

Catholic-Jewish text under scrutiny

Jerry Filteau | Jul. 9, 2009

WASHINGTON -- By publicly criticizing a seven-year-old document, two U.S. bishops' committees have drawn new attention to Catholic-Jewish relations.

Until now the 2002 document, titled "Reflections on Covenant and Mission," has received relatively little attention outside the rather narrow community of theologians who actively engage in dialogue.

The bishops' committees have questioned whether theologians who wrote the Catholic part of "Reflections" adequately expressed the church's mission and the centrality of Christ in salvation.

At stake in the new discussion initiated by the bishops' June 18 "Note on Ambiguities" are some subtle but fundamental issues. How should Catholics perceive Judaism today? How should they approach dialogue with Jews? How should they understand the relationship between the church's fundamental mission of spreading the Gospel and the church's role in interreligious dialogue -- especially in relation to dialogue with Jews?

"Reflections" in 2002 was a product of the ongoing consultation between the bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the National Council of Synagogues. The council is formed by the national rabbinical and lay synagogal organizations of Reform and Conservative Judaism.

Like all ecumenical and interreligious dialogue reports, "Reflections" was not an official statement of either religious body, but a contribution by scholars in the dialogue to the ongoing study and reflection of their respective churches or religious bodies.

Apart from a brief introduction, "Reflections" consists of two main parts: a reflection by the Catholic scholars in the dialogue about their understanding of God's distinct but related covenants with Jews and Christians and how that relates to the mission of the church in Catholic relations with Jews, followed by a similar reflection by the Jewish scholars on covenant and mission in Judaism.

On the council's Catholic-Jewish Web site the "Reflections" document is the only report from the dialogue that is listed without any link to the actual text. One place the text is available online is at the Boston College Web site.

The "Reflections" section drawn up by Catholic scholars highlights some of the very strong papal and Vatican statements issued since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) on the permanence of God's covenant with the Jewish people.

"John Paul II has explicitly taught 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 scholars wrote.

They said papal and Vatican statements on the permanence of that covenant and the ongoing validity of the

Jewish religious experience include Pope John Paul II's 1982 statement that "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."

They also cited other official church affirmations of what John Paul called post-biblical Judaism's "continuous spiritual fecundity, in the rabbinical period, in the Middle Ages and in modern times."

The bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and Committee on Doctrine and Pastoral Practice said "Reflections" clearly and accurately represents Catholic teachings on many points, but reflects "ambiguities" on some issues, especially on "the description of the church's mission and, in particular, what evangelization means with regard to the Jewish people."

The two committees said, "The section representing Catholic thought contains some statements that are insufficiently precise and potentially misleading."

That section lacks "a clear affirmation of the church's belief that Jesus Christ in himself fulfills God's revelation begun with Abraham and that proclaiming this good news to all the world is at the heart of her mission," they said.

The committees' "Note on Ambiguities" also criticized a portion of the "Reflections" report for saying that interreligious dialogue is "a mutually enriching sharing of gifts devoid of any intention whatsoever to invite the dialogue partner to baptism."

The note responded, "Though Christian participation in interreligious dialogue would not normally include an explicit invitation to baptism and entrance into the church, the Christian dialogue partner is always giving witness to the following of Christ, to which all are implicitly invited."

"This threatens to undermine the very possibility of Catholic-Jewish dialogue," wrote Philip A. Cunningham, director of the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, in an e-mail following the release of the committees' note.

Cunningham, a longtime participant in the dialogue, said the note "raises the prospect that Catholics in dialogue with Jews ought to be aware that they are extending implicit invitations to baptism by the very act of giving witness to their faith in Christ. If this is true, then Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's warning that Jews ought not to dialogue with Christians about religious matters seems well-placed."

Soloveitchik, an iconic figure who headed the rabbinical school at Yeshiva University in New York for more than 40 years, is widely regarded as the most influential thinker in modern Orthodox Judaism in the latter half of the 20th century.

In a phone interview with *NCR*, Cunningham said, "Most Jewish concerns that I have heard about the note really zero in on that [Soloveitchik's warning]. For the Jewish side, from his Orthodox point of view -- which was somewhat in the left of Orthodoxy at the time, in the '60s -- he was against the notion of Jews and Christians talking about theology or theological matters."

