



Nostra Aetate, past and future

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During the almost 2000 year long history of relations between Jews and Christians, there were moments of encounter and deep dialogue, as well as moments of clashes and hatred. Israel Jacob Yuval's book *Two Nations In Your Womb*^[1] presents a very well-documented study about the complex relationships between Jews and Christians in Medieval Europe, and Edward H. Flannery's famous *The Anguish of the Jews*^[2] provides a meticulous history of twenty-three centuries of anti-Semitism, in which Christianity played an important role.

A very important recent study is offered in David Nirenberg's *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*.^[3]

The very survival of Jewish people presented a challenge to Christian theology. The killers of God's son were still alive, continuing to deny the truth of Christian faith. The Jews were considered to be a *deicide* people, and as a cursed people they deserved a humiliating treatment. European cities like Paris (1240), Barcelona (1263), Tortosa (1413-1414) and others were the sites of infamous and dreadful theological disputes between Jewish and Catholic sages. Their common roots in the Hebrew prophets were acknowledged by both sides, but their interpretations diverged from one another in a zero-sum fashion. Everyone presupposed that only one interpretation was correct, the other was wrong.

Even in the twentieth century we can find modern "disputations", such as the one that occurred after the publication of Adolf von Harnack's classic *The Essence of Christianity* and Leo Baeck's reply in *The Essence of Judaism*.^[4]

However, the *Shoah* perpetrated in the heart of Christian Europe clearly demonstrated the futility of vain disputations. The Nazi regime destroyed once and for all the illusion of what Baeck had called "the romantic dimension of religion", which, in contrast to the classical character of the Jewish religion, Christianity had internalized as an essential aspect of its religiosity.^[5] Baeck defines the meaning of romantic religion saying:

Friedrich Schlegel has characterized the romantic book in these words: "It is one which treats sentimental material in a fantastic form." In almost exactly the same words one might also characterize romantic religion. Tense feelings supply its content, and it seeks its goals in the now mythical, now mystical visions of the imagination. Its world is the realm in which all rulers are suspended; it is the world of the irregular, the extraordinary and the miraculous, that world which lies beyond all reality, the remote which transcends all things.

The *Shoah* revealed that European culture—so significantly shaped by its Christian legacy—was morally bankrupt. The atrocities committed against the Jewish population in the territories under Nazi administration, with the collaboration of many members of various European peoples, called for much more than mere justice; it called for a deep and critical analysis of the roots of European culture. And the uniqueness of this horrible drama in human history called for a conscientious reaction from the different European Churches. The Shoah demanded a response from

Christianity.

Pope Pius XII passed away on October 9th 1958. All of the relevant documentary evidence regarding his role during the Shoah has yet to be examined. Neither has evidence come to light that he grappled after the fact with the theological problems raised by the Shoah. It seems that it was left to his successor, Pope Saint John XXIII, who did so much to rescue Jews during the Second World War, to accept the unavoidable challenge.

On October 11th 1962, after two years of preparations, the Second Vatican Council opened its sessions. On October 28th 1965, the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* was approved by 2221 votes in favor with 88 against. Blessed Paul VI solemnly promulgated the Catholic Church's first significant engagement with the reality of religious pluralism in general and the reality of ongoing Jewish life in particular.

There are three main affirmations in the document. First: The Jewish people are still beloved by God. Second: one cannot ascribe the death of Jesus indiscriminately to the entire Jewish population of his time — much less so to any of its descendants. Even though for theological reasons^[6] the infamous word “deicide” does not appear in the text,; the prohibition of blaming the Jews as the killers of God becomes explicit. And third: there appears an explicit condemnation of all kinds of anti-Semitic expressions or teachings.

The declaration was originally intended to address the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jews; only later were paragraphs related to Islam and other religions added. John XXIII was the one who took the initiative for such a declaration and entrusted its first rendition to Cardinal Augustin Bea^[7], who maintained a fruitful dialogue with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel on the subject. Ultimately, *Nostra Aetate* fulfilled the proposals presented to Cardinal Bea by Rabbi Heschel in a famous memorandum^[8] of May 22nd 1962.

