



Transforming “Divine Mystery” into “faith and reason”.

Lisa Palmieri-Billig* | 01.09.2018

Benedict XVI on Catholic-Jewish relations-reactions.

Very soon after his election as the first post-Shoah German Pope, Benedict XVI won over world Jewry's initial diffidence by visiting the Synagogue of Cologne on his first papal trip outside Italy in August, 2005 and then making repeated declarations condemning Naziism and antisemitism. Significantly, his new essay on Catholic-Jewish relations begins with the words, “Ever since Auschwitz, it is clear that the Church must meditate anew on the nature of Judaism. Vatican II laid the foundations with the ‘Nostra Aetate’ declaration.”

His commitment is indisputable. Yet unlike the two illustrious popes preceding and succeeding him - St. John Paul II and Pope Francis - he lacked the first-hand experience of having Jewish friends. His personal vision of the Jewish religion did not include familiarity with the development and ferment of Judaism through the ages. While fully supporting the ongoing healing process between Catholics and Jews, Joseph Ratzinger may nevertheless not be keeping pace with its latest evolution.

His experience with interreligious dialogue is essentially confined to scholarly research and Catholic exegesis, a world of theory relatively untouched by references to the periodic violence inflicted for centuries on Jews via the post-Constantine Church and rise of Christianity to temporal power. The ground cause, the perverted theology behind the Church's “teaching of contempt”, was officially banned only as late as 1965 by the Second Vatican Council's document, “Nostra Aetate”. Joseph Ratzinger was one of the participating Council Fathers.

In the decades that followed, the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews issued four other significant documents to help implement the Conciliar statement and facilitate Catholic-Jewish reconciliation. The 1985 “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Teaching in the Roman Catholic Church” refers to the 1974 “Guidelines and Suggestions “...’ that define the fundamental condition of dialogue as ‘respect for the other as he is’, knowledge of the ‘basic components of the religious traditions of Judaism’ and learning ‘by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience’ “

The most recent document, issued in 2015 to commemorate Nostra Aetate's 50th anniversary, “The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable (Rom 11-29): a reflection on theological questions pertaining to Christian-Jewish relations” was the first purely theological document. The coexistence of seemingly everlasting contradictions between the “elder” and “younger” brother religions, such as different beliefs in the Covenant (or Covenants) and in the Messiah, were described as “Divine Mysteries”. In his presentation, the President of the Pontifical Commission, Cardinal Kurt Koch, stated that “...there can only be one story of the Covenant between God and his people, and God has always renewed his covenant with his people Israel.” The document reads, “The New Covenant does not revoke previous covenants, but brings them to completion...The New Covenant has the Old as its basis and foundation, since it is the God of Israel who establishes the Old Covenant with the people of Israel and makes possible the New Covenant in Jesus Christ... For Christians the New Covenant neither abolishes nor replaces, but fulfills the promises of the Old Covenant.”

Benedict's learned intellectual forays into Catholic theology taught him to venerate the “Old Testament” (“Torah” or “Jewish Bible”) as an integral part of the Christian Holy Scriptures. He believes in the “intrinsic unity of the Old and the New Covenant, the two parts of the Holy Scriptures” as he said to me in 1990 when, as the Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the

Doctrine of the Faith, he granted me his first interview on Catholic-Jewish relations, "Jews and Judaism in the Universal Catechism" published simultaneously in Italian and English by "Studi Cattolici" and "Midstream". He said, "We can read the New Testament only together with what preceded it, otherwise, we would completely fail to understand it."

An acceptance of the unity of the Old and the New in one developing Covenant is clearly reflected in the 2015 document, which was not to be considered an "official document of the Magisterium" but rather as a "study" paper meant to inspire further reflection. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI took up the challenge and decided to delve deeper into the theological issues that seemed to him needy of further clarification.

Since his voluntary retirement in 2013, Benedict XVI has devoted much of his time meditating and writing. His new, 20 page essay is a solitary reflection on "Grace and Calling without Repentance" – regarding the "Decree on the Jews", as "Nostra Aetate"'s first version was called. He concentrates basically on two theses of the 1965 and 2015 documents. 1) "Israel has not been replaced by the Church", and 2) "the Covenant (with the Jewish People) has never been revoked". He states that both are "basically correct but require further critical evaluation." A third thesis on which Pope Ratzinger focuses is the theological meaning of "the Promised Land."

While received by Cardinal Koch as an essay for internal Catholic reflection only, the Cardinal convinced Ratzinger of the need for its publication. It thus appeared in early July in the German Catholic Review, "Communio" (co-founded by Joseph Ratzinger himself). To this date a translation has not yet circulated.

Initial reactions were limited to fellow German speaking theologians, Jewish leaders, and scholars of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue. They express concern for its potential to stir up controversy and send the dialogue backwards. According to "The Tablet", the "Coordinating Council of the 80-plus Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation in Germany" demands "immediate clarifying talks" regarding the Pope Emeritus's "relativized" statements on "the rejection of the replacement theory" and the "never-revoked covenant".

The Provincial of the Swiss Jesuits, Christian Ruttishauser, wrote an article for the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" entitled "There is No Way around Christ: Benedict XVI reaffirms his stance: The Jews are God's people, but the truth lies in Christianity."

A more benevolent but thoughtful response comes from Austria's Chief Rabbi, Arie Folger. Recognizing that the text was meant primarily for internal use of the Church, he finds it "understandable" that Benedict seeks to make its theses compatible with the Christian magisterium.

