

Kardinaal Willebrandslezing 2008

**Responsible Teaching
about the Death of Jesus**

main speaker:

Professor Mary C. Boys DD

co-speakers:

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Ten geleide

Hoe het niet moet, dat wisten we al. Maar hoe het wèl kan, dat is de vraag. Ik doel op de manier waarop de joodse godsdienst en het joodse volk ter sprake komen in katholieke catechese en verkondiging.

Voor die vraag, “hoe dan wel?”, beginnen de contouren van een antwoord zich af te tekenen. Enerzijds door het document van de Pauselijke Bijbelcommissie uit 2001 over de manier waarop “Het joodse volk en zijn heilige geschriften” worden gewaardeerd “in de christelijke bijbel”. Anderzijds door het werk van dr. Mary Boys, hoogleraar aan het *Union Theological Seminary* in New York.

Het verheugt ons daarom zeer dat prof. Boys bereid was in januari 2008 de Kardinaal Willebrands Lezing uit te spreken. Haar bijdrage spitst zich toe op de presentatie van het lijden van Jezus. Ook de co-referaten, van twee Nederlandse hoogleraren, werden in het Engels gehouden. U vindt alledrie de teksten in dit boekje afgedrukt.

Wij hopen dat deze bundeling mag bijdragen aan een verdere toepassing van de nieuwere inzichten in de praktijk van kerk en onderwijs.

Drs. Jaap F. van der Meij, voorzitter
van de Katholieke Raad voor Israël.
(RK instelling voor de religieuze betrekkingen met
het jodendom)

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Responsible Teaching about the Death of Jesus

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I thank the Catholic Council for Relations with the Jews (Katholieke Raad voor Israël) for the honor of lecturing on this Day of Judaism. Coming as I do from the small, if densely populated, island of Manhattan, originally called New Amsterdam, I am delighted to return to this wonderful city.

Preparing for this lecture afforded me the opportunity to reread some of Cardinal Willebrands's addresses and essays as well as to review his involvement at the Vatican's Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity and then as the first president of the Pontifical Council for Religious Relations with Jews. Since so much of Cardinal Willebrands's life was dedicated to the teachings articulated in *Nostra Aetate*, I propose this afternoon to comment upon his 1977 speech on "Catechetics and Judaism," in which he called attention to the presentation of Judaism in catechesis. It is precisely this focus that has been a major concern of my own work.¹

My lecture will proceed as follows. The first section consists of a brief word about the process by which *Nostra Aetate* came before the Council. Then I will take up the Cardinal's essay

¹ Johannes Cardinal Willebrands, *Church and Jewish People: New Considerations* (New York and Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1992), 73-76.

and engage in an extended reflection on one of the “four very practical points” he identifies, namely teaching about the death of Jesus. Finally, I will offer some concluding words about what I believe this means for Jews and Christians today.

I. *Nostra Aetate*

Because we stand now at over 42 years since *Nostra Aetate*, it is easy to overlook its difficult birth. During the preparatory period and the Second Vatican Council itself, political intrigue and entrenched theological positions made for a perilous journey. In light of formidable barriers – the paucity of conciliar participants (of about 3200 total) who possessed accurate knowledge of Judaism and other religions of the world, the longstanding anti-Jewish teachings of Christianity, the resistance from a block of traditionalists who contested any significant changes in church teaching (Cardinal Ottaviani’s motto of “*Semper Idem*” seemed to be their watchword), and the opposition of Eastern bishops, especially those from Arab lands – it is a wonder that even a weakened document finally emerged from the fourth and final session of the Council in October 1965. Scurrilous antisemitic tracts were distributed by anonymous or pseudonymous parties at all the sessions, although, according to one of the commission members involved in the drafting of *Nostra Aetate*, their “arguments were so vile, their allusions so repulsive, their origin apparently so uncertain and even suspect” that this literature exercised no influence on the conciliar participants.²

² Cited in John M. Oesterreicher, “Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 3 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 1-136 (citation, 122).

