The week that I was working on this essay, I was also preparing to attend the third meeting of a formal interreligious dialogue between a small group of Catholics delegated by the Canadian bishops, and a similarly small group of scholars, priests and laypersons from various traditions of Hinduism. The dialogue is relatively new, and its results still far from certain. It follows, however, in a well-established line of such dialogues, with other Christians, with Jews, and with Muslims. As we collaborated with prominent leaders in the Hindu community of Toronto to form this group, there were many practical issues at the front of our attention: shared concerns about religious freedom in an increasingly secular Canadian society, shared interests in the education of youth, shared perplexities about the causes of religious violence at home and abroad. But we also brought questions about God, about the human vocation, about faith, about the spiritual life, and about the nature of religious community. Even in the short period we have been meeting, Hindu and Catholic members of the group have already begun inviting one another to deepen further our commitment to our own traditions, and to our mutual relationship.

It would be very difficult to imagine that this dialogue, or many of those more mature dialogues that have preceded it, would have been possible without the teaching of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and, in particular, its short document Nostra Aetate, “The Declaration on the Church’s Relation to non-Christian Religions” (1965). In his magisterial survey The Second Vatican Council on Other Religions, Jesuit scholar Gerald O’Collins identified the Council’s teaching on other religious paths as one area in which it is virtually incontestable that the Church executed a fundamental change in its self-understanding. This teaching, he concedes, “had some (partial) antecedents in theology and official teaching...but [it] went far beyond these antecedents to embody a massive shift in the official doctrine and practice of the Catholic Church.” [1] Such a “massive shift” cannot be confined to the text of Nostra Aetate. As O’Collins’ study well illustrates, very significant steps in this area were also taken in the documents on liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium, 1963), on the Church (Lumen Gentium, 1964), on mission (Ad Gentes, 1965) and on the Church in the modern world (Gaudium et Spes, 1965). This is particularly true with regard to the bishops’ teaching on the universality of grace and the possibility of salvation for those outside the Christian community, concerning which Nostra Aetate by itself has relatively little to say.

The specific contribution of Nostra Aetate
was simultaneously more modest and, in its own way, more revolutionary. Rather than directly addressing questions of grace or salvation in other religious paths, it specified that specific “attitude” or “relation” (habitudo) that must be cultivated by Catholics toward these persons and their religious communities: an attitude not of confrontation or competition, but of dialogue and collaboration.

But this, too, is not all of one piece; for the drafting and implementation of Nostra Aetate reveals at least two different rationales for such dialogue and at least two trajectories that it can follow. Many of the controversies about this document, as well as the creativity it has generated in the life of the Church, can—in my view—be traced to a tension between these two trajectories. To illustrate this, I turn first to the history of the document’s drafting and implementation and then to a close reading of Nostra Aetate itself.

The Complex Development of Nostra Aetate

As we have approached the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, we have been gifted with ever richer documentation of the complex processes that produced its sixteen documents, including Nostra Aetate. In addition to standard references works, including Herbert Vorgrimler’s now classic Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II (1967-69) and Giuseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak’s somewhat more contested History of Vatican II (1995-2006), we now possess more focused treatments by Miikka Ruokanen, Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, Elena Procario-Foley, John Connelly, Michael Attridge, and O’Collins, among many others. The story of the Declaration, as it emerges in these sources, is a vivid tale, full of drama and political intrigue. The first draft of a “Decree on the Jews” (Decretum de Iudaeis) was created during the preparatory period and submitted to the Central Preparatory Commission of the Second Vatican Council in early 1962, but it was withdrawn from consideration in June of the same year. It was presented to the Council Fathers for the first time in November 1963 as the fourth chapter of the draft schema on Christian ecumenism. It then went through at least three further drafts before being debated and accepted in principle by the Council Fathers in November 1964, adopted by the Council on 14-15 October 1965 and promulgated some two weeks later.

