



## Judaism as "Sacrament of Otherness"

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**Philip A. Cunningham, director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, explores the idea of Judaism as a “sacrament of otherness” for Christians.**

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[Philip A. Cunningham](#)

On the 37<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second Vatican Council declaration, *Nostra Aetate*, Walter Cardinal Kasper, president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, used a memorable phrase to describe the relationship between the church and the Jewish people. After referring to the progress in relations that has occurred since 1965, he went on to say:

[W]e Catholics became aware with greater clarity that the faith of Israel is that of our elder brothers, and, most importantly, that Judaism is as a sacrament of every otherness that as such the Church must learn to discern, recognize and celebrate. It is therefore proper [on] this date for the Pontifical Council to welcome and to encourage any initiative favoring the growth of a bond with Judaism, with its theological and spiritual wealth, and with the culture that is expressed by it.<sup>1</sup>

The phrase “as a sacrament of every otherness,” struck me as particularly evocative. Without suggesting that what follows represents the thinking of Cardinal Kasper, I would like briefly to explore these words as an illustration of the present moment in the post-*Nostra Aetate* development of Roman Catholic theological thought about Jews and Judaism.

#### “As a sacrament”

It seems appropriate to begin with a very significant word in the Catholic tradition; namely, “sacrament.” In this context, a sacrament can be defined as an outward sign that gives grace or that mediates the life of God to the church community. The application of the distinctively Catholic term “sacrament” to Judaism therefore means that Christians are graced by a mediation of God’s presence when they spiritually engage the Jewish community and tradition. Certainly, many if not all of those Christians who have been involved in the dialogue with Jews will testify to the holiness they have experienced by their participation.

It is worth noting that this application of Catholic theological terminology to Judaism is remarkable from the broad perspective of the two millennia history of Christians and Jews. However, it is consistent with other post-*Nostra Aetate* writings, such as the pope referring to Jews as “brothers”<sup>2</sup> or describing their ongoing covenantal duties before God as a “vocation.”<sup>3</sup>

To say that the Christian encounter with Judaism has sacramental qualities is predicated on the recognition that Jews “are partners in a covenant of eternal love” with God, as Pope John Paul II has expressed it.<sup>4</sup> Such a covenantal relationship with the Holy One necessarily means that Jews are capable of mediating God’s holiness to others. Therefore, Cardinal Kasper’s use of the

phrase "as a sacrament" is quite apt.

**"that ... the Church must learn to discern, recognize and celebrate"**

Cardinal Kasper, however, went beyond simply identifying the Christian-Jewish encounter as sacramental from a Christian point of view. He went on to say that we Christians must learn to appreciate this sacramental quality. A need to learn how to do something suggests that the deed is unfamiliar or unpracticed. When one recalls the longevity and pervasiveness of the Christian "teaching of contempt" for Jews and Judaism, it becomes almost an understatement to say that Christians "must learn to discern, recognize, and celebrate" Judaism as sacramental. For almost two millennia we took the opposite for granted. The collective Christian religious imagination has been shaped by centuries of habitually thinking of Judaism as superseded or obsolete. Thinking of Judaism as mediating holiness does not come naturally to us. We Christians have no inherited reflexes that incline us to conceive of or to respect Judaism in this way. But perhaps I should qualify this by saying we have no inherited reflexes to think of *post-biblical* or *rabbinic* Judaism in this way. We do have a tradition of esteeming biblical Israel.

I suspect that the absence of a "Judaism-as-sacramental" consciousness lies behind some of the negative reactions in my own country and elsewhere to an August 2002 national Catholic-Jewish dialogue statement entitled, *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*.<sup>5</sup> The Catholic portion of this document concluded that it was theologically unacceptable for Christians to organize campaigns to baptize Jews (something that Catholics have not done officially for decades), if we are serious about affirming their eternal, and necessarily saving, "covenant of eternal love" with God. Not surprisingly, some Catholic critics of this conclusion are clearly inexperienced at discerning, recognizing, and celebrating the presence of God's holiness within the Jewish tradition, or they would not have been so startled by the conclusion of the *Reflections*.

A related difficulty is that the idea of sacramentality has heretofore been equated with the explicit activity of Jesus Christ. "The sacraments were instituted by Christ to give grace," is a formula familiar Catholic schoolchildren over the years. To speak of Judaism as sacramental or Jews as participants in a saving covenant, therefore makes many Christians feel that the universal salvific importance of Jesus Christ is being denied. Christians with this reasonable enough response ask, "How can a Christian say that the Jewish people, who do not recognize Jesus Christ, are saved since Jesus Christ makes salvation possible?" Or, "how can Jews be 'as sacraments' to Christians if Jesus Christ, whom they do not know, or his Holy Spirit, empowers the mediating effects of the sacraments?"