It is important to remember that the documents the council fathers promulgated were forged in the crucible of debate, controversy and conflict (let us hope Vatican III will include council mothers as well). As Michael Barnes observes, without recognition of the contentious history of *Nostra Aetate*, the reader will detect only a “portentous blandness.”³

One of the foremost historians of Vatican II, Giuseppe Alberigo, asserts that the most important “novelty” of the Council lay not in its various positions but rather that it was convoked and held at all. In that same spirit, it may perhaps be said that one of the most significant aspects of *Nostra Aetate* was that it survived the drafting process and was finally promulgated.⁴ And what is vital today is recognition of its “reception,” that is, the way in which this modest text – a disappointment to many who worked on it – nonetheless became the basis for a dialogue that our ancestors, whether Jewish or Christian, would find absolutely incredible. Yet it is not enough to cite *Nostra Aetate* as if it were the final word. We must understand its significance, refine its claims, and hand on its spirit. On this Day of Judaism, we must celebrate this marvelous step forward, and resolve to keep the momentum going forward.

II. Teaching and Preaching about the Death of Jesus

The key passage of *Nostra Aetate* to which Cardinal Willebrands draws attention is this now frequently cited passage:

³ Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, 38.

⁴ Giuseppe Alberigo, “The Christian Situation after Vatican II,” in G. Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Joseph A. Komonchak, eds., *The Reception of Vatican II* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 11 n.31.

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ; still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ

I assume that you who have come to this lecture are very familiar with this passage – indeed, I suspect many of you have been teaching it in some way for many years. Yet I think we are not done with it, for at least three reasons. First, the death of Jesus stands at the center of Jewish-Christian relations. Second, the formulation of the Council requires nuancing from more recent biblical scholarship. Third, we are obliged to hand on the deepened and refined teaching of *Nostra Aetate* to generations of Christians and Jews who have little or no sense of the enormous significance of the conciliar and post-conciliar teaching.

The Death of Jesus and the Christian-Jewish Relationship

The texts about the suffering and death of Jesus, particularly the so-called passion narratives of the four canonical Gospels, constitute a narrative that is fundamental to Christian identity. Collectively, they give rise to a story as elemental to Christianity as the Exodus is to Judaism. Yet have been used in ways that I can only call sacrilegious in their disparagement and vilification of Jews and Judaism. The charge that the Jews bear responsibility for the death of Jesus that was initially leveled in

the New Testament, developed with considerable rhetorical effect in early church writings, and became a common staple of church teaching for nearly two millennia. So the story of Jesus' passion and death constitutes the theological core of anti-Judaism. In short, the passion narratives are both deadly (to Jews) and life-giving (to Christians).

The passion narratives are life-giving. Stories of Jesus' death are lodged in the core of Christian identity. They offer an encounter with the way Jesus experienced the human condition, including betrayals by those closest to him, his own fear of death, uncertainty about God's will, and the endurance of terrible suffering and an ignominious death. These stories cause us, in the words of that magnificent spiritual, to "tremble, tremble, tremble."⁵

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

This spiritual offers us a glimpse into the power of the passion stories. An enslaved people could identify with the suffering Jesus; in some way, he had taken on their pain as well. The

⁵ In his commentary on this spiritual, James Cone writes: "Because black slaves knew the significance of the pain and shame of Jesus' death on the cross, they found themselves by his side. [...] Through the blood of slavery, they transcended the limitations of space and time. Jesus' time became their time, and they encountered a new historical existence. Through the experience of being slaves, they encountered the theological significance of Jesus' death: through the crucifixion, Jesus makes an unqualified identification with the poor and the helpless and takes their pain upon himself." *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury, 1972), 53-54.

passion stories are especially revelatory for marginalized peoples: Jesus, through whom we Christians see God revealed, is one with the marginal peoples of this world – all those whom brutal rulers, whether Pontius Pilate or Hitler or Pol Pot considered expendable, of non-human status. In sum, for many Christians, because Jesus has suffered, he “gets” our suffering.

