In the Person of Christ: An Examination of Relations between the Vatican and the Jewish People after the Holocaust

Nisheeta Menon

From its genesis, the Christian faith has undoubtedly interacted with the followers of Judaism more than with any other faith. However, despite their common roots, the history of Jewish-Christian relations has been fraught with conflict, persecution and division. The climax of this narrative occurred with the Holocaust and WWII, a memory which is still fresh in the minds of Jews and Christians alike. Dialogue continues today around this horrific event from numerous angles of scholarship. One such discussion circles around the Papacy and its involvement, or lack thereof, in the events of the Shoah. In this paper I will attempt to extend this discussion by examining relations between the Papacy and the Jewish people in a post-Holocaust context. I will focus on two central documents produced by the Vatican since WWII which address the relationship between Christians and Jews: Nostra Aetate and We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah.

Nostra Aetate

On June 21st, 1963, Giovanni Battista Montini assumed the name Pope Paul VI.¹ Montini had served on the Central Preparatory Commission for Vatican II under John XIII, and in his first message to the world as Pope, he pledged to continue the work of his predecessor.² On October 28th, 1965, Nostra Aetate: The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions was released – a document which would have a great impact on the future of Jewish-Christian relations.³ Nostra Aetate began as a statement called for by John XIII entitled Decretum de Iudaeis.⁴ Before the Second Vatican Council convened, John XXIII had appointed Cardinal Augustin Bea S.J. to draft a statement which would specifically examine the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jews.⁵ In this letter, and in the documents of the council itself, John XXIII intended to express a sense of indebtedness to the Jewish people – a remarkable shift in the Church’s attitude towards Jewish-Catholic relations.⁶ Decretum de Iudaeis affirmed that the Catholic Church would continue to hope that the Jews would recognize Christ as the Messiah, but in the mean time, Jews should be treated with love and respect, for they were not rejected by God.⁷ The shortest sentence in the decree carried the most poignantly message: “The Church loves this people”.⁸

Building on this foundation, Nostra Aetate was intended to educate Catholics on relations with the Jewish people and all non-Christians alike.⁹ The document is generally positive in this regard, but perhaps too cautious and neutral for the tastes of some. Many believed the document was only a first step in initiating more dialogue on the issue.¹⁰
Nosstra Aetate acknowledges a common spiritual heritage between the Church and the Jews, validating the Jewish influence in the church through the Hebrew Bible. However, as it affirms a positive relationship between the Jews and God for the sake of the Patriarchs, it does little to legitimize the Jewish faith in its present context.

It also expresses a continued hope that the Jews will collectively acknowledge Christ as the Messiah, so that they may be joined in serving God “shoulder to shoulder.”11 The sentiment appearing here is a watered-down version of an earlier draft which made a direct reference to conversion of the Jews.12 Robert Graham writes that this reference was removed because it was believed inappropriate for a document which was first attempting to establish common goals and interests.13 The implication here is, of course, that the ultimate objective remained conversion, even though this was not expressed explicitly in the final document.

Nosstra Aetate denies that Jews are in any way accursed or rejected by God, and strongly condemns any acts of violence against the Jews in this regard. However it had been John XXIII’s intention that the document go further to acknowledge the culpability of the Church in the history of anti-Semitism in the world. While Nosstra Aetate clearly expresses the Church’s condemnation of anti-Semitic attitudes, it in no way assumes blame for the propagation of these attitudes in the past.14 In this way the document fails to acknowledge the Church’s role in the propagation of anti-Semitism, therefore rendering it as a half-hearted attempt at reconciliation with the Jewish people. The goal of the document then, seems geared more towards looking ahead to the course of Jewish-Christian relations in the future, rather than looking back and making repentation for the events of the past.15

Some argue that the document demonstrates hesitancy on the part of the church to deeply engage in the Jewish question for fear of its far-reaching implications.16 “…the foundational assumptions of Christian faith, the prophesy-fulfillment structure of salvation history, the construction of a Passion narrative requiring the Messiah to be rejected by ‘his own’, and atonement Christology itself” cannot be separated from the denigration of the Jews.17 Nosstra Aetate does little to engage these issues or explain how they might be nuanced by a modern understanding of Jewish-Christian relations. Overall, the document is a step in the right direction for the Catholic Church, but leaves much to be desired for the future of Jewish-Catholic relations. After Pope Paul VI came another widely influential pope who would continue to the work of re-building Jewish-Catholic relations in new, and perhaps more profound ways.
**We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah**

Born Karol Józef Wołtyła, Pope John Paul II is credited with taking the most initiative to strengthen relations between the Catholics and the Jews. Where John XXIII is remembered for *aggiornamento*, John Paul II might be remembered for “a strategy of restoration.”18 In this modern “culture of death”, John Paul II sought to restore and unify the Church as the body of Christ, while at the same time recognizing its solidarity with other Christians, and even other faiths. His relationship to the Jews was a special one, marked throughout his pontificate by such memorable events as his trip to the Walling Wall in Jerusalem: “By bending in prayer at the Western Wall, the Kotel, the pope symbolically created a new future. The Church was honoring the Temple it had denigrated”.19 Before assuming the throne of Peter, Wołtyła experienced first-hand the Nazi presence in Poland as a youth.20 The Nazis invaded his homeland in 1939 and reportedly sent him into forced labour.21

Under John Paul II, The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued a document on March 16th, 1998 called *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*. This document is viewed as the “culmination of a series of positive steps the Vatican has taken since the mid-1960s toward improving Christian-Jewish relations.”22

*We Remember* has been praised for meeting the challenge of the Church and the Jews in the post-Holocaust context head on. The title itself and the emphasis on the act of remembering recognize the enormity of the Holocaust event and its continuing influence in the modern world. The document makes a surprising reference to the “common future” of Jews and Christians, affirming that “there is no future without memory”23

*We Remember* makes some important strides in acknowledging the involvement of Christianity in propaegating anti-Semitism, but the tone with which the topic is approached is suspiciously lukewarm. Therefore, some have come to refer to the document as an “apologia” of the church, rather than an apologia.24

Indeed, the document acknowledges the role of some of its members in the propagation of anti-Semitism, but fails to recognize any anti-Semitic leanings in itself as an institution. *We Remember* proudly states that erroneous interpretations of the New Testament which have given rise to hatred against Jews in the past have been “totally and definitively rejected by the Second Vatican Council.”25 Yet, it does little to address the 1900 years of questionable teachings before the Council.

