

### NOSTRA AETATE AS A RELIGIOUS RESOURCE FOR COMMON SPACE

#### 1. Introduction

##### 1.1 Tension between State and Religions and Among Religions

**The recent terrorist attack in Paris (and more recently in Jakarta), whether for religious or political reasons or both, is a real concern for all of us.** What happened in Paris could very well happen here. But it reveals the tensions brewing among some groups of people in the world. Indeed, there is always tension between state and religions and among religions themselves. How do we handle such tensions in a creative and proactive way so that they do not give rise to terrorism, civil war or religious wars?

In the first place, **there could be a conflict between the policies of the State and that of the beliefs of the people.** In such a conflict, who does one give his/her allegiance to: his religion, or to the State? In the gospel, Jesus did say, "Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to Him". (Mark 12:17) So there is always this perceived double allegiance as unhealthy for the State. What the State wants is complete loyalty. So there seems to be a tension between the authority of the State and that of religion. Worse still, when believers appeal to their religious beliefs for disobeying the laws of the country. In such instances, the State will feel threatened because religious leaders appeal to their authority based on God or divine revelation. This could be problematic as the State would then be subordinated to religion. The truth is that faith believers give their allegiance to God, but they will not give their allegiance to man. To overcome this, in ancient times, kings were raised to the status of a deity or god so that they could command the people to obey using their sacred authority.

Secondly, **there is also a possibility of tension among religions causing division in the State,** especially when religions claim that they are revealed. What is even more dangerous is when believers of one religion attempt to impose their beliefs on others. This can lead to proselytism and competition, giving rise to religious wars. Consequently, it is in the interest of the State to ensure that all religions co-exist and cooperate with each other. Indeed, the duty of the State is not simply to respect the freedom of worship but to make sure that religions do not function in such a way that could bring disorder to the country. Unfortunately, instead of the State playing the role of peacemaker, in some countries, the State imposes on all one religion, or disallows the practice of any religion other than the State religion, or simply imposes secularism on the peoples. Instead of worshipping God, they are called to worship the State, to and give their total allegiance and loyalty to the State and its constitutions.

In the light of these conflicts, **we can understand why religions are often seen as a cause of disunity in the world.** We can also appreciate why throughout the ages, kings and governments have sought to instill order and unity by ensuring that the kingdom has only one religion at most, or better still, have no religion. The truth is that having many religions can be divisive if not dealt with carefully. For this same reason, most countries are moving towards secularization so that the State is seen as a neutral body in overseeing the rights of each religion. How, then, can this whole relationship between religion and the State be better handled?

##### 1.2. The Urgency to Increase the Religious Common Space

**It is within this context that we are called to explore how religions can increase their common space so that the fostering of religions in a secular society will not result in religious conflict,** competition and misunderstandings but truly become an important and essential partner in the development of the people, especially values and morals which are so necessary in ensuring that humanity does not become a people without a soul.

**At any rate, economic and technological progress without human development will result in moral decadence.** A society without the absolute values of integrity, honesty, diligence, respect, trust, fraternal concern and care for the poor and the weak, will disintegrate. If a society is lacking in graciousness, individualism, materialism and self-centredness will prevail. Even the government would not be at the service of the people!

### 1.3. Two Different Approaches

**In order to increase the common space for society, we have to take into account those with some form of religious beliefs and those without any religious beliefs.** These two groups must be dealt with differently because communication and mutual understanding requires a common platform. Without anything in common, it would be difficult to conduct any serious dialogue.

**For dealing with those with religious beliefs, the Catholic Church, in a landmark document** promulgated 50 years ago on 28<sup>th</sup> October called, “Nostra Aetate” in Latin, or “Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions”, **proposes** the principles for relationship and dialogue with other religions.

**However, for those without any religious affinity or believe in God or in the Transcendent, then the Church proposes the way of reason leading to faith.** To this end, Pope John Paul II wrote the encyclical, “Fides et Ratio” (Faith and Reason, 1988). The language of communication with non-believers, secularists and humanists must begin with the universality of reason and logic, since faith is not a possible starting point.

