



Learning about Ourselves while Learning about Each Other: Proposals for Jewish and Catholic Education

31.12.2006 | Schiffman, Lawrence
Sievers, Joseph

A document prepared for the November 2006 meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, Capetown, South Africa.

Learning about Ourselves while Learning about Each Other: Proposals for Jewish and Catholic Education

Lawrence H. Schiffman

New York University

Joseph Sievers

Pontifical Biblical Institute and Pontifical Gregorian University

At the 2001 New York ¹ and 2004 Buenos Aires meetings of the International Liaison Committee (ILC), various educational recommendations were adopted. Despite these recommendations, little has been done to make the aspirations voiced at these meetings a widespread reality. The present proposals, drawn up at the request of the ILC leadership are intended to refine and focus our objectives, and to set into motion a program to bring these dreams to fruition.

We seek to address an outstanding need in the ongoing development of close relations between the Jewish People and the Catholic Church. Recent years have seen immense improvements in official interchanges, not to mention close personal relations between many of the leaders of this important movement. Furthermore, recent academic scholarship regarding Judaism and Christianity has also helped to provide a scholarly background for the improvement of Jewish-Christian relations.

Numerous issues that used to divide us have been overcome, so that our regular meetings have taken on an atmosphere of cooperative learning and planning. However, it is clear that our respective communities have not been sufficiently educated to partake of this new relationship.

The task of remedying this deficiency will certainly be a difficult one. On the one hand, we seek to extend a new understanding of Jewish-Catholic relations to a wide range of age groups in different countries and cultural atmospheres, and in two very distinctive religious groups. Even without these complications, the resources necessary to complete this task will be great. What we propose below is to develop a method to enlist existing church, synagogue and communal institutions in a

widespread and coordinated effort to get the word out about what has been accomplished. Such steps are necessary for two reasons: first, we cannot consider any of our already achieved efforts to be complete until our respective communities are well aware of them. Second, those in the lead regarding Jewish- Catholic relations are hoping to move to further heights by joining together to promote efforts and to undertake steps regarding various moral and ethical commitments that we share. Such efforts require the support of our communities, no matter how far-flung or how small.

It is clear that success in bringing this message to the entire Catholic and Jewish communities will require steps aimed at particular groups by those best equipped to plan and execute them, local educators, clergy and lay leaders. At the same time, we wish to set forth in this document and in a proposed resolution our commitment to the importance of these steps. Further, it is our sincere hope that the discussion of this issue will lead to the appropriation of sufficient resources to make sure that the limited steps set out by us will indeed be undertaken and bear their important fruits. It is clear to us that the proposal outlined here will call for dedication of substantial staff resources for each of our communities in order to give the project ongoing leadership.

In what follows we present outlines of what ought to be stressed in educational programs aimed at the Catholic and Jewish communities. We propose to approach each community bearing in mind its particular theological and religious character, and community organization. This is often referred to as part of the asymmetry between the two communities, a factor that we have taken into consideration and have embraced as a necessary feature in our planning. We expect that tailor-made programs for various subsections of the community will be essential to the success of our program. We hope to speak to Catholics in theological and catechetical language and to Jews in the language of history and Jewish law. We are convinced that only such an approach, coupled with adequate staffing and funding, can bring about the success of that to which we are committed.

We have also prepared reports about current efforts in both the Catholic and Jewish communities to educate our children and adults about the issues we are concerned with at our meetings. These reports show that much less has been done than we might wish. However, they also demonstrate that many of our colleagues have developed successful and meaningful approaches. With the help of these already developed approaches, we can begin a process in which the new relationship of the Catholic Church and the Jewish People will become "household" information for all of our respective religionists. Only in this way can we open the door to the future developments for which we are now planning.

We want to emphasize that this document is submitted in order to provide a framework for ongoing discussion about how to achieve the goals we have outlined. We look forward to further efforts to refine these ideas.