In its final form, Nostra Aetate includes five sections: two initial sections on the Church’s attitude to religions in general (§§ 1-2); a third section on Islam (§ 3); the fourth and longest section on Jews and Judaism (§ 4); and a final section condemning any form of religious discrimination (§ 5). Of these, only section § 4 can be traced to a definite point of origin in the preparatory period; for we know that, on September 18, 1960, Pope John XXIII submitted a request to Cardinal Augustin Bea to draft a document on the Church’s relation to the Jewish people. Various motives have been suggested for this papal initiative. No doubt Pope John’s historic meeting with the French historian Jules Isaac (1877-1963) in June of the same year played a very significant role. Whatever the cause, one thing can be said for certain: Jewish-Catholic relations was part of the agenda of the Second Vatican Council well before the bishops gathered for their first meeting in the fall of 1962.

By contrast, the Church’s relations with religious traditions beyond Christianity and Judaism, the specific subject of Nostra Aetate §§ 1-3, emerged only slowly, from the Council floor. Perhaps the most well-known aspect of this dramatic narrative was the organized opposition to the Declaration from those who expressed concerns that a document on the Jews without reference to Islam would render the Christians of Western Asia extremely vulnerable. But this was not the only argument behind the document’s enlargement. Paul Pulikkan has, for example, brought out the decisive role of a number of Indian bishops, who raised questions of interreligious dialogue in the preparatory period and in the earlier discussion of the schema on the Church. It was perhaps Fortunato Da Veiga Coutinho, the bishop of Belgaum, Karnataka, who argued most forcefully for a Catholic engagement with what he called the “wider ecumenism,” an engagement which would bring to light the truths of Hinduism and other great traditions of the world. No doubt, these interventions reflected a fair variety of motives and concerns on the parts of the bishops who made them. It is nevertheless clear that the question of the Church and other religious traditions, treated as a whole, emerged very differently than did that of the Church’s relation to Jews and Judaism.

Further evidence of the relative independence of these two major units of Nostra Aetate can
also be found in the debates that led up to their eventual adoption by the Council. On the 20th of November 1964, for example, the draft Declaration was accepted in principle through three successive votes: one on sections §§ 1-3 as a block, a second on sections §§ 4-5 and a final vote on the document as a whole. At the final vote in 1965, moreover, the issues of greatest controversy were specifically different for each of these two major units. A document of the conservative coalition Coetus Internationalis Patrum, distributed on the 11th of October 1965, accepted most elements of § 4 with minor amendments, while severely criticising the “comparativist ideology” of §§ 1-3, pushing forcefully for their rejection on the grounds that it was "unworthy, not to say scandalous" to raise Hinduism and Buddhism to the same level as Christian faith. The strongest opposition to § 4, on the other hand, related to Nostra Aetate’s rejection of the idea that all Jewish people could be held responsible for the death of Jesus. It came both from conservatives, who objected to the apparent change in Church teaching on this point, and from progressives who wished for a more explicit disavowal of the curse of “Deicide”—as had appeared in earlier drafts of the document.

Arising as they did from different origins, it may perhaps come as no surprise that these two major units also bore rather different fruit. The Declaration calls for “dialogues” (colloquia) not once but twice: once at the conclusion of § 2 and a second time in the middle of § 4. One could not be faulted, therefore, for inferring that the bishops were imagining not one, but two different forms of dialogue, as attested by the creation of two entirely different Vatican bodies responsible for them. On the one hand, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, created under the aegis of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in 1966 and elevated to the status of a Commission in 1974, has enjoyed a focused mandate on particular issues specific to Jewish-Christian relations—exemplified most clearly in its 1998 reflection on Christian complicity in the Holocaust, entitled “We Remember.” On the other hand, the Secretariat for Non-Christians was instituted by Paul VI in 1964 and eventually renamed as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1988. It has carried a far more diffuse mandate. In addition to issuing pastoral statements to recognize important events in Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and other sacred calendars, it has also collaborated with other Vatican dicasteries, the World Council of Churches, and other partners to produce general guidelines and statements on particular questions relevant to any dialogue. Arguably, the most influential of these statements was issued in 1991 under the title “Dialogue and Proclamation.”

