

A living question mark: Protestants and Jews after *Nostra Aetate*

by [Clare Amos](#) in the [October 28, 2015](#) issue



Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time, sculpture by Joshua Koffman for the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*. Photo by Joshua Koffman via [Creative Commons license](#).

This month marks the 50th anniversary of the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, one of the shortest but conceivably among the most influential of the major documents to come out of the Second Vatican Council. Its promulgation in October 1965 was controversial, and its appearance was therefore delayed. When it was finally published, its scope had been enlarged. It was no longer a document focused solely on Judaism and Jewish-Catholic relations; it also included brief reflection on other non-Christian faiths, especially Islam.

Looking back with the advantage of 50 years' hindsight on what *Nostra Aetate* said about Judaism, our first reaction might be surprise at what it says and doesn't say, and at its tone. It states that the Jews of today cannot be held responsible for the passion of Christ, but this comes across as a rather grudging declaration, prefaced as it is with the remark, "True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ . . ." An explicit reference to expunging the charge of deicide (the killing of God) had been present in an earlier draft but was eventually omitted as a result of pressure from representatives of Middle Eastern Catholics. It was noted that the church "decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone," but there was no

overt admission that the church and its adherents had been guilty of precisely such actions many times over many centuries.

A careful reading of the paragraphs in the document relating to Judaism makes it apparent that the theological position adopted could be described as a soft supersessionism (the belief that Christianity has superseded Judaism and made it obsolete). Liberal Catholic critics noticed that though *Nostra Aetate* described other religions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism in terms that followers of those faiths would regard as authentic, the same courtesy was not applied to Judaism, which was clearly viewed through Christian spectacles, albeit with a gaze that was seeking to be as benevolent as possible.

In spite of such limitations, *Nostra Aetate* was a watershed in the field of Christian-Jewish relations, not simply for what it said, but because of the radically new direction it encouraged—and not merely among Catholics. Other Christians, including many of the mainline Protestant churches that are members of the World Council of Churches, found themselves wanting to rethink their engagement with Judaism and their theological understanding of the Jewish-Christian relationship. Indeed, it is arguable that it was *Nostra Aetate* and the change of Catholic institutional direction resulting from it that prompted the World Council of Churches to open its own interreligious dialogue office in 1971.

Although the initial Jewish reaction to *Nostra Aetate* was mixed, by 1970 a representative group of Jews, largely American but coming from across the Jewish religious spectrum, had formed the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, initially to be a bilateral dialogue partner with the Catholic Church. (Later the IJCIC also entered into bilateral dialogues with other Christian bodies, including the World Council of Churches.)

In 1974 the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews was established. The very existence and name of this body witnesses to the ambiguities of the relationship with Judaism in Catholic eyes. First, a deliberate decision was made not to include Judaism among the "other religions" for which the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue was responsible, but to locate the relationship with Judaism within this commission, which is attached to but autonomous within the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. This marked out Judaism as somehow enjoying a special relationship with Christianity, at least in Catholic eyes.

Second, it was significant that the title of the Vatican body was “*Religious Relations*.” This wording was deliberate, and was intended to steer conversations away from dangerous political topics such as the question of Israel and its role in Jewish self-understanding. Since 1974 interventions of three popes (John Paul II, Benedict XVI, Francis) have all emphasized the close fraternal relationship between Catholics and Jews.

Pope Francis’s appreciation of Judaism, linked in part to his close friendship with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, is reflected in his recent encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*. The section on relations with Judaism, distinct from both the section on ecumenism (relationships with other Christian bodies) and the section on relations with other religions, is especially warm in tone and notably remarks, “We hold the Jewish people in special regard because their covenant with God has never been revoked, for ‘the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.’” This belief in one shared irrevocable covenant, common to both Christians and Jews, language that was particularly emphasized by Cardinal Walter Kasper during his tenure as head of the CRRJ, reflects a massive change even from the language of *Nostra Aetate*, yet at the same time we can see in that earlier document the seed of these later developments.

