

**Nostra Aetate – A Religious Revolution In Our Time
transforming Christian-Jewish and Interfaith Relations**

Rabbi David Rosen, 12 May 2015, Great Hall, Manchester Town Hall

Discussion Panel:

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Transcript:

Morai Rabbanai, your Graces, ladies and gentlemen, and many friends amongst you all.

It is a great pleasure for me to be here in this magnificent hall and to be able to celebrate this momentous event, and in a city that has a great deal of family associations, some of which you have already heard, but long-standing family associations for me, so it is a very special pleasure. If I may be allowed just for the record to correct a small error in a very generous and too long introduction that was given; I was not Chief Rabbi of South Africa, I was rabbi of the largest congregation in South Africa but not formally with the title of Chief Rabbi; though it is a great honour to bear the title of Chief Rabbi of Ireland, even though that was a very long time ago as well, more than thirty years ago. To some extent it was these two positions both in South Africa and in Ireland that paved the way for me to be able to play the role that I have been extremely blessed and fortunate to play in the interfaith field, in which I have been in effect in the right place at the right time to be able to enjoy the opportunities and benefits that I have been able to partake of and hopefully to help provide for the benefit of our respective communities, and hopefully for humanity at large.

The great rabbinic luminary of the 19th century Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsh, with the remarkable vision, describes the role of Christianity in the world as being the essential emissary for humankind to the universe of the essential truths of Torah, of the biblical revelation. And interestingly he suggests that there had to be an animus between the nascent Jesus movement that came to be known as Christianity and the Jewish bedrock out of which it came, precisely in order to fulfil that universal role.

But that animus became something a little more poisonous than simply a separation of the ways. Ironically, the second century Christian theologian Marcion, who propounded that Christianity needed to cut itself off from its Jewish sources and from the Hebrew biblical tradition, was declared a heretic by the Church; but in reality that is to precisely what happened. The parting of the ways led to an overwhelming alienation on the part of both communities, and not just to a distancing on the part of the religion of Christianity from its Jewish origins, but often to a demonization of its historical bedrock.

Its wasn't totally difficult to understand how that might be perceived as justified on the part of early Christians; indeed if you see the language of Justin Martyr you can see how in his eyes the facts on the ground simply confirmed his theological position of how he viewed the

Jewish people. “Your temple is destroyed; you are cast out among the nations; you are spurned and hated”; what greater proof could there be that G-d had rejected the Jewish people and had replaced it with a new Israel, a true Israel, the Church.

That set, therefore, the context for what came to be known in modern times as “the teaching of contempt” towards the Jews that became prevalent within the Church; a teaching which paved the way to see the Jews as in fact the enemies of G-d; as collectively guilty for the for the crime of deicide, as rejected by G-d, and indeed even in league with the devil; the ultimate demonization.

This prepared the way for all kinds of terrible things that were perpetrated against the Jewish people in the course of history. Of course there were notable exceptions, and there were periods that were glimmers of light in a rather dark context, and even though the ultimate tragedy that befell the Jewish people in the Shoah – Holocaust, was perpetrated by a pagan Nazi ideology; there is no question that it could not have succeeded to the degree that it did if the terrain had not been prepared by centuries of anti-Jewish animus.

Against this backdrop of Christian teaching that the Jews had been rejected by G-d and condemned to wander, one can also understand why there was opposition on the part of the Catholic Church (and indeed beyond the Catholic Church) to even the very idea of the return of the Jewish people to its ancestral homeland; and why, when Theodore Herzl was received by Pope Pius XII as he was seeking to hawk his wares around the European capitals to gain support for the idea of the reestablishment of Jewish independence in the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people, that he received the reply he did. Herzl records in his diaries that Pope Pius X said to him, “We cannot recognize you for you have not recognized our Lord. We cannot prevent the Jews from returning to Palestine, but if they do our priests will be there with holy water ready to baptise them all”. Now Pope Pius X was not particularly hostile; most Popes would not have given Theodore Herzl the time of day. He graciously received him, but was simply articulating what had become the dominant perception within the Christian world, that the Jews had been punished for their great failure, had been rejected by G-d, condemned to wander, and therefore could not return to establish independent Jewish life until they had recognized the Christian dispensation.

