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The 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*:
The Past, Present and Future of the Christian-Jewish Relationship

50° anniversario della Dichiarazione conciliare *Nostra Aetate*:
passato, presente e futuro delle relazioni ebraico-cristiane

Plenary Session

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***Nostra Aetate*: Reflections from an Eyewitness**

by *Judith Hershcopf Banki*

I will begin by quoting another eyewitness – someone much closer to the daily conflicts and crises within the halls of Vatican Council II than I was. Fr. Thomas Stransky, who served as a young priest in the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity during the Second Vatican Council – which is where the “Jewish portfolio” was housed – has written, “It is impossible to understand modern Catholicism, indeed modern Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy, without taking into account Vatican II.” I would add that it is also impossible to understand the contemporary Jewish community and the broad field of Jewish-Christian relations without taking into account the changes wrought by Vatican II. He goes on to note that these monumental changes took place before most of today’s Catholics and others were born. The documents “...stand by themselves, without a history.” In his words, “the texts outlive the contexts.” Today, 50 years later, I hope to recall some of the contexts.

Like Fr. Stransky, I am a child of the Second Vatican Council – he on the Catholic side, I on the Jewish side. That is, I cut my teeth in the field of Jewish-Christian relations as part of a relatively small group of Jewish activists who mounted an initiative on behalf of an authoritative statement on Jews and Judaism to be adopted at the Council – a statement that would condemn antisemitism, repudiate the then fairly widespread deicide charge against the Jewish people, correct teachings of contempt about Jews and Judaism, acknowledge that Judaism did not end with the emergence of Christianity but continued to develop as a living faith, and inaugurate an ongoing dialogue between the Church and the Jewish community. We further hoped these policies would be implemented through the establishment of some permanent structure within the Church – in other words, an address and a phone number!

Like Fr. Stransky, I look around at the actors in that drama – and, believe me, it was a drama – what they call in the movies a “cliffhanger.” From the Catholic side, all or most of the 2500 bishops who attended the Council are gone. Of the secretariat in which he served, only he and one consultant remain.

From the Jewish side, those active in some sustained fashion on behalf of the so-called “Jewish decree” and the declaration on religious liberty during the Council: Rabbis Marc Tanenbaum and Abraham Joshua Heschel, Dr. Eric Werner of Hebrew Union College, (who drafted the memorandum on anti-Jewish elements in Catholic liturgy), Dr. Joseph Lichten of the Anti-Defamation League, Dr. Gerhardt Riegner of the World Jewish Congress, all have passed on. I remain, a somewhat battered veteran of that 50 year old struggle. In Fr. Stransky’s poignant words, “Fifty years later, we remember, mis-remember and forget.”

When John XXIII was elected to the papacy in 1958 and shortly thereafter, surprised everyone by announcing the summoning of an ecumenical council, we were approached by a French Catholic author and scholar, Mme. Claire Huchet Bishop, an ardent devotee of the work of Jules Isaac.* It was she who pressed for the publication of his books in the United States, and thus, indirectly, for familiarity with the expression, “the teaching of contempt” on the North American continent.

She urged the American Jewish Committee to become involved, insofar as possible, in the forthcoming Council, to engage in a vigorous initiative for the repudiation “at the highest level of the Church.” of that anti-Jewish and

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Antisemitic tradition of teaching and preaching whereby Jews had been segregated, degraded, charged with wicked crimes, and valued only as potential converts. Ecumenical councils are few and far between, she said, and this is a historic opportunity. "Seize it."

