

Schismatic Bishops, Holocaust Denial and Christian-Jewish Relations

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The lifting of the excommunication of Richard Williamson has left many people confused about the Catholic Church's relation to the Jewish people. John McDade SJ explains the developments in the Church's understanding of its relationship with Judaism since Vatican II. How can the recognition that the Church is linked to Israel at a level of identity help to enrich Christian-Jewish relations, and the Church's mission?

As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing for the world. This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another.¹

These words from Pope John Paul II are an eloquent stimulus to dialogue between Jews and Christians and the development of a shared mission that brings mutual blessings and support.

But events can conspire against this. Pope Benedict's recent decision to lift the excommunication of four illicitly ordained bishops, followers of Marcel Lefebvre, has sparked controversy and anger because one of them, Richard Williamson, seems to belong to that nasty group of people who deny the scale of the Holocaust. As a general rule, those who deny the Holocaust hate Jews and Judaism (they usually have no idea about the features of the religion) and this should never be treated lightly especially when it occurs in someone exercising a Christian ministry, even though it may be formally schismatic and outside Papal jurisdiction.

Jews have expressed the fear that the consideration of re-admitting Williamson meant that the Catholic Church was backing away from its commitment, begun in the Second Vatican Council, to foster a positive relation to the Jewish people as an integral element of the Church's authentic identity. But it is clear from the speed with which the Vatican has responded to these criticisms and fears that the



original decision was made in ignorance of Williamson's publicly expressed views. Quite how the TV interview denying the Holocaust got under the Holy See's radar is hard to fathom. The whole matter was botched and is best understood as an exercise in clumsiness, rather than as a deliberate reversal of the dynamic set in motion in Vatican II's decree *Nostra Aetate*.

Pope Benedict has gone out of his way to condemn denial of the Holocaust, calling such revisionism 'intolerable'. He is following the lead taken by Pope John Paul II who was responsible for an astonishing transformation in the Church's theological understanding of the Jewish people and their significance in the present age. The change inaugurated at Vatican II can be simply described: it was the removal of what is called the 'theology of supersessionism' by which Judaism is replaced by Christianity. Supersessionism has been the default position in Christian thought, given clear expression in the American *Baltimore Catechism* used before the Council:

Why did the Jewish religion, which up to the death of Christ, had been the true religion, cease at that time to be the true religion?

Answer: the Jewish religion was only a promise of the redemption and figure of the Christian religion, and when the redemption was accomplished and the Christian religion was established by the death of Christ, the promise and the figure were no longer necessary. (391)

Nostra Aetate subtly rejects this replacement theory by affirming that God's covenant with the Jewish people was not revoked because 'God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made'. St Paul had written about those Jews who did not accept Jesus as Messiah and Lord: 'as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gift and the calling of God are irrevocable' (Rom 11:28-9). In other words, God does not reverse the choice he has made to bestow his love on Israel because he is faithful to his promises.

Too often Christians have treated Judaism as part of the prehistory of Christianity, coming before us, but lacking significance in the present age. In this perspective, continuing Jewish fidelity to God through the Torah is of no significance: Jews are simply early, troublesome actors in the Christian story. Christians who suggest that God has now 'rejected' the Jewish people should consider that if God can withdraw his love from Israel, he can also withdraw it from the Church: so on what basis could we Christians possibly trust a God who shows himself to be so inconsistent? A replacement theology has profound consequences for your doctrine of God and your doctrine of the Church, so think again, my supersessionist friend, before, with your theories of Israel being removed from divine favour, you undermine the solidity of the very Christian faith you claim to uphold.

In a thoroughly Pauline spirit, during his visit to the Mainz synagogue in 1980, Pope John Paul II spoke of 'the people of God of the Old Covenant that has never been revoked by God'. Now, if the covenant has never been revoked, then it is still in place, and you have to acknowledge that what God inaugurated at Sinai is still a feature of God's relation to the Jewish people, awaiting fulfilment as God brings them to the fullness of redemption. Later the Pope spoke of Christianity and Judaism as traditions 'linked together at the very level of their identity' and 'founded on the design of the Lord of the covenant'. Now this cannot be a sequential relationship, in which one follows the other and supersedes it: it must refer to a bond at one and the same time. John Paul II's theme of the continuing significance of Jewish identity is taken up in the 1985 Vatican document *Notes on the Correct Way*

to present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis when it discusses the persistence of Jewish life since Christ:

