

ARTICLE

Uncharted Waters

The Future of Catholic-Jewish Relations

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It has been almost forty-one years since *Nostra aetate*, the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, transformed relations between Catholics and Jews, effectively repudiating the church's long history of anti-Jewish and even anti-Semitic teaching.

The declaration opened up bold new paths, even as it left many theological questions unanswered. As Pope Benedict XVI noted when visiting the Roonstrasse Synagogue of Cologne in August 2005, "much still remains to be done." Jews and Christians "must come to know one another much more and much better," the pope elaborated, "for only in this way will it be possible to arrive at a shared interpretation of disputed historical questions, and, above all, to make progress toward a theological evaluation of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity."

To understand what "still remains to be done"-and how challenging is the task of arriving at that shared interpretation-one must keep in mind the magnitude of the transformation *Nostra aetate* initiated back in 1965. It's sometimes hard to recall just how hostile pre-Vatican II theological understandings of Judaism were. Take, for example, the 1938 draft of an encyclical on Nazi racist ideology prepared for Pope Pius XI. The draft (Pius died before it was completed) reflected the church's longstanding teaching that the Jewish people collectively were responsible for Christ's death. As a consequence of that inherited guilt, it stated, there was an "authentic basis of the social separation of the Jews from the rest of humanity." This was not due to race but to religion: "The Savior...was rejected by that people, violently repudiated, and condemned as a criminal by the highest tribunals of the Jewish nation." Bearing a collective responsibility for the death of Jesus, the Jews were doomed "to perpetually wander over the face of the earth...through the ages into our own time." And the church was charged with guarding against "the spiritual dangers to which contact with the Jews can expose souls."

Such sentiments sound outlandish to us today. But the encyclical's shocking assertions about Jews-that the Jewish people had killed Christ, that they were doomed to eternal wandering, and that they posed a constant menace to Christians-were simply the latest restatements of ideas that had permeated the Christian world for more than fifteen hundred years. In 1965 *Nostra aetate* explicitly rejected these notions. Galvanized by the horrors of the Shoah, many bishops saw that changes in the long-lived, uncriticized church teachings about Jews and Judaism had to be made. A transformed understanding of Judaism grew from the bishops' agonized recognition that centuries of contemptuous Christian condemnations had helped make the Nazi extermination of European Jewry possible. "How many [Jews] have suffered in our own time? How many died because Christians were indifferent and kept silent?" Boston's Cardinal Richard Cushing remarked during the council's tense deliberations over *Nostra aetate*: "If in recent years, not many Christian voices were raised against those injustices, at least let ours now be heard in humility."

And so they were. Vatican II announced that Jews were not Christ-killers, were not accursed, and were not enemies of God. This radical reversal of church teaching and practice is best described using the Greek word, *metanoia*, or the Hebrew, *teshuvah*: a complete "turning," a total penitential reorientation of attitude or action. In making their theological case, the council fathers were sobered to find they could cite hardly anything in prior Christian tradition that was affirming of Jews and Judaism. Blaming "the Jews" for the crucifixion of Jesus, on the other hand, was deeply embedded in Christian tradition, going as far back as the early second century, when Melito of Sardis had charged: "What strange crime, Israel, have you committed? You dishonored him that honored you; you disgraced him that glorified you;...you killed him that made you live!"

Tellingly, the final text of *Nostra aetate* disregarded such problematic texts as Hebrews 8:13, which had typically been understood as dismissing God's covenant with Jews as "obsolete and growing old." Now, instead of condemnation and derision, the church taught that Jews and Judaism were to be respected, and that Catholics should remember their

indebtedness to Judaism. Rather than avoid Jews, Catholics were to seek dialogue with them. One can draw a straight line forward from this new exhortation to Benedict's entreaty at the synagogue in Cologne, his call for "a sincere and trustful dialogue between Jews and Christians."

Intertwined Questions: Covenant, Conversion, and Interpreting *Nostra aetate*

Unavoidably, *Nostra aetate* did not address all the theological questions raised by altering the church's basic attitude toward Judaism. Exploring those questions is part of the work "that still remains to be done." How, for example, does the Jewish people's ongoing covenantal relationship with the God of Israel relate to Christian faith in Jesus as universal savior and as the ultimate revelation of that same God? This is a particularly challenging question, since a defining conviction of Jews is that Christ is not part of their experience of covenant, while a similarly defining conviction for Christians holds that the salvation brought about by Christ is necessary for all humanity.

