



ICCJ Rome Conference 2015

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

CONCLUDING PLENARY

WEDNESDAY, JULY 1, 2015 - AUDITORIUM

Rabbi Joseph Levi

Nostra Aetate: Fifty years later

First, I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me, as the Chief Rabbi of Florence, to close this important and unique conference. The lectures and thoughts we have heard today bring us toward the conclusion of our collective evaluation of the revolutionary dimension of the *Nostra Aetate* declaration. The reflection on our present post-wartime problems leads us to realize we are facing a new era. Yesterday, Professor Andrea Ricardi gave us an overview of the background of the *Nostra Aetate* declaration in the Catholic Church's post-war quest for dialogue after World War II. At first glance, *Nostra Aetate* should be seen as part of a new global view in a context of new global vistas out of which interreligious dialogue becomes more and more basic for a new worldview. Yet by and large, it contains within itself a revolutionary and radical new historical and theological dimension of Christian- Jewish relations. As Rabbi Rosen outlined yesterday, the enemy of the past has become a close ally. Through its construction of a neo-humanistic concept, the Catholic Church is trying to lead, by building new vistas for the future, and this is intrinsically related to the effort to rediscover the ancient roots of Christianity itself, and the Jewish roots of its faith and liturgy. A similar process took place during the Renaissance in which Florence, as we all know, played an important role. The search for the ancient roots of Christianity led thinkers like Pico della Mirandola and other Renaissance theologians and philosophers to rediscover a possible role for Jewish faith and tradition in forming the Christian faith and its Church. The difference, however, is that the Church authorities and leaders of the time were not yet ready for such a radical change. As a result, Pico's innovative proposal for redefining past and future interconnections between Judaism and Christianity, through the study of rediscovered ancient Hermetic and medieval Kabbalistic sources, was banished by Church authorities, and Pico's 900 theological and historical theses were rejected. The influence of Pico's theories on the unity of the human mind has continued their influence throughout the ages.

The modern post-World War II process of renewing contacts with Judaism and the Jewish roots of the Christian faith was re-formulated and proposed more than 50 years ago, much before our contemporary conflict with radical Islam's reading and interpretation of its own sources. One may see in this renewed process of dialogue between Christians and Jews a divine sign of a new revelation. From the Catholic Church's perspective, the new modern dialogue with Judaism contributes, first and foremost, to the Catholic Church itself, enabling it to renew itself politically and theologically in a post-war and post-*Shoah* reality, by connecting itself to the ancient roots of Christianity, and to Judaism itself. Judaism, on the other hand, was renewing itself in a post-World-War-II and post-*Shoah* reality, by renewing and reinventing itself historically and politically through the creation of a completely new and autonomous

Jewish state, with statehood on the one hand and a call to renew its reading of the role of other, non-Jewish collective groups or religions, in forming and forging world history and its ultimate religious goal. The biblical message of revealing the name of the one ethical God, committed to a covenant with humanity and responsible for the creation of humanity and the world, might be and may have been announced in this new theological and cultural perspective; it was also announced through other religious channels, such as Christianity and Islam. This is a theological and cultural perspective, the roots of which may be found in ancient, medieval and modern Jewish sources. For example: by a new reading of the concept and the role of Noah's children with whom, according to Genesis, God established a covenant right after the flood, proposing and formulating a universal pre-particularistic covenant with all the members of the human family—the family, brothers and children of Noah.

