

Catholicism and World Religions

The relationship of the Catholic Church to the faith traditions of the world was outlined in the document *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (Nostra Aetate, 1965)*. It begins by recognizing humanity's perennial questions about the nature of happiness, the purpose of suffering, and where we are ultimately going. Though these perennial questions establish common ground among various religions, the answers to these questions provided by various religions are quite different. For example, in Hinduism there is the belief in *samsara*, the wheel of rebirth that symbolizes the anguish of the human condition and the innate need to be liberated. Buddhism teaches the impermanence of reality and teaches that individuals are capable of attaining enlightenment by extinguishing desire from their lives. Though the treatment of these and other traditions is limited in *Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, the document highlights an important dimension of witnessing a more global understanding of truth. In one of the most quoted passages from *Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, we find an affirmation of the essential goodness of the world's religions:

The Catholic Church 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. (2)

This tone of respect and admiration characterizes much of the twentieth-century movement to actively engage in dialogue with non-Christian traditions.

Much of the initial work undertaken by the Catholic Church in this interreligious dialogue has been with Judaism. Before his death Pius XI had drafted an encyclical that was to be titled *Humani Generis Unitas* ("The Unity of the Human Race"). Unfortunately, sections of this document revealed a perpetual teaching that the Jews were separate from the rest of humanity and that the Jewish nation bore a collective responsibility for the Crucifixion of Jesus. However, the document still maintained that Israel's Covenant with God as a "Chosen People" had not ended as the consequence of this charge and it condemned anti-Semitism and the persecution of Jews. After the death of Pius XI, Pius XII chose not to promulgate this encyclical.

The heritage that unites Christianity and Judaism goes back to the early patriarchs of the Jewish people: Moses, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. This is why you often see these two traditions—along with Islam—referred to as the Abrahamic traditions, recognizing their common religious heritage. Though Christians are called the new "People of God," it is important not to think that Christianity has somehow replaced Judaism. This is the misguided belief in supersessionism, or replacement theology, in which the life and message of Jesus Christ has replaced or superseded the first People of God. The Church teaches that the fulfillment of the promises of the first Covenant between God and Jewish people is found within the ministry and event of Jesus Christ. This explains how Christianity does not replace Judaism but rather relies on its earliest teachings about prayer, worship, and morality to fully answer and live out the Reign of God on earth.

The history of Jewish-Christian relations, however, has not always been lived out this way. The theological and historical difficulty of explaining the trial and death of Jesus has, until recently, been used as a vehicle for anti-Semitism. Since the time of early Christianity, different writings and images have depicted the Jewish People as being responsible for the Crucifixion of Jesus. This unfortunate legacy is supported by this passage in the Gospel of Matthew: "His blood be on us and upon our children!" (27:25). This is unfortunate, because Matthew wrote this to address the era of conflict with the synagogue, not for what it is used for today.



Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions was the first authoritative declaration on Catholic-Jewish relations. It repudiated the charge of deicide—the death of Christ—by stating that “the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from Holy Scriptures” (4). By recognizing the prejudice and discrimination faced by the Jews, *Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* goes on to state the following:

Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel’s spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone. (4)

Though this document is not the last word on Catholic-Jewish relations, it nevertheless established a precedent for honoring the common ground that unites religions while working to promote the related heritages of Christianity and Judaism.

In 1991 the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue issued “Dialogue and Proclamation,” articulating and reaffirming the major points from *Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. *Dialogue* is defined as “reciprocal communication . . . to interpersonal communion” where there is “both witness and the exploration of respective religious convictions” (9). *Proclamation* is defined as “the mystery of salvation realized by God for all in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit” because it is the “foundation, centre, and summit of evangelization” (10). The task of promoting the Good News stands in tension with the commitment to growing in the appreciation and understanding of the pluralism of religious beliefs and practices. Because interreligious dialogue is an integral dimension of the Church’s evangelizing mission, its commitment is not just anthropological but theological in that the offer of salvation exists for all. Dialogue is about life, action, theological exchange, and religious experience (see 42). The sharing of joys and sorrows, the development of peoples, an appreciation for spiritual values, and the different ways of searching for God all highlight the social ethic that informs genuine interreligious dialogue. At its core, the world’s religions foster an ethical care and concern for one another. Nevertheless, one should enter into the dialogue with the integrity of their faith. Dialogue does not mean compromising or denying your faith; it does mean, however, being open to revising misconceptions about the truths in other traditions. In particular, “Dialogue and Proclamation” notes how the pluralistic environment in which young people live necessitates that dialogue be a constitutive dimension of the everyday encounter with those from other faiths.

Since the publication of “Dialogue and Proclamation,” there have been numerous examples of this dialogue in a tangible way. Christian-Muslim relations have continued to grow, especially after 9-11, to discern authentic expressions of the Islamic faith from radical minorities that are portrayed as normative for the media outlets. As a starting point for Christian-Muslim dialogue, there are many similarities in both faiths—from their monotheism to the role of the prophets to the nature of eschatology and the “end things.” Peace is also a central goal of both traditions. The very word *Islam* means “submission, to give back to God what he has given.” There are also differences in terms of doctrines that cannot be ignored, such as the manner in which the Incarnation transformed humanity’s relationship with God, while Muhammad is seen as the final seal on the prophets, the last of God’s spokespeople. Despite the differences, there are grounds for dialogue and growing in understanding and appreciation between the Christian and Muslim faiths. Obviously the political and social landscape of the twenty-first century requires a reevaluation of religious extremism and a call to conversion to promote harmony and reconciliation. The central concerns about the nature of God, the role of charitable giving, and the place of nonviolent resistance all figure into the equation of solidarity with the Muslim faith.



This commitment to dialogue extends beyond the faith traditions of Judaism and Islam. Other interreligious conferences throughout Europe and Asia with Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, and Sikhs have contributed to the renewed efforts by the Church to seek out dialogue partners, especially where there may not be a common heritage, founder, or creed. This type of dialogue is often referred to as intra-religious dialogue, because it seeks to work across very different traditions rather than working within a commonly accepted theological and social worldview. Messages from the Vatican to Hindus on the festival Diwali and to Buddhists for the feast of Vesakh / Hanamatsuri are powerful symbolic gestures of goodwill on behalf of the Church as it steps forward with greater awareness of the increasing diversity in the world.

The twenty-first-century face of religion is constantly changing with the rise of Pentecostalism in the United States and Islam in Europe. This has raised new challenges and opportunities for Catholicism to enter into interreligious dialogue in the pluralism that characterizes our global community. Pluralism, however, is not merely the presence of diversity but the engagement with it that proves most fruitful. Going beyond tolerance—which does not make any intellectual demands on our knowledge of different doctrinal beliefs of non-Christian faiths—pluralism seeks to remove the ignorance that underlies the stereotypes that lead to conflict. As mentioned earlier, *pluralism* means “holding our deepest theological commitment in relationship to one another, not in isolation but with a firm commitment to achieving common ground.” Lastly, there is an element of what Bishop Krister Stendahl coined “holy envy,” to bear witness to a belief, practice, or attitude of another religion that is not your own but that you admire and do not attempt to make yours. At the heart of dialogue is the ability to actively listen through prayer and reflection. The pontificates of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI have consequently positioned the Church to foster this commitment to dialogue and proclamation.

