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Edward Bristow,ed. No Religion is an Island: The Nostra Aetate Dialogues

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Recommended Citation

Haas, William P., "Edward Bristow,ed. No Religion is an Island: The Nostra Aetate Dialogues" (1999).
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NO RELIGION IS AN ISLAND: The Nostra Aetate Dialogues, Edited by Edward Bristow, New York, Fordham University, 1998

Review by W. P. Haas, August 3, 1999

Catholics and Jews have begun the most intense theological dialogue in 1900 years, according to George Weigel (Boston Globe, July 17, 1998). An entirely new relationship has been created by Pope John Paul II's steady condemnation of the "sin of anti-Semitism" and the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the Vatican Council, Nostra Aetate, which condemns the indiscriminate charge that all Jews are to blame for the suffering of Jesus and rejects the idea that the Holy Scriptures speak of all Jews as "accursed." (Nostra Aetate #4)

In 1992, Fordham University took a significant initiative in fostering Jewish-Catholic exchange of ideas, which now constitutes the substance of No Religions is an Island: The Nostra Aetate Dialogues. Appropriately enough, the annual series of dialogues began with the question of the Jewishness of Jesus (1993), then took up the Death of Jesus (1994), Catholic-Jewish Dialogue and the New Millennium (1995), Jerusalem: Heavenly City and Earthly City in Jewish and Early Christian Thought (1996) and finally Abraham Joshua Heschel: Prophet of Social Activism (1997). The participants in these dialogues brought to these sensitive issues the full force of their scholarship, their moral persuasion and the credibility of their leadership.

The first of the Fordham series encounters the question of just how Jewish Jesus was or the kind of Jew he was. Father John P. Meir of Catholic University argues in his work A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus (New York, Doubleday, 1991-1994) that Jesus was an atypical Jew who presented himself as the "eschatological prophet of the coming kingdom of God" and as the "Elijah-like miracle worker" and as teacher of complete personal authority. Rabbi Shaye Cohen of Brown University agrees that Jesus was "an unusual Jew" a "virtuoso Jew" who stood out by the force of his personality and his teaching. Rabbi Cohen claims that the Jewishness of Jesus challenges Christians to develop a "non-supersessionist theology" which recognizes the legitimacy of Judaism for Jews. John Meir notes that, "Jesus did not intend to found a new religion" (p.41). There was no need to found a new church, since there already was a church, Israel, from which Jesus never really separated himself. The text of John's

Gospel bears out Meir's point: "We know what we [Jews] worship for salvation is of the Jews."
(4:22)

No less complex, but even more sensitive is the question of assigning responsibility for the suffering and death of Jesus. This issue was the crux of the reconciliation offered by Vatican II. Once the accusation of all Jews as "Christ Killers" had been unequivocally condemned, true dialogue on the point became possible. Father Raymond Brown of Union Theological Seminary thoroughly explored the controversy in The Death of Jesus (New York, Doubleday, 1994) asserting the difference between blame for the death of Jesus and responsibility for his death. Although there is no basis for assigning blame to any one person or group of persons, the New Testament record asserts that some Jewish leaders acknowledged responsibility for their judgment in condemning Jesus for blasphemy.

Rabbi Michael J. Cook of Hebrew Union College conceded the "essential plausibility" of Brown's point (p. 68), but presses the question whether the concept of responsibility extends "to Jesus personally." He asks further: "And what of 'responsibility' for the later deaths of countless additional Jews attributed to the way of the Gospel texts were enlisted as pretexts for pogroms and other persecutions?" He makes the point more explicit by suggesting that "The four Evangelists were ill-disposed toward Jews who would not accept Jesus" and characterized them as "chief culprits" in the death of Jesus. (p.68-70) This "animosity" led to a distortion of the motives and character of Jewish leaders at the time.

One must note here that genuine interfaith exchange needs to welcome such painful reflections- painful to have to make such suggestions and painful to listen attentively. Rabbi Burton L. Vistosky of the Jewish Theological Seminary noted that Nostra Aetate "overturned" two thousand years of anti-Semitic writing by some of the early Church Fathers, thus opening a new era of easy and scholarship. (p. 62) Yet, he observes, Jews are still fearful because this openness has not reached the people whose enlightenment is most needed: valuable as scholarly exchange is, by itself it does not change heart or habits.

This concern carries over to the 1995 examination of progress in the dialogue themselves. One has to risk "being shaken to the roots of one's being", cautions John Cardinal O'Connor (p. 109) "Otherwise... what we call dialogue so easily can be simply the equivalent of cocktail

chatter.” Clemens Thoma, two decades earlier, was even more severe in his warning (A Christian Theology of Judaism, New York, Paulist Press. 1980). He claims that much Christian-Jewish dialogue is often nothing but “confused mental gesticulation in an empty room” clearly doomed to failure (p. 29) He admonishes that the very term “dialogue” be used sparingly, unless the participants are prepared to look deeply into a very perplexing history.

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch of the Jewish Theological Seminary and Cardinal O’Connor came to the conclusion that the Jewish-Christian reach for understanding has only begun. More progress has been made among scholars than in the area of public affairs and social action. They pointed to the need for further cooperation in the domain of public health and health care, in education and in pastoral counseling. The practical consequences of serious differences in the field of action are more daunting, the constituencies are more fragmented and more volatile, yet the need for candid assessment remains.

