



Italy's Rabbis protest – controversy over title and program of Italian biblical association colloquium

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The original title and presentation of a colloquium organized by the Associazione Biblica Italiana (ABI - with membership of c. 800 Biblical scholars and professors, recognized by CEI - Italy's Episcopal Conference) scheduled for September has caused indignant comments amongst the Italian rabbinate.

“The People of a Jealous God (cf. Ex 34,14): coherence and ambivalence of an elitist religion” was the original title which has since been removed and replaced. The term, “elitist religion” was transformed into “the religion of ancient Israel (“The People of a jealous God (cf. Ex 34,14) coherence and ambivalence of the religion of ancient Israel”).)

The original introduction has also been removed and replaced on the ABI site following the protests of the Italian rabbis. The most articulate and detailed reaction was written by Giuseppe Laras, the esteemed President Emeritus of the Italian Rabbinical Assembly and former Chief Rabbi of Milan, known among other things for his engagement and belief in interreligious dialogue and his participation for years in public theological discussions with the former Cardinal of Milan, Carlo Maria Martini, who was so deeply committed to Catholic-Jewish relations.

The ABI Colloquium's vanished first introduction contained some startling statements, presented as facts, or more precisely as foregone conclusions instead of actual hypotheses to be proven, as scientific methodology would normally require.

The introduction states: “The choice of the topic of this colloquium, contrary to the usual, is inspired by the contemporary panorama of a **return to religion with absolutist and intolerant accents...** This may represent defeat for a modern critical spirit through which the traditional religion was developed and enriched, but poses the problem of attentive consideration regarding the possible roots of a religion which in its structuring can give rise to manifestations considered degenerate. ...We have chosen to begin with an initial hypothesis: at the basis is the process through which **Yhwh, from a subordinate divinity ... gradually became the exclusive divinity of a people who, in an elitist manner, believe themselves to be his unique possession.**” And further, “...a people that believe themselves to belong in an elitist manner to a unique divinity has determined a **sense of superiority** of their religion and led them to trace borders of separation from other peoples...”

The “ambivalence” to which the title refers is the coexistence of particularism and universalism in the “religion of ancient Israel” (with no reference to contemporary Judaism), and the ambiguity of the coexistence of a “jealous God” with the possibility of free choice. The introduction states that it wants to “avoid the impression of wanting to speak of the religion of the Ancient Testament in a negative light. The intention, instead, is to supply useful elements for verifying how the problematics emerging from this religion appear again in other religious systems and discover whether ambiguity is intrinsic only to the Ancient Testament texts or is found instead (or also) in the interpretations of the subsequent traditions.”

It can be deduced that the intent is to discover (or prove?) that the “ancient” Jewish religion as

expressed in the texts of the Jewish Bible produced Fundamentalism within Judaism but is also at the base of Christian and above all, Islamic Fundamentalism.

The first, most elementary observation is that these texts were written in Hebrew and Aramaic, languages in which every word embodies layers of different meanings, and that the living Jewish religion is based on the multiple comments of rabbis through the centuries, discussing different points of view in study sessions that cast constantly changing new light on interpretations. Biblical scholars who are not aware that this method is by nature anti-fundamentalist and anti-absolutist, and that the Jewish method of searching for mutations of divine truths leads to ever renewed doubts and re-examination in each generation, have not understood the basic essence of the religion they plan to study.

The proposed colloquium is defined as “scientific”, but Biblical studies cannot be undertaken in a specialized vacuum and still be considered scientific. Interdisciplinary research (such as theological, linguistic, anthropological, etc.), and historical context are of prime importance. In past centuries, Catholic studies of the Jewish religion were strongly biased because they were based on theological prejudices and “the teaching of contempt” where the absurd “deicide” accusation (banned from Church teaching only with the Vatican II’s ‘Nostra Aetate, No. 4’ document in 1965) furthered the anti-Semitism that resulted in persecutions, pogroms and the substrata of hate that facilitated the Shoah. Without a historical perspective to throw light on the mutable meanings and interpretations of religion through the ages we grope around in the dark and arrive at mendacious conclusions.

Yet in the past half century the Catholic Church has produced invaluable documents for educational purposes, which should really be taken off the shelves, remembered, studied, and applied, to avoid conflictual situations such as that provoked by this ABI Venice Colloquium outline. **The post Vatican II documents of the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, based on “Nostra Aetate” are largely a result of the ongoing dialogue between Catholic and Jewish representatives of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee. They offer specific advice that, if applied as meant to be, would lead to a rewriting of this colloquium from scratch. They are invaluable tools for combating the theological anti-Semitism that arises in every new generation if the Gospel and Magisterium are not taught in their historical context.**

In Rabbi Laras’ extenuous analysis of what he finds are steps backward in the Jewish – Catholic dialogue and a sadly decreased sensitivity to theological anti-Judaism evidenced in this description of the ABI Colloquium, he also points to Pope Francis’ homilies as ignoring the vital advice contained in these documents produced by the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews.

