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“Interreligious Dialogue at a Momentous Anniversary: Religious Educators Re-Imagining *Nostra Aetate* in Connecting, Disrupting, and Transforming Ways”

Abstract

The fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* challenges religious educators to examine the signs of the times and to imagine how this document is best taught in the face of interreligious bigotry, violence, ignorance, and indifference. Examining the postmodern landscape, this paper discusses ways to connect with the seminal points of this historic document while exploring new trajectories especially relevant for today.

Introduction

Celebrating its 50th anniversary this fall, Vatican II’s historic document, *Nostra Aetate*, ushered in a “Copernican revolution” in Jewish-Christian relations.¹ The “teaching of contempt,” which shaped the first 19 centuries of Jewish-Christian relations held the Jews responsible for Jesus’ death, justified persecution and hatred of Jews, and planted a fertile ground for the tragic consequences of the Holocaust. *Nostra Aetate* (NA) repudiated this “teaching of contempt,” and in its par. 4 replaced it authoritatively with three critical tenets: 1) Christians may in no way accuse Jews of deicide; 2) the covenant that God has with the Jews continues and was never revoked even though Jews do not believe in the divinity of Jesus; 3) Christians who seek to know and to understand Jesus need to learn about his Jewishness. These three fundamental points led John Pawlikowski to describe the impact of NA as a complete shift in the Church’s theological self-understanding.² Setting the stage for these critical reversals, NA reflects in par. 2 an inclusive and welcoming tone as it discusses the Church’s relationships with all non-Christian 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 and women.”³

Fast forward to 2015 and one recognizes that NA’s “sincere reverence” of non-Christian religions and, even more, the painful history of a Christian “teaching of contempt” of Jews is to a

¹ Gilbert S. Rosenthal, ed., *A Jubilee for All Time: The Copernican Revolution in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick) 2014.

² John T. Pawlikowski, “Vatican II’s *Nostra Aetate*,” in Gilbert S. Rosenthal, ed., *A Jubilee for All Time: The Copernican Revolution in Jewish-Christian Relations*, 21-33.

³ Pope Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate*, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html, 1965

great extent unknown to many college and graduate students of today. For this reason, as David Rosen notes, “the significance of the transformation is not fully grasped.”⁴ Elena Procaro-Foley shows that while the 1974 Guidelines *and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration “Nostra Aetate”* calls for religious education promoting a deeper understanding of Judaism, this mandate seems to have been largely ignored in Catholic secondary school curricula.⁵ At best, ecumenical and interreligious issues are presented as a final, elective option in documents such as the USCCB’s 2008 *Doctrinal Elements of a Curriculum Framework for the Development of Catechetical Materials for Young People of High School*.

Given both this scant attention to NA in ecclesial education curricula and also a large scale ignorance of the significance of NA in Jewish-Christian relations, and in interreligious dialogue as a whole, the role of religious education in the jubilee year of this document becomes quite formidable. Added to this reality are two contributing factors that shape the teaching of NA. One, religious violence often perpetrated by extremists of diverse backgrounds is on the rise; Jews, Christians, and Muslims, among others, are the victims of increasingly frequent violent hate crimes. With daily news reporting on religious-based hatred, the notion of progress in interreligious relations seems incredulous to many and certainly to the undergraduates, primarily first year students I teach. The Pew Forum (2014) noted that global hostilities involving religion reached a 6 year high in 2012, involving one-third of all countries and three-quarters of the world’s population.⁶ A second key phenomenon, piling in nature and gravity to the above-mentioned religious hatred, is the reality of the “Spiritual But Not Religious,” the fastest growing religious sensibility, according to Linda Mercadante⁷ and the Pew Forum.⁸ This seemingly ubiquitous self-identification, especially among young adults, has experienced a rapid burgeoning to the extent that, as Mercadante claims, “unbelief” in America exceeds Protestantism and, on a global level, constitutes the third largest religion in the world.

Meeting Young People Where They Are

The threefold scenario of ignorance of history, religious violence, and indifference towards/rejection of religion challenges the imagination of the religious educator who is confident that the teaching of NA is both relevant and significant “in our time.” With these three obstacles noted, insights of contemporary religious educators can help provide a trajectory that

⁴ David Rosen, “Fifty Years Since the Second Vatican Council,” in Gilbert S. Rosenthal, ed., *A Jubilee for All Time: The Copernican Revolution in Jewish-Christian Relations*, 3.