Two Distinct Theological Trajectories

At one level, of course, it is no surprise to discover that the Church’s relation to Judaism differs from the Church's relationship with other religious traditions. What is more interesting is that, once one recognises the clear distinction between Nostra Aetate §§ 1-3 and §§ 4-5, each major unit can then also be read as a reasonably coherent whole.

The older of these two theological trajectories in the history of composition is, ironically, the one that comes second in the order of presentation: namely, Nostra Aetate §§ 4-5. The Council Fathers begin this discussion not with any general reflections on dialogue or on religion, but with the specific history that joins Christians and Jews, reflecting on the spiritual link that unites the “people of the new covenant” with the “descendants of Abraham” (§ 4.1) and clearly recognising the roots of Christian faith and election in the Jewish patriarchs and prophets, the earliest apostles and above all Christ himself (§ 4.2-3). In the core of the section, the bishops state their fundamental conviction, drawn from the Apostle Paul, that “the Jews still remain very dear to God, whose gift and call are without regret” (§ 4.4). From this affirmation of Jewish particularity, the bishops look forward to a more universal future, when “all peoples will call upon the Lord with one voice” (§ 4.4). So also, after rejecting collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus and deploring anti-Semitism in all its forms (§ 4.6-7), the bishops conclude with a proclamation of “the cross of Christ as the sign of God's universal love and the source of all grace” (§ 4.8). In the Declaration's final section, such universal love is underscored by a condemnation of all forms of discrimination, against any person or religious group, as a stark contradiction of the Fatherhood of God (§ 5). The particular and specific, in this case, reveals and leads to the universal.

The trajectory of NA §§ 1-2, by contrast, largely inverts that of §§ 4-5. Whereas § 4 begins with the specific, historic emergence of Christianity from early Judaism, § 1 begins with an appeal to
the increasing communication between persons and nations in the contemporary era, as well as the desire for the Church to promote “unity and charity” and to seek what “human beings have in common” (§ 1.1). The bishops go on to describe what they will call the “deep religious sense” of human-kind (§ 2.1), as demonstrated by the shared origin and destiny of all persons in God (§ 1.2), by the existential questions shared by all (§ 1.2) and by a brief phenomenological account of Hinduism, Buddhism and unspecified “other religions” (§ 2.1).

From this broad foundation, the bishops articulate yet another programmatic statement:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of those things which are true and holy in these religions. It regards with respect those ways of acting and living and those precepts and teachings which, though often at variance with what it holds and expounds, frequently reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens everyone . . . (§ 2.2).

In some contrast to the affirmation of God's irrevocable “gift and call” to the Jewish people in § 4.4, this important statement does not directly draw from the Christian scriptures… not, at least, until the bishops go on to insist that the Church must continue to preach “Christ who is ‘the way, the truth and the life’ (Jn 14,6).” The section concludes, moreover, by a shift from the universal toward the particular, encouraging Christians to enter into “dialogues and cooperation” with particular religious others and actively to preserve and promote “those spiritual and moral good things as well as the socio-cultural values” found among them (§ 2.3). In §3, finally, such a process of constructive engagement is specified and further illustrated with reference to Islam.

Importantly, these two theological trajectories overlap with one another on many points—not least, the bishops’ all-important preference for dialogue (rather than censure or condemnation) as the appropriate mode of engagement with religious others. Yet, the grounds for such dialogue, and its way of proceeding, would seem to be different in each case. One approach, perhaps most aptly symbolised by Paul VI's pilgrimage to the Holy Land in January 1964, plunges deep into the heart of Christian faith to re-discover its own proclamation anew, and only subsequently draws conclusions from this re-examination, first for the Jews and then for all human beings. In the other, similarly symbolised by Paul VI's travel to Bombay in December of the same year, dialogue proceeds from broader, more phenomenological convictions about the unity of all humankind, convictions which are only subsequently applied in practice and in diverse relationships with particular religious others. Though their conclusions may be similar, these two theological trajectories rest on specifically different sources and warrants, and each therefore shades the meaning of “dialogue” in distinctive, possibly conflicting ways.

