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Catholic-Jewish Relations Since 'Nostra Aetate'

Christians and Jews share a common spiritual patrimony, and that heritage should foster mutual respect—said Vatican II. Since 1965, this goal has been partially achieved

Ten years ago the Second Vatican Council produced its statement on Jewish-Christian relations called *Nostra Aetate*. The tenth anniversary of the decree would seem a proper time to take stock of the progress we have made, the difficulties we are encountering and the hopes we have for the future.

First, what did the document actually say? The council declared that the covenant God made with the people of Israel, as recorded in their Scriptures, is irrevocable. The council also affirmed that the church is a partner in the covenant with the God of Israel. How the new people of the covenant, the church, stands to Judaism is not expressly sorted out. A good deal of further theorizing is possible. But one point should be stressed: the covenant with Israel has not been revoked.

This principle enunciated in *Nostra Aetate* means that the Old Testament relationship of the people of Israel to God still exists today. Consequently, any reprobation of Israel, any theory of the "wandering Jews," like that reflected in the reply of Pope Pius IX to Theodore Herzl's request for papal support for the early Zionist cause, is ruled out. Pius IX explained at that time that the Roman Catholic Church could not recognize modern Jews as a people because they had not accepted Christ and had therefore been dispersed by Divine Providence itself. The Council explicitly rejects such thinking as well as any thought of Jewish collective guilt for the death of Christ and all theories which might see the contemporary Jewish people as anything less than the chosen people of a divine covenant. The problem remains, however, of the exact nature of the relationship between the old Israel and the new Israel, the Old Testament and the New Testament. Various theories have been advanced in the last 10 years by both Jewish and Christian theologians.

In discussing the meaning of *Nostra Aetate*, that excellent encyclopedia of contemporary Roman Catholic theology, *Sacramentum Mundi* (Volume III, p.228), suggests the following formula: "The Church professes the ancient doctrine of the Jews, that the union of mankind under God's kingship will only take place when all men in one way or another belong to the seed of the unrevoked covenant and thus are rightful heirs of the Spirit." In some real sense the kingdom of God has come and is at hand in the reign of Christ. At the same time, in some sense the kingdom has not as yet reached its eschatological perfection.

Some Jews suggested that Christianity has a providential role in the spreading of the Jewish concept of monotheism and include Christians as members of the covenant given to Noah (Gen. 6:9). Jesus is frequently seen by some Jews as a great witness to the faith of Israel. Christian authors, like Gregory Baum, Rosemary Reuther and Monika Hellwig, have written on the significance of modern Judaism for Christianity. These authors reject the notion that the people of Israel were the people of God in the Old Testament but under the new covenant were replaced by the Church. Some Christian writers have suggested that since the coming of Christ there is only one people of God, Christians and Jews, and two covenants, one for the Christians and one for the Jews.

I find none of these answers satisfying. Faced with the certainty of both the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man, St. Thomas Aquinas suggested that God infallibly moves man to act freely—another way of saying: "I do not know the answer to this question." Perhaps this is where we are in regard to the question of the full significance of contemporary Judaism since the coming of Christ. I will sketch out some of the reasons for my doubts.

Vatican II ruled out any reprobation theories in regard to Judaism and affirmed the irrevocable character of the covenant of God with his people. Any possible theological basis for anti-Semitism in any form is totally repudiated. But what of contemporary Judaism? Does it have any contemporary validity? Was Judaism only a preparatory stage? Is it a second-class religion in relation to Christianity? These are some of the questions that face Christians today in the Jewish-Christian dialogue. I recommend an excellent survey article by J. P. Paw-

likowski entitled "The Theological Agenda of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue," which appeared in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Autumn, 1974).

I would find it hard to accept a theory that would affirm that Christ is the Saviour of all humankind except Jews. Vatican II recalled that we achieve salvation not as isolated individuals, but in societies. A Hindu, for instance, attains salvation partly because of the beneficial influences of Hindu society. Yet this does not explain the unique relation of Judaism to Christianity.

Perhaps it is best to leave the problem in the terms of the author of Romans, who considers Israel to be a mystery of the last times. I wonder if talk about first and second-class religions might not be asking the right question the wrong way. After all, religions do not exist by themselves. A religion does not walk around. People do—people who profess religions are what are real and significant. Perhaps, then, we ought to speak of first-class believers rather than second-class beliefs.

