

NOSTRA AETATE AND THE CALL FOR A RENEWED RELIGION AND HUMANITY

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Abstract: “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” (*Nostra aetate*) offered a positive outlook in approaching different faiths and their faithful, as they are accepted to be integrally part of the one Divine plan for humanity. As fifty years have passed after this Declaration was issued by Vatican Council II, it is time that the Church and other religions take stock of the situation and prepare together for a renewed understanding of religion and humanity. Humanity can progress towards a more cohesive and peaceful existence only if religions offer a collaborative front and infuse in other socio-political realities a sense of communion. Although the Church has not succeeded in proceeding beyond the *Nostra aetate*, she has already laid out a new path of openness, dialogue, and collaboration into which Christians as well as the faithful of other religions should be initiated so that a better understanding of religious realities and human co-existence could be facilitated. The way forward in this direction needs to be effectively supported by educating youngsters in being authentically religious and dynamically interreligious at the same time.

Keywords: *Nostra aetate*, Vatican Council II, Pluralism, Inculturation, Indian Religions, Interreligious Dialogue

1. Introduction

To remain relevant, a religion should be capable of engaging in the exigencies of people’s lives. In order to do that each religion should become a living reality, on the one hand, by effectively vitalizing its creed, code, cult, and community, and the agencies

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such as priests and other religious functionaries and, on the other, by enabling its faithful to establish a reasonable relationship with members of other religions and those who follow divergent ideologies or value systems. The effort of the Vatican Council II to renew Christian life in the modern world, when seen from this perspective, is adjudged to be a great success. *Nostra aetate* was one such initiative of the Council to renew the understanding of the Christian faithful in their relationship with members of other faiths, especially as plurality of religious faiths became an existential reality everywhere. This Declaration opened up the avenues of dialoguing and collaborating with members of other religions as an integral part of the effective life witness that each Christian is called to realize. Every dialogue offers opportunities to unveil the truth that either we have partially grasped or not yet grasped. Hence, *Nostra aetate* could also be seen as an instance of the Catholic Church opening herself up to the truth of other religions and of recognizing their reality existing side-by-side with her own faithful.

Although the realization that no religion is an island has gone deep into the formation of *Nostra aetate* and, gradually, into the consciousness of every religion that is capable of assessing itself in relation to other religious or non-religious entities existing in the world, the approach of positive recognition accorded to other religions was a good start. While the Catholic Church has to sincerely move further forward along the same direction in reaching out to members of other religions and in engaging with them at various levels, it has to take along all others in undertaking a pilgrimage of peaceful coexistence and all-inclusive collaboration so that the ultimate aim of being a genuinely religious person becomes a reality here and now by becoming partners in building up an integral society.

2. *Nostra Aetate* and a New Outlook among Christians

Both within the Catholic Church and in the larger world engaging with Church affairs, the *Nostra aetate* ushered in a positive understanding of other faiths. One of its major

achievements, from the point of view of an attitudinal change among the Catholics,¹ is the fact that God’s presence and activity are recognized to be present within the whole humanity (NA §§1-2). The whole document offers a new emphasis on those elements present in various religions which offer opportunities for a common bonding among people of different faiths, although we continue to witness horrid events of division and violence allegedly perpetuated on the behest of religion. It initiated new methods of collaboration² among the people of good will with a scope for a new earth and a new heaven where religions would be able to work together for the realization of common causes for which all of them claim to exist.

¹In the medieval and modern times, at least prior to the Vatican Council II, the attitude of Christians towards other religions was largely negative. Capturing the general outlook among Catholic missionaries, E. C. Dewick maintained that, on the part of the Church, there was no question of granting any value to other religious faiths and their practices. Therefore, the missionaries “went out with love for non-Christians in their hearts, but not with nay thought of appreciating the non-Christian religions. Their purpose was simply to rescue souls from the clutches of heathenism in this world and from the fires of hell in the next. They went to give, and not to receive; to save, not to cooperate” (*The Christian Attitude to Other Religions*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953, 116). Over against this negative trend, soon after the Second Vatican Council, theologians, particularly in India, started to cultivate a positive and appreciative attitude towards other faiths (see GS §92). This was coupled with a serious critique upon the methodology and attitude of the pre-Vatican Church. For example, D. S. Amalorpavadass, who pioneered the National Biblical, Catechetical and Liturgical Centre (NBCLC) in Bangalore, squarely faced it and almost condemned it as anti-Gospel. He said: “It was critique and interpretation of others by a yardstick or the criterion of those belonged to Christianity, not necessarily of the Gospel” (“Theological Reflections on Inculturation,” *Indian Theological Studies* 27, 3-4 [September-December 1990], 244-245).

²On collaboration with members of other faiths, see also AG §12, 2 and GS §84, 3.

