

# Jerusalem Letters

## The Vatican and the Jews

By Yoram Hazony, December 27, 2015

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It was Friday afternoon a couple of weeks ago, and I was meeting in my home with an Israeli rabbi who asked me excitedly: “Did you hear that the Church has announced it will no longer seek the conversion of Jews to Christianity?” I had not heard, and when our meeting was over, I flew upstairs to my computer, where I discovered that this headline was indeed everywhere:

- *The New York Times*: “Vatican Says Catholics Should Not Try to Convert Jews.”
- *The Wall St. Journal*: “New Vatican Document Says Church Doesn’t Seek Conversion of the Jews.”
- BBC: “Catholics Should Not Try to Convert Jews, Vatican Says.”
- *Ha’aretz*: “Vatican: Catholics Shouldn’t Convert Jews but Must Work With Them to Fight anti-Semitism”

Many other media outlets followed suit, reporting that (as the *Wall St. Journal* put it) “The Vatican released a document Thursday stating with unprecedented clarity that the Catholic Church doesn’t seek the conversion of the Jews.”

Incredible, I thought. I had been certain that the Church would never be able to change its position on an issue so central to Christian theology. But

since all the media were saying the same thing, I allowed myself to be get caught up in what, for a moment, seemed to me to be a truly extraordinary development in the story of the Western nations. I sent off some excited emails to Jewish and Christian colleagues, and as the sun was going down, printed out the document to read over Shabbat. I told my family that if the newspapers had the story right, I was holding history in my hands.

Unfortunately, the newspapers did not have the story right. As is clear to anyone who actually reads the new Vatican document in question, the words “Catholics should not try to convert Jews” do not appear anywhere. Nor is it possible to find anything remotely resembling this proposition in the 25 pages of the document in question—a declaration authored by the Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews entitled “[The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable: A Reflection on the Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations.](#)”

How could such an outrageous mistake have been made? A Catholic scholar with many years of experience in these matters wrote me back ruefully: “Just the media making things up again.” I’m sure he has ample reason to react in this way. But you have to wonder whether they really could all have made up the same story without having had something to go on. Could it be that something like what we saw in the headlines was in fact expressed at the press conference in which members of the Commission discussed their paper with reporters? Perhaps. Yet even if something like this was intimated by a member of the Commission, why not include such an important position in the written document itself?

It’s worth taking a look at what the Commission’s “Reflection” actually does say. Among other things, it tells us a great deal about why the Vatican is unlikely to call upon Christians to refrain from trying to convert Jews in the foreseeable future.

Like other Vatican statements in recent years, the “Reflection” does demonstrate an intense desire on the part of the Church to rebuild Catholic theology so as to put an end to nearly two millennia of Christian hostility toward Judaism. The document repeatedly and explicitly renounces the mainstream medieval view according to which the Christian “New Covenant” has replaced or superseded the Jewish people’s covenant with the God of Israel.

In this vein, the Commission writes that “the Church does not question the continued love of God for the chosen people of Israel.” (Sect. 17) It emphasizes that “It does not in any way follow [from Christian teaching] that the Jews are excluded from God’s salvation because they do not believe in Jesus.” (Sect. 36) Moreover, the Commission believes that:

[God’s] Word invites all people to respond. If their responses are in accord with the Word of God they stand in right relationship with him. For Jews this Word can be learned through the Tora and the traditions based on it. The Tora is the instruction for a successful life in right relationship with God. Whoever observes the Tora has life in its fullness (cf. Pirqe Avot II, 7). By observing the Tora the Jew receives a share in communion with God. (Sect. 24)

Given the Church’s historical views concerning God’s rejection of the Jewish people and abandonment of the “Old Covenant,” these statements must be read as proposing, or perhaps confirming, very deep changes in official Catholic attitudes toward both Jews and *tora*.

These are changes that Jews should obviously welcome. And to the extent that it is possible to assist in establishing such an approach to Judaism among Christians, it seems both just and prudent to do what we can—

provided, of course, that we can do so without damaging the integrity of *halacha* and Jewish theological tradition.

