

# Reimagining *Nostra Aetate*

## A Jain viewpoint

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*Nostra Aetate* (Latin: "In our time"), is the Declaration on the Catholic Church's relations with Non-Christian Religions, passed by the Second Vatican Council, an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church. It was promulgated on 28 October 1965 by Pope Paul VI. On its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, it feels appropriate to consider its relevance to the future of Jain-Catholic interfaith relations.

After World War II, Europe was left clearing the atrocities of war, the widescale massacre of the Jewish people and destruction across the continent. *Nostra Aetate* came twenty years later, at a time where everyone over the age of 35 would have had direct experience the evils of that war.

In the 1960s, the lack of digital communication and mass movement of people resulted in people and their local communities being centred and around their places of worship.

The *Nostra Aetate* declaration reflects the Church's historical and textual positions, mainly in relation to the Jewish and Muslim religions; whilst reaffirming its commitment to "promoting unity and love among men", because "God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth". The declaration continues that any form of "discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color (sic), condition of life, or religion" is "foreign to the mind of Christ". *Nostra Aetate* considers the differences between the Church and other faiths, and address these by saying the "Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions".

Sixty years on, however, this image of the world is largely unrecognisable. The internet, telecommunications and cheap global travel has resulted in the breakdown of 'old' institutions such as family, community, marriage, and religion. Young people, born after *Nostra Aetate*, no longer have direct experience of the world wars.

Interest in organised religions, and historical beliefs and textual positions, are also in decline due to interfaith marriages, decreases in participation in 'formalised religion', and global scandals in religious institutions.

Instead, young people focus their energies on the current global existential crises; the environment and climate change catastrophe, resulting in global warming and extreme weather events, wars in Africa, Asia, Middle East and Europe, often by those having nuclear capability, genocides, and widescale poverty. They worry about the impact of AI and the widening gap between rich and poor.

Although religions offer 'hope' for the determination of these events through belief in their Gods, deities, and faith, it is equally important for religions to have a collective voice to resolve these calamities, and to have relevance in these times.

The Jain faith, with some others, were not mentioned in the original *Nostra Aetate* declaration. This was an indication of the lack of meaningful Jain-Catholic interaction rather than wilful omission. However, since that time, and especially over the past 20 years, that dialogue has been robust and fruitful.

Modern Jainism was preached by Bhagwan Mahavir, a historical figure and enlightened teacher who lived in circa 500BC in what is today northeast India. The faith teaches that he was the last of 24 such teachers, who achieved liberation from human suffering, and attained eternal bliss. Jainism does not believe in a creator god, but rather the dualism of an impermanent body hosting a permanent soul which is in a circle of reincarnation due to its karma. The actions of the body bind karma which results in future rebirth, following death, into animal, plant, or human life, or as heavenly and hellish beings. Liberation is goal of human life, and is achieved through penance and a disciplined monastic lifestyle, limiting actions. Jains believe in absolute non-violence and see all life as souls that are capable of future liberation and hence a source of compassion.

In a reimagined *Nostra Aetate*, Jainism's core values offer a solution based on its core principles; Ahimsa or non-violence in word, thought or deed, Anekant meaning a multisided view of reality, and Aparigraha or living sustainably with life on the planet. This in a modern context translates into protection of the environment and all its life, living with others in tolerance and diversity, and living frugally in harmony with the environment. If these are applied by all, then the existential crises of today would be urgently solved.

These values are universal and although it's unrealistic to assume that all faiths can adopt these values to the same extent as Jainism does, it is equally realistic that they have a level of belief in managing, protecting and nurturing 'God's creation'.

A new *Nostra Aetate* should therefore focus on values that all faiths can advance, rather than historical differences, in seeking to find convergence and areas of commonality. In this way, there will be a common message from all faiths that will add to the voices of those people, governments, NGOs and others who seek urgent solutions to today's crises.

*Nostra Aetate* was for its time. A Declaration that laid historical differences to rest, and instead sought peace and dialogue after two world wars. Today, the world faces different challenges, and other global crises. A reimagined *Nostra Aetate* could unite all faiths around core values to address these matters for our time.