The positive attitude towards the whole world and other realities is clearly implied in the Opening Speech of Pope Paul VI at the Second Session of the Vatican Council II. He said: "The world should know that the Church constantly looks at her, sincerely admires her, and sincerely intends not to dominate but to serve, not to despise her but to increase her dignity, not to condemn her but to bring her comfort and salvation."³ Acutely aware of the past tone of condemnation on other religions by the Church, *Nostra aetate* adopted a sincere and open approach enabling the Church to embrace those aspects that would unify than what would divide humanity along the religious differences by blowing them out of proportion, especially by religious fundamentalists.

Although, originally, there was no plan to issue a document on the Church's relationship with other religions, the interest to include a statement on its approach towards Jews, especially against the wave of anti-Semitism during the World War II and

³Cited in Richard G. Cote, *Universal Grace: Myth or Reality?* Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1977, 102. This new direction is well articulated in other documents of Vatican II. For example, see *Optatum totius* §16; GS §§22, 32, 92; LG §16. This opened up the avenues to understand the positive dimensions of each religion, which also has the potential for further improvisation as the faithful lead their life as per the faith tenets. Along this line of thought, Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), in his commentary on the first chapter of *Dei Verbum*, has categorically stated that "there is no such thing as a natural religion in itself, but each religion is 'positive'" ("Revelation Itself" in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, New York: Herder and Herder, 1969, 180). In this regard, it is interesting to note the position of Walter Kasper. He wrote: "When one seriously takes the universal character of the grace of Christ, it is no longer possible to bring Christianity and the non-Christian religions into opposition with each other. Nor can one characterize Christianity as the revelation of God 'from above', the non-Christian religions, on the other hand, as man's own attempts 'from below' to obtain power over God" ("Are Non-Christian Religions Salvific?" in *Service and Salvation*, ed. Joseph Pathrapankal, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1973, 196).

is aftermath and the intent to distance itself from the violence perpetuated against the Jews in Europe,⁴ the second Vatican Council was providentially led to the formulation of this ground-breaking document in the whole tradition of the Catholic Church. In one of the narratives (*relatio*) of October 1965, Augustine Cardinal Bea, a key figure in the drafting of this declaration, held that the purpose of this declaration was not a complete exposition on other religions but “to show that there is a bond between man and religions which is meant to be the basis of dialogue and collaboration.”⁵ Hence, as he clearly articulated, this declaration took notice of those elements that unite one another, Christians and members of other religions. Although it does not offer an exhaustive treatment about other religions nor about Church’s approach towards other religions, it lays the foundation and opens up new avenues of exploring and understanding the religious reality in the context of contemporary pluralistic society. According to Mikka Ruokanen, “The *Nostra aetate* declaration is not meant to be the final word of the Catholic Church concerning non-Christian religions. It is, instead, just the beginning, meant to lay the foundation for dialogue, for a new system of communication between people of

⁴For information on the developments that led to the drafting of this separate document, see Mikka Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions according to the Second Vatican Council*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992, 35-44.

⁵AS IV/IV, 722, cited in Ruokanen, *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions according to the Second Vatican Council*, 85 (footnote 1). It is worth noting a statement by John Peter Muringathery, a Catholic priest who pioneered practical interreligious dialogue in Coimbatore, Tamilnadu: “The statement [NA] reflects the Church’s determination to liberate herself from the ecclesiology of the Middle Ages which was absolutist in its claims and marked by its negative attitude to other religions. When Christians look upon other religions as inspired by the devil or the sum total of man-made techniques, they continue the attitude of the old Israel, ‘We alone are the chosen people of God’.” “Evangelization and Dialogue,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 54, 8 (August 1990), 403-404.

different faiths; this is in accord with the Council's vision of the united humanity."⁶

As we look back at the changes in the outlook and approach, especially within the first three decades after the Vatican Council II during which a lot of positive research on interreligious dialogue and collaboration had been initiated, the Church could be proud of a lot of good and commendable achievements in the overall understanding about other religions. However, this was not strategically supported by a more foundational theological vision and backing from those who were in positions of leadership and animation of the community of faithful. In fact, much of what happened in the Council did not get translated into the parish contexts and the life of ordinary Catholics. Unfortunately, neither catechesis nor celebration of liturgy – in all its variations – which form the core of the formation for active Christian life, was positively impacted by the outlook visualised by the *Nostra aetate*. Thus, the initial enthusiasm generated by the *Nostra aetate* has lost its sheen in the wake of the change of attitude among the ecclesiastical functionaries and the faithful at large. Instead of breaking new grounds and exploring avenues of creative understanding and more effective modes of collaboration, the Church has experienced a relapse in its enthusiasm for interreligious dialogue that was ushered in by the documents of Vatican Council II.

