

COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

- Topic: Beyond *Nostra Aetate*: Interreligious Dialogue as Source for Comparative Theology
- Convener: Thomas Cattoi, Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University
- Moderator: Thomas Cattoi, Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University
- Presenters: John Borelli, Georgetown University Heather Miller Rubens, Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies  
W.G.B.M. Pim Valkenberg, Catholic University of America

On October 28th, 1965, Pope Paul VI promulgated the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions*, better known as *Nostra Aetate*. This document, which had been passed by a resounding majority of the bishops assembled in Rome for the Second Vatican Council, signaled an important turning point in the Church's attitude towards non-Christian religious traditions. To mark the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the Comparative Theology group assembled a panel to explore the ecclesial and academic reception of this document, which constitutes a veritable Magna Carta for interreligious outreach and dialogue in our time.

In his paper, "*Nostra Aetate* as a 'Pre-Dialogue' Text and its Influence on Comparative Theology," John Borelli charted the genesis of the document, whose initial draft—provisionally titled *De Iudaeis*—sought to correct the Church's 'teaching of contempt' towards the Jews. Other factors, however, ensured that the final version of the document would also address other religious traditions. For one, thanks to his friendship with Louis Massignon, Paul VI was exposed to the work of some French Catholic intellectuals interested in the resonance between Christian and Islamic teaching. In addition, the Council brought to Rome numerous Asian Bishops who lobbied for a document articulating the Church's teaching on non-Abrahamic traditions. The publication of *Nostra Aetate* gave scholars of religions working theologically great confidence to do their work with the support of the Church, leading eventually to the emergence of comparative theology as distinct discipline. The relationship between interreligious dialogue and mission continues to be a controversial issue, however, as attested by later documents such as *Dialogue and Proclamation* issued by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1991.

In her paper, "Mapping the Theological Boundaries of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue or The Jewish Jesus & Pope Benedict: Defining a Boundary in Jewish-Catholic Conversation," Heather Miller Rubens shared her experience leading an intensive retreat course for seminarians and rabbinical students, where the members of each tradition explored their intellectual and personal understanding of Jesus. Moving on to discuss the ubiquity of the Jewishness of Jesus in popular/public Jewish-Christian dialogue, Miller Rubens offered some observations on Pope Benedict's engagement of this topic, presenting his Christological writings as a kind of theological fence-building around the traditional understanding of the incarnation in response to the Jewish Jesus industry. Fifty years after *Nostra Aetate*, Catholic theology continues to be marked by the tension between the call to evangelize and the desire to reach out to the religious other.

In his paper, “Muslim Catholic Dialogue Between Fear and Friendship,” Pim Valkenberg turned again to the different reception of the conciliar declaration in the church and the academy. At an ecclesial level, *Nostra Aetate*’s strongest impact was in the context of Jewish-Christian relations, as attested by the wealth of secondary literature devoted to this topic. In the academy, the conciliar declaration led first to the emergence of theology of religions in the 1980’s, which was followed by comparative theology and most recently by interreligious/interfaith studies.

Valkenberg offered some additional reflections on the direction of Muslim-Christian dialogue, noting that most of the time this dialogue tends to focus on community-building, while actual theological discussion happens only in elite academic settings.

In the discussion that followed, the conversation focused on the conceptual genealogy of *Nostra Aetate*, while also exploring the ongoing difficulties of engaging in interreligious dialogue within the church and the university. A number of questions addressed the special challenges of Jewish-Christian dialogue, where scholars and practitioners must confront the legacy of centuries of theological supersessionism. Finally, some members of the audience remarked on the fact that comparative theology and interreligious dialogue have a variety of different audiences within the church, the academy and the broader society, each of them requiring different conceptual approaches and levels of sophistication.

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