The new Vatican document on Jewish-Christian Relations, issued by Cardinal Jan Willebrands, president of the Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity and president of the New Commission for Religious Relations With Jews, advises Christians that they must "strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience." Christians must strive to learn how Jews define themselves. And Jews must strive to learn how Christians define themselves. Has there been perhaps too much talk about the Judeo-Christian heritage, as if there were not real differences between Christians and Jews? Are we unwilling to live with genuine pluralism in our day and age, despite all our protestations to the contrary?

There are, of course, difficulties in our dialogue. Christianity makes universal claims, while Judaism does not. Christianity has a mandate from its Founder to preach Jesus Christ to the world, as the Second Vatican Council declares (*Ad Gentes* No. 2). Judaism sees itself as a covenant for a particular people and does not have this same kind of missionary mandate. Yet if a particular religion, in the sense that I have described Judaism, cannot exist side by side with a universal religion, as I have described Christianity, are there not ominous implications even outside the Jewish-Christian dialogue? Islam is also a religion with universal claims, and Judaism will have to come to grips with Islam, if there is any hope of reconciliation in the Middle East.

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It is important for the Christian to understand Judaism so that he can understand the roots of his own religious heritage. It is not nearly so important for the Jew to understand Christianity, the offshoot, the daughter religion, in order that he, the Jew, can understand his own origins.

There is also the problem of numerical disproportion. There are relatively few Jews in the world and many more Christians. When a small group dialogues with a very large group, there are inherent logistical problems. It is like getting in bed with a friendly elephant. For this reason, I find the interreligious dialogue in Israel itself refreshing. There the Jews are "the establishment," the majority. Christians are a tiny minority. They are the ones who run the demonstrations for redress of grievances. They are the ones who denounce what they see as the moral shortcomings of the establishment. The Christians there begin really to understand what it is like to be a minority, to live in somebody else's milieu, to have another religion's holidays officially observed. Jews know all too well what it is like to live in Christian societies; Christians are now learning what it is like to live in a Jewish society, and I would have to say that their experience as a minority in Israel is a tremendous improvement upon the past experience of Jews living as minorities in Christian societies.

Now that we have seen something of what has been said, what has been done in the last 10 years? At the time of the council, Augustin Cardinal Bea, because of his particular interest in Jewish-Christian relations, created a special office to deal with this area within the Secretariat for Christian Unity; there was a recognition that relations with Jews should not be assigned to the Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions. Judaism's special relationships to Christianity were thus emphasized. Unfortunately, some saw this as a sign of proselytism.

In April, 1969, an international consultation of leading experts was held in Rome, and in these discussions the problem of proselytism was reviewed. The next year the same conference surveyed liturgical and catechetical texts in need of revision.

In 1969 the bishops belonging to the secretariat met to finalize the draft prepared on the subject of Jewish-Christian dialogue. A provisional draft of that statement was leaked to the press, disclosing that it contained a reference to the land of Israel in relation to modern Jews: "It would seem that Christians, whatever the difficulties they may experience, must attempt to understand and respect the religious significance of this link between the people and the land." That version of the document was never published, and one can only suppose it was the result, at least in part, of the opposition of Arab Christians who feared persecution in their home Islamic countries should such a statement be made by the Vatican. It also resulted in a somewhat unrealistic arrangement whereby the Unity Secretariat dealt with Jews only for reli-

gious purposes, while all political affairs concerning Israel were handled by the Secretariat of State.

In 1971 a Roman Catholic-Jewish liaison committee approved by the Pope was established, composed of five Jews and five Roman Catholics, who were commissioned to study the concepts of people and land in Jewish and Christian traditions. In 1974 the Holy See established two new commissions, one for Islam and the other for Judaism. The paper establishing the Jewish Commission, like the original Council document, again made no mention of the state of Israel and stressed the religious nature of all discussions. And finally in January of 1975, the long-awaited guidelines and suggestions for implementing the conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate* were issued. In addition to the points already mentioned concerning the necessity for Christian understanding of Jews in terms of their own self-definitions, the document called for an interpretation of the New Testament that would respect Jewish sensibilities.

