

Evaluating *Nostra Aetate*

In October 1965, Paul VI promulgated *Nostra Aetate*—the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions—one of the most influential documents of Vatican II. In the course of its composition, the Declaration was expanded to include all religions; however, its original subject remained at the heart of the final document: the unique relationship between Christians and Jews. By officially repudiating any presentation of the Jews “as rejected or accursed by God”—and by insisting “God holds the Jews most dear”—*Nostra Aetate* officially and permanently reversed previously unchallenged presuppositions which influenced Christian attitudes for centuries, paving the way for an increasingly positive relationship between Christians and Jews.

Relationships don’t change by fiat, however. After such a long history of estrangement—and in view of the remaining fundamental differences between Christianity and Judaism—it’s inevitable misunderstandings and controversies continue to arise. For that reason, the Vatican thought it best to evaluate *Nostra Aetate* at an academic level rather than a diplomatic level. In 2006, about two dozen academics—primarily Catholic but including a few Lutheran and Jewish academics—met to consider challenging and still unresolved questions emerging from the document. The evaluation was called “Christ and the Jewish People”. It was essentially a Christian evaluation; however, the Jewish academics were there as auditors to ensure the accuracy of references to Jewish teachings and concepts, and to offer insights from their own tradition.

The result of the evaluation is an important book of essays, *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today*,

Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today

by Philip Cunningham, Joseph Sievers, Mary Boys, Hans Hermann Henrix and Jesper Svartvik (editors)

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which ought to be read by anyone interested in the current state of Christian and Jewish relations, because Christian academics are saying surprising things, and Jewish academics are saying surprising things too.

Regarding the death of Jesus, the Christian evaluators argue *Nostra Aetate* doesn’t go far enough in atoning for the Church’s historical role in Western anti-Semitism. Against this prophetic self-critique, Jewish auditor Rabbi Marc Saperstein defends the Church by pointing out that the catechism of the Council of Trent (1566) teaches that Christian sinners are more to blame for the crucifixion than those few Jews who brought it about, and this catechism is consistent with the spirit of *Nostra Aetate*. Saperstein explains how—until relatively recently—Jews never denied responsibility for Jesus’s death. Throughout history, established Jewish leaders who accepted the doctrine of a coming messiah in principle almost invariably resisted anyone who claimed to implement it in practice, hence it’s hardly surprising some Jewish leaders wanted Jesus out of the way. The real problem for Jews, he argues, is the retrospective overlay of Christological doctrine upon the crucifixion, a doctrine the Jewish leaders of Jesus’s day couldn’t possibly have known about. He believes it’s more important to note *Nostra Aetate*’s statement, “The Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this follows from the Holy Scriptures,” because *that* is what the Church once taught.

Regarding the parting of the ways, the Christian evaluators argue that, as there was no fixed point where Christians and Jews parted company—and for centuries there were Jewish Christians who retained Jewish teachings—this raises several issues around how modern historiography influences Christian doctrine. For Christian fundamentalists, the choice is clear: if modern historiography contradicts Christian teaching it must be refuted, condemned, rejected or ignored. For Christians committed to modern historiography, there’s a preponderance of evidence to

argue the historical Jesus had no intention of establishing a separate Church and throughout his life he remained within the spectrum of contemporary Jewish diversity. Does this mean the Petrine authority conferred by Matthew 16:18 was attributed to Jesus after his death to validate Catholicism? If so, how's that significant for the claims of papal authority throughout history and today? Saperstein doesn't believe this is an issue, however, as the challenge of modern historiography isn't only a Christian challenge, since modern historiography also questions the accuracy of the Egyptian enslavement and the Exodus, which doesn't invalidate the Passover celebrated annually by Jews throughout the world. As Christians and Jews both share the challenge of modern historiography, this should be a fruitful avenue for inter-faith discussion.