⁵ Elena Procaro-Foley, “Teaching, Learning, and Relationships: *Nostra Aetate* and Education,” in Gilbert S. Rosenthal, ed., *A Jubilee for All Time: The Copernican Revolution in Jewish-Christian Relations*, 189-206.

⁶ Pew Forum Newsletter, www.pewforum.org/2014/01/14/religious-hostilities-reach-six-year-high/

⁷ Linda Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious* (New York: Oxford University Press) 2014, 2.

⁸ Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012. “Nones” on the rise. Pew Research Center.

may prove useful in the teaching of NA. Noting what has become almost a rigid binary between religion and spirituality Kieran Scott argues that educators must “meet young people where they are,” while at the same time must “lead them out to where they can become.”⁹ How might the notion of meeting young people where they are help religious educators teach NA?

Complexity of Youth Voice

That very task of meeting students where they are, simple though it may seem, is rife with complexity. In their interviewing and analysis of “youth finding and claiming religious voice,” Mary Elizabeth Moore and Joseph Kyser speak to many factors of difference – personality, ethnicity, gender, religious affiliation, ability, social class, gender identification, and sexual orientation – that shape how youth might associate themselves within the larger religious sphere.¹⁰ These factors provide diverse lens by which youth might “come out religiously” in the pluralistic world in which they live. Their study speaks to the value of youth giving voice to how difference shapes who they are, the way they see the world and what they value deeply. These insights help to identify “the rich textures” and to provide the context – muddy as it may be - in which religious educators find themselves teaching NA now 50 years after its promulgation.

While young people may not be aware of the centuries of persecution Jews experienced at the hands of Christians, they can reflect on the bullying they may have experienced in their lives and that may have been provoked by their religion, class, disability or any number of factors. In addition young people are inevitably familiar with anti-bullying campaigns common to primary, middle and secondary schools. In no way do I suggest here that individual experiences of bullying can be compared to the attempt of the Nazis to annihilate a people, a religion, a culture, and a way of life. At the same time in meeting young people where they are, it is important to register with their assumptive worlds so that as educators one can open their minds and hearts to understand others. With this in mind, religious educators might imagine and devise pedagogical tools that push young people to name difference; these may include digital/written autobiographies, personal journals, or small group testimonies. These exercises might serve as catalysts for a deeper appreciation of the generations of contempt that Jews suffered and religious minorities continue to experience at the hands of extremists and bigots.

Provocative Cultural Symbols

Another strategy to meet young people where they are in the teaching of NA is to identify unitive and provocative cultural symbols that capture the students’ contemporary horizons of meaning. Patrick Manning notes that “between the extremes of lazy pluralism and exclusivism,” symbols can spur the imagination and foster new insight.¹¹ Drawing from David Tracy’s

⁹ Kieran Scott, “Inviting Young Adults to Come Out Religiously, Institutionally, and Traditionally,” in *Journal of Religious Education*, 109/4, 2014, 471.

¹⁰ Mary Elizabeth Moore and Joseph Kyser, “Youth Finding and Claiming Religious Voice: Coming Out Religiously in an Interreligious Multivalent World,” in *Journal of Religious Education*, 109/4, 2014, 455-468.

¹¹ Patrick R. Manning, “Engaging Our Symbols, Sharing Our World: Forming Young People Around Symbols for Participation in the Public Sphere,” in *Journal of Religious Education*, 109/4, 2014, 442.

insights about the symbols that have become “religious classics,” Manning emphasizes how symbols which are life and death matters can elicit profound meaning. Noting this evocative power, Manning also shares Paul Knitter’s claim that symbols, much more than doctrine, can bring people together.¹² Examples of classic symbols in Christianity are the cross and the altar table which, for the Christian, both point to the love and sacrifice as hallmarks of the faith. On the other hand, negative symbols of the swastika and the Confederate flag evoke the hatred and violence perpetrated by the Nazi party and the painful history of racism in the United States.

In teaching at a New York, Catholic college I am keenly aware of the event of 9/11/01 as a powerful symbol of the suffering and destruction that can be unleashed by bigotry and violence. It is not uncommon that one of my students is the son/daughter or niece/nephew of a fire fighter or World Trade Center employee who died that tragic day. My teaching of NA often falls within a week or so of 9/11. One strategy I have employed to “meet students where they are” and to provide a somewhat contemporary perspective on the context and importance of NA is to view “Divided We Fall,” a documentary produced by human rights lawyer activist Valerie Kaur, a Sikh woman, who details the violence done unto her people in the weeks and months following 9/11.¹³ The film demonstrates how Sikhs were singled out because of their turbans, some physically assaulted and taunted, and some murdered. When viewed in this light, this film helps to disrupt the popular image of 9/11 as a source of unity in the face of terrorism. While potentially raising up personal wounds that students have suffered in diverse ways, discussion of this subject helps to give focused attention to NA and particularly its concern for the contempt and discrimination Jews experienced.

