

## Catholic Witness to the Jews

Catholic-Jewish dialogue has reached an impasse, with both Catholic and Jewish participants calling for magisterial clarifications on whether the Jewish people are exempt from the Church's missionary mandate to preach the gospel to all nations.<sup>1</sup> It was this request that dominated the speech by Rabbi David Rosen at the Vatican celebrations for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*.<sup>2</sup> Inspired by Pope John Paul II's repeated declarations that the Old Covenant has never been revoked,<sup>3</sup> as well as statements by high-ranking Church committees<sup>4</sup> and Vatican officials that the Jews have their own saving covenant with God,<sup>5</sup> Jewish participants in the dialogue clearly have the impression that the Catholic Church has renounced, or is about to renounce, the need to convert or evangelize the Jewish people.<sup>6</sup>

For many Catholic observers, the Jews request for exemption from all missionary activity is seen as a challenge to the Gospel's command to evangelize all peoples. They see it as a way of imposing unacceptable terms on the dialogue, and as a temptation to repudiate important elements of traditional belief. They argue that it is not possible to exempt Jews from evangelization without distorting the Church's traditional theological positions. Recent Catholic doctrine has insisted that there can be no dialogue without proclamation.<sup>7</sup>

The call for clarification certainly places the Church Authorities in a difficult position. Failure to renounce missionary activity to the Jews may lead to a freezing of the Catholic-Jewish dialogue and a return to former levels of distrust and animosity. Almost certainly it would also have a negative impact on the negotiations between Vatican representatives and the State of Israel, concerning the legal status of the Catholic Church in Israel. On the other hand, affirming that the Jews are exempt from evangelization because the Old Covenant is still valid and effective for their

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<sup>1</sup> A useful account of the situation from the Catholic point of view can be found at: [http://www.ratzingerfanclub.com/covenant\\_and\\_mission.html#12](http://www.ratzingerfanclub.com/covenant_and_mission.html#12).

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi David Rosen is the AJC's international director of inter-religious affairs and one of the main Jewish interlocutors with the Vatican. His speech is at <http://rabbidavidrosen.net/Nostra%20Aetate.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> The first occasion Pope John Paul II referred to "the people of God of the old covenant never revoked by God" was on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1980, at Cathedral Museum of Mainz. For a full account of the subject see "The Covenant has never been revoked: Basis of the Jewish-Christian Relationship" by Hans Hermann Henrix at <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?id=814#24>.

<sup>4</sup> In a document called *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* published jointly by a Committee of US Bishops (USCCB) and the Council of Synagogues in August 2002, the Roman Catholic participants proposed that "campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church". The conclusions of this committee were subsequently challenged by Cardinal Avery Dulles, in an article which can be found at: <http://www.sfarchdiocese.org/dulles.html>.

<sup>5</sup> In an address at the 17<sup>th</sup> meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in New York, on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2001, the President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Cardinal Kasper, declared: "The only thing I wish to say is that the Document *Dominus Iesus* does not state that everybody needs to become a Catholic in order to be saved by God. On the contrary, it declares that God's grace, which is the grace of Jesus Christ according to our faith, is available to all. Therefore, the Church believes that Judaism, i.e. the faithful response of the Jewish people to God's irrevocable covenant, is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises."

<sup>6</sup> For example, Rabbi Yitzhchok Adlerstein, in a recent *Jerusalem Post* article, writes: "Long educated to believe that there was no other portal to Heaven, it is upsetting to many Catholics to learn that there may be a Jewish back door." The full article can be found at: <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1132475663314&pagename=JPost%2FJPostArticle%2FShowFull>.

<sup>7</sup> This is clearly the message of 'Dialogue and Proclamation' published in 1991 by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue. Cardinal Ratzinger endorses this teaching in his book *Many Religions, One Covenant* (p. 112), when he writes that missionary activity should not "cease and be replaced by dialogue.... This would be nothing other than total lack of conviction. Rather, mission and dialogue should no longer be opposites but should mutually interpenetrate."

salvation contradicts the letter and spirit of the New Covenant (cf. Heb 7,12; 8,13;10,9). It would also be seen as giving Church approval for a rival form of salvation based on a modern reconstitution of the Old Covenant, involving the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, the resumption of animal sacrifices, the re-establishment of the temple priesthood and the Sanhedrin,<sup>8</sup> as well as the installation of a leader who satisfies the Jewish expectations for the long-awaited messiah.<sup>9</sup>

The present impasse in the dialogue can therefore be interpreted as a sign that we have already reached a point of irreconcilable difference between the Christian and Jewish Faiths. Christians cannot renounce their universal missionary mandate, and Jews cannot accept any vision of redemption that clashes or competes with their own.