In spite of the negative setbacks that the movement initiated by the *Nostra aetate* received in the course of time, the positive impact, especially in opening up the portals of knowledge paving the way for a more thorough Christian understanding of those who do not believe in the person of Jesus Christ and subscribe to the teachings of the Church, is immense. At least this declaration could help a section within the Church to open up to the reality of other religions; a large section of the rest of the world was also positively impacted by the approach adopted by the Church. Many individuals and institutions acted upon the

⁶Ruokanen, The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions according to the Second Vatican Council, 85; see also NA §2, 3.

direction given by the Vatican Council II and started to explore new theological domains as well as practical avenues to substantiate it with practical means of interreligious dialogue and collaboration. It is inspiring to note that, while addressing a group of members from other religions, on 3 December 1964, Pope Paul VI stated that India is “a nation that has sought God with a relentless desire, in deep meditation and silence and hymns of fervent prayer.”⁷ Later, in 1986, this positive outlook on Indian religions in general and Hinduism in particular was reiterated by Pope John Paul II while addressing a similar group at Madras: “Your meditations on the things unseen and spiritual have made a deep impression on the world... It is my humble prayer that the remarkable sense of the Sacred which characterizes your culture may penetrate the minds and hearts of men and women everywhere.”⁸ These statements clearly indicate that, following the teachings of Vatican Council II, instead of animosity and suspicion, Church began to cultivate a positive attitude and approach towards the spiritual contributions made by other religions in India and elsewhere. This has served to pave better ways to realize harmony and understanding that were badly needed in the new world that witnesses to the co-existence of members of humanity pledging their allegiance to different religious faiths but, at the same time, many of them fighting with each other for their own dominance within the power structures allegedly animated by pseudo-religious motives.

⁷Pope Paul VI, “Address of Pope Paul VI to the Members of the Non-Christian Religions,” https://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1964/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19641203_other-religions.html accessed on 9 September 2015.

⁸Pope John Paul II, *The Pope Speaks to India*, Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1986, 86.

3. Indian Horizons of Interreligious Understanding and Relationship

"In our time"⁹ no one exists in isolation; interconnectedness is an undeniable fact of our contemporary life experience. Despite the differences perceived on various counts and the disturbances surfaced across the globe, we all form the worldwide web of life, which naturally includes both the online and offline time and space, and virtual and actual realities. The way life is evolving in the last couple of decades, the web of life is becoming increasingly and extensively connected so that one can understand himself or herself only in relation to others. Taking cue from the speculative thought of Immanuel Kant, it may be stated that my own self-consciousness stems from my consciousness of others,¹⁰ which would then clearly indicate the importance that we must accord to every other reality (be it religious or non-religious, irreligious or areligious) that belongs to the web of life.

In the past, when human life was comparatively less complex, religions devised their strategies to manage life of their followers. While religion claims its 'sanctity' based on the divine sources and inspired traditions that date back to thousands of years, there is a possible danger that it would become irrelevant in the modern times, especially among the new digital generations and liberal netizens. Moreover, due to the active work of many new *almighties* like politics, market, and media, and the complexities involved in the life of contemporary society, in order to remain relevant, it is high time that religions reinvent themselves. For, from being the most powerful and the *only* influencing institution, religion has climbed down to be one among the many forces that shape and influence human life.

⁹*Nostra aetate*, the first two words of the original Latin text of the Declaration, literally means "in our time."

¹⁰Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, second edition (1787), trans. Norman Kemp Smith, as *Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, London: Macmillan, 1929, B276: "the consciousness of my existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me."

Given these developments, attempts made by agencies and institutions associated with religious (sacred) sphere should extend their positive reach in (secular) domains such as literature, media, politics, science, ethics, and philosophy so that a more integral and lasting impact could be generated for establishing a more effective and value-based life of humanity.

Powers such as politics, business, etc., tend to ignore or even invalidate religion as a force to reckon with. This, however, is a dangerous tendency, as religious aspiration is a fundamental human aspiration, which needs to be cultivated and nurtured in order to enhance individual and collective human existence. It is argued that a better future could be conceived if the mighty institutions and power centres such as politics and business corporates respect the sphere of religion and offer a legitimate space for the same so that better rooted value consciousness could be cultivated among the general public, especially among the youngsters who would eventually set the woof and warp of an integral human society for the times to come. In such a context, to be effective, it is imperative that religion connects with the present and offers relevant and meaningful engagement with the concerns of the people of the day.