During the 1973 war in the Middle East, the Arab Anglican rector of a church in Haifa had to suspend the recitation of Morning and Evening Prayer because they contained so many references in the psalms to the victory of Israel over its adversaries. The Arab congregation would have none of that, and the vestry approached him with the demand that unless he could find some psalms in which Arabs won, they did not want any more Morning or Evening Prayer.

It seems that while we cannot rewrite the Scripture, we can come to better understanding of it and be alert to the potential damage that can arise out of the indiscriminate and uninterpreted use of traditional language.

Even the concept of the chosen people can, if distorted, encourage a type of nationalistic arrogance that assigns everyone else to the status of second-class citizen. One of the worthwhile functions of the Jewish-Christian dialogue is for each religious group to draw up a list of its doctrines that might be potentially dangerous if misused or exaggerated when taken out of context.

As might have been expected, there was considerable criticism in the Israeli press of the guidelines because they made no mention of the state of Israel. The liaison committee met in its Fourth Plenary Session at Rome in January, 1975, a few days after the publication of the guidelines, and made similar observations. The omission of any reference to the Jewish concept of the land of Israel is in itself, it seems to me, a violation of the guidelines' call to understand Jews in terms of their own self-definition.

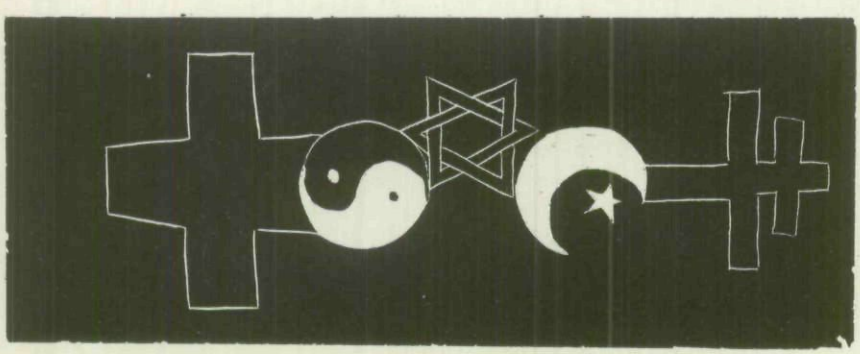
On the national level, a great deal of progress has been made in the last 10 years. The American Bishops' Sub-Commission on Jewish-Christian Relations was established in 1965, the very first of the national offices to be established. Since 1967 there has been a full-time executive secretary of the Secretariat for Jewish-Christian Relations in the person of Fr. Edward Flannery. Cardinal John Heenan established a similar commission in London in 1966. Such groups were also formed in 1967 in Belgium and in 1969 in France.

In 1973, the French hierarchy issued a set of guidelines that caused considerable comment. They stressed the link between the Jews and the land of Israel, acknowledged as a divine gift. They also affirmed the need for justice for Palestinian refugees and spoke of our common Christian-Jewish hope for the Messianic era. The debate that followed became so heated that the French bishops' committee had to issue an explanation a few months later. The controversy has continued to the present time.

The Dutch hierarchy's document, issued in 1970, blames the church for its failure to combat anti-Semitism, refers to Jews as a people and not merely a religious community, explains the link of Jewry with the land of Israel, speaks about God's everlasting covenant with His people, rejects proselytism and demands the exclusion of all anti-Jewish references in the liturgy as well as a catechesis that will do justice to the Hebrew Bible and to the vitality of Jewish religious life in the Christian era. The Italian and German hierarchies have not been as active in this area.

In the United States the bishops issued a major document in 1967 recommending dialogue and discouraging proselytism. The document recommends programs of education in Judaism on all levels of Christian education, common scholarly research and the examination of religious textbooks in collaboration with Protestants in matters concerning Jewish-Christian relations. The American guidelines make no explicit mention of the state of Israel.

In all programs of Jewish-Christian dialogue, the state of Israel continues to be the key concern of the participants. At an interreligious consultation on the Middle East in the fall of 1974, Rabbi Balfour Brickner, Interreligious Affairs Director of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, asserted that "the subject of Israel has now become the most divisive subject separating Jews and Christians in this country." Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin of Cincinnati, President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, told officials of the American Jewish Committee in a recent address in New York that Jews and Christians have a different view of the religious significance of Israel. But, he added: "What you do expect and what we must give you is a real understanding



of and a genuine respect for your belief in this matter. Insensitivity on our part for your convictions would be inexcusable."

