

## A Breakthrough in Christian/Jewish Relations



A new Vatican document has broken theological ground by stating explicitly that Jews can be saved despite not believing in Jesus Christ. A Jewish commentator hails the conclusion as the most significant advance in Christian-Jewish dialogue in half a century.

Fifty years ago, the Second Vatican Council published an epoch-changing document on relations with Jews and Judaism entitled *Nostra Aetate*, which means “In Our Time”. It symbolised a transformation in Jewish-Christian dialogue and, according to a leading American campaigner against anti-Semitism, Fr Edward Flannery, “terminated in a stroke a millennial teaching of contempt of Jews and Judaism and unequivocally asserted the Church’s debt to its Jewish heritage”.

It ushered in a new era, fresh attitudes, a new language of discourse never previously heard in the Catholic Church concerning Jews. The concept of a dialogue now entered the relationship.

Five decades later, the Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews has issued a new document, *The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable*. Its theological premise is based on *Nostra Aetate*, which had stated: “from the Jewish people sprang the Apostles”, the foundation stones and pillars of the Church who “draw sustenance from the root of that good olive tree on to which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles”. Catholics are reminded in the document of the Jewish origins of Christianity, especially that Jesus was a faithful Jew, as it sets out a theological agenda for future discussions.

As a Jewish partner in today’s dialogue, I was one of two Jewish theologians (the other being the former Chief Rabbi of Ireland, David Rosen) invited to comment on the document before it was published. The invitation symbolised not only a personal friendship but the genuine desire in the Vatican for Jewish participation in inter-religious dialogue.

Of course, this is a Catholic document affirming Catholic perspectives, quite different from the Jewish, but my participation was part of ever-growing mutual respect and appreciation. In particular, it explores two concepts that have been deeply troubling to Jewish-Christian relations: first, missionary activity towards Jews. Strikingly, the document states that Catholics should not try to convert Jews. “The Church is therefore obliged to view evangelisation to Jews, who believe in the one God, in a different manner from that to people of other religions and world views . . . In concrete terms, this means that the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews.”

This is a remarkable assertion and marks the end of “missions to the Jews” and any initiatives that have the purpose of convincing Jews to accept Christianity. However, individual Catholics are not asked to renounce the right to “bear witness” to their own beliefs to Jews, though even this they need to do very sensitively.

Secondly, this new document tackles a dilemma at the heart of the Christian understanding of Judaism. On the one hand, *Nostra Aetate* states that “the Church is the new people of God” while, on the other, “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 (cf. Romans 11:28-29)”. How is it possible to reconcile both statements?

From a Christian perspective, it means reflection on the intrinsic relationship between Christianity and Judaism as well as the survival and vitality of Judaism over 2,000 years – this is the “mystery of Israel”, upon which Paul reflected in his Epistle to the Romans.

One of the reasons why *Nostra Aetate* is a milestone in Christian-Jewish relations is that it began an immensely difficult process, namely, to take the “Other” as seriously as one demands to be taken oneself, i.e. Judaism and Christianity must be understood on their own terms (as stated by the 1975 Vatican guidelines to *Nostra Aetate*). The crucial question in today’s relationship is, to what extent can Christians view Judaism as valid in its own terms (and vice versa)?

Questions also need to be considered by Jews. What was the divine purpose behind the creation of Christianity? What are the implications for Jews that, as a result of the Jew Jesus, 2 billion Christians now read the Jewish Bible? Martin Buber, for example, famously called Jesus “my elder brother”.

My own view is that the covenant promised to Abraham and revealed to Moses demonstrates not only an irrevocable relationship between the Jewish people and God but also allows the theological space for Christians to possess their own special relationship with God and to see their reflection in a Jewish mirror, which I hope will serve to deepen Christian faith in Christ and Christian respect for their elder siblings.

Coincidentally, a few days before the new document was issued, a group of Orthodox rabbis issued a significant declaration, which stated: “We acknowledge that Christianity is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations. In separating Judaism and Christianity, God willed a separation between partners with significant theological differences, not a separation between enemies.” Of course, not all Orthodox Jewish rabbis endorsed their colleagues’ position but this represents another important milestone in the Jewish-Christian relationship.

More milestones are planned and I am pleased to inform readers that the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the Woolf Institute are convening a group of Jewish and Catholic theologians in Cambridge this year, including the commission's president, Cardinal Kurt Koch, to discuss theological questions. The joint initiative is another sign of the significance for the Vatican of the Jewish-Christian encounter.

One topic we will examine at our meeting concerns salvation. Cardinal Koch told me that the theological centrepiece of the new document is that Jews can be saved while not believing in Christ and that this "remains an unfathomable mystery in the salvific plan of God".

"Since God has never revoked his covenant," the cardinal said, "so there cannot be different ways of approaches to salvation through God. There is only one God, the God of Israel, revealed in Jesus Christ. How salvation will be possible without a belief in Jesus Christ is a divine mystery that cannot be resolved by human beings, but [that] Jews are part of God's salvation is beyond theological discussion." Thus, it seems, lack of Jewish belief in the divinity of Jesus no longer bars Jews from salvation.

As a Jewish partner in this increasingly vibrant dialogue, I am looking forward to further progress. I hope it is not limited to an elite, but extends from the citadels of the Vatican to the pews of the Church, from the Offices of the Chief Rabbis to the floors of our synagogues.

During the past five decades, Jews and Catholics have witnessed a transformation in relations. As *The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable* demonstrates, giant strides have been made. But we are talking of a dynamic and relentless process. We will never be able to sit back and say: "The work is done. The agenda is completed."

However, on many major issues, Jews and Catholics find themselves on the same side of the theological fence, faced with the same challenges, and we are in the unusual position of seeking to tackle them together.

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