

All the Nations? Orthodox Theology in the Wake of *Nostra Aetate*

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Any Orthodox reckoning with nationalism must include a reckoning with antisemitism. The term “nationalism” as defining a particular ideological and political phenomenon belongs to the newest history, as does the modern understanding of religion as a set of beliefs and customs. The concept of national self-determination is ancient, however, and so is its connection to religious identity. The tribal religion of ancient Israel has for centuries been a defining identity of the Hebrews, sustaining them as a nation even as they were separated from their land yet remained linked to it. One might have supposed that the development of monotheism from a tribal Israelite religion into the universal faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam would have propelled their adherents beyond national identities. Yet on the contrary, national and religious identities have remained inextricably linked.

The development of modern nationalism in nineteenth-century Europe paralleled the coming to term of the poisonous fruit of antisemitism. This term was coined in 1879 by the German journalist Wilhelm Marr to designate anti-Jewish campaigns, and refers specifically to the hatred of Jews. Notwithstanding its modern etymology, antisemitism has haunted Christianity for most of its existence. It is much like the tares in the Lord’s parable. Both Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity were born from the ashes of Second Temple

Judaism, and the bitter fight over claims to religious truth left Christians with many negative portrayals of Judeans and their leaders in our scriptural texts and hymnody. For instance, Christian texts are almost uniformly negative toward the Pharisees, who are the fathers of modern Rabbinic Judaism (Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus are notable for breaking with their compatriots). More importantly, while the writers of the Gospels and the Epistles used the word “Jews” from within the context of both the Jewish tradition and the nation of Israel, its later use in Christianity would serve to define the people inherently opposed to Christ and the Church “from the beginning.” Orthodox hatred of Jews cannot be divorced from the frequent charge of deicide in the hagiography of Holy Week. Indeed, studies of the history of Jewish pogroms note their frequent proximity to Holy Friday and Pascha.

The stateless status of the Jews after the destruction of the Second Temple and their existence as eternal aliens within European societies meant that the nineteenth-century development of European national consciousness continued to exclude the Jews from the newly-defined Christian nations. This exclusion, together with a persistent narrative that slandered Jews as the scapegoats of European society, developed into blame for the devastation wrought by the First World War, and made conditions ripe

¹ See “Memo on Spelling of Antisemitism” (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, 2015), https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/sites/default/files/memo-on-spelling-of-antisemitism_final-1.pdf.

² Sergei Hackel, “The Relevance of Western Post-Holocaust Theology to the Thought and Practice of the Russian Orthodox Church,” *Sobornost, incorporating Eastern Churches Review* 20.1 (1998): 20. Also see Peter Kenez, “Pogroms and White Ideology of the Russian Civil War,” in *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, ed. John Klier and Shlomo Lambroza, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 306.

for the Shoah—the catastrophic genocide of over six million Jews under the Nazi regime—as well as the systematic killing of other minorities and any who assisted them. The libelous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which have been nourishing hatred of the Jews for over one hundred years and served as an ideological justification for their systematic persecution and extermination by the Nazis, were fabricated in Orthodox Russia around 1902. To be sure, some Orthodox in the Nazi-occupied lands and in the Russian diaspora in Western Europe assisted Jews during World War II, even to their own suffering, imprisonment, and death. Saint Maria (Skobtsova), Saint Dimitri Klepinin, and their community in Paris are among the many named and unnamed “righteous among the nations.” However, unlike other Christian denominations, the Orthodox Church has never attempted to reconcile its history with the Holocaust. Coming to terms with nationalism also requires articulating an attitude toward other religions that is consistent with Orthodox teaching about God, love, and anthropology. The dearth of Orthodox engagement with these matters becomes starkly apparent when one attempts to examine the Orthodox response to the landmark document of the Second Vatican Council *Nostra Aetate*, the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*. The Orthodox have, in fact, more or less ignored it.

Nostra Aetate first addresses East Asian religions—Hinduism and Buddhism explicitly, Taoism, and Confucianism implicitly—which are philosophically most unlike Christianity, and gradually moves closer, finally spending the second half of the document addressing Christianity’s closest relative, Judaism. In every non-Christian religion, the council fathers find something true to affirm. In address-

ing Judaism, however, *Nostra Aetate* not only affirms the common ground and common heritage shared by Christians and Jews, but also discusses antisemitism, as well as the relation of the Judaic covenant to salvation in Christ.