The tragedy of the Shoah perpetrated overwhelmingly by baptised Christians in ostensibly Christian lands led to a reckoning in many quarters in the Christian world, and specifically within the Catholic Church. There was also the impact of the enlightenment and a more critical reassessment of Christian history and teaching. But in all these processes very often there are personalities who personify a particular process. And even though that tragic backdrop, that terrible night of the Nazi extermination of more than six million Jews and many millions of others embodied the tragedy of Jewish homelessness and the consequences of Jewish vulnerability; and even though there were so many who collaborated with the Nazis and even more who were insensitive to the plight of the Jewish people precisely because of the teaching of contempt that had prevailed throughout the

centuries; there were very many great heroes, many very righteous gentiles who risked their lives and the lives of their families - those nearest and dearest to them - to save Jews. Amongst those great righteous individuals there was one churchman, representative of the Pope in Turkey by the name of Angelo Roncalli, who was one of the first to receive information of the Nazi extermination machine, and who was so moved by this plight that he sought to do all he could, including issuing false baptismal certificates for Jews at a time when the Nazis would allow Christians of Jewish origin to still escape their clutches. This might to the Jews amongst us not sound such a big deal, but for those who understand what the nature of Christian sacrament means, this was indeed something very dramatic.

Roncalli was subsequently appointed as the Papal Nuncio in France, and played a very significant role in enlisting Catholic countries to support the United Nations resolution that led to the establishment of the State of Israel.

In due course and to the surprise of many, he was elected as the successor to Pope Pius XII and took the name John XXIII. St John XXIII as he is now, was deeply moved by the tragedy that had befallen the Jewish people and profoundly aware that there was a link to the tradition of hundreds of years of anti-Judaism, of anti-Semitism; and this tragedy that befell the Jewish people. This was further enhanced by a dramatic meeting that took place where he received the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac who presented before him the litany of the teaching of the contempt, and in the preparation for this momentous event which I will come to in a moment, asked the Pope for his intervention. John XXIII, according to conventional wisdom, had been elected Pope as a Pope of transition, as somebody who would be able to bring the Church into the new era without too much fuss and without too much upheaval. But he proved within the very few years that he was Pope to be a true revolutionary for the Catholic Church, and he convened what is known as the Second Vatican Council, the gathering of bishops from around the world to address the challenges facing the Catholic Church in the modern world that he called “aggiornamento” – “updating” the Church and addressing essential contemporary issues. But among those issues he was already determined, and his meeting with Jules Isaac reinforced that determination, to address the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people. He gave that task to his close associate Cardinal Augustine Bea - to formulate a text that would transform and restore in essence what should be the true relationship between the Christian world and its Jewish brothers and sisters. John XXIII did not live to see the promulgation of that document, but it was ultimately issued in October 1965 and reflects the fruits of this remarkable “cheshbon nefesh” – reckoning of the soul – that took place within the Catholic Church in the wake of the tragedy of the Shoah and its reappraisal of its relationship to its fundamental Jewish origins. The document promulgated dealing with the Catholic Church’s relations to other religions m, but above all its relationship to Judaism and the Jewry is known by its opening words “Nostra Aetate” which mean “In our Times” - and it stated four dramatic things in relation to the Jewish People:

1. That any attempt to present the Jews as collectively guilty for the death of Jesus, even at the time let alone in perpetuity, is wrong; In other words, this idea is against correct Christian teaching.
2. It declared that to present the Jewish people as rejected by G-d, and thus replaced is wrong; in effect repudiating the theology of Justin Martyr that I referred to and so many others after him.
3. It affirmed that the Covenant between G-d and the Jewish people is an eternal covenant never broken.

As opposed to any of the other conciliar documents, *Nostra Aetate* did not make any reference to any previous Catholic document addressing the relationship with the Jewish people because thank G-d, providentially, there was no such formal document; but it went right back to Romans chapter 11 referring to Paul's image of the wild olive branch – the Christian gentiles - grafted on the original olive tree – the Jewish People, that provides the sustenance for that wild branch grafted onto it; and affirmed therefore, that the Jewish people is in effect intrinsic to the life of the Catholic Church, as Pope John Paul II subsequently described the relationship.

4. And finally, last but not least, *Nostra Aetate* condemned anti-Semitism by anyone at any time.

This paved the way for further documents and further developments that transformed the whole perception, attitude, teaching and relationship of the Catholic Church towards the Jewish people and has had ramifications way beyond the Catholic Church itself.