Educational Objectives for the Jewish Community

One of the most important challenges that face those of us concerned with the ongoing progress of Jewish-Catholic relations is the need to put into effect a large-scale educational effort within the Jewish community. On the one hand, such an effort must seek to explain to Jews how and why we approach our Christian neighbors with respect, even as we disagree with them about many fundamental religious issues. This is especially important to a minority community seeking to retain its identity and character. The Jewish community must know how to explain its distinctive views while at the same time affirming its deep respect for others. On the other hand, members of the Jewish community must come to recognize the fundamental and wide-ranging steps undertaken by the Catholic Church to redefine its relationship to the Jewish People and, more recently, to the State of Israel. Jews need not only to know much more specifically about these developments, but they also need to understand that they spring from genuine feelings and commitments on the part of our Catholic friends. Jews must come to understand that all of Jewish history was not one

episode of anti-Semitism and that the Catholic Church related to the Jews in various ways throughout the ages. However, most importantly, as we move beyond the sad history of our past relationships, we must prepare the ground for naturally friendly relations based upon mutual respect and our common devotion to ethical and moral principles.

To implement these goals successfully, a variety of issues need to become part of the Jewish educational framework, extending from teenage years, through seminary studies for those who pursue them. Further, we must make sure that textbooks, whether regarding Jewish history or general history, speak respectfully of Christianity and adequately portray the complexities of the relationship of Jews to their Christian neighbors as well as the important developments in recent years in Jewish-Catholic relations. A group of Jewish scholars and educators should put together a booklet regarding the presentation of Christianity and Catholic doctrine in the context of Jewish education, similar to *Within Context*² which has been so successful.

Here is a brief list of some of the main important issues that need to be explored:

1. The Jewish Christian schism and its historical context
2. Jewish-Christian relations in antiquity and the Middle Ages, the bad and the good, including the role of popes in protecting Jews
3. Jewish-Christian relations in modern times, with emphasis on the important changes, and the new relationship that Jews and Catholics enjoy
4. The significance of changes in Catholic doctrine about the Jews, their covenant and traditions of interpretation
5. Catholic withdrawal from proselytizing Jews
6. Catholic approaches to the Holocaust
7. Catholic documents that highlight this new relationship
8. Diplomatic relations between the State of Israel and the Vatican

These topics need to be presented honestly, not hiding the difficulties of the past. At the same time, we need to emphasize the positive future that has already begun to unfold. We seek to make known to the entire Jewish community the respect and cooperation that currently typifies Jewish-Catholic relations and that provides the platform for the new joint efforts we are planning.

Educational Objectives for the Catholic Community

In the years since the Second Vatican Council and its declaration *Nostra Aetate*, much progress has been made in the Catholic Church toward a more accurate knowledge about Jews and Judaism and about Christian-Jewish relations. Several Church documents have been specifically addressed to the furtherance of more adequate education. Taking its cue from *Nostra Aetate* and from the 1974 *Guidelines*,³ the 1985 document *Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* has indicated specific areas where a new understanding of and appreciation for Judaism and Christian-Jewish relations makes possible and requires changes in educational materials. Quoting Pope John Paul II it affirms:

“Because of the unique relations that exist between Christianity and Judaism - "linked together at the very level of their identity" (John Paul II, 6th March, 1982) - relations "founded on the design of the God of the Covenant" (*ibid.*), the Jews and Judaism should not occupy an occasional and marginal place in catechesis: their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated.”⁴

A variety of initiatives have been taken to implement this document. *Within Context* is one example of how to provide guidance for educators and textbook publishers for the implementation of parts of the *Notes*⁵.

In many countries, religion textbooks for different levels of primary and secondary schools have been revised, so as to provide a more accurate picture of Judaism and of early Christian-Jewish relations. Too frequently, however, negative stereotypes are still to be found in descriptions of relations between Jesus and his Jewish contemporaries, in the image of the Pharisees, and in accounts of the circumstances of Jesus' crucifixion.