Further, the death-resurrection of Jesus lies at the heart of the church’s liturgical life and spirituality, as well as in its creeds and doctrines. It has evoked centuries of reflection, given rise to powerful rituals, inspired beautiful art and music, stimulated tomes of theology, motivated persons to sacrifice themselves for a cause greater than they, and sustained persons through times of horrifying suffering. The stories of Jesus’ death symbolize all that is sacred in Christianity.⁶

The story has also been told in ways that have glorified suffering, condoned passivity in the face of violence, and constricted the meaning of salvation by associating it only with the death of Jesus, as if his life and teaching had little meaning. These are troubling interpretations, but there is another even more troubling one: We know from history that misinterpretations of the passion narratives have rationalized hostility to and violence against Jews. As Gerard Sloyan, a respected New Testament scholar (and Catholic priest) lays out the charge: “The chief actual sufferers from Jesus’ death by crucifixion have been, paradoxically, not Christians but Jesus’ fellow Jews.”⁷

⁶ In the Roman Catholic tradition, we speak of the passion-death and resurrection as the “paschal mystery,” (from the Greek, *pascha*, derived from Hebrew *pesach*)—that is, Jesus’ “passing over” from death to life. In a sense, the Eucharist is the *Haggadah* from which we retell this story and enact it ritually.

⁷ Gerard S. Sloyan, *The Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) p. 2.

In this lecture I can only highlight the ways in which accusations that “the Jews” bore total responsibility for the death of Jesus have been the centripetal force in anti-Jewish teachings. Indeed, I believe one could write the history of Jewish-Christian relations through the lens of this accusation. But on this occasion, let several examples suffice.

As you know, the charge originates in the New Testament. The writers of the gospels differ from one another in the way they tell the story of Jesus’ passion (arrest, beating, trial[s]) and death. But common to all their accounts is this: Jews are primarily responsible for the death of Jesus. Two texts in particular have been especially troubling. The Gospel of Matthew (27:25) has a scene in which Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator, acclaims his innocence before an unruly crowd. He washes his hands in their presence, saying, “I am innocent of this man’s blood; see to it yourselves. Then the people as a whole answered: ‘His blood be on us and our children!’” The Gospel of John (19:14-16) puts this accusation in sharpest relief in the scene in which “the Jews” demand of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, “Crucify him, crucify him.”

Already by the mid-second century, the accusation that the Jews had killed Jesus had moved out of Judea: Justin Martyr, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, accused Trypho: “He was pierced by you.” In late second century, the bishop of Sardis (in modern Turkey), Melito, (d. ca. 190), preached an eloquent sermon articulating what became the leitmotif of anti-Judaism: in killing Jesus, the Jews had murdered God.

Major Christian figures of the fourth and fifth centuries, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and John Chrysostom (347-407), intensified the separation. Augustine argued that the Jews,

though responsible for the death of Son of God, were ignorant of his true identity because they misread their own scriptures. They preserved faithfully the books of Scripture, but Jews read them “as the face of a blind man appears in a mirror – by others it is seen, but by himself it is not seen.” (*City of God* 18.46) Because the Jews had rejected Jesus, they were cursed to wander in exile as reprobates. Yet they must not be killed so that the world will see the consequences of rejecting the Christ. Chrysostom authored some of the most vitriolic denunciations of Jews: “Where Christ-killers gather, the cross is ridiculed, God blasphemed, The Father unacknowledged, the Son insulted, the grace of the Spirit rejected.” (*Homily One Against the Judaizers* 1.6).

How can we not be troubled by these interpretations of the passion and death of Jesus that portray Jews as blind to the ways of God, unfaithful, cursed, a deicide people. But over time, the interpretations became even more toxic to Jews.

Once Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire ca. 379 C.E., the church had greater capacity to exercise its theology in the political and cultural sphere. Jews became subject in many areas to decrees that restricted their rights and effectively reduced them to second-class citizens. Yet Augustine’s dictum that Jews were not to be killed held force; Christian society tolerated the presence of Jews in *their* society.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was a tragic turn to violence against Jews. The Crusaders (so called because of the crosses that marked their tunics) set out to destroy the infidel Muslims, but found other infidels – Jews – en route. The church became more preoccupied with rooting out heretics, and as Christians began to learn more about rabbinic Judaism (in

part through the infamous disputations), they realized that contemporary Judaism was shaped by the Talmud; Jews were no longer merely blind to the Christ whom their Scriptures prophesied, but practitioners of a heretical religion.⁸ Moreover, in theological circles, most notably in the work of Thomas Aquinas, the Jews who killed Christ were not so much ignorant as they were guilty of “voluntary ignorance,” that is an express desire to be ignorant; voluntary ignorance increases the degree of sinfulness.⁹

⁸ The church “had awakened to the reality that Judaism did not cease to develop on the day of Jesus’ crucifixion, on that day when the New Testament presumably replaced the old. If this New Testament charted the only legitimate direction in which the religion of biblical Israel could develop, and if the Jews had survived solely to testify to that Old Testament which had given birth to Christianity, then a postbiblical or talmudic Judaism was an impossibility. [. . .] The value of the Jews in a Christian world depended on their blindness, their ignorance of Christian truth, their testifying to that very truth unknowingly, despite themselves” Jeremy Cohen, *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)88-89.

