

CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

From Denial to Acceptance: Holy See - Israel Relations

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Keynote address at the *Holy See and Israel* Conference
Center for Christian- Jewish Learning, Boston College, June 17-18, 2009



Excellencies, Reverends, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends:

It is a special honor for me to present this address which inaugurates tomorrow's colloquium. It seems that the success of the recent Papal visit to Israel has attracted an audience wider than insiders and scholars. I welcome all here tonight for this opening presentation.

I have to confess that, before joining Israel's diplomatic service thirty-four years ago, my profession was historical research. I still find it a most stimulating pursuit. The quality control of diplomatic reporting and evaluations begins the moment the ink has dried.

My ambition was to be considered a good historian among diplomats and as a good diplomat among historians. Now, after being at the Vatican for one year, I face a new challenge: to become a theological diplomat. Theology preoccupies me more than ever, because this is the body language in which relations between Israel and the Holy See are embedded.

As the title of this lecture indicates, my historical reflections begin with the state of *non*-relationship, during which the Vatican withheld any openness towards the very concept of Jewish statehood in the Holy Land, in other words towards the Zionist idea. I wish to share with you quotations from two documents, which are very telling. The first is a very early Catholic reaction to the Zionist congress in Basel. It was published in the *Civiltà Cattolica* on May 1, 1897. *Civiltà Cattolica* was and still is the leading Jesuit periodical which is always published with an *imprimatur* (ecclesiastical approval).

Civiltà Cattolica (1.05.1897): "...according to the Holy Scriptures, the Jewish people is to live in dispersion and itinerant among the nations in order to serve as witness to Jesus, and not only through the scriptures but in its own existence. Concerning the newly built Jerusalem, which could be the center of the renewed Jewish state, we have to add that this contradicts Jesus' own prophecy."

The objections are encapsulated in the prophecy of dispersion which, according to then-prevailing Catholic doctrine should mark the fate of the Jewish people. The encounter between

Theodor Herzl and Pope Pius X was equally negative, according to Herzl's notation of the Papal reply to Herzl's quest for diplomatic support. In his January 25, 1904 diary entry Herzl presented Pope Pius X's words as follows:

There are two possibilities: Either the Jews will remain in their belief and will wait for the Messiah to come, the one who has already come according to us. In this case we cannot help the Jews, because they do not believe in the divinity of Jesus. Or they will go there [i.e. Palestine] without any religion, and then we surely cannot help them. The religion of Israel was the root of our religion but it was superseded by the teaching of Jesus, and we cannot attribute any status to it. The Jews, who should have been the first to recognize Jesus, have not recognized him until today...If milord will come to Palestine and will settle with his nation, *we will prepare churches and priests in order to baptize all of you.*"

Obviously, the first encounters of the Holy See with Zionism were problematic to say the least. The objections were theological touching upon such principles of belief as the succession of Christians to Jews as the Chosen People, or the dispersion of the Jews as a punishment for failing to recognize Jesus as their Messiah. To the best of my knowledge the secret archives of the Pope, which are relevant to the apostolic tenures of Pius X, Benedict XV and Pius XI, are open, but the Vatican's attitudes towards the Zionist movement are still known mainly from Jewish sources. It is time to diversify these sources, especially since they are already accessible in Rome.

The Vatican had to face the challenge that emerged from the rise of Zionism. After all, some Jews were transforming a religiously articulated Jewish hope into a secular action plan, aimed politically at the return of the Jewish people to the Promised Land.

Although the first Catholic objections to Zionism were theological, *political* objections were added progressively in tandem with the Zionist action plan gradually taking shape in the Land of Israel. After the Balfour Declaration, which promised Jews British support for building a homeland, Zionists became competitors on both the theological and political levels. In view of the coming Mandate rule by a Christian power, albeit of Anglican denomination, the Holy See hoped to improve its standing in Jerusalem and the Holy sites after the removal of the Ottoman rule. In order to accommodate the Vatican, Theodor Herzl and later Nahum Sokolow (who met Pope Benedict XV on May 4th 1917) gave assurances that a future Jewish state would respect Catholic interests in the Holy sites and may even consider not establishing its capital in Jerusalem (according to Herzl). The Holy See, however, saw its interests in the Holy Land best served in the context of international status for Jerusalem and Bethlehem (*corpus separatum*), which it advocated in 1937. The Holy See succeeded diplomatically to integrate this concept in a more limited formula into the UN partition plan, which was adopted on November 29, 1947. Still today this position has not been formally abandoned. A relic of it is visible every day as *L'Osservatore Romano*, reports – from Tel Aviv and never from Jerusalem – what is happening in Israel. The concept of special status for Jerusalem is still alive in the *terza loggia* in the Vatican Palace. One has only to read the Preamble to the February 15, 2000 Basic Agreement between the Holy See and the PLO. I would not rely much on Palestinian contractual promises. As long as Palestinians did not assume effective responsibility in Jerusalem, *epistola non erubescit* [the letter is not ashamed], as Cicero used to say.

