



“Jewish-Christian dialogue and studies take a leap forward: a commemorative Symposium marks the advent of a new era”

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15 Dicembre 2021 - “Reading from the Same Text: From Dialogue to Jewish-Christian Studies” was the title of an international symposium that took place on November 9 at the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies of the Pontifical Gregorian University. “Moving from Jewish-Christian dialogue to studying together is an important step forward” said the President of the Cardinal Bea Centre, Prof. Etienne Veto. It is “the fruit of a seed planted 20 years ago” according to Aldegonde Bennenkmeijer-Wehrhahn who, together with her husband, founded both this center and the Center for the Study of Christianity of Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

“Like the little mustard seed in Matthew 13:31-32, the Bea Center has become, twenty years later, a strong tree that has grown tall, a fine-grained and beautiful tree” she declared.

The Symposium evidenced the truth of these words. It included two days of joint study sessions of Jewish and Christian texts and an afternoon of key speakers from the U.S., Austria, Germany, Italy and Israel. In wrapping up the stimulating, lively discussions, Prof. Veto declared he was “impressed by the amount of knowledge of each other that has been displayed. In fact, we couldn’t have done this without each other. This has been a step upwards that went beyond the dialogue”, he said, “as is written in the Talmud, ‘The learning of scholars increases peace in the world.’ ”

Prof. Nuno da Silva Goncalves, Dean of the Pontifical Gregorian University (or “the Greg”, as students like to call it) referred to a comment made by Pope Francis at the audience he gave the Cardinal Bea Centre in the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the passing away of Cardinal Bea 28 February 2019. He said, “The dialogue must be held between two voices, the testimonies of Jewish and Christian scholars teaching together is more valuable than a multitude of speeches.”

The date of the conference, November 9, marked some portentous anniversaries. The Rome and Jerusalem study centers were founded on that date twenty years ago; the date also signaled the 63rd anniversary of “Kristallnacht” which raged through cities and towns in Germany and Austria in 1938, the first major sign of the unspeakable horrors that were to wipe out 70 – 85 million people or about 3% of the world population in the 7 years that followed. In 1989 the same date marked the end of the Soviet Union, as the Berlin Wall fell.

Talks alternated between a Jewish scholar discussing a Christian text followed by a Christian respondent and vice versa. Its rich contents may well be described as avant-garde and much more stimulating than hearing only a one-sided presentation. The insights of “the other” were refreshing and revealing of new levels of mutual understanding.

Prof. Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish-American scholar and Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, a prolific author who had presented her “Jewish Annotated New Testament” to Pope Francis in a private audience, gave a vivacious talk about

“The Good Samaritan”. Her interpretation of the parable (as is usual for her) evidenced the Jewish heritage and culture of Jesus and its meaning in contemporary terms. Her comments issued from what she likes to define as her “strong Jewish identity” which continues to inspire her to focus on the Jewish roots of Jesus. “One does not need to believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior” she said, “to appreciate his message of justice and compassion” adding that “...it helps to hear the parable as a story spoken by the Jew Jesus to other Jews.... We choose how to read -- the responsibility for using the Bible correctly is in our hands. Here and in many other places, Jesus makes clear that Israel’s Scripture is the divine word, a font of wisdom, and a source of life.” Jesus refers to the Torah, which is “better translated not as ‘law’ but as ‘instruction’ “.

Leviticus 19:18 is cited in the parable: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself” which, Prof. Levine points out, was repeated by “Rabbi Akiva, a Jewish teacher also executed by the Romans a century after Jesus”. He said that to love your neighbor as yourself “is the greatest principle of Torah.” She refers to Leviticus (19:16) “...you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt”. So much for the mistaken interpretation of “neighbor” as being exclusively another Jew, the true message is “love must extend beyond those in our own group” says Prof. Levine.

After clarifying the common misunderstandings of the true Jewish context of the parable she presents her “Jewish reading”.

“Setting Jesus’ words in a modern context, I hear the challenge. I am an Israeli Jew waylaid by robbers, and while two people who should have helped – a member of Likud and a member of Yesh Atid /(2 contemporary political parties)/ - fail, a Palestinian from Nablus offers aid. If we can picture this scenario, and if people in the Middle East can picture it, then there is hope for peace.”

Here we must note, that help offered from Palestinians to Israelis and vice versa on Israeli roads when needed, actually does take place, and not infrequently.

Prof. Di Luccio, in his reply to Prof. Levine notes that “the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lc 10,25-37) is an actualization of the teaching of the Torah” since, as Levine says, “ ‘Torah is not a to do list: Torah is instruction for daily life,’ and this is the actualization of the interpretation of the commandment of love of God.”

Another amazing “interreligious” study was presented by Rev. Dr. Christian Rutishauser, a Jesuit Research Fellow at the University of Salzburg in Austria.