So *Nostra Aetate* deserves to be celebrated 50 years on. Among the gatherings to mark the occasion (the Vatican has scheduled one for late this month) was a meeting in June in Rome of the International Council of Christians and Jews, the global body that acts as an umbrella for national Christian-Jewish organizations. I was privileged to be present.

I was surprised at how the meeting brought out my “inner Protestant.” I’m an Anglican (Episcopalian) with a considerable amount of ecumenical experience, which has included close friendships with (Roman) Catholic Christians. However, I found the heavy focus at the meeting on Catholic-Jewish relations quite disconcerting and jarring. It was telling how often a speaker would begin by using the phrase “Christian-Jewish relations” but then slide into “Catholic-Jewish relations” by the second sentence.

To some extent, of course, this was due to the location and theme of our gathering, and the fact that the highlight was an audience with Pope Francis. But it also represents a wider reality that perhaps I was not sufficiently aware of. I think there is a particular appreciation among the Jewish community of the importance of relations

with the Catholic Church. It is partly demography: there are a lot more Catholic Christians in the world than there are liberal Protestants. It is also the fact that at least in theory the Catholic Church can speak with one theological voice, which is impossible for the rest of Christendom. And the theological voice of the Catholic Church has over the past 20 to 30 years been used to explore and witness to a theological closeness with Judaism.

A considerable majority of what is called the Christian Scholars Group (largely based in the United States), which works to “develop more adequate Christian theologies of the church’s relationship to Judaism and the Jewish people,” are Catholics. Within the mainstream Protestant world, although most churches (certainly in the United States) now have statements and policies distancing themselves from the deliberate targeting of Jews for conversion to Christianity, there has not been the same institutional desire to push toward finding ways to express closer theological convergence between Judaism and Christianity. (The Lutherans, especially in Germany, may be something of an exception here, and—bearing in mind Martin Luther’s ambiguous attitudes to Judaism—interesting work is being done in preparation for 2017 and the 500th anniversary of the Reformation.)

It is very difficult for the non-Catholic Christian world to own with one voice a theology that gives an unambiguously salvific role to the Jewish religion in itself. It was telling how efforts at theological dialogue between Jews and Christians fostered by the World Council of Churches effectively came to a halt in the late 1980s. WCC members were divided on whether they could say that Judaism was a totally valid way to God or that Jews should not be the subject of Christian mission. The WCC’s increasingly strong support for Palestinians also flavored the discussion.

Of course, in the Catholic world no less than the Protestant one, there may be questions as to how far any new thinking filters down into the religious experience of ordinary believers. Probably quite a lot of sermons still get preached with an implicit element of supersessionism. A factor here is surely the lectionary, and in the case of the Revised Common Lectionary, the way the Old Testament lesson is often set over against the Gospel in a typological fashion.

Protestant churches, rather more than the Catholic Church, often tend to find themselves caught between two opposing tendencies, both of which militate against a unique theological affirmation of Judaism. On the one hand is the conservative viewpoint that still wants firmly to assert that salvation is to be found only in the

name of Jesus (Acts 4:12). On the other hand is the considerable number of Protestant Christians, at least in the Western world, who hold a “pluralist” religious viewpoint and are willing to accept the possibility that salvation may be experienced through many different religious traditions, not merely Christianity and Judaism. From that perspective, worrying about how to express the possible salvific role of Judaism is less relevant.

Another reflection from my recent ICCJ experience was that there may be a difference between Europe and the United States in the comparative importance given to key practical and social questions. In Europe—I speak as a citizen of the United Kingdom who resides in France and works in Switzerland—the past few years have seen a resurgence in what I call “traditional” anti-Semitism. Some of it is obviously influenced by the political situation in the Middle East and the convoluted interplay between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in Western Europe today, but there are also definite examples of hostility to Jews that deliberately play into historic accusations.