In his address at the Roman Synagogue on April 13th 1986, Pope Saint John Paul II referred to the relevance of *Nostra Aetate* No. 4 and the last mentioned documents. This visit of a Pope to a Synagogue and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel in 1993 have marked a new horizon for the relations between Jews and the Roman Catholic Church.

For Cardinal Jorge Mejía one of the most important goals in the advancement of the dialogue was the presence and participation in the dialogue of rabbis from the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.

Jews were aware of these changes and gestures, and they responded in different ways. This leads me to another document that should be mentioned. I am referring to *Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity* composed by a group of Jewish thinkers and signed by 220 intellectuals, which was published in The New York Times' edition of September 10th 2000. This document tried to pave a way for the development of the relationship in response to the steps taken by the Holy See. It stated eight major points: 1) Jews and Christians worship the same God. 2) Jews and Christians seek authority from the same Book. 3) Christians can respect the claim of the Jews to the land of Israel. 4) Jews and Christians together accept the moral principles of the Torah (Pentateuch). 5) Nazism is *not* a Christian phenomenon. 6) The controversy between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture and no one should be pressed into accepting another's faith. 7) A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice. 8) Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace.

Several points of the document did not achieve consensus among Jews, especially the affirmation that Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon. The text, on that point, literally states:

Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon. Without the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and Christian violence against Jews, Nazi ideology could not have taken hold nor could it have been carried out. Too many Christians participated in, or were sympathetic to, Nazi atrocities against Jews. Other Christians did not protest sufficiently against these atrocities. But Nazism itself was not an inevitable outcome of Christianity. If the Nazi extermination of the Jews had been fully successful, it would have turned its murderous rage more directly to Christians. We recognize with gratitude those Christians who risked or sacrificed their lives to save Jews during the Nazi regime. With that in mind, we encourage the continuation of recent efforts in Christian theology to repudiate unequivocally contempt of Judaism and the Jewish people. We applaud those Christians who reject this teaching of contempt, and we do not blame them for the sins committed by their ancestors.

On this subject, Cardinal Walter Kasper wrote the following in 2010^[9]:

The history of Jewish-Christian relations is complex and difficult. In addition to some better times, as when bishops took Jews under their protection against pogroms by mobs, there were dark times that have been especially impressed upon the collective Jewish consciousness. The Shoah, the State-sponsored organized murder of approximately six million European Jews, based on primitive racial ideology, is the absolute low point in this history. The Holocaust cannot be attributed to Christianity as such, since it also had clear anti-Christian features. However, centuries-old Christian theological anti-Judaism contributed as well, encouraging a widespread antipathy for Jews, so that ideologically and racially motivated anti-Semitism could prevail in this terrible way, and the resistance against the outrageous inhuman brutality did not achieve that breadth and clarity that one should have expected.

Cardinal Kasper's observation has this further implication, in the words of John T. Pawlikowski^[10]:

The church cannot enter into a fully authentic dialogue with the Jewish community, nor present itself and its teaching as a positive moral voice in contemporary society until it has cleansed its soul of its role in contributing to anti-Semitism.

However, the issue of the role played by perennial Christian antisemitism in providing a seedbed for twentieth-century Nazi racism still awaits full exploration. A clear and unambiguous reckoning by Christians of all denominations is still expected by Jews with regard to all the components of Christian anti-Semitism, not only those found in the Patristic literature, but also those contributory elements that can be found in the New Testament, such as John 8: 43-47.

Other objections to *Dabru Emet* came from Jews^[11] who consider Christianity as a “strange worship” –idolatry. On the other hand, Rabbinical personalities such as HaRav Itzhak Isaac HaLevi Herzog^[12], Hayim David HaLevi^[13], and others have established on clear *halakhic* grounds that Christianity is a non-idolatrous religion.