Cardinal Koch, whom I greet and profoundly thank for his presence at our meeting, has proposed for us a hope of a theological renewal and *rapprochement* regarding the fundamental religious beliefs and theological principles of Christianity and Judaism, as an outcome of the Christian-Jewish dialogue. I presume that his hopes were directed, not only at generic religious positions, but at the specific Jewish and Christian views of the figure of the Messiah and his ontological character as well. With your permission, I will try to be more cautious and careful. The dialogue can certainly lessen contrasts between the two religions, and can redefine common similarities between the two religious cultures and their social and historical values, concerning social values and social ideals, such as social justice, the role of the family in past and present human history, attitudes towards science and technology, and other climatic and bioethical issues which concern us all ... the gender issue and many other modern and post-modern issues and value clarifications. But I do not believe the dialogue will change or erase basic theological principles and beliefs of both Judaism and Christianity, and I personally do not believe we should expect or cultivate syncretistic hopes from the renewed dialogue. Rather than look for an artificial unity of views, we should teach ourselves, over and over again, to respect and love diversity, and the plurality of voices and modalities of faith in the one and only God in the midst of our one family history. As much as late-17th century Protestant fundamentalist faith and messianic beliefs (which hoped to see the coming of Christ as an outcome of the possible return of the Jews to their original homeland) were not fulfilled in their times, to the same degree, a hope for a radical and basic theological change in one or the other religious positions concerning the coming of the Messiah and the theological role of the person of Christ, is not realistic as a possible outcome of the renewed Jewish-Christian dialogue. As part of forging new principles for a possible Christian-Jewish dialogue and building relations of truth, the old Christian hope of converting the Jews, in its different formulations, should be definitively abandoned. Both ancient and medieval compulsory forms of preaching and conversion and/ or modern 19th-century theological-political hopes that the emancipation of the Jews would bring about the conversion of the Jews as a result, are no longer applicable or relevant to present-day dialogue. The great starting-point and achievement of *Nostra Aetate* was, and is, its recognition of the biblical covenant with the Jewish people as irrevocable (unchangeable), opening up space for a new dialogue of recognition and respect between grown-up brothers and sister who have learned how to appreciate the value of difference, and the legitimacy of each other's life-stories and biographies.

Yet, in spite those evident limits of the dialogue I believe the renewed dialogue enables us to renew our understanding of our own religious traditions and history. The new reading of both Jewish and Christian ancient and late classical sources enables us to enlarge our understanding, not only of our own sources, but of the history of the ongoing dialogue between the two traditions themselves, constructing itself as a positive or negative mirror of the other, but the similarities of both religious attitudes in confronting other religious realities of the time, such as pagan and Gnostic beliefs and theological worldviews and

positions, as Gabriele Boccaccini tried to demonstrate for us in his interesting talk. This renewed understanding of the past should help us understand in a new way our present-day goals and partnership. [We seek] to define and clearly understand the common goals ahead of us as two ancient religions of the classical past. Our task continues to be to echo, in the context of the modern and post-modern arena, the positive inheritance of both classical culture and biblical values concerning the centrality of human beings, their dignity and uniqueness in the created world, their merits, duties and liberty.

We should feel responsible to teach and claim these values together, and not in contrast to, or against, each other, as in the past, but proclaiming and revealing it anew in a secular and globalized world, in its Marxist or liberal neo-colonialist forms—a mass unified culture which makes us forget the infinite human modalities of our minds, created in the image of the infinite images of God. The infinite value and centrality of human beings, their life, their positive abilities and aspirations, their fragility and their immense poetic, intellectual and spiritual strengths, against the new prophecies of false readings of faith and religion of contemporary radical Islam. We can and should reveal together a new religious humanism which once again puts human beings at the centre of creation, not as part of an ontological or material order but as a goal, the teleological order of our world and universe. A sublime being, able, thanks to his divine image and inclination, to give and offer positive forms of meaning to the world, capable of producing social solidarity, values and moral systems, brotherhood and divine beauty, spirituality and poetry.

Reclaiming together the value and centrality of human beings, and of every human life, can be the true work of *Teshuvah* and reparation (*tikkun*) that both of our religions, their societies and religious institutions can perform together, to repair the dehumanized attitude toward Jews and Judaism propagated by Christianity from antiquity through the Middle Ages and into modern times. The new neo-humanist partnership between past enemies who choose to re-propose together to humanity the religious, philosophical and everyday life value of humanity, of every and each human being, as a new message for our present days and for the future ... a message which has its origin in the biblical view of humanity and creation. Once again, former enemies, joined by their longstanding traditions and sensitivities to the difficulties and trials of humankind, will be able, as in the first centuries of the Common Era, to convey a new message to the West and to the East, to the Asian and Muslim worlds, to Africa (which is still looking for a better future), and to the West itself, which has lost its faith in God and humanity.