However, beyond the yet-to-be solved question of Jerusalem, has the Vatican changed its basic attitude towards the Jewish homeland since 1948? The answer is clearly positive. How else should we understand the words of Pope Benedict on the occasion of my accreditation on the 12th of May 2008?

The Holy See joins you in giving thanks to the Lord that the aspirations of the Jewish people for a home in the land of their fathers have been fulfilled.

His statement was simultaneously meant as a blessing on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the establishment of Israel. These words go beyond the mere recognition which was extended in December 1993. They amount to a theological justification of the return of the Jewish People to Israel – indeed, an acceptance which shed a new light on all previous Catholic denials. What has happened to Vatican attitudes towards Israel and Zionism during the last century, between 1904 and 2009?

My answer will not be structured chronologically. It will instead rely on an eclectic choice of events. My aim is to explain how the process of change from denial to acceptance took shape. Changing attitudes is sometimes a process of adapting to new realities. What were the realities that affected the attitudes of the Holy See towards Jews and Israel, and when did they occur?

The Vatican did not recognize Israel long after its establishment in 1948. Moreover, there are indications presented in Uri Bialer's book, *Cross on the Star of David*, that the Holy See did not believe that the Jewish state would survive its War of Independence. Confronted with Israeli survival in spite of all odds, Pope Pius XII issued an encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Nostris Cruciatu*s on April 15, 1949. The letter's aim was to encourage the return to the *status quo ante* of the partition plan of November 1947. I assume that the Vatican believed that Catholic interests were much better safeguarded under an international umbrella than by relying on the benevolence of a non-believing ruler, be it Jewish or Muslim. The policy of denial was maintained throughout Pope Paul VI's Holy Land pilgrimage in 1964. The State of Israel was never mentioned by him. President Shazar, who welcomed the Pope in Megiddo, was not addressed by him as the President. However, the first decade of Israel's existence was marked by constant Israeli diplomatic efforts to come to terms with the Holy See and to pave the way towards some modest level of recognition. Nobody in Jerusalem dared to dream about full-fledged relations. Most Israeli statements, during that time, relating to the Vatican and to Pope Pius XII should be evaluated with this parameter in mind. But far beyond the arduous diplomatic parquet, new developments took place within the Second Vatican Council's deliberations during the years 1962 and 1965. The Catholic Church's new openness was aimed at claiming its place in the modern public sphere. It did not stop short of reformulating its theological attitude towards Jews, Muslims and other religions. The outcome of this reassessment is known as the Council declaration *Nostra Aetate*, promulgated on October 28, 1965. What is less known, however, is the fierce opposition by the oriental Latin churches and substantial conservative circles within and outside the curia to §4 in this declaration which addresses the Church's relationship with Jews and Judaism. This opposition has not faded away. Even until today several segments of the Catholic Church fail to accept this declaration wholeheartedly. In third world Catholicism this declaration is still regarded by many believers as not relevant. This is especially the case where no Jewish community structure can provide a solid basis for a dialogue. Therefore, we welcome any public Papal statement which refers to *Nostra Aetate*. It has immense value, even if it is a repetitive exercise.

Did this new theological approach lead to a new political relationship with Israel? It is assumed the Vatican adapts to new political realities more quickly than to changes in theology, which usually lag behind. Are we able to recognize here an exception where theological change is the forerunner of political change vis-à-vis Israel? Perhaps. At least we would like to think so.

I rather tend to assume that the new reality was a result of Israel's effective control over the entire Holy City in a united Jerusalem since 1967. This forced the Vatican to add a pragmatic dimension to its well-known declaratory policy of political denial. Hence, since 1967, Vatican diplomacy vis-à-vis Israel began to waver between two parameters:

1. A policy of strict and consequent non-recognition of Israel's sovereignty over Jerusalem, far beyond the usual interpretation of international law. The Holy See still embraced its own ideas regarding the special status of Jerusalem.
2. A pragmatic policy through which Catholic interests can best be served by having a working relationship with the party who exercises effective authority in Jerusalem.

The salient though never confirmed understanding is that the Holy See is aware of the fact that Catholic interests are better safeguarded under Israeli governance than under Muslim-Arab rule. This leads to an optic distortion whenever the Vatican laments the fate of the Christians in the Middle East. The Holy See may have good reasons to do so, but consequentially it always fails to mention the improved living conditions of Israeli Christians.

What then brought about the establishment of full diplomatic relations in 1993-94?

