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Marjorie Shahani  
*Loyola Marymount University*

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*Say Something Theological: The Student Journal of Loyola Marymount University Theological Studies*

## ***Nostra Aetate to Combat Anti-Judaism*** By Marjorie Shahani

**Abstract:** This essay explores the reason the Catholic Church felt the need to release *Nostra Aetate*, specifically Article 4, and were they in fact successful. The intention to improve Catholic - Jewish relationship and to denounce anti-Judaism were primary. Christianity grew on the backs of centuries of anti-Judaism rhetoric expressed by Catholic Church leaders and anti-Jewish literature written by the Church fathers. All this negativity against the Jewish people contributed to the beginnings of anti-Semitism and purposely or inadvertently influenced the reality of the Shoah. These sentiments included the deicide condemnation of the Jewish people, the replacement theory or concept of supersessionism, and the Church's continued attempts to evangelize the Jewish people proclaiming salvation only through Jesus Christ. Desecration of synagogues, hate messages against the Jewish people and violence against the Jewish nation continues up to this very day. Proposals by the United States National Catholic Bishops calling for critical changes in Church beliefs and teachings have not been realized. The intended transformative message of *Nostra Aetate* seems to be confined to theologians and scholars, unknown to Christian believers of our time. The pedagogy of the Crucifixion, and the hermeneutics of the blood cry must be rectified, otherwise we will keep encountering events that may very well lead us to another Holocaust. Unless Christians learn to read, understand, and interpret Scripture from the vantage point that Yeshua is, was and will always be a Jew, any path towards reconciliation between Christians and Jews, is very unlikely.

**Keywords:** *Nostra Aetate* and the Shoah (Holocaust), Anti-Semitism/Anti-Judaism, Supersessionism/Replacement Theory, Deicide condemnation, Jewish-Catholic relationship

*Nostra Aetate* (NA) is an authoritative Catholic Church declaration issued by Pope Paul VI twenty years after the Holocaust, the Jewish Shoah, on October 28, 1965. The significance of this declaration is evident by remarks from well-renowned clergy, theologians, and scholars. Philip A. Cunningham affirmed that *Nostra Aetate*, Article 4, is a "solid foundation for improving the relationship

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between Catholics and Jews.”<sup>1</sup> *Nostra Aetate* declares the Church’s rejection of anti-Semitism and encourages a dialogue between Christians and Jews. On the other hand, Katharina Von Kellenbach stated, “The revolution proclaimed by *Nostra Aetate* is the denial of centuries of Christian anti-Jewish teachings.”<sup>2</sup> This essay will explore why the Catholic Church felt the need to release *Nostra Aetate*; and more specifically, as seen most clearly in Article 4, how it intended to denounce anti-Judaism and whether or not it was successful in doing so.

Anti-Judaism (opposition to Judaism as a religion) and anti-Semitism (prejudice against the Jewish race as a people) carry on in our present day. These two terms have been used interchangeably to imply prejudice against the Jewish people without distinction. Anti-Semitism is evil and must be urgently curtailed, as it breeds contempt which leads to violent actions towards our Jewish brothers and sisters still today. To fully comprehend the essence of *Nostra Aetate*, we will need to highlight events in the historical trajectory of the Christian religion that speak to its relation to the Jewish faith. Christianity grew on the backs of centuries of anti-Judaism rhetoric expressed by Catholic Church leaders and anti-Jewish literature written by the Church fathers. All of this negativity against the Jewish people contributed to the beginnings of anti-Semitism, and purposely or inadvertently influenced the reality of the Shoah and our present-day discrimination of the Jewish people.

At the outset, we must acknowledge that Jesus was born, lived, crucified, and died as a Jew. He prayed to the one God of Israel and used the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) as his sacred Scripture. It is critical to affirm Jesus’s ethnicity as a Jew and his lineage to Joseph, David, and Abraham. This foundational Christian truth affirms that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah of the Hebrew Bible. Secondly, we need to understand that Jesus lived in the early first century, in a Greco-Roman world influenced by Hellenistic culture and where different Jewish religious sects existed. These groups debated with each other on how best to be Jewish. Among these groups were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees believed strictly adhering to the law was the best way to be Jewish. The Sadducees, on the other hand, believed Temple sacrifices was the best way to follow God. The Gospel writers and Paul, through his letters, argued that following Jesus was the best way to be Jewish. Simply

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<sup>1</sup> Philip A. Cunningham, “The Source Behind ‘The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable’ (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (No.4),” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12, no. 1 (2017): 3.

