

In Search of Mutual Respect

On 15 September 2009, the Vatican announced that the Holy see will hold talks during the last two weeks of October with the Society of Pius X. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna, noted: "the Society of Pius X will be told very clearly what is not negotiable for the Holy See. This includes such fundamental conclusions of the Second Vatican Council as its positions on Judaism and other non-Christian religions".

Further to this, we asked Sergio I. Minerbi, former Israeli ambassador, visiting Professor at University of Haifa and an expert on Jewish Christian relations, to share his vision of relations between the Holy See and Israel and between the Catholic Church and Judaism.

Essay by Sergio Minerbi

In recent days, we have witnessed a flare-up of emotions regarding relations between the Jews and Pope Benedict XVI. What follows is a tentative explanation of the occurrences leading to the present tensions.

Some Jews have a tendency to see Benedict XVI as the "bad guy," in comparison to his "good guy" predecessor, John Paul II. I believe this is a superficial judgment that does not take into account either John Paul's comparison of Auschwitz to Golgotha, the place of Jesus' crucifixion, or his establishment of a convent in Auschwitz, or his characterization of Edith Stein, after her conversion to Christianity, as "a faithful daughter of her people, the Jewish people."

John Paul II's tendency toward syncretism - i.e. the arbitrary conciliation of opposite doctrines - has been abandoned by Benedict XVI, and we should be glad for it. We need clarity, and dialogue should not be an attempt to confuse ideas. On theological matters, there will always be a profound rift between Jews and Catholics, since the former can accept neither the Holy Trinity nor the resurrection. The best we can hope for is mutual respect - and that goal is good enough for me.

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council approved the declaration *Nostra Aetate*, in which the Catholic Church reduced the guilt of the Jews for the killing of Jesus. It was not a complete absolution of responsibility, but it nonetheless put an end to the senseless accusations that held all Jews culpable for all time. This major change in Church theology, together with the beginning of a peace process between Israel and the Palestinians nearly three decades later, allowed for the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel in 1993.

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Many Jews were impressed by gestures made by Pope John Paul II, including his visits to Auschwitz (1979) and to the Great Synagogue in Rome (1986), as well as his official pilgrimage to Israel (2000). But political relations between the Holy See and Israel continued to be tense, tarnished by the unsolved Palestinian problem and by the fact that, even to this day, the Curia considers Israel to be a transitory entity rather than a permanent state.

John Paul's successor has taken a different stand on two main issues: Islamic fundamentalism and the Shoah. In 2006, at a lecture in Regensburg, he expressed his resistance to fundamentalist Islam, a significant issue for European Jews who feel threatened by the continent's growing Muslim population. One may also expect that anyone who is conscious of the danger of Islamism, should recognize Israel's important role in the Middle East. At Auschwitz, on 28 May of that same year - although he repeated John Paul II's comment that, "six million Poles lost their lives during World War II: a fifth of the nation," back at the Vatican, the pope corrected himself three days later, saying: "Hitler had more than six million Jews exterminated in the camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau and in other similar camps."

Benedict XVI thus took a very important step away from his predecessor's attempt to "Christianize" the Holocaust by transforming it into a Polish Catholic event. On a related issue, that of the beatification of Pius XII, who maintained his silence about the Jews' murder throughout World War II, Benedict XVI said in 2008 that he wanted to pause for reflection before giving his approval.

Benedict is deeply concerned about the unity of the Church which is why, in July 2007, he renewed the use of the old Latin version of the traditional Mass. This version includes a prayer asking God to "illuminate [the Jews'] hearts, that they acknowledge Jesus Christ is the savior of all men." In response, the chief rabbi of Rome, Riccardo Di Segni, rightly decided to suspend the participation of Italian rabbis last month in a planned meeting with Italian bishops.

A conservative himself, Benedict XVI decided on 21 January of this year to revoke the excommunication of four bishops who were ordained in 1970 by the rebel traditionalist French bishop Marcel Lefebvre. The four were excommunicated in 1988, with the active participation of Cardinal Ratzinger, who was then in charge of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

This was a purely internal Church matter until it became known that one of the four former bishops, Richard Williamson, was on record claiming that the Nazis had not murdered six million Jews and that no more than 300,000 of them died in concentration camps. Holocaust denial has been condemned by the Church - in its document "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah" (1998) - so it's strange that it took so long for the Vatican to ask Williamson to retract his remarks. I can only suggest that the Pope lacks advisers of the same caliber he was when he served as an aide to John Paul II.

This incident has sparked a global uproar, and Nobel Prize laureate Elie Wiesel has even accused Benedict XVI of anti-Semitism, a debatable statement that may simply have been an overreaction. In this context, let us recall what Benedict XVI said on 28 January: "I renew with affection the expression of my full and unquestionable solidarity with our [Jewish] brothers."

Another source of concern is the relations between the Holy See and Israel. Cardinal Renato Martino, former permanent observer of the Vatican to the United Nations, said on 07 January that Gaza now "resembles a big concentration camp." In his message to the Holy See's diplomatic corps the following day, Benedict XVI said, regarding Gaza: "Once again I would repeat that military options are no solution and that violence, wherever it comes from and whatever form it takes, must be firmly condemned. I express my hope that with the decisive commitment of the international community, the cease-fire in the Gaza Strip will be re-established."

