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Book Review: 'Introduction and Commentary: Declaration on the Relationship of the Church and Non-Christian Religions' by John M. Oesterreicher

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John M. Oesterreicher:

INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY:

**DECLARATION ON THE RELATIONSHIP OF
THE CHURCH TO NON-CHRISTIAN
RELIGIONS***

THE importance of the late Pope John XXIII's call for an *aggiornamento* of the Roman Catholic faith and community grows more patent every day, and the implications of the Vatican II decisions that he set in motion assume even broader dimensions with the passage of time. The Rome-based Council that ended in 1965 issued a series of texts whose full meaning and import cannot be wholly fathomed at present, since their application is only now unfolding and their interpretation in the face of ongoing pressures and in the light of changing intellectual, political, and sociological circumstances is not ready for crystallization. All historic and living documents are, of course, comprehended years after their original creation according to the needs and insights of their later readers, even when these later constructions are regarded not as midrash but as the primal intent. The eventual "orthodox" interpretation and application of the Vatican II constitutions, decrees, and declarations will undoubtedly be considered the clear and unequivocal meaning intended by their writers. At a future date, scholars will then turn in retrospect to discover the *Sitz im Leben* surrounding the birth of these texts and their "true" basic purport.

In the study of any document, we are fortunate when a contemporary commentary is available and doubly blessed to possess a commentary recorded by one who participated in the formulation of the original text. There has been no lack of printed material on Vatican II by those who lived through the era of its sessions, and even by those who shared in its open and behind-the-scenes deliberations. It is possible that this abundant and accessible contemporary comment will

* In *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), III, pp. 1-136.

inhibit interpretations and applications too far removed from the purpose of the promulgators.

Among the significant results of the Council is its Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, including Article 4 which deals with Jews and Judaism under the rubric "On the Jewish Religion." No one can afford to study this Statement without reflecting simultaneously upon the commentary on it composed by the late Augustin Cardinal Bea, whose book entitled *The Church and the Jewish People* was published during the year after the Declaration was adopted. Cardinal Bea was intimately involved in the fashioning of this document, from the genesis of the process when, in September 1960, Pope John personally asked him, as President of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, to prepare a draft declaration on the inner relations between the Church and the people of Israel, to the very end when the final revision was promulgated on October 28, 1965, by Pope Paul VI. The presentation by Cardinal Bea is a contemporary commentary *par excellence*. It furnishes a guideline to the meaning of the text of the Statement; at the very least, it conveys the attitude by which he desired the text to be understood and applied.

Cardinal Bea's little volume is prefixed by a chapter designated "A Short Note on the History of the Document." This five-page section is, indeed, a short note. Its designed brevity and meager dimensions call for a more ample history of the text, preferably by another representative of the Church who was also a contemporary participant in its various stages of development. Happily, such a treatment is now in existence, and we are indebted to Herder and Herder for publishing in Volume III of the *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* the excellent monograph by Monsignor John M. Oesterreicher, Director of the Institute of Judaean-Christian Studies. This account carefully delineates the origins of the Declaration, sensitively describes the history and evolution of the text, and passionately comments on its implications and potentialities for the future of the Church and Christian-Jewish relations. Msgr. Oesterreicher merits applause for a task exceedingly well planned and executed, for his obvious appreciation of the nature of Judaism, and for his integrity of presentation, even to the point of forthright indication of significant

personal differences with certain Council maneuvers and decisions.

It is well known that, within the Church, there were some who questioned whether this kind of Council pronouncement on the Jews would or should be issued, and there were pressures from both inside and outside the Church urging the inadvisability of a statement on this subject. Yet, the context of world events in this century is such that, had the Council failed to offer an updated position paper on its attitude toward the Jewish faith, people, and history, it would have branded itself unfeeling, irrelevant, mired in medievalism. There were and still are occasional Jewish spokesmen who make application to the theological leadership in the Church to modify or emend some given formulation or attitude sanctioned by the Church. It is not in order to placate any plea by a Jew, even if he be a Jules Isaac, that the Church had need to revise its official relationship towards Jews and Judaism.

Msgr. Oesterreicher plainly urges all men "to understand quite unambiguously that the proposed Declaration was a measure that was necessary for the inner life of the Church" (p. 19). The world is not composed of a collection of isolated islands of men, and it is neither mature politics to act as though the segments of mankind are not integrally related to each other, nor mature theology to maintain that any of civilized man's religious expressions are not overtones of God's fatherhood. In addition, theology cannot function outside history, and it may never divorce itself from the realistic individual yearnings and societal aspirations of humanity. Such views are not absent from classical religious utterances, although the actual experience of the centuries often gainsaid their validity. To resuscitate these ideas, to take the leap into modernity, the seemingly revolutionary pronouncement was made, in the Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, that the Roman Catholic Church

rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and of life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men (art. 2).