Having said this, it is important to note that the “Reflection” is not an endorsement of the idea that there are two different possible routes to salvation. Jews sometimes talk as if the Church is moving toward a view of this kind, which would recognize the Mosaic *tora* and covenant as an independent and sufficient way of doing God’s will. In fact, such a theory is explicitly rejected by the Commission as endangering all of Christianity. As the Commission writes:

The theory that there may be two different paths to salvation, the Jewish path without Christ and the path with the Christ... would in fact endanger the foundations of Christian faith. Confessing the universal and therefore also exclusive mediation of salvation through Jesus Christ belongs to the core of Christian faith. (Sec. 35)

Here the authors of the “Reflection” deny any possibility that the Jewish *tora* could constitute a kind of parallel track, permitting Jews to fulfill our covenant without any reference to Jesus. The mediation of the New Testament’s messiah remains “the universal and therefore also exclusive” way of doing God’s will.

The Commission thus holds what to Jews must appear to be two irreconcilable and contradictory views: On the one hand, that the *tora* is sufficient for “a successful life in right relationship with God”; on the other, that the Christian teaching is “the universal and therefore also exclusive” way of doing God’s will.

The Commission admits that it has not completed the theological work of reconciling these two views. In fact, the Commission concludes that how

these two positions can be reconciled “remains an unfathomable divine mystery.” (Sect. 36)

Interestingly, the Commission does not leave the matter at that. It is interested in trying to find a way out of the dilemma. So at one point, the authors of the “Reflection” write that while “God’s word is one single and undivided reality,” it is possible to see that both “Tora and Christ are the locus of the presence of God in the world as this presence is experienced in the respective worship communities.” In other words, if Jesus and the *tora* are recognized as two different ways of experiencing the single and undivided reality of God’s presence in the world, then for a Jew to live in accordance with *tora* could end up being a way of accepting Jesus. (Sect. 26)

We should not rule out the possibility that the Church could ultimately accept a position of this kind as being right. Christianity has done much to advance important principles of the *tora* among the nations. And it achieved this stunning success by announcing a series of metaphysical equivalences that have never been able to attract much enthusiasm among Jews: The claim that a single human being *is* God; the claim that a single human being *is* God’s word; the claim that God *is* love; and others. And now the Commission in effect proposes yet another such equivalence—one in which Jesus and the *tora* are seen as two different things that are, at the same time, somehow one “single, undivided reality.”

As I say, Jews have never been able to accept these sweeping metaphysical equivalences that are the foundation of Christian doctrine. In our eyes, such claims are a stumbling block to clear thinking about God’s nature, God’s presence in the world, and the demands he makes of human beings. But who knows? There is much evidence to suggest that positions of this kind were needed for the nations to begin their approach to the true God.

Perhaps Christian elaboration of additional such doctrines in our own time is also a necessary stage in bringing the world closer to God and *tora*.

As Jews, our task is not to contribute to the development of Christian theology in this vein. Our responsibility toward the nations who wish to learn the content of God's *tora* is to speak only the truth to them, as best we understand it. That is, we must make available a strong and clear understanding of God and of what he wants from the world that is not obscured by what are, according to our understanding, confusing equivalences drawn between things that are not equivalent to one another at all. On this view, the messiah of the Christians is not the *tora*, just as the messiah of the Christians is not God.

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Which brings us to the question of Christian efforts to convert the Jews. On this matter, the Commission correctly notes that the Christians' "mission to the Jews' is a very delicate and sensitive matter for Jews because, in their eyes, it involves the very existence of the Jewish people." (Sect. 40)

It is telling that this sentence refers to Christian missionizing as a threat to the existence of the Jewish people "in their eyes" (that is, in the Jews' eyes). The Church is still not able intuitively to grasp what is obvious to virtually every Jew, which is that a Jewish community that embraces Christianity will immediately disappear as a historical actor in the Jewish story, just as a Jewish community that embraces Islam likewise comes to an immediate historical end. This is an experiment that has been tried time and again over the centuries, from Spain to Turkey, so that we do not need to speculate about the results. And given the unequivocal nature of these results, it should be obvious that anyone who truly understands the nature and position of the Jewish people—and who wishes to see us flourish so that we may play the role God that has commanded us to play on this

earth—would quickly give up on the desire to turn the few remaining Jews of the world into Christians.

