But he also shares his suffering and death with every victim of racial and religious hatred down to the present day.

## II.

### ENDING THE CHRISTIAN HATRED OF MUSLIMS

The 133 words in the section on Muslims in *Nostra aetate*, dwarfed as they are by the 433 words on Jews, would probably have been much longer if the Second Vatican Council had happened 40 or 50 years later than it did. The fact that there is any passage at all about Islam in *Nostra aetate* has much to do with another Frenchman, not unlike Jules Isaac, who was to exercise considerable influence on what eventually emerged as section 3 of *Nostra aetate*, the Catholic scholar of Islam, Louis Massignon. His influence, however, was much more indirect because he died in Paris during the first session of Vatican II on October 31, 1962.

Massignon, an insouciant Catholic as he grew to adulthood, had undergone a psychological and spiritual revolution while doing research in Ottoman Iraq in 1908, when he fell ill with what was probably cerebral malaria. In the throes of that illness he felt that “interceding witnesses” had brought him back into the presence of “the Stranger” who was God. He enumerated the names of five of those “interceding witnesses,” three of them still living in 1908, but one of them dead for almost a millennium: the Muslim mystic and martyr of Baghdad, Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, whose memory and literary remains Massignon had dedicated himself to research. Hallaj had offered up his own suffering and death in 10th-

century Baghdad as one of the “intercessors” (*abdal*, plural of *badal*) for the Islamic community throughout the world, a community he had hoped to rescue from the clutches of mean-spirited legalists and corrupting political and mercantile classes, all of whom had grown to hate the free-spirited Hallaj.<sup>22</sup> Massignon always insisted in later years that it was this Muslim martyr and mystic who had interceded for him before the Divine Majesty, and who had helped to bring him back to his faith as a Catholic.

Later in his life, Massignon asked Pope Pius XI to bless a project he himself had initiated along with some other Christian friends from the Middle East and from Paris, a league of Christians and Muslims—a *badaliyya*—who would promise to pray for each other as *abdal*, substitutes or intercessors, not for the conversion of one to the faith of the other, but simply that each would come closer to God. Pope Pius XI, possibly a bit nonplussed by Massignon, seems to have given his blessing to this project of the man to whom he referred, somewhat jokingly, as a “Catholic Muslim.”<sup>23</sup> Even if Massignon himself was not able to participate as a *peritus* or specialist in the deliberations of the Second Vatican Council, one younger scholar much influenced by his work did so, the Egyptian Dominican Georges Anawati (1905-94). It was Anawati who translated, when it was complete, the short section on Islam into Arabic for the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity to see how it would be heard and understood in the Muslim world.

Like section 4 on Jews, section 3 of *Nostra aetate* on Muslims needs to be parsed carefully. Note, moreover, that the section on Muslims precedes the section on Jews in *Nostra aetate*. Much as there are many linkages between the faith tradition of Muslims and the faith traditions of Jews and Christians, Islam as a post-Jewish, post-Christian phenomenon—at least to the eye of the non-Muslim—does not have the same organic relationship to Christianity that Judaism does. On the other hand, the relationship of Islam to both Judaism and Christianity is genuine and very different from the relationship of the faith traditions of Hindus and Buddhists to Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Jews, Christians, and

Muslims have lived with each other for a long time, not always peacefully, but not always in a state of hostility either. They venerate some of the same ancestors in faith, even if their understandings of those ancestors may sometimes differ.

Let me begin now with commentary on smaller segments of section 3 of *Nostra aetate*.