<sup>2</sup> Katharina Von Kellenbach, “Guilt and the Transformation of Christian-Jewish Relations,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 15, no. 1 (2020): 8.

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speaking, there were different perspectives on how best to be Jewish and follow the one God of Israel. This was a discussion strictly understood among the Jews.

### **Early Beginnings of Anti-Judaism**

Pamela Eisenbaum categorically states “some would argue that Paul is the father of Christian anti-Judaism, and by extension, modern anti-Semitism.”<sup>3</sup> She continues to share that Christian interpreters from Justin Martyr to Martin Luther regarded the practice of circumcision to be against the will of God based on Paul’s teaching in Galatia. Circumcision is a sacred Jewish practice confirming their covenantal relationship with God. The fact is Paul merely believed in an apocalyptic type of Judaism and thus felt an urgency to his mission. Paul believed the end times were near when all nations would be brought together to worship the one God of Israel. He needed the Gentiles to believe in the one God of Israel. Therefore, Gentiles did not have to convert to Judaism, obey the Torah, or get circumcised, as they had their own path. It can be said, then, that Paul’s writings to the Gentiles were intended to uphold that faith was more important than works.

The availability of the sacred texts in Greek, the prevalent language of the time, to the entire Roman Empire resulted in the beginnings of the rise of anti-Judaism.<sup>4</sup> Outsiders did not understand the Jewish discourses as mere differences in debate on how best to be Jewish. Some began to interpret Paul’s letters to the Romans and Galatians as being anti-Jewish, while others understood Paul’s letters in the context of his being a Jew sent as an apostle primarily to a Gentile community. The misinterpretation of sacred text contributed to anti-Judaism.

### **Early Church Fathers**

Around the early second century (138 CE), Justin Martyr along with other Church Fathers claimed that the old covenant God had with the people of Israel was replaced by the fulfillment of the new covenant with Jesus Christ. They further claimed the Jewish people were no longer the chosen people of God. This is known as the replacement theory or supersessionism. These teachings evolved to condemn Judaism, *Adversus Iudaeos*, and led to personalized contempt against the Jews. *Adversus*

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<sup>3</sup> Pamela Eisenbaum, “Jewish Perspectives: A Jewish Apostle to the Gentiles,” in *Studying Paul’s Letters*, ed. Joseph A. Marchal (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 135.

<sup>4</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “The Birth of Christianity and the Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism,” in *Jesus, Judaism & Christian Anti-Judaism: Reading the New Testament After the Holocaust*, eds. Paula Fredriksen and Adele Reinhartz (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 28.

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*Iudaeous* broadly refers to literature, homilies and teachings against the Jews. The perplexing and disappointing fact is that it was the leaders of the early Christian movement that led the charge of perpetuating the discourse against the Jews. Around 160 CE, Bishop Melito of Sardis wrote an Easter homily where he outright accused the entire Jewish people of killing Jesus, thus murdering God—he called it “deicide.”<sup>5</sup> One is left wondering why such a condemnation was necessary. As Bart D. Ehrman explains it, “Christian survival required a defensive posturing.”<sup>6</sup> The impact this had is it seemed to create an “us versus them” mentality between the Christians and the Jews.

Moving into the fourth century, Roman Emperor Constantine established the Edict of Milan, abolishing Christian persecutions. At this time, Constantine began to favor the Christian religion, and thus Church building activities flourished. Christian orthodoxy was formalized with the first council of Nicaea in 325. Despite this, Jesus’s followers continued to follow Jewish traditions and festivals and visited the synagogues. The archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, in 387 delivered a sermon to Christ’s followers who continued to visit the synagogues. He preached, “Don’t you understand that if the Jews’ way of life is true, then ours must be false?”<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, breaking away from their Jewish roots was the way Jesus’s followers chose to define their religion, Christianity, and themselves. By the end of the fourth century, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire. The rise of Christianity was a political move, backed by the Roman Empire. As the number of Gentile Christians increased and the Jews became the minority, Christian anti-Judaism sentiments became even more intense resulting in the parting of ways. As I have illustrated, the parting of ways was not a sudden break, but a gradual and complicated shift.

