Thank you to Father Ryan for both his erudite remarks and the invitation to act as a respondent to his talk. I am grateful for the continued ability to participate in these conversations.

This particular topic is timely, not just because of the 50th anniversary of the *Nostra aetate*, but because of the recent visit of Pope Francis to New York City. After nearly three generations, we need to think about the ways in which we have taken action on the words of the text. Ultimately, we must remember that *Nostra aetate* was needed because of the words and actions that came before it. Here now is a chance to reflect on the words and actions that came after it.
I have little to add in direct commentary on the reference in *Nostra aetate* to Muslims. Father Ryan’s comments were comprehensive. Rather, I wish to discuss the weight of memory of Christian-Muslim engagement, the way it entangles us, and how we can move forward to a more durable community.

When the pope took the name Francis, many of us read it as a reminder of Saint Francis’ connection to Sultan al-Kamil in 13th-century Egypt. Not only was this pope committing to care of the poor, but to deep, meaningful, transformative engagement across religious boundaries.

The positive association with the name is a result of a cultural memory. At the same time that it carries positive connections, cultural memory also carries with it stigma and stereotypes.

When I refer to cultural memory, I mean the collective history that we share and which shapes us, and is not bound by individual memory. So, for example, when we hear the quote, “Give me liberty, or give me death,” we think immediately of Patrick Henry and the American Revolution. Although none of us was alive to have experienced that time, there is a powerful emotive connection that we feel, eliciting notions of patriotism. It is this communal knowledge that moves beyond facts, and determines our actions in ways that are not always obvious.

Ritual is an important engagement with cultural memory, as we attempt to explicitly call forth and engage with our shared history. Ritual also serves as a way to indicate who is “in” and who is “out” of our group. It is the embodiment of who we consider “us.” Theology is both the source and a product of ritual, and as we move away from explicit connections of theology and ritual, we are left with the cultural memory of who is “in” and who is “out.”

Perhaps one of the earliest Christian refutations of Islam is Saint John of Damascus’ (675-749) _Heresy of the Ishmaelites_. The title reveals much
of how Saint John positioned Islam against Christianity. It is first and foremost a heresy, not a true religion. More importantly, it is a heresy of the children of Ishmael, whom the Bible describes as “a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin” (Gen 16:12).

Muslims are not only deficient in religion, but are violent and will be at war with their Christian kin. One can also make a connection to the fraternal conflict that Dr. Teter discussed in her remarks.

Saint John was present at the expansion of the Arab empire after the death of Muhammad, even possibly serving in the Arab-Muslim court. His experience reflected the emergence of a new religious movement with which he was directly familiar. However, many of the tropes he relied on for constructing Islam as an Ishmaelite heresy survived him, even amongst those with little contact with Muslims.

Dante, the author of *The Divine Comedy*, makes claims of Prophet Muhammad and his cousin and son-in-law Ali in Canto XXVIII of *The Inferno*. The eighth circle of hell contains schismatics, those who break from the true church, which by Dante’s time means the Roman Catholic Church. The punishment of Muhammad and Ali is to be split down the middle, reconstructed, and split again.

The idea of Islam as a heresy and schism from the Catholic Church developed in the 600 years between Saint John and Dante. Muhammad was an anti-pope, who sought to undermine the true teachings of the Church, and so he was consigned to the realm of schismatics.

Saint John’s and Dante’s portrayals of Islam raise the specter of how we define ourselves against others. In many ways, we only know who we are by who we are not. Within that context, we define not only who the Other is, but who we are, and there are only a few ways by which we can do so. If we think about who the Other is, he/she is
• Violent.
• Lacking culture.
• Patriarchal/misogynistic.
• Illogical/superstitious.
• Dirty.

By starting with the premise that Arab-Muslims are the children of Ishmael, the categories of violent, lacking culture, and dirty are quickly attached to Islam. With Dante, we see how the religion of Muslims is illogical because it does not recognize Jesus as divine, nor the authority of the pope. It is important to note that this type of categorization is not unique to Muslims. In fact, one can easily see the connections between what we now refer to as “anti-Semitism,” and “Islamophobia.” It is the same pool of symbols that one draws from in constructing the Other.

These are pre-modern examples of anti-Islam rhetoric. However, the memory persists in the modern period, through the Enlightenment, and outside of Catholicism. Many of our revered Enlightenment thinkers spoke poorly of both Judaism and Islam, transforming the theological mistrust of the Other into a matter of state policy and national belonging.