Regarding the Church's role in the history of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, the Christian evaluators lament the ways in which the accusation of deicide wasn't confined to academic realms and had terrible practical consequences throughout history. Saperstein doesn't disagree with this assessment, as he's taught it for decades; however, he believes a full understanding requires a balanced perspective, not just recognising the negatives. For more than a thousand years Christians had the power to eliminate Jews but chose to coexist with them instead. Why? Because official Church teaching, formulated by Augustine and reiterated by the popes throughout the Middle Ages, was that God wanted Jews to remain within the Christian world, continuing to observe their own tradition, and it was a violation of God's will to harm or kill Jews. Of course, the rationale for this toleration doesn't pass muster by modern standards, but Saperstein guesses that, historically, Jews cared far less about the doctrine's rationale and far more about its practical conclusion. For example, the papal bull issued by Clement VI, as anti-Jewish riots swept through Europe in the wake of the Black Death, said: "Let no Christian dare to wound or kill the Jews."

Regarding the connection between Christianity and the Holocaust, some Christian evaluators argue the Church continued to engage in the worst offences of the past during the Nazi period and was directly implicated in the Holocaust; however, Saperstein believes no fair-minded reader will find this view persuasive. Other Christian evaluators see Nazism as a neo-pagan attack on monotheistic religion in

general, including Christianity, and emphasise the novelty of Nazi anti-Semitism and the Holocaust as radical breaks with the past. Saperstein admits this is how the Nazi onslaught was generally understood, or at least presented, by Jewish leaders in the 1930s and 1940s. Between these extremes are intermediate Christian positions which recognise the novelty of Nazi anti-Semitism yet insist on some degree of continuity with the Church's anti-Jewish past. Saperstein believes these intermediate positions lack nuance and their persuasive power relies on metaphors rather than data. We need to be persuaded by evidence and Saperstein isn't persuaded such evidence exists. He believes we should re-examine and reclaim a position that places more emphasis on the restraints imposed by the Church throughout the Middle Ages: restraints the Nazis (and the communists) felt no longer applied to them.

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Regarding the phenomenon of Christianity interpreting its scripture in anti-Jewish ways, the Christian evaluators argue that antagonism towards Jews is neither integral to nor a necessary development from the New Testament. While Jewish auditor Tamara Cohn Eskenazi is grateful for these reflections, questions must be asked. First, if Christian animosity towards Jews didn't come from the New Testament, where *did* it come from? Second, how can we correct the tendency to use the New Testament as a weapon against Jews? The answer to the first question is beyond the scope of Eskenazi's response. The answer to the second question depends on the role of hermeneutics within and between the critical traditions of Judaism and Christianity. What's distinctive about current hermeneutical thinking, she argues, is the acknowledgment that texts are susceptible to multiple legitimate interpretations. Consequently, she believes we should become more self-conscious of the process of interpretation, more honest about the lenses we use, and more responsible for our choices of interpretive tools, the ways we use them, and the readings we end up with. If Jews and Christians are both on a pilgrimage, the unfolding of textual meaning in the light of changing circumstances can be acknowledged with integrity, without annulling or denigrating earlier understandings.

Regarding the significance of Jesus's Jewishness, the Christian evaluators admit this awareness still tends to be mere background for Christian identity formation. As a way of encouraging Christians to

deepen their awareness of what Jesus' Jewishness really means, they reflect on the significance of the Jewish Jesus through the prisms of covenantal membership, incarnational theology, and the varied and complex doctrinal discussions of the early Church councils. Jewish auditor Edward Kessler finds this approach profound, as it explores Jesus' Jewishness in a broad religious sense rather than a narrow ethnic sense; however, their approach focuses on Late Antiquity and what is missing is a comparable examination of the varieties of first-century Judaism among Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek-speaking Jews. Also, in the Gospel accounts of Jesus's ministry, the Pharisees are prominent as his main rivals, yet they had more in common with him than other contemporary Jewish groups; they shared many beliefs in the coming of the messiah, life after death, the resurrection of the dead, immortality, and the day of judgment. Likewise, we need to recognise what binds all Jews: a belief in the one and only God who accepts no rivals and makes behavioural demands, and, a belief that God elected and chose his own people in the call of Abraham, the Exodus from Egypt, and the giving of the Torah.