The archbishop's statement was not unlike the answer of Fr. Pierre Marie de Contenson, O. P., Secretary of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, to questions about the omission of references to the land of Israel in the guidelines. He said it was not within the "competence" of the Roman Catholic Church to comment on the conception the Jews have of Judaism or of the relationship of the Jewish people to Israel.

Perhaps one must simply accept the fact that there are diverse understandings of the full significance of the modern state of Israel for Christians and Jews. What Christians need to do is to try to understand the significance of the land for Jews, even if they cannot share those beliefs. For a number of years since my initial visit to both the Arab side and the Israeli side in 1969, I have been concerned about the Middle East. I have always found biblical references dubious foundations for modern sovereigty. I do not accept the scriptural exegesis that seeks to resolve complex political conflicts of today on the basis of biblical texts.

By any definition of modern national legitimacy, however, the state of Israel has as much right to exist as any other nation, and more right than some, in terms of historic association with the land, the clear identity of its people, humanitarian need, the right of conquest, the contributions of its society. If Israel has no right to exist for these reasons, then there is no modern nation state that has the right to put up its flag, and the entire world can be exposed to endless and chaotic controversy over "Who got there first?" Will the last person alive decide the question? An Arab once shouted at me in a public meeting in Jerusalem, "You as a priest should know who got there first! Who gave the keys of the city to King David? It was Melchizedek and he was an Arab!"

But what state of Israel is it whose existence should be recognized? The 1948 Israel? The 1956 Israel? The 1967 Israel? The 1975 Israel? If my recognition of the right of Israel to exist is based upon the inalienable right of a people to self-determination, can I deny the right of Palestinians to self-determination? I sometimes think that Palestinian nationalism is a kind of Zionism without Jews. The success of the one has led to the emergence of the other. Golda Meir used to ask who the Palestinians were, and I think a partial answer would be: Palestinians are a dispersed people, just like the Jews.

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Rather than speak of territorial rights over designated geographical areas, I would prefer to speak of the rights of peoples to self-determination. I believe that where Jews are a clear majority in a given area their right to national self-determination should be recognized. I believe the same should be said of Palestinians where they constitute a clear majority. I would hope that minorities on both sides, Jews living in Arab areas, as well as Arabs living within areas of Israeli sovereignty, will enjoy civil equality. The moral health of any state can be judged by its treatment of its minorities.

There are, then, two prime requisites for peace in the Middle East: the withdrawal of Israeli forces from areas populated by Arabs, who do not wish to live under Israeli occupation, and the establishment of at least minimal security prerequisites for the smaller area Israel would then occupy.

The time has come for Christians in the United States to say quite clearly that they will support those on both sides, Israelis and Palestinians, who work for the emergence of two self-determining states, Israel and Palestine. At the same time, we should oppose those who demand all for one side or the other. We should oppose the Likud program for a greater Israel to the exclusion of all Palestinian rights west of the Jordan, just as we should refuse to offer any support to the PLO until it clearly recognizes the right of self-determination to those three million Israelis who have consistently registered their demand for their own Zionist state.

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of our 10 years of dialogue as Christians and Jews is this: I feel that we have now reached the point where we can be honest and open with each other and can speak from our hearts and minds without fear that the indestructible bond which unites us will be broken. I have had the privilege of close contact with Israeli society, and I have come to understand that there are as many opinions expressed in that wonderful, free, democratic forum as there are people. There is no single Jewish position on just about anything. There is no single Christian position either, I suppose, in this age of pluralism. What we need now is openness and candor.

Recently, I went to Jerusalem with a group of people, among them a marvelous Brazilian Pentecostal woman. She was full of good humor, good spirits, zest and somewhat disconcerting explosions of religious devotion. One day we visited the western wall of the temple, sometimes called the "wailing wall." I do not like to disturb the Jewish worshipers at that holiest of places, and although I have approached the wall on occasion to reverence it and pray for peace, I usually stand off to one side. Not my Pentecostal friend. She marched right up to the wall in the women's section and threw up her arms shouting, "Lord Jesus Christ, bring peace to your holy city Jerusalem." And the Jewish woman standing next to her said, "Louder!" Shalom.

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