In the first issue of *Journal of Dharma*,¹¹ published in 1975, ten years after Vatican Council II promulgated the *Nostra aetate* (28

¹¹*Journal of Dharma* (Dharmaram Journal of Religions and Philosophies; see, <http://dharmaramjournals.in/JournalOfDharma/Default.aspx>) began its publication under the auspices of the Centre for the Study of World Religions (CSWR), which was established at Dharmaram College in 1971. Both the Centre and the JD were the creative responses from the experts in theology and philosophy at Dharmaram who were inspired by the ideal of harmony among religions as it was conceived and perpetuated by the fathers of the Vatican Council II. It is interesting to note that the publication of JD itself was a collaborative scientific and academic venture in which Dharmaram could enlist the active involvement of four higher education institutes from different parts of the world, namely, the Department of Philosophy, Banaras Hindu University, India; the Department of Asian Studies and Non-Western Civilization, Seton

October 1965), the first editors, Francis Vineeth Vadakethala and John Britto Chethimattam, realistically and prophetically wrote: "... Religions in this world, fragmentarily realized as they are, march along the golden path of such a concordant discord where agreements are warmly welcomed and disagreements are certainly respected."¹² Writing from the pluralistic religious context of India, this statement reflects the earnest attempts initiated by the members of different religions to arrive at and maintain a respectful concord in the context of the varieties of religious experiences practised and perpetuated and the concordant discord emerging in the socio-political arena due to the similarities perceived as well as the differences in practising the tenets of different religions. The earnestness that is reflected in this and similar pronouncements among the Indian Christian philosophers and theologians was facilitated by the new vision enshrined in the *Nostra aetate*, which delineated a new Christian outlook on other faiths; in fact, many welcomed this new approach in the context of religious pluralism and began to involve in processes of dialogue, collaboration, and witnessing (NA §2).¹³

In this connection, it is interesting to note a report on the experience of certain Christians in their association with Hinduism. Summarizing the whole process and commenting on the same, A. Mathias Mundadan wrote in his survey of contemporary Indian Christian literature: "... Each of the circle

Hall University, South Orange, New Jersey, USA; Department of Religious Studies, University of Lancaster, UK, and Sri Aurobindo Research Academy, Pondicherry. As far as the Indian response towards other religions in the post-Vatican II milieu is concerned, Dharmaram in general and the Centre for the Study of World Religions and *Journal of Dharma* in particular have been adjudged to be a critical and creative contributor.

¹²F. J. Vadakethala and J. B. Chethimattam, "Editorial," *Journal of Dharma* 1, 1-2 (April-June 1975-1976), 3.

¹³On dialogue with members of other faiths as it is referred to by other documents of Vatican Council II, see AG §34, 1 and §41, 5; see also AG §11, 2, AG §16, 4, GE (on education) §11, 1, and GS §91, 1.

Journal of Dharma 40, 3 (July-September 2015)

was constrained to say that the Spirit of God has revealed to him, through close touch with Hindus and Hindu spirituality, some new treasures in spiritual life in Christ. As a result, the members were unable, with honesty, to wish for the end of Hinduism, or to conceive this spiritual phenomenon as being simply apart from Christ, from the working of God’s Spirit. *Instead they found to their surprise that each had been personally enriched in Christ.*¹⁴ This is indicative of the changed perspective of many Christians towards other faiths and their practices that they came to experience through their closer proximity with the religious life of people from different religious affiliations. This openness and readiness to be influenced by the faith of other religious believers who join hands with Christians result from the new approach facilitated by the *Nostra aetate*. The readiness to openly admit it is a sincere and significant advancement in the faith declaration among Catholics, which could be the first among all religions.

4. New *Kairos* in Interreligious Relationship

Vatican II and its bold approach towards other religions, particularly the *Nostra aetate*, offered a *kairotic* moment in the history of the Church. The new perspective of openness and appreciation for other religionists and their faith tenets, and the commonly shared brotherhood and sisterhood along with the promise for a new and extensive partnership with them were certainly the Spirit-inspired *kairotic* opportunities for the modern world which had already witnessed terrible tragedies and atrocities that a sectarian religious outlook or a fundamentalist religious approach could unleash on the face of humanity. Now, although the widespread enthusiasm in the mainstream Catholic Church for cultivating a positive outlook towards other religions seems to be adversely affected, the serious question now is whether we could revisit those *kairotic* moments in the historic past of the Catholic Church, particularly by the Indian Catholics,

¹⁴A. Mathias Mundadan, “Inter-Faith Approaches: A Survey of Contemporary Indian Christian Literature” in *Meeting of Religions*, ed. Thomas A. Aykara, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1978, 100.

and redeem and relive them in the present so that we could transmit to the coming generations a healthy vision of religious co-existence that would facilitate creative engagement in all fields of life. Co-existence with mutual understanding and appreciation would open up new horizons of religious perspective that would fecundate human life and lead it towards its fullness.