Pedagogy of Dangerous Memory

Another religious educator whose insights help us consider ways to teach NA is Russell Butkus, who laments an amnesia common to contemporary, middle class U.S. Catholics and Protestants forgetful of their heritage as poor immigrants or religious refugees, suffering humiliation and discrimination.¹⁴ Writing before the emergence of the contemporary SBNR phenomenon, Butkus employs the language of theologian, Johann Baptist Metz, whose notion of “dangerous memory” captures the reality of Christian, post-Holocaust Europe¹⁵. Calling for a pedagogy of “dangerous memory,” Butkus advocates for a process of critical reflection on how people suffered to exercise the freedom to practice their religion in this country. Butkus believes that a conspicuous lack of reflection on the early Catholic and

¹² Ibid, 445.

¹³ Valerie Kaur, writer, and Sharat Raju, director, *Divided We Fall* (Milwaukee, Wn: New Moon Productions) 2006.

¹⁴ Russell A. Butkus, “Dangerous Memories: Toward a Pedagogy of Social Transformation,” in *Religious Education as Social Transformation*, edited by Allen J. Moore (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press) 1989, 201-233.

¹⁵ See Johann Baptiste Metz, *The Emergent Church, the Future of Christianity in a Postbourgeois World* (New York: Crossroads) 1981.

Protestant social justice and labor efforts constitutes a significant gap in theological and seminary education.¹⁶

Butkus' pedagogy of "dangerous memory" involves the second and third movements of Thomas Groome's shared praxis model.¹⁷ Groome's second movement consists of critical reflection on the current and past influences that shape an individual's assumptive world. During this stage, one considers prevailing myths and cultural influences in order to, as Butkus claims, "uncover the controlling interests and ideologies that constitute one's present situation."¹⁸ Inquiry into personal and family heritage of suffering and discrimination, Butkus suggests, may be effective exercises in this second stage.¹⁹ The discussion above on bullying and the complexity of youth voices addresses the concerns of the second stage of Groome's pedagogy as employed by Butkus.

In Groome's third movement of shared praxis, participants reflect on the Story/Vision of the tradition. As utilized in Butkus's justice education model, this movement engages participants in critical analysis and "remembrance" of subversive elements of the Christian story of suffering and freedom, including biblical narratives, theological approaches to justice, and social/historical periods of discrimination. In this section, the scholarship of Mary Boys, John Pawlikowski, and Philip Cunningham, among others, can help to unpack the "teaching of contempt."²⁰ In discussing this "contempt" Boys elaborates on the long history of the Christian deicide charge against Jews and the rampant supersessionism that is reflected in the writings of bishops and theologians such as St. Augustine, St. John Chrysostom, and Martin Luther.²¹ This notion of supersessionism, the belief that the New Testament negates any validity and significance of the Old Testament, is clearly depicted in medieval art such as the Christian iconography renderings of Synagoga and Ecclesia, the latter conquering and defeating the former.²² "If God has more than one blessing," Boys writes, "we need to fashion new images of Synagoga and Ecclesia." She continues to say, "The image of Jews and Christians as partners in witness and work is a new vision. It reverses nearly two thousand years of church teaching and popular religiosity." As students reflect on the Story/Vision of the tradition, as proposed by

¹⁶ Butkus, 206.

¹⁷ Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers) 1991, 220-227.

¹⁸ Butkus, 222.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 226.

²⁰ See Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston) 1964.

²¹ Mary Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York: Paulist Press, Stimulus) 1999.

²² *Ibid*, 6.

Groome and Butkus, serious attention needs to be dedicated to the literature of Jewish-Christian dialogue that uncovers the subversive history of repression and discrimination against Jews.

The final component of this third movement Butkus calls “field experience,” which challenges participants to “an experience of contrast” involving personal interaction with people who experience suffering and injustice.²³ Butkus claims that the classroom alone is not enough to challenge students to the reflection and action required to effect social transformation. In my own teaching of NA, I often begin with a story about my first interaction with a holocaust survivor, a hospital patient I met as a Clinical Pastoral Education student. In recovery from an aortic valve replacement, Helena spoke about her interactions with the Nazis as if they happened yesterday. “The Nazis,” she said, “they were swines.” She shared with me that her family was killed at the camps and then, complimenting me for being kind and attentive to her, she questioned with an intent eye and raspy whisper what made some people good and others evil. Now almost thirty years later my conversation with Helena and her sincere inquiry into this fundamental question of theodicy remains with me and beckons me to ask that same question with her while the victims of the holocaust are very much part of my consciousness.