- Was it adaptation to the new political reality of the Oslo peace process? Hence, the Vatican could not simply behave more Palestinian than the Palestinians themselves.
- Was this peaceful scenario only a pretext for realizing a long standing personal aspiration of Pope John-Paul II? Hence, the Pope overruled his own advisers.
- Was this establishment to be understood within the overarching framework of zealous Vatican diplomacy during the nineties to establish relations with as many countries as possible? Hence, Vatican diplomacy is focused less on Israel than one might assume.
- Was it a belated political consequence of the theological change towards Judaism as reflected in *Nostra Aetate*? Hence, it would denote theological priority over political considerations in the shaping of Vatican diplomacy.

Historical truth may reside within all four reasons. Each reason probably contributed its own share. I, at least, cannot provide a clearer answer. It is more than fair to leave this to future research.

THE NATURE OF OUR DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

Allow me now to outline some of the parameters of our diplomatic relations. They will reflect the unique framework within which the relations are conducted.

First Parameter: Asymmetry in Scope of Representation

Examples:

1. The nuncio, as the Ambassador of the Holy See, is at the same time a high ecclesiastical dignitary with the title of archbishop. He *may* perform his religious office, but he *must* care about the wellbeing of all the Catholics in his host country, including intervention on their behalf with the authorities. However, he will not participate in the Presidential New Year reception in honor of the non-Jewish religious leadership. He rather prefers to participate in the annual reception for the diplomatic corps. By doing so he underlines the

reality of the Vatican as a full-fledged member of the international community of sovereign states.

2. An Israeli Ambassador to the Holy See (on the other hand) is by definition regarded as a lay person representing his state but not any religious community. Therefore, he may observe and discuss, with his hosts in the Holy See, religious concerns, but will not be able to speak *officially* on their behalf.

Second Parameter: Intertwining Theological and Political Mode of Action

Examples:

1. The theological and political levels of performing the duties of a Nuncio are intertwined. When he requests to enter an area of restricted accessibility for the purpose of saying Mass, he is making a request in the name of religious freedom. Once his request is granted, it is regarded as a political gesture, meeting expectations of religious freedom maintaining friendly bilateral relations as well. However, if, upon his return, he speaks to the media about his visit it may be seen as a political and not as a spiritual act.
2. In order to enable the resumption of the interfaith dialogue between the Holy See and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel one year ago, the Vatican had to write a response from the highest possible rank, explaining, in an acceptable manner, the Papal measure regarding the Good Friday prayer for the Jews. Every answer would have entailed an interpretation about the time when the truth will be unveiled to the Jews. The final answer (in an eschatological frame of time) given to the Rabbis came from the highest political echelon in the Vatican – without any binding theological authority. The dialogue was resumed. I have reasons to believe that at the given moment, this was the best answer the Holy See could provide, and Israel did not insist on a theological *imprimatur*.
3. Both the Nuncio and the Ambassador of Israel participate in the interfaith meetings between the Vatican and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. It is just this grey zone between diplomacy and theology which I personally cherish most.
4. Issues of beatification or excommunication are internal theological matters of the Vatican. Diplomatic courtesy obliges Israel to respect this. Nevertheless, when these matters have a political bearing on the public sphere, such as Pius XII's disputed historical role during the Holocaust or Bishop Williamson's denial of the Holocaust. Israel's official representatives reserve their right to take public positions related to the political public sphere. At the same time they are advised to avoid any reference to internal affairs of the Vatican.

Third Parameter: Intertwining Theology and Domestic Policy

Examples:

1. Most matters for discussion on the bilateral agenda relating to Israel's authority are within Israel's domestic policy: taxation, exemptions, juridical status, property rights. The Holy See cares about the wellbeing of Catholics in Israel, the great majority of whom are Israeli citizens. They are served by the Ministry of the Interior. Fiscal negotiations are,

from the Israeli perspective, a domestic issue involving four ministries (Finance, Justice, Interior and Foreign). For the Holy See, these are foreign political issues.

2. Most matters to be discussed on the bilateral agenda relating to the authority of the Holy See are theological issues: anti-Judaism, combating racism and antisemitism, Holocaust education, joint research and academic exchange, promoting Biblical studies etc. Classical bilateral ventures, such as cooperative efforts in development or joint issue of commemorative stamps, exist but are not many. Economic or defense issues are obviously not included in our bilateral relations.

Fourth Parameter: Intertwining Freedom of Religion and Security

1. Extending visa permits to Catholic clergy is, for the Vatican, a matter of exercising freedom of religion, which Israel respects. If, however, a cleric holds passports from states which are at war with, or do not recognize Israel, Israeli authorities regard the matter as a security issue. On this delicate matter not all the hopes of the Vatican can be fulfilled.