For Catholics, one solution to this impasse is to understand why the Jews cannot tolerate the Christian Gospel of salvation, or redemption, and in the light of this understanding to consider how to proceed in fidelity to the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Scriptures and the Christian tradition. Furthermore, this understanding must be based on knowledge of Orthodox and Ultra-orthodox Judaism in Israel, since these are the branches that hold official authority in the State of Israel and therefore determine normative Judaism for the largest and most religiously active Jewish population in the world. They not only shun dialogue with Catholics, and other Christian denominations,<sup>10</sup> but also with rival sects of Judaism such as the Reform and Conservative Movements. So for the Orthodox Jewish position on redemption, our understanding is formed not by dialogue, but by paying attention to authoritative Jewish teaching and debate.

Quite simply the Orthodox Jews do not accept the Christian Gospel because they have an entirely different conception of redemption. The basic elements of redemption are also understood differently: the role of the redeemer, the form of repentance, the moral capacity of men, and the nature of sin and evil are all fundamentally different from corresponding elements in Christian theology.

In Orthodox Jewish theology,<sup>11</sup> sin and evil arise from the ‘evil impulse’, which is found alongside the ‘good impulse’ in every human being. Having perfect free will, the Jewish soul (in contrast to the souls of the non-Jews) is able to choose to follow the good impulses and reject the bad ones, in accordance with the revealed Will of God expressed in the laws of the Torah. If a Jew fails in some way, then he is encouraged to repent, which simply means that he must take a decision to return to observe the laws revealed in the Torah. It is claimed that his soul has the inner capacity to do this, without help from outside itself. Through its own moral effort in overcoming

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<sup>8</sup> In actual fact, the Sanhedrin has already been re-established (on 14<sup>th</sup> October 2004); links to news items on this subject can be found at: <http://www.chayas.com/sanhed.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> As defined by the specific Halachic criteria established by Maimonides in *Mishneh Torah*, book 14: Judges; Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, chs 11-12.

<sup>10</sup> Orthodox Jews generally avoid dialogue because 20 years ago Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik, a leading Halachic expert, came out strongly against participation in inter-religious dialogue. Although he saw a place for Jewish cooperation with non-Jews in secular activities, he understood dialogue on a theological level as negotiation, and felt that this was inappropriate for people of faith. Up to the present time, Jewish-Christian dialogue has taken place mainly in the Diaspora, where most Jewish participants belong to the heterodox Reform and Conservative Movements, and are not guided by Rabbi Soloveichik’s advice. Orthodox avoidance of dialogue may explain why, even after 40 years of Catholic-Jewish dialogue, there has been little or no change of attitudes among Israeli Jews, especially among the educated classes (see Drew Christiansen’s article “Unfinished Work” in *America*, 10<sup>th</sup> October 2005, available at: <http://www.americamagazine.org/gettext.cfm?articleTypeID=21&textID=4403&issueID=545>).

<sup>11</sup> Principle sources are: Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, “Redemption and the Power of Man” (*Azure*, no. 16, Winter 5764 (2004) available at [http://www.azure.org.il/magazine/magazine.asp?id=172&search\\_text](http://www.azure.org.il/magazine/magazine.asp?id=172&search_text)); Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, book 14: Judges; Treatise 5: Kings and Wars, chs 11-12; and Rabbi Menachem Brod, “*The Days of Moschiach*”.

evil impulses the soul earns its reward in the after-life. Redemption refers to the destiny of the Jewish people as a whole, and its realization depends upon their collective repentance, so as to merit the coming of their redeemer or messiah. The messiah is an observant Jew who brings his people back to the observance of the Torah, gathers the dispersed remnants of Israel, conquers all the surrounding nations and rebuilds the temple in its place on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. His leadership is expected to reflect the leadership of Moses, and his arrival is to be announced by a religious leader representing the return of Elijah (cf. Malachi 3:23). Redemption starts only after the temple has been built, and proceeds in an entirely natural way, without miracles or supernatural interventions. Nevertheless, it is believed that the establishment of this historical, Jewish, messianic kingdom in Jerusalem will bring about peace in the whole world (*Tikun HaOlam*). At an unknown time in the future, it is said that this kingdom will undergo a supernatural transformation resulting in the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment and the life of the world to come.

