It is no small thing to acknowledge Vatican II as the first Council in the history of the Church to speak positively of other religions, let alone to consider the question of their possible role in the divine plan of salvation. The highpoint of the Council’s deliberations on the topic was its Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*, 28th October 1965). Although the briefest of the Council’s sixteen documents (consisting of only five sections), *Nostra Aetate* (literally “in our times”) is unquestionably among the most
important. Why is this? What has been its impact? What are its implications for Christian-Muslim relations in particular?

Before answering these questions, we need to situate the document in relation to what the Council had already stated in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium): Jews are "the first receivers of God's covenant"; Muslims too acknowledge the Creator, profess faith in Abraham, and “together with us adore the one, merciful God”; people of other traditions “seek the unknown God” who is the life and breath of all things. After all, it is fairly argued, does not God will the salvation of all people (1 Tim. 2:4) such that those who live their lives with integrity, according to the dictates of conscience, may also receive eternal salvation? Lumen Gentium is concerned to show how other religions are in some way related to the Church and its role in the divine economy of salvation.

Nostra Aetate builds on these insights while beginning with a different premise. Its immediate concern is not doctrinal but pastoral. It wants the Church to overcome divisions, foster friendly relations, achieve mutual understanding, and to work together with people of all faiths for the betterment of the world. Indeed, part of the Church’s mission is to create fellowship among peoples and nations since we are all united by virtue of our common origin and shared destiny in God. The Declaration also recognizes that religions are united in their common search for answers to the mystery, purpose and riddles of human existence. By beginning with this focus on contemporary human experience, Nostra Aetate is more closely aligned to the Council’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes) and its Declaration on Human Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae).

In Part Two, Nostra Aetate speaks positively of the diverse philosophies, meditative and ascetical practices, moral precepts, spiritual doctrines and sacred rites of religions
such as Hinduism and Buddhism. The Declaration states unequivocally that "the Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions". In fact, she reverences “those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which . . . often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people”. As a result, Christians should "acknowledge, preserve and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, as well as their social life and culture". These words sum up the open and tolerant spirit of the document which also invokes Christians to dialogue “with prudence and charity” with members of other religions.

The second half of the Declaration is exclusively focussed on Christian relationship with Muslims and Jews. The latter relationship is pivotal in view of the “common spiritual heritage” shared by Christians and Jews as well as a history in which misunderstanding, persecution and anti-Semitism played an unfortunate role. There is acknowledgement that Christian interpretation often painted Jews in poor light without recognizing that Christ himself and almost the entire infant Church was Jewish. This hotly-debated section of the document was a catalyst for reconciliation, especially between Catholics and Jews, that is ongoing.

_Nostra Aetate_ is also recognised as a watershed in the Catholic Church’s relationship with Muslims. Without mentioning the Crusades, there is admission that “over the centuries many quarrels and dissensions have arisen” between these two major faiths that now make up over half the world’s population. The Declaration makes a plea for both Christians and Muslims to “forget the past” in order to “achieve mutual understanding” for everyone’s benefit. Moreover, we should work together for “peace, liberty, social justice and moral values”.

The Declaration reaffirms the Church’s high regard for Muslims who worship the One merciful and all-powerful God, creator of heaven and earth, who has revealed himself to the world. While recognizing differences,
Muslims show respect for Abraham, Mary and even Jesus as a great prophet (though not, of course, as Son of God). The document commends the manner in which Muslims commit themselves to prayer, almsgiving and fasting. It also affirms their hope in the day of judgment and their belief in the resurrection of the dead at the end of time.

This is a remarkable document in terms of encouraging a positive relationship between our two biblical religions despite past hostilities. One may wish to question whether the invocation to “forget the past” is really possible or even desirable. As with Christian-Jewish relationships, it may be more a case of owning up to past sins and, where appropriate, seeking reconciliation. Also worth noting is the fact the Declaration does not recognize Islam’s key figure, the prophet Mohammed, by name. Neither does it actually use the term “Islam”—so central for Muslims. Such weaknesses are minor compared to the enduring inspiration this document has provided for growth in Catholic-Muslim understanding throughout the past four decades.

*Nostra Aetate* set the Catholic Church on a new footing when it came to understanding and relating to other religions. Gone was the defensive language of exclusion to be replaced by openness, sensitivity and tolerance towards the religious other. Without neglecting the importance of religious doctrine, *Nostra Aetate* recognizes the starting point for dialogue is our shared humanity under God. The three religions which stem from Israel share so much more. In the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*, may we learn to celebrate what we have in common, respect our differences, and work together for the good of all.

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