## 2. Nostra Aetate as the Guide for Inter-religious Dialogue

### 2.1. The Point of Departure

**Nostra Aetate provides the guidelines for the Church in reaching out to those from other religions, particularly Judaism and Islam, as we share a monotheistic faith and a history and culture that could be traced to Abraham.** Most significant in this decree is the repudiation of the centuries-old contempt for Judaism and the Jewish people who were held to be responsible for the killing of Christ.

**With respect to the Muslims, the Church “regards with esteem also the Moslems.”** It affirms faith in the One God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth who revealed His plans to men like Abraham.

But it is also necessary for the Church to address those from other faiths as well. Perhaps, **the most important statement with respect to other religions is the Church’s position that she “rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.** She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.” (NA No. 2) This becomes the

fundamental principle in the Church's relations with non-Christian religions, particularly, Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism.

### **2.2. The Principles In Approaching Inter-Religious Dialogue**

#### **2.2.1. All are Brothers and Sisters with a Shared Humanity**

**It is the Christian's belief that God is the Father of all.** Nostra Aetate underscores that "we cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man's relation to God the Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: "He who does not love does not know God" (1 John 4:8)." There is no basis for discrimination with respect to human rights and dignity. Indeed, "No foundation therefore remains for any theory or practice that leads to discrimination between man and man or people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from it are concerned. The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion." (NA No. 5) This is the fundamental principle for peace and harmony.

**Accordingly, the Church advocates ongoing study, dialogue, respect, appreciation, friendship and collaboration with other religions.** "The Church, therefore, exhorts her sons, that through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, carried out with prudence and love and in witness to the Christian faith and life, they recognize, preserve and promote the good things, spiritual and moral, as well as the socio-cultural values found among these men." (NA No. 2)

#### **2.2.2. Stress On What Is Common and Appreciate what is True and Holy**

**The starting point in her approach to other religions is to avoid underscoring our differences.** The Church says that "In her task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship." (NA No.1) We should instead stress on what we share in common, especially religious practices, prayers, moral values and charity.

**Indeed, there are more things we have in common** with all peoples, because we are one in our origin and also the final goal. We have a shared humanity. All religions are expected to provide answers to the mysteries of life. Such questions as, What is man? What is the meaning and purpose of our life? What is right and wrong? Why is there suffering? What is the way to true happiness? Where do we come from and where are we going? What is that ultimate inexpressible mystery? For many believers, there is recognition of a Supreme Being or the Transcendent, although the expressions are different.

**By affirming holiness and truth in other religions, we give them dignity and respect.** By asking that the good things in other religions be preserved and promoted, it makes possible inter-religious dialogue. Instead of defending one's theological positions or, worse still, putting down the religious doctrines and practices of other religions, we are called to witness and promote the good things found in all religions.

**Hence, the document seeks to emphasize what the Jews and Christians have in common with regard to the spiritual patrimony.** Beyond the rejection of the negative

attitudes towards Judaism, Vatican II gives a positive appreciation of God's "irrevocable" covenant with the Jewish people. Instead of passing judgment on the Jews for the rejection of Christ, it calls for a dialogue based on mutual esteem.

**With the Muslims, the Church holds them in high regard**, especially in their submission of faith in God, veneration of Jesus as prophet and Mary as ever virgin, belief in the final judgement and, most of all, their way of life, in morality, worship, prayer, fasting and almsgiving, which are all values of the Catholic Church as well. Such virtues are key to living a life of harmony and peace, mutual respect and charity. Pope Francis also highlights the centrality of the mercy of God. (Evangeli Gaudium No. 252) By highlighting these similarities, Pope Francis is pointing out the "rays of Truth". Furthermore, Pope Francis even declared that "authentic Islam" is non-violent. Most of all, he explains Islam as submission in the sense that Muslims "have a deep conviction that their life, in its entirety, is from God and for God" (Ibid).

**With respect to the other non-Christian religions, the Church extols the goodness, beauty and holiness in these religions.** Hinduism is affirmed in its contemplation of the divine mystery expressed in myths and the search for freedom from suffering through ascetical practices and meditation. Buddhism is appreciated by its recognition of the passing things of this world and, through contemplation, arriving at a state of perfect liberation. Finally, it recognizes that "likewise, other religions found everywhere try to counter the restlessness of the human heart, each in its own manner, by proposing "ways," comprising teachings, rules of life, and sacred rites." (NA No. 2)

### 2.2.3. Religion Must Be Taken On Its Own Terms

Among the guidelines on Nostra Aetate, **Judaism and Christianity must be understood on their own terms.** Vatican II noted that "Christians must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience". Only when religion is accepted on its own terms is dialogue possible.