Anti-Judaism persisted for over 2000 years, and Christianity grew on the endorsement of this rhetoric. In my quest to explore the real motive for *Nostra Aetate*, I discovered one of the most shocking anti-Jewish forms of literature. Authored by Martin Luther in 1543, *On the Jews and Their Lies* was outright hate speech. In it, Luther provides the playbook for the Nazi’s persecution of the Jews. Luther proposed burning down synagogues and Jewish homes and the confiscation of Jewish prayer books and Talmudic writings. He also proposed a prohibition of rabbis to teach on pain of loss of life and limb. Even more horrifying was his comparison of Jewish laborers to gangrene that required one to “cut, saw and burn flesh, veins, bone and marrow.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ed Kessler, “The New Testament and Jewish-Christian Relations,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, eds. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 765.

<sup>6</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, “Christian and Jews,” in *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 493.

<sup>7</sup> Paula Fredriksen, “The Birth of Christianity and the Origins of Christian Anti-Judaism,” 30.

<sup>8</sup> Katharina Von Kellenbach, “Guilt and the Transformation of Christian-Jewish Relations,” quoting Luther, 11.

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## 19<sup>th</sup> – 21<sup>st</sup> Century: The Holocaust

During World War II from 1941 to 1945, around six million Jewish people were murdered by Germany, a Christian nation. “Before the Holocaust, anti-Judaism established and sustained Christian triumphalism.”<sup>9</sup> The Holocaust demonstrated anti-Jewish sentiments that were based on the premise that since the Jewish people persecuted Christ, they deserved to be punished. This theme was apparent not only in sermons but also in literary writings, sculptures, popular pamphlets, and caricatures written by scholastic figures and Church leaders. This is the same belief the Nazis utilized to encourage Christians, including non-Germans, to cooperate in the Jewish genocide. Hitler and other Nazi leaders considered Luther their model and used his words to support the Jewish slaughter. When taken into consideration, it presents some devastatingly thought-provoking questions: Was the Church complicit in one of the most, if not the most, horrific event against the people of Israel? Was the silence of the Church against the Shoah an act of collusion since Pope Pius XII did not boldly object to the annihilation of Jews?

### **Impact of *Nostra Aetate*: What to Forget? What to Remember?**

In light of the Holocaust, one would think such a tragic and devastating event would eradicate the Church’s traditional hermeneutics of Matthew 27:25. It is commonly known as the blood cry, as scripture reads, “Then the people as a whole answered, ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’”<sup>10</sup> After *Nostra Aetate* was written, Jewish theologian Richard Rubenstein visited German church representatives who were sympathetic to the Jewish people. He discovered they too still viewed the Holocaust “through the lens of divine punishment for the betrayal and rejection of Christ.”<sup>11</sup> According to Cunningham, it was this “dark and terrible shadow of the Shoah” that led the Church to finally rethink their 2000-year relationship with the Jewish people.<sup>12</sup>

*Nostra Aetate* seeks to address the Catholic Church’s relationship with non-Christian religions. The most significant article within the declaration is Article 4, as it asserts a “reconsideration of Catholic

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<sup>9</sup> Von Kellenbach, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Matt 27:25 NRSV.

<sup>11</sup> Katharina Von Kellenbach, “Guilt and the Transformation of Christian Jewish-Relations,” 5.

<sup>12</sup> Philip A. Cunningham, “The Source Behind,” 3.

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responses to and teaching about Jews.”<sup>13</sup> It explicitly reorients the Church’s negative relationship with the Jewish people and Judaism. Pawlikowski discusses the three basic declarations involving the Jewish people. First, the Church affirms Jesus’ Jewishness by quoting Romans 9:4-5: “from them is traced the human ancestry of the Messiah and the faith of the Church is rooted in faith of the Jewish people.”<sup>14</sup> As mentioned earlier, Jesus’ ethnicity as a Jew is a foundational Christian truth that affirms that Jesus is indeed the promised Messiah, thus recognizing Christianity’s relationship with the Jewish people and that “Jesus is not the initiator of a totally new covenant.”<sup>15</sup> The God of Israel has a binding covenant with the Jewish people, one that cannot be broken or replaced. Secondly, the Church negates both Bishop Melito’s condemnation and centuries of ongoing accusation against all the Jewish people. It states, “[Bishop Melito’s] passion cannot be charged against all Jews...nor against the Jews of today.”<sup>16</sup> Finally, secondary to being descendants of Abraham, the Church encourages dialogue between Christians and Jews. Jesus is a direct descendant of Abraham, the father of the people of Israel. Therefore, Christians and Jews are one family.