⁹ It must, however, be understood that their ignorance did not excuse them from crime, because it was, as it were, affected ignorance. For they saw manifest signs of His Godhead; yet they perverted them out of hatred and envy of Christ; neither would they believe His words, whereby He avowed that He was the Son of God. Hence He Himself says of them (John 15:22): “If I had not come, and spoken to them, they would not have sin; but now they have no excuse for their sin.” And afterwards He adds (John 15:24): “If I had not done among them the works that no other man hath done, they would not have sin .” And so the expression employed by Job (21:14) can be accepted on their behalf: “(Who) said to God: depart from us, we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways.” (*Summa theologica* 3.47.5, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4047.htm>)

All this led to the conviction among many that contemporary Jews no longer deserved the protection of the church. Popular legends about Jews as ritual murderers became widespread in this period. During the thirteenth century, Christians charged Jews with desecrating the host so as to reenact their original deicide. They accused them of blood libel – using the blood of Christians, preferably children, for their Passover rituals. Preachers spread tales based on such fabrications and vilified Jews in passionate sermons. The violence against Jews – both verbal and physical – suggests that anti-Judaism had come to resemble what the modern world calls antisemitism. It had, however, one major difference: Christianity provided no sanction for genocide.

What role did these tragic tellings of the passion story play in the Shoah? This is not a question I have sufficiently researched, but it is clear that the Nazis drew significantly on the Christ-killer myth in the curriculum of German schools. Most notable is the 1938 work of Ernst Hiemer, *Der Gifpilz (The Poison Mushroom)*, a collection of seventeen short stories for young readers and a key text making the ideology of the Third Reich widely accessible. Among its chapters is “What Christ Said about the Jews.” A peasant mother, returning from working in the fields, stops with her three children near a roadside shrine of Christ:

Children, look here! *The Man who hangs on the Cross was one of the greatest enemies of the Jews of all time. He knew the Jews in all their corruption and meanness.* Once he drove the Jews out with a whip, because they were carrying on their money dealings in the Church. He called the Jews killers of men from the beginning. By that he meant that the Jews in all times have been murderers. He said further to the Jews: Your father is

the Devil! Do you know, children, what that means? It means the Jews descend from the Devil. And because they descend from the Devil, they live like devils. So they commit one crime after another. *Because this man knew the Jews, because He proclaimed the truth to the world, He had to die. Hence, the Jews murdered him. They drove nails through his hands and feet and let him slowly bleed. In such a horrible way the Jews took their revenge. And in a similar way they have killed many others who had the courage to tell the truth about the Jews. Always remember these things, children. When you see the Cross, think of the terrible murder by the Jews on Golgotha. Remember that the Jews are children of the Devil and human murderers.*¹⁰

One of the great problems with *Nostra Aetate* and the way it has been passed on is that this “back story,” as it were, is not widely known in the church. *Nostra Aetate* had no footnote that indicated how deadly the accusation that “the Jews” were responsible for the death of Jesus had been for Jews for most of the church’s history. It had no notation to indicate that the

¹⁰Cited in Gregory Paul Wegner, *Anti-Semitism and Schooling Under the Third Reich* (New York and London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002): 162; emphasis is mine. Wegner says, “No other society has ever devoted such a focused effort at integrating anti-Semitic thinking into curriculum intended for young children. [...] The language of religion expressed by various Nazi curriculum writers became another effective way in which Jews could be categorized as the negative other. The image became all the more potent through the exploitation of Golgotha. The charge of deicide against the Jews, one which survives to this day in anti-Semitic circles, carried a powerful emotional appeal for Nazi propagandists both inside and outside schools” (181).

“Christ killer” charge has been at the core of the church’s anti-Jewish teaching.

