



Dialogue, not proselytizing

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The Christian attitude towards Jews and Judaism. Hans Hermann Henrix is Director of the Bishops Academy of the Catholic Diocese of Aachen, Germany, which has six conference centers.

Dialogue, not proselytizing: The Christian attitude towards Jews and Judaism

By Hans Hermann Henrix

Today's church is called to dialogue not to make proselytes. Dialogue between Christians and Jews is conversation between both communities that respects the dignity and identity of the other.

Sanctifying God's name is a common task of Christians and Jews (cf Ex 9 16; Is 29 23; Nm 20 12; Ez 36 22; Mt 6 9; Lk 11 2) The "that" of this task is an unquestionable determinant of Jewish and Christian identity The problem concerns what the sanctification of God's name means for Christianity and the church in its relationship to the Jewish people and Judaism Does Christian sanctification of God's name go beyond the living witness of love and righteousness to include efforts to proclaim the name of Jesus Christ to the Jewish people so that they confess Christ and become members of the church?

Such an effort might be "mission" in the classical/traditional sense. This mission can be established through various theological presuppositions (e.g., Mt 28:18-20; 1 Cor 1:23). Others argue that according to Jn 14:6, without Jesus Christ (the way), the way to the Father and to salvation is missed. To sanctify God's name, then, means that God's will is "that all people be saved" (1 Tim 2:4). Doubtless, the chief motivation for such argumentation is a marked missionary interest in the Jewish people and Judaism. But does this understanding of the Jewish mission correspond to today's Catholic teaching?

Does Judaism lack salvation?

Fulgentius of Ruspe (468-533) was a student of Augustine and bishop of the small north African seaport of Ruspe. According to Fulgentius:

It is absolutely certain and beyond doubt that not only all heathen, but also all Jews, heretics and schismatics who die outside the present catholic church, will go into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

There is a long ecclesial and theological tradition that has denied the possibility of salvation to the Jews and that has disputed any salvation significance to the Jewish faith. Those voices that did speak positively about salvation of the Jews spoke only by recourse to biblical Israel or in anticipation of endtime salvation. The question of whether a positive post-biblical interim and contemporary word can be spoken concerning salvation of the Jews was only conceivable for the Catholic tradition after Vatican II.

In 1973 the French Bishops Conference declared:

If the covenant for Christians was renewed in Jesus Christ, then for Christians Judaism must be considered not only a social and historical reality, but above all a religious reality; not a relic of a venerable and finished past, but an enduring, living reality throughout time.

This enduring, living, Jewish reality does not lack salvation, but has a positive dignity that is thoroughly soteriological.

This French document contradicts a long church tradition which claimed that the Jewish people had forfeited their election, and that it was replaced in God's plan by the church. The document annulled the usual substitutionary model of the relationship between the church and Israel, and established a quasi sacramental relationship between the continuing efforts of the Jewish people through time, and God's faithfulness to God's people. When the community of Israel gathers to worship God in the synagogue, praises Israel's God, confesses God's unity and uniqueness, reads and hears the scriptures, then God is active in the midst of Israel. God's acts of power and salvation do not remain fruitless. God's gifts and call prevail.

The document desired to follow scripture and concretized that desire by saying that according to biblical revelation God called this people into existence and established an eternal covenant with them (Gn 17:7) that the apostle Paul said was irrevocable (Rom 11:29). The French document echoed Vatican II's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra aetate*).

In the context of Catholic understanding it is obvious that the statements of Paul and the Council do not apply to illustrious individual members of the people of Israel, but to them as "people" (*populi electi, per populum, ex populo iudaico*). According to Herbert Vorgrimler:

Judaism and Jews are in God's grace, and not only as individuals, but also and primarily collectively. This means, however, that Judaism is a way of salvation ordained by God ... or a God-given way of righteousness, i.e., standing in right relationship before God.

Pope John Paul II has also emphasized the enduring significance of God's election of Israel. In Nov. 1980 in Mainz, the Pope encouraged Jewish Christian dialogue. Essential to this dialogue are the Jewish people *today*. What is needed is a contemporary dialogue, not a dialogue of dissimilarity between the church of today and the Israel of the bible or Jesus' time. According to the Pope, today's Jewish people are the people of the covenant. The "covenant between the church and the Jewish people" is based "on the plan of God's covenant." The Pope's conviction is that God "has never ceased to love his people (Rom 11.1)" and that God's call is irrevocable. The Pope's words about "God's people of the old covenant never abrogated by God" are much more than mere words of goodwill. They are theologically sound and central to the network of papal statements about Israel. The covenant concluded with Moses has never been abrogated; God has never ceased to love God's people; God is faithful. Fulgentius' certainty that the Jews lacked salvation, is replaced by the assurance of salvation. This certainty is expressed in the Catholic Good Friday liturgy where the community of God "prays for the Jews." "He preserves them in faithfulness to his covenant and in love to his name."

