

Four historical forces reshaping Catholic-Jewish relations

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 16, 2009 All Things Catholic

Recently I was on the PBS "Religion and Ethics Newsweekly" show, along with E.J. Dionne of *The Washington Post* and Kim Lawton of PBS, looking ahead to the big religion stories of 2009. We rounded up the usual suspects, from church/state relations under Obama to debates over gay rights. At the end, host Bob Abernethy asked each of us to flag a "sleeper question" in '09 that we hadn't yet discussed.

I went last, and my response was "Christian/Jewish relations."

Admittedly, I don't have the world's greatest track record as a prognosticator -- from time to time, readers still remind me that I once predicted Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger would not be elected pope. In this case, however, it only took a few days into the new year for my forecast to start looking pretty good.

Last week's blow-up came with Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, who likened the Gaza Strip to a "huge concentration camp." (The Anti-Defamation League called Martino's line "shocking and disgraceful" in a Jan. 12 press release.) This week another shoe fell, as Italian rabbis announced they are pulling out of an annual event celebrating Judaism sponsored by the country's Catholic bishops. The "Day of Judaism" is held on Jan. 17, the date in 1945 when German forces evacuated the Auschwitz death camp.

The Chief Rabbi of Venice, Elia Enrico Richetti, made the announcement in an essay in the Jesuit journal *Popoli*, asserting that recent steps by Pope Benedict XVI with regard to inter-faith dialogue risk "the cancellation of the last fifty years of the history of the church." (My translation of Richetti's brief essay appears below.)

Specifically, Richetti cited two moves by Benedict XVI as the basis for the decision to withdraw, at least temporarily, from collaboration with Catholic institutions:

- Authorizing wider celebration of the old Latin liturgy, including a controversial Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews;
- Declaring that inter-religious dialogue "in the strict sense of the term, is not possible," because it means "putting one's own faith into parentheses." (That comment came in the preface to a new book by Italian senator and philosopher Marcello Pera.)

In general, Richetti charged, these steps signal a lack of even the most "banal sense of respect owed to the other as a creature of God."

On Wednesday, Cardinal Walter Kasper, the Vatican's top official for Jewish/Catholic relations, came to Benedict's defense. "It is the pope's conviction that we must talk together and act together, knowing that we have fundamental differences in our faiths and respecting them," Kasper said.

For the moment, it seems unlikely that this contretemps signals a wider shutdown in Jewish/Catholic relations. Italian Jews are sometimes more inclined to bristle at perceived papal slights, and especially at anything that smacks of proselytism or assimilation, since memories of their second class status under the Papal States are still very much alive. Last fall, for example, the Chief Rabbi of Rome, Riccardo Di Segni, withdrew from a marathon reading of the Bible on Italian national television staged in conjunction with the Synod of Bishops, declaring the event "too Catholic."

Kasper told the Italian daily *La Stampa* that, "Unfortunately, here in Italy we have a special susceptibility that we don't find either in France or Germany, or in North America." (Richetti acknowledges, and rejects, these perceptions of "hyper-sensitivity" in his essay below.)

For the most part, other Jewish leaders have expressed confusion and disappointment about the recent turbulence in relations -- which includes mixed reactions to a vigorous defense by Benedict XVI of his controversial wartime predecessor, Pius XII -- but also determination that dialogue must continue. Meanwhile, several observers have noted the irony that Richetti's complaint about the clock being rolled back in Catholic/Jewish relations was actually published in a Catholic journal.

Whatever one makes of this particular case, symbolically it represents a canary in the coal mine in terms of the broader direction of Catholic/Jewish relations. Four historical forces are currently reshaping that relationship, each destined to make it more complicated.

First, the most powerful movement in the internal life of the Catholic church today is what I've defined as "evangelical Catholicism," meaning a reassertion of traditional Catholic beliefs and practices, coupled with robust public proclamation of Catholic identity. Part of that identity is the conviction that Christ is the lone and unique savior of the world. If "respect," from the Jewish point of view, requires the church to renounce the claim that all salvation comes from Christ -- which Richetti's essay could be read to suggest -- then it's probably not in the cards.

Second, there's a generational shift underway. The pioneers of Catholic/Jewish relations, for whom the living memory of the Holocaust is a powerful motivating force, are passing from the scene. The new cohort remains committed to the cause, but its leaders may not feel the same sense of personal moral obligation.

Third, the demographic shift in Catholicism away from Europe and, to a lesser extent, North America, towards Africa, Asia and Latin America, means that increasingly leadership will be coming from regions where Catholic/Jewish relations yield pride of place to dialogue with other traditions, especially Islam and the religions of Asia. In the Catholicism of the future, Judaism will no longer be the paradigmatic religious "other," but rather

one relationship among many, and in some respects not the highest priority.

Fourth, Benedict XVI's preference for "inter-cultural" rather than "inter-religious" dialogue, placing the accent on social and political cooperation rather than strictly theological encounter, may also drive Catholic/Jewish ties down the list of concerns. Theologically, Christianity's root relationship is with Judaism. In terms of geopolitics, however, relations with Islam, or Hinduism, or for that matter Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity, often pack a greater punch. (There are roughly 13 million Jews in the world and 1.6 billion Muslims; you do the math.) Even in Europe, the rising Muslim population means that when Catholicism is looking for partners to influence social life, Islam is steadily replacing Judaism as the most obvious "live option."

Of course, Catholics can walk and chew gum at the same time, which means that the church ought to be capable of affirming its identity and fostering relations with other faiths while simultaneously maintaining its dialogue with Judaism. During his visit to the Park East Synagogue in New York last April, Benedict XVI reiterated his commitment to building "bridges of friendship."

