

VATICAN - ISRAEL RELATIONS PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

RABBI DAVID ROSEN

The evolution of the Catholic Church's attitude towards the return of the Jewish people to the Land of Israel and the establishment of Jewish sovereignty within it, can of course only be understood in the context of Catholic teaching and attitudes towards Jews and Judaism as a whole. These naturally go back to the beginning of Christianity. Very early in Patristic times, those passages of the New Testament that reflected the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. began to be used in Christian apologetics against Jews and Judaism¹ Justin Martyr, for example, utilized the destruction of the Temple as a proof for his thesis that the Mosaic Law had been abrogated in favor of the new, Christian dispensation.² The destruction of the Temple and the exile, were seen as a sort of inverted proof for the divinity of Jesus and the abrogation of the "old" Covenant in favor of the new. The destruction of Jerusalem, argued John Chrysostom, represented divine punishment on the Jews for their alleged rejection and killing of Jesus. The Diaspora was thus seen as a continuing "proof" that the Jesus whom "the Jews" had killed was, in fact, divine. Why else would God want to punish them so severely? Because Jews suffer, the logic went, they were to be seen as an "accursed" people. As they had broken their Covenant with God by refusing to acknowledge Jesus, the "fulfillment" of that Covenant; so God had passed the Covenant to a new people, one taken from among the nations who believed in Jesus. This people formed the Church, the "new people" of God who had replaced the "old" people, the Jews, in God's plan of salvation.³ The Church was now the "Verus Israel" having replaced the Jewish People.

This "teaching of contempt" towards the Jewish people not only had its negative consequences for Jewish life in the Christian world, but naturally was also reflected in a negative attitude towards the nascent Jewish national movement of return in the late nineteenth century.

Some four months before the first Zionist Congress in Basle (August 1897) the *Civiltà Cattolica*, the semi-official Vatican periodical, edited by the Jesuits, published an article entitled "The Dispersion of Israel over the Modern World" which declared that according to the New Testament, Jews had to live in the diaspora as slaves to the gentiles, until the end of time. The curse they had called upon their own heads and those of their children would hold good for ever.

It was argued that it would be unthinkable to entrust them with the guardianship of the Holy Sites. As for a rebuilt Jerusalem as capital of a state of Israel, this would never happen, being contrary to the words of Christ himself.⁴

Most notable of all, the famous reply of Pope Pius X to Theodor Herzl's plea for papal support of the Zionist cause illustrates the influence of such theological categories

on his thought; "We are unable to favor this movement", said Pius to Herzl, "We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem - but we could never sanction it. As head of the Church I cannot answer you otherwise. The Jews have not recognized our Lord. Therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people; and so, if you come to Palestine and settle your people there, we will be ready with churches and priests to baptize all of you."⁵ Cardinal Merry del Val, instructed by the Pope to pursue the correspondence with Herzl, wrote in 1904 that "as long as the Jews deny Christ's divinity, we cannot take a stand favorable to them."

The Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Gasparri, was bitterly opposed to the Balfour Declaration, and he wrote in 1919 that "the danger that frightens us the most, is that of the creation of a Jewish State in Palestine."⁶

While already in the earlier part of the century new tendencies towards a reappraisal of Catholic teaching concerning the Jews were being expressed in certain quarters, it was both the impact of the Shoah as well as the personal commitment of Pope John XXIII that led to the radical break with this past theology. Pope John XXIII was undoubtedly influenced both by his experiences during World War II and by his personal encounters especially with Jules Isaac, on this subject.⁷

Accordingly "The teaching of contempt" towards the Jewish people was categorically rejected by the Second Vatican Council document known as "Nostra Aetate" which in 1965 ushered in the "positive revolution" in Church teaching regarding the Jewish people and Judaism, that has continued over the last thirty years. The Church rejected the idea of Jewish corporate and continuous responsibility for the death of Jesus. It affirmed the Divine Covenant with the Jewish people as eternal and unbroken and it condemned anti-semitism.⁸

Since Nostra Aetate, the Vatican and in particular the present Pope, John Paul II, have made many additional and forthright condemnations of anti-Semitism which has been declared to be a sin against God and man and thus incompatible with Christian Faith. Furthermore, in 1990, he also confirmed the declaration made in Prague by Cardinal Cassidy and the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews that the fact that anti-Semitism has found a place in Christian thought and teaching, demands an act of Teshuvah (repentance) on its part. Amongst the notable Vatican milestones since Nostra Aetate are the 1975 Guidelines that greatly elaborated and advanced Nostra Aetate and the document concerning Jews and Judaism issued in 1985 by the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. Therein for the first time in an official Vatican document, the importance of the State of Israel for the Jewish people and its self-identity was recognised.