It is commonly acknowledged that in spite of the groundbreaking teachings of Vatican Council II, especially the initial positive response to the *Nostra aetate* from various circles, practically, the Church is yet to enthusiastically flag off in engaging with members of other faiths in a genuine spirit of dialogue and collaboration. The thrust of opening up centres for interreligious dialogue in the first three decades in different parts of the world, especially in India where plurality of religions is a fact of existential experience, seems to have lost its momentum. It is sad that most of these centres have not succeeded in facilitating an attitudinal change among majority of the Christian faithful; if at all such centres have managed to survive, in the overall perception of ecclesial life, they are assigned a place on the margins, if not considered almost an 'outcaste'. Laxity in the allocation of funds and qualified and charismatic personnel would speak volumes in this regard. In most of the diocesan or national level ecclesiastical administration, centres of dialogue and persons involved (mostly in a passive manner) in such institutions are not in the ecclesial limelight; for at least some on the top ladder, such institutions which heavily depend on the central resources constitute an 'unproductive' and an avoidable liability.

If things must improve, taking the message of *Nostra aetate* to further levels of enhancing our understanding of different faiths through dialogue and collaboration and to engage in more meaningful and effective acts of witnessing¹⁵ to our Christian

¹⁵This refers to the Christian testimony on the salvific truth revealed in Jesus Christ and received and cherished by individuals and communities. Every Christian, by virtue of having freely chosen to embrace the person and message of Jesus, as available to us in the

faith in India (NA §2), it is imperative upon the contemporary Indian Christians to reinvent and re-articulate the imperative of dialoguing and partnering not only with other religions but also with other prevalent ideologies and movements that occupy prime of place in the lives of people; instead of emphasizing the divide between sacred and profane, or religious and secular to unnecessary extremes, Christian faithful in India must look beyond such dualistic visions and embrace the Gospel-inspired holistic outlook in such a way that an overarching and all-inclusive integral attitude towards all sections of humanity could be cultivated and celebrated for the enhancement of the entire humanity and creation.

As the new horizons opened by the *Nostra aetate* are explored with enthusiasm and commitment, there is a need to preserve the unique value and specificity of the Christian message and its vehicle the Church. It should not, however, curtail the right of other people to hold their own beliefs, which they think are best suited to attain God experience and the realization of the ultimate goal of their life. Therefore, as Christians committedly and fervently live and proclaim the Good News, they must be ready, on the one hand, to be witnesses to their own religious experience anchored in the person of Jesus Christ as unique and, on the other, let others freely subscribe to a faith of their own personal choice and to live it with all earnestness. The life witness of Christians may eventually inspire them to embrace faith in Jesus Christ and to embrace Christianity as their way of life;¹⁶ however, as it is done in their freedom, every Christian

Gospel, takes upon oneself the responsibility to witness to the proclamation of faith in the vicissitudes of everyday life.

¹⁶Pope Francis has repeatedly reiterated the need of life witness in inviting and attracting people to the Church. In 2013, following what St. Francis of Assisi told his friars (“preach the Gospel at all times; if necessary, use words”) and Pope Benedict XVI (“the Church does not grow by proselytizing; she grows by attracting others”), Pope Francis insisted that “people should see the Gospel, read the Gospel, in our lives” (27 April 2013). He repeats the same message over and again insisting that missionary spirit is manifested by preaching love,

must respect the personal choice of their fellow citizens, and should cultivate a genuine sensitivity towards their faith tenets and practices without in any way compromising the foundational faith of Christians in the person of Jesus. Moreover, the sensitivity and attitude of respect for the faith tenets of other religions may, in turn, create an attitude among Christians of their life being complemented by those people who live their faiths differently.

5. Necessity of Osmosis among Religions

While the *Nostra aetate* was prepared and promulgated at a time when humanity was still grappling with information flow across the globe, today we live in a world that is flooded with information, as the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have opened up the floodgates of information explosion. Information about the next person or anything is just one click away; naturally, many know quite a lot about everything than it used to be. In fact, we live in a world that is better networked, be it online or offline. It is an anomaly that in spite of the enhancement in communication and information technology, there seems to be a widening gap among religions and the believers who subscribe to them. Instead of better communication facilities wedging the gap already existing, the trend is almost a reversal in many instances. Although faster and easier access to information flow has contributed in enhancing many human domains, unfortunately, it seems to have not made proportionate impact upon the religious sphere, especially in enhancing the understanding among them.

As *Nostra aetate* literally means “in our time,” fifty years after the promulgation of this declaration by the Catholic Church, in the context of the need for religions to come closer to each other to be of service to humanity, there is still a greater need to usher in a new perspective to generate and sustain better

humanity, and faith through one's witness and not through proselytism. See <http://www.catholic.com/blog/jimmy-akin/pope-francis-on-%E2%80%9Cproselytism%E2%80%9D> accessed on 10 September 2015.

understanding among religions. Although all the major religions of the world seem to be more active than they used to be fifty years ago (which is coextensive with the other spheres of human life in the contemporary period), perception and effectiveness of religiosity among their declared faith-adherents seem to be dwindling. Thus, we may say that although religions seem to be peripherally active, there are more active, effective, and pervasive forces and institutions that are at work in shaping the value perception and behaviour patterns of people at large. Some of such major forces are politics, media, business, and science.

