

THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN SEARCH FOR UNDERSTANDING

Sergio Nudelstejer

To try to penetrate the theme of this paper is not an easy task since it requires a good deal of space. Thus, we will try and point out the most important aspects of the topic, especially in light of the present interest in this subject.

On June 21, 1985, the Vatican published its third official modern document concerning the Jews and Judaism. Although it contained various positive points, the tone disillusioned the Jewish circles that had been participating in the Catholic-Jewish dialogue. Even with more than two decades of dialogue, Judaism, the Jews and Israel are defined not in terms of a Jewish concept but only according to Christian categories.

The first document was the famous declaration made public at the close of the Second Vatican Council in 1965. The event constituted an historic shift in viewpoint inspired by John XXIII and his awareness of the contribution of Christian teachings in the creation of an atmosphere that made the Holocaust possible. That document not only revoked the traditional teachings that considered Jews of all different periods guilty of the crime of deicide, but also started a completely new attitude towards the Jews. It strongly condemned antisemitism and opened the way to understanding between the two religions.

Ten years later the Vatican established *Guides* to put the declaration into effect which were also another step forward. Christians were asked to acquire a better understanding of the religious traditions of their "Jewish brothers and sisters". The *Guides* asked that dialogue replace the historical monologue, thus implying respect for the faith and religious convictions of each. They also established recommendations for a liturgical revision that would eliminate the offensive references, emphasize the Old Testament and underline the common elements of the two religions. These *Guides* also made similar proposals on teaching and education and favored joint action in social affairs.

Antisemitism is being fought against strongly by the (Catholic) hierarchy

The *Guides* generated their own momentum and there was considerable progress made in Judeo-Christian relations.

The document to which we are referring, entitled *Notes about the Correct Way of Presenting the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechism in the Roman Catholic Church*, was in the making for over two years and was long awaited.

During the last twenty-five years the Vatican has taken various positive steps in the framework of Judeo-Catholic relations. One of these was the abandonment of missionary activity by the Church. The virtual disappearance overnight of Catholic missions that for centuries had tried to convert Jews by persuasion or force, was a very notable event. Another step has been the strong position adopted against manifestations of antisemitism.

Inevitably, traditional attitudes are so deeply rooted that they may not be totally erased in a couple of years. All manifestation of antisemitism, however, is being strongly fought against by the hierarchy, which through its monolithic and authoritarian structure has very effectively made known its displeasure. The clear and unmistakable condemnation of all forms of antisemitism and discrimination comes at an opportune moment such as the present, when there is a rebirth of antisemitism in different places and in very different forms from the traditional types that, based on selections of a political nature, try to find justification of antisemitism in general.

Another positive step has been the development of inter-religious activities at a grass-roots level with Jewish and Catholic laity and clergy of different countries working together to attain a mutual understanding.

Writer and journalist. Researcher on Jewish-Christian Relations. President of the Latin American Committee for Human Rights.

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Analysis of the 1985 Document

The new document produced the main disillusionment in the field of theology, although there are gains with respect to certain themes: it underlines the Jewish roots of Christianity and the Jewishness of Jesus and it speaks against the traditional Christian derogatory view of the Pharisees. It gives a lot of attention to the Old Testament and sees it as something good... when it is read by the light of Christian interpretation. It underlines the fact that the Jews continue to be the chosen people, and not a punished people. At the same time it renders tribute to the spiritual fertility in the rabbinical period in the Middle Ages and in modern times, thus negating the traditional Christian vision of Jews and Judaism as fossils.

The document however, adopts its most conservative and reactionary position in regard to the most basic problem. And it is here that the Jews lose their basic identity. This attitude comes from the old Christian teaching that the pact of God with the Jewish people was replaced by His pact with those who accepted Jesus. Cristian theologians have referred to the "displacement" of Jews and the "discontinuance of the divine agreement". The logical implication in accepting this belief is that the Jews were rejected and relegated to an inferior status.

On its highest level, the Judeo-Christian dialogue has developed perceptions that permit mutual respect by recognizing the validity of the other faith without compromising one's own beliefs. The pioneers of the parallel evolution were the Jewish intellectuals Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. Since the Second World War, this way of thinking has been adopted by certain liberal Christian thinkers. This leaves the possibility open for an eventual convergence of the two religious traditions to be attained through some mysterious way in the moment that God chooses.

It was thought that Pope John Paul II had had a glimpse of such a way of thinking in 1982 when he spoke to Catholic experts of Judaism and said: "We may go on different paths which finally come together and with the help of the Lord, who never stopped loving His people; we may reach a true fellowship in the reconciliation, in the respect and the complete fulfillment of God's plan in history."

The 1985 document, however, repudiates all type of thinking in this direction. "Jesus declared (it states) that there will be one flock and one shepherd. Thus, the Church and Judaism cannot be seen as two parallel ways of salvation. The Church must be the witness of Christ as

the Redeemer of all and at the same time maintain a strict respect for religious freedom" (implying that the recognition of the legitimacy of Judaism only lies in the principle of religious freedom). With the admirable goal of uprooting antisemitism, it was suggested that Catholics be taught about the only ties that unite the Church with the Jews "who were chosen by God to prepare the way of Christ". If this is the only basis of their connection and if Jews are excluded from salvation unless they accept Christ, then they continue with an inferior status and again we are back to zero.