To distance itself from any blame for the Holocaust, the document also denies that the
church had any influence in the rise of Nazi Anti-Semitism: “Its anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity.” However, some scholars argue that “the document overlooks the fact that the Nazi onslaught against the Jews took place in a climate of opinion that was conditioned by centuries of Christian hostility to the Jews”.  

A continuation of this trend is evident in the way the document treats the question: Did Christians give every possible mean of assistance to those being persecuted and in particular to the persecuted Jews? Again, the Catholic Church and the actions of its hierarchy are aligned with all that is good and morally correct, acknowledging the actions of Pope Pius XII and other religious while attributing the silence and inaction which occurred to individual Catholics who were “not strong enough to raise their voice in protest.”

In general, the language and tone of the document suggests, if nothing else, a sense of hesitancy in admitting any wrongdoing on the part of the Catholic Church in the history of anti-Semitism and the Holocaust in particular. Use of terms such as “sometimes”, “at times” and “did not always” waters down any serious attempt at an apology, leaving the document as a half-hearted attempt at reconciliation.

Overall, the Papacy of John Paul II is not likely to be remembered for documents such as We Remember, as it is for his actions and attitude when in direct contact with others. Though John Paul has been criticized for his movement to canonize Pius XII (the Pope often accused of failing to defend the Jews during the Holocaust), he has also been praised for his attempts to reach out to the Jewish people throughout his pontificate. The National Director of the Jewish organization ADL (Anti-Defamation League) had these poignant words to say about John Paul II:

In your exceptional writings and pronouncements, you have reflected your understanding of Judaism as a living heritage of the permanent validity of God’s covenant with the Jewish people and of the abhorrent sin that is anti-Semitism… I pray our common God will bless our efforts and strengthen our understanding of each other. Your Holiness, we salute your own great and leading role on this journey with our deepest admiration and affection.

As we have seen, the history of relations between the Jews and the Vatican since the Holocaust has been somewhat like a train lurching back and forth, stopping and stalling on occasion, but generally moving forward with time. What we have not discussed however, is the desired destination for this journey.

Shalom Haverim - “Peace, My Friends”

Despite the negative observations of Nostra Aetate and We Remember presented in this paper, one cannot forget the importance of the goal which ultimately guides all attempts to build relations
between Christians and Jews. Therefore, I begin this section with a hopeful phrase borrowed from
an Israeli folksong, a message which provides focus for this discussion as it comes to a close.31 In his
book *The New Encounter Between Christians and Jews,* author John Oesterreicher isolates *shalom* as
“integrity of existence, integrity of relationships” and “the mark of the true relationship between
Christians and Jews.”32 It is our hope in the present day that Shalom is where the dialogue between
the nation and the Jewish people will lead.

This is not an idealistic, naïve hope. It is not simply a dream which we can expect to be
fulfilled only at the eschaton. If Jewish-Catholic relations are to move forward, we must believe that
it is possible to build and sustain a dialoqical relationship between the two religions. In doing so, we
must take into account certain things.

If dialogue between the Vatican and the Jews is to progress, it can never cease to
acknowledge the events of the past, particularly the Shoah. These sentiments are expressed by John
Paul II who says:

> We would risk causing the victims of the most atrocious deaths to die again if we do not
commit ourselves to ensure that evil does not prevail over good as it did for millions of the
children of the Jewish people…Humanity cannot permit all that to happen again.33

This awareness of the past must then be transformed into a firm resolve to construct a future which
fosters understanding, acceptance, and of course, *shalom*.

At the same time, the entire scope of Jewish-Christian relations cannot continually be viewed
through the lens of one-sided persecution.34 Continued dialogue between the Vatican and
representatives of the Jewish faith is required to recognize the two faiths in their current context.
and further the building of healthy relations between the two. Therefore Christians and Jews are
called to continue the work of the documents discussed in this article, probing the depths of Jewish-
Christian relations, including those most difficult questions which have thus far been avoided. It is
the hope for peace, shared by both religions, which sustains this relationship and guides it into the
future.

Notes

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3 Carol A Martinelli, *People of God in Selected Vatican II and Post Vatican Documents: Implications for Jewish Catholic Relations,*
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7 Ibid., 229.
10 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 131.
14 Carroll, Constantin’s Sword: the Church and the Jews, 553.
16 Carroll, Constantin’s Sword: the Church and the Jews, 554.
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19 Carroll. Constantin’s Sword: the Church and the Jews. 600.
20 Bokenkotter, A Concise History of the Catholic Church, 432.
21 Ibid., 432.
24 Randolph L. Braham, “The Vatican: Remembering and Forgetting, the Catholic Church and the Jews During the Nazi Era.” In The Vatican and the Holocaust: the Catholic Church and the Jews During the Nazi Era. (Boulder: Columbia University Press, 2000), 17.
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32 Ibid., 420.
34 CODA. The Papacy, the Jews, and the Holocaust. 303.

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