To have taken any other position, or to have remained silent on this theme, would have labeled the Church a fossil. Not to have included the article on the Jews would have vitiated the entire four-year effort of the Council.

Furthermore, the Nazi genocidal program for Jews and the Holocaust are misunderstood if relegated to the Jewish corner of human events. To be sure, Nazi philosophy and policy had and still have terrible and terrifying consequences for Jews and, indeed, for numberless human beings not of the Jewish community. But their significance, from a historical point of view, is even more profound for the world at large, especially for many lands whose citizenry is Christian by identification and culture, and for other lands where Islam prevails and where Hitler was not rejected. In terms of the Church—whatever its idealistic, pristine posture on human brotherhood—its centuries-long actual practices causing so much anguish to Jews, and its persistent teachings concerning them, were certainly instrumental in creating a climate of contempt for Jews. This is not to say that the Church in the twentieth century espoused or countenanced a program of genocide. But this was the end of the road whose paving blocks were stamped with the sigil of second-class humanity for Jews.

This record of the ages was in desperate need of repudiation. For how can the Church serve God with a clean conscience or hold its head high among men without a clear and unequivocal act of renunciation of this record? This was not required for the sake of the Jews. And, deep down, Jews were not and are not in need of such an expression of contrition by the Church, except in so far as all upright men are happier when fellow human beings feel clean before the Almighty. A statement of atonement with its implications for the future was rather "necessary for the inner life of the Church."

Not all are agreed, as Msgr. Oesterreicher points out, that the ultimate Council schema that was promulgated achieved its best potential. Some think that it should have been much more candid in confessing the role of the Church in abetting the spread of anti-Semitism in Europe through the centuries, and that it should have been more explicit in condemning anti-Semitism. Some think that the removal of the word "deicide" from the final version was too great a concession to conservative theologians. The present writer mentions these two points of the various aspects criticized in the final form of

this Statement because he shares this critique. On the other hand, the intent of the Council Statement was certainly to make clear that the path of the past must be denounced and a new chapter in history must be inaugurated, a chapter characterized by mutual respect and friendly communication and cooperation. The monograph under review states that "Pope John knew, of course, that there was an inevitable tension between the beliefs of Christians and Jews, but was convinced that this division must and ought not degenerate into hostility" (p. 6). Surely, this is "necessary for the inner life of the Church."

It is no less necessary for the Church to gain a correct understanding of its neighbors in this world. Without an authentic appreciation of Judaism and of the essential meaning of Jewish peoplehood, it is well nigh impossible to set out upon the course of improved Christian-Jewish relations. The final draft of the section on the Jewish people, as pointed out by Msgr. Oesterreicher as well as by Cardinal Bea, demonstrates insufficient understanding; it bears the heading "On the Jewish Religion." This title was selected in order to make it clear that it dealt with the faith and not with the people of world-wide Israel. Though this heading was but a working title that, like all other subheadings, does not appear in the promulgated text, it is nevertheless an unreal distinction, for Judaism is an amalgam of religion and peoplehood, or, to put this in other words, Judaism is the religio-cultural framework of the Jews. There is no Judaism without the Jewish people, just as there is no Jewish people without Judaism. To imagine that either can be separated from the other is the product of misunderstanding, or bias, or ulterior motive.

The fact is that Jews are a community, a family, with a specific way of life, a unique pattern of beliefs, and a shared sense of destiny on the particularistic and on the universalistic levels. A religious motivation, however defined, undergirds and lends tone to the existence of this community. A mutual familial concern contributes to the unity of this people. The past is alive in the modern Jew and is regarded as foundation and prelude to the future of the Jewish people. It is an identification with this people that makes one a Jew. Obviously, members of this Jewish community reside in many lands, are loyal subjects to diverse political units, and contribute faithfully to the security and well-being of their respective countries. This, however, in no way diminishes the unitary character of the Jewish people. To miss this

factor is to fail to reach even the starting point in understanding one's Jewish neighbors.