The permanence of Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God's design.... We must remind ourselves how the permanence of Israel is accompanied by a continuous spiritual fecundity...²

But where does this spiritual fecundity come from? Only from God. And then you realise that if God enables the Jewish people to 'remain' and be spiritually fruitful in the present age, the Church has to develop an understanding of its relationship to a Jewish people whose persistence in history is willed and sustained by God. In this vein, when he was still Cardinal Ratzinger, Pope Benedict wrote these important words:

Even if Christians wish that Israel might one day recognize Christ as the Son of God and that the fissure that still divides them might thereby be closed, they ought to acknowledge the decree of God, who has obviously entrusted Israel with a distinctive mission in 'the time of the Gentiles'.³

Christians, in other words, rightly want Jews to see Jesus as God's Beloved Son, but we should also have the humility to recognise that in the present age (*nostra aetate*) God has given Israel 'a distinctive mission' not linked to faith in Christ. Is it too much to ask Christians to hold that it is God's will that Israel continue to witness to him in a distinctive way? The Church, after all, is not the sole instrument by which God establishes signs of his love and presence. If Pope Benedict is right, Israel too is such an instrument with a distinctive mission in the present age. How do Gentile Christians relate to this people? An American Jewish scholar, Michael Wyschogrod, suggests that Gentile Christians might understand themselves as

the gathering of peoples around the people of Israel, the entry of adopted sons and daughters into the household of God. Through the Jew Jesus, when properly interpreted, the gentile enters into the covenant and becomes a member of the household, as long as he or she does not claim that his or her entrance replaces the original children.⁴

If Wyschogrod is right, then both Jew and Gentile Christian are members of the household of God because membership by one does not mean exclusion of the other. How are Christians to think of what a living, contemporary Judaism means? John Pawlikowski offers us a simple starting point: Judaism is a 'kinship community' that has been constituted in response to revelation.⁵ Jews are a people, a family, descended from the Patriarchs. But more needs to be said. Rabbi Norman Solomon offers a valuable description of the character of Judaism: it is universal in significance (of service to all) and particular in focus (while remaining distinct):

One of the most peddled distortions of Judaism is that it is some sort of 'ethnic' religion. As Jews themselves, sometimes even the learned among them, are principally responsible for this notion getting about, I cannot follow my gut reaction of blaming it on anti-Semitism. But it is about as wrong-headed as can be. Judaism combines a world religion with a prototype people. Judaism is a missionary (though not necessarily proselytising) religion, with deep concern for the world and a profound contribution to make to resolving its present problems....⁶

Taken together, Pawlikowski and Solomon point us towards an approach which we can develop using a remark from Archbishop Rowan Williams, who points out that Judaism and Christianity are not two competing answers to the same question; they are rather *different answers to different questions*. So if we ask what is the question to which the answer is 'Judaism', it might be: how does a people conduct a universal mission on behalf of God while remaining a distinct people?

Hence, we might think, the need to maintain appropriate boundaries between Israel and the rest of the world: only by being distinctive in how it lives out the Covenant can Israel be of witness to God and of service to all. Observance of the Torah is laid only on Israel as an obligation and a privilege; God deals with others in different ways. There is no space here to develop the theme of the question to which the answer is 'Christianity', certainly a major topic in itself, but an initial approach might be:

how does God make available to all what begins in Israel as call and response, and which completes the dynamic of our nature by grounding us unsurpassably in God's self-giving truth (Word) and love (Spirit)?

We cannot pursue these suggestions further here, but they might enable us to think of Christianity as 'reconfigured Judaism' and to see the Church as 'reconfigured Israel' whose boundaries have been extended to include potentially all human beings. The basis of Christianity, like Judaism, is a practice of Torah-observance within a covenant of divine love, accessible to all through faith, conducted through following Christ's teaching in committed discipleship and through sharing sacramentally in his self-offering to the Father. The reconfigured Israel that is the Church, bringing together Jew and Gentile in one body (Eph 2.16), is grounded in Jesus' own vision of gathering Israel to be the restored Temple, the dwelling place of divine holiness, sanctified by his self-offering, there to be joined by the nations in worship of God (Is 2.1-2).