Another historic event added urgency to that goal. At the same time that the preparatory commissions for the Council were going about their work, the nightmarish details of the Nazi genocide against the Jews were being vividly recalled by the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. A generation after the Shoah, some people learned for the first time that half the Jews of Europe, one-third of the Jewish people in the world, had died in that in that holocaust, most of them deliberately and cruelly murdered. Ancient communities of learning

*Jules Isaac, for those who may not know his name or his contribution to our time, was a non-religious French Jewish scholar who had attained the highest position ever achieved by a Jew in France: Director of Higher Education in the French civil Service. One day, after the Nazi invasion of France, he came home and discovered that his wife and children had been arrested by the Gestapo. Hidden out by Christian friends and colleagues, he devoted the rest of his life to exploring the roots of the poison of Antisemitism, and found some of them in a longstanding and hostile tradition of Christian teaching and preaching that he brilliantly named "the teaching of contempt." Over the years, his books and lectures convinced a number of Christian and Jewish supporters, among them Mme. Bishop.

and piety were entirely decimated, all with the deliberate goal of wiping this people from the face of the earth, and erasing from memory its culture, its language, its religious legacy. The moral questions posed by the Eichmann trial were not lost on religious spokesmen, some of whom pointed to the need to root out the sources of hatred and contempt for Jews and Judaism for once and for all.

It soon became known that the key figure with regard to a "Jewish decree" at Vatican II was Cardinal Augustin Bea, and that he and his secretariat had been entrusted by Pope John to draft a statement and to seek representative Jewish viewpoints. The way was open for communication and dialogue. We jumped in with both feet!

On July 31, 1961, over a year before the opening of the Council's first session, we submitted to Cardinal Bea, by prior agreement, the first of several comprehensive memoranda. Titled, *The Image of the Jew in Catholic Teaching*, the 32 page document identified and illustrated slanderous interpretations, oversimplifications, unjust or inaccurate comparisons, invidious use of language and significant omissions in American Catholic textbooks, and it cited existing Catholic sources that could serve as corrections. I am the author of that document, and therein lies a story.

When I came to the American Jewish Committee in late 1959, I was assigned an intriguing task: to assess, summarize and circulate the findings of self-studies of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish religious textbooks stimulated by the AJC. That Jews should be concerned about how Christians depicted them should not surprise anyone: Jews were convinced that a certain tradition of Christian teaching and preaching represented one of the primary sources of Antisemitism across the centuries. Still, it should be stressed that these were self-studies, in which the religious education materials of a particular religious community were examined by a scholar from within that community and faithful to its values and vision. The Catholic studies were carried out at St. Louis University, a Jesuit institution. The religion and church history textbooks and teaching manuals were examined by Sr. Rose Thering, a Dominican nun from Racine, Wisconsin. (Transformed by the implications of her own research, Sr. Thering became an important educator in the field, serving with Msgr. John Oesterreicher at the Center for Judaean-Christian Studies at Seton Hall University. She was also a lively activist on behalf of Israel, and led over fifty study tours to the Jewish state.)

When I first began reading the raw data from the Protestant and Catholic textbooks, I was astonished both at the degree of hostility to Jews and Judaism and at the extent of group libel I found in many of the excerpts. I recall some of these statements to remind us of the dimensions of the problems we uncovered.

From several Roman Catholic textbooks:

His prophecy was partially fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem and more fully in the rejection by God of the chosen people.

Christ, by his miracles and preaching, tried to conquer the obstinacy of the Jews and to bring them to repentance. The Jews, on the contrary, by the bad influence of their hypocrisy and pride, hindered the spread of the knowledge of God among other nations. . (Did this lesson-writer recall Mathew's accusation that a Pharisee would "cross land and sea to make one disciple?" Israel's mission is to spread the knowledge of One God among the nations! Not to make everyone Jewish, but to have everyone affirm One God, the creator and redeemer.)

The Jews as a nation refused to accept Christ, and since his time they have been wanderers on the earth without a temple, or a sacrifice, and without the Messiah.

I was struck by this passage because it was so similar to a Protestant lesson:

Israel rejected their Messiah when He came and because of their failure they withered away. This has been Israel's condition as a nation for centuries; she has been dried up with no national symbols, such as a land, a king a flag.