**We must be aware that our world view and religious experience is very much determined by our past and present.** The past includes one's culture, background, religious tradition, education and also one's present experiences in life. When we meet other people, we carry with us our cultural and religious heritage. Whether we are conscious or not, the way we see the future is determined by our past world-view. When we meet others, we are meeting them with different world-views conditioned by upbringing and experiences. When we strip ourselves of the cultural and theological jargons, we would be better able to resonate with the other person because of our shared humanity. Conversely, because of different experiences, we might be challenged by others, causing us to rethink our own views. Regardless, experiences remain personal and it is not a question of right or wrong.

**It is also important to see the intrinsic relationship between faith and culture.** Culture is the way in which faith is expressed. That is why all religions will form their own cultures. Culture means a way of life, of looking at the world and ourselves; and values of the religion are then expressed through signs and symbols. Developed over the years, these customs give stability to the values that religions seek to instill in their believers. Hence, it is not possible to dichotomize faith from culture.

**Hence, whilst regarding other religions with respect for the richness of their spiritual tradition, it is also necessary to be honest and respect our differences.** Such differences with respect to one's understanding and experience of God must be accepted with humility and respect and in mutual tolerance. Through reciprocal knowledge, we can sincerely with joy, recognize the religious values that religions share, and yet respect the differences.

**Communications break down when we start to prove the other person's faith either wrong or "not as perfect as ours".** Each faith claims "to have the whole truth" but no faith has the right to deride the other faith. This is a sure way of shutting down doors leading to any meaningful interaction, reconciliation and eventual peace.

**This also calls for an accurate presentation of the beliefs of other religions.** Nostra Aetate marked the beginnings of a fresh approach to Judaism by its outright condemnation of anti-semitism. It is necessary to reject and repudiate false teachings and inaccurate representation of another's faith which could otherwise cause confusion and misunderstanding. In the Catholic Church in Singapore, instead of having Catholics teach the faiths of other religions, we make it a point to invite authorized teachers from non-Catholic or non-Christian religions to teach in our seminary or religious institutions so that we have a more accurate presentation of their beliefs. This is to ensure justice and an objective presentation of others' faith, rather than from our Catholic perception.

### 2.2.4. Dialogue in Truth and love with Humility

**Dialogue begins with an attitude of forgiveness that arose from religious conflicts and misunderstandings in the past.** Nostra Aetate says, "The Sacred Council now pleads with all to forget the past, and urges that a sincere effort be made to achieve mutual understanding; for the benefit of all people, let them together preserve and promote peace, liberty, social justice and moral values" (NA No. 3). It is significant that when Nostra Aetate urges us to "forget", what she really means is "to surpass". Whilst we cannot expect believers to forget painful events in the past, we can surpass such events by taking the path of forgiveness. To surpass is to learn from the mistakes and see the goodness that comes out of it.

**We can surpass the past by entering "with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration with members of other religions"** (NA No. 2). Dialogue means sharing, listening, forgiving and cooperating. In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis advocates "an attitude of openness in truth and in love must characterize the dialogue with the followers of non-Christian religions, in spite of various obstacles and difficulties, especially forms of fundamentalism on both sides" (EG No. 250). The purpose is to build each other up and not tear each other down. It seeks the good in others, not to destroy.

**Dialogue is quite different from syncretism and relativism.** Dialogue does not mean renouncing one's own identity, nor does it mean compromising our beliefs and morals. Unless we are faithful to our own traditions, we have nothing to offer to those from other traditions. So true dialogue presupposes both partners are faithful to their own traditions and know their traditions well. Dialogue requires mutual respect of each other's beliefs. It takes

differences seriously and recognizes the difficulties. But this is not seen as an obstacle or a betrayal of dialogue. By taking each other seriously, we learn from each other.