The *Notes* also emphasized the importance for Catholics to be aware of later Jewish history and Jewish-Christian relations up to and including the reality of the State of Israel and the religious significance it holds for Jews. In particular, Catholic religious education needs to heed the call of the 1998 document *We Remember* "for a 'moral and religious memory' and, particularly among Christians, a very serious reflection" on what gave rise to the *Shoah*. "The fact that the *Shoah* took place in Europe, that is, in countries of long-standing Christian civilization, raises the question of the relation between the Nazi persecution and the attitudes down the centuries of Christians towards the Jews."⁶

It is also important that an awareness of the positive changes in Jewish-Christian relations be appropriately communicated, together with an appreciation for the unique and evolving religious identity of each community. The situation in every country and region of the world is different and all educational efforts need to be adapted to the intended audience. Therefore, specific initiatives must be entrusted to persons familiar with each local situation and constituency – as well as with the advances in scholarship and with current Church teaching.

Therefore, we propose that the following suggestions be communicated to Bishops Conferences worldwide:

1. Appropriate authorities should be encouraged to check existing and, especially, new catechisms in order to ascertain that their approach to Jews and Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations conforms to recent advancements in scholarship and to current Church teaching. Relevant portions of the assessment criteria developed by Eugene J. Fisher, amplified and updated by Philip A. Cunningham, may provide a helpful guide and checklist.
2. Publishers and authors of textbooks for religious education at primary and secondary levels should be encouraged to get actively involved in a similar process.
3. As part of the continuing education for teachers, catechists, clergy and lay leaders, courses, seminars, visits to Jewish sites should be organized, where feasible, in order to increase firsthand knowledge and to communicate the Church's new attitude.
4. As indicated in the Recommendations of the 2001 ILC meeting, "the curricula of Catholic seminaries and schools of theology should reflect the central importance of the church's new understanding of its relationship to Jews."
5. Educators should be made aware of teaching aids and other educational resources that are available in different languages on the Internet at sites such as www.jcrelations.net, www.sidic.org, www.bc.edu/cjlearning, in printed form or through other media.

Joint Educational Objectives

Much of what has been accomplished thus far depends on increasing understanding of the historical and religious aspects of our respective traditions and their interaction throughout the centuries. We recommend that we seek to reach large numbers of students, seminarians and lay leaders with a deep appreciation of our history, theology and new modes of cooperation.

The following joint projects are intended to provide avenues for a deepening of our understanding:

1. Existing websites dealing with Jewish-Christian relations need to be expanded and developed in order to provide a central source of materials for educators and leaders. Such

sites need to provide an expanding library of materials in all languages used by members of the two faiths. We should aim to provide resources on all levels.

2. A series of exchange programs and reciprocal visits of an educational nature need to be organized to bring seminarians to meet one another directly and learn together about issues of common concern. Where feasible, faculty and course exchanges should be arranged on the university level between Catholic and Jewish institutions and/or between academic programs that teach Judaism and Christianity.
3. Seminars or conferences should bring clergy, educators and lay leaders together for the explicit purpose of furthering mutual understanding and organizing joint projects in areas of shared concern.
4. Jewish-Catholic understanding is nourished by academic scholarship in our respective faiths and in areas in which they have intersected. We need to make available resources to encourage conferences and ongoing seminars in such academic areas, resulting in publications that make our joint scholarship available widely.

Notes

1. www.vatican.va/.../rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20010504_newyork-meeting_en.html.
Also available at www.jcrelations.net/en/?item=1022
2. Available at www.bc.edu/cjl
3. Available at www.vatican.va/.../index_relations-jews.htm
4. *Notes #2*, available at www.vatican.va/.../rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820306_jews-judaism_en.html
5. Available at www.bc.edu/research/cjl.
See also “Jews and Christians in Germany: Responsibility in Today’s Pluralistic Society”, April 13, 2005. English version available at www.bc.edu/research/cjl
6. *We Remember # II* available at www.vatican.va/.../rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_16031998_shoah_en.html.
See also Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops “Catholic Teaching on the Shoah: Implementing the Holy See’s *We Remember*.”

A document prepared for the [November 2006 meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee](#), Capetown, South Africa.