No one in the Vatican has ever protested the firing of rockets from Gaza against Israel's civilian population. When Benedict XVI visits Israel next May, it would be useful to offer him a comprehensive tour d'horizon on the politics of the Middle East, to make him understand that the only guarantee for the continued survival of the Christian communities in the Middle East is a strong Israel.

This article first appeared in Haaretz in February 2009.

IJCIC Developments

On June 2009 IJCIC installed new officers appointing Rabbi Richard Marker as chairman and Prof. Lawrence Schiffman as vice-chairman. Betty Ehrenberg, of the World Jewish Congress, will serve as IJCIC treasurer. At the beginning of July 2009, Richard Marker, Lawrence Schiffman and Betty Ehrenberg participated in the ILC steering committee meeting in Rome with Cardinal Kasper, Bishop Farrel and Father Hoffman, to discuss plans for wider ILC meetings, to review the Papal visit to Israel, and an update on the issue of Bishop Williamson and the Society of Pius X.

ICCJ Annual Conference, Berlin July 2009 (Germany)

The International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ) co-organized with the 'Konrad Adenauer Stiftung' the ICCJ Annual Conference in Berlin (Germany) from the 05-08 July 2009. The conference was entitled 'A Time for Recommitment, Jewish-Christian Dialogue 70 Years after War and Shoah'. The final document is an up-dating of the Ten Points of the 1947 Conference in Seelisberg (Switzerland), the first Jewish-Christian meeting.

http://www.iccj.org/en/pdf/Berlin_Paper.pdf

Mission of European Rabbis and Imams, New York July 2009 (USA)

WJC secretary general Michael Schneider greeted the 28 imams and rabbis from ten European countries hosted by the Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, the World Jewish Congress and the Islamic Society of North America, at their meeting at the WJC in New York from 20 to 23 July 2009, stating "Interfaith relations between Jews and Muslims is one of our priorities. We have therefore been supporting the initiatives in this regard with the President of the Foundation, Rabbi Marc Schneier," in building "ties of friendship and trust between Jews and Muslims for the good of both communities, and to combat Islamophobia and anti-Semitism in the United States and across Europe. We want to help strengthen those in the Islamic World who are projecting this voice of moderation and to help them take their religion back from the cadre of extremists and fanatics in Islam".

<http://www.thejc.com/articles/interfaith-group-bond-trip-us>

<http://www.forward.com/articles/110377/>

http://www.startribune.com/templates/Print_This_Story?sid=51443447

<http://www.tabletmag.com/news-and-politics/11208/shalom-and-salaam/>



Project Aladdin, Rabat July 2009 (Morocco)

In July 2009, Morocco's King Mohammed VI has formally acknowledged the Holocaust and declared the Nazi genocide of the Jews "one of the most tragic chapters of modern history" days after Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denied it had ever occurred. On the same occasion, King Mohammed VI also announced his endorsement of the Aladdin Project, a Paris-based program run by the Foundation for the Memory of the Holocaust designed to educate the Muslim world about the genocide. The project involves translating key Holocaust texts such as 'The Diary of Anne Frank' into Arabic and Farsi.

<http://www.projetaladin.org/en/homepage.html>

<http://blogs.jta.org/politics/article/2009/07/28/1006857/conference-of-presidents-recognizes-moroccan-holocaust-acknowledgement>

Unesco Meeting, Moscow July 2009 (Russia)

On July 22, Koïchiro Matsuura, General Director of UNESCO, met in Moscow with representatives of the main world religions, Christianity (orthodox, catholic, and protestant) Islam and Judaism. The final communiqué of the meeting is reproduced here:

We, representatives of Christianity, Islam and Judaism, participants of the meeting with the Director-General of UNESCO Koïchiro Matsuura, in Moscow on 22 July 2009, to reflect on how to intensify and institutionalize dialogue between religious leaders and UNESCO.

Taking into account the call of the world Summits of religious leaders (Moscow, 3 - 5 July 2006, Cologne, 5-6 June 2007, Sapporo, 2-3 July 2008, Rome, 16 - 17 June 2009) for the setting up of dialogue of religious groups within the UN system as well as numerous analogous appeals on behalf of representatives of world religious communities,

Being convinced of the benefits that interactions between UNESCO and religious communities in the spheres of education and culture may bring,

Emphasizing the importance of UNESCO's longstanding efforts in support of intercultural and interreligious dialogue,

Condemning extremism and terrorism, which maliciously exploit the religious feelings of believers to attain ends incompatible with any religion,

Bearing in mind cultural and religious diversity and relying upon the single unshakeable moral foundations of humankind, fully resolved to contribute to the building of a just and stable world, in particular in the framework of the 2010 International Year for Rapprochement of Cultures,

Support the endeavours of the Director-General of UNESCO in the intensification and institutionalization of UNESCO's dialogue with the world religious communities aimed at strengthening inter-religious peace and encouraging religious leaders to discuss the relevant problems of the global agenda.

