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Theology's 'Sacred Obligation'

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As members of the Christian Scholars group on Christian-Jewish Relations, we helped write a statement released in August, "A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People." At the heart of this statement is our belief that "revising Christian teaching about Judaism and the Jewish people is a central and indispensable obligation of theology in our time."

Moreover, our interfaith group, half of whom are Catholic scholars, asserts that Christians should not seek to convert Jews: "In view of our conviction that Jews are in an eternal covenant with God, we renounce missionary efforts directed at converting Jews. At the same time, we welcome opportunities for Jews and Christians to bear witness to their respective experiences of God's saving ways."

Since we hope that our statement will foster widespread consideration in the churches of Christians' relationship with Jews and Judaism, we are grateful to **America's** editors for inviting us to respond to Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., and thereby extending the circle of conversation.

Theological Context

Reflections on Covenant and Mission, issued by representatives of the Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the National Council of Synagogues on Aug. 12, 2002, has elicited both charges of apocalyptic apostasy and yawns of apathy. Neither extreme understands the document.

Reflections illustrates theological developments since the Second Vatican Council promulgated its "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra Aetate*) in 1965. Although the general contours of that statement are well known—the council refuted the longstanding charge of deicide and "deplored" anti-Semitism—its revolutionary implications are less recognized. For nearly 2,000 years, Christians predicated their identity on the notion that God's covenant with the Jews had ended because they rejected Christ, and that the covenant now "belonged" to Christians. The council's declaration repudiated this by teaching that Jews remain part of the covenant, thus initiating one of the council's most profound changes in the ordinary magisterium of the church.

The promulgation of this conciliar document inaugurated thinking unimaginable in earlier church teaching. Most Catholics have yet to internalize the implications of Pope John Paul II's insistence in 1979 that the relationship between Judaism and Christianity is so close that they are "related at the very level of their respective religious identities." In that same 1979 address, the pope said that because of this unique interrelationship, "we recognize with utmost clarity that the path along which we [Catholics] should proceed with the Jewish religious community is one of fraternal dialogue and fruitful collaboration." In other words, dialogue, not conversion, should be the Catholic goal in relations with Jews.

The Catholic portion of the *Reflections* thus seeks to explain an already existing reality. Unlike some Christian groups, the Roman Catholic Church does not engage in campaigns to baptize Jews. *Reflections* accounts for Catholic disinterest in targeting Jews by tracing the development of official Catholic teaching since Vatican II; it cites encyclicals and speeches of Pope John Paul II and instructions of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.

It is a mistake to dismiss this recent documentary tradition as merely irenic. As Cardinal Edward Idris

Cassidy, who at the time was president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, stated in an address to the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in 1990, these developments are part of the process of *teshuvah*, of reforming Christian theologies that promoted hostility toward Jews for hundreds of years. The developing tradition is motivated by fidelity to “the truth of the Gospel message [and] the spirit of Christ” (*Nostra Aetate*), whether Jews respond favorably or not.

At the same time, the theological developments that have increasingly made their way into magisterial teachings about Judaism are not always evident in other recent official church documents. That inconsistencies and tensions appear is not surprising. So much church teaching is rooted in a deficient and negative assessment of Judaism that it will take many years to rethink Christian identity. Thus, we must be cautious in citing documents, since current ecclesial thinking is not entirely of one mind.

Reflections, then, is not written to mollify Jews who may, to use Cardinal Dulles’s phrase, “remember all too vividly the polemics and persecutions” of the past. Rather, it is the fruit of postconciliar study and dialogue, and an attempt to do justice to a people whom Christians treated contemptuously over the course of history. It reflects respect for a 1974 Vatican instruction that says we Christians “must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.”

Evangelization

Cardinal Dulles criticizes the presentation of evangelization in the *Reflections* as “difficult to reconcile with the teaching of recent popes.” He objects to the document’s “extremely broad definition” of evangelization and disagrees with its claim that equating evangelization with proclamation is “a very narrow construal.” Further, he disputes the statement’s assertion that interreligious dialogue must be devoid of “any intention whatsoever to invite the dialogue partner to baptism.” Citing papal texts, Cardinal Dulles counters that evangelization must be a “clear and unequivocal proclamation of the person of Jesus Christ” (*Ecclesia in America*, No. 66).

The multiple layers of meaning of evangelization indeed leave it vulnerable to inconsistent usage, as a 1991 document of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples acknowledged. The authors of this “Dialogue and Proclamation” distinguished between *evangelizing mission*—evangelization in the broad sense of the church’s mission in its totality (presence and witness; commitment to social development and human liberation; liturgical life, prayer and contemplation; interreligious dialogue; and proclamation and catechesis)—and *proclamation*, “the invitation to a commitment of faith in Jesus Christ and to entry through baptism into the community of believers which is the church.”

Reflections seems to follow this usage. Evangelization is the total mission of the church; proclamation is the invitation to conversion. If Cardinal Dulles regards this as “an extremely broad definition of evangelization,” then the fault lies not with the *Reflections*, but with the Vatican’s “Dialogue and Proclamation.” Cardinal Dulles argues that *Reflections*, in contrast to papal statements, “seems to say that Christians can evangelize without pronouncing the name of Jesus.” The document, however, does not say this, even though it draws upon the broader sense of evangelization. Rather, it declares: “The Catholic Church must always evangelize and will always witness to its faith in the presence of God’s kingdom in Jesus Christ to Jews and to all other people.”