The use of the heading "On the Jewish Religion" in the final draft of the Vatican document was clearly a compromise, for a previous version—the November 1964, text—was called "On the Jews." There are many in the Church who comprehend the connotations of this latter rubric and regard it a misfortune that it was cast aside. There seem to be others who also appreciate the implications involved, but who find difficulty in acknowledging the facts of Jewish life. I am not implying malice on their part; rather do I see a long ingrained bias in operation, one that essentially denies God's eternal Covenant with the Jewish people. Msgr. Oesterreicher records that "many Christians assume *a priori* that the Judaism after Christ is without life or grace" (p. 136). This stance, which can only be revised through a change in attitude, is firmly held by "those lovers of the status quo" (p. 115). We recognize that a call for an overnight renewal of attitude is too facile, especially in our awareness of "how greatly we are tied to our emotions" (p. 65). Inherent in a change is the stripping away of many concepts that were held to be truths for a long time, thus seeming to jeopardize an entire system.

In the great debate on the third draft of the Declaration, Archbishop Šeper, in Msgr. Oesterreicher's words, "regretted that the Declaration considered the Jews too much in the context of the Old Testament and applied itself far too little to the Jews of today." The Archbishop was, indeed, "in advance of his time" (p. 77). The over-emphasis of the equation of the Old Testament with the Jews of history is related theologically to a rejection of Jewish creativity these last two thousand years and of meaningful Jewish survival in the eons that lie before us. It is coordinated with the traditional aspiration of the conversion of the Jews through human intervention. It is hardly unconnected with the denigrated position accorded the Jew in society for so long. And it is on the periphery of the view that non-acceptance of the New Testament constellation of ideas is tantamount to a forfeiture of the right to the breath of life.

The Hebrew Bible (the Christian "Old Testament") is, indeed, a *praeparatio*. It is the foundation, in Jewish eyes, of rabbinical Judaism, the great structure that is very much alive and that does not regard any other religion as the logical or theological extension of biblical

Judaism. The ascription of a different *praeparatio* concept to the sacred writings of the Hebrew Bible is a bias. Webster's *New World Dictionary of the American Language* defines "bias" as a "mental leaning or inclination; partiality, prejudice." In this sense, Jews are biased in favor of Judaism, and Christians are partial to Christianity; this implies partisanship, commitment, loyalty. The world does not need neutral people. The greatest loyalty, however, must include and insist upon reality, and not upon deviations from the facts as they are. To terminate Jewish selfhood with the biblical period is myopic and deluding. Whatever the trauma entailed, whatever the theological and historical reconstructions that must be undertaken by Christians, it is a prime need of the Church to follow the lead of Archbishop Šeper in the years ahead. In the felicitous phrase of Msgr. Oesterreicher concerning the Jewish community, "it is undoubtedly a people *sui generis*, that is, a community of experience and destiny which can hardly be called anything but 'people,' whether or not it has a State of its own and lives in its own country" (p. 123).

The issue of the State of Israel was the third factor leading to the use of the limiting phrase "On the Jewish Religion." Among the many healthy and unhealthy pressures that sought to influence the venerable fathers gathered at Vatican II, was the combined voice of Arab governments and spokesmen, prelates from the Middle East, and others emotionally tied up with the aim of eliminating Israel from the family of nations. Msgr. Oesterreicher forthrightly reports the anti-Israel pressures and asserts that the choice of a heading that implies a denial of Jewish peoplehood "was made principally for the sake of the Arabs" (p. 123). This ulterior motive of political compromise was really beneath the Council, quite apart from its violation of the truth. The Council sought, in this document, to restructure its relationship to the Jews of today in a spirit of warm brotherliness. It is this spirit which is encouraging for the developments of tomorrow. It was, therefore, a missed opportunity and cast a shadow upon Christian-Jewish relations, a shadow darkened during the Six-Day War of 1967, when Roman Catholic spokesmen by and large were silent while world Jewry worried about Israel's survival.

The love of Zion is deeply imbedded in Judaism. There is hardly a page of the Jewish prayer book, or a chapter in the 3500-year-old annals of the Jewish people, that does not affirm the eternal tie of

Jews with Canaan-Palestine-Israel. The *mitzvah*, the meritorious deed, of settling in and rebuilding the land of Israel is paralleled by the *mitzvah* of helping those of the Jewish family who fulfill the first *mitzvah*. Who does not know the refrain "Out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the word of God from Jerusalem" as the banner of Jewish solidarity? Jewish theology is not comprehensible without a Jewish people in the land of Israel; even in dispersion, Jews regarded this land of Abraham, Isaiah, and Akiba as the heart for the body of the House of Israel. One has only to see Jews cry every year on Tisha B'Av for the loss of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E. and in 70 C.E., to understand why this holy city is so dear, so central in the Jewish soul in 1969. Every weekday, when finishing a meal and reciting the prayers of thanksgiving, the *birkhat ha-mazon*, the Jew repeats the words of the psalmist:

