

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Jews, Christians share mission to honor God, seek peace

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Who are the "People of God?" This is the question discussed by Father Etienne Veto, director of the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies, at a recent lecture at the Woolf Institute here in Cambridge. The Center

is a part of Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome and takes its name from the Jesuit Augustin Bea, who greatly influenced Christian-Jewish relations during the Second Vatican Council.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the "people of God" is a term used frequently to describe the Israelites. In the book of Exodus, God speaks to Moses with a promise to take his people out of Egypt. "I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God." (Exodus 6:6-7)

Veto notes that, by contrast, others are referred to as "the nations." Of particular interest is the Genesis narrative where God makes a covenant with Abram and changes his name to Abraham, meaning the father of many nations. God says, "Your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations." (Genesis 17:5) Furthermore, "All the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him." (Genesis 18:18)

The prophet Isaiah has the vision that Israel will be a witness to the nations who will come "to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." The result will be peace when "they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isaiah 2:3-4)

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul refers to the church as the "new Israel" as he proclaims that the covenant with God and has now been extended to the Gentiles. Does this replace the covenant with the Jews? Not according to Paul who declares, "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." (Romans 11:29) Gentiles are adopted as children of God, and he refers to the Gentiles as a "wild olive tree" being grafted into the original rich root of the cultivated olive tree.

Father Veto described three ways one can be seen as belonging to the people of God: those by birth (Jews), those by adoption (Gentile Christians), and those by calling (others who have received God's call). Here it is helpful to remember that Abraham himself was not a Jew or a Christian, since his calling was 500 years before Moses received the law and 2,000 years before the Christian community was formed. Genesis describes his calling "because he was righteous and just." (Genesis 18)

An important question in this context is what is the role of mission? The Woolf Institute published a 60-page document titled, "Jews and Christians: Perspectives on Mission." It begins with reference to the 1988 Anglican Communion Conference that addressed the role of mission in relationship to the Jewish people in the following words:

"There are a variety of attitudes towards Judaism within Christianity today. ... All these approaches, however, share a common concern to be sensitive to Judaism, to reject all proselytizing, that is, aggressive and manipulative attempts to convert, and of course, any hint of antisemi-



Father Etienne Veto, director of the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies, posed the question of who comprises the "People of God."

tism. Further, Jews, Muslims and Christians have a common mission. They share a mission to the world that God's name be honored."

The document includes both Jewish and Christian discussion on the role of mission. From the Jewish perspective, mission is described in terms of promoting justice as the prophet proclaimed, "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8) This includes the Jewish principle of "Tikkun Olam" (Repair of the World). The report described it as a "Renewal of that covenant to tackle world problems of poverty, hunger, disease, hate and environmental catastrophe together in the 21st century." It includes the duty to engage in greater interfaith understanding.

Christian mission has traditionally been seen in terms of "proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom, teaching and baptizing new believers." In this context, it has often been assumed that Judaism is simply one of the non-Christian religions, forgetting the very close relationship especially in the early years of the Christian era. The report affirms that because of the bonds between the two faiths, special consideration is required in light of God's covenant not having been revoked.

The Catholic Church addressed this issue in the document, "Nostra Aetate" from the Second Vatican Council, promulgated in 1965 by Pope Paul VI. It speaks specifically of the relationship with the Jewish people as follows:

"The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles."

One of the early theologians in America to call for this reappraisal of Christian mission was Paul van Buren, who taught at Temple University. He wrote, "The church, called to be a witness to Christ among all the nations, and having a special relationship to Israel, has the specific mission to the Jewish people of serving them in their task of being a light for the nations."

It should be noted that van Buren was one of the early speakers in 1988 at the Jewish-Christian Dialogue in Muskegon, which was established by Sylvia Kaufman and other Jewish and Christian leaders of that community. That effort then came to Grand Rapids as the Kaufman Interfaith Institute and continued as the triennial Jewish-Christian-Muslim Dialogue, scheduled for Nov. 15 this year.

This special connection provides an important principle for all interfaith efforts. We must always guard against the temptation to see the other as the enemy. Just as God called Abraham to be a blessing to all nations, so we must seek those areas where we can work together to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly in our efforts to seek peace.

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