Fifth Parameter: The Triangular Nature of Our Bilateral Relations

Examples:

2. The not-always silent shareholders of the Holy See in the bilateral relationship with Israel are the Catholics in Israel, most of whom have Israeli citizenship. Most are of Arab ethnicity, and they bear the marks of a Catholic minority of 140,000 persons within a larger Arab Muslim minority. The fact that they belong to the higher socio-economic echelons in Israel seems not be a consolation to them. They rather like to lament about their fate, despite the fact that they are far better off in Israel in every respect than their brethren are in any given Arab Muslim country.
3. In the past as well as in the present some Israeli Catholics are opponents to the improvement of relations between the Holy See and Israel. Their leadership opposed the theological opening towards the Jews during the Second Vatican Council. They were overruled by the Holy See when they objected to the establishment of diplomatic relations. It seems to me that they will be overruled also in the future when the interests of the Vatican require it.

PAPAL VISITS TO ISRAEL: A BARAMOTER OF THE RELATIONSHIP

It is rewarding to compare the three papal visits, as we can draw some conclusions on the state of bilateral relations. In 1964, the visit of Paul VI was a clear expression of a non-recognition policy. *Nostra Aetate* had not yet been promulgated. The aim of the visit, beyond the act of pilgrimage, was the meeting with the Greek-Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras in Jerusalem. The Papal visit of John Paul II in 2000, on the other hand, was in the context of the Second Millennium celebrations. To the best of my knowledge, the long-time pre-announced Papal visit took place without a formal invitation. It was as if Papa Wojtilla had set himself in motion and later, knocking at Israel's door, announced, "I'm coming – are you at home?" The personal desire of the Pope overruled any objections on the part of his advisors and of the local Catholics. The program included, not only acts of recognition by visiting the President at his official residence in Jerusalem. His personal affection towards Jews was visible, as he stayed longer than planned at Yad Vashem, speaking with Jews from Krakov who had survived the

Holocaust. His dramatic gesture of asking forgiveness from God at the Western Wall gave his visit a historical dimension. At the same time, not everyone in the Vatican was happy with this gesture, which might have far-reaching theological implications. In November 2008, the first operative steps were set in motion in order to implement Pope Benedict's long-standing desire to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor and to perform a pastoral visit together with an act of pilgrimage to the Holy Land. One of the first Vatican requests, after frequent verbal invitations, was to get official invitations from all heads of state in question (i.e. the King of Jordan, the President of Israel and the President of the PA). With those invitations in hand, the Pope gave his visit a *political* dimension. This served as an additional proof that the Holy See is aiming at a special position as a political player. The gestures, which could mean an upgrading of bilateral relations with Israel, were taken hereby into account.

By and large, the visit of 2000 served as a model for the Papal program in 2009. The slight changes were more of a non-political nature mainly due to logistical considerations. Neither "Operation Cast Lead" nor the Williamson affair, neither the elections in Israel nor the historical dispute about Pius XII, endangered the Papal visit at any given moment. Potential minefields, such as a visit to the display about Pius XII in the Yad Vashem museum, were cleared in advance. An uncontrolled initiative of the Rabbi in charge of the Western Wall, not to allow bearing crosses during the Papal visit, was thwarted at an early stage. The preparations continued discretely without interruption. As in the past, the local Catholics were the least excited about the visit. The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem Twal had to *campaign* among his flock before the Papal visit took place. On the other hand, the Jewish world was cooperative and joined Israel in accepting the explanatory remarks given by the Holy See regarding Williamson's Holocaust denial. In his exceptional letter to his Bishops, Benedict expressed thanks to Jewish friends for showing understanding, an attitude which, according to the Pope, many Catholics were not ready to show. Many critics within the Church and in the media watched every move of Pope Benedict in order to "celebrate" another potential mishap. With this background in mind, the overall success of the visit counts even more. Vatican diplomacy performed at its best during the visit. The state secretariat tried to accommodate the sensitivities of Jordanians, Israelis and Palestinians, each upon its own merits, as much as it could. Only requests which put the Vatican's own interests in jeopardy were rejected.

For Israel, Benedict's visit was of historical dimension, and not only because it actually took place. Israel holds the present Pope in high esteem perceiving him as very friendly towards Jews as well as promoting interfaith dialogue with them. It seems that his visit has fashioned a tradition acknowledging that any future Pope may visit the Holy Land and Israel. The program of John Paul II is likely to remain as the model for visits to come. Pope Benedict's statements during his visit will nourish our future relations for a long time. His homily on names and memory in Yad Vashem was a contribution to indepth reflection never heard before on such an occasion. His remark on the meaning of the Hebrew expression *batah* at the Presidential palace was constructive in promoting the semiotic and political nexus between security and confidence. His clear words against Holocaust denial and his call to combat anti-Semitism, as well as his commitment to dialogue with the "elder brother" in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* will also hopefully reach Catholic quarters in the Third World.

Bearing the events of the past year in mind, we can express our present state of bilateral affairs with Samson's riddle from the *Book of Judges* (14:14):

...and out of the strong came forth sweetness

כי מעד יצא מתוק