Closely related is the question of proselytization. Should Catholics seek to convert Jews? After all, the Gospel of John portrays Jesus telling his disciples, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). If Jewish covenantal life with God has never been invalidated, however, do Jews need baptism to be in a saving relationship with God? On the other hand, if Christians do not seek to convert the Jews, hasn't a fundamental Christian teaching been jettisoned, namely, that Christ is essential for everyone's salvation?

The answers to such questions depend on how *Nostra aetate* is interpreted. And some recent interpretations show how pivotal that declaration remains. In a November 2005 essay in *First Things*, Cardinal Avery Dulles offered a minimalist reading of *Nostra aetate*, claiming that the council "left open the question whether the Old Covenant remains in force today."

There are several problems with this assertion. True, the declaration did not explicitly use the word "covenant" to characterize the enduring relationship between God and the Jewish people. Yet by rendering Romans 9:4-5 in the present tense ("to them belong the covenants") and by invoking Romans 11:28-29 ("the Jews remain very dear to God, for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made"), *Nostra aetate* clearly affirmed the special relationship between the people of Israel and the God revealed in the Bible. This affirmation was later echoed by Pope John Paul II, who unequivocally and repeatedly stated that there exists "a covenant of eternal love, never revoked by God" between God and the Jewish people. More recently still, Pope Benedict has observed that "the favor of the God of the Covenant has always accompanied" the Jewish people, from biblical times to the present day, "giving them the strength to overcome trials."

In making his argument, Dulles disregarded subsequent magisterial documents issued by the Vatican while relying on Christian texts that *Nostra aetate* intentionally eschewed. Moreover, he ignored the Vatican's 1974 "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration, *Nostra aetate*, 4," which noted that Catholics "must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience." In other words, as Rabbi Allen Mittleman wrote in response to Dulles's revisionist reading of *Nostra aetate*, "dialogue is about understanding the other as the other understands himself....Can dialogue be conducted solely on the ground of territory already secured by one's own tradition? Doesn't it involve a certain sallying forth onto new, unsecured and insecure ground?"

A further point of contention in Dulles's essay is his implicit construal of *Nostra aetate* as a defense of a mission to convert the Jews. The crucial passage from the declaration reads as follows: "The church awaits the day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and 'serve him shoulder to shoulder.'" A look into the history of this sentence's composition reveals much about the council's intentions. As it turns out, the final wording was a dramatic change from what had been initially proposed. As the *New York Times* reported on September 4, 1964, the bishops had been considering approving the following, very different, paragraph: "It is also worth remembering that the union of the Jewish people with the church is a part of Christian hope. Accordingly, and following the teaching of the Apostle Paul, the church expects in unshakable faith and with ardent desire the entrance of that people into the fullness of the people of God established by Christ."

Great concern was expressed over this earlier proposed version. The president of the American Jewish Committee said that "Any declaration, no matter how well-intentioned, whose effect would mean the dissolution of the Jewish people as such and the elimination of Judaism as a religion, will be received with resentment by Jews throughout the world." Influential rabbi and scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel sent a memorandum to the Vatican describing the proposed paragraph as "spiritual fratricide," and declaring himself "ready to go to Auschwitz any time, if faced with the alternative of conversion or death." After listening to the concerns of Jewish groups and others, the council's bishops purposefully redrafted the language of the declaration to discourage efforts at conversion. This effort makes it quite difficult to read *Nostra aetate* as a defense of any mission to convert the Jews, as Dulles implies.

During the council's subsequent deliberations, moreover, several cardinals and bishops specifically addressed this fraught

issue. None advocated for a mission to convert Jews. Indeed, Coadjutor-Archbishop Arthur Elchinger of Strasbourg insisted that "Our declaration must avoid...all appearance of any present-day call for the conversion of the entire Jewish people." Archbishop Patrick O'Boyle of Washington, D.C., added that efforts to convert the Jews would make "any fruitful dialogue impossible." Vatican II decided that it was not the task of Catholics in historical time to try to baptize Jews. Rather, the relationship between Jews and Christ would remain dependent on the mysterious action of God at the end of human history. As Cardinal Giacomo Lercaro of Bologna asserted, "Only an eschatological turn of events will bring [Jews and Christians] to the common messianic meal of the eternal Pasch." Ultimately the council embraced an eschatological ("the church awaits the day, known to God alone") rather than a missionary understanding of the church's relationship with the Jewish people. Nostra aetate was "an expression of the long-term 'eschatological' hope of the church for the eventual unity of all mankind," reported the New York Times. "But there is no call to active proselytization and no presentation of conversion as the price of brotherhood."

