



A Jewish Response To Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church

| Signer, Michael A.

The Abrams Professor of Jewish Thought and Culture at Notre Dame University (U.S.A.) offers an evaluation of the Vatican document Dominus Iesus.

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Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church

**by Michael A.
Signer**

On June 16, 2000 the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger published a technical document that set out the boundaries of proper teaching about the Catholic Church and world

religions. When the document was announced publicly on September 7, 2000, the rather strident tone of the document unleashed a whirlwind of confusion among Jews, Protestants and Orthodox Churches. Over the past two weeks major bishops of the American Catholic Church have issued a number of clarifications about the document and its intended audience. These American statements have been augmented by announcements from the Vatican as well.

Why publish Dominus Iesus?

This twenty six-page document is a summary of theological teachings of the Second Vatican Council about the relationship between Catholic teaching and religious truth outside the Church. During the Council the bishops decided that the Catholic Church

would open itself up to the world. This was a major revolution from the position that had been espoused at the end of the nineteenth century. In the First Vatican Council the Church had described itself as a fortress against the tendencies of modernity. The Church was identical to the hierarchy and the priesthood. Vatican II opened the windows of the Church to the world. It declared that human dignity and human rights were compatible with the message of the Roman Church. In *Nostra Aetate* [No 4], a document that Jews associate with a major shift in Church policy towards Judaism, there is an even more revolutionary statement about the grace of God extending to all of humanity. Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam are declared to be "worthy of respect." The approach to the world in general and Judaism in particular was to be "dialogue" no longer "disputation." However, the Council asserted that the primary source of truth — where God's grace

was most clearly understood — remained the Catholic Church.

Asserting this primary truth did not stop Catholic theologians and the popes since the Council from engaging in serious dialogue with Protestant and Orthodox Churches. Major theological documents that indicate areas of profound agreement have been signed with the Anglican Church, Lutheran Church and Eastern Orthodox Church. As Jews we are well aware of the work accomplished by the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.

The rapid growth of dialogue with non-Western religions and the expansion of Christianity in Asia and Africa posed different problems. Roman Catholics are tiny minorities in those countries. In China and some parts of Southeast Asia, Catholics have been persecuted. On the other hand, the constant dialogues with members of

Hindu and Buddhist faith have produced a theological literature that enters under-explored areas.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has been evaluating this literature. From their perspective some of the trends in this literature are in serious contradiction to the teaching of the Church. Therefore, they set guidelines for theologians in these countries. However, when "Dominus Iesus" was issued, it made universal claims. Its language was juridical — like a halakhik *pesaq din* (legal decision).

How have American Catholic bishops received Dominus Iesus?

After almost forty years of dialogue with Catholics, we American Jews should have learned that we wait until we discern how American bishops

interpret technical documents from the Vatican. We should restrain our comments, especially when the document in question is not issued by an agency that consults with Jews on a regular basis such as the Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews.

Within days of the public announcement the American bishops indicated that Jews and Protestants had nothing to fear from Dominus Iesus. Bishop Fiorenza, president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, indicated that the Jews had a unique relationship to the Church. Cardinal Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles cited that enormous efforts had been made by Pope John Paul II to engage in ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. His examples included Pope John Paul II's visit to Yad VaShem and his tireless efforts to speak with Muslims and Hindus.

Further clarifications
of Dominus Iesus
are available in
Origins: CNS
Documentary
Service, September
21, 2000 [Cardinal
Law of Boston,
Archbishop Levied
of San Francisco;
Archbishop
Theodore
McCormick of
Newark NJ;
Archbishop
Alexander Brunet of
Seattle]

What should Jews do?

1. We should not be worried by this document. It does not mention Jews and Judaism. There is no retreatment of the position of the Vatican or the American bishops toward dialogue with Judaism. In fact, the papal trip to Israel and the many occasions of penitence expressed by American

Bishops ought to be an opportunity to move forward in dialogue and educational projects with the Catholic Church.

2. We ought to learn how to react to assertive and exclusive claims by the Vatican congregations. Our initial response should be to ask for clarification: What is the audience for this statement? Does the statement apply to the Catholic-Jewish relationship? How can we engage in continuing dialogue in a climate that seems to narrow the windows of clear conversation.
3. We can appreciate the difference between a religious

community that has an Orthodoxy and our own. It is too simple to dismiss the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as attempting to shut down dialogue. In the Jewish community we also have problems of boundaries and syncretism: many of our congregations are discussing the problem of "Jewish-Buddhism" or "Jewish-Christianity." We too sometimes make proclamations that set boundaries and guidelines.

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