



## Looking for a new framework

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**According to the authors, the Catholic Church needs to rethink its relationship with Israel according to a paradigm that makes it possible to believe in Jesus the Christ while restoring Israel to its rightful place in the economy of salvation.**

Since *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church has deeply revisited its discourse and its thought on the Jewish people. She has been working in all honesty to draw the consequences of the new bases laid down by the Council and this approach has resulted in a rediscovery of the vocation of the Jewish people, questions about the way of stating the Christian faith, pastoral advances and a dialogue which is embodied in numerous encounters between Jews and Christians throughout the world. However, for the past few years, research on this question seems to have stalled.

It is of course quite possible to note that the declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (2000), which strongly redefines the framework for reflection in Christian theology of religions, has not encouraged the impetus of research on the place of the people of Israel for and in Christian theology. However, we may observe today a new breath coming from Pope Francis promoting a "necessary theological freedom<sup>[1]</sup>" for all these investigations.

In this article, we would like to understand why we have the impression that we are now caught in a reflection that no longer offers major advances and only refines the observations made for several years? What do we need to give new impetus to basic research for Christian theology as a whole? The lines that follow are intended to take this observation seriously and to suggest a few ideas to contribute to the debate.

### Status of issues

The latest document written by the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ), released in 2015, titled "The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable" (quote from Paul in the Epistle of the Romans 11:29) is interesting to study because it is a good synthesis of the whole progress made by the Magisterium of the Catholic Church since paragraph 4 of *Nostra Aetate*. In an article written with Emmanuelle Main<sup>[2]</sup>, we notice that some formulas are approximate in the use of the vocabulary as well as they present simplistic prisms in the approach to the question. Far from being simple details, these dissonances seemed to us to be clues to mistakes of thought. Let us indicate some examples:

- The latest documents of the Magisterium seem unable to give a clear place to the Jewish People in its relationship to the Church. It is described as part of the family but alternately as brother, older brother, favorite brother, father in faith. These approximations show the difficulty the Church has to identify the very nature of her relationship to Israel.
- The difficulty of making the Jewish People the true interlocutor of the Church and by preferring Judaism as religion to it. As if there could be any Judaism without the Jewish People! This weirdness is also present in the French title of the Vatican Commission in charge of these questions. In English this commission is called: "The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews<sup>[3]</sup> In French, its name is "Commission pour les relations religieuses avec le judaïsme" ("Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism"), as if it were important to restrict relations to religion alone and

only within a religious framework.

- The text is fully losing the biblical anthropology as well as its founding distinction between Jews and non-Jews which is framing the First Testament and the issues of the New one.
- The permanence of the People of Israel is considered as accidental and at no time as is considered the hypothesis that it could be a God's project.
- The place and role of the Jewish People is only approached with an utilitarian prism and only as far as they can contribute to the understanding of Jesus or the Church.
- Finally, we observe that, despite the significant shifts made since *Nostra Aetate*, research on the issue is no longer progressing, as if the research had reached a sort of glass ceiling.

All this seems to us to be part of a more structural problem. We then hypothesized that it was the paradigm in which we thought about the relationship to the People of Israel that was no longer appropriate. Indeed, the relationship with the Jewish People was quickly thought on the horizon of Replacement Theology, a theory in which the Church took the place of the Jewish People in the plan of God. Israel is rejected by God and has become a cursed people. For many centuries, it is properly in this paradigm that the relations between the Church and the Jewish People have been elaborated as the document *The Gifts and the Calling of God* points it out at paragraph.

“17. On the part of many of the Church Fathers the so-called replacement theory or supersessionism steadily gained favour until in the Middle Ages it represented the standard theological foundation of the relationship with Judaism: the promises and commitments of God would no longer apply to Israel because it had not recognized Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, but had been transferred to the Church of Jesus Christ which was now the true ‘new Israel’, the new chosen people of God.”

Following Jules Isaac, researchers continue to work on the consequences generated by the theology of substitution. Kendall Soulen recently showed that it could have two sides. On the one hand a punitive supersessionism which claims that God had rejected the Jewish people because he had not recognized his Messiah. On the other hand, an economic supersessionism which cancel the role of Israel because of the fulfillment at stake in Jesus. As Matthew Tapie sums up “Economic supersessionism assumes the Jews are no longer God's elect because the Jewish law is fulfilled and obsolete<sup>[4]</sup>.”

The whole work undertaken by the Magisterium since Vatican II has aimed at invalidating the Replacement Theology (more the punitive one than the economic one) and at cleaning up all the explicit traces that could remain within Christian theology. Our hypothesis is that this attempt has reached its limits. Everything happens as if we had gone to the end of what it was possible to undertake within this paradigm, the framework in which we have thought the place of the Jewish People in theology.