Both of these comments were published years after the emergence of the modern State of Israel – the Protestant textbook comment fourteen years later. They are striking instances of history, of reality, trumped by theology. If the theological proposition is that the Jews' loss of national sovereignty, their dispersion and subsequent suffering and persecution are providential punishment for the crime of killing and/or rejecting Jesus, then clearly the State of Israel can have no validity. It contradicts the theological conviction of permanent Jewish dispersion. Therefore, by definition, is Israel is a spiritual imposter. (Whether this theological presupposition carries over into political judgments on Israel's behavior is not our subject here today; it is a question worthy of another conference. I would like a place at the table at that one...)

These were not the only kinds of references to Jews and Judaism in the textbooks. There were fair or neutral statements as well. But what struck me about the examples I have cited was the vehemence, the intensity with which any sense of continuing mission for Judaism, any meaningful witness for the Jewish people (except witnessing to the superior truth of Christianity), any validity in Jewish terms for the re-creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Israel, were dismissed *a priori*.

This surely qualifies as the "teaching of contempt."

The documented submitted to Cardinal Bea incorporated such examples unearthed in Sr. Rose's research, but the organization, the arguments, the call for the forthcoming Council to repudiate such teachings, were my own. I was not bound by the rules and regulations that constrained her, for she could not evaluate as negative any statement about Jews and Judaism, no matter how disparaging, that was considered Church doctrine at the time.

On November 17, 1961, a second memorandum, *Anti-Jewish Elements in Catholic Liturgy*, was submitted to Bea. While acknowledging the recent deletion of problematic passages in the liturgy, the document noted that the concept of Jews as deicides still figured in some liturgical passages, in popular and scholarly commentaries on the liturgy, and in homiletic literature.

In December, 1961, Rabbi Tanenbaum arranged for Professor Abraham Joshua Heschel to meet with Cardinal Bea in Rome, and Heschel was invited to submit suggestions for positive Council action to improve Catholic-Jewish relations. In May, 1962, he followed up with a memorandum recommending a number of specific actions: forthright rejection of the deicide charge against the Jewish people, recognition of Jews as Jews, (rather than as potential converts) promotion of scholarly and civic cooperation, and the creation of church agencies to help overcome religious prejudice.

There was some resistance from fellow Jews to these initiatives. There were naysayers who claimed that the Church was, by its very nature, Antisemitic, and that efforts to change it were futile and demeaning. One rabbi told me, "Esau will always hate Jacob." Others argued that Antisemitism was a Christian problem; let the Christians solve it. To which we responded with the language of the civil rights movement: racism may be a white problem; should that prevent the Black community from addressing and confronting it? But resistance within the Jewish community was nothing compared to the vehemence and hostility that the so-called "Jewish declaration" engendered, both inside and outside the deliberations of the Vatican Council.

The objections to any positive statement about Jews and Judaism came from two sources: theological conservatives and Arab governments and religious leaders.

The Arab opposition to any statement expressing esteem or affection for Jews, suggesting a special relationship between Christianity and the Jewish people, deploring specific acts of persecution against Jews, and removing a theological basis of Antisemitism was politically motivated, but Christian theological categories were enlisted in this campaign, which was carried out on the highest political and diplomatic levels. Indeed, the campaign included several diplomatic *demarches* to the Holy See, and threats of reprisals against Christian minorities in Arab lands.

In addition to the Arab initiatives, there was a sustained campaign

against the so-called Jewish declaration on doctrinal grounds by conservative elements within the church who believed that Jews, as a people, did indeed bear collective responsibility as deicides, and that their suffering across the ages was proof of providential punishment. Representatives of this position may have constituted only a small minority within the Council, but they had access to extraordinary channels of distribution. Thus, a few days before the conclusion of the second Council session, every prelate found in his mailbox a privately-printed 900 page volume, *Il Complotto contro la Chiesa* ["The Plot Against the Church"] filled with the most primitive anti-Semitism. Described by Msgr. George Higgins, a columnist for the National Catholic Welfare Conference's press service as "a sickening diatribe against the Jews", it charged that there was a Jewish fifth column among the Catholic clergy, plotting against the Church, and it even justified Hitler's acts against the Jews. The "fifth column" accusation was undoubtedly directed at converts from Judaism who were associated with Bea's secretariat and who played some role in the drafting of the declaration, such as Fr. Gregory Baum and Msgr. John Oesterreicher, both of whom had written widely on issues of Jewish-Christian relations. These – and others, such as Edith Stein -- were faithful Catholics, serious scholars, who found their religious fulfilment in Christianity, but who also realized that Judaism was being distorted and maligned by blind hatred.