Catholic teaching considers interreligious dialogue in the context of evangelization. By dialoguing with Jews, Catholics are evangelizing by *witnessing* to their faith in Jesus Christ. They do so, however, *without the desire to convert them*. Dialogue is distinct from seeking conversion to Christ, as Cardinal Francis Arinze, president of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, has repeatedly stated.

“Dialogue does not aim at conversion in the sense of a change of religious allegiance, but conversion understood as greater readiness to do God’s will should be one of the aims and fruits of sincere interreligious dialogue” (*The Church in Dialogue*, pp. 331-2). To refrain from targeting Jews for conversion is not a rejection of the church’s evangelical mission but a recognition that this dimension of evangelization is inappropriate in the unique case of Judaism, the tradition to which we are “intrinsically” related, as the pope has expressed it.

Covenant and Mission

Much of Cardinal Dulles’s critique of these concepts in *Reflections* flows from his reading of the New Testament. It is not enough, however, to cite Scripture without recognizing that the Bible is the church’s book and that, therefore, the church continuously interprets those texts. In the words of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, “[I]nterpretation of Scripture involves a work of sifting and setting aside; it stands in continuity with earlier exegetical traditions, many elements of which it preserves and makes its own; but in other matters it will go its own way, seeking to make further progress” (*The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1993).

Thus, we are troubled by Cardinal Dulles’s assertion that the Letter to the Hebrews offers “the most formal statement of the status of the Sinai Covenant under Christianity.” Without further analysis, he quotes Hebrews: The “first covenant is ‘obsolete’ and ‘ready to vanish away’ (Heb. 8:13).” Christ “abolishes the first [covenant] in order to establish the second’ (Heb. 10:9).” Cardinal Dulles implies that Catholics believe that God’s covenant with the people of Israel is obsolete.

In contrast, we argue that official Catholic teaching today has, in the Biblical Commission’s 1993 formulation, “gone its own way” and “set aside” the opinion of the author of Hebrews about Israel’s covenant. As *Reflections* notes, Pope John Paul II has on many occasions declared that Jews are “the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God,” “the present-day people of the covenant concluded with Moses,” and “partners in a covenant of eternal love which was never revoked.”

The magisterium can explicitly contradict an idea of an individual New Testament author because the Catholic tradition is one of commentary, not of *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone). The author of Hebrews, convinced that he was living in the final stages of human history, could argue that the Old Covenant had yielded to the New. Two millennia later, however, in a church whose pope has prayed for God’s forgiveness for the sins of Christians against Jews, such an assertion is unacceptable. The constant disparagement of postbiblical Judaism through the ages and general ignorance of its character encouraged European Christians to marginalize and even at times demonize Jews, thus providing a fertile seedbed for the Shoah.

Similarly, Paul’s words in Romans 11 cannot be actualized today without considering his conviction that Christ would quickly return to judge the living and the dead. Paul considered Jews who did not recognize Christ to be branches *temporarily* broken off to make room for the Gentile branches (Rom. 11:17-24). He believed these broken branches were irrevocably (11:29) destined to be regrafted because “all Israel will be saved” (11:25-26). Until that eschatological day dawned, however, Jews who did not accept Jesus’ Lordship were dead branches, detached from God’s unfolding plans.

Paul could have imagined this temporary state of affairs in his eschatological enthusiasm. But another understanding of Judaism has developed in our time. The Vatican’s 1985 *Notes* speaks of “the permanence of Israel” as “accompanied by a continuous spiritual fecundity” over the ages. Thus, “the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practiced still today, can greatly help us to understand better certain aspects of the life of the Church.” Moreover, the rabbinic

interpretation of Scripture, according to a 2001 Pontifical Biblical Commission study, is “analogous” and “parallel” to Christian readings (“The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible”). So interpreting Romans 11 today entails respecting the ongoing spiritual life of Judaism. Far from being dead branches, Jews still draw nourishment from the good olive tree.

Cardinal Dulles seems concerned that *Reflections* denies the universal saving significance of Jesus Christ. This is not the case. The Catholic Church does not teach that explicit personal confession of faith in Jesus is necessary for salvation. It teaches that Christ saves everyone. If Jews are in covenant with the God whom Christians understand to be triune, then they are in relationship with the Father, Son and Spirit and are related to the saving power of Jesus Christ, even if that is not how Jews experience the relationship. Can any relationship as intimate as a covenant with the triune God not be salvific? Cardinal Walter Kasper, currently president of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, referred to both Christological and covenantal aspects in his address at the 17th meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, which was held in New York City in April 2001: “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.”

Recent Catholic teaching also reflects the understanding that Jews have a mission to the nations that Christianity does not annul. *Reflections* cites various pertinent magisterial comments, including one from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, president of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: “God’s providence... has obviously given Israel a particular mission in this ‘time of the Gentiles.’” *Reflections* concludes, therefore, that the church no longer wishes “to absorb the Jewish faith into Christianity” and thus end Judaism’s distinctive, God-given mission in the world. Jewish expectation of a messianic age is “not in vain. It can become for us Christians a powerful stimulant to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith” (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001). By virtue of our covenanting, both communities will be in the eschatological kingdom; both are obligated to prepare the world for it. Until that Day, we do so in distinctive ways.

Christian theology today must reckon with Jewish self-understanding. As theologians long engaged in dialogue, we believe that rethinking our faith in light of our changed relationship with Jews is not only a sacred obligation, but a call to a more profound Christian faith.

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