

THE CHURCH AND THE JEWS: ISSUES RESOLVED SINCE VATICAN II AND ISSUES REMAINING*

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The Second Vatican Council, through its adoption of a "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Catholic Religions," which included a section on the Church and the Jews, marked a new beginning and a new direction in Catholic-Jewish relations. Those of us on this side of that declaration, *Nostra aetate*, who are the beneficiaries of the progress it engendered and who are aware that it was ultimately passed by an overwhelming majority, might conclude that its adoption

was a routine matter . . . In fact, it was from the outset a highly-charged matter which became one of several key issues dramatizing the split between liberal and conservative viewpoints within Roman Catholicism and the fierce struggle for control between forces representing these viewpoints at the council. Like some of the other controversial subjects on which there was sharp division between a majority of the bishops and a small, but powerful and influential minority, it was subjected to various procedural delays and other tactics designed to prevent it from coming to a vote. Furthermore, the statement on the Jews became involved with political considerations never intended by its authors and the object of intensive diplomatic representations and political pressures.¹

The document that was promulgated on October 28, 1965, was not the same as the one passed on November 20, 1964, eleven months earlier. From a Jewish perspective, it was weaker, less forthright, less decisive. Even so, there were last-ditch efforts to prevent it from coming to the floor. It was, as we say, a cliffhanger!

During the course of its various formulations, it became something of a bone of contention within the Jewish community as well. There was openly-expressed disagreement both as to the intentions and value of the declaration and as to the role, if any, that Jews should play with regard to it, and to the Ecumenical Council generally.²

*The indented excerpts in this essay are drawn from the author's earlier articles, "The Church and the Jews: The Struggle at Vatican Council II," written as Judith Herahcoopf, originally published in Morris Fine and Milton Himmelfarb, eds., *American Jewish Year Book, 1965*, vol. 66 (New York: American Jewish Committee; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1965), pp. 99-136; and Morris Fine and Milton Himmelfarb, eds., and Martha Jelenko, assoc. ed., *American Jewish Year Book, 1966*, vol. 67 (New York: American Jewish Committee; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1966), pp. 45-77. Minor emendations for clarification are bracketed. Hereafter, *A.J.Y.B.*

¹*A.J.Y.B.*, 1965, pp. 100-101.

²*Ibid.*, p. 101.

I believe it would be helpful to revisit that struggle and to review some of the tensions *within* the Catholic and Jewish communities, as well as between them, during that period, because some of them are still with us.

While the declaration in question was essentially a statement of attitude whose effective implementation would require specific directives and . . . educational measures, it was immediately seen as a symbol of fundamental change within the Roman Catholic church. Its supporters claimed that it did not enunciate any new doctrine, but that it did remove—in the words of *America* [the Jesuit] magazine—the source of a “ghastly ambiguity.” Many Jews believed that, new doctrine or not, the authoritative removal of a [negative and hostile] tradition depicting them as deicides, cursed by God and doomed to punishment in each succeeding generation, would do away with one of the deeply-rooted sources of antisemitism; for the charge had been used to justify many of the hostile policies of the church and of Christian rulers toward Jews throughout history.³

I do not call attention to these elements of the Christian anti-Jewish polemic—summarized by the French historian Jules Isaac as “the teachings of contempt”—to embarrass us. The Church has effectively repudiated these pernicious teachings. However, it is remarkable how some of these ugly themes kept resurfacing in material circulated during the Council: that the Jews *were* killers of God, doomed to perpetual servitude for the crime of deicide, a crime that could only be expiated by their conversion; that the Jews were the enemies of and conspirators against the Church; and that the Jews were Freemasons and Communists. Antisemitic literature distributed during the Council in opposition to the “Jewish Declaration” played on exactly these themes. This opposition

had access to extraordinary channels of distribution. Thus, a few days before the session ended, every prelate found in his box a privately-printed 900-page volume, *Il Complotto contro la Chiesa* (“The Plot Against the Church”), filled with the most primitive antisemitism. The volume charged that there was a Jewish fifth column among the Catholic clergy plotting against the church, and even justified Hitler’s acts against the Jews. No one knew how the book was distributed to the Council Fathers, and it reportedly produced little effect other than indignation. But it showed to what lengths the opposition was prepared to go.⁴

As in the first session, so during the second also, an antisemitic publication was privately distributed to the Council Fathers. *Gli Ebrei e il Concilio alla luce della Sacra Scrittura e della Tradizione* (“The Jews and the Council in the Light of Scripture and Tradition”) by a pseudonymous Bernadus, cited authoritative Catholic sources supporting the deicide charge against Jews, proclaimed that Jews could only wipe out the curse upon them by converting to Christianity, and insisted that efforts to change the traditional view were the result of a conspiracy in the Council by Jews and Freemasons working on behalf of Communism.⁵

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., p. 112.

⁵Ibid., p. 117.