*The Church regards with esteem also the Muslims.*

That may seem a bit bland for a starter, but we have come a long way from earlier Church pronouncements on Islam. To give you an idea of how different it is, let me quote a prayer that was used on every Feast of Christ the King from the time of the institution of that feast in 1925 by Pope Pius XI. The prayer, having in mind various secularizing forces at work, especially in Europe, consecrated the whole of the human race to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is a not untypically long-winded prayer, the sort of thing that a Vatican committee produces, ignoring the words of Jesus who urged us, in the Sermon on the Mount, “When you are praying, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard because of their many words” (Mt 6:7). I am only interested in this context in one short passage from that lengthy prayer:

Be Thou King of all those who are still involved in the darkness of idolatry or of Islamism, and refuse not to draw them all into the light and kingdom of God. Turn Thine eyes of mercy towards the children of that race, once Thy Chosen People. Of old they called down upon themselves the blood of the Savior; may it now descend upon them [as] a laver of redemption and of life.<sup>24</sup>

Today, I, at least, am embarrassed to read that prayer aloud in the presence of any Jew or any Muslim. Note how it lumps together “the darkness of idolatry or of Islamism,” a passage that sounds suspiciously like the medieval canard that Muslims worshipped an idol named Mahound. Then there is the use of the word “Islamism” for Islam, a term that in recent years has been used to denote the interpretation of Islam dominant

in Saudi Arabia or among the Salafis of contemporary Egypt. The term is too loosely used today, and it is sometimes hard to figure out what non-Muslims mean by it, other than to say it is a version of Islam that they don't like, if they can be said to like any form of Islam at all. Even so bland a phrase as "regards with esteem" can be seen as a dramatic reversal from that prayer created only 40 years earlier asking God to illuminate the minds of those "still involved in the darkness of idolatry or of Islamism."

In *Nostra aetate* the teaching of the Church has gone a little beyond the text of the Vatican II Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*. That master document of the council declared that "the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind" (LG 16). The Latin original of that text uses the accusative plural of the Latin neologism *Musulmanos*, which derives from French, Spanish and Italian words for Muslims. A year later, a new plural is developed in Latin, directly derived from Arabic: *Muslimos*. This is a small matter, but symbolically significant, possibly suggesting the participation of Arabic-speaking Christians like Father Anawati in the drafting of this section.

The next sentence of section 3 is complicated:

*They [the Muslims] adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees, just as Abraham, with whom the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself, submitted to God.*

That sentence reflects closely themes in the Qur'an, especially some of the key names of God so central to the Muslim tradition: God as One, Living, Subsisting in Himself, Merciful, All-Powerful, Creator of heaven and earth, Speaker to humankind. Note also how that sentence recognizes the centrality of Abraham to the faith of Muslims. The text hedges its bets a

little, as did *Lumen gentium*, saying that “the faith of Islam takes pleasure in linking itself” to Abraham (*ad quem fides islamica libenter sese refert*). The fathers of the council were not quite ready to say that the Quranic version of Abraham is the same as the Biblical versions of Abraham in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In any case, both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament have several versions of Abraham. In other contexts I have examined more systematically the difference between Hebrew Bible, New Testament and Quranic portrayals of Abraham, but that will take us in a direction that would make this lecture far too long.<sup>25</sup> Very nicely, however, the conciliar text says that “Abraham . . . submitted to God,” a phrase which means, when translated into Arabic, that Abraham practiced *islam* in its root sense, the submission of oneself to God.

Let me continue with the next portion of section 3 of *Nostra aetate*:

*Though [Muslims] do not acknowledge Jesus as God, they revere Him as a prophet. They also honor Mary, His virgin Mother; at times they even call on her with devotion. In addition, they await the day of judgment when God will render their deserts to all those who have been raised up from the dead. Finally, they value the moral life and worship God especially through prayer, almsgiving and fasting.*

The conciliar text distinguishes the portrayals of Jesus and Mary in the Qur’an from the accounts of them in the New Testament. It is important to note the caveat implied there. The Quranic Jesus is a great prophet, but in no sense the Son of God, even though his birth from the Virgin Mary is insisted upon even more specifically than in the New Testament. But it is considered a miracle associated with the birth of the prophet Jesus, not a sign of the Incarnation, the Christian doctrine of the enfleshment of God in Jesus of Nazareth.

The eschatology of Muslims occupies the attention of the next sentence, specifying that Muslims “await the day of judgment,” the rising of the dead both to bliss and damnation. Once again, this hope for divine vindication at the end of history serves as a link between Christian and Islamic

teaching. Not mentioned in the text of the council document is that Jesus is thought by Muslims not to have died on the cross and his return is expected before the end of history as part of Muslims' expectations for the end of time. This is another fascinating topic, but it would have to be treated in another forum.