During the second session, another anti-Semitic publication was privately distributed to the Council fathers: (*The Jews and the Council in the light of Scripture and Tradition*, translated from the Italian title.) It cited Catholic sources supporting the God-killing charge against the Jews, and proclaimed that Jews could only wipe out the curse upon them by converting to Christianity, and insisted that efforts to change the traditional view were the result of a conspiracy in the Council by Jews and Freemasons working on behalf of Communism.

Revisiting the paranoia of the ultra-right and the fierce opposition of the Arab world, it is perhaps remarkable that any positive statement made it through the gamut at all. But it was almost scuttled, and its fate was tied to a roller coaster for the duration of the Council. It was not introduced into the second session of the Council at all. A weakened version of the statement was introduced in the third session, including language that seemed to imply that that respect for Jews was motivated by missionary interest and contingent upon Jewish conversion. Obviously, this didn't sit well with the Jewish community. (Rabbi Heschel stated that, faced with the alternative between conversion and death, he would choose Auschwitz.) But it also angered some major American and European Catholic leaders, who raised their voices in support of a clear and forthright statement. The battered and bruised "Declaration on the Jews," promulgated by Paul VI as *Nostra Aetate*, was adopted at the Council on its final day, along with the Declaration on Religious Liberty. Both had survived determined assaults, were weakened in their final form, and were, to a certain extent, compromise documents. But both changed the Church irretrievably and set Christians and Jews on a new path. *Nostra Aetate* has been addressed in a number of

follow-up documents. Some have expanded and strengthened it, some appear to have backtracked or retreated. There have been many bumps along the way, some setbacks and misunderstandings. In an American Jewish Year Book article in 1966, I predicted that it would be implemented least where it was needed the most, and this seems to be the case. I must also note, sadly, that the entire arsenal of Christian anti-Judaism – particularly the blood libel – now thoroughly repudiated by contemporary church communions, has been appropriated by Muslim extremists as a political weapon. To wit: a former Jordanian MP claimed on in a television interview that Jews use the blood of Christian children to make matzah. I quote: “On their religious holidays, if they cannot find a Muslim to slaughter, and use drops of his blood to knead the matzohs they eat, they slaughter a Christian in order to take drops of his blood, and mix it into the matzohs they eat on that holiday.” Alas, this belief is not exceptional in the Arab Middle East. Egyptian national television broadcast a multi-segment series based on the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a fabrication of the Czarist Secret Police, but incorporating most of the Antisemitic imagery current in Christian polemic at the time. I saw one of these segments with my own eyes: in it, Jews capture a young Christian boy, place him in a barrel, pierce his veins, draw the blood. And the rabbi rubs his hands together and tells the group: “the matzas will taste particularly delicious this Passover.” It made me sick to my stomach. At the time, I thought it was an Egyptian production and limited to that audience. But Professor Reuben Firestone, a scholar and defender of Islam and a friend of the Muslim community, told me that the series was produced in Syria, and has been distributed throughout the Muslim world. Hundreds of thousands – perhaps millions -- of Muslims in Indonesia and Malaysia who have never met a Jew now believe this of Judaism. It has done, he said, “incalculable harm.”

Still, out of that historic Council fifty years ago has emerged a group of Christians and Jews – religious leaders, scholars, activists, ordinary citizens – committed to mutual respect and understanding, to overcoming the sources of bigotry and discrimination in our own religious traditions, to making this world a saner and safer place for our children. We have come a long way, but we have a long way to go. May we follow this path together.