Peter Bouteneff, in his contribution to the book *The Future of Interreligious Dialogue*, notes that a couple of options are open to him in presenting an Orthodox response to *Nostra Aetate*. He says he could critique Catholic ecclesiology or explore Orthodox attitudes toward the declaration, but he does not even mention surveying previous Orthodox responses to *Nostra Aetate*, perhaps because such a survey would expose how little Orthodox thinking on interreligious dialogue, such as it is, has acknowledged the declaration’s existence. In the introduction to the same book, Charles L. Cohen, one of the editors, writes that Protestants have often dismissed *Nostra Aetate* and interreligious dialogue altogether and then laments dryly, “The Orthodox have done even less”!

In a recent survey of Orthodox theology on the subject of other religions by Orthodox Archpriest John Garvey, the only reference to the Second Vatican Council comes in a discussion of Saint Cyprian’s famous formula, “*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*” (outside the Church there is no salvation). Garvey summarizes this attitude by saying:

The Protestant who says that no one can be saved who has not accepted Christ as a personal savior; the anti-Vatican II Catholic who believes that those who are not Catholics of the strictest (and these days anti-papal) sorts cannot be saved; or the Orthodox who believe that there is no truth to be found anywhere beyond the boundaries of the Orthodox

³ Shoah is the term Jews use to name the Nazis’ Final Solution. This Hebrew word is a scriptural term meaning “destruction” or “catastrophe.” “The Holocaust: Definition and Preliminary Discussion,” https://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/holocaust/resource_center/the_holocaust.asp.

⁴ A honorific used by the State of Israel for the non-Jews who have labored on saving Jews from the Nazis and their allies.

⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, proclaimed by Pope Paul VI, October 28, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

⁶ Peter C. Bouteneff, “Nostra Aetate: Views from a Sibling on Inclusivism and Pluralism,” in *The Future of Interreligious Dialogue: A Multi-Religious Conversation on Nostra Aetate*, ed. Charles L. Cohen, Paul F. Knitter, and Ulrich Rosenhagen (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017), 143.

⁷ Charles L. Cohen, “Introduction: Some Declarations

Church are all inheritors of this [Cyprianic] tradition.

Garvey's survey thoroughly favors inclusivism—it uses Saint Justin Martyr's notion of *logos spermatikos* as its framework, inspiring its title *Seeds of the Word: Orthodox Thinking on Other Religions*. Maybe Garvey or his editors wanted to avoid the appearance of importing a non-Orthodox perspective, but *Seeds of the Word* seems to overlook if not ignore Vatican II's momentous pivot from exclusivism to inclusivism, which cannot but have had an impact on Orthodox theologies of inclusivism, especially given the increased dialogue between Orthodox and Roman Catholics in the late twentieth century.

As few and far between as they are, several Orthodox treatments of *Nostra Aetate* and of relations with other religions can be examined. First, the talk by Father Sergei Hackel at a Saint Petersburg conference on "Theology after Auschwitz," in which he leans heavily on *Nostra Aetate* for inspiration (especially the second half of the declaration, dealing with the Church's relation to Judaism); second, the aforementioned article by Peter Bouteneff; and finally, the brief statement of the Great and Holy Council of the Orthodox Church at Crete in 2016 on the Orthodox attitude toward other religions.

"Theology After Auschwitz"

In a recent article in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Harold Smith examines whether the Orthodox theological attitude with respect to Judaism can be properly described as "supersession." He argues that supersession is not a term or category used by Orthodox theologians, although the classic Orthodox teaching that the nations have been grafted into the Church of Israel in a single covenant

could be understood as supersession, depending on the definition used. Throughout his essay, he engages Catholic theology on the Church's relation to Judaism, but he never specifically mentions *Nostra Aetate*. Indeed, he only implicitly addresses it when he quotes from Sergei Hackel's 1998 essay, "The Relevance Of Western Post-Holocaust Theology to the Thought and Practice of the Russian Orthodox Church," presented at the second conference in Saint Petersburg on "Theology After Auschwitz and Theology After the GULAG."