What does the Commission have to say about this? It says this:

The Church is... obliged to view evangelisation to Jews, who believe in the one God, in a different manner from that to people of other religions and world views. In concrete terms this means that the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews. While there is a principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission, Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God's Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah. (Sec. 40)

In concrete terms, there are two things said here: First, that the Catholic Church does not have any organs or institutions whose purpose is specifically to bring Jews (as opposed to people generally) to embrace Christianity. Second, that despite the absence of any formal institutional frameworks aimed specifically at converting Jews, "Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews."

Much expert discussion has been devoted to what "bearing witness" to one's faith in Jesus entails. But from a Jewish perspective, these discussions are largely academic. In practice, a call to "bear witness" regarding faith in Jesus "also to Jews" does amount to a call to bring Jews to a belief in Jesus where this is possible. Indeed, the Commission itself states a few sentences later that "Christian mission and witness, in personal life and in proclamation, belong together." (Sect. 42) Thus while the Church will not, out of consideration for the sensitivity of the matter, maintain and

operate organs whose declared purpose is to bring Jews to Jesus, the mission to bring Jesus to the Jews will continue in a more “humble and sensitive manner.”

Here, too, the Commission seems to be holding two opposed positions simultaneously. If a Christian really believes that for Jews, “The Tora is the instruction for a successful life in right relationship with God,” (Sect. 24) then “Christian mission and witness” directed “also to the Jews” becomes entirely superfluous. For in this case, what possible reason could there be for insisting that Jews should embrace Jesus? A Jew living according to the *tora* would be in a right relationship with God, and that should be the Christians’ highest hope for their Jewish friends and acquaintances. Then it would be possible to issue a document stating in plain language, understandable to all, that “Catholics should not try to convert Jews” (as the news media put it).

The fact that the Commission did not include any such plain language in its document strongly suggests that the Church is not yet ready to truly accept the idea that for Jews, *tora* is the instruction for a life “in right relationship with God.” Moreover, given the Commission’s unequivocal statement that the theory that there are two different paths to salvation, one for Jews and another for Christians, “would endanger the foundations of Christian faith,” we must be prepared for the possibility that the Church will never be ready to take the step of calling on Christians to refrain from mission and witness directed toward Jews.

It is not clear, however, that we should view this as such a terrible thing. Jews have many interests that may be advanced through practical cooperation with Christians, and the number of such common concerns seems only to be growing with time. An alliance on issues of common concern does not, however, require some kind of theological “end-of-conflict” agreement between Jewish and Christian theology as a

precondition. On the contrary, there is much to be lost in seeking such an agreement. Having read the Commission's proposed affirmation of a unity between the Christian messiah and the *tora*, I cannot escape the feeling that this equivalence is designed to permit some kind of syncretistic resolution of Jewish-Christian disagreements—one in which Christianity recognizes the redemptive potential of the *tora* in exchange for one or another kind of Jewish acceptance of Jesus as a path to salvation.

We should be thankful for much that is in the Vatican's "Reflection," and for the fact that God has permitted us to see a day in which the Roman Church sincerely wishes to bring the centuries of bitter Christian antagonism toward Jews to a close. At the same time, we must emphasize that from our perspective, a rapprochement of the kind that would involve fitting the Jewish and Christian theological traditions together into a single system, acceptable to both sides, is neither possible nor desirable. There is no such system that would be true to God's word as Jews understand it. Indeed, if Jewish theological tradition can contribute something important to Christians and to the rest of the world, it is precisely because it is in conflict with the Christian tradition on a series of crucial issues. The fact that, in other spheres, Jews and Christians seem to be entering an era of unprecedented cooperation, does not lessen the importance of maintaining and presenting, in a humble and sensitive manner, the Jewish critique of Christian theological constructs. Indeed, if relations between Jews and Christians continue to improve in the coming years, the importance of this critique will only be all the greater for that.