Refusal of mission to Jews

On March 31, 1492, Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castille ordered the Jews to leave Spain and brought a long development to an end. In the 14th and 15th centuries there was increasing separation of residential districts between Christian and Jewish families in order to curb Jewish influence on old or new Christians. Legislation against Jews was sharpened and Jewish

involvement in official functions was limited. An unsavory mixture of religious fanaticism and social unrest led to pogroms in 1391. In Seville and Cordoba many synagogues were destroyed, thousands of Jews were killed, and elsewhere they were forced to be baptized. In order to save their lives or maintain their social and economic position many Jews and their families submitted to baptism. These mass conversions weakened the Jewish community just as much as the obliteration of entire communities through death or flight.

During the forced disputations of Tortosa (1413-14), willing conversion of Jews and their families occurred very infrequently. Following a period of respite, legal, social and religious restrictions recurred, especially the separation of new believing Jews (*conversos*) from Christians. This ultimately led to Ferdinand's and Isabella's edict of expulsion (1492). The historical experience of the Spanish expulsion, as well as its pre and post-history, led the German Bishops' Conference to comment:

The year 1992 marks the 500th anniversary of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain and provides a rare opportunity to earnestly acknowledge that in line with the papal statement (i.e., "God's people of the old covenant never abrogated by God") a "Jewish mission" is no longer tenable.

In fact, the church's missionary efforts had little effect. As Spanish history makes clear, the church's credibility was not only damaged externally, but its internal integrity was forfeited and it lost a piece of its soul. The church's identity as the "holy" church was obscured. Thus, on historical and theological grounds the idea and conduct of "mission" to describe and determine Christian-Jewish relations was abolished.

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Christian sanctification of God's name in relation to the Jewish people and Judaism also does not mean proclaiming Christ's name to the Jewish people with the intent that they accept baptism and become members of the church. Numerous official documents of dioceses and bishops' conferences have stated that "making proselytes in the dialogue should carefully be avoided," or "the intent of conversion is excluded."

The idea of making proselytes or proselytism is derived from the Greek *proselytos*, "reaching the heart." The Greek word is a translation of the Hebrew *ger* which originally referred to strangers living among biblical Israel. Later, however, it referred to non-Jews who converted to Judaism (cf Acts 2:11). Eventually proselytism came to mean having great zeal for spreading one's faith. In Mt 23:15, Jesus sharply criticizes the Pharisees for making proselytes.

It is not surprising that the word "proselytism" has a negative ring. It now means recruitment and conduct which, through giving witness to one's own faith, offends the right of others to freedom from external or mental oppression and force regarding religious questions. It also unfairly estranges others from their ancestral community. Tommaso Federici, professor of biblical theology at the Gregoriana in Rome, was in charge of a study commissioned by the Vatican commission for religious relations with the Jews. The official, combined Catholic-Jewish committee completed its six years of meetings on March 28-30, 1977. According to Federici, every form of witness and proclamation that in any way can be construed as a physical, moral, psychological and cultural necessity for Jews--whether as individuals or community--is rejected.

A conversion cannot be authentic if it is not operative as a spiritual deepening in a person's religious consciousness. This step must only be undertaken after a period of intense inner examination. Thus, the attempt to establish organizations for the "conversion" of Jews, above all pedagogical or charitable, is rejected.

These statements were not only supported by members of the Vatican delegation, but also by the Jewish members. For many Jews, the conduct of the Jewish mission is the test question for whether the church's reversal of traditional ways of Jewish enmity is credible. Almost seventy years ago Franz Rosenzweig wrote to his cousin Hans Ehrenberg who was baptized and ordained a pastor of the Protestant church:

Your Jewish mission is still the *shibboleth* of whether anyone has grasped the true relationship (between church and Israel). There will be further Jewish baptisms even though pastors should make it as hard as possible for those who come to them, but there should not be an organized Jewish mission.

This thesis is not only the church-political point of Rosenzweig's philosophy of religion and his chief work, *The Star of Redemption*, it is also an expression of Jewish-Christian consensus to day.

Official church documents which reject proselytizing use instead the concept of dialogue. Dialogue is the appropriate Christian way for sanctifying God's name in relationship with the Jewish people. It is face to face conversation between individuals and between both communities, an event of personal encounter and the exchange of substance and ideas. Beyond the exchange of ideas dialogue is a search for closeness when the otherness seems strange. It also is the preservation of solidarity where the danger of estrangement or a threat arises. Dialogue between Jews and Christians is conversation between them as members of their own communities. The dialogue between church and Israel is a dialogue between "both religious communities on the level of their own religious identity" (Pope John Paul II).

Dialogue also involves witness and solidarity, the responsibility to truth and love. Witness to the truth is not oppressive proselytism, but the readiness "to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (I Pt 3:15f).

Such dialogue requires respect and discipline in light of the call of the other. It is neither betrayal of one's own call, nor a renunciation of solidarity. Those who dialogue are not the vanguard for others who want to proselytize. Dialogue is not "faith before the faith," but results from and is the application of faith. Dialogue is the essence of Christian-Jewish relations. Christian participation is an option which does not derive from convenience or liberal indifference which says it is irrelevant what one believes. Rather, it

flows from the passionate belief that a gracious and faithful God has called the Jewish people out of love for them and as a sign of an abiding, never-to-be-broken sacrament of election (M. McGarry).

Where Christian-Jewish dialogue succeeds as a witness to truth and solidarity, the divine name is sanctified between Jews and Christians and before the world.

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