

THE NEW VATICAN NOTES ON JUDAISM; A REVOLUTIONARY  
POTENTIAL

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December 1985

(TO BE PUBLISHED in the April 1986 issue of ECUMENICAL  
TRENDS)

Upon their release last June the Vatican NOTES ON THE PRESENTATION OF JEWS AND JUDAISM IN PREACHING AND CATECHESIS (cf. ORIGINS, 15:7, July 4, 1985) stirred up a great deal of controversy. Many Jewish leaders, including the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, raised serious questions about some of the theological outlooks towards Judaism present in the NOTES (a return to pre-Vatican II displacement theology?) as well as the treatment of Israel and the Holocaust. A number of Christian theologians, both Protestant and Catholic, also raised some serious questions. While the negative reactions came largely from North America and Israel, they were not confined to these areas. Eyebrows were also raised in Europe among those connected with the dialogue. But the NOTES also were defended by some prominent Christian and Jewish leaders and scholars. And there was general agreement, even among most of the critics, that in many areas the NOTES had advanced the perception of the Jewish-Christian relationship beyond NOSTRA AETATE and the 1975 Guidelines for its implementation.

My purpose here is not to delve into the initial controversy over the NOTES. Some of it has subsided as a result of further statements by Msgr. Jorge Mejia, Secretary of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, Cardinal Willebrands, and the Pope himself. Particularly important have been the papal remarks during the Rome meeting of the Vatican Commission and the International Jewish Committee on the occasion of the twentieth

anniversary of NOSTRA AETATE in late October. For the Pope basically endorsed the developing theology of the intimate bond between the church and the Jewish People which in the NOTES moves in the direction of affirming Jews and Christians as partners in the process of humankind's salvific liberation. And, except for a general comment about the need to preserve authentic church teaching which no one would dispute, the Pope gave no support to those hardline theological sections of the NOTES which reflect a pre-Vatican II mentality and which caused most of the criticism from Jewish and Christian quarters when they first appeared.

Now that we are beyond the early stage of reactions to the NOTES and mindful of the papal approval of the need for continued theological reflections on the Jewish-Christian link it is time to examine the longterm implications of the NOTES not only for the dialogue but for theology generally. Having begun this process myself I would make the claim that their constructive potential is truly, if subtly, revolutionary in several respects which I would now like to outline.

The first major implication has to do with basic methodology in scriptural studies and systematic theology. In what could become their most famous assertion the NOTES argue that "Jews and Judaism should not occupy an occasional and marginal place in catechesis: Their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated." But good catechesis depends on solid scholarship in bible and theology. So if this principle holds

true for religious education it must also be applicable to religious scholarship. What the NOTES appear to be saying is that any Christian form of exegesis or systematic theological construction that does not make positive use of the Jewish tradition, past and present, remains incomplete. Jewish reflections on the bible and the Torah now must be seen by Christian scholars as obligatory data for their own expositions of the Christian message. There is no authentic proclamation of the gospel which does not integrate Jewish insights.

With the above principle the NOTES have given sanction to a movement that has been gaining steam in recent years <sup>ANAL</sup> biblical scholars but which has still hardly penetrated systematic theological circles. An increasing number of exegetes are taking the Jewish biblical and rabbinic traditions far more seriously in exegeting the New Testament. This is in stark contrast to the situation some years ago when little or any account was taken of Judaism and what there was frequently showed marks of serious ~~DIS-~~ <sup>OPENING</sup> ~~tortion~~. While a student at the University of Chicago I recall vividly the ~~first~~ session of a course on Palestinian Judaism and the New Testament offered for the first time by the noted biblical scholar Norman Perrin. He began by saying he knew little about the subject but thought it important. His new enthusiasm was triggered by his reading of a popular, basically adult education level, volume on Jewish holy days. It was shocking to me as a person already somewhat into Christian-Jewish dialogue that a

scholar of such deserved standing was so ignorant of the Jewish tradition. It was obvious his own doctoral training in exegesis was almost totally devoid of contact with interpretations of biblical and rabbinic Judaism.

Concretely several things must be result from the NOTES' introduction of this far-reaching hermeneutical shift. First of all, the Hebrew Scriptures must be seen as a continuing resource for understanding the New Testament and for theological formulation, not merely as foil or prelude to the gospel. Any presentation of Jesus' message that relies solely on the New Testament becomes a truncated version of his full teaching. There must be far greater integration of the Hebrew Scriptures in the presentation of the Christian faith perspective. And <sup>POST-BIBLICAL</sup> Jewish religious reflections, rabbinic-medieval-modern, must become regular components of Christian scholarship. The NOTES are quite insistent on this last point.