Regarding covenantal membership, the Christian evaluators argue that both Jews and Christians can justly claim to be chosen by God. Kessler notes that this isn't a new idea. Paul says the same thing in Romans. It's impossible for God to elect the Jewish people and later displace them. As the Church's election derives from Israel, Jesus' Jewishness implies, theologically, that God's covenant with Israel remains irrevocable and unbroken. Yet Kessler notes a theological problem here. On the one hand, *Nostra Aetate* says "the Church is the new people of God", while on the other hand "the Jews remain most dear to God because of their fathers, for he does not repent of the gifts he makes nor of the calls he issues". In a mysterious way, then, the Jewish people are still elect, even though the Church understands itself as the new Israel, and the Church discovers this bond of identity between Jews and Christians when it searches into the meaning of its own existence. Because of Christ, it has a relationship with Judaism unlike any other religion. Finally, as so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace, Kessler believes the permanence of Israel is a sign to be interpreted within God's design.

Regarding incarnational theology, the Christian evaluators argue the incarnation of Jesus can't be separated from his Jewishness without losing its meaning. God's son isn't a generic human being, he's specifically Jewish. When compared with covenantal theology, however, Kessler wonders whether this incarnational theology exceeds the limits of Judaism,

even though it develops central Jewish themes and can't be left out of the inter-faith conversation altogether. For Jews, one way to approach incarnational theology is to view it alongside the Jewish insistence on God being with his people, and the term *Shekinah* is the closest Jewish analogue to the Incarnation; indeed, the cloud and fire leading the people in the Exodus may be analogous with the tabernacling of the Word in John's Prologue.

Also, the Christian evaluators speak of Jesus as Torah, which has interesting Jewish analogies, since tradition holds the Torah was in existence before the creation of the world (Ben Sira 1:1-5), or even before the throne of glory (Genesis Rabbah 1:4). Similarly, Torah is equated with Wisdom (Proverbs 8:22), and Philo wrote of the pre-existence of the Logos, and its role in creation, which he identified with Torah. Of course, Rabbinic Judaism also personified Torah; however, the divine origin of Torah is never viewed as the self-manifestation of God, as Jesus is viewed within Christianity. Kessler believes the Rabbinic understanding of Torah, like the concept of *Shekinah*, may help Jews better understand incarnational theology and the religious significance of Jesus' Jewishness. Although incarnational theology is more difficult for Jews to grasp than covenantal theology, they can't dismiss it out of hand without imposing external constraints on God's freedom: a notion fundamentally foreign to Judaism.

From a Jewish perspective, then, the key question is whether covenantal theology or incarnational theology implies the abrogation of God's promises to Israel. For the Christian evaluators, such an abrogation—leading to supersessionism, also known as "replacement theology"—is no longer an option for Christianity, a view supported by the modern papacy. This is why they ask their Jewish partners to continue challenging theological doctrines, in their goal to establish a partnership (*chevruta*) in which we seek not only to build respect but also to further understanding. Kessler thanks them for that invitation. Separately and together, Jews and Christians must work to bring healing to our world. In this enterprise, both Jews and Christians need to be guided by the vision of the Prophets of Israel.

Regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, the Christian evaluators take a fresh look at the trinitarian tradition and its implications for Christian and Jewish relations. In summarising their various discussions, Jewish auditor Adam Gregerman notes how impossible it is for these evaluators to conceive of divine activity—even of God's covenanting with Jews—separate from the triune God. It is, they write, in the nature of God to exist in three subsistents, at all stages of his relationship with the Jews, as at

