

Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations

Volume 3, Issue 1

2008

Article 8

FEATURE TOPICS:
THE LAND AND STATE OF ISRAEL
PAUL AND CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

John Paul II and the Jewish People: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue

Copyright ©2008 by the authors. All rights reserved. This work is licensed to the public under the Creative Commons Attribution License. *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). <http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr>

REVIEW

David G. Dalin and Matthew Levering, eds.

John Paul II and the Jewish People: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue

(New York, Toronto, Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, Sheed & Ward, 2008), xiv + 175 pp.

Reviewed by Eugene J. Fisher, Associate Director Emeritus,
Secretariat For Ecumenical and Interreligious Studies, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

The two editors of this fine book, one Jewish, one Catholic, are both professors at Ave Maria University in Florida. The volume well awards a close reading both by those wishing to gain an understanding of the profound contributions of Pope John Paul II to Catholic-Jewish dialogue and their implications, and by those already involved in the dialogue who wish to have the central questions of the relationship sharpened, if not entirely answered. The Catholic Church has only been working on the questions raised by the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium*, 16; *Nostra Aetate*, 4) for somewhat over 40 years. As Cardinal Walter Kasper, President of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews has said on numerous occasions, we are only “at the beginning of the beginning” of this great rethinking of virtually all aspects of traditional Catholic theology in the light of the acceptance, following St. Paul, of God’s covenant with the Jewish people as an ongoing (until the End Time) positive and indeed necessary reality in God’s plan for the salvation of all humanity.

After a foreword by Robert P. George of Princeton and an informative and helpful introduction by the editors, the eight essays that make up the volume are organized into three sections: historical, ethical and biblical-systematic reflection. In the historical section, George Weigel, among other accomplishments a major biographer of John Paul II, provides an excellent biographical overview of why the future John Paul II, because of his youthful experiences with Jewish friends and as a Pole under Nazi occupation, focused so much of his papal energy on expanding on the thinking of the Second Vatican Council on Jews and Judaism and embedding it so deeply in the teaching of the Catholic Church that it cannot, ever, be rolled back or overturned, a point on which the contributors to this book and this humble reviewer agree and take heart in.

My only caveat to George Weigel’s otherwise exemplary article comes on page 11, where he states that “it seems virtually certain that most members of the interreligious dialogue establishment missed the deeper point” about “theological conversation” being necessary to undergird social and moral collaboration. I think, after working for thirty years for the US bishops in this field, and working as well during the period for the Holy See, I can safely be called a member of the “establishment” in the field. As such, I can only say to Dr. Weigel, that I have been pushing for and actually engaging in theological dialogue for all of this period. The inhibition against theological dialogue, as Weigel does not seem to know, came from the Jewish side, from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, who feared, for quite valid historical reasons, that any such discussions would turn into Christian attempts to proselytize Jews. The “establishment” Catholic side of the dialogue of course respected the Orthodox Jewish point of view with regard to the Synagogue Council of America, and respects it still in its ongoing moral/social dialogue with Orthodox Judaism. And the USCCB ongoing consultation with the National Council of Synagogues, which represents Reform and Conservative Judaism, who represent the majority of American religious Jews, have for a number of years now engaged in theological dialogue and will continue to do so. The press communiqués which note the topics of the twice-yearly meetings can be found on the USCCB website, Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. There have also

been, ever since the Second Vatican Council, theological discussions in scholarly conferences as well as in various programs set up by the USCCB working with Jewish agencies such as the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League. David Dalin's essay from a Jewish point of view on the history, and history-making events of the pontificate of John Paul II very nicely complements the overall excellent survey of George Weigel.

Part II of this exemplary volume, on ethics, begins with an essay by Stanley Arkes of Amherst, essentially on John Paul II's *Fides et Ratio*. It is an excellent essay on its subject, but it is not clear what it has to do with Catholic-Jewish relations. David Novak's reflection, as a Jew, on *Veritatis Splendor* does credit to both the late Holy Father's work and to Novak's own understanding of the field. This is theological dialogue writ large and most helpfully.

The third article in this section, Michael Novak's "The Assymetrical Relation", to my mind, is the most significant in terms of Catholic-Jewish relations. It should be read by anyone, "establishment" or not, engaged in the dialogue. Novak describes helpfully the theological asymmetry (Christians need to grapple with their relationship with Judaism in order to define themselves; Jews can profit from grappling with Christianity, but do not need to in order to understand their basic identity) and historical reality (Christians had power over Jews, and abused it; Jews did not have power over Christians), and applies these insights into contemporary controversies such as Edith Stein and conversion. He does not, however, show as deep a knowledge of Judaism as he does a commendable sympathy for it. He states, on page 82, that Jews will see Christian claims that Jesus is "the Son of God" to be "blasphemous." Extremely important for the dialogue, Jews will not see this as constituting blasphemy at all. They will, however, see the idea that a human being can be called God as "idolatrous," a category of sin invoked by some Jews to this day. But, actually, nothing Jesus said, did or claimed, would have or could have constituted "blasphemy" either in his time or in ours.

The third section, which begins with Matthew Levering on Aquinas and Maimonides, is fascinating to read and well worth the effort. Levering asserts that the reflections of these two philosophers on divine providence and natural law help illuminate the pope's poetic and pastoral understanding of the Holy Land. Bruce Marshall's "Elder Brothers" is one of the two most challenging essays in the volume. He presents and briefly discusses three options held by various Catholic theologians today for defining the Church's relationship with the Jewish people. The first is the two-covenant theory in which each community is saved by its own unique covenant with God. This respects Judaism but renders it difficult to maintain the universal salvific validity of the Christ event. The second links "the old covenant to the new as 'figure' to 'reality' or 'shadow' to truth." (p. 124) This does show the connectivity between the Jewish People and the Church, but is easily prone to slide into supersessionism, as does the third, which is that of Messianic Judaism: Jews are called to faith in Christ but should continue to observe the mitzvot. Marshall has an option which he calls a "weaker" version of option one, but which I believe deserves more extensive treatment on its own terms than given here by Marshall. This is that there is ultimately only one covenant, but that the Church and the Jewish People represent two "branches" of it. Ultimately, all humanity is saved through the grace of Christ, but Jews practicing Judaism as they understand it will, as God told them in their Scriptures (and God speaks truly) be saved. While I agree with him in rejecting a "two covenant" approach, for the reasons he gives, I do not think he presents here a fully nuanced understanding of the first (1b) "single covenant" theology, which happens to be my own approach. Engaging in a full discussion with him on this, however, is beyond the purview of a book review, since it would require a full article, or perhaps a book to do so.