Incidental to the efforts in New York, there is encouraging evidence of the extension of dialogue in to the community in the New Direction program mounted by the Archdiocese of Boston and the New England Regional Office of Anti-Defamation League. Together they are providing workshops for catechists in Basic Lay Formation and seminars for teachers of religion in thirty six Catholic high schools, as reported in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies (Summer-Fall, 1998)

Both the Rabbi and the Cardinal drew attention to the pressing danger of fundamentalism and zealotry. Rabbi Schorsch admonished that no one can claim exclusive authority on God’s will and that the prerequisite for discerning what God wants is a sense of humility and fallibility- because so much is “unknown and unfathomable.”

If great cities have personalities, character and destiny, what city could be more unfathomable than Jerusalem. Hence the subjects of the 1996 dialogue in which Professors Robert L. Wilkens of the University of Pennsylvania and Michael Fishbane of the University of Chicago present a most comprehensive view of the unbroken link between the Earthly Jerusalem and the Heavenly Jerusalem, where secular history and the interventions of divine providence intertwine. Jews, Christians and Muslims all claim that divine providence has brought their faith to some fulfillment in this place, both sacred and political, crushed by history yet timeless in

meaning. The dialogue did not attempt to dispel the paradox: the scholars seemed to hope that divine providence might yet bring Judaism, Christianity and Islam to a fuller understanding of the City of Peace. Professor Fishbane emphasized the “Judaism is not one thing, and Jews do not believe one thing” (p. 149) Hence, the Earthly Jerusalem becomes the physical and historical unifying force so desperately and uniquely a Jewish need.

Professor Wilkens shows in detail the evidence of a constant Christian presence in Palestine over the centuries, enduring much suffering at the hands of “friend” and foe. Yet, he does not make the argument that Christians ever laid claim to Jerusalem as the fulfillment of a divine pledge.

Jerome Crowe, C.P. in his work From Jerusalem to Antioch: The Gospel across Cultures (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997) makes the additional point that the journey from Jerusalem to Antioch is symbolic of the journey of the church down to our own place and time.

The last of the five dialogues (1997) is a remembrance of Abraham Joshua Heschel, Prophet of Social Activism, appropriately brings attention to the central reality assumed in all dialogue- the person who bears witness by word and deed. Abraham Heschel as a scholar and as a social activist reintroduced the Jewish vision of Justice, not as a sterile ethical duty sanctioned by reason, but as a transcendent demand involving God’s need for mercy and righteousness. Father Daniel Berrigan, whose approach to social activism was very different from Heschel’s relied upon the close friendship of Heschel throughout Berrigan’s most bitter struggles. “To Heschel, no matter the outcome, one simply went on.” (p. 167) Berrigan’s understanding of his friends Jewishness was, “Faith stood there, spoke up, and paid up.”

Susannah Heschel, Abraham’s daughter, and Dartmouth Professor, concludes this dialogue, and fittingly the series, with a reflection about her father’s deep involvement in the preparation of the Vatican II statement on relations between Catholics and Jews. His interest was simply, “in helping Catholics be better Catholics.” (p. 172) He asked: “What can Jews learn spiritually from the great religious traditions of Christianity?” Professor Heschel observes that this is a question that not enough Jews ask.

In conclusion, the reader who is encouraged by the Nostra Aetate dialogues to look further into the substantive issues introduced in this work might consult the several books on

Jewish-Christian topics published by the Paulist Press under the sponsorship of the Stimulus Foundation. Clemens Thoma's work, a Stimulus publication and already cited here, offers a penetrating analysis of a Christian Theology of Judaism. He is not proposing a theology preoccupied only with those elements of Judaism that happen to interest Christians: he is seeking the inner core of Jewish Faith history, faith statement and Jewish Life. "A Christian theologian must emphasize that the Christ event does not diminish or destroy a legitimate and autonomous Judaism after Christ." (p. 27)

Of particular help to the non-specialist are two articles which assimilate much recent study. Donald Senior, C.P., writing in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly Between Two Worlds: Gentile and Jewish Christianity in Matthew's Gospel (1-61, 1999) digests the recent avalanche of articles, monographs and commentaries on the ancient tensions which shaped early Christianity and still reverberate in present Christian-Jewish communication. Also of note, Gershon Greenberg writes in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies (Summer-Fall 1998) that Orthodox Jewish thinkers in pondering the Holocaust presumed that the sacred world of Israel was fundamentally different from the "profane world outside, including Christianity." (p. 483)

His study, Wartime Orthodox Jewish Thought about the Holocaust: Christian Implications concludes that at times of great crisis the two religions draw only upon the redemptive value of suffering. The time has arrived when it would be valuable to begin to dwell on the possibility of elements of inner synthesis of Judaism and Christianity in the wake of the Holocaust." (p. 495)

One can imagine that the title No Religion is an Island borrows from John Donne's proclamation that "No man is an island entirely of in itself... never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee," the implication being that Christians and Jews are incomplete human beings if through hostility, ignorance or indifference they remain in false isolation.