Relations with Israel

The references to the State of Israel are also disappointing, though this is to be expected. In the previous documents the existence of the State of Israel is completely ignored. The negative of the Holy See to formally recognize or establish diplomatic relations with Israel has been a very important obstacle in the dialogue with the Vatican. On its part, the Vatican has shown what it considers to be a *de facto* recognition expressed, for example, in the visits of Israeli ministers to the Pope. The Vatican holds that the problem is not theological but political, and that official recognition has not been given due to such factors as the



The Star of David in a synagogue in Mexico City. Photo by Gerardo Hellion.

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absence of recognized borders, the situation of Palestine refugees as well as that of the West Bank and Jerusalem. We have to recognize, of course, the political pressures on the Vatican, pressures that also come from churches in Arab countries. The theological aspect that the Vatican says it is not influenced by (but some suspect that it is), is the traditional opinion that the Jews were excluded from their land because they rejected Jesus and they cannot return to it until they accept Christ.

The new document refers to the Jews of the Diaspora saying that "they preserve the remembrance of the lands of their ancestors in the center of their hope". Christians are invited to understand this religious attachment that has its roots in biblical tradition, but they are not asked to realize any religious interpretation about this relation. The existence of the State of Israel and its political options, including the concept that Jerusalem should be its capital, should be seen not from a perspective that is religious in itself, but in reference to the principle of international law.

Though this declaration has the positive aspect of formally recognizing the Jewish attachment for the Holy Land, it does not consider that this has any religious

validity for Christians (this area is nebulous and one might ask how this will be interpreted by Catholic educators who look for clear guidelines). In 1975, a short while after the publication of the *Guides*, the priest, Pierre de Contenson, secretary of the Vatican Committee of Liaison with the Jews, and one of the most outspoken advocates of understanding between Jews and Catholics stated: "The Jews cannot wait for us to adopt their theology concerning their divine right to return to the Promised Land".

Here the basic theological question of the repeal of the old agreement is implicit. According to Contenson's thinking, which continues in the document, the promise that God made to the Jews of giving them the Promised Land has no religious significance for Christians. All was cancelled by the new agreement. No reference is made to the right of Israel to exist. From a practical point of view and given the fact that the State of Israel should be seen with reference to international law, one might ask the following: Why doesn't the Vatican give *de jure* recognition to a nation that received international legitimation by a resolution of the United Nations and that has been recognized by more than one hundred countries?

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A future Rabbi, on his way to the Synagogue. Photo by Gerardo Hellion.

FEATURES

Catholic Viewpoint on the Persecution of Jews

The reference in the passage that concerns the Holocaust is also unfortunate: "Catechism (systematic instruction) should help towards understanding the significance that the extermination perpetrated during 1939-1945 has for the Jews, as well as its consequences." It would have been much better if the document had talked in the language of its first signer, Cardinal Willebrands, President of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, who stated in London in March, 1985: "The Jewish sensibility should be respected and understood... and I will mention two cases: the recent history of Jewish sufferings during the Nazi persecution and their preoccupation for the Land of Israel. This preoccupation is political and secular, but for many it is also religious. By not commenting about that dimension we are exercising Christian charity toward a brother with whom we are searching for reconciliation over very real offenses. Carrying the remembrance of millions of deaths is a terrible weight; having a place under the sun to live in peace and security, with due respect for the rights of others, is a form of hope."

The existence of the State of Israel should be considered in reference to the principles of international law

For his part, Pope John Paul II, who experienced Nazi persecution and was the recent victim of blind terrorism, has done more than any other Christian in making explicit what was implicit in the declaration of the council. In his historical declaration directed to Jewish leaders in Germany on November 17, 1980, the Pope referred to the Jews as "the people of the ancient agreement that God never withdrew" and as "the present day people of the agreement established with Moses". He asked that a joint testimony of Jews and Christians be presented to the world as a "sacred duty" in the name of the One God. He then added: "If Christians consider themselves brothers and sisters, and believe that they should teach one another, then so much more so should this be present when one finds him or herself with the Jewish people." The Pope finished with a prayer of Shalom (peace) for Israel, "the land that the Jews view with special reverence".

It was the hope that had been awakened by words such as these that was frustrated by the recent Vatican document. Even though there are attempts to find acceptable ways to stimulate understanding, the document may have made dialogue more difficult. Certainly Jews and Catholics can continue to look for common ground in such fields as social action, the struggle for religious freedom and by fighting against all forms of prejudice and persecution. The document as it is written, however, con-



Modern Jewish Architecture. Photo by Gerardo Hellion.

stitutes a contribution to conservatism that strengthens the basic theological barriers. Although the Jews recognize that the declaration was directed to guide internal Catholic action and although they never thought that their friends in dialogue would renounce to their basic beliefs, they did have the hope that the new tendencies would signify that these friends in dialogue would be dissuaded from their traditional supposed superiority and triumphal thinking. The new document places this supposition in doubt.

But although the dialogue has been successful in some areas it is still in its infancy and is very fragile. Twenty-five years of dialogue cannot entirely erase two millenniums of distrust and "Christian teachings of contempt" towards the Jews.

The present situation of recuperation of human dignity finds Judaism open to this ideal since we live in particularly dramatic times where new things are maturing and we have manifestations of serious material and spiritual crises. Undeniably this is a time in which men and women, whatever their faith be, feel the need to come together and speak of their common destiny. ■