You don’t have to venture too far into the darker corners of the Internet to find material that seeks to blame the financial crisis in Greece on Jewish bankers or even more nauseatingly tries to claim a link between some of those being investigated in the child sexual abuse inquiry in the United Kingdom and the infamous blood libel (that is, that Jews kill Christian children to drink their blood).

I was surprised at how little attention was focused on such concerns at our meeting in Rome. Maybe it was because the agenda was substantially driven by the organization’s recently elected president, Philip Cunningham, a theologian at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, who primarily sees the ICCJ as a theological advance guard. From where I am standing in Europe, that ambition, however laudable, needs to be reinforced by a still watchful eye on other concerns. The ancient enemy of anti-Semitism can all too easily rear its ugly head.

I sometimes talk about the lopsidedness of Jewish-Christian relationships, both in the “guilt” linked to anti-Semitism that many Western Christians carry and in the way that on the whole there is more interest among Christians in exploring the relation with Judaism, both theologically and practically, than the other way round. This is one reason that the statement *Dabru Emet*, a Jewish reflection on relations with Christians, published in 2000 by a range of American Jewish religious leaders, is significant. Although primarily intended to foster an intra-Jewish conversation, *Dabru*

Emet was clearly undertaken with the awareness that Christians would be listening in.

This need to correct the lopsidedness in the relationship becomes more important because of the shift in Christian demography. I arrived at the ICCJ meeting just having come from teaching at a theological summer school for young Asian Christians held in Cambodia, so the monochrome hue of the participants—other than Israelis, possibly no one was there from either Asia or Africa—made an impact on me. While in Cambodia I had begun teaching a session on anti-Semitism by asking how many of the participants in the group had met a Jewish person. Out of the group of 24, only four people raised their hands.

I am increasingly convinced that both Christians and Jews need to take account of the way that the shift of Christianity toward the Global South, both in terms of numbers and of influence, is bound to affect the nature of international Jewish-Christian relationships. If you are an East Asian Christian who is unlikely ever to meet a Jewish person in the flesh, and if the convoluted European story of centuries of Christian antagonism to Jews is essentially alien to you (but linked somehow to your own colonial experience), and if you are a Christian minority in a society that is majority Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim and need to wrestle with the relationship between Christianity and these faiths—then you are going to be looking at relations with Judaism in a way very different from the way European and American Christians do. In particular you may find yourself asking (and some Asian Christians are doing just that) whether Christians should continue to think in terms of a “special relationship” with Judaism.

The situation is slightly different in Africa, where theological and biblical conservatism plays into the picture. There is what I call a naive supersessionism—often combined with a strongly political pro-Israel stance. Somehow the history of the last 2,000 years is collapsed and the Jews of the New Testament (and Old Testament) are implicitly conflated with Judaism today. Judaism is somehow critiqued and cherished in the same breath. The hostility to Islam felt by Christians in some African countries also encourages a form of Christian Zionism, although not necessarily including the detailed dispensationalist schemas prevalent among some Western evangelicals.

This leads us toward the elephant in the room, which is largely unspoken in this article as it also was unspoken during much of the meeting in Rome, though

ultimately named. However hard one might try, the question of Israel/Palestine cannot ultimately be ignored in the Jewish-Christian conversation today. It clearly has the possibility of poisoning relations. But as I hinted about *Nostra Aetate* above, the question refused to be silenced even in this key document of Vatican II.

The past 50 years (in particular the past 25) have seen something of a sea change in the stance of mainline American Protestants on this issue. The change is symbolized for me by the writings of the well-known Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. In 1977 Brueggemann published an influential book called *The Land*, which looked at the theme of land as a key motif in the Old Testament. It did not address at all the significance of this topic for land questions in contemporary Israel/Palestine, though most readers probably assumed that Brueggemann took a broadly, though qualified, pro-Israel stance. I remember meeting Brueggemann on occasion during the 1980s, when he commented to me that academic and church life in the United States made expression of any other stance very difficult.