He chose to examine the message of the famous 20th century Orthodox Hassidic rabbi, Joseph Soloveitchik, who never relented in expressing his opposition to theological dialogue, but who, he found, expressed profound concepts that inspire both religions. “Soloveitchik’s Halachic Man: A Jewish Self-Reassurance with Inspirational Power for Christians” was the title of his talk.

“He defends dignity and beauty of the halakhic existence in the face of modernity’s philosophy and psychology of religion” said Prof. Rutishauser. In a rich exploration of Soloveitchik’s thought, Rutishauser exclaimed, “...a Christian must position himself in view of the modern, anthropologically oriented conception of faith and religion. In reading ‘Halakhic Man’ he learns how the other does it, a Jewish orthodox intellectual” helping him “...to position himself in the modern age...He also encounters a rich interpretation of Talmudic texts and learns a theological interpretation of Jewish liturgical prayers and holiday customs.” He describes Halakha as “a spiritual system...the halakhist is not only in the service of knowledge. He is always also the servant of an ethical way of life....

In exploring similarities with Christian belief, Rutishauser points to “the fact that the religious and spiritual movement is from transcendence towards the concrete world and not vice

versa...Soleveitchik, like the Christian faith, is concerned with preserving a qualified concept of revelation that is prior to religious experience. If this is abandoned, faith lapses into subjectivity and relativism....”

“Only insofar as he lives ethically-normatively, is creatively active, does good and takes responsibility does he make himself immortal. Not a soul, no matter how ethereal, guarantees man’s eternity. Only creative action, only the righteous act is stronger than death.”

Rutthauser drew many comparisons between Soloveitchik’s concept of Jewish Orthodoxy and Christianity. His “focus on the carrying out, on the normative and ethical is also highly stimulating for Christian faith. ... Soloveitchik’s essay”, concluded Rutthauser, “is a grandiose self-assurance for an orthodox Jew of the modern age. For a Christian, it is more than inspiring. It challenges theological, interreligious debates, even if Soloveitchik was reluctant to engage in them.”

The Jesuit professor’s Jewish respondent, Prof. Karma Ben Johanan of Humboldt University in Berlin and the Hartman Institute of Jerusalem stressed the significance of Rutishauser’s choice “to not engage with a Jewish thinker who is overtly dialogical, whose stated purpose is to bridge the gaps between Christianity and Judaism” but rather “to stress the singularity of the Jewish experience, even to keep it from being reduced, or abstracted from its unique Jewish context, for the sake of dialogue.”

As to the dialogic roles chosen by and self-assigned to the seminar’s speakers, Ben Johanan commented tongue in cheek, “As an Israeli interested in Catholic theology, I was often asked the following: ‘What is a nice Jewish girl like you doing studying all this Catholic theology?’ As a paraphrase we could ask here: What is a nice Jesuit like Christian Rutishauser doing studying Halakhic Man??” and quoted Ruthauser who stated that his choice of this “apologetic text” lies, in his words, in defending “the dignity and the beauty of halakhic existence in face of modernity’s philosophy of religion and psychology of religion” thus crafting, according to Ben Johanan, “a space for Orthodox Jewish existence within a secular culture.” In this, both scholars agreed, Soloveitchik’s work is very relevant for Catholics as well.

Connected via video from Jerusalem, Prof. Odel Irshai, Director of the Hebrew University’s Center for the Study of Christianity recalled that 30 years ago when these two Institutions were founded in Rome and Jerusalem, there was little Jewish interest in studying Christianity. But in these three decades several “fundamental changes” have occurred. In Jewish eyes, Christianity has changed from being seen as a daughter to being considered a sister religion; the Talmud and Midrash have come to be regarded as reflecting ideas of New Testament times, now thought to have preceded Talmudic Judaism. “An inexplicit belief also emerged that Jewish texts contained a latent controversy with Christianity.” Consequently “Christianity can be seen as having a key role in the religious history of the Jews in late antiquity.” Yuval even suggested that the Oral Torah “was a response to the ‘New Testament’.”

Christian and Jewish scholars today seek parallels in each other sources, he holds. “In conversations between Father Prof Etienne Veto and me”, he declared, the idea was born “to establish institutional frameworks of joint teaching and research, in which Christian and Jewish experts as well as students will meet to study Jewish and Christian sources together...The study of texts connects people, creates trust and increases awareness of the other...becomes a bridge that connects cultures and religions...helps realize Buber’s concept of the I-you dialogue.”

The 2-day seminar received its final input with Amy-Jill Levine’s lively workshop entitled, “Understanding Jesus and Paul Means Understanding Judaism: Correcting the Common Mistakes.” Listening to her fascinating and lively talk, it was impossible not to think of how valuable the possibility of participating and listening to such a debate would be for all those who deliver many major and minor sermons today, while failing to update their interpretations by the inclusion

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of historical context.

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