The renewal of the message of a covenant between the divine and humanity, working to increase man's confidence in himself, and in his own ability to renew this dialogue with the divine and the sublime, should be the right answer to the loss of faith and self-confidence of humanity in itself, still today, almost a century after the war. This search and this message will unify Jews and Christians who, in Isaiah's own words, are seeking the renewal of human dignity and hope. The covenant of the divine creator with Adam and Eve, with Noah's sons and the rest of humanity, the positive and profound covenant of trust and dignity with Abraham. "And G-od said to Himself, Shall I conceal anything from Abraham?". The renewal of the hope and confidence in a covenant between God and Humanity, between god and the created world, after the greatest collapse of the 20th century—after Auschwitz.

The idea of a covenant between God and humanity is so fundamental to both our religions' concepts and views can be the constructive element for a new collaboration and partnership between past enemies, enabling each biblical family to renew itself and its messages.

What I have said up to now is but an example of many other basic religious and human values common to both our religious families. Apart from the theological issues related to the figure of the Messiah and the means by which G-od the creator is relating to, and revealing Himself to, the world, we will be able to discover that what unites us in terms of basic values is much more extensive than what separates us: The centrality and uniqueness of Man in the universe, a human being who is an ally of G-od and not in contrast with a blind merciless Deity, who shares with the divine the responsibility for this world , and whom the Divine offered intelligence and positive initiative to cure this world, to develop their own minds and creativity, their scientific knowledge and ability. We also share awareness of the need to build a human culture of caring and acceptance, of offering and listening those who are in need of being heard and taken care of (and who of us is not?!): the stranger, the poor and the weak, orphan kids, all over the globe, in our own societies and those of the Third and Fourth Worlds, in Africa, in Asia, in South America. As I have stated, the values which we have in common and which may unite us are more numerous than those which separate us.

That is why we should occupy ourselves less with theological issues which might separate us, and concentrate on new possible ways to implement and pass on our historical dialogue choice to future generations.

The first important traditional concept concerns knowledge and study. As Gabriele has reminded us, there is much to be done in the study of the parallel relations between our two cultures. A long time has passed since the first works of the late Professor David Flusser on parallel Midrashim and textual similarities between first-century Jewish and classical Christian texts. The new theological apocalyptic and eschatological concepts were developed in geographical and cultural contexts that were adjacent and similar. Much still has to be done and studied to better understand, not only the differences but also the similarities, between the Jewish Midrash and the teaching of the Church Fathers. Our communities should spend more energy and offer more opportunities to learn more about each other's cultural history and traditions. There are still not enough schools where the future clergy of both religions are formed according the new teachings established by *Nostra Aetate* itself, namely the attention to, and knowledge of, the teachings of the biblical Jewish covenants. Both Jews and Christian should learn and know more about the other's doctrine, practice and values, as they prepare themselves to serve as future religious leaders.

In parallel ways, such an effort at studying the teachings of the ancient world should be broadened, and should include the study of Islam. Both Jewish and Christian educational systems should dedicate more efforts to bringing the new dialogue into the classroom.

Let me also remind us that, within Christian dogmatic and educational systems, a continuous and constant effort should be dedicated to fighting anti-Semitism. The Christian Church must dedicate constant efforts to dismantling the Satanic and caricatured negative image of the Jews as being anti-social elements who work against humanity. This anti-Jewish garb—developed by early and later Christians in their fight against their sister or brother religion, in a fight for new spaces and new believers—must once again be situated in its proper context. It continues to be a primary duty of the church to dismantle the negative image it created of its own brother, and special educational efforts must continue to be undertaken, especially with new clergy. Unfortunately, I do not believe that one or two pontifical institutes are enough, and I still hear from people in Florence for example, that in small remote churches, much information that is prejudiced or simply wrong is still being repeated in the rural and less rural churches. I think it may be part of our task as the ICCJ to create a committee which may,

with humility, study the problems and offer, in the frame of dialogue and concerns, suggestions to the suitable offices of the Holy See.