When a second edition of *The Land* appeared in 2002, however, it had an additional preface which made it clear that Brueggemann was now aware that, as he put it, “the land as a theological theme is never to be taken as innocent,” and which made explicit reference to potential implications of the ideology of land entitlement for the situation in Israel and Palestine. Clearly Brueggemann’s earlier stance was beginning to shift. His latest work—a small book published only a few weeks ago with the title *Chosen? Reading the Bible amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*—clearly tackles head-on difficult themes related to what seems to be an increasingly intransigent conflict. Brueggemann’s perspective is now very different from what it was in the 1970s, and witnesses to a shift not only in his own views but also in the willingness of mainline American Protestant churches to be overtly critical of Israel in a way that was unthinkable a generation or so ago.

Along with this shift in one direction among the more liberal American churches, a shift has occurred in the other direction among conservative evangelical Christians influenced by forms of Christian Zionism. I sometimes tell the story of an experience I had when I lived in Jerusalem for five years in the 1970s. I was friendly with one of the wives of the Palestinian Anglican clergy. Her husband was then the senior Anglican pastor of Ramallah, a town just north of Jerusalem. She, apart from being a loyal clergy wife, was a well-known Palestinian poet.

I happened to encounter her one day in the courtyard of St. George's Anglican Cathedral when she was gasping, almost hyperventilating, with disbelief. She had just come from lunch at one of the Christian guesthouses in Jerusalem where she had had a conversation with a Christian woman pilgrim from the West, visiting the Holy Land for a couple of weeks. This visitor, on discovering that my friend was a Palestinian Christian living on the West Bank, had informed her quite categorically that "she couldn't be a real Christian, because if she were a real Christian she would of course have been willing to leave her hometown, since she would know that God had given the land to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

In those more innocent days of the 1970s both my Palestinian friend and I regarded such views as extraordinary and extreme. So I am perturbed that 40 years on, what seemed then to be extraordinary has, with the rise of Christian Zionism in the United States and the Jewish religious right in Israel itself, become far more acceptable to think.

However, changing views on this topic is not just the prerogative of Christians. There have also been changes in Jewish circles in the United States, particularly among members of the younger generation. There's still a general commitment among the vast majority to the importance of the continuing existence of the state of Israel, but they are now much more willing to be openly critical of current Israeli stances and actions. I had a memorable conversation this past summer with a young Jewish woman from New York. She commented that she, and many young Jews, committed as they were to humane and humanitarian values, felt "betrayed" (her word) by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in particular because of Israeli actions in Gaza in the summer of 2014.

One thing is sure: from the Christian perspective (and probably from the Jewish perspective as well), when it comes to Jewish-Christian relations and the issue of Israel/Palestine, there are more questions than answers. I have been struck by how many publications on this subject carry a question mark in their title. *Sharing One Hope?* is a 2001 Church of England report on Jewish-Christian relations. *Land of Promise?* is a 2012 Anglican Communion report on the land and Christian Zionism. And now Brueggemann's *Chosen?*

Such titles witness to the essential ambiguity and mystery of the relationship between Jews and Christians at many levels, theological, historical, and political. My husband, Alan Amos, speaks of Judaism being for Christians "a living question

mark.” That phrase reflects my own vision. It is true to the apophatic tradition that I cherish and that Christians ultimately derive from the elusiveness of the name of God as it is portrayed in Exodus 3, a fundamental biblical text for both Christians and Jews.

Perhaps part of the reason for my hesitation about the “theological advance guard” approach is my perception that Christians don’t actually need and should not seek total clarity and coherence in thinking about Judaism. It is its very difference from—yet also closeness to—Christianity for which we can esteem this religion and its people.

Thirteen years ago, on the 37th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, Cardinal Kasper described Judaism in a wonderfully evocative phrase as “the sacrament of every otherness.” Kasper’s words offer us an inexhaustible richness for reflection. Through a deepening relationship with Jews, Christians can come to a deeper understanding of our need to value the other, the one not like us, if we are going to live healthily in God’s world.