In his essay, Hackel draws explicitly on *Nostra Aetate* as a model for Russian Orthodox theology in understanding the proper place of "theology after Auschwitz." His main argument is that Russian theology has lagged far behind its Roman Catholic counterpart, in particular, in addressing its own deficiencies related to Jews and particularly the Shoah. In making his case, he positively evaluates the declaration's implicit rejection of supersessionism and its embracing attitude toward Jews. Hackel sees the Shoah as the impetus for Vatican II to address Christian relations with the Jews. He quotes Cardinal Willebrands, who wrote, "After the Shoah . . . we have to make every effort of cleansing Catholic thought of any residue of religious anti-Judaism or antisemitism, because we have seen the abyss of horror into which hatred for the Jewish people exploded into our midst in Europe."

Hackel uses Vatican II's embrace of Jews as brothers and sisters in the declaration as a starting point to examine why the Russian Orthodox Church hesitates in following suit. Among other problems, he identifies anti-Jewish patristic homilies, such as Chrysostom's *Adversus Iudaeos*,

on the Relation of the Non-Christian Religions to the Church," in *The Future of Interreligious Dialogue*, 6.

⁸ John Garvey, *Seeds of the Word: Orthodox Thinking on Other Religions*, ed. Peter Bouteneff, Foundations Series 2 (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2005), 88.

⁹ Harold Smith, "Supersession and Continuance: The Orthodox Church's Perspective on Supersessionism," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 49.2 (2014): 269–70.

¹⁰ Hackel, "Post-Holocaust Theology," 7–25.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹² Johannes Cardinal Willebrands, "The Impact of the Shoah on Catholic-Jewish Relations," in *Church and Jewish People* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 169. Cf. Hackel, "Post-Holocaust Theology," 10.

anti-Jewish canons, and the pointed anti-Jewish rhetoric of the Holy Week hymnography as inhibiting recognition of the importance of a theological conversion in the wake of the Shoah. It is worth noting that Hackel avoids blaming the Church for antisemitism—although it is clear that church members, from laity to hierarchs, have been responsible for encouraging and furthering it—so his call for a new perspective stops short of a call to repentance.

Hackel's essay only draws on the second half of *Nostra Aetate*, the half that deals with the Church's relationship to Judaism. His paper focuses on how theology has affected Christian and specifically Russian Orthodox relations with Judaism. Orthodox relations toward other religions are excluded from the paper's scope by its topic and audience.

By contrast, Peter Bouteneff initially focuses on the first half of *Nostra Aetate* but also addresses *Nostra Aetate*'s second half, on Judaism. The context for his discussion is an extended account of the push toward pluralism and of the theological reasons for maintaining an inclusivist attitude toward other religions. Bouteneff generally regards the content of the declaration positively. His analysis points out some of the background of *Nostra Aetate*'s implicit inclusivism (such as Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christianity," the idea that non-Christians are saved in Christ even if they do not explicitly follow his teachings), some of its results in theological discourse and interreligious dialogue (especially the move among some theologians toward pluralism), and first millennium patristic sources shared by Orthodox and Catholic traditions which point toward inclusivism. Based on this

analysis of both *Nostra Aetate* and the shared patristic heritage, Bouteneff confidently casts the Orthodox and Catholic Churches as partners in interreligious dialogue, in substantial agreement on the main issues.

Bouteneff's central thesis is that Christ is the cornerstone of Catholic and Orthodox approaches to truth and salvation. He identifies a question central to Christian inclusivism: "Is it possible to see Jesus Christ as the unique Son of the Living God, to identify Jesus' name as the one by which all are saved, and remain genuinely open to truth and wisdom everywhere, and to do so without being patronizing, hateful, or violent, and without minimizing the full impact of that truth?" He grounds his analysis in *Nostra Aetate*'s identification, following the Gospel of John, of truth wherever it is found with the person of Jesus Christ, who is "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6, cited in *Nostra Aetate* 2). It is this identification of truth with the person of Jesus, both in *Nostra Aetate* and in the shared patristic and conciliar inheritance of the first millennium, that for Bouteneff mitigates against pluralism, which, as he observes, requires diluting the distinctive teachings of each religion until they are alien to their adherents:

Pluralism necessitates a sometimes elemental realignment of the faiths that it purports to respect. Thus altered (Muhammad is not "the seal of the prophets," Jesus is not the unique Son of God in any literal sense, the unity of the Hindu pantheon is identical to that of the Trinity), these faiths are rendered all but unrecognizable to their main adherents, through whatever theological work or demythologizing needs to be done in order to denude them of their universal claims. Such distortions could not withstand Catholic Christianity, which is why *Nostra*

¹³ Bouteneff, "Views from a Sibling," 154.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.