He does however accuse the Pope Emeritus of an "a-historical revisionism that ignores the real suffering inflicted over centuries by the Doctrine of 'Verus Israel' (Substitution theology)." ... "Despite all Ratzinger's efforts", he says, "his portrayal of Judaism still resembles that of the sculpture on top of the Strasbourg Cathedral where Judaism is represented as a poor blindfolded woman."

Yet Cardinal Koch, in his Introduction to the essay, suggested that Ratzinger's "theological reflections should be incorporated into the future dialogue between the Church and Israel", that they are "an important response to the invitation of the Vatican Commission to enter into deeper theological dialogue" and will be an "enrichment".

Christian Ruttishauser conjectures that Koch's motivation "may have been a concern to defend the claim of Christ's universal salvation in the face of relativism..."-- an unnecessary concern, Ruttishauser holds, "since the Vatican document of 2015 already rejected Judaism and Christianity as parallel paths of salvation."

One might add that according to Jewish religious teaching, not mentioned by Ratzinger, salvation is open to all the world's people who live according to the moral code of the seven Noahide Commandments.

Benedict XVI's "clarifications" regarding replacement or "supercessionist" theology and "the Covenant", are precise. "Replacement theory", he states quite simply, "never existed."

Ratzinger's new essay elaborates on the solution of continuity and progression between the two religions (which is obvious for Christians but problematic of course for Jews). Going further, by proposing it as a platform for future Catholic-Jewish dialogue, the document risks creating misunderstandings.

An exemplary case might be Ratzinger's reference to Luke's account of Jesus's conversation with two young people on the road to Emmaus. He writes, "This text describes the development of the Christian faith in the first and second century and therewith a path that must always be sought and trodden anew. It therefore also describes the basis for conversation between Jews and Christians, as it should take place today and unfortunately has been glimpsed only in rare instances."

Another example of Joseph Ratzinger's pervasively Christological approach to the Old Testament is expressed in his tracing the evolution of the Psalms as authored by David to the Christian belief that their author is Jesus. He states, "The original historical meaning of the text is thus not abolished but must be transcended."

The Jewish partner, especially Jewish Orthodoxy, cannot but help recalling the long, painful history of medieval theological "disputations" imposed by the Church, whose predetermined outcome was always the defeat of the Jewish partner and triumph of the Christian, often accompanied by burnings of the Talmud and violence against Jewish communities.

In Ratzinger's theological vision the Hebrew Bible seems to acquire its true interpretative value only via the Advent of Christ. He appears to pay little heed to the instructions of the Pontifical Commission to learn "by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience". He does not seem to recall the multi-level Hebrew rabbinic Talmudic discussions and interpretations, not to speak of the vitality and diversity expressed within today's Jewish religiosity.

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's hopes or expectations of expanding the openness on the part of Jews to engage anew in such historically sensitive theological discourse seem problematic where the unspoken Christian aim remains that of "convincing" Jews of the Christian faith, and thus once more, engaging, however discretely, in the missionary activity that was decried in all recent official Vatican documents. The document might trigger an adverse response on the part of Orthodox Jewish leaders who only last year finally overcame their wariness of dialogue with the Church and presented Pope Francis with a unified document ("Between Jerusalem and Rome") foreseeing closer relations in a common commitment to working together for a better world.

In his detailed clarification of the "Substitution theory", Benedict first lists the minor substitutions that simply characterized the "parting of the ways" of the two fraternal religions in the first centuries. He states for example that "the Eucharist replaced the Temple cult's sacrifice of animals" (but, one might add, that Judaism too replaced animal sacrifices - with penitence and fasting...). The Sabbath, observed by Jews on Saturdays, later became the Christian Sunday - a day of prayer and rest. Circumcision, dietary laws, instructions related to cleanliness were also transformed.

An important affirmation of unity between the two religions is Ratzinger's statement that regarding the legal and moral instructions of the Torah, "there is absolutely no substitution for the moral law. Even if interpretations may vary, the moral instructions in the Old and New Covenants are actually

identical and no 'Substitution' is here possible."

Benedict concludes that the only real stumbling block today is the irreconcilable difference in belief in Jesus as the Messiah. According to the Pope Emeritus, "The subject of Jesus as Messiah is and will remain the real controversy ("Streitpunkt") between Jews and Christians. ... The different concepts of the Messiah reflect our different beliefs. Jesus did not want to directly bring peace into a complete new world...but wanted, rather, to spread faith in God. "

Ratzinger's reflections on religious Zionism provide further difficulty for many Jews. He states that "the Promised Land" took on a purely metaphysical meaning within Christianity. This rejection of all Jewish theological claims to Israel spurred a strong protest by Austria's Rabbi Folger and also, in a previous response regarding the content of the 2015 "Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable" document, by Rabbi David Rosen. At the same time however, Benedict XVIth strongly defends the Jewish People's "natural right" to the land of Israel.

Referring to this thesis, Rabbi Rosen, AJC's International Director of Interreligious Affairs, had pointed out that the "Nostra Aetate"'s 50th anniversary document lacked reference "to the centrality that the Land of Israel plays in the historic and contemporary religious life of the Jewish People". He recalled that the historical and theological significance of Vatican-Israel diplomatic ties established in 1994 reflected the Catholic Church's "repudiation" of a former "portrayal of the Jewish People as wanderers condemned to be homeless until the final Advent". He also recalled that "the relationship between religion, people and land has been amply explored in its religious dimensions during meetings of Vatican and Jewish experts of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in the 1970s. "

Editorial remarks

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