

TEACHING OF CONTEMPT

MARY C. BOYS

The history between Jews and Christians in general, but particularly Jews and Catholics, is a very tragic one. In a way, when we stand here, we see the long arc of history. And we see that from the beginning, as was understood then, that the writings of the New Testament, particularly the gospels and the Gospels of John, present Jesus -- he's a Jew but he seems to be against the Jews. And the crucifixion as John's account has it, makes the Jews the ones who cry, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" And we rehearse this every Good Friday, so anyone who goes to church on Good Friday hears this and it's very evocative. So, the Jews became blamed for the crucifixion of Jesus even though, historically, it's the Roman Empire in the personage of Pontius Pilate who has the power and makes the decision to crucify. And there were thousands and thousands of Jews who were crucified in the Roman Empire. But that fact was really lost and so over time it developed from a rhetorical opposition to these Jews to when the church gets power, political power, it really enforced segregation between Jews and Catholics.

JAMES RUDIN

The phrase that covers it all is "the teaching of contempt." If you teach young children contempt for another group, they're inferior and they're not beloved by God, they're not worthy of God's love, that they missed the boat theologically 2000 years ago, their religion has been superseded and taken over by Christianity, that's contempt . . . And the teaching of contempt had to be addressed, confronted, and overcome. It's like you have a pathology and you have to medically identify it, diagnose it, and then treat it. So, the teaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism runs and ran very deep. And that's what the Bishops had to confront at the Vatican Council and that's what interreligious dialogue is about today.

NOSTRA AETATE

MARY C. BOYS

A French historian, a Jew who had been hidden by a Catholic woman during the Second World War had used his historical research to trace what he came to call "the teaching of contempt." That is, how the Catholic Church in particular has taught about Jews and Judaism over the centuries. And in this June meeting he, Jules Isaac, was 83 and Pope John is 79 and Pope John's trusted lieutenant, as it were, Cardinal Augustine Bea, also 79, met together for about 15 minutes. And something happened between the two. And it's at that time that the Pope decides let's put this question our relationship with the Jews on the agenda of the council and then he turned to Cardinal Bea and asked him to oversee that. A momentous meeting, 83 and 79. Who says old people can't change the world?

SUSANNAH HESCHEL

My father wanted the repudiation of any effort to convert the Jews, that was extremely important to him. He wanted a rejection of anti-Semitism of course, but he also wanted something positive. He wanted the church have institutions that would foster an understanding of Judaism, and working together, and so forth. So there were three statements issued, the first two drafts, then the final one. When the second draft appeared,

it called for a hope for the eventual conversion of the Jews. My father was very upset about that and he called it spiritual fratricide. And he said and it was quoted in the papers, "If given the choice, I would go to Auschwitz before I would give up my faith."

JOHN CONNELLY

The document *Nostra Aetate* was a revolutionary statement because it was the first church statement that said that God loves the Jewish people. It was a statement that made clear that the object of this divine love was indeed a people that represented a tradition that was a religious tradition but it wasn't simply a religion. There's a complexity to Judaism that the church recognizes in this final document. It also breaks decisively with the core of the anti-Judaic message that Jews were thought of previously as Christ-killers. It was stated explicitly that Jews could not be held accountable for the death of Christ, that Christ had died because of the sins of all human beings and for the sake of all humanity. And it recognized an enduring vocation to the Jewish people, of the Jewish people over time that would persist to the end of time.

TAYLOR BRANCH

It was an incredible ecumenical statement and response to the Holocaust and to World War Two. It took a long time coming and not without tremendous struggles within the church. Catholic bishops, and archbishops, and cardinals warned that there would be riots against Catholics and Christians in Arab countries if they were nice to the Jews because Muslims would take that as a sign of betrayal of them. I mean this is international politics and theology and the heart. Some Catholics saw the facts that the teaching that Jews killed Jesus as central to Christianity. How are we going to back down on that?

A REVOLUTION

BENJAMIN SAX

So, one of the great achievements of Abraham Joshua Heschel in the American Jewish community was his ability to allow American Jews to think about interreligious dialogue in a productive way. It was very difficult for Jews, and I will put a footnote that Jews had a tough relationship with American Christians and Christianity in general since most Jews blamed Christian theological language for the conditions by which Nazi Germany took place. There was a lot of anti-Jewish sentiment in the New Testament that has played its role historically in terms of violence, ghetto-ization, etc. For all the history that Christians learn about themselves, what they don't learn are the things that Jews memorize. So, Jews have a tempestuous relationship with Christianity. And Heschel had this almost uncanny ability to take something so fraught within the Jewish community and see it as something potentially productive theologically.

JAMES RUDIN

He made it kosher. He made it legitimate for other rabbis and Jewish lay people to enter into positive, constructive, meaningful relationships with not only the Roman Catholic

Church with all forms of Christianity and other religions including today Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, other religions throughout the world. Because the sense was, to put it in simplest terms, if Abraham Joshua Heschel, revered and beloved in the Jewish community for all that he represented, if he could do it, and not only do it but be a leader. Not only be a leader in the United States but to go to Rome and confront the highest officials, leaders of the Roman Catholic Community, if he could do it, then we could do it too.