New temples and cathedrals that are mighty and all-pervasive have already emerged in different areas of human life. There are politicians and political parties in all hues and shades and with readiness to change colours as per the needs of the people, or science labs that either boast about developing and modifying life in different forms or others claiming to have found even the ‘god-particle’ or still others who go after a ‘theory of everything’ with the insistent claim that God and religion are the things of the past. There are other cathedrals that host people of different types in providing them all that they need by way of consumer experience: shopping malls that sell everything under one roof, TV channels that offer round-the-clock entertainment programmes catering to the diverse interests of all types of people, and social media networks that reach out to inner recesses of private as well as public life of people. Given the unquestioning and increasing number of adherents these powerful organizations or movements elicit, and looking at the influence they wield in the life of people, the Catholic Church should be in a position to offer another *Nostra aetate* (in our time) in her attempt to respond to these powers, which are capable of even taking over the entire religious sphere. In other words, the spirit of openness with which other religions were approached in the 1960s should now be extended to the all-pervasive powers in the contemporary life of the people, be it religious or otherwise. For, if the Church could involve in a critical and creative dialogue with such powers, she might succeed in

recapturing relevance among her own devotees or members and could remain a powerful catalyst in influencing the forward march of humanity. In fact, what is indicated above is not only the situation of the Catholic Church but also the response received by almost all religions in the contemporary era.

Most of the religious traditions consider that their path for realization is the ultimate and most unique. Yet, for a critical observer, many religions fail in facilitating a creative engagement and the subsequent mutual influencing. Practically, however, what happens is the spontaneous attempt on the part of more open adherents of these religions to adapt themselves to better practices and formulations. There is nothing surprising in this process as every human endeavour happens through processes of mutual fecundation. In the case of this mutuality among religions, due to superiority and exclusivism claimed by at least a section of the faithful, creative mutual fecundation is stifled. If it could have been consciously encouraged and supported, especially by those in positions of power and influence within the respective religion, not only all these religions might have benefitted for their own more cohesive development but would also have contributed in facilitating better respect for each other through enhanced self-understanding and mutual understanding. The fact that religions are primarily human endeavours (without explicitly denying the fact that their sources are considered *apauruseya*, inspired, or revealed) implies that they have their limitations and, hence, the possibility for improving their own inner practices that would impact upon the creed, cult, code, and community. The ability of the religious functionaries in engaging with and learning from other religions and non-religious traditions and endeavours is the need of the hour in revamping and revitalizing the inner recesses of every religion so that each of them would continue to inspire humanity in the present as well as in the times to come. Religions would, thus, prove that they are relevant and that they can creatively accompany their votaries to a more meaningful existence, whereby proving that each religion has a legitimate place in the life of humanity.

Although dialogue and collaboration among religions involve religious leaders as well as experts in religions and their scientific guidance for the overall success of these projects, it is not exclusively restricted to their involvement and contributions. As religion is a living reality accessible to everyone who lives the religious tenets in the personal and collective lives, the dialogue of life, dialogue of works, dialogue of lived and shared religious experience, etc., become very crucial: for, it is in such contexts real and genuine religious dialogue and effective and lasting religious osmosis will take place.

Religions have shaped themselves through a process of osmosis that each religion has facilitated through its relationship or interaction with other religions. Most of them have adopted elements from other religions and traditions – religious and non-religious. Only those religions that have been able to adapt themselves to the changing conditions and to respond to the emerging predicaments of people have remained relevant and dynamic, serving the humankind. Others who tend to close in on themselves would eventually become fundamentalist and redundant as they lose their ability to meaningfully guide the lives of their faithful.

6. Educating to Be Authentically Religious and Dynamically Interreligious

As the Council documents indicate that there is no contradiction in being a true and devoted Catholic and, at the same time, cultivating a positive and respectful attitude towards the goodness and virtues found in other faiths, fifty years after the *Nostra aetate*, it is important that the Church itself facilitates better understanding of other religions through the portals of her own education institutions. Genuine dialogue and collaboration can be effectively made, especially by enlisting the support and involvement of the younger generation, only if the whole machinery of education is properly tuned to offer both scientific understanding and experiential sharing (and life witness) of the lived faith of those who profess their faith in one or the other religion.

Institutions imparting education, whether managed by Christians or by any other person or institutions belonging to other religions or organizations that claim to have no affiliation to any religion, should exist and operate in order to champion the causes of humanity and the common good, which would also include in its horizon the whole of nature. A society devoid of value consciousness does not qualify itself to be a human society. The acute awareness that our new generations are losing a sense of values could be better addressed if humanities and religious studies could be re-introduced into the curriculum of all branches of specialisation. While no one can dispute the importance of economic concerns in the contemporary society, we must reiterate that economy is only one of the factors that constitute human life; there are other significant domains which should not be neglected. It is generally held that civilizational culture and value conception could be better imparted through various disciplines of humanities, as they are built around the refined humane qualities and the principles and examples that would further enhance personal as well as social life of humanity.