Conclusion: Whither Dialogue?

Faced with these two rather different approaches to dialogue, many interpreters simply prioritize one over the other. In most cases, such a decision is practical: since one can only become an expert in a limited number of traditions and dialogues at any one time, it is expedient to emphasize only those sections of Nostra Aetate most relevant to engaging one’s particular dialogue partner(s) most effectively. Sometimes, however, such interpretative judgments become more systematic. Thus, in The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions, Miikka Ruokanen insists that, particularly if one treats it apart from later developments, Nostra Aetate should be regarded primarily as a statement on the Church’s relationship with Jews and Judaism. [2] That’s how it started, and that’s where it made its real contribution. O’Collins, with Ruokanen in mind, tacks in precisely the opposite direction, placing his strongest emphasis on the Council’s universalism and its new appreciation of the teachings and traditions of other religious paths.

But this, it seems to me, is ultimately a false choice. One distinguishes these two theological trajectories within Nostra Aetate not primarily in order to separate them or to prioritize one or the other, but to notice how they open up new imaginative possibilities by their mutual juxtaposition. Thus, reading the document from beginning to end, one becomes newly aware how Judaism and indeed Christianity itself can be placed firmly within a wider vision of shared questions, shared orientations, and shared values, alluded to in Nostra Aetate §§ 1-2. Phenomenologically, their adherents respond to many of the same fundamental concerns as Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and many others; descriptively, our rituals, practices, and ethics show great affinities with those prescribed in other religious paths. Conversely, by reading according to the historical development of Nostra
Aetate, one can use §§ 4-5 as a lens to understand the full significance of §§ 1-3. Judaism shares a unique relationship with Christianity, no doubt, but it also provides Christians with what the prominent theologian and ecumenist Gregory Baum described in the late 1960s as a primary analogy for understanding Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and other religious paths. Christians may thus be empowered to approach these traditions with new eyes and ears, listening for a word of God and divine promise no less particular and no less challenging to Christian faith than that given to the people Israel. By weaving the treatment of these religious paths together with a document on Jews and Judaism, Nostra Aetate may be read to invite its readers to consider each of them as, by analogy, bearers of a unique life and purpose in God’s divine plan—albeit a life and purpose that may emerge in its fullness only at the end of time.

What does this mean for me and for other Catholic members of our nascent Hindu-Catholic dialogue group? On the one hand, following the universalist trajectory of Nostra Aetate §§ 1-3, the document invites us not to diminish the full range of common, practical concerns that we may share with our Hindu sisters and brothers. Concerns about education and the formation of youth, questions of ethics, reflections on various forms of contemplative practice—these are widely shared, legitimate areas of enquiry, and we stand to gain enormously by dialogue and collaboration about them. At the same time, following the more particularist trajectory of Nostra Aetate §§ 4-5, the document opens the possibility that, in our Hindu partners, we may discover a partner like the Church also finds in historic Israel. That is, we may encounter insights and truths that arise, not only from our questions to God and to one another, but also from God’s questions and demands of us, as individuals and as religious communities. So we attend carefully to our dialogue partners, listening for their voices… as well as to the voice of the Lord that may well be revealed anew, in and through our shared dialogue.

Author’s note: except where noted, for the text of Nostra Aetate, I have followed the Latin text and English translation available in Norman P. Tanner, S.J., ed., Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, Volume Two: Trent to Vatican II (London and Washington, D.C.: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), 968-71. I would like to express my gratitude to my colleague Yiftach Fehige for his insights into Nostra Aetate, which have deeply informed the argument of this essay.

ENDNOTES