Let me now dedicate some space to another aspect of the dialogue which concerns practical or action programs.

While the theological dialogue is progressing, with unexpected points of transformation (as the last Salerno meeting showed), I believe we should concentrate on, and be inventive in, planning new forms of collaboration in new areas which concern the social sphere and trust-building.

Thus, along with reaffirming the divine total value of every human being's life, the sanctity of life, particularly in a changing global world, we should dedicate more time to getting to know each other's traditions better. Christians should learn more about Judaism and its moral, social and life values, and Jews should try and learn more about positive Christian values such as the value of humanity, life lived in the service of others, solidarity and compassion for those who suffer. We believe in the same social values and work for them in the name of the same biblical G-od, the merciful, all-encompassing and loving Creator.

As an example, I would like to remind us of a joint project organized by the office of Paris's archbishop and the World Jewish Congress in New York, in the context of which a few parallel initiatives took place. The Paris Church authorities helped Mr. Desbois to collect more information and do research intended to identify more and more mass graves in Poland, helping Desbois to present himself to Polish Catholic believers. Old people, both men and women from remote Polish villages, who had witnessed the events of the murder and deportation of Polish Jews, gave valuable testimonies on Second World War events in the East, helping Mr. Desbois to reconstruct the story of the *Shoah* by bullets in the eastern territories. Most of all, however, it helped to identify hundreds of gravesites, permitting the families to bury the remains of their family members and loved ones ... a religious and greatly important therapeutic act, in the name of the new Christian-Jewish dialogue and partnership. At the same time, young clergy students were invited from Paris to New York and were able to study traditional Jewish texts from the Middle Ages, dealing with justice and social actions, at a major Jewish institution in New York, the famous Yeshiva University. In this way, they were able to get a sense of what Jewish law and culture are really about, and put aside ignorance and old prejudices. The other part of the project concerned illness and poverty in Third World countries. The Jewish World Congress and the Paris Catholic authorities joined forces for a large-scale international fund-raising campaign, in order to help street children in Brazil and other South American countries, and they agreed to jointly send the necessary medical aid and drugs to an African country fighting some of the sicknesses that were widespread on that continent.

To me, this was a tangible project of collaborating in curing the past and building a different future in the name of biblical and prophetic values and solidarity. I would suggest it as a model and a paradigm of what we should continue doing, in order to build together our new friendship and dialogue in the service of humanity and the international community. Of course, there are many similar topics of international concern which can and must concern us, from bio-ecology to community-building, where both our communities in their various forms can collaborate and join forces to build together a better world in the name of biblical values. Christianity has a long and outstanding experience in helping poor and weak populations and societies, and Jews and Jewish entrepreneurs can, and should, join forces to cure suffering and sickness in our world. We should create more and more community dialogue opportunities for the Abrahamic believers (Jews Christian and Muslims), but should take the efforts to help and mediate in other conflicts spots in the world, where ethnic hatred and lack of knowledge make



members of one specific community forget the divine image which resides in the life, and in the face, of the other.

In conclusion, I would say that *Nostra Aetate* has paved the way for a new understanding between religions, and between Judaism and Christianity in particular. Implementing its principles can pave the way for a new neo-humanistic order, in which both Jews and Christians can work as a team in improving social relations and physical conditions for millions of people, by proclaiming and working together to implement the biblical values of solidarity and humanity proclaimed by our biblical prophets thousands of years ago.

Thank you all for your contributions and participation, and let us hope that the God of the universe—the God of all people—will acknowledge our goodwill and will bless us all with immense benevolence and wisdom. May we see His intimate and illuminating presence in our feelings, reflections and thoughts, in the aspirations and breath of each one of us, created and bearing in our deepest heart His image with gratitude.

(edited by Murray Watson)