Positively evaluate the ongoing process of creating dialogue mechanism between world religious communities and UNESCO and intends to establish, in consultation with the Director-General of UNESCO, a high-level consultative group in cooperative partnership with UNESCO.

Mr Matsuura's speech can be read here: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0018/001833/183361e.pdf>

Religious Communities Update

World Council of Churches, Geneva August 2009 (Switzerland)

The Norwegian theologian and pastor Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit, 48, was elected as the 7th general secretary of the World Council of Churches (WCC) on 27 August during its Central Committee meeting. On September 2009, the WCC Central Committee called for freezing settlements in Israel.

<http://www.oikoumene.org/en/news/news-management/eng/a/article/1634/wcc-calls-to-freeze-and-d.html>

Sant'Egidio Meeting, Cracow September 2009 (Poland)

Religious representatives from all over the world went to the former concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau on 08 September 2009, as part of the closing events of an inter-religious meeting in 'the spirit of Assisi'. It was a continuation of the first inter-religious and inter-cultural meeting convened in Assisi in 1986 by Pope John Paul II. The three-day event was convoked by the Archbishop of Krakow, Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, and promoted by the Sant'Egidio Community. The meetings' theme was the 70th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II. Two survivors of the concentration camp, former Israeli Chief Rabbi Lau and an Austrian woman of gypsy origin, spoke about their experiences during the brief but moving ceremony. During the three days of the congress, attended by Christians of all denominations as well as Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and other minority religions, there was talk of peace, the development of peoples, the economic crisis and inter-religious dialogue. Director of the Department for Inter-religious Affairs of the American Jewish Committee Rabbi David Rosen quoted messianic passages of the prophet Isaiah about peace.

<http://www.santegidio.org/index.php?pageID=905&idLng=1064>

Argentina

In June 2009, the young leadership of Latin American Jewish Congress meet with the Archbishop of Cordoba, Mgr. Carlos Nañez. The meeting focused on Jewish-Christian dialogue with youth.

Australia

In September 2009 a group of Christian, Muslim and Jewish leaders are meeting in Yass to promote appreciation and co-operation between all people. The 'Together for Humanity' workshops program provides an opportunity for students to learn about diversity, commonality and question assumptions about identity. Students worked together for a better world by taking part in the 'one million actions together' project which offers the students a more in-depth experience. Previous workshops have seen a shift of attitudes towards other religious groups resulting in a more culturally accepting community, which contributes to Australia's overall positive multiculturalism.

France

On 14 September 2009 Richard Prasquier, President of Crif, was invited by Mohammed Moussaoui, President of the French Muslim Council, to celebrate the end of Ramadan. Civil Authorities and member of other religions were present at the celebration of Muslim Calendar.

Italy

In September 2009, on the occasion of the European Day of Jewish Culture, the Jewish Community of Trieste erected an Abraham's Tent between a Catholic Church and a Serbian Orthodox Church. The Community made the space of Abraham's Tent a place of hospitality with the other religious communities of the town.

United Kingdom

In June 2009 Sir Sigmund Sternberg attended a seminar on 'Faith in Capitalism' co-hosted by the Three Faiths Forum at the Islamic Cultural Centre/London Central Mosque, the first time such an event has been held at this venue. Sternberg stressed the importance of Muslims and Jews working together in view of the recent BNP seats won at the EU elections.

In July 2009 the Three Faiths Forum hosted an end of year celebration with the Anne Frank Trust and Interfaith Action. It was an opportunity to share the successes of the past year, test out some activities and talk about the coming year. A Youth Interfaith Day was held at the London Jewish Cultural Centre: there were several workshops about prejudice and how to react positively and peacefully to violence. Two of the Education Officers facilitated Tools 4 Dialogue and Skills for Dialogue workshops and received very positive feedback from the students who participated actively in all the workshops.

In July 2009 in his capacity as Senior Religious Advisor to the World Economic Forum, Sir Sigmund Sternberg had a private meeting in London with Cardinal Tauran, president of the Pontifical Interreligious Council to discuss Benedict XVI's document "Caritas in Veritate".

In September 2009 Sir Sigmund Sternberg attended the opening of the exhibition "Portraits for Posterity" at the North Western Reform Synagogue, invited by Italian Ambassador to the screening of a new documentary "Credo John Paul II" on the life of the Pope. The Director of the Three Faiths Forum spoke to the Board of Deputies on Interfaith Week and various projects running in the interfaith world. He also gave the Deputies an overview of the development of interfaith over the past five years.

Press Articles

For further reading on Inter-faith issues:

Analysis of Benedict XVI trip to Israel by the Italian journalist Sandro Magister and by Yad Vashem Magazine

<http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1338469?eng=y>

<http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1338409?eng=y>

<http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/1338380?eng=y>

<http://www1.yadvashem.org/yv/en/pressroom/magazine/54/pdf/magazine54.pdf>

Mordechay Lewy, Israeli Ambassador to Holy See about the diplomatic relations between State of Israel and Holy See

http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles_of_faith/2009/06/in_boston_israeli_diplomat_speaks_of_rome_.html