According to John XXIII's secretary, now Cardinal Loris Capovilla - I think still alive and kicking, if I am not mistaken at the age of 102 - it was John XXIII's intent, after dealing with the relationship with the Jewish people, to establish diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. But as I say, John XXIII did not live to see the document itself. He was succeeded by perhaps a more cautious Pope, who perhaps tested the waters with his visit to the Holy Land in January 1965, where there wasn't a very welcome reaction in the Arab world to his encounter with the Jewish people; and it was precisely those concerns of how Christian communities within the Arab world might be affected and impact on the Church's interests and concerns that led to a delay of some thirty years before diplomatic relations were established between the Vatican and the State of Israel.

But in effect, it was *Nostra Aetate* that had paved the way, because the moment you say that the covenant between G-d and the Jewish people is an eternal covenant never to be broken, then there is not only no problem with the idea of the return of the Jewish people to their ancestral homeland, it's totally in keeping with the core of that covenantal affirmation.

As I mentioned, it's been my great privilege as I say to be in the right place at the right time, and I was invited to be part of the little team that established and negotiated the diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel.

That paved the way for the visit of Pope John Paul II, now St John Paul II, in the year 2,000. That was a very dramatic visit. One needs to bear in mind that certainly for the Jewish community in Israel and I would say in many parts of the world, Jews do not encounter modern Christians. They tend to meet non-Jews as non-Jews, not as modern Christians. (That in part in my opinion is why the work of the Council of Christians and Jews is so important.) It's not just a matter of Jews and non-Jews getting together, it's a matter of Jews and Christians getting together, to work together, to understand one another, and to be able to bring about a greater awareness of the Divine Presence in our world and working within our lives and what this demands of us in terms of our responsibility for society, for humanity.) But certainly most Israelis do not encounter contemporary Christianity, and therefore the image of the latter tends to be taken from the tragic past. However to see a Pope at Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial, in tearful solidarity with Jewish suffering; discovering the stories of how he had saved Jews during the Shoah; of how afterwards when he was a bishop he returned Jewish children who had been sheltered by Christian parents and had those children baptised, and often against their will insisted on the children being returned back to their natural Jewish parents; this blew the minds of Israeli Jews. And to be able to see the Pope at the Kotel – the Western Wall – putting there the text of a liturgy of repentance that he had composed and had recited a few weeks earlier in St Peters asking G-d's forgiveness for sins committed down the ages against the Jewish people; had a profound effect. This opened up the Jewish community, many of whom were completely unaware of the remarkable transformation that had taken place in terms of the Church's approach towards those who Pope John Paul II described in his visit to the synagogue in 1986 and subsequently as the dearly beloved elder brother of the Church of the original covenant never broken and never to be broken. John Paul II also condemned anti-Semitism as a sin against G-d and man, and affirmed as I mentioned before, the fundamental intrinsic nature that binds the Christian world to its Jewish foundations, and without which Christianity cannot properly understand itself.

There is arguably nothing comparable to this transformation in human history.

It is something that many of us might even take for granted, and for many more is simply not known. But there is nothing comparable in human history where a particular community was seen as rejected, condemned by G-d to be spurned, and even in league with the devil; and almost overnight in terms of human history, to change one's view some one hundred and eighty degrees and see that community as the most beloved and dear, foundational to one's own identity with whom one has a relationship and a commitment as with no other; there is nothing comparable to that in human history.

And that is what we are celebrating today. We are celebrating that moment, that document Nostra Aetate that was the watershed of this transformation. Despite our different understandings of what this may mean, this was surely the work of the Holy Spirit that brought about such a revolution in our times, even though there is still plenty of additional work ahead of us to do to overcome the tragic consequences of the past.

Another great Jewish scholar of the 19th century was Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin known by his acronym: the Netziv. One of his important works was Ha'amek Davar, his commentary on the Torah - the Pentateuch. He has a fascinating comment regarding the reunion between Jacob and his brother Esau. Within both our traditions there was a tendency to paint the other as Esau, as Edom; a tendency either to deride, or even to define the other in as negative terms as possible. But commenting on Genesis 32:4 where it is written that "they fell on each other's shoulders - "vayivkoo" – and they cried", the Netziv states "this teaches us that they both cried. Jacob's compassion was also aroused with love for Esau at that moment. And so will it be in future generations. When Esau's seed are aroused in a spirit of purity to recognize the seed of Israel (Jacob) and its quality (its place within Divine Providence) then we too will be aroused to recognize Esau that he is our brother. And in a sense we are at a moment in time where that vision of the Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, is being realised. This new discovery of the unique siblinghood, sisterhood and brotherhood, that connects the Jewish community and the Christian world, a recognition that is increasing, and that was facilitated momentarily, by the promulgation fifty years ago of the historic document Nostra Aetate which we are celebrating today.

Thank you.