These sorts of questions point to a pressing need in the post-*Nostra Aetate* development of Catholic theologies about Jews and Judaism. While we officially recognize that Jews dwell in covenant with God, we have not yet articulated how such an intimate relationship with a saving God relates to the action of Christ as universal savior. This question confronts Christian theology today with an unprecedented urgency since it is only recently that some Christians have begun fully to appreciate the vitality and holiness of Jewish covenanting. As an ecumenical group of Christian scholars in the United States put it last year, addressing this question is *A Sacred Obligation*.<sup>6</sup>

Although it would go beyond the limits of a short paper to pursue this very far, for myself Christian Trinitarian theology is important to this question. Jews are covenanting with a God whom Christians know as triune. Christians must therefore understand that Jews are in an intimate relationship with all three subsistents of the Triune God, including the *Logos* and the Spirit. The truth of this claim is demonstrated by the fact that the scriptures of ancient Israel, which Jews call *Tanakh* and which I wish Christians would call the "Shared Testament,"<sup>7</sup> are considered by Christians to be divinely inspired and so comprise the first part of the Christian bible.

If Christians believe that Jews are in covenant with God, then Christian Trinitarian doctrine demands that they also affirm that Jews share covenanting life with the divine *Logos*, even though they do not share the Christian conviction that the *Logos* became in time hypostatically united with the Jew Jesus. Indeed, one might suggest that God's covenant with Israel was made even *more* intimate because it was with the humanity of a son of Israel that the *Logos* became incarnated. From a Christian theological perspective, then, Jews are "saved" because of their covenanting with the God whose saving power operates in the world through all three subsistents of the Trinity.

### **"of ... otherness"**

To say that Judaism is as a sacrament of otherness implies that a *particular* lesson to be learned by Christians encountering Judaism is that God's holiness is not restricted to the baptized. The Jewish community is a distinct "other" in which God's presence nonetheless abides. Again, this may be a hard point for some Christians to accept if their religious imaginations have been conditioned to limit holiness only to followers of Jesus Christ. The notion that there exist two communities of faith that are intimately related to God through covenanting violates an inherited tendency toward exclusivism.

Moreover, some Christians might ask, "why would God want there to be two such covenanting communities in the world?" Pope John Paul II has already suggested one approach to this question. God wills these two related covenanting communities to exist in order to assist each other in walking in covenant, to "be blessings for each other" in the pope's now famous words.<sup>8</sup> Among other things, for example, the existence of two faith communities who are covenanting with God helps each to overcome the temptation to feel superior to all other people because of the intimacy of its own divine relationship.

### **"Sacrament of Every Otherness"**

Finally, Cardinal Kasper spoke of Judaism as a sacrament of "every otherness." This suggests that dialogue with Judaism may help Christians to divine the presence of God in other faith traditions than Judaism, or indeed in other groups of humanity who differ from us in any way, such as in terms of ethnicity, culture, or gender. Surely in a world plagued by interreligious conflict, this potentiality must be earnestly pursued. Indeed, one wonders about the impact on the entire world if Christians and Jews are able to work through their history of hostility and were to indeed become "blessings for each other."

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To conclude, Cardinal Kasper's well-chosen words, it seems to me, convey a wealth of meaning and offer a snapshot of the current state of Catholic thinking about Judaism and the Jewish people. They implement well the advice of his predecessor, Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, who shortly after his retirement counseled, "Our first aim [in Catholic-Jewish relations] must of course be to press forward. To stand still is to risk going backwards."<sup>9</sup>

1. Walter Cardinal Kasper, "Address on the 37th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*," Oct. 28, 2002.
2. John Paul II, "Address at the Great Synagogue of Rome," April 13, 1986.
3. John Paul II, "Address to Jewish Leaders in Warsaw," June 14, 1987.
4. John Paul II, "Address to Jewish Leaders in Miami," Sept. 11, 1987.
5. Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the National Council of Synagogues, "Reflections on Covenant and Mission," *Origins* 32/13 (Sept. 5, 2002): 218-224.
6. Christians Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations, [A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People](#). The Christian Scholars Group, sponsored by the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, will be

studying this question at its upcoming semi-annual meetings.

7. See my *Sharing the Scriptures* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press/Stimulus Books, 2003), pp. 10-19.
8. John Paul II, "Address on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising," April 6, 1993.
9. Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, "Jewish-Catholic Relations: 1990 to 2001," Address delivered at the 17th meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, New York, May 1, 2001.

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