During the third session of the Council, antisemitic pamphlets were once again circulated among the bishops, charging that the Jews had masterminded the declaration and that Cardinal Bea was himself Jewish. During the fourth session, there was additional evidence of a sustained campaign:

Msgr. George Higgins, a columnist for the National Catholic Welfare Conference's press service[,] reported angrily . . . that Gerald L. K. Smith [a notorious home-grown American Antisemite] had written to all American bishops offering to supply them, free of charge, with a copy of an English translation of a "sickening diatribe against the Jews." . . . Smith's four-page letter, Msgr. Higgins reported, suggested that the American bishops had been taken in by "a fraternity of deceivers too close to the centers of authority in the affairs of the church." Higgins saw the letter as "just one more convincing proof that the Council's proposed declaration on the relationship between Christians and Jews is desperately needed and long overdue."

A pamphlet distributed at a Franciscan sanctuary near Rome, written by someone calling himself Fra Giorgio da Terni, charged:

All of the most famous popes, saints and fathers of the Church . . . have . . . warned against the epidemic Jewish disease, more contagious than the plague or venereal disease. . . . From the first Masonic lodges to the Bolshevik revolution, we find Jews everywhere; from . . . Rome to the ferocious and bloodthirsty Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev. . . . The six million Jews gassed in German concentration camps never existed, except in the distortions of the clever Children of Israel. . . . This truth is beginning to appear in the Egyptian, Syrian, and Jordan press. Go and ask the Arabs who the Jews are, and you will really learn how they hate Jesus.

After protests filed by the Italian Federation of Jewish Youth and the Union of Italian Jewish Communities, Bishop Giuseppe Gori revealed that Fra Giorgio was "neither a priest nor religious" but a layman . . . who had "no authorization whatsoever to speak or publish with ecclesiastical approval." Gori added that he was "most sorry" for what had happened.⁶

The antisemitic screeds accomplished little more than to infuriate most of the Council Fathers. However, the campaign against the declaration from Arab churches and political leaders was equally intense and more sophisticated. Christian prelates from Arab nations warned that its adoption would create "serious difficulties for the hierarchy and the Roman Catholic faithful in many localities," because of the hostility of the Arab world to such a declaration.

[S]peaking before leaders of the Eastern-Rite communities in Damascus, Syrian Premier Salah el-Bitar assailed the draft statement, and asked the heads of the Catholic communities to urge Pope Paul to thwart the attempt to exonerate the Jews from deicide. *Al-Baath*, the official newspaper of Syria's ruling party, said the Syrian government would bring the issue

⁶*AJYB*, 1966, p. 55.

before a conference of neutralist heads of state in Cairo in order to enlist wider opposition to the proposed declaration. Other diplomatic interventions also took place, reportedly from President Sukarno of Indonesia and Nasser's plenipotentiary ambassador, made directly to Pope Paul.⁷

During the fourth session, the Arab pressure remained unrelenting:

The Moslem mayor of Jordanian Jerusalem announced that, as a result of a resolution of the Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant communities, the bells of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre . . . would toll in protest against Vatican endorsement of the declaration. He also revealed that a cable was sent to Pope Paul, with copies to the seven Oriental Rite cardinals at the Ecumenical Council, reminding the pontiff of his pilgrimage to the Holy Land and "the results of Jewish crimes against Palestine's Arabs."⁸

Some of these protests were undoubtedly conscientious; others were prompted by threats of reprisals against vulnerable Christian minorities in Arab states. It is regrettable that the opposition from Arab sources crossed the line between their stated position of anti-Zionism to a crude Antisemitism. Some leaders who were not themselves Christian played on themes of Jewish guilt and rejection that came out of another religion's polemic to try to defeat a statement that denied and disclaimed political intentions.

Recalling the intensity of these diplomatic and ecclesiastical initiatives, we may count ourselves fortunate that *Nostra aetate* was ultimately adopted and promulgated and that we are here today as witnesses to the achievements it launched.

The foot-dragging around the declaration for more than two years at the Council, the repeated instances of theologically and politically based hostility to Jews, the foul accusations that somehow found their way into the mailboxes of Council Fathers, the nipping around the edges of what was intended as a simple act of justice, the delays, the rumors—all of these had their impact on the Jewish community as well, even among those most cooperative and committed to a positive relationship with Christianity. The Council launched a spirited, sometimes vitriolic, debate within the Jewish community, with much of the criticism reserved for other Jews.

These are the questions Jews asked themselves and argued about: Did the declaration spring from a moral impulse to correct the injustices of the past and to heal the Catholic Church's relationship to Jews, or was it an expediency, an easy way of glossing over centuries of abuse without accepting responsibility? Was it intended to create respect and esteem for the continuing Jewish people or to encourage their conversion? Should Jews try to relate to the Council or stay away? One school of thought argued that, since Antisemitism is a Christian problem, Christians must find the solution. Others responded with a comparison to racism: It is a white problem, but Blacks, who are its victims, have rightly been active in fighting it. Similarly, Jews should indeed

⁷A.J.Y.B., 1965, p. 125.