As education progresses by integrating research, thinking, value conception, and life experiences of people, institutions that offer opportunities for education – at all levels – should conceive of an integral approach in which there would be scope not only for subjects of pragmatic value such as positive sciences and commerce, but also humanities, ethics, and religious sciences. While the liberal market forces would clamour for expertise in the specialised domains, which is said to be directly contributing into productivity and profits, educators must insist on a holistic approach so that even when students are trained in intricate aspects of sciences or commerce, they are given opportunities for blending it with human and cultural sensitivity, which could be imparted by humanities. Ethical and religious deliberations naturally form part of the humanities and, as students undergo academic formation, they should not be deprived of opportunities to get initiated and, if possible, excel in all those domains of human knowledge that would make them more

humane and sensitive towards the needs of fellow human beings and other creatures. The present system of compartmentalizing education and assessing students’ capabilities in terms of expertise gained in the domain of specialisation should change. If there is an insistence that students who complete their education must be ‘industry-ready’, there should be greater emphasis and insistence on the fact that their education should equip them primarily to be ‘life-ready’. Although humanity in general has an orientation for what is ‘useful’, it should also be guided and supported to identify that which is more ‘valuable’ to lead a meaningful and respectful human life.

As religion is found to be playing a significant role in the life of a vast majority of people, instead of setting it aside in the name of ‘secular’ education, due role must be accorded to religious aspects in the curriculum at all levels of education. In the context of a pluralistic religious society that we encounter in different parts of the globe, imparting education on religious matters, which should also include stage by stage introduction into different religions of significance, would prepare the young minds to understand and respect each other, and celebrate their differences as a healthy form of living human social life; it would inculcate in them a healthy sense of inclusiveness. While the content of their learning (the *what* of education) is certainly important, how they learn (the *way* of education), how their learning content is selected, etc., are also of great significance. For example, when a religion is taught in the presence of members who profess that religion, not only better understanding could be facilitated through conceptual clarity and their life witness but also better mutual appreciation and openness could be gained across the board.

In fact, this proposal implies that educators – teachers, managers, and the entire staff involved in education – must be, first of all, equipped with a broader understanding of religious reality and human response towards its varied forms. Instead of shying away from matters religious, our educational milieu should be reasonably open to varieties of religious experience and their ability to elicit better human living. Their ability to

create, invent, and manage learning environments should be infused with a sense of religious inclusiveness, which would then gradually percolate into the inner layers of our social fabric. This goal could be better served not only by emphasizing on individual responsibility of teachers, but also on institutional and governmental investment in this regard; for, when institutional and societal goals are set high in synchronization with religious integrity and social cohesion enhanced by private-public partnership and sharing of resources, it would become easier for the entire education machinery to realize its potential. Indeed, this calls for a necessary collaboration between political and religious leadership for the sake of building up a society with strong religious fabric running through its woof and warp; instead of making political gains by manipulating religions (many a time both by politicians and religious leadership), these leaders must seek avenues of positive collaboration for serving the common good of the society, effectively managed at all levels of education.

If religious matters could be studied with a sense of critical acumen and creative abilities, each religion will be identified as a mine of inspiration for leading better human lives. Hence, instead of shutting them out of the educational system, serious thought must be given to re-integrate religious learning into the different stages of formal and informal education imparted in our societies. In this context, it must be emphasized that along with imparting academic information about religions, teachers and all those who are involved in the process of education, including the parents, should be able to live their religious life of their own choice with a sense of openness and mutual understanding in their relationship with people of other faiths. They must cultivate interpersonal relationships without prejudice to faith affiliations of individuals; they should develop a sense of caring attitude towards all members of the society. All these will avail living testimonies of greater mutual understanding, cooperation, and solidarity that prevail among the senior members as well as educators who may profess different religious beliefs or even no religious belief.

This type of a healthy percolation of religion into the formation of young minds will reset the mind-set of our present society, which seems to get easily polarised along religious affiliations. Moreover, it is hoped that when better understanding about each other is gained through a collaborative search that becomes the basic pattern of education system, it would contribute towards greater openness towards the faith and practices of others. It is within such an ambience we could develop a sense of open dialogue and possibilities of collaboration, both of which could be further enhanced by the vibrant and living witnesses of one’s own faith commitment lived out in the existential situations of life. Interacting with each other without bias and remorse along religious lines would instil among educated youngsters the ability to interact and teamwork, with a sense of freedom and an attitude of care for each other.