Cardinal Augustin Bea, one of the principal authors of *Nostra Aetate*, with Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who played a significant role in drafting the document.

Aetate, as a Roman Catholic conciliar text, takes an inclusivist and not a pluralist position.

Bouteneff recognizes that *Nostra Aetate* teaches a thoroughly Catholic Christology even while reaching out to other religions, thus marking it as inclusive rather than pluralist.

The Holy and Great Council

The year after the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* saw the culmination of nearly as many years of preparation in the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church. With so much preparation and anticipation over the previous decades, it is perhaps not surprising that the event would not match inflated expectations. Even so, everything about the Council strikes even the most optimistic believer as disappointing, to say the least.

I close with an examination of the council's document *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World* because it is here one might expect to see a recognition of the work of a "sister church," a designation sometimes used in the Orthodox-Catholic dialogue. No mention is made of *Nostra Aetate* anywhere in the text. Although, as Peter Bouteneff

recognized, *Nostra Aetate* made a bold stand in recognizing truth wherever it may be found as a profoundly Christological commitment, the Orthodox council barely acknowledges other religious communities. Its limited mention of them does not rise to the full-throated acknowledgment of the common goals and the opportunities for common work one finds in *Nostra Aetate*.

The council's *Mission* document grounds its vision in the dignity of the human person (§A), which warrants cooperation with others of good will outside the Christian faith.

As a presupposition for a wider co-operation in this regard the common acceptance of the highest value of the human person may be useful. The various local Orthodox Churches can contribute to interreligious understanding and co-operation for the peaceful co-existence and harmonious living together in society, without this involving any religious syncretism.

We are convinced that, as God's fellow workers (1 Cor. 3:9), we can advance to this common service together with all people of good will, who love peace that is pleasing to God, for the sake of human society on the local, national, and international levels. This ministry is a commandment of God (Matt. 5:9).

The dignity of the human person requires respect for human freedom, but the exercise of that freedom entails responsibility. The evils resulting from abused human freedom include "racism; the arms race and wars, as well as the resulting social catastrophes; the oppression of certain social groups, religious communities, and entire peoples; social inequality; the restriction of human rights in the field of freedom

¹⁶ *The Mission of the Orthodox Church in Today's World* (Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, 2016), <https://www.holycouncil.org/-/mission-orthodox-church-todays-world>, §A:3-4.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, §B:2.

of conscience—in particular religious freedom,” and a host of other social evils, creating “infinite anxiety for humanity today.” Peace and justice are identified as primarily Christian virtues, in that they flow from the ministry of the Church as the mystical Body of Christ. “At the same time,” the document states,

the Orthodox Church considers it is her duty to encourage all that which genuinely serves the cause of peace (Rom. 14:19) and paves the way to justice, fraternity, true freedom, and mutual love among all children of the one heavenly Father as well as between all peoples who make up the one human family. She suffers with all people who in various parts of the world are deprived of the benefits of peace and justice.

Thus, the document condemns violence and especially war. It also condemns discrimination of any kind: “The Orthodox Church confesses that every human being, regardless of skin color, religion, race, sex, ethnicity, and language, is created in the image and likeness of God, and enjoys equal rights in society.” Therefore, she rejects any discrimination based on these differences among human beings, since such discrimination is based in a false “difference in dignity between people.” The document concludes with a condemnation of economic and social injustices.

I have dwelt extensively on this document because it is here, in teaching on the Church’s mission in the modern world, that the fathers of the council decided to address the question of working together with other religious communities. It is highly laudable that they recognized the need to work together with all people of good will for peace and justice in the world. Even so, to bring this dis-

cussion back to *Nostra Aetate*, this document pales next to the power of an ancient Christian Church recognizing what is good and glorifying to God in non-Christian religions and condemning antisemitism clearly and by name.