And still we read the passion narratives on Passion Sunday and Good Friday. How many are aware of what these texts have been used to rationalize? Is it enough to simply put a reference to *Nostra Aetate* in the parish bulletin? Would not our teaching and preaching be enriched by familiarity with some of the scholarship that would give rise to a far more nuanced statement than was possible in 1965?

The Contribution of Biblical Scholarship

It is well known that Catholicism struggled initially with historical criticism, that is, methods that situate biblical texts in their literary, cultural and historical contexts. “Struggle” is in fact too kind – historical criticism was condemned in official church teaching around the turn of the twentieth century in the so-called “Modernist” crisis. Yet beginning in the 1940s a more open attitude became evident. Today, an official Vatican document, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), calls historical criticism “indispensable.”

Indeed, historical criticism is an indispensable tool for a transformed interpretation of the crucifixion of Jesus. For the sake of clarity, let me outline the principal findings

1. Second Temple Judaism was heterogeneous, and the proper matrix in which we must situate the teachings of Jesus. As a consequence, to generalize about “the Jews,” and especially to make claims that Jesus taught “x” while the Jews taught “y” falsifies the picture (e.g., Jesus taught love, but Jews the law.)

2. From the 60s of the first century B.C.E., Second Temple Judaism existed under the vise of Imperial Rome. There is now a wealth of scholarship attesting to the way in which Rome enforced its rule by violence. Crucifixion was an especially effective deterrent to any who might challenge the Empire. It was “highly organized, massive state terrorism, intended to intimidate the vast peasant and slave populations of the empire into passivity.”¹¹ In the name of the Empire, thousands of Jews met their death this way.

3. There is a consensus among biblical scholars that Pontius Pilate, governor of Judea from 26-36, appointed (and later removed for excessive cruelty) by the Roman Empire likely alone had the authority to impose the sentence of crucifixion, though it is highly probable that some Jewish authorities, likely members of the Temple high priesthood, may have been involved. Philo wrote that under Pilate there were “executions without trial constantly repeated” (*On the Embassy to Gaius*, 302). The likely charge against Jesus was sedition: a threat to the order of the state. Greater recognition of Rome’s authority and cruelty in the crucifixion of Jews means that the claim in *Nostra Aetate*, “True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ,” should be reformulated.

4. The gospels, composed some thirty to forty years (or more) after the death of Jesus, were shaped by the devastation unleashed by Rome’s destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem in the wake of the Jewish War. The evangelists seem to have interpreted this devastation as divine punishment.¹²

¹¹ Stephen J. Patterson, *Beyond the Passion: Rethinking the Death and Life of Jesus* (Fortress, 2004), 8.

¹² On the composition of the Gospels in various states, see the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Historical Truth of the Gospels (Instructio de Historica Evangeliorum Veritate)*, #2.

5. The period of gospel composition likely witnessed rivalry and disagreement between the Jewish followers of Jesus and other Jews. It is probable that these tensions fueled a sense of betrayal because of the memory that some Jewish authorities were complicit in the death of Jesus.

6. Gerard Sloyan says about the evangelists: “As modern reporters, they were a flat failure. As ancient dramatists, they were more than a little successful; in assigning human responsibility for Jesus’ death, in light of subsequent history they were tragically successful.”¹³

Taking these six factors into account, we may rightly conclude that the accounts in the Gospels, shaped by the experience of the evangelists and their communities in the latter third of the first century C.E., downplay Roman imperial power, especially as exercised by Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator of Judea, and assign greater culpability to Judean Jews (Matthew) or to “the Jews” (John).

Such scholarship plays an elemental role in how the Catholic Church at official levels now teaches about the death of Jesus. For example, the 1993 *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*

Clearly to be rejected also is every attempt at actualization set in a direction contrary to evangelical justice and charity, such as, for example, the use of the Bible to justify racial segregation, anti-Semitism or sexism whether on the part of men or of women. Particular attention is necessary, according to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council (*Nostra Aetate*, 4), to avoid absolutely any actualization of certain texts of the New Tes-

¹³ Gerard S. Sloyan, *the Crucifixion of Jesus: History, Myth, Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 42.

tament which could provoke or reinforce unfavorable attitudes to the Jewish people. The tragic events of the past must, on the contrary, impel all to keep unceasingly in mind that, according to the New Testament, the Jews remain "beloved" of God, "since the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:28-29).