How significant was this enlargement in the church's acceptance of God's covenant with Jews? It is worth noting that a self-designated "International Association of Bishops," which included Bishop Luigi Carli, Archbishop Maurice Mathieu Louis Rigaud, and the later excommunicated Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, urged that the council reject Nostra aetate for precisely this reason. It was "unworthy of the council," these bishops said, to have framed "the future conversion of Israel" so as to preclude proselytizing. In short, the explicit eschatological understanding of the phrase "the church awaits the day" was recognized and understood by both proponents and opponents of the declaration. For his part, Rabbi Heschel later judged the final text of Nostra aetate, approved on October 14-15 by a margin of 1,937 to 153, to be "the first statement of the church in history-the first Christian discourse dealing with Judaism-which is devoid of any expression of hope for conversion."

By rejecting the notion of Jews as an accursed people, and by indicating that God's covenant with Israel endures, the council instructed Catholics to embrace an attitude of collaboration, dialogue, and mutual respect toward those John Paul II later called "our dearly beloved brothers...our elder brothers." The bishops were content to trust in God's saving love. As Bishop Jules Daem of Antwerp observed, "Jews and Christians are moving toward the same fulfillment-the revelation of God's mercy in a common bond. We must follow this divine decree, not by means of unseemly proselytism, but in plain dealing and complete humility." In other words, God's plans for the Jewish people and for the church might be more complex than simply one tradition capitulating to the perspectives of the other.

Enlivening the Trinitarian Tradition

Clearly, the history of Nostra aetate's composition precludes Dulles's cramped interpretation of the bishops' intent. But what about the more fundamental question: If Jews are not to be converted, then how does Christ remain relevant for Jewish salvation? Church leaders and theologians continue exploring this mystery today (see, for instance, the current volume of Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations at www.bc.edu/scjr), with a consensus yet to emerge. Catholics are entering uncharted waters here, and will not be left unchanged by the experience. As Rabbi Mittleman reminds us, genuine interreligious dialogue cannot be conducted solely on the ground of territory already secured by one's own tradition. It requires rallying forth onto new, unsecured, and insecure ground.

One such rally might go as follows. In thinking theologically about Catholicism's new understanding of Judaism, three principles must be affirmed simultaneously. First, Jesus Christ has a unique, universal significance for the salvation of all humankind. Second, Israel's distinctive covenantal relationship with God will continue until the Eschaton. Third, an "intrinsic" bond exists, as John Paul II declared, between the covenantal lives of the people of Israel and the church.

In order to uphold these principles, it is important to keep in mind the essentially relational character of covenant. As the Jewish philosopher Michael Wyschogrod has written:

The people of Israel pursues its course in history in the faith that it is the people of God. Because God loved Abraham, he chose him and his seed as the people of his Covenant. Because this people is a human family with all the frailties and failings of humankind, the people of Israel has never ceased to prove unworthy of its election....God, in his infinite mercy, nevertheless continues to love this people above all others. To it, he has given his name so that he is known to all the families of the earth as the God of Israel.

Wyschogrod's emphasis is on covenant as a dynamic relationship, a sharing in life with God that brings mutual responsibilities. In other words, the covenant is not an object to be possessed, but rather is best understood as a continuing action. The "people of God of the Old and the New Testament"-as one Vatican document has put it-are those who constantly covenant with God. If we understand covenant in this way, we need no longer think that there is only one divine covenant with Jews and Christians as the two different human parties to it; or that there are isolated Jewish and Christian covenants (which flirts with Marcionism, an early heresy that sought to separate Israel and the church so radically it claimed that the God revealed by Jesus was not the

same deity who gave Israel the Torah on Sinai); or multiple covenants in a complex interrelationship (with Noah, Moses, David, or anticipated by Jeremiah). Instead, Jews and Christians are both covenanting communities, both walking with God through history in related but distinct ways.