Cunningham continued: "He had two main reasons for that: One was that he thought Christians would always be -- if not consciously, then unconsciously -- trying to persuade Jews to become Christians. And secondly, that there was a disparity of power between "the community of the many (Christians or others in every society outside Israel) and the community of the few (Jews in those societies)," as he put it."

Even for Conservative and Reform Jews, "that hesitancy on Soloveitchik's part is partly on their mind," he said.

?What has happened over the last four decades is that there has been a track record of the dialogue being a sort of safe place for Jews, that they weren't feeling that they were being imposed upon to accept Christian faith in Jesus.

?What the note does now is sort of reopen that can of worms,? he said.

?Is this opening a Pandora's box that most of us who have been involved in dialogical work had thought had been resolved a long time ago?? he asked.

In fact, that issue was raised at a June 25 dialogue between representatives of the council and the (Orthodox) Rabbinical Council of America and Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America.

According to a council news release on the dialogue July 1, Jewish participants said that if the implicit invitation to follow Christ cited in the note means a subtle attempt to convert Jews to Christianity, it would render any interreligious dialogue with Catholics illegitimate and ?dangerous.?

The release said Fr. James Massa, executive director of the bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs ?assured participants that interreligious dialogue for the Catholic bishops is never about proselytism or any coercive methods that would lead a person to abandon his or her religious convictions.?

The release quoted Massa saying, ?The important term in this discussion is ?witness.? As Catholics involved in a dialogue of truth, we cannot help but give witness to Christ, who, for us, is synonymous with truth. Without acknowledging our indebtedness to God's revelation in Christ, we cannot sit at the table and speak as Christians about how we arrive at notions of justice, compassion and building up the common good -- the very values our interreligious dialogues seek to foster.?

In an interview, Eugene J. Fisher, a leading authority on Catholic-Jewish relations and longtime Vatican consultant on the topic, said of the bishops' committee's note, ?That is fair enough if they wanted to clarify, but then questions come in with the clarification.? He said he was surprised that the note made almost no reference to the numerous papal and Vatican statements since Vatican II that have developed and expanded on the council's teaching on Catholics and Jews.

Fisher -- who for 30 years was the bishops' associate director for Catholic-Jewish relations -- cited the 2001 statement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, ?The Jewish People in Their Sacred Scriptures and the Christian Bible,? as one example that ?is very pertinent to the discussion.?

?It talked about how the Jews are not wrong in awaiting their Messiah,? Fisher said. ?And the reason ... is that while we Catholics believe that the promises were fulfilled at the time of the coming of Christ, we also acknowledge that they await their perfect fulfillment at the end of time. ... Part of our commission as church is to stand together with Jews to witness to the end of time and therefore the meaning of history -- and therefore we work with the Jews. ... We await the coming -- or return -- of the Messiah, and in that we wait together.?

?Now that's something that this document [?Note on Ambiguities?] should have taken into account, but it didn't even refer to any of that,? he added.

Fisher said the lack of attention to the postconciliar Vatican literature in the ambiguities note is ?kind of startling. There is a field of study here and of interpretation? and a dynamic of gradually building and refining the language and precision of the teaching, he said. ?That's the internal dialogue of the church.?

Cunningham said that 2002's ?Reflections,? in contrast to the recently issued note, ?cites a lot of Vatican and papal documents? since Vatican II.

?That seems odd to me, in what?s presented as a kind of doctrinal clarification, that there?s so little citation of the developing post-*Nostra Aetate* documentary magisterial tradition,? he said.

He called it ?peculiar? that the council Web site currently carries a news release and the text of the note on ambiguities, but not the original 2002 text (or related press releases) allowing people to compare texts between the note and the original ?Reflections.?

?I think the note could be the occasion for making better known the work that has been accomplished in Catholic-Jewish relations,? he said.

Fisher said he hopes the note might become the occasion for ?a healthy dialogue among Catholics to work through these many questions.?

Jerry Filteau is NCR Washington correspondent.

Related Web sites

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs
www.usccb.org/seia/jewish.shtml

Boston College (search "Reflections on Covenant and Mission")
www.bc.edu

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