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## A Review of Culture and Idea

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FORDHAM UNIVERSITY QUARTERLY

# INTO THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: A JEWISH VIEW OF THE DIALOGUE

RABBI A. JAMES RUDIN

IT HAS BEEN OVER A QUARTER-CENTURY since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, over a quarter-century since the world's Roman Catholic bishops called for a dramatic leap: a different relationship between the Church and the Jewish people. The bishops publicly condemned and deplored anti-Semitism as sinful, and they laid the groundwork in 1965 for a new theological, and ultimately psychological, understanding of Jews and Judaism. Since 1965 there have been additional authoritative teachings and guidelines from the Vatican and from many bishops conferences throughout the world. There has been so much material since 1965 from Catholic sources that a cottage industry has grown up: for printers, editors, publishers, and the greatest industry of all, Ph.D. theses.

Since 1965, there have been more positive Catholic-Jewish encounters, especially here in America, than there were in the first nineteen hundred years of the Roman Catholic Church's history. But the novelty is over. The excitement that many Jews and Catholics experienced after 1965 in "explaining themselves to each other" is coming to an end. It has been, after all, six-and-a-half years since Pope John II spoke in Rome's Grand Synagogue, and it is no longer news when a rabbi speaks in a cathedral or when a cardinal speaks in a synagogue.

But clearly, as Eugene Fisher has indicated, relations have dramatically improved. Those studies that Dr. Fisher has referred to show that a new

generation of young Catholics and young Jews has grown up which has never experienced the alienation, the mutual suspicion and the bigotry that so often poisoned earlier Catholic-Jewish relations.

Something irreversible and irrevocable has indeed happened in our nearly two-thousand-year-long story. And when you judge Catholic-Jewish relations against the increasing ethnic, racial, and religious hatreds so rampant in the world—in Northern Ireland, in the Middle East, in Asia, and now once again, even in Eastern Europe—when you judge Catholic-Jewish relations against those sorry records, Catholic-Jewish relations at their best represent one of the true and few success stories of the twentieth century.

During the past five years, those relations have been tested. The shocks surrounding the Pope's meetings with Yassir Arafat and Kurt Waldheim, and the Auschwitz convent crisis, have placed a strain on those relations. But I am convinced that *those* relationships are perhaps even stronger because of the tests and the stresses of recent years.

Now, if we were to stop the story at this point and if the video tape were to be shut off, and the lights turned on again we could safely say that today's Catholic-Jewish relation is a model for other groups and other people to follow. If we Catholics and we Jews with such long memories—a bitter history, deep suspicions—if we can begin the process of reconciliation, then other groups can do so as well.

Here are two ancient faith communities, two ancient peoples, once locked in the deadly embrace of hatred and hostility, now moving away from that posture to one of growing mutual respect and understanding. But let's look ahead into the next century. Let's "dream" ahead and try to perceive what Catholic-Jewish relations will look like fifty years from now.

Alexis de Tocqueville observed long ago that the growth of a nation bears some resemblance to the growth of women and men. That is to say, as in individual development, the circumstances of birth contribute to the development of nations. In the case of Catholic-Jewish relations, anti-Semitism—and its Dante-like result, the Nazi Holocaust—were the circumstances that were present at the birth of *Nostra Aetate* and at the creation of the Second Vatican Council. The success story that is Catholic-Jewish relations was fueled and driven by the Holocaust and its memory and by anti-Semitism.

Anti-Semitism as a virulent pathology is clearly present today as it was in 1965. So let us be candid. A morbid melancholy, a vast sadness, a permeating sense of loss all were present in 1965 and they are present today; they still color today's Catholic-Jewish relations. And if I may speak most personally, my own prevailing sense of Jewish loneliness after the Holocaust, my urge for Jewish self-reliance, and my never-ending quest to demonstrate continuing Jewish vitality is present in all my efforts in Catholic-Jewish relations.

Today Jews are like the Israeli poet who wrote that most people of our time have the face of Lot's wife, turned toward the Holocaust and yet they are always escaping. But you and I know there is no escape. So in my "dreams" and in my nightmares of the future, I wonder how the Holocaust will be remembered. How will it be taught in fifty years when all of the actual survivors will be gone? As Catholics and Jews, we live with our conscience, pangs of guilt, shame, and responsibility. In its own powerful way, the Holocaust powers and shapes today's encounter, but what about fifty years from now?