In my judgment, the most useful Catholic teaching document is a 1988 monograph by the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Criteria for the Evaluation of Dramatizations of the Passion*.¹⁴ It establishes some very practical guidelines for "catechesis and Judaism," and, thanks to the Web, is now available worldwide. I also call to attention a 2004 collection of Catholic documents since *Nostra Aetate* that are relevant to interpreting the crucifixion, *The Bible, the Jews and the Death of Jesus*, by the same bishops' committee. It, however, is not "teacher friendly," as an anthology of ecclesial documents requires more explanation if it is to be of beyond a circle of experts.

II.C. In Every Generation

Finally, I raise the question of how we hand on the tradition Cardinal Willebrands worked so tirelessly to promote. We need to keep in mind a number of factors that complicate this task: 1) the historical amnesia that afflicts so many, including vast numbers of Catholic Christians who have no knowledge of the tragic history associated with holding "the Jews" responsible for the death of Jesus; 2) the connection of religion with violence, both in the past and present, and the failure of religious institutions to wrestle seriously with their complicity, thereby

¹⁴http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/metaelements/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/Passion_Plays.htm

fueling dismissals or condemnations of religion by (see, e.g., *God Is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens); 3) the ways in which missionaries carried anti-Jewish teachings to peoples who had no interaction with Jewish communities, thereby bequeathing an anti-Judaism to the global South that has few resources to counter this colonial legacy; and 4) the reappearance of certain traditionalists in the church who, for example, seem to have no problem in the 1962 prayers for Good Friday.¹⁵ These are daunting challenges.

¹⁵ The second prayer is for “the conversion of the Jews. Let us pray also for the Jews that the Lord our God may take the veil from their hearts and that they also may acknowledge our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us pray (kneel, arise): Almighty and everlasting God, You do not refuse Your mercy even to the Jews; hear the prayers which we offer for the blindness of that people so that they may acknowledge the light of Your truth, which is Christ, and be delivered from their darkness. Through the same our Lord.” At this juncture of some 6 months since Pope Benedict XVI issued his *motu proprio*, *Summorum Pontificium*, on the Latin Mass, it has still not been clarified whether or not this prayer may be used if the Good Friday service is done in Latin in public. In a statement of 23 July 2007 the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued a statement, which reads in part: “The problem of the Prayer for the Conversion of the Jews requires further reflection. In this regard, it is expected that an adaptation of the 1962 Missal will be needed, and this could provide a way forward. The Commission for the Religious Relations with the Jews is committed to the search for an appropriate solution. It should be stressed that there is no intention whatsoever to change the contents of the teachings of *Nostra aetate* concerning the relations between the Church and the Jewish People.”

The more I learn about the difficult passage *Nostra Aetate* had at Vatican II, the more I admire Cardinals Bea and Willebrands for their bold perseverance, political savvy and enduring resolve. We require these same characteristics no less in our day if the Council's hope of "mutual understanding and respect" will flourish in our time. So on this Day of Judaism, let us renew our resolve to do everything in our power to teach our sacred story of the passion and death of Jesus in ways that redeem its tragic uses in the past. In so doing, we will not only honor the legacy of Cardinal Willebrands, but we will be involved in the work of reconciliation our world so desperately needs.

The next stumbling block

Dineke Houtman

Professor of Jewish Studies,

in particular the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

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I thank professor Boys, both as a colleague and as a fellow Christian, for her illuminating lecture, in which she put her finger on one of the main problems in Christian relations towards Judaism, namely the death of Jesus. This is a courageous step, since it concerns the heart of Christian doctrine.

Professor Boys explained clearly how the Christian narrative of the death of Jesus has determined the relations between Christians and Jews throughout history. Her solution lies, in line with many contemporary theologians, in contextualizing the gospel narratives and using new historical insights into the period concerned. An important step in the deterioration of the relationship between the early followers of Jesus and their contemporaries was the development of the doctrine of the godhead of Jesus. As if it were not bad enough that the Jews, according to the writers and/or editors of the New Testament writings, murdered their beloved Rabbi and Savior Jesus, Melito, the Bishop of Sardis went a step further in his sermon on Passover by stressing the divine nature of Jesus. Since Jesus was God incarnate, the Jews did not merely kill a human being, but they killed God himself. In the words of Melito:

[96.] The one who hung the earth in space, is himself hanged; the one who fixed the heavens in place, is himself impaled; the one who firmly fixed all things, is himself firmly fixed to the tree. The Lord is insulted, God has been murdered, the King of Israel has been destroyed by the right hand of Israel.