Dabru Emet also elicited criticisms from all those in the Jewish people who do not accept theological interfaith dialogue. Meir Soloveitchik, the great nephew of the famous Rabbi Joseph Ber Soloveitchik, published in the magazine *Forward's* issue of April 25th 2003, a very interesting article entitled “How Soloveitchik Saw Interreligious Dialogue”. In it, he explains his understanding of Rav Soloveitchik's reasons for refusing such dialogue:

“The Rav's opposition to communal, and organizational interfaith dialogue was partly predicated upon the prediction that in our search for common ground — a shared theological language — Jews and Christians might each sacrifice our insistence on the absolute and exclusive truth of our respective faiths, blurring the deep divide between our respective dogmas. In an essay titled “Confrontation,” Rabbi Soloveitchik argued that a community's faith is an intimate, and often incommunicable affair. Furthermore, a faith by definition insists “that its system of dogmas,

doctrines and values is best fitted for the attainment of the ultimate good.” In his essay, the Rav warned that sacrificing the exclusive nature of religious truth in the name of dialogue would help neither Jews nor Christians. Any “equalization of dogmatic certitudes, and waiving of eschatological claims, spell the end of the vibrant and great faith experiences of any religious community”, he wrote.

It seems to me that Rabbi Soloveitchik’s position could be understood only if dialogue is seen in a superficial way, when the dialogue has as its objective merely a sympathetic relationship. Authentic dialogue means much more than that. Martin Buber’s teaching about interpersonal "I-Thou" relationships must be considered here.

The core of Buber’s philosophy is the essence of dialogue, one that could be developed by each one with himself, with the other, with Nature and with God. He maintained intensive dialogues with Christian theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann, Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Otto and Leonhard Ragaz, which proved crucial to Buber's own understanding of the New Testament. And it was through that knowledge, which he acquired through a deep dialogue, that he came to affirm that Judaism and Christianity were “two types of faith”.

In a book entitled precisely *Two Types of Faith*,^[14] Buber concludes:

The faith of Judaism and the faith of Christendom are by nature different in kind, each in conformity with its human basis, and they will indeed remain different, until mankind is gathered in from the exiles of the ‘religions’ into the Kingship of God. But an Israel striving after the renewal of its faith through the rebirth of the person and a Christianity striving for the renewal of its faith through the rebirth of nations would have something as yet unsaid to say to each other and help to give to one another-hardly to be conceived at the present time.

Buber proposes in this book a way to develop a deep dialogue with the Christian World. The conditions under which Buber wrote the book are very significant. He composed the text in the midst of battles in Jerusalem during the independence war in 1948, three years after the *Shoah*. In his own words^[15]:

I wrote this book in Jerusalem during the days of its so-called siege, or rather in the chaos of destruction which broke out within it. I began it without a plan, purely under the feeling of a commission, and in this way chapter after chapter has come into being. The work involved has helped me to endure in faith this war, for me the most grievous of the three.

Buber's treasuring of interreligious dialogue because of his own prior experiences, even when he was immersed in such a conflicted situation, challenges Soloveitchik's claim about the impossibility of meaningfully conversing across religious lines.

My own friendships and profound religious dialogues with Christians are not only very meaningful to me, they have also helped me grow spiritually as a religious person.

Martin Buber has additional lessons to teach us. In his effort to understand Christianity in its essence, Buber differentiated between Pauline Christianity and Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels. The latter he understood in terms of the pure Jewish belief in God –*Emunah*- and he argued that a Hellenistic Pauline syncretism transformed that belief into a Greek *Pistis*.

Buber was not alone in conducting an analysis of the beginnings of Christianity in order to understand its defining nature as a means to inform the dialogue from the Jewish side. It was also the approach used by Joseph Klausner^[16] and David Flusser.