The next sentence of *Nostra aetate* directs our attention to what Muslims call the five pillars (*arkan*) of their faith: (1) testifying to the oneness of God and the messenger-status of Muhammad; (2) the ritual practice of the five-times daily worship (*salat*); (3) payment of a precisely determined alms-tax (*zakat*) that is not the same thing as free-will charity; (4) fasting (*sawm*) annually for a lunar month, usually the month of Ramadan, but lost days in that month can be made up at other times; (5) the pilgrimage (*hajj*) to the holy places in Arabia associated with Abraham (not just Mecca), an obligation for the individual Muslim that is qualified for those unable to afford it or those impeded by other circumstances from undertaking that sacred journey.

Let me return now to the last words about the faith of Muslims in *Nostra aetate*:

*Since in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Muslims, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.*

Finally, and very realistically, the council fathers recognized the long history of tension between Christians and Muslims that dates back to the seventh century, but reached a climax in the era of the Crusades, a climax that is (alas!) only rivaled decades after the Second Vatican Council by the tensions in the post-9/11 world. Let the final words of the council fathers on Islam provide us with food for thought. In many instances the tensions between Muslims and Christians have also involved Jews, especially since the creation of the State of Israel. But there are also other places in the

world where Muslims and Christians have lived together for a long time: Syria, Lebanon, Pakistan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Nigeria. Terrible tensions have arisen in recent decades in those countries as well. *Nostra aetate*, brief as it is, and especially its section of 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.

### CONCLUDING REFLECTION

I grew up here in New York City in the Borough of Queens, a borough now deemed the most ethnically and religiously diverse in the city, and, in fact, in the whole United States. I knew from grade school history that many of the forefathers and foremothers of this country were Protestants—curious people who wore bonnets, shot turkeys with blunderbusses and submitted malefactors to disgrace in dunking chairs or public stocks. None of those people lived in Queens, as far as I could tell, and if any of their descendants did, they didn't live on our block in Woodside—or they kept a low profile. Everyone on our block was either Catholic or Jewish. Later in my life I studied theology, where I read Martin Luther, John Calvin, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich. After that, I went to Harvard as a graduate student, where I met people who actually enthused about the writings of Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards. My horizons were broadened.

Before I studied theology as a young Jesuit, and while I was still involved in that study in preparation for ordination, I spent time in Muslim or mixed Muslim and Christian areas of West Africa. Finally, I have actually lived in Muslim and Christian West Africa for 26 years. Living with these Muslims and Christians in Africa became just as familiar as living with Catholics and Jews in Woodside years ago. I think of the words of Thomas Stearns Eliot in the last of his *Four Quartets*, “Little Gidding.”

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

*Nostra aetate*, short as it is, was an exploration for the Catholic Church, as Muslim and Christian West Africa was an exploration for me. Those experiences I had and that conciliar text in particular extended my neighborhood to include a larger and larger world. I hope this evening will help you as well “to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time.”