The documents of the Council of Crete were drafted in preparatory committees over the course of several decades. It seems clear from the final text that some of the authors were disposed to acknowledge the good in other religions, but there was also wide resistance among Orthodox hierarchs to the danger of “religious syncretism.” This range of opinions reflects the attitudes of the council fathers’ respective flocks. In its encyclical, the council also identifies ethnophyletism as “an ecclesiological heresy,” one that not only violates the fundamental principle of Christian love, but threatens to undermine the very nature of the Church. But neither the encyclical nor the *Mission of the Church* document addresses antisemitism directly. Especially in view of the resurgence of violent forms of nationalism, both in the world and among the Orthodox, the pastors of the Church must be forthright in censuring violence, racism, and antisemitism.

The example of the Roman Catholic Church could be instructive. Vatican II’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christians Religions, *Nostra Aetate*, clearly condemned antisemitism while turning the Church away from the theological sources of this problem. Orthodox theologians will doubtless debate the merits of the Roman Catholic answers. How are the Sinai covenant and the covenant in Christ related? How would an answer drawn from Eastern sources address their relation?

¹⁸ Ibid., §C:5.

¹⁹ Ibid., §E:2.

²⁰ Archbishop Job (Getcha) of Telmessos, “Towards the Council,” trans. A. Krochak, <https://www.holycouncil.org/towards-the-council>.

²¹ Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, *Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church* (Crete: Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church, 2016), §I:3.

These questions cannot be answered if no one is asking them. The question of other religions, too, is important if the Church is to address violence and racism.

The example of the Second Vatican Council also raises a related question: how to address the anti-Jewish texts of Holy Week as well as the many hymns condemning the “Hagiorites” and the “children of Ishmael,” that is, Muslims. Regarding the possibility of reforming the Byzantine rite Holy Week texts, Bert Groen has briefly surveyed some of the current inclinations: suppression of the anti-Jewish texts (favored by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew), removal of their Jewish content (favored by some European translators), and reinterpretation of the texts as condemning the listeners (“we are the Jews,” an approach favored by Metropolitan Kallistos Ware). No consensus for an appropriate solution has been reached so far.

More recently, Father Bogdan Bucur has addressed this question by focusing on the Christological content:

If and when liturgical corrections are to be applied, we would do well to avoid some of the well-meaning but, in my view, theologically inept solutions adopted by our separated brethren. More specifically, it is of the utmost importance to avoid replacing concrete references to God’s presence in the Old Testament (Passover, the Law at Sinai, the manna, the water from the rock) because this would dilute the Christological proclamation of the hymns: namely, that Christ

himself is the LORD (*Kyrios*) in the Exodus narrative.

However, Bucur does think that the specifically anti-Jewish content could be carefully excised. He asks, “What would be lost if, rather than chanting ‘when You were lifted up today, the Hebrew nation was destroyed,’ the Church would instead focus on the fact that with the Lord lifted up on the Cross, death is destroyed and all mankind is summoned to inherit immortality?” Is the good news for all the nations or not? The examples I discussed—the essays by Father Sergei Hackel and Peter Bouteneff along with the survey by Father John Garvey and the essay on supersessionism by Harold Smith—indicate a kind of ambivalence within Orthodox scholarship toward Vatican II’s declaration. Hackel and Bouteneff acknowledge it and they do so positively, sharing the same spirit of inclusivism that produced *Nostra Aetate*. Even so, these two are selected for analysis here *precisely* because they are the *exceptions*. Orthodox writers, even when they are persuaded that their tradition leans toward inclusivism regarding non-Christian religions, tend to ignore the landmark conciliar document in which the Roman Catholic Church shifted from exclusivism to inclusivism. Very few Orthodox writers seem to have taken on the task of a “theology after Auschwitz.” Orthodox theologians need to articulate anew how Christ can be the fulfillment of the hope of Israel in a way that appropriately acknowledges the Apostle’s doctrine regarding Judaism: that “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29). ✱

²²Bert Groen, “Old Testament Saints and Anti-Judaism in the Current Byzantine Liturgy,” in Marcel Barnard, Paul Post, and Els Rose, eds., *A Cloud of Witnesses: The Cult of Saints in Past and Present*. (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 157–159.

²⁸Bogdan G. Bucur, “The Murderers of God, the Lawless Nation of the Jews...’: Coming to Grips with Some of Our Holy Week Hymns,” *The Word*, 61.3 (April 2017): 17.

²⁹Ibid.



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