In the American context, the legend of the tribe of Ishmael brings together notions of who is worthy of welfare with concerns around race and religion. We even see the return of Marcionism, but applied to Muslims. Retired Lt. Gen. William Boykin, who is believed to have authorized the abuses of Abu Ghraib, said that Allah was an idol, and that his, Boykin’s God, was bigger than the God of Muslims.

At the same time, the study of religion, based on Enlightenment thinking and thus operating within a Christian framework, does not actually open ways of communication in a meaningful way. Based on the implicit premise that Christianity is the teleological religious endpoint for belief, other traditions are constructed and measured against Christianity. Will Herberg’s classic work, Protestant, Catholic, Jew even frames Protestantism as the norm to which American religion will structure itself.
Focusing on the Abrahamic traditions, we see that the way we construct the idea of how religions operate makes the category error of treating “similar” as the “same.” The independent logic of different Judaisms, of different Islams, and of different Christianities are effaced so that they are forced to function in the same ways, even though they are only similar. Massignon, whose scholarship is a monumental contribution to the field of Islamic Studies, exhibits his worldview by constructing the martyrdom of Hallaj as a Christ-like story, even calling his work *The Passion of Al-Hallaj*.

With this weight of cultural memory affecting not only how we subconsciously look at the world, but also how we study it, there seems to be a limit as to how we can participate in transformative engagement. Yet, the story of Saint Francis offers a way out of this morass: to listen without prejudice. Although his intent was to convert the sultan to Christianity, he also listened. So perhaps the way to move beyond what we have inherited is to focus on the commonality that Muslims and Christians share—Jesus—and listen to his common teachings.

In the Qur’an, Jesus is portrayed as a miracle worker, who breathes life into clay birds, and heals those with no other hope of healing. One of my favorite passages relating to Jesus is when he speaks from the cradle and says:

> Indeed I am a servant of Allah! He has given me the Book and made me a prophet. He has made me blessed, wherever I may be, and He has enjoined me to prayer and to be charitable as long as I live, and to be good to my mother, and He has not made me self-willed and wretched. Peace is to me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I am raised alive (19:30-33).

For Muslims, Jesus is a model of asceticism and radical love; a recognition that the acquisition of wealth and worldliness is inherently distancing from God, to whom we should always be grateful. Abu Abdullah al-Sufi (1254-1327) cites Jesus as saying, “Seeing this world is like wanting a
drink of sea water, for the more you drink the more thirsty you become until you die.”

It is a shared belief that our faiths call us to radically rethink the world, so that the emphasis is not on materiality, but on spirituality. The world is a reminder of God’s mercy and munificence, but it is also a trap to lure us away from remembering God. The poison and the antidote are one and the same; it is about how we choose to take it.

The 10th-century group, the Ikhwan as-Safa, has lengthy passages on Jesus and his disciples. They say that the disciples “put on patched garments and travelled with Christ from place to place.” They did this based on Jesus’ guidance to them:

Go to the kings and the far nations and tell them all that I have taught you, and call them to the same thing to which I have called you. Do not be afraid of them, and never fear them, for when I leave my humanity, I shall stand in the air on the right hand of my Father and your Father, and I shall be with you wherever you go, and I shall strengthen you with victory by the permission of my Father. Go to them and call them with gentleness; heal them and command them to do good and shun evil. Do that until you are killed, crucified or expelled from the land.

This teaching is not the most appealing on its surface, to go and be killed, or crucified, or exiled. Yet, it is the power of truth that Jesus relies on here, a truth that is enjoined by the Divine to be spread. In calling people to turn to God, to reject materialism, to help those in need, there can never be any fear. It is these actions that bring us to our true nature, and thus closer to God.

It is the prophetic vision of Jesus — who calls people to their true nature, who speaks truth to power, who shows that the trappings of the world are a trap — that is shared by our faith communities. It is the call to a more just, equitable society that we need to listen for from each other.
When Pope Francis held his interfaith gathering at Ground Zero, we could see it as an act carrying the weight of cultural memory, signifying Muslims as the violent Other. Yet, in listening to the words of the pope, we understand that he saw the location as transformative for our relationship to each other, telling us, “I trust that our presence together will be a powerful sign of our shared desire to be a force for reconciliation, peace and justice in this community and throughout the world,” which can only happen “if we uproot from our hearts all feelings of hatred, vengeance and resentment.”

It is in Pope Francis that we see an embodiment of the promise of *Nostra aetate*. It is a rejection of the worst part of the world and a commitment to the best of us to fulfill a vision of a more peaceful society. It is the transformation through acts, dependent on deep listening to each other, that is our challenge for the next 50 years.
NOTES


4 Adapted from the translation by Ali Quli Qarai.


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