⁸A.J.Y.B., 1966, p. 57.

involve themselves in the pursuit of historic justice at Vatican II. (The American Jewish Committee and Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum were vigorous advocates of this position and related to the Council in various ways: submitting scholarly documentation regarding the image of Jews in Catholic teaching materials, fostering academic and theological symposia on issues before the Council, and bringing together key personalities to advance the dialogue, such as Cardinal Augustine Bea and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel.)

When the first announcements were made in the fall of 1963 that the Ecumenical Council would consider a document repudiating the deicide charge against Jews, the information was publicly welcomed by major Jewish organizations and criticized by none. There were a few dissenting individual voices, . . . but . . . critical responses were exceptional at this early stage. . . .

But when the second session of Vatican Council II ended with no action on the declaration, criticism was more common. Behind this criticism could be sensed a mistrust of the church's motives, a suspicion that theological dialogue was the honeyed approach to conversion, and simple resentment over the prospect of some 2,500 bishops debating the extent of Jewish culpability in the death of Jesus. Before the Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) in February 1964, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a leading spokesperson for Orthodox Jewry, attacked the proposed declaration as "nothing more or less than evangelical propaganda." He also discouraged religious dialogue with Catholics. Others charged that the "absolving" of Jews from a crime that they never committed was condescending.⁹

This reaction was a complete misreading of the declaration, which was addressed to Catholics, not to Jews, and which intended to clarify authentic Catholic teachings, not to "forgive" the Jews.

When a later revision both eliminated a clear repudiation of the deicide charge and inserted what appeared to Jews to be conversionary expectations, the fat was in the fire. Even Jewish spokespersons who had worked cooperatively with Catholic leaders attacked the document. Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the venerable founder of Reconstructionism, wrote that dialogue based on the expectation or desire of Jewish conversion was "unthinkable," and Heschel described the revised draft as "spiritual fratricide."

The objectionable language was eliminated in the final declaration as adopted on October 28, 1965, but, in some ways, the damage was done. The Orthodox Jewish community is still officially opposed to religious dialogue — although not to interreligious cooperation on social and human problems — and I believe Heschel remained skeptical about the Church's motives thereafter.

Nevertheless, in the past thirty-plus years, we have learned to listen to one another and to learn from one another. We have even learned to trust one another. There has been solid work of genuine good will done on both sides to increase understanding and advance the dialogue. Guidelines issued by the

⁹A.J.Y.B., 1965, pp. 127-128.

Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, statements by national bishops' conferences, and creative initiatives by scholars and theologians have gone far beyond the declaration itself. The Vatican-Israel Fundamental Agreement was a particularly heartening step for most Jews, because it put an end to lingering suspicions that there were theological impediments to full diplomatic relations. Those Jewish organizations and leaders open to dialogue have sponsored symposia, courses, conferences, commemorations, and celebrations without number, both to confirm and to advance the process of mutual understanding.

Finally, I would end by noting two areas that need our common attention, one educational and one conceptual. While studies of post-Vatican II Catholic teaching materials show continued progress in correcting negative stereotypes of Jews and Judaism, nevertheless, New Testament conflict themes and the Jewish rejection of Jesus still create problems for Catholic teaching. The sense of antagonism and enmity is largely gone, but there is still a tendency to claim the superiority of Christianity over Judaism through such false dichotomies as law vs. grace, justice vs. mercy, flesh vs. spirit, old vs. new, promise vs. fulfillment. Jewish education about Christianity is frequently spotty and lacks a perspective on the development of Christian thought and history. On both sides, I believe there are residual apologetics and a desire to protect one's own tradition and community, which is understandable and perhaps inevitable.

Above all, we need to reconceptualize the Jewish-Christian relationship. In my experience, Christians tend to see our history as linear; first, God chose the Jews, but they somehow failed their mission, so God sent Jesus to reconcile God and humanity. After that, Jews tend to drop off the chart. There are almost no references to a continuing Judaism that developed and changed after Christianity entered history—a vital faith that created a liturgy, literature, philosophy, rules of living, institutions of study and learning, rituals and ceremonies, and a moral vision based on law and its continuing application and interpretation in succeeding generations. Visualizing our two traditions of faith as two branches growing from the root of the Hebrew Scriptures would present a more historically accurate and less polemical model of relationship. Our relationship has not been sequential, one faith displacing the other, but dynamic, even interactive.

Without discounting the consequences in terms of Jewish suffering of the Church's efforts to implement its claims of supersessionism in the past, its recent affirmations that the Jews' covenant with God has never been revoked and remains valid presents an opportunity fundamentally to reimagine our relationship for future generations. I believe that Orthodox Jewish sages and rabbis should put aside their ban on religious dialogue with Christians and join their non-Orthodox colleagues in forging a new basis for the Jewish-Christian encounter. If our religious leaders can rise to the challenge of fleshing out this vision, they can create a model to help usher us into the next millennium in friendship and mutual respect.