all stages of human life generally. According to this model, Jews as well as Christians remain actors in a theological drama; Jewish religious life is presented positively—and partly in terms a Jew would recognise—but always in trinitarian terms. To a Jew it's simultaneously scandalous but also, Gregerman recognises, unavoidable for Christian theologians to think this way. So, while the overall theological shifts they propose are enormous, these shifts are ultimately limited. They don't offer, and perhaps can't offer, an alternative way of conceiving the divine activity apart from trinitarian theology; even at the end of days; even for those who reject a Christian understanding of that theology. While the historical areas of clash are minimised, and both Jews and Christians have central aspects of their religious identity affirmed, Christian evaluators don't deny that Christ is somehow active in Jewish covenantal life. They perceive Christian covenantal life in their own terms, which are not the terms Jews use to describe their covenantal life.

Still, Gregerman believes this fresh Christian look at the doctrine of the Trinity, which seeks to overcome centuries of anti-Jewish rhetoric, has enormous implications for inter-faith relations if it can put forth deep roots. Can that happen? Perhaps not, he suggests, as the Church's greatest growth is in places where Jews are almost entirely absent, where memories of the Holocaust are fading, and where the sense of responsibility to alter religious teachings in its wake is also fading. Also, many perceive a growing conservatism that, if not hostile to Vatican II, is sceptical about some of its conclusions, including those regarding other religions. While the Church will continue to promote dialogue, changes in demographics and trends towards conservatism may encourage backsliding. Further, there's much that is complex and elusive about trinitarian language, not just for Jews but for Christians too. For guidance, Gregerman argues we should return to Paul's vision. While these Christian evaluators no longer use the same language Paul did, his profound refusal to give up on the Jewish people offers a rare and heartening precedent for their fresh look at the trinitarian tradition, and for the way forward.

Regarding post-Vatican II ecclesiology and liturgy, Revaluator Christian Rutishauser offers a focused exploration of a fundamental question: How can one understand the assertion that the Jewish people are

in an eternal covenantal relationship with God and simultaneously maintain the Church's understanding of the universal salvation offered through Christ? This is, Jewish auditor Rabbi Ruth Langer observes, an inner-Christian question, and she believes the value of Rutishauser's proposals can only be fully evaluated by other Christians. However, she's grateful for Rutishauser's sensitivity; he fully understands that his fundamental question is an affront to Jews, given the history of Christian attempts, many successful, to undermine Judaism's integrity and bring Jews to baptism; however, as Langer points out, most Jews—other than the few engaged in high level dialogue and those conversant with Christian theological issues—will easily misunderstand his discussion, so its presentation must be extremely and carefully nuanced if it's to contribute to future understanding.

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Among his theological proposals, Rutishauser makes a series of important points. First, and from Jewish perspective the most fundamental, is his recognition that the Sinai Covenant, Torah itself, needs to be the focus of this discussion, including the specific commandments of how to live in relationship with God. The Sinai revelation is the most important manifestation of God's covenantal relationship with Israel, and the response to its halakhic directives—not just the Ten Commandments but all of God's commandments—is the essence of

Jewish covenantal living. Second, he presents Jesus as the embodiment and personification of Torah, which could well be what John means when he refers to Jesus as Logos.

Langer admits we know little about theologies of the Logos in late Second Temple Judaism, but the sense that God's Word had an existence and a presence in people's lives seems to have been part of Greek-influenced Judaism. Rabbinic Jews ceased to speak in these terms in the course of Jewish and Christian differentiation but remnants remain in targumic discussion of God's Word (*Memra*); therefore, the idea that Torah might be embodied within a particular manifestation of God has some roots in Judaism. Third, Rutishauser suggests Gospel references to Jesus being "handed over" (*paradidonai*) to the Romans be read not as betrayal but as God's positive act, literally of handing on his Word to the gentiles. He does this by suggesting an analogy with the Hebrew root *m-s-r*, to elicit its positive meaning, "that which is handed down as a tradition" (*mesoret*); however, Langer notes that *m-s-r* also has a negative

meaning which Rutihauser doesn't mention, "an informer who hands something over inappropriately to someone else; one who betrays others" (*moser*). The Hebrew analogy is therefore less helpful than Rutihauser suggests, but this should not negate his argument for a benign meaning of the concept.