**Dialogue must be based on mutual respect.** No one has a right to impose his religion or his religious beliefs on another. Precisely, because faith is required, we cannot presume that others would have the same faith. Consequently, it is not wrong to share our faith but we need to agree to disagree when it comes to doctrinal and moral questions. The only way forward is through greater engagement and dialogue if we want to grow in respect and mutual understanding.

**Through understanding of other religions, there can be a growth in fraternity, enrichment, mutual respect, peace and harmony.** Our differences should not cause hatred and division but we should work together for the truth and for justice, peace and harmony. In the context of globalization, where we are living in a situation of multi-faith and multi-culture, dialogue is the only way to preserve peace, unity, trust and mutual respect. One must know how to give dialogue the time for progress and discernment.

**Without open dialogue, the consequence is suspicion, misunderstanding, mutual ignorance and fear.** To avoid such tragic outcomes, we need to strengthen dialogue to forge the bonds of friendship and trust for the sake of peace and social harmony. Ignorance is the best ground for xenophobia. Constructive dialogue overcomes fear through exploring philosophical and theological questions together to come to a more objective and comprehensive knowledge of each other's religious beliefs. It is our common desire to search for the fullness of truth.

**But dialogue goes beyond information. Dialogue means encounter and communication.** It is to enrich each other through exchange and sharing so that we can make a common good of one's own good. Dialogue and encounter is the only way to overcome fear and suspicion. We need to learn to accept our differences by overcoming prejudices in mutual respect. Dialogue is built on trust. The goal of dialogue is friendship.

**The fruits of dialogue are seen in practical collaboration towards common ideals and values, especially freedom, peace, unity, justice, the promotion of family values, the sacredness of life and ecology.** In a word, we work together to help humanity to be more loving and caring. An authentic dialogue between religions in a spirit of cooperation can help to ease tensions. Even whilst faithful to our own religious traditions, through dialogue, we can prevent believers from intolerance and violence. Together, we need to reach out to a secular world that views religions as a threat to peace and unity. Religions should promote goodwill, friendship, peace and unity amongst all people since we form one human family.

### 3. REASON AS THE LANGUAGE OF DIALOGUE WITH THE SECULAR WORLD

**For those who have faith or share a common faith, depending on the extent of a shared vision, dialogue can be established on whatever is common to both religions.** Consequently, with varying degrees, the Catholic Church would have more in common with the Orthodox Catholics, the mainstream Christian communities, and then the evangelical Christians. With the non-Christian religions, what is common would be less. For example, with Judaism, we have at least a shared Jewish history. With Muslims, we have also some

shared religious heritage of the Abrahamic faith. With Buddhism, we have common shared religious practices such as the value of celibacy, fasting, discipline and meditation and non-violence.

**How, then, do we have a dialogue with respect to those without religions and without shared beliefs, especially those of other religious traditions or those who do not believe in any religion, are freethinkers, secularists and humanists?** The way to conduct a conversation therefore is through reason. Indeed, the Church has always maintained that faith and reason are two complementary approaches to seeking the truth, which is a desire in every human person.

**The human person, who is comprised of intellect and will, seeks the truth and seeks love.** He will not be at rest till he finds the ultimate truth and meaning in life. Whether it is the Greek philosophers or the Torah or the Veda or the writings of Confucius, Lao-Tze and Buddha, all seek the truths of human life. Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life? The answers to these questions will determine the direction we take in life.

**In dealing with those without faith beliefs, our approach therefore cannot be on the level of faith; it has to begin from the level of reason, that is, philosophy.** The modus operandi for dialogue cannot be on the level of faith, because faith is a given. Dialogue must be based on reason and natural law. Reason is a common denominator to all. Religion, as in philosophy, is also concerned with the question of truth and meaning. The object of philosophy is to provide answers to the fundamental questions of life through a systematic reflection in arriving at some universal principles of life. However, in modern times, the distrust in human reason being able to arrive at the truth has led to agnosticism, relativism and skepticism. When the quest for ultimate truth is abandoned, what we are faced with now is relativism, or rather, the belief that no truth can be found. Relativism contradicts itself when it proclaims relativism as the absolute truth. If that were the case, we cannot truly live. In ignoring the radical question of the ground of existence, which is for believers another name for God, we end up in meaninglessness and despair.