This severe accusation became a source of virulent anti-Judaism that caused a lot of suffering for the Jews. As a result, the Jews came to fear the Christians as dangerous enemies who were to be avoided as much as possible.

I have just returned from a study trip with students from the Protestant Theological University to Israel where we had meetings with both Jewish Israelis and Arabs. The first week we stayed in Nes Ammim, a Christian Moshav in Galilee, where we met amongst other people Tanja Ronen, a Jewish woman from a neighboring kibbutz. She told us that in Nes Ammim she realized for the first time that there are also Christians she needed not to be afraid of. This sad reality had a sobering effect on us.

The relation of the Protestant Church towards the Jews as a people and to Judaism as a religion has not been much better than that of the Roman Catholic Church. The reasons for this poor relationship are, however, different. Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, is notorious for his vicious attitude towards the Jews and their religion. He did not, however, stress the fact that the Jews were instrumental in the death of Jesus, but rather that they did not accept Jesus as Messiah. His attack against them was aimed at their religion, which he condemned as heresy, and not primarily at their being Christ killers. Consequently, in the centuries that followed, the Protestant attention to the Jews was mainly focused on mission. The Jews

simply had to accept Jesus as the promised Messiah. The disaster of the Shoah and the foundation of the State of Israel that followed soon after it, brought about a change in this attitude. The shocking events gave rise to an awareness of guilt on the one hand and the hope of fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies on the other. Consequently, theologians started to reconsider the relation of God to His chosen people and linked to that the relation between Church and Synagogue. Had the people of Israel really been supplanted and had it been superseded by the Church as the true Israel? Or was God's covenant with His chosen people still valid and should the Church be considered merely a new partner in this covenant? What was the theological import, if any, of the foundation of the State of Israel? These thoughts led to new developments in Christian theology in which an important autonomous role was ascribed to Israel. As a result, theologians and lay people started to take an interest in Judaism as a living tradition and it was discovered that a lot could be learned from it. The new insights were also expressed in official church documents. In the Church Order of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands of 1991 it was expressed as follows:

[I.7] The church is called upon to give expression to its unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish people. As a Christ-confessing community of faith it seeks a dialogue with the Jewish people concerning the understanding of Holy Scripture, in particular as regards the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Since May 2004, three Protestant churches, the Netherlands Reformed Church, the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, are united in the Protestant Church of the Netherlands. The Church Order of this newly united Protestant

Church adopted the above quotation on the unrelinquishable solidarity with the Jewish People. However, the wording of this paragraph has recently become the subject of a fierce discussion. The obstacle now is no longer the Jews being held responsible for the death of Jesus, nor the stubborn unbelief of the Jews, but the responsibility of part of the Jewish people as represented in the Government of the Jewish State of Israel for the suffering of the Palestinian people, part of which (about 9 per cent, 150.000 people) is Christian. Today some Protestants are seriously troubled by the role of the Israeli government in the suffering of fellow Christians. The so-called Theology of the Land that justifies the right of the Jewish people to live in Israel proves to be harmful to the Palestinian inhabitants. Is it possible that God blesses people at the expense of other people, even if these other people are Christians? So, for the Protestant church the next theological challenge is not so much the death of Jesus, but rather the rethinking of the Theology of the Land.

T'en syn de Joden niet – It wasn't the Jews

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Why is it that my mind was immediately directed towards the first verses of the poem composed by Jacob Revius in the first half of the 17th century? “T'en syn de Joden niet, Heer Jesu, die u cruysten – It wasn't the Jews that crucified you, Lord Jesus. They did not spit in your face; they did not drag you to court; it is me, I am the one who did it. I have led you to your death – all this happened through my sins.”

For quite a few years I did not think about these lines until I read Professor Mary Boys' fine and subtle paper, and on hearing her words here today, I was again reminded of these lines.