The NOTES' hermeneutical revolution of necessity demands major revisions in Christian theological curricula. Training in the Hebrew Scriptures and in rabbinics must become a standard, core element. And medieval and modern Jewish authors need to be consulted by Christian students as they address such crucial issues as the meaning of God (where the experience of the Holocaust, as David Tracy has insisted, becomes critical), the significance of covenantal obligation and the nature of the church. And Christologies cannot be formulated without reference to Jesus' deep



bonds with Judaism, Pharisaism in particular.

One area where the methodological change introduced by the NOTES will have direct impact is ethics. As Christians deal with such specific issues as war/peace, economic justice, abortion,<sup>AND</sup> sexual morals the ongoing Jewish covenantal tradition has to be consulted with great seriousness for its viewpoints. We have generally not done so in the past. The biblical section of the Catholic Bishops' proposed pastoral on the American economy is one example of the constructive use of the Jewish biblical tradition, far more so than the Peace pastoral where Jewish perspectives still appear to be an inferior prelude to Jesus' teachings on peace. An area of current debate where the NOTES' hermeneutics may demand some new consideration is that of abortion. Can Catholics take seriously the NOTES' call for the integration of the Jewish perspective into Catholic teaching and still claim that each and every form of direct abortion is automatically contrary to divine law when not even orthodox Judaism holds this position? I am not suggesting any easy resolution of this dilemma, only that the dilemma now seems there in light of the NOTES' hermeneutics.

The NOTES' also raise significant questions about the basic thrust of Catholic liturgy. Two paragraphs of the NOTES specifically allude to the positive connections between Catholic worship and Judaism, especially the Passover festival. But they only touch the tip of the iceberg. The <sup>REAL</sup> problem is the dominance

of typological Christology in the key moments of the liturgical year such as Advent and Lent. Christ has fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies which in a veiled way were speaking about him. It is very difficult not to fall into the classical displacement theology of Judaism so long as such typology predominates. The most controversial section of the NOTES in fact tries to build a new positive theology of Judaism from a typological base. I do not feel it quite works, though others such as my colleague Dr. Eugene Fisher are more enthusiastic about the possibilities. In my judgment the liturgy must move away from typological Christology if it is ever to become a faithful witness to the NOTES's startling assertion that Jews and Christians are indispensable partners in human redemption. This is surely not conveyed as yet to the Christian congregation worshipping in Advent or Lent.

Another implication of the NOTES concerns the nature of inter-Christian ecumenical dialogue. If the Catholic church as a result of the NOTES now holds that Judaism is central to the interpretation of Christianity then this issue must be raised as pivotal to any dialogues involving Christian dominations. Thus far nothing really has been done in this regard. The international Catholic-Presbyterian/Reformed dialogue once had it on a preliminary agenda but it was never taken up. The U.S. version of this dialogue considered it at one point, but never pursued the issue in earnest. The NOTES seem to be telling us this

cannot remain so.

The NOTES' likewise carry potential significance for all forms of interreligious dialogue. For the extent to which they acknowledge continued theological significance for Judaism against which the church originally defined its identity, to that same extent do we moderate, albeit implicitly, any absolutist claims about Christian faith. The NOTES themselves are somewhat schizoid on this score. But the theology of Jewish co-partnership in the salvation of humankind cannot be asserted without significant modification of some traditional claims. Sooner or later the Catholic church and all other Christian denominations will have to face up to this. And when they do, they will see that parameters have been broken in the relationship with other non-Christian religions as well. Because Christianity has so often cast its relationship to Judaism in "over-against" terms, far more than has been the case with other religions, any changes in the theological conception of the Christian-Jewish relationship will automatically redound favorably on the ability of the church to relate to these religions with a new theological voice.

A final word about the implications of the NOTES for Judaism. The specifics must be determined by Jewish scholars. But insofar as Jews applaud the new theology of partnership and bonding that appears in the constructive sections of the NOTES they must ask what this means for their theological understanding of Christianity and their use of Christian religious insights. Jews cannot



cheer for this emerging Christian theology and not confront its implications for Judaism.

Finally, the controversy over the NOTES now requires an additional step from Jews. It is the attempt to create a consensus statement by the International Jewish Committee on whether Christianity in any way represents a covenantal moment from the Jewish faith perspective. I think it is vital for Jews to have some concrete experience in writing a consensus document of this kind so that there might be better appreciation of the difficulties involved when any official Christian body attempts it. Also, Jews cannot continue critiquing the church's theological approach to Judaism without an equal opportunity for Christians to do the same with a Jewish statement.