7. Conclusion

The strides made by the *Nostra aetate* in 1965 continue to influence the relationship that the Catholic Church cherishes with other religions. In fact, the avenues opened up fifty years ago still inspire interreligious outreach of the Church in the twenty-first century. As the self-understanding of the Church is set to grow as time passes by, it could be reasonably expected that the Church should keep her arms wide open to welcome the truth that each religious reality unveils in the existential contexts of human life. While dialoguing and collaborating with each other were perceived as the contribution of this ground-breaking declaration, the life witness of the faithful would remain the backbone of the entire religious edifice, be it Catholic Church or any other religion.

Religious dialogue, be it intrareligious or interreligious,¹⁷ must be based on religious experience and not merely on

¹⁷R. Panikkar has stated the intentions of dialogue very clearly: “The aim of the intrareligious dialogue is understanding. It is not to win over the other or to come to a total agreement or a universal religion. The ideal is communication in order to bridge the gulfs of

dogmatic treatises; for, though concepts can contribute in expressing religious faith, over-reliance on them and undue importance accorded to their subtle differentiation may deter us in eliciting mutual understanding. In other words, while sharing in religious experiences can better facilitate enhanced relationships among different religions, doctrinal discussions employing concepts developed in specific linguistic and cultural contexts may only contribute into the distancing of religious persons involved in dialogue. In this regard, it is important that members of all religions try to focus more on aspects that would enhance bonding with members of other religions by being more sensitive towards their religious tenets and practices, even if they seem to be insignificant or negligible from an outsider's point of view. Dialogue is usually blocked by the insensitivity of those who do not understand the inner dynamics of certain religious practices. Here it is important that partners in dialogue adopt a non-judgmental attitude so that mutual appreciation can be developed and experienced. It is enlightening to note that, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis asks Christians to "avoid hateful generalisations,"¹⁸ as they would thwart attempts of the Church to elicit understanding and generate opportunities of collaboration with members of other religions.

If we approach the *Nostra aetate* for positive inspiration to dialogue and collaborate with members of other religions, especially as the religious reality becomes more and more suspect in our times, it would be improper to limit the horizons in interfaith matters exclusively to what was stated in the Council documents. Taking cue from the Council and readying ourselves to subscribe to and perpetuate the openings offered, fifty years after the Second Vatican Council was concluded, we need to generate genuine interest and harness courage to fathom

mutual ignorance and misunderstandings between the different cultures of the world, letting them speak and speak out their own insights in their own languages" (*The Intrareligious Dialogue*, New York: Paulist Press, 1978, xxvii).

¹⁸EG §253. This paragraph is dealing explicitly with the Church's approach towards Islam.

our understanding of other faiths so that the Church as a whole may be able to respect and appreciate their customs, values, and faith commitment, which, in turn, would positively influence the way Christian faith is lived by Christians themselves and how they would engage with members of other faiths.

There is a growing tendency across the world to keep aside or restrict religion to private sphere; many subscribe to this view as it offers to free public sphere from religious influence, especially as the contemporary world is acutely aware of and, sometimes, alarmingly disturbed by the plurality of religious faith due to the unprecedented movement of people all over the world and the conflicts arising from their unhealthy interactions. This trend has become the rule of the day due to the spread of secular democracies where religion is alleged to be a hindrance in pursuing their declared goals. The alliance of democracy with the liberal market forces which press for increasing freedom from all regulations – including moral and religious forces – has made religion effectively a marginal entity. However, understanding the way religious aspirations of people are at work at the very base of their being and their ability to move people into action – both creative and destructive – and the sheer inability of the competing forces to eclipse religion in the lives of the vast majority of people indicate that religion is still a force to reckon with. Hence, positively accommodating religion within the domains of the new world and enabling them to be creatively influence their inner recesses could generate a new ethos that would be more holistic in their content and presentation. From this perspective, integrating the variety of religious experiences contributed by different religious traditions will enhance the social fabric of humanity. Instead of religious animosity and fundamentalist attitudes that thwart social cohesion and peaceful co-existence, these self-same religions could become instruments of harmony by catering to those elements that enhance our human bonding and socio-religious communion. As each religious tradition epitomizes one or other dimension of human-Divine encounter through its own methodology developed within the given geo-political context,

all of them can certainly make significant contributions in taking humanity to higher levels of existence where communion among human beings and communion between human and Divine realms would be realized.

At a time when religions are perceived to be contributing into social disturbance than social cohesion, as suspicion and division in the name of religion seems to be on the increase, and as some religious leaders and their followers consider that violence against the members of other faiths is a justifiable means for securing their this-worldly and other-worldly goals, the vision enshrined in the *Nostra aetate* calls for seeking reasons to make the religious bonding of humanity more and more a reality. Indeed, its vision continues to remind and inspire the Catholic Church and every other person who takes religion seriously that “the bonds that unite us are stronger than the barriers that separate us.”¹⁹

¹⁹This quote is a Vatican II (specifically GS §92) inspired motto of Divyodaya, a centre established for the promotion of interreligious dialogue in Coimbatore, Tamilnadu.