**Hence, we must also maintain that reason is not against faith.** Reason seeks the truth. Dialogue, therefore, is man's attempt through reason to pursue what is truth, for love must be based on truth. Without truth, there can be no justice or love. It is therefore important that philosophy, with the help of faith, must recover its original vocation in pursuing the ultimate truths of life. Faith, whilst not against reason, transcends reason. So the role of faith is to purify reason by helping reason to see the big picture and, most of all, the long term effects of pragmatic policies that seem to be reasonably good for the country. But this faith must be spoken on universal terms that can be understood by all.

**In the final analysis, the Church maintains that faith and reason do not contradict.** Faith and reason come from God, the Ultimate Ground of Existence. Reason, however, has its limits, for there are mysteries beyond the empirical world of science. In such a situation, faith supplies what reason cannot grasp. And even if reason can seek the truth, faith purifies reason and helps reason to attain the fullness of truth. This was the context of the infamous lecture given by Pope Benedict in 2006 at the University of Regensburg on "Faith, Reason and the University."

**Flowing from this distinction between faith and reason and its complementarity, the only way out is through engagement and dialogue between State and religions; and among religions themselves.** It is necessary for the State to provide an avenue for dialogue so that there is better mutual understanding between the State and religions. Indeed, when the State does not provide such avenues, it will only breed resentment and misunderstanding. No State can suppress the beliefs of each individual because faith is more than mere ideology, unlike politics. Faith springs from the heart, not so much from the head. You cannot reason with the heart as with the head.

**Finally, religions among themselves, and even with the State, have more in common than differences.** All religions, including the State, champion peace and justice based on equality, progress and harmony among everyone. So all of us have a common goal, which is to give life and love to our people for their security, happiness and well-being. We might have differences as to how we go about it, but the goal is the same. Hence, it behooves us all to cooperate, and through dialogue, engagement and mutual respect, celebrate what is common among ourselves. By observing these principles, we help each other to promote unity, progress and justice for all.

### CONCLUSION

**With the advancement of science and technology and mass communication, the opportunity to build world peace is even greater.** Furthermore, with the phenomenon of migration, contact among peoples of different religious traditions and cultures can bring greater appreciation of each other's richness.

**Whilst globalization presents a golden opportunity for humankind to come closer through greater communication, it could also cause greater tensions and misunderstandings.** This is because global migration also means that there is no homogenous culture or religion, and if there is a dominant one, it could lead to competition, jealousy, oppression and misunderstanding. Race, culture and religion remain sensitive issues because they do not simply touch the level of the head but the heart as well. Insensitivity could lead to civil, racial or religious wars. Hence, political and religious leaders must be alert and watchful at all times that unity among different religions and races must never be taken for granted. This explains why fostering unity among races and religions is always work in progress.

**Indeed, it is the failure of leaders to prevent such racial and religious conflicts that leads to war, division and often violence.** Religious wars are still being fought, and unfortunately politics often use religion as a tool to gain power. On account of the division caused by religions, secularization is the middle path to ensure neutrality in government policies and in public life. Whilst in itself this may appear to be a correct approach to ensure unity among religions and cultures in society, yet, when secularization becomes secularism, which is hostile to religions, then the situation becomes untenable. Secularization is used as a tool to exclude religion from public life all together; considering religion as a threat to peace. The truth is that religion must not be seen as an enemy to society, or a threat to the peace and harmony among peoples, but a contribution to the development of the peoples.

**The principles laid down by Nostra Aetate invite all of us, Catholics and all other religions, to commit to pursuing paths of dialogue through friendship and mutual**



**respect.** Though this reality may never fully be realized, because it is work in progress, we must continue to strive together, knowing that in spite of the difficulties, our commitment will bring about a better humanity and a more peaceful world.

**At the same time, Nostra Aetate must also be complemented with the encyclical of Pope John Paul II on “Faith and Reason”.** These two documents will help us to engage peoples of all religions or without religions. With those who have a shared faith, the dialogue will begin with the common faith. With those who have no faith, then the Church uses the language of philosophy, the universal language of reason based on natural laws to dialogue with the rest of the world. Together, we hope that through our shared humanity, because we are basically one people with common interests and needs, whether of love, peace, unity and harmony, we can make this world a better place to live in where there is joy and happiness.