



Gregory Baum and Jewish-Christian relations

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Gregory Baum, a well-known theologian, has passed away in Montreal on December 18, 2017. As a member of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), he made a major contribution to the preparation of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*. The following text briefly looks back at this page of history in Jewish-Christian relations.[1]

Élisabeth Garant, the General Director of the Centre for justice and faith, has invited me to say a few words about the contribution of Gregory Baum to help the Catholic Church open herself to Judaism, particularly during the Second Vatican Council. I have accepted to do so on behalf of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Montreal where I have been for the last twenty years or so, along with a few other members, a representative of the Roman Catholic Church in Montreal.

Our Dialogue, set up in 1971, is one out of many groups which have emerged after the change of attitude of the Church towards the non-Christian religions which took place during the Council and which is evident in the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* proclaimed by Pope Paul VI in 1965. Gregory Baum played a major role in the preparation of this declaration, as he has explained in the collected work *Vatican II au Canada – enracinement et réception* and, most recently in the story of his theological pathway.[2]

A few elements of the context are important to remind. The tragedy of the Shoah, during World War II, forcefully shook the consciousness of Christianity. This has led a group of Christians and Jews to adopt, in 1947, "[The Ten Points of Seelisberg](#)", the charter of post-war Jewish-Christian dialogue. Directed towards Christian Churches, these ten points proposed concrete means to put an end to, as historian Jules Isaac phrased it, "the teaching of contempt" towards Jews and to « promote brotherly love towards the sorely-trying people of the old covenant ».

One can also recall that, during the war, the Apostolic Delegate in Turkey, Bishop Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, had helped many European Jews to escape to the Nazi regime. Elected as pope under the name John XXIII, he convened the Council. Following a meeting with Jules Isaac (Oct. 1958) and requests from Europe and America, he asked to the German cardinal Augustin Bea and to the new Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity to draft a preparatory text on the relationship between the Church and the Jews and Judaism.

Gregory Baum was 37 years old at that time. Born in a family "of Jewish origin and Protestant culture", [3] he had flown Nazi Germany in 1939. Set into Canada, having become a Catholic (1946), he entered the Augustinian religious order (1947), and was sent for graduate studies in theology at the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). His dissertation, the topic of which was based on his own experience, was a study of the teachings of the popes on ecumenism [4]. Following a request that he had received, he also gave in Fribourg a series of lectures on the relations between the Catholic Church and Judaism. Deeply moved by the reading the book *Jesus and Israel*, in which Jules Isaac presented Christian antisemitism as contrary to the teaching of Jesus, he undertook to study the texts of the New Testament about Jews. [5]

His dissertation draw attention in Rome and he was invited to join, as expert, the new Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, mostly for helping to draft a text on ecumenism for the Council. But

when cardinal Bea told the group about pope John XXIII's request to prepare a schema on the relationship of the Church with Judaism, Gregory Baum offered to collaborate. He was commissioned to prepare a short working paper "for which he seemed to be well fitted by origin, experience and training".[\[6\]](#)

In his paper, presented to the Secretariat on February 1961, he put forward the idea that for the Church, the "Jewish question" is a theological one which needs to be addressed as such, while leaving aside certain patristic and medieval conceptions of the Jews, and returning to S. Paul's thought on the "mystery" of the rejection of the Gospel by a large part of Israel (Romans 11:25). According to him, the declaration of the Council should consider three points:[\[7\]](#)

- 1) The Church of Christ, by origin and nature, has a close connection with the old Israel. From a Christian standpoint, "the new Covenant confirmed, renewed and transcended the Old, and (...) the New Testament fulfilled and superseded the Old, but nevertheless did not render it invalid".
- 2) Not all "the" Jews have rejected Jesus as Christ since part of them have accepted him as Saviour: "It would therefore be unjust to regard the Jews as an accursed race or people who has been rejected".
- 3) Following S. Paul, the Church should proclaim her "hope of Israel's final reconciliation with herself", and, until then, "the Christian attitude to his Jewish neighbour should be one of love and respect. Antisemitism should be condemned."

These propositions were the basis for a first version of what was to become *Nostra Aetate*. The document was discussed and reworked several times until the final version (the 5th one), adopted towards the end of the Council and proclaimed by Pope Paul VI on October 1965. But the orientations suggested by Gregory Baum were largely preserved.

Commenting recently on this text, one of the shortest but the most remarkable of Vatican II, Gregory Baum correctly noted that the reflection of the Council led the Church to realize that "the ancient Covenant made with the people of Israel has retained its validity and is the source of divine grace for Jews in the present".[\[8\]](#)

Nostra Aetate clearly was a turning point in the relations between Jews and Catholics, and it has been influential on other Christian Churches as well. This declaration has been an inspiration for us for more than 50 years and it will continue to be one for a long time.

It has not solved all problems, however, and Gregory Baum was the first to acknowledge this. Among the questions to be clarified, he listed for instance the need for a well-articulated theological statement on the relation between the Church and Judaism, or the relation between the "never revoked" ancient Covenant, that of Israel, and the new Covenant, that of the Church. He was also asking how one can define a Christology faithful to the tradition and yet allow theological room for Judaism to be a "sister religion".[\[9\]](#)

It is also well known that *Nostra Aetate* has deliberately avoided any reference to the political situation when discussing the relations between the Church and Judaism. But the question of Israel remains an important problem. Gregory Baum refers to it in a chapter of his last book devoted to "Theology after the Second Intifada".[\[10\]](#) He shows himself very concerned about the treatment imposed on Palestinians by Israeli authorities, about the Jewish voices raising to advocate the rights of Palestinians, and about the fate of Christian Churches established in Israel and Palestine. His views are certainly closer to liberation theology than to Jewish-Christian dialogue; they nevertheless deserve much attention from people involved in dialogue.

On behalf of such people, I would like to give thanks, as Gregory Baum himself does, for his

contribution to this “extraordinary historical event” that the Second Vatican Council was and for the theological movement which brought the Church to open herself to the world in several ways, including through honouring “contemporary Judaism as the living heritage of the God’s ancient Covenant”.[\[11\]](#) This is not a fortuitous event in history, but the work of the Holy Spirit.

Gregory Baum

1923 - 2017

(Photo: François Gloutnay, Présence)

Jean Duhaime, Vice-President of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue of Montreal and JCR's French language editor.