## **Presentation of the reference system in which we are until today**

To properly identify the issues, we need to identify what characterized the frame of reference in which our relationship with Israel was built. We are going to try to do it by crossing it with another research led by our institute on the dialogue of salvation. Synthetically the old frame of reference was built by denying the permanence of the dialogue between God and Israel. Traditional theology quickly set up the Church as the only one interlocutor in the dialogue with God. By taking the place of Israel, the Church understood herself in such a way that is she alone could legitimately enter into a dialogue with God, that she exclusively possessed the keys of his revelation to the world. On this dialogue between God and Israel, the position of the Church has been twofold. On the one

hand, she recognized that before Jesus this dialogue existed and bore fruit.

For example, the Bible is the repository corpus of what has been played out in the dialogue between God and this people, as an interpretation of the dialogue constructed through historical events, direct revelations, "conversations" between God and members of the Jewish People. By inheriting the Bible, the Church has recognized *de facto* the reality and the value of this dialogue between God and Israel.

On the other hand, after Jesus, while making these modalities of the relationship with God her own, the Church denied the legitimacy of Israel to remain a partner of a dialogue with God. Israel not having recognized Jesus as its messiah, the Church decreed that this dialogue had ceased to make room for an exclusive dialogue of the Church with God.

About this non-magisterial but real decision<sup>[5]</sup>, several observations can be made:

- The Church interfered in a dialogue that was not hers own.
- She spoke for God and in his place. In a way, she began to say what was the possible dialogue of God with Israel and according to which criteria.
- She disqualified Israel as a partner in this dialogue that escaped from her hands.

## **According to these observations, we set some convictions**

The change of frame of reference on which we are working consists in restoring a room to this dialogue between God and Israel, in re-legitimizing Israel as a partner of a dialogue with God, a dialogue which, in a certain way, impacts the dialogue between the Church and God. Henceforth it supposes in particular taking an interest in the Jewish People, in its history, in what it says about it, because there is no dialogue without an interlocutor. Re-legitimizing this dialogue involves recognizing Israel as a living and on-going interlocutor in this dialogue with God. It is a question of considering that the People of Israel is instituted by God. It is the initiative of God that establishes a dialogue and lets Israel live from this dialogue with him. It is God who gives it its existence, the mystery being what God realizes through this dialogue. From this perspective, Israel is a sign of God's salvation given to the world.

It is not an easy task to identify the consequences of this denial of dialogue between God and Israel. It is not easy to become aware of the paradigms in which we think, as they have formatted the concepts, the places, the roles, the very mission of the protagonists. Getting out of it requires such a step back, such a reflexivity that we certainly cannot consider this first stage of the work as finished. It may even be its very beginning. It will consist in still identifying the distortions that we hold to be exact and in getting clarity on our conditioning. But we are also working on a second project, which consists in identifying the edges of a new frame of reference that takes into account the on-going dialogue between God and the People of Israel.

## **Design a new framework**

What does it mean to design a new framework and from what convictions can we think it?

**1/** We need to design a new architecture. It is not possible to repair the old one. It is an impossible operation to restore Israel's place in an architecture from which it was removed even before the dogmatic formulation of the Christian faith. There is no longer a place for Israel in the theological cartography that we have drawn up. The whole system that we know and are familiar with was designed with the disappearance of Israel from the landscape of revelation theology.

The impact of this disappearance has major consequences. We may affirm that any reflection which aims to be ecclesiocentric, that means which takes the Church as its center, does not take into account the specific vocation of Israel. Taking into account the mystery of Israel it is as well impossible to make Jesus-Christ alone the heart of the Christian faith, without linking him to a broader conception of Christ, to the Father, to the Holy Spirit or to the history that precedes him. Because these drifts are only possible on the condition of denying the Jewish People the status of partner and considering it only as an archaeology. It is therefore a whole system of reference (from the Son to the Father, of the Church for the Kingdom, of the Word through Israel...) which is at the heart of Christian theology and which has been damaged by the Replacement Theology.

**2/** It became obvious to us that the old paradigm had to be abandoned not only to restore its place to the Jewish people, but also to allow Christian theology to better give account of the data of the Christian faith as such. Our goal is to add clarity and consistency, not to alter the content of the faith. For the Church, it is about setting Israel in its right place to better receive Christ. We do not think that it is by denying the singularity of Israel that we will be able to give account of the universality of salvation that is at stake in Jesus.

**3/** Therefore the new architecture must restore the People of Israel to its place. In order to do this, we have to get out of the competitive modality the way we usually consider the link with Israel, such a modality which could simply be formulated as follows: "If we are right, the Jews are wrong; if we are wrong, they are right." It's about not opposing God to God. If God made the choice of Israel, ignoring that choice means going against God's will. To be against the election of Israel is to be against God. The new architecture, the frame that we seek to build should allow us to confess Christ without condemning Israel and thus, to believe in Jesus Christ without being against the Jewish people. It is on this condition that the Church will be able to get out from rivalry with it and enter into true collaboration.

The subject is complex because it is a real shift of center of gravity. It requires to break free from old patterns. The whole difficulty is therefore to succeed in disobeying not the contents of the Christian faith, but their distortion generated by the Replacement Theology and its consequences. At the moment the Church is only catholic in hope<sup>[6]</sup>. Since the catholicity of the Church will always be deficient without Israel. Can theology be truly Catholic, without seriously taking into account Israel's own vocation?

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