In this Jewish view of redemption, there is no place for a divine and personal saviour (Jesus) who dies for the remission of sins, and returns at the end of history to eradicate evil and perform the final judgment. The Christian Gospel is as foreign to Orthodox Jews now as it was when it was first preached 2000 years ago.<sup>12</sup> Now, as then, their messiah is a worldly leader who restores full national and political sovereignty to the Jewish people. Most important of all, though, he enables them to return to the full performance of their religious obligations under the Old Covenant, through the rebuilding of their temple in its place. Not surprisingly, the establishment of the State of Israel (1948), the immigration of Jews from all over the world and the conquest of the Temple-Mount and East Jerusalem (1967) are all interpreted as necessary preparations for the imminent coming of their messiah and redemption.<sup>13</sup>

It is in this context that Catholic leaders must decide very carefully on the request of their Jewish interlocutors to renounce all missionary activity among the Jews. To agree to this request, on the basis that the Old Covenant is still a valid means of salvation for Jews, is to give approval to the political ‘redemption’ that they are preparing for. From the Christian point of view, however, the political ‘redemption’ so eagerly desired by the Jews is a false redemption, and their long-awaited messiah is nothing but a false messiah<sup>14</sup> – a worldly imitation and antagonist of Jesus Christ.<sup>15</sup> Even though Christians have to accept the realization of this political ‘redemption’, as part of God’s plan for the condemnation of those who “have not believed the truth...” (2Thess 2,12),<sup>16</sup> it is dangerously mistaken to support it as a valid means of salvation. In fact, to support this false ‘redemption’ is a work of false prophecy (cf. Rev 13,11-17). So the Church must absolutely avoid statements suggesting that the Old Covenant provides, or can be reconstituted so as to provide, a valid means of salvation for the Jews, or anybody else.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the imminent realization of this false system of redemption makes the present time especially critical for the salvation of souls. At this critical time, it is totally inappropriate for the Church to agree to renounce her missionary activity among the Jews. Although the mere presence of the Church in the Holy Land occasionally attracts individual Jews or Muslims, there

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<sup>12</sup> Jesus is still understood as a failed messianic contender who attempted a military uprising against the Roman Authorities; for a recent presentation of this view by an Orthodox Rabbi, see “Discovering the Jewish Jesus” by Shmuley Boteach, published in the Jerusalem Post, 7<sup>th</sup> December 2005, at: <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1132475699597&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull> .

<sup>13</sup> The final obstacle in the realization of this plan is the Muslim presence on the Temple Mount.

<sup>14</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church 675-676.

<sup>15</sup> In Christian prophecy and tradition he is often called the ‘Antichrist’.

<sup>16</sup> See also 2Thess 2,3-12; Rev 13; 20,15; Matt 24,15-28 et par.

<sup>17</sup> See note 5 above, for example.

is, at this time, the need for a more active and prophetic approach directed towards the population at large, witnessing to the true redemption and warning against its false counterpart. However, the precise form and content of this approach should be ‘contextualized’ to the present circumstances. These circumstances are not only intensely resistant and hostile to the proclamation of the Christian message, but also recall the situation at the first Advent, with the Jews imminently expecting two national redemptive figures, one like Elijah and the other like Moses.

We find that the Lord has already precisely anticipated this situation, in the central part of St. John’s Apocalypse (Rev 11,3-13), with the mission of His two witnesses, who will prophesy in sackcloth and be granted the same powers as Moses and Elijah (Rev 11,5-6). Their power to slay their enemies with divine fire is evidence of the hostile environment in which they must prophesy. When they have completed their mission, they are put to death in Jerusalem<sup>18</sup> at the start of the false messiah’s brief reign.<sup>19</sup> Their prophecy bears witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and warns about the imminent realization of this false-messianic reign, a time of persecution and martyrdom for the people of God (Rev 13).

In view of this forthcoming prophetic mission from the Church of Jerusalem, it is inconsistent for Church leaders to declare themselves against missionary activity among the Jews. Instead, the Church should be preparing herself for her final and most important mission of all, that of witnessing Christ up to death in the extensive persecution that will follow – the great tribulation (Rev 7,14) or “final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 677).

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<sup>18</sup> The city “where indeed their Lord was crucified” (Rev 11,8)

<sup>19</sup> The ‘beast from the abyss’ or ‘sea’ (Rev 11,7; 13,1-10).