Like Buber, Flusser saw the figure of Paul of Tarsus as crucial. He argued that “Only from the

Synoptic Gospels do we know the faith *of* Jesus; outside them, it is the faith *in* Christ that is mostly presented and developed.”[\[17\]](#) Flusser says:

Paul was the most important factor in a trend which gave birth to Christianity as a distinct religion, because he deepened its Christology and stressed the inevitable necessity of accepting it for salvation, and he was the most extreme exponent of the doctrine that Jewish way of life had no validity for Christians. The Gentile Christians in Rome, to whom Paul wrote his epistle, were surely Gentile God-fearers before becoming Christians: e.g., they knew the Old Testament (Rom. 7:1), Paul’s opinion is that, by being converted to Christianity, they “have died to the law by becoming identified with the body of Christ.”[\[18\]](#)

But Flusser further remarks[\[19\]](#):

On the other hand, the origin of Christianity is Jewish, and many of the first Gentile Christians were close to Judaism; Jesus and his disciples were observant Jews: therefore Christianity had to solve the problem of why the Jewish people did not embrace Christianity. The separation of Christianity from Judaism was brought about by heightening the centrifugal tendency, which produced opposition to and even hatred of Jews in Gentile Christians. The Jewish origin of Christianity and the failure of Christianity to convert the Jewish people to the new message was precisely the reason for the strong anti-Jewish trend in Christianity; this explains the disharmony between the old and new community, which is probably unique in the history of religions . . . tension towards Judaism was an historical necessity for Christianity, in order to become a world religion for former pagans – a need which no longer exists. Today, Christianity can renew itself out of Judaism and with the help of Judaism. Then it will become a humane religion.

I have summarized these opinions about Paul of Tarsus not simply because they are among the subjects to be addressed during this conference, but in order to make a larger point: today we have the opportunity to resume foundational conversations that historical circumstances put on hold for almost two millennia. Buber, Klausner, and Flusser are only a few examples of Jewish sages who have studied the ancient sources in order to understand the commonalities and differences between Judaism and Christianity. In a sense they can be seen as initial efforts to recommence unconcluded dialogues from the origins of Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism. It is time, in our time, to reopen these conversations, not as disputations, but as an effort to understand the other in order to understand ourselves.

The future Christian-Jewish dialogue must reassume the old dialogue, which was disrupted almost two thousand years ago. Of course it is impossible to restart the dialogue at the same point in which it was broken off and disregard all that has happened during the succeeding two thousand years. We meet each other now not as rivals or foes, but as true friends. We need to see each the other as a partner in a common struggle: to instill a dimension of spirituality in the midst of humanity and thereby erase idolatry in all its forms from human reality.

In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel[\[20\]](#):

Nazism has suffered a defeat, but the process of eliminating the Bible from the consciousness of the Western world goes on. It is on the issue of saving the radiance of the Hebrew Bible in the minds of man that Jews and Christians are called upon to work together. *None of us can do it alone.*

For Catholics, the new approach and dialogue with Jews based on *Nostra Aetate's* theological statements, opens a theological quest: Since the "Old Covenant" has never been revoked, what does the *living* faith and practice of the Jewish People *today* mean for Christian faith and self-understanding?

For Jews, the new relationship means to take more to heart Maimonides' statement in his authoritative Code^[21]:

It is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of the Creator; for our ways are not His ways, neither are our thoughts His thoughts. All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite (Mohammed) who came after him served to clear the way for King Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord, as it is written, "For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent" (Zephaniah 3: 9) Thus the messianic hope, the Torah, and the commandments have become familiar topics –topics of conversation (among the inhabitants) of the far islands of many peoples . . .

There is still a long way before us until *Nostra Aetate* in its body and spirit will be incorporated into the heart of all the churches and parishes throughout the world, and to become a deeper challenge for Jewish vision on Christianity.

But still, the next step must be to think and to analyze the present dramatic moment in humankind's history in order to continue paving a way for a better future. We have been given an opportunity to be "a blessing to one another," as John Paul II put it. It is therefore our duty in the years ahead to make the most of this unprecedented moment.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham Skorka is Rector of the Seminario Rabínico Latinoamericano Marshall T. Meyer, Rabbi of Congregation Benei Tikva in Buenos Aires.