

DECLARATION ON THE RELATION OF THE CHURCH TO NON-CHRISTIAN RELIGIONS
NOSTRA AETATE
OCTOBER 28, 1965

This declaration began as an appendix to the Decree on Ecumenism, with the title, “On the Jews and non-Christians.” After initial debate, however, the Council Fathers decided to dedicate an entire document to this topic.

The search for truth and holiness in all religions

Prior to the Council, the Catholic Church rejected all religions and religious philosophies not grounded in the worship of the one, true God as completely devoid of any truth and useless for the pursuit of virtue or holiness.

The Council Fathers note that all people of faith seek answers to the same fundamental questions about life, human history, and the hidden power that governs Creation. They explain accurately and succinctly how Hinduism, Buddhism and various religious philosophies (like Daoism and Confucianism) seek to explore these mysteries and lead people to a more profound experience of the human and the divine. Then they assert: “The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions.” Furthermore, the Church “regards with sincere reverence” those moral teachings which lead to virtue. (#2)

Muslims

Prior to the Council, Muslims (called “Moslems” in this declaration) were considered militant enemies of the Church. The Council Fathers note many points of common belief that we share with Muslims: worship of one God, faith tracing back to the patriarch Abraham, reverence for Jesus as a great prophet, devotion to his virgin mother Mary, and belief in final judgment. In addition, they note that Muslims likewise value a moral life and practice prayer, almsgiving and fasting. While acknowledging the past “quarrels and hostilities” between Christians and Muslims, the Council Fathers urge both sides to reconcile and seek peace. (#3)

The Jewish people and anti-Semitism

Prior to the Council, the Catholic Church taught that all Jews bear collective guilt for Jesus’ death. The Council Fathers reject this notion as contrary to Scripture.

- The Council Fathers draw heavily on St. Paul, especially his Letter to the Romans, to explain how the roots of Christianity are found in the “spiritual patrimony” that we share with our Jewish brothers and sisters. Although the Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day failed to recognize the “time of their visitation,” St. Paul taught that God still wishes to save all peoples, both Jews and Gentiles. (#4)

- Recognizing that much of the hatred directed at Jews is politically and racially motivated, the Council Fathers strongly condemn all “hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.” (#4) They say further: “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.” (#5)