It is important that we acknowledge the possibilities for *Nostra Aetate* to give room to dangerous misinterpretations and false impressions about how to move forward. Von Kellenbach argues that in reading *Nostra Aetate*, two problematic and opposing solutions are proposed to move forward. The Church urges the Christians and the Jewish people, like other members of non-Christian religions, to forget and yet to remember—to forget and erase centuries of anti-Jewish persecution and violence, and to remember “the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham’s stock.”<sup>17</sup> She asks a very pertinent question: who gets to determine what memories are to be forgotten and which ones remembered?

In the spirit of moving forward, Robert P. Ericksen communicates how the teachings of Vatican II intended to dramatically change the Jewish Christian relationship. He shares an experience he encountered in 2006 regarding the Church’s mission to evangelize. Ericksen attended a conference in Lund, Sweden with the purpose of addressing Christian-Jewish relations after the Holocaust. The conference was attended by scholars and clergy representatives. Unfortunately, contrary to the mandate

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<sup>13</sup> Robert P. Ericksen, “Jews and ‘God the Father’ after Auschwitz: American Responses to *Nostra Aetate*,” *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 29, no. 2 (2016): 323.

<sup>14</sup> Rom 9:4-5 NRSV.

<sup>15</sup> John T Pawlikowski, “Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate*: Its Impact on the Church’s Theological Self-Understanding,” *New Theology Review* 25, no. 2 (March 2013): 24.

<sup>16</sup> Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate*, Vatican website, October 28, 1965, sec. 4. [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html).

<sup>17</sup> Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate*, sec. 4



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of Vatican II, the issue of Christian efforts to proselytize Jews had not stopped. The clergy in attendance still believed in the mission to share Jesus as the salvation for all the world. Ericksen claims that *Nostra Aetate* responds to the fact that centuries of anti-Judaism rhetoric “might have had something to do” with the Shoah, the murder of six million Jews.<sup>18</sup>

The United States National Catholic Bishops in their response to *Nostra Aetate* proposed critical changes in Church beliefs and teachings.<sup>19</sup> Here are three takeaways: first, the Crucifixion story is to be proclaimed without incriminating the Jews of Jesus’s time or of any time. Secondly, the Christian community needs to accept the irrevocable covenant the God of Israel made with the people of Israel. Thirdly, the bishops acknowledged that the Gospel of John portrays the Jews in a negative light and thus needs to be clarified.

Pawlikowski, twenty years after *Nostra Aetate*, affirms that “Christians can now agree with Jews” that Christianity is not superior to Judaism.<sup>20</sup> He also advocates for Christianity to recognize its roots in the Jewish faith and moreover that Christianity is not the fulfillment of Judaism. He supports research that could lead us to realizing that Jesus “never intended to begin a totally new religious community in his own lifetime.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, Christians and Jews belong to one faith. However, he does recognize the challenges both communities may have if further studies and discoveries demonstrate this truth.

### ***Nostra Aetate’s* Transformative Message**

Christian-Jewish tensions seem to only to be acknowledged amongst theologians, scholars, and historians. Members of the various faiths should be aware of the need to dialogue and accept the truth that *Nostra Aetate* declares in regard to interreligious dialogue. Being a Catholic who attends liturgical services regularly, I must admit I have never heard of the Jewishness of Jesus, that Christianity is rooted in the Jewish faith, and *Nostra Aetate*. The actions proposed by the United States bishops do not seem to have reached members of the faith or the clergy who preach in the pulpits. The fact of the matter is, unless the transformative message of *Nostra Aetate* becomes common knowledge amongst Christians, anti-Judaism will continue. Unless the pedagogy of the Crucifixion, and the hermeneutics of the blood cry is redressed, we will continue to witness prejudice against the Jews. Unless Christians learn to read,

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<sup>18</sup> Robert P. Ericksen, “Jews and ‘God the Father’ after Auschwitz,” 328.

<sup>19</sup> Ericksen, 326.

<sup>20</sup> Ericksen, 328.

<sup>21</sup> Ericksen, 329.

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understand, and interpret the Scripture from the vantage point that Yeshua is, was, and will always be a Jew, I do not see any path towards reconciliation and harmony between Christians and Jews.

Based on our review of history, it was having the wrong interpretation of sacred texts that got us to this point. As such, I believe the only way towards mending the relationship between the Jews and the Christians is to right these wrongs. Most importantly, dialogue and theological reflection have to continue between the Christians and the Jews, as they are indeed one family in the God of Israel. There are so many unanswered questions. There is still so much to be revealed by the mystery who is the God of Israel, the Father of Jesus. Maybe together, Christians and Jews can ultimately end prejudice against all humanity.

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