Laras refers to “the resumption of the old polarization between the morality and theology of the Hebrew Bible and of pharisaism, and Jesus of Nazareth and the Gospels”, used by Francis metaphorically to illustrate hypocritical behavior in today’s society and within the Church itself. This is a very sensitive issue since Francis is generally so highly considered and beloved by Jewish people. Jewish representatives and friends, while loth to criticize him, have nevertheless made him aware of this problem from various sources on various occasions, but apparently he does not realize the potential damage that these homilies can cause.

Rabbi Laras writes, “I know very well that the official documents of the Catholic Church are thought to have reached points of no return. What a shame that they should be contradicted on a daily basis by the homilies of the pontiff, who employs precisely the old, inveterate structure and its expressions, dissolving the contents of the aforementioned documents.

“One need think only of the law of ‘an eye for an eye’ recently evoked by the Pope carelessly and mistakenly, in which instead, through it, interpreting it for millennia, also at the time of Jesus, Judaism replaced retaliation with reparation, making the guilty party pay what would now be called damages, for both physical and psychological harm. And all of this many centuries before the highly civilized (Christian?) Europe would address these issues. Was the argument of what is called the law of ‘an eye for an eye’ not perhaps through the centuries a warhorse of anti-Judaism on the Christian side, with a clearly defined story of its own?”

Yet the Vatican documents regarding Catholic-Jewish relations are indeed a treasure of guidelines for the principles governing successful dialogue.

The Introduction to the 1985 “*Notes on the Correct Way of presenting Judaism in Teaching and Preaching*” document refers once again to the important instruction of the 1974 “*Guidelines and Suggestions for implementing the conciliar declaration Nostra Aetate (4)*” which “tried to define the fundamental condition of dialogue: ‘respect for the other as he is’, knowledge of the ‘basic components of the religious traditions of Judaism’ and again learning ‘by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience’ ... due awareness of the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practiced still today, can greatly help us to understand better certain aspects of the life of the Church”, it states.

Chapter III of the “*Guidelines*” document on “*Teaching and education*” lists a number of practical things to be done, with this recommendation:

“Information concerning these questions is important at all levels of Christian instruction and education. Among sources of information, special attention should be paid to the following: catechisms and religious textbooks; history books; the mass media (press, radio, cinema, television).” (To this one might well add “and Biblical colloquiums”!)

“The effective use of these means presupposes the thorough formation of instructors and educators in training schools, seminaries and universities” (AAS 77, 1975, p. 73).” continues the document.

Significantly, it then states, “ The paragraphs which follow are intended to serve this purpose. - the singularity of the people of the Old Testament is **not exclusive and is open, in the divine vision, to a universal extension; - the uniqueness of the Jewish people is meant to have the force of an example.**” (emphasis added)

This last statement is particularly relevant to our present discussion, since, certain key concepts, **such as that of the “election” of the Jewish people, are so often misunderstood. The true religious meaning of this term does not imply a state of “superiority” or privilege, (as we are led to believe in the original introduction to the Colloquium, which stated that “thinking of oneself as a people belonging in an elitist way to a unique divinity has determined a sense of the superiority of one’s own religion,” opening the door to possible fundamentalist, absolutist tendencies.**

For Jewish self-understanding, to be “chosen” or “elected”, implies the duty and obligation of setting an example, for the sake of all humanity. As is well put in the Vatican document, here the “uniqueness” of the Jewish people implies a mission of universality.

The Vatican document also mentions (6), “finally, work that is of poor quality and lacking in precision would be extremely detrimental” to Judaeo-Christian dialogue (John Paul II, speech of March 6th, 1982). But it would be above all detrimental - since we are talking of teaching and education - to Christian identity”.

In an interview published by "Avvenire", the President of ABI, Prof. Luca Mazzinghi explained that the title of the Colloquium referred to "an underlying ambivalence, the relationship between the jealous God and human freedom: to what extent the 'jealousy' of God could demean human freedom. It is an ambivalence that is, in fact, behind every system of religion, including Christianity (as we address in our second conference)""

He strongly rejected accusations that the conference program expressed anti-Semitic attitudes: "The fact that some have interpreted the key theme of the conference as anti-Jewish goes against all our intentions. I say this very forcefully. Any shadow of anti-Semitism, which we repudiate in the strongest terms, has always been absent from our Association. I add that many of our members are personally committed to the Jewish-Christian dialogue. Personally, as a Christian, I've always taught my students love for the Jewish people and its Scriptures."

Perhaps what is needed most today is to refresh our knowledge of Christian-Jewish history and to require seminarians, university students and teachers to brush up on the relevant documents.

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