Why Jacob Revius? He was not a Catholic but a Protestant who was born in Deventer in the year 1586 and lived most of his life in Amsterdam. The interesting part of his biography is that he studied theology in both Leiden and Franeker during the years 1604-1610, towns that were once centres of Hebrew learning and knowledge of Judaism. Christian Hebraic and Judaic studies have always fascinated me, because 'Hebraica veritas' since Late Antiquity and the school of Saint Victor in 12th-century Paris were concepts or places of relative hope that Christians might understand something of Jewish tradition and religion, despite all the ideological objections, traditional revulsion and rejection.

This is precisely one of Boys' observations: who was actually adequately informed about Judaism when *Nostra Aetate* appeared, or was it rather the pressure of time and the outcome of so much anger and deception about the Catholic attitude during the Second World War? So much remained unclarified then and indeed even now. E.g. where was the Pope's voice in those terrible days of the persecution and destruction of European Jewry. Indeed, whose fight is it when it comes to a revised or new understanding of modern Catholicism or contemporary Christianity as such? Jews can easily say that they have nothing to do with it, after all, THE Jews never existed, and again, it is historical information and scientific data that can clear up the matter with regard to the definition of Judaism in the first century and thereafter. The already mentioned 'historical amnesia' can be lifted to some extent, and new insights are gaining momentum in order to lead Jews and Christians alike to a more honest approach of the context of Jesus' life and death.

I very much appreciate the words of Mary Boys, and it is an important attempt to elucidate modern opinions within Catholicism and within the Vatican – my pragmatic question is: will positivism hold, will the Church keep to the modifications of *Nostra Aetate*, and will the results in fact lead to an improvement of the complex relations between the Church and the Jews? I would like to make a comparison here that may give rise to some astonishment: the sociopolitical trend in modern Germany to deal with its war past, to define the relationship between Germany and Judaism, if you like, between Germany and Israel, although that should not be considered an automatism. Intensive academic studies have been conducted within Germany about medieval and early modern Judaism in German-speaking countries, the cradle of Jewish reformism and participation in almost every branch of German culture, science and economics. The contribution was

immense, and a book appeared later with the title ‘Germany without Jews’, showing how much the country suffered from the brain-drain, the intellectual and cultural losses, the lack of playfulness and reflection within German civil society. And even earlier, medieval studies demonstrated the great importance of the German-Jewish language, Yiddish, for the history and literature of European Jewry even down to the present day. To discuss Judaism respectfully is not just a matter of necessity in modern Germany, there is a truth in it.

This is how it can be: what Cardinal Willebrands tried, as well as Monsignor Ramselaar, was to create and find a way of restoration. This is a successful approach because history has it that the average Christian in Late Antiquity understood his personal religion as rooted in a Jewish past and present.

Despite the controversy in theology and faith, Christians and Jews knew each other personally, coexisted, and elements of Jewish practice and ritual were understood by Christians as an integral part of their own identity and belief. Who indeed was really ‘adversus Judaeos’, ‘against the Jews’? Surely, the biblical example of the twins Esau and Jacob has a typological function: twins are brothers who are familiar with and akin to one another, but who may also become... alienated, show disrespect for one another, fall out, and curse one another. This is how Jews often understood their Christian environment, and there was too little to breach the typology, to reconcile, to have an open mind towards each other’s faith and tradition. The time has come, indeed now is the time, to combat ignorance and indifference.

Ladies and gentlemen, there is no excuse any more: scholars and researchers of the history of theology, rabbinics, Christian imperial power and Jewish society, have found so many new relevant information about Judaism and Christianity, that these facts and thoughts should not be left alone but be brought to

bear on the debate, foster our studies, and sharpen our perception of one another.

This is my personal belief: academic studies of the Bible, archeology, theology, the history of Judaism and Christianity, the history of church and synagogue, liturgy, etc. are not just disciplines in their own right. They can equally serve the religious communities involved. I acknowledge that in this respect I am greatly influenced by such modern Jewish examples as Louis Jacobs, Abraham Heschel, and David Hartman, who all formulated many 'reasons to believe'. Some level of rationalisation of one's religious tradition may produce the clarification called for by Mary Boys for the sake of an inspiring and powerful dialogue, or rather trilogy, inviting Islam to join in. We all are called upon to act.



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