As a Jew, Langer can be quite satisfied with the argument that God's handing his Word over to the gentiles opens the covenant to the gentile world without affecting God's Sinai-based relationship with Judaism. This explains how both communities can fit into the divine covenantal framework. However, she isn't certain that a Christian theologian would find this ultimate differentiation between Jew and gentile answering the question of how Christ functions for Jews. Also, she feels Rutihauser is dissatisfied with his own answer, as he's critical of a response that pushes a solution off to the eschaton—the end of time, the day of judgment—but he sees no alternative.

Langer argues that, from a Jewish perspective, this eschatological solution is a nice piece of mental manipulation (*pilpul*) which allows us to achieve our immediate goal of living as two communities side-by-side in friendship. In practice, Jews can accept an expectation that we'll discover at the eschaton whether Jews or Christians have been correct about the person of the messiah—whether the messiah is coming or whether the messiah is coming again—as this defers the issue indefinitely. However, there are several problems with this solution to what is essentially a Christian theological conundrum. The obvious one is that it's a practical solution, not a philosophically rigorous one. More seriously, if we look at, for example, the revised prayers for the Good Friday liturgy, which seek to redress an important misconception about Jews, we're confronted with a practical impossibility. If the Church's approved liturgical texts have a potentially harmful plain sense meaning about Jews, which can only be obviated through complex acts of interpretation, then the community in the pews is being misled. As Langer points out, liturgy doesn't operate that way.

Rutihauser concludes his essay with a call for Jews to engage in a parallel process of theological thinking about Christianity: perhaps Jews could be expected to understand the Church as also being in covenant with God; could ponder what their relationship to Jesus might be beyond historical controversy or polemic; could see a place for Jesus's teaching in Jewish tradition. Langer makes cogent observations here: First, while the Rabbinic tradition hasn't developed a discussion of how other religions in their specificity are in relationship with God, the tradition doesn't presume to limit God

by assuming he doesn't have different covenantal relationships with other peoples. Second, does dialogue with Christians require Jews to have a relationship with Jesus, apart from understanding him in his historical context? Third, it's easy for Jews to locate Jesus's teaching in Judaism since most of those teachings, in their origins, were questions of how to apply Torah in the first century. Ultimately, therefore, the relationship Rutihauser wants Jews to consider having with Jesus clearly responds to a deeper theological need within Christianity than within Judaism. Also, while Jews have a historical reason to desire a repaired and improved relationship with Christians, their theological need applies to all the world's religions. An expectation that Jews give priority to Christianity—especially over Islam, which represents a more urgent if a more difficult priority for Jews—arises from a Christocentric perspective of the world which Jews can't share and shouldn't have to share.

Even though this evaluation of *Nostra Aetate* is academic rather than diplomatic, what's on the inter-faith table is still impressive, as are the arguments put by both the Christian evaluators and the Jewish auditors. We've come a long way but there's still a long way to go. We need to know more about the varieties of Second Temple Judaism, especially in relation to the Logos-*Memra*. We need to know more about the relationship between the Jesus movement and those other varieties of Judaism, since this first-century relationship is more or less paradigmatic for the relationship Jews and Christians can hope to have in the future. We need to know more about the emerging identities of Patristic Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism as separate religions after the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD; whether they developed with an eye towards each other; whether there was official or unofficial dialogue between them.

Of course, Langer is right. Jews can't and shouldn't be expected to share a Christocentric view of the world; however, having said that, it seems ironic that—along with so many other Jewish academics—these Jewish auditors of the evaluation of *Nostra Aetate* seem to admire the apostle Paul more than many of the Christian evaluators do, which suggests that Paul may represent a common theological basis for Christian and Jewish dialogue. He was, after all, a Rabbinic Jew himself, and Christians could benefit from listening to what Jews have to say about the apostle to the gentiles.

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