Similarly Pope John Paul II showed his personal recognition of the centrality of Israel for Jews, when in his Apostolic letter "Redemptionis Anno (20 April 1984) he acknowledged that "Jews ardently love (Jerusalem) and in every age venerate her memory ... from the time of David who chose her as the capital, and of Solomon who built

the Temple there. Therefore, they turn their minds to her daily ... and point to her as the sign of their nation." And he added , " For the Jewish people who live in the State of Israel and who preserve in that land such precious testimonies to their history and their faith, we must invoke the desired security and the due tranquility that is a prerogative of every nation and a condition of life and of progress for every society ..."

Similarly in his address to leaders of the Jewish community in Miami (11 September 1987) he declared that "... After the tragic extermination of the Shoah, the Jewish people began a new period in their history. They have a right to a homeland, as does any civil nation, according to international law (which is what we seek), for the Jewish people who live in the State of Israel..."⁹

Accordingly, we can see that the normalization of relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel was logically long called for, as the natural outcome of these profound changes in theology and attitudes.

Moreover for many years before the establishment of diplomatic ties with Israel the Holy See had categorically stated that there were no theological barriers to its full normalization of diplomatic relations with the State of Israel.¹⁰

When the Bilateral Commission of the Holy See and the State of Israel was established in July 1992, Vatican spokesperson Joachin Navarro-Vals declared that "diplomatic relations is not a goal in itself but the culmination of a process." This was reiterated by officials of the Vatican Secretariat of State in the course of our negotiations. They were of course referring to the process of negotiations on the Agenda to which I will refer later. However at the same time they were perhaps unconsciously articulating a much more profound truth. The normalization of relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel was the culmination of a process that began almost thirty years beforehand with the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*.

Why then did the Vatican resist the establishment of full ties with Israel for so long and what led to the change of policy?

As I have indicated, it seems fair to say that while there were undoubtedly those within the Church hierarchy who still adhered and some may continue to adhere to the "old theology", they were not the major obstacle. The Vatican's reluctance to establish full diplomatic relations with Israel in recent years, was rather the consequence of secular political considerations.

The Holy See spokespersons said as much, but I will allow myself to venture a little further with commentary.

The Church has communities, institutions and assets in Arab and other Muslim societies, and it feared a backlash from any rapprochement with the State of Israel. Moreover the Holy See's interests in the Third World, where the Church is a substantial presence and often a dominant one, have been linked closely with the Arab/Muslim world. Not least of all, most Catholics in Israel and the administered territories identify themselves as Palestinian and are currently led by a Palestinian Patriarch. Christians living as part and parcel of Palestinian nationalist society had no interest in any change in the status quo regarding the absence of normal relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel for as long as Palestinian and Israeli interests were seen as in conflict. Accordingly, the local Catholic leadership made it clear to the Vatican that it was opposed to any advance in bilateral diplomatic developments with Israel until Palestinian political claims had been satisfied.

The Vatican position however changed as did global and regional realities of realpolitik in the nineties, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and, above-all, after the Gulf War which descended on the former and the ensuing Middle East Peace Process which resulted from them both. As Vatican spokesman Joachin Navarro-Val's put it at the time: "The Palestinians are talking with Israelis, why shouldn't we?"

Moreover in the course of the three years, prior to the Madrid Peace Conference Israel had more than doubled the number of its diplomatic missions with the reestablishment of diplomatic relations with African countries who broke them off after the Yom Kippur War and the establishment of new relations with the emerging States from the former Soviet Union and Communist bloc. The Vatican remained one of the last to be outside Israel's diplomatic circle. Were the Vatican to have further delayed rapprochement with Israel, in this new context, one might say that its own credibility would have suffered and protestations regarding the theological acceptance of Israel would have rung hollow to many. Perhaps, above all, as the peace talks moved ahead, the Church did not want to be left out in the cold, especially regarding the future of Jerusalem where the Holy See has substantial interests. Significantly on this matter, the Vatican was no longer talking of the internationalization of Jerusalem, but rather of "international guarantees".

Diplomatic moves towards the normalization of relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel involving the Apostolic Delegate, the Pope's personal representative in the Holy Land and Israel's representatives, brought matters to their formal turning point in July 1992 with the establishment of the Permanent Bilateral Commission of the State of Israel and the Holy See, on which I am honored to serve.

While from Israel's point of views the issue at stake was essentially one of establishing full diplomatic relations, for the Holy See a variety of questions concerning her position and claims in the Holy Land had to be addressed. These include questions of legal status, rights in the fields of religious practice, education and welfare etc, as well as regards taxation and fiscal matters. What the Church had enjoyed de facto under Israeli

rule, she sought to enshrine de jure. Not only was this a matter of principled interest for the Holy See but it was also essential for the interests and image of the local Churches in Israel, which had to be able to see and "show" Palestinian society as well, the practical dividends that "justified" such normalization with the Zionist State! Accordingly, the Commission agreed on an Agenda that would deal with these issues, as well as the State of Israel's interests and subjects of mutual interest. Through the Commission's committee of experts, work on this Agenda proceeded, leading to the signing of the Fundamental Agreement between Israel and the Holy See last December 30th in Jerusalem.