Of course, for Christians the church's covenanting with God is explicitly Christomorphic, or Christ-shaped: our knowledge and experience of God are sustained through the Risen Christ, who is with us always. Still, there is a tendency in the West to focus so myopically on Christ-what theologians call "Christomonism"-that we obscure the full Trinitarian tradition. As my late colleague Anthony Saldarini explained:

In all else, in all activity, in all relationships with humans, God is, acts, loves, and saves as one, indivisibly. To say that God saves humans means that the Father saves as do the Son and the Spirit. To say that Jesus the Son of God saves is to say that God saves. When God saves Israel, in the Christian understanding of God, the Spirit of God and the Son of God as well as God the Father save Israel....At the most fundamental level of theology Christians need to emphasize God more than they have....Christians too frequently center everything on Jesus to the detriment of the God who sent him, guided him, and sustained him.

From the church's perspective, then, Israel knows God's revealing and inviting Word, not Christomorphically in the Word made flesh, but in Jewish engagement with the Word as expressed in the Torah, both written and oral. Israel also knows the Father and the Spirit as part of its constant covenanting. It does not conceive of that relationship in the Christian Trinitarian way; still, Israel knows the God who saves. Such an emphasis suggests how it is possible for Catholic teaching to affirm Israel's distinctive covenanting with God.

Conclusion

The Catholic-Jewish dialogue that has unfolded in the years since *Nostra aetate* has been immensely beneficial to both communities. We have learned, for instance, that Jews and Catholics bring very different interests, concerns, historical memories, and (mis)conceptions to interreligious dialogue. Catholics tend to want to talk "religion," while Jews, on the other hand, are more inclined to discuss social-justice issues. Christians, perplexed by Jewish resistance to the idea of Incarnation, don't seem to understand how difficult it is for Jews to imagine that the pure spirit of the transcendent Holy One could enter into history as a mortal human. Jews tend to avoid expressing their mystification over Christian claims that something called "salvation" is the result of the crucifixion of a single first-century Jew, who was, after all, only one of the thousands of Jews executed under Roman imperial rule. Finally, while most Catholics are surprisingly unfamiliar with the history of Christian oppression of Jews, and are shocked and guilt ridden when they first learn of it, Jews wonder if modern Catholic overtures are but a temporary cessation in the centuries-long effort to convert them.

Concern for where the Catholic-Jewish dialogue may lead can impede the work that remains to be done. Catholics with little experience of interreligious dialogue will accuse Catholic participants of "watering down the faith" or offering a "weakened" or "politically correct" version of it. Their Jewish counterparts will charge Jewish participants with inviting "assimilation." Such critiques sometimes express a desire to keep the borders between the two traditions defined along familiar lines. There is a certain comfort in thinking, "I am Christian because I believe what Jews do not" or "I am Jewish because I don't believe the incredible things that Christians do." Old habits die hard. But authentic interreligious dialogue does not imply a syncretistic melding of religious traditions. The differences, the boundaries between Christianity and Judaism must always be respected. Serious dialogue, however, may cause those boundaries to be reconfigured or understood differently, as discomfiting as that process can be.

Four decades after *Nostra aetate*, it is important that Catholics not shrink from pursuing the unprecedented theological questions that the declaration opened up. As the Second Vatican Council rightly understood, in the aftermath of the Shoah Christians are called on to rethink our relationship with Judaism, and thus our understanding of what salvation in Christ means. In securing this new theological ground, Christians must ask what is essential and what is not essential in our understanding of who Christ is and what ongoing role the Jews play in the history of salvation. In this respect, Avery Dulles is quite correct to insist that from a Catholic perspective the "mystery of Israel and the mystery of the church are permanently entwined."

Fidelity to the gospel and to the prompting of the Spirit demands metanoia, which is always uncomfortable. But we must continue to push into these uncharted waters. We should keep in mind the exhortation of Cardinal Edward Cassidy, past president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: "To stand still is to risk going backwards....[W]e refuse to be tied down to the past by chains that hold us back from building a new future, a new partnership between Jews and Catholics, a future based on mutual trust and understanding." And the words Pope Benedict offered, at the Cologne synagogue: "This dialogue, if it is to be sincere, must not gloss over or underestimate the existing differences: in those areas in

which, due to our profound convictions in faith, we diverge, and indeed precisely in those areas, we need to show respect and love for one another.”

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