I am hopeful that the *Shoah* will not be forgotten or trivialized over the next fifty years. Certainly Jews will continue to remember the Holocaust even though George Steiner has said it lies outside the normative syntax of human communication in the explicit domain of the bestial. And after all, Christianity has commemorated quite successfully the death of a single Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, for nearly 2000 years. So we will remember, but how will we remember with our separate histories, our separate symbols, and our separate memories? In my nightmare, in my dream (and forgive the sexist language for just a moment) I fear that fifty years from now, the *Shoah* may be referred to as just one more example of "man's inhumanity to man."

Present also at the Second Vatican Council was the State of Israel—put differently: restored Jewish sovereignty in our ancient homeland. Fifty years from now, modern Israel will be nearing its one-hundredth birthday. Many of today's Jewish and Catholic leaders were alive and experienced the birth of creation in 1948 when Israel achieved independence, but of course it will not be that way in the year 2042. Will Israel ever become a normative part of Catholic-Jewish relations, with ambassadors in Jerusalem and in the Vatican? Will Israel fifty years from now be secure enough in that difficult part of the world we call the Middle East that Catholics and Jews can make Israel a principal but not the central part of a dialogue?

Today it is different. I strongly believe that every meaningful Catholic-Jewish encounter must address Israel. The State of Israel remains at the center of all such encounters, but what will it be like in fifty years? Will Israel be part of the rich, interreligious tapestry, or will the State of Israel still stand in painful existential loneliness as a highly vulnerable nation-state? And I wonder whether in the twenty-first century Jews and Catholics can successfully overcome what I see as the twin enemies of all of our efforts: religious extremism and the pervasive irreligiousness of the society in which we live.

Both enemies poison all our efforts at reconciliation. Roman Catholics and Jews especially should be on the barricades against mindless and dangerous religious extremism. These extremists would reduce all religious thought to simplistic phrases and verses from holy books, and they would reduce all religious deeds simply to repressive actions against those

who do not share the extremist views. Our two traditions are much better than that. And even in the brief time since the Second Vatican Council, we have come too far together to capitulate or collapse in the face of such simplistic and harmful religious extremism.

And the opposite is also true. There is a growing sense of hostile indifference to our values. Jews and Catholics today and in fifty years will still be the custodians of a unique set of values about life and about death. Will Catholics and Jews, who have so much to contribute to our society's health and well-being, be pushed aside by that galloping irreligious *Zeitgeist* of our time and of the twenty-first century?

I worry that there will be a pincer-movement in fifty years. Extremists will retreat to their self-created fortresses of a new tribalism, saying that the only thing that matters is my way, my reading of my holy book, and my group. And on the other side will be the relentless pressure of a valueless society that will override all our values and all our standards. In such battles, and they are not long in coming, the work of reconciliation and the sense of solidarity that has been achieved since 1965 between Jews and Catholics will be indispensable.

Hopefully in the new century, Catholics and Jews will intensify their studies of each other's religious beliefs. I dream that rabbinical students of the future will receive part of their training at Catholic seminaries. And likewise, candidates for the priesthood, and those who aspire to be sisters and brothers in the Church will study also at rabbinical schools. I am convinced that such studies will deepen the religious commitments of our future leaders. And Catholics and Jews will need that commitment to face together the threats and challenges that await us all.

For centuries Catholics often regarded Jews and their religion as two-dimensional stereotypes, emptied of all humanity and meaning. And for centuries Jews regarded the Roman Catholic Church as the ultimate "Other," the perennial adversary. If we have done anything in these past twenty-five years, we have at least begun to overcome these mutually hostile images and perceptions. But much more will be needed in the next fifty years.

Catholics and Jews in the twenty-first century will have to work together in ways we cannot even imagine now. The stakes in Catholic-Jewish relations are high, and those stakes are rising. We are building together for the next century and for the generations of Catholics and Jews yet unborn.

In the meantime, we will do what we have been doing so well since *Nostra Aetate*. While we wait for the new century, and while we wait for the new generation of leaders of the Catholic and Jewish communities, we will continue to work as faithful daughters and faithful sons of the One God of Israel. And to those of the new generation yet unborn, who will be our leaders of the twenty-first century, let me close with the words of a poet, an English poet, who wrote: "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be."