This way of seeing the two traditions as different answers to different questions no longer construes them as essentially inimical to one another or as competitive rivals whose existence is a threat to the other. James Dunn, writing about Paul's Gentile mission as a fulfilment of the promise of Abrahamic blessing to the nations (Gen 28.14), thinks that Christians come to be part of Israel, but not in a way that replaces the Jewish people:

Can Christians understand themselves except as part of Israel: as enlightened by Israel, as Abraham's seed and heirs of Israel's covenant promises, not instead of Israel but as part of Israel? But the question confronting Jews is equally profound. Can Jews understand themselves as Israel without being open to the possibility that Gentile Christians are also participants in that same Israel, again not instead of Israel but as part of Israel?⁷

Dunn's first question invites Christians to see themselves as that which, arising in Israel for the sake of the nations and permanently dependent on Jewish teaching and the divine promises made to the Jewish people, never ceases to be part of Israel. The Church may become socially and culturally distinct from Israel, but I doubt that it can ever be religiously distinct from Israel. Whatever arises through Christ must be *part of Israel* because it belongs within the dynamic of God's dealings with Israel and because it quite simply cannot 'be' anything else. Christianity cannot but see itself as springing from Israel for the sake of the nations and from the nations for the sake of Israel.

Dunn's second question, directed towards Jews, invites them to consider that, through Christ and the Church, the boundaries of Israel have been extended to include, potentially, all human beings in one reconfigured 'Israel of God' (Gal 6.16). Many Jews are coming to see a religious significance in Christianity: the important statement by Jewish scholars in 2000, *Dabru Emet*, responding to the theological recognition of Judaism by various churches, says that 'as Jewish theologians we rejoice that, through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel'. This is a generous acknowledgement by Jews that what arises through Christ brings blessing to the Gentile world, a remarkable act of recognition by a people whose history at the hands of Christians has been a bitter experience: it is all the more gracious for that.⁸

Modern Christians have inherited a version of Christianity in which there has been a negative relationship to Judaism: the Baltimore Catechism, quoted earlier, is only the tip of the iceberg. A considerably darker legacy is the hate-filled rhetoric bequeathed to us by John Chrysostom in 4th Century Antioch, Martin Luther in 16th Century Germany and the countless preachers who stirred up the anti-Jewish feelings that flowed murderously into 20th Century European history. The task is now a simple one: to develop an account of Christian identity in which there is a positive relationship to the Jewish people. And with this project, we are setting ourselves the task of recovering the insight available in the earliest Christian decades that there is a living tie between what God does in Israel and what God does through Christ. This can only be an enrichment of the core Christian identity and mission, and it is this enrichment which is threatened by those who, for ideological reasons, try to drive a wedge between Christians and Jews. We should not tolerate them.

If Richard Williamson is accepted back into communion with the Catholic Church, there should be no question of his exercising either an episcopal or

a priestly role in the Church. This would be completely inappropriate and unwelcome: no one needs ministry from a person who holds views which are inimical to the Church's positive relation to the Jewish people. When Pope Benedict was simply Joseph Ratzinger, he wrote that 'the highest vocation that we can have is simply to be a Christian'. This ought to govern the advice that is given now to Williamson: live as a Catholic layman and do your best to reach heaven through the grace you received at Baptism, but do not expect to act in the name of Christ in either a priestly or episcopal capacity. This matter is too important for the Church to act otherwise and Williamson is too marginal and offensive to genuine Catholicism to be given a ministry to speak in the name of the Church.

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¹ Eugene J. Fisher & Leon Klenicki, eds., *Spiritual Pilgrimage: Texts on Jews and Judaism 1979-1995: Pope John Paul II* (Crossroad, 1995), 169

² *Notes on the Correct Way to present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis* (1985), 25. Emphasis added.

³ J.Ratzinger, 'Interreligious Dialogue and Jewish-Christian Relations,' *Communio* 25 (1998), 29-41; 37

⁴ M.Wyschogrod, *Abraham's Promise: Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations* (Eerdmans, 2004), 21-2

⁵ John Pawlikowski, *First Things* 62 (April 1996), 52-4

⁶ Norman Solomon, *Judaism and World Religion* (Macmillan, 1991), 8

⁷ J.D.G.Dunn, 'Paul: Apostate or Apostle of Israel?', *ZNW* 89 (1998), 256-71; 271.

⁸ This generous statement is controversial for many Jews because it seems to commit Jews to developing a Jewish theology of Christianity at odds with Jewish tradition. Cf. J.Levenson, 'How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue,' *Commentary* (December 2001), 31-7; 'Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Jon D.Levenson & Critics,' *Commentary* (April 2002), 8-21