Yet those concerned with Catholic/Jewish relations should be under no illusions: A historical moment is dawning in which the stars are not especially well-aligned. Momentum in some ways is cutting in the other direction, suggesting that new energy and imagination will be required to keep things on track.

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The Day of Judaism: The Reasons for Our 'No'

(Published in *Popoli*, January 2009)

By Rabbi Elia Enrico Richetti

Chief Rabbi of Venice

(Translation from the Italian by *NCR*)

Editor's Note in Popoli: The first step for an authentic dialogue is a disposition to listen to the reasoning of the other. With that conviction, which also animates the editorial policy of our journal, we willingly present the comment of Rabbi Richetti.

The Assembly of Rabbis of Italy has communicated that, at least for this year, there will be no collaboration between the Jewish communities of Italy and Catholic institutions for the celebration of the Day of Judaism (Jan. 17). It's a logical consequence of the particular moment which inter-confessional dialogue is living through today, the signs of which began to become clear when the pope, liberalizing the Mass in Latin, indicated the Tridentine Missal as the model to follow. That formulation, in the prayers for Good Friday, contains a prayer expressing hope for the conversion of the Jews to the "truth" of the church and to faith in the salvific role of Christ.

In reality, that prayer -- which in its first formulation defined the Jews as "perfidious," that is, "outside the faith" and blind -- had already been "omitted" (but never abolished) by Pope John XXIII. Benedict XVI has expunged the most offensive terms and reintroduced the prayer. Right away, the Assembly of the Rabbis of Italy declared a pause for reflection, temporarily suspending inter-religious meetings. The following months were characterized by a succession of contacts, meetings and mediations with diverse exponents, including those at a high level, from the ecclesiastical world, some of whom showed themselves to be sincerely concerned for the future of a dialogue that had been proceeding in a fruitful manner, and that had registered an expanding sense of respect for the equal dignity of the two faiths.

Unfortunately, the results [of these contacts] were disappointing. Some senior Vatican officials took offense: "How can Jews be permitted to judge the manner in which a Christian should pray? Perhaps the church should be permitted to expunge from the rituals of Jewish prayer some expressions that could be interpreted as anti-Christian?" Other prelates held that the attitude of the Italian rabbis was perhaps shaped by a Jewish "hyper-sensitivity" about attempts at proselytism, a hyper-sensitivity which was not justified by the facts. On the other hand, the more or less official response (a formal response from the episcopal conference, though requested, never came) was that the Jews have nothing to fear: the hope expressed by the prayer "*Pro Judaeis*" is "purely eschatological," meaning that it's a hope relative to the "end of time," and does not invite active proselytism (which, among other things, had already been prohibited by Pope Paul VI.)

In fact, these responses have not satisfied the Italian rabbinate. If I believe, even in an eschatological key, that my neighbor must become like me in order to be worthy of salvation, I do not respect his identity. It's not a question, therefore, of hyper-sensitivity: it's rather a question of the more banal sense of respect owed to the other as a creature of God. If we add to this the most recent positions expressed by the pope with regard to dialogue, defined as useless because in any case the superiority of the Christian faith must be proclaimed, it's evident that we are moving towards the cancellation of the last fifty years of the history of the church. From this point of view, the interruption of collaboration between Italian Judaism and the church is the logical consequence of the ecclesiastical thought expressed by the highest authority.

It's true, the church is not permitted to correct Jewish prayers (even if at one time, the ecclesiastical censure was rather active). But it should be said that the prayers which some wish to interpret as anti-Christian are, in reality, directed against "those who bow to idols," and against "calumniators and heretics." Why should Christians feel targeted? What do they think of themselves?

It's also true that it's not up to Jews to teach Christians how they should pray, or what they should think. No one among the Jews or the Italian rabbis would try to do so. But it's clear that dialogue means that everyone must respect the right of others to be themselves, taking the opportunity to learn something from the sensibility of the other, something which may enrich me. When the idea of dialogue as respect (not as syncretism, and not as prevarication) is restored, the Italian rabbis will always be ready to play the role which they have played in the last fifty years.

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Last week I discussed Martino's comment on Gaza, among other things suggesting that the sympathy some Palestinian Christians seem to feel for Hamas often strikes the outside world as puzzling. I linked that to the on-going exodus of Christians out of the Holy Land, which, I wrote, is "driven to a great extent by rising pressure from Islamic fundamentalists."

That line brought a number of responses, including some from Palestinian Christians and other Catholics in the Holy Land. Here's a sample, from Paulist Fr. Michael McGarry, rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem:

"I believe that this is at worst, false, or at least distorted. Over the last number of years, Christians in the Holy Land, both in Israel and in Palestine (although more so from the latter), have been leaving because of economic hardships and lack of a political/economic future as a result of the occupation. As an employer of Palestinians, both Christian and Muslim, we at Tantur see the reality on a daily basis. We are disappointed when this difficult situation is portrayed as resulting from Muslim extremism. While surely an issue, portraying Islam (as your sentence does) as the main driving force has two effects: 1) It perpetuates a stereotype and untruth about Muslims and Christians living together in the West Bank, and 2) It plays into the ideologically driven movement that says, in effect: 'We Jews and Christians have a common enemy in [radical] Islam, and therefore we should band together against it.' "

Like everything else in the Middle East, of course, the causes of Christian out-migration are the subject of fierce debate. Yet my correspondents were correct that my sentence over-simplified a complex situation, and for that I apologize.

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