## NOTES

- 1 See Giovanni XXIII, *Lettere ai familiari*, ed. Loris Capovilla (Roma: Storie e Letteratura, 1968), I: 629-30, as quoted in Peter Hebblethwaite, *Pope John XXIII: Shepherd of the Modern World* (Garden City, NY: Image Books/ Doubleday & Company, 1987, original edition 1984), 189. Henceforth this book will be cited as Hebblethwaite.
- 2 See Massimo Faggioli, *John XXIII: The Medicine of Mercy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 80.
- 3 Hebblethwaite, 186-87.
- 4 See Annarita Capponera, “Papers of the Secretariat for Christian Unity on *Nostra Aetate*,” in *Nostra Aetate: Origins, Promulgation, Impact on Jewish-Catholic Relations*, ed. Neville Lamdan and Albert Melloni (Berlin: LIT VERLAG, 2007), 56-62. Henceforth this work will be cited as Lamdan and Melloni.
- 5 See Jules Isaac, *Jesus and Israel*, tr. Sally Gran, ed. Clare Huchet Bishop (New York/ Chicago/San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971). Henceforth this work will be cited as Isaac.
- 6 For these details on Jules Isaac and his intervention as well as the words Isaac heard from John XXIII, see Marco Morselli, “Jules Isaac and the Origins of *Nostra Aetate*,” in Lamdan and Melloni, 26.
- 7 Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1996), 221.
- 8 On Marcion and Marcionism, see W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 212-18.
- 9 See Alfred Rosenberg, *The Myth of the Twentieth Century: An Evaluation of the Spiritual-Intellectual Confrontations of Our Age*, tr. Vivian Bird (Newport Beach, CA: The Noontide Press, 1982), 38: “Around the year 150, Marcion, who was a Greek, once again represented the Nordic idea of a world order based on organic tension and hierarchical structure. This was in direct contrast to the Semitic conception of a capricious God who exercised a boundless despotism. Marcion therefore rejected the Old Testament as the ‘Book of Laws’ of so false a deity. Similar efforts were made by a few of the Gnostics. But Rome, now racially polluted beyond redemption, was utterly committed to Africa and Syria, and smothered the simple essence of Jesus with the accretions of late Roman goals of world empire and ecumenical church.”
- 10 Paul claimed to be an apostle, one sent out to found communities of faith in Jesus, even when the Jerusalem leadership of the earliest Church—James, Peter, and John—questioned his claim. He did not abide easily with their critique: “I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles” (2 Cor 11:5). The Church in later times made up for the neglect of Paul among its original apostles by simply designating Paul “the Apostle.”

- 11 On the religious and ethnic composition of the Christian community in Rome to whom Paul was writing, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *Romans: A New Translation and Commentary*. The Anchor Bible, 33. (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 32-34.
- 12 There are 21 Propositions in Isaac's work plus 18 suggestions made at the end for "the rectification necessary in Christian teaching" (Isaac, 401).
- 13 See Acts 5: 35-37. Luke, like some earnest students I have taught, understood the basic notion that there were various messianic uprisings in the first century, but he did not have a command of all the factual details. On this subject, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Acts of the Apostles: a new translation with introduction and commentary*. The Anchor Bible, 31. (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 333-34.
- 14 Two French Jewish brothers from Alsace, Théodore Ratisbonne (1802-84) and eventually his brother, Alphonse Ratisbonne (1812-84), converted to Catholicism in the first half of the 19th century, were ordained priests and were instrumental in founding in 1843 the Congregation of Notre Dame de Sion for women, a group whose original mission was the conversion of Jews to Catholicism. The two brothers subsequently founded in 1852 a congregation of priests, the Fathers of Sion, with the same orientation. In the Nazi era both congregations changed dramatically, renouncing any attempts at converting Jews. To the present day they promote Jewish-Catholic amity from their base at the Convent of the *Ecce Homo* in the old city of Jerusalem. See Marie Joseph Stiassny, "Ratisbonne Brothers," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 17: 111-12.
- 15 See the discussion in American Catholic theological circles that arose in 2002 after the publication of the papers entitled "Reflections on Covenant and Mission" by two committees, respectively Catholic and Jewish, each of which had participated in the Consultation of the National Council of Synagogues and delegates of the (U.S. Catholic) Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. Among other things the Catholic committee had reached the highly controversial conclusion that "a deepening Catholic appreciation of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people, together with a recognition of a divinely given mission to Jews to witness God's faithful love, lead to the conclusion that campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable." The unfortunate imagery involved in targeting Jews for conversion suggests some of the more typically Evangelical Protestant approaches to Jews, a style of evangelization no longer found among Catholics. Past campaigns by Catholics to promote or even enforce Jewish conversion to Catholicism, as in 16th-century Rome and post-*Reconquista* Spain, have scarred not only the memories of Jews, first and foremost, but also Catholics with a chastened sense for what was iniquitous in the past history of the Church. For important articles related to these Catholic and Jewish documents of 2002, see Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., "Covenant and Mission" and the response, "Theology's Sacred Obligation," written by three other American Catholic theologians, Philip A. Cunningham, Mary C. Boys, S.N.J.M, and John T. Pawlikowski, O.S.M. These articles all