For me that “field experience” was truly “an experience of contrast” in which my assumptive world was thoroughly challenged and, in that discomfort, I was compelled to imagine the life perspective of someone who suffered the Holocaust. I would propose as well that through academic service-learning similar types of field experiences can be made available to students and, if structured well, can help students ask important questions and take action against injustice. In many parts of the world students have little access to interaction with Jews. However, this is not the case in many of the large cities of the United States. In these settings, there are opportunities to engage oral history projects through nursing homes and community centers. Such service-learning experiences with elderly Jews can especially enlighten contemporary students, unfamiliar with history of contempt and perhaps rarely exposed to people faithful their whole lives to a religious tradition. Furthermore, such direct interaction with Jews fulfills an intention of NA, that in order to understand Jesus people need to appreciate Judaism in its depth and practice.

Leading Young People to Where They Can Become

A key emphasis in this paper has been to “meet young people where they are,” but an education in the truest sense of the word must “lead people out,” and, as Scott says, “lead them out to where they can become.”²⁴ Groome’s “shared praxis” model and Butkus’ “dangerous memory” pedagogy conclude with invitations for thoughtful and active praxis in the world. As Groome says, “Whatever the form or level of response invited, the practical intent of the dialogue in movement 5 is to enable participants – by God’s grace working through their own discernment and volition – to make historical choices about the praxis of Christian faith in the world.”²⁵ Groome and Butkus propose then an education that produces reflective action. To

²³ Butkus, 228

²⁴ Scott, 471.

²⁵ Groome, 148/

relate this notion to our teaching of NA in a postmodern context, Leonard Sweet's *Postmodern Pilgrims* (2000) also provides some helpful context.²⁶ Noting that many educators are schooled in modernity and thus trained in historical-critical methods of textual analysis, Sweet says, "Western Christianity went to sleep in a modern world governed by the gods of reason and observation. It is awakening to a postmodern world open to revelation and hungry for experience."²⁷ He thus names postmodernity an EPIC culture that is experiential, participatory, image-driven, and connected. Mirroring Sweet, Mercadante's findings from her extensive interviews with people who identify as SBNR also show that people seek out spiritual connectedness and experiential understanding of how transcendence effects their daily lives.²⁸

Given Mercadante's research and Sweet's challenge to embrace a culture that is EPIC, it is fitting then that experiential pedagogies might be applied in the process of teaching NA. Service-learning has been touched upon as a method of learning within this school of experiential pedagogy. Another pedagogy could involve students re-writing NA for the current time period. Such an activity challenges students to understand the spirit and intent of NA, "discern the signs of the times,"²⁹ and to engage in a creative work aware of the social, religious, and theological tensions. To re-write NA forces students to face up to the current issues of religious violence that certainly affects all of the monotheistic religions "of the Book," but extends to just about every religious tradition in the globe. This exercise also can trigger a serious evaluation of what "sincere reverence" of diverse religious traditions really means and how one can embrace one's own religious tradition while appreciating the "ray of Truth" in another. This assignment may help students gain a new appreciation of the unity of spirituality and religion and perhaps shed the tendency to separate the two. Scott proposes that the spiritual and the religious are inextricably intertwined and that the SBNR refrain might be reframed into another "mantra" that says "I'm spiritually religious and religiously spiritual"³⁰ Re-writing NA for the current time might help students appreciate more clearly both the distinctions and connections between religion and spirituality.

Conclusion

Too often the church is deemed irrelevant to the lives of young people and out of touch with their experience. For many young people its teachings are often seen as unchangeable and archaic so much so that one can easily be skeptical about the future of the church. Studying *Nostra Aetate* in creative and imaginative ways can help to disrupt a pre-conceived notion of church and reveal a church instrumental in transforming the relationships between Christians and Jews. Fostering critical understanding and hopefulness such teaching of *Nostra Aetate* can help to equip young people with a depth and appreciation necessary to embrace the complexity of interreligious dialogue in a fractured world.

²⁶ Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims* (Nashville, Tn: B&H Publishing Group) 2000.

²⁷ Ibid, 28.

²⁸ Mercadante, 72-73

²⁹ Pope Paul, VI. *Gaudium et Spes*. (Vatican City) 1965, par. 4.

³⁰ Scott, 476.

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