*If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!*
(137[136]:5-6)

One could as soon ask a Christian to renounce his belief in the godhood of Jesus as ask a Jew to renounce his association with the land promised by God to the seed of Abraham forever. Jews were driven from this promised land; even that has never severed the emotional, religious, and cultural-nationalistic bond with *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel, nor abated the yearning for a restored Jewish commonwealth for those who need or want to live in the *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel.

Ever since 1947, when the United Nations determined to acknowledge this bond and yearning, Arab states have subverted the intention of the international family and have sought to snuff out the breath of the State of Israel. This is an announced plan to commit national murder. This plan has often been accompanied by the promise of many Arab leaders to wreak genocide upon the Jews of Israel. Not to see in this the ultimate in immorality is to be blinded to the image of

God. Now, it would be preposterous to hold that the spokesmen for Roman Catholicism associate themselves with the call for the liquidation of the State of Israel or the practice of genocide against its people. On the other hand, to fail to recognize that modern Israel is the direct continuation of historic Israel is, in effect, akin to appeasement of those whose will and acts are meant to discontinue this relationship; the one is a theological construction, the other a political framework, and there is no way to separate ideals and works in an integrated divine order.

Msgr. Oesterreicher, in a moving passage dealing with the Council session of 1962 and the pressures from the Arab governments and their sympathizers, recounts the advocacy of Cardinal Bea who

should really be called the father of the Declaration on the Jews. He spoke with sympathy of the anxiety of Christians of the Near East who feared for their religious life. He held that, to judge from all appearances, this alarm was deliberately stimulated from a certain quarter. It would be bad policy to give way to the pressure of the opponents. If one stood firm against this pressure, it would probably crumble into nothing (pp. 42-43).

Cardinal Bea was a very wise man and it would have been good policy to have obeyed his exhortation and to pursue this counsel for the future. During the period of the Council, the Church fathers were not yet ready for this. In another prophetic passage, Msgr. Oesterreicher reports that they

stated time and again that the Declaration was in no way meant to prepare diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel; sometimes it was even suggested by some that such a measure was out of the question for a long time. Nevertheless among Catholics this demand is made again and again, and there are many signs that it will continue to become stronger. It seems the Arab attack on the Declaration with its threats and blandishments has turned into a boomerang; the conduct of the Arabs during and after the Council has deprived them of the sympathies which they had enjoyed before, and thus the hearts of the Christians turn to the forward-looking State of Israel. All this must be said in order to show beforehand that the increasing desire for the recognition of Israel does not amount to a breach of promise but springs from the realization that it is the duty also of the

Christians to confirm the sovereignty, freedom, even the mere existence of the country that has given its Jewish citizens a home and has strengthened a healthy self-esteem of Jews everywhere (pp. 130-131).

Indeed, the survival and security, as well as the religious, cultural, and economic well-being of the State of Israel, are so viscerally basic to Jews everywhere, that we may well foretell an upsurge of Christian-Jewish dialogue and a deepening of Christian-Jewish understanding when Israel is recognized by the Church.

In his call for a revised theology of post-biblical Israel, the fuller use of recent biblical scholarship, the need for corrected interpretation of texts within sacred Christian writings, and the elimination of misunderstandings that have crept into liturgical texts, Msgr. Oesterreicher sets the stage for a new era. He is optimistic, but not unrealistic. He courageously perceives that the

new thought inaugurated by the Declaration does demand a mental change, and this is not easy. Indeed, the Declaration was never meant to be a document favouring ease and comfort. On the contrary, it is . . . a revolutionary document in the good sense, a document intended to change a centuries-old mentality in the spirit of reconciliation (p. 136).

After Pope Paul VI had promulgated the document on October 20, 1965, Cardinal Bea said that

the Declaration on the Non-Christian Religions is indeed an important and promising beginning, yet no more than a beginning of a long and demanding way towards the arduous goal of a humanity whose members feel themselves truly to be sons of the same Father in heaven and act on this conviction (p. 130).

To which we add, *amen selah*. Those who proceed in this spirit will discover deep wells of brotherhood within Jewish hearts.

DAVID H. PANITZ