- appeared in the same issue of *America: The National Catholic Review*, 187:12 (October 21, 2002), 8-16.
- 16 A footnote also refers to similar eschatological passages in Third Isaiah (Is 66:23) and Psalm 65:4, as well as Paul's longer exposition of this theme in Romans 11:11-32.
  - 17 See Jerome-Michael Vereb, C.P., "*Because He Was a German!*": *Cardinal Bea and the Origins of Roman Catholic Engagement in the Ecumenical Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 123.
  - 18 To give very simple examples, the Book of Jonah in the Hebrew Bible is not be understood as a historical account of what happened to a reluctant Jewish prophet who became a man overboard, but rather as a parable about God's mercy shown even to the most hated enemies of ancient Israel, the people of Nineveh. In the New Testament, the Magi or astrologers who came from the east to venerate the newborn king of the Jews tells us less about ancient international stargazing and more about Matthew's desire to reconcile Jewish-Christians to the advent of Gentile-Christians in their communities as the first Christian century advanced.
  - 19 See Alberto Melloni, "*Nostra Aetate and the Discovery of the Sacrament of Otherness*," in *The Catholic Church and the Jewish People: Recent Reflections from Rome*, ed. Philip A. Cunningham, Norbert J. Hoffman, S.D.B. and Joseph A. Sievers (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 144-47.
  - 20 Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.4.1-2.
  - 21 See Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth*, tr. Alejandro Bermudez and Howard Goodman (New York: Image, 2013), 176-90, esp. 177-78.
  - 22 Massignon's *magnum opus* on Hallaj, two volumes basically completed by 1914 but only defended for the *doctorat d'état* in 1922, was amplified throughout his life. The final French edition, published posthumously by Massignon's son Daniel Massignon in 1975 in France, was translated lovingly into English by Herbert Mason in four volumes: *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*. Bollingen Series XCVIII (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).
  - 23 The term was used by Pius XI not as an accusation of syncretism but as a "*remarque bienveillante dite avec une sourire affectueux: 'Vous êtes en somme un musulman catholique.'*" See Georges C. Anawati, O.P., "Louis Massignon et le dialogue islamo-chrétien: souvenirs personnels," in *Louis Massignon et le dialogue des cultures*, ed. David Massignon (Paris: Cerf, 1996), 266.
  - 24 For the text of this prayer, see *Liber Devotionum ad Usus Scholasticorum Societatis Jesus*, 5th ed. (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1947), 150-52.
  - 25 In an earlier McGinley lecture I have examined this theme. See "The Faith of Abraham: Bond or Barrier?" *Origins* 41 (June 9, 2011): 65-74.

## PATRICK J. RYAN, S.J.

Patrick J. Ryan, S. J., is the Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society at Fordham University. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees in English language and literature at Fordham, and a Ph.D. in the comparative history of religion from Harvard University (with a specialization in Arabic and Islamic studies). At Harvard he studied with the famous Canadian scholar of Islam, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and the German scholar of Islamic mysticism, Annemarie Schimmel. Between 1964 and 2005, Father Ryan lived and worked in West Africa for twenty-six years, principally in Nigeria and Ghana, where he taught Islamic studies and comparative religion at both the University of Ghana and the University of Cape Coast. From 1999 to 2005 he was the president of Loyola Jesuit College in Abuja, Nigeria. In March 2014, he had a Fulbright Specialist Award to teach in Arrupe College in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Father Ryan held numerous positions at Fordham before becoming the McGinley Professor in 2009. He taught Middle Eastern studies (1983-1986), held the Loyola Chair in the Humanities (1996-1998), and served as Fordham's vice president for University mission and ministry (2005-2009). Author of numerous articles, scholarly and popular, Father Ryan has also published three books. In his semi-annual McGinley lectures he is currently working with Jewish and Muslim scholars on the commonalities these faith traditions share with Christianity.