

Commemorating *Nostra Aetate*

The Cardinal Hume Lectures, Heythrop College

Over the last couple of years there have been a considerable number of celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, the 'Declaration on the Church's Relations to Non-Christian Religions,' reflecting the importance of this document in the life of the Church. Itself a product of the 'dialogue and collaboration' that *Nostra Aetate* commends, the Centre for Christianity and Interreligious Dialogue at Heythrop College, University of London, dedicated the 2004 Cardinal Hume lectures to the study of Catholic encounter with the four religious traditions mentioned by name in the Declaration.

Nostra Aetate shaped subsequent Catholic reflection on other religions in two distinct ways. Firstly, it established the guiding principles for a theology of other religions, in which the unity of humanity and the unity of the divine saving plan are affirmed. In various ways all the religions of the world represent a common human search for meaning and fulfilment, and in their answers reflect the one saving outreach of the Trinity. Secondly, the document pointed to specific features of other religions that establish a relation with the Church and might serve as a basis for 'dialogue and collaboration' between Christians and members of other religions.

Both aspects have been developed in the flourishing of engagement with other religions since the Second Vatican Council. The first is manifest in the search for ever more adequate theological paradigms to express the relationship between the Church and each religion. The second is manifest both in the work of interreligious dialogue itself in its different forms and in the promotion of inculturation, in which there is an exploration of new expressions for Christian faith and practice through adoption of the intellectual, spiritual and social traditions fostered within other religions. These themes are themselves developed in the papers that have emerged from the Cardinal Hume lectures.

John McDade S.J., the Principal of Heythrop College, considers the evolution in theological reflection on the Church's relation with Judaism that *Nostra Aetate* brought about. He argues that, instead of a supersessionist account in which the covenant with the Jews is taken

to be replaced by the new covenant brought about by the coming of Christ, Catholics might better think of one covenant, which continues to have two valid expressions, one in the Torah and the Jewish people, another in Christ and the Church.

Anthony O'Mahony looks at the concerns and discussions that resulted in the statements on Islam in *Lumen Gentium* and *Nostra Aetate*. He then offers a detailed exegesis of these passages, set against Muslim belief. He stresses both the radical newness of the Church's position on Islam as it establishes common ground between Christians and Muslims, as well as its caution, avoiding issues that remain deeply divisive, such as the status of Muhammad.

Martin Ganeri O.P. examines the search for an Indian Christianity and how intellectual and spiritual inculturation also entails critical encounter with the social and ethical traditions of Hinduism. He argues that inculturation into the theology and spirituality of Advaita Vedanta, which dominated Catholic encounter with Hinduism for most of the twentieth century, now faces considerable challenge. He suggests that a new emphasis on social concerns in India points to a different inculturation into the traditions of *bhakti*, devotional theistic Hinduism.

Michael Barnes S.J. looks at Catholic engagement with Buddhism especially in the monastic and contemplative encounter, in the 'dialogue of religious experience.' He argues that 'the real value of this particular engagement lies in its capacity to make Christians reflect on the *nature of dialogue itself* – and indeed on the nature of religion.' Buddhism challenges Catholic theological reflection to take seriously the limits of religious language, but also to wonder at and contemplate in silence the Divine Word who has spoken to humanity.

Martin Ganeri OP