However while Vatican spokespersons and the Delegate subsequently the Nuncio, were at pains to emphasize that this is a political agreement between two sovereign entities, very much like other international agreements (and it is of course quite understandable politically why they should choose to give it that emphasis), it is evident from the text of the Agreement itself, that it is of course much more.

The Preamble of the Agreement not only made it clear that this normalization takes place within the context of the historic reconciliation of the Catholic Church with the Jewish people, but also as Archbishop Luigi Barbarito the Apostolic Nuncio to the Court of St. James pointed out at Westminster on Feb. 28th 1994, the document is also historic in its recognition of "the unique character and universal significance of the Holy Land for the Jewish People". Archbishop Barbarito could have gone even further and used the words of Dr. Yossi Beilin at the signing ceremony.

For the very act of the Holy See signing an agreement and normalizing its relations with the restored sovereign Jewish people in the land of their ancestors, is indeed not only "the culmination of a process"... of a revolution in Church teaching, but it is in Beilin's words "a triumph for Judaism, for Zionism and for Jewry."

Notwithstanding this reality, some Israelis have questioned the value of diplomatic ties with the Vatican, fearing that this may allow the Church a role in the Middle East peace process where it may be more of a hindrance than a help. After all, they say, the Church's interests are not necessarily contiguous with Israel's.

What then are the practical advantages, if any, for Israel in this normalization?

To begin with, one may answer that while those aforementioned interests are indeed not necessarily contiguous, they are also not necessarily otherwise. In the struggle over Jerusalem there is in fact reason to believe that the Church may well perceive her interests as substantially linked to those of Israel herself. Secondly Stalin's famous comment belittling the power of the Pope -"How many divisions does he have?" - was belied by Gorbachev whose policy of "glasnost" led him almost immediately to St. Peter's, recognizing that the Church has profound influence in various ways upon many societies

and their leadership, even without military divisions. Catholicism is the dominant ethos in South America; it is a growing force in Africa and one to be reckoned with in South-East Asia and still not without influence in Europe and the United States. The normalization of the Holy See's relations with Israel thus has global diplomatic ramifications.

Furthermore the relationship between the Holy See and the State of Israel affects the attitude of Catholics throughout the world towards not only the Jewish State, but the Jewish people and Judaism as a whole. Consciously or unconsciously, for many the lack of ties suggested a lack of mutual respect. In the battle against the prejudice and the promotion of Jewish interests, this accord with the Vatican is of unquestionable importance. Notable in this regard is the remarkable commitment in the Fundamental Agreement on the part of the Church to working together with Israel to combat anti-Semitism. Indeed the very ability to mobilize the Vatican's diplomatic service on such an issue is of obvious value to Jewry as a whole.

I have sought to clarify here the great significance of the normalization of relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel. Words like "historic" and "revolutionary" have become rather common this last year and one searches, perhaps in vain, for a new phrase. Perhaps epoch-making is an appropriate term, for what these relations spell out is a new mutual respect; a new mutual commitment, born out of a recognition of a special relationship to which Pope John Paul II has made particular reference not only at the Synagogue in Rome where he referred to the Jewish people as "our dearly beloved elder brothers" but also in 1985 when he emphasized that for Christians the relationship with the Jewish people is one of a "unique spiritual link". It is, he declared "a real parentage which we have with the Jewish community alone, notwithstanding our many connections with other world religions" (Rome, October 28, 1985), and this relationship demands special cooperation between us for "the great task of promoting justice and peace in the world" (Rome, March 22, 1984) As article eleven of the Fundamental Agreement states, the Holy See and the State of Israel have a common commitment to "promoting mutual understanding among nations, tolerance among communities and respect for human life and dignity".

1. Cf. E.J. Fischer, The Holy See and the State of Israel, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Spring 1987
2. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 40:1-5 and 46:2
3. Cf. Robert L. Wilken, *John Chrysostom and the Jews* (UCP, 1983)

4. Cf. Charlotte Klein, Vatican and Zionism 1897-1967, in Christian Attitudes on Jews and Judaism nr. 36-37, June-Aug 1974
5. Marvin Lowenthal ed. The Diaries of Theodor Herzl pp. 429-430 (Dial Press, 1956)
6. quoted by Francesco Lucrezi, The Church and the State of Israel, paper delivered in Bergamo at the 12th Jewish-Christian colloquium, November 1991
7. Cf. L.L. Flannery, The Anguish of the Jews, (Macmillan 1964)