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**THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND GLOBALIZATION.  
CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS SINCE VATICAN II:  
APPROACHING THE 40<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF NOSTRA AETATE**

**Introduction**

One of the most important achievements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century theology is the conviction that every religion is a path toward salvation for its followers. This conviction is called “religious pluralism”. What seems obvious today, was for centuries considered to be a heresy or a wrong way of thinking – and was usually violently opposed. One of the reasons for this new way of looking at one’s own religious tradition is the process of globalization. Also the Catholic Church embarked on the path of pluralism, and a concrete example of this new way of perceiving her own position in the mosaic of the world’s religions is the declaration issued during Vatican Council II in 1965. The aim of this article is to consider the impact of that short text devoted to Jewish-Christian relations. In fact, for forty years we have been able to witness a very intensive philosophical and theological reflection on mutual relations of both religions<sup>1</sup>. It seems that this religious dialogue is also an effort to overcome what Samuel Huntington once called a “clash of civilizations”<sup>2</sup>, moreover, in the context of globalisation religion appears to be losing its dangerous face. In fact, careful analysis shows that what we observe are mutual influences and not a clash or homogenisation. And religion plays a significant role in this process, as Peter L. Berger stated in the Introduction to a very inspiring volume on many types of globalisation written by scholars from different countries: “All these

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<sup>1</sup> The best example of this is probably the volume *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, ed. by T. Frymer-Kensky et al., Colorado 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. his book entitled: *Clash of Civilizations...*

cases make it abundantly clear that the idea of the mindless global homogenization greatly underestimated the capacity of human being to be creative and innovative in the face of cultural challenges”<sup>3</sup>. It seems that also different religious systems are able to change in order to make its traditional teaching suitable for the new situation.

### Traditional teaching but a new language

Probably only few contemporary students of theology are able to realize how radically the Catholic theology has changed as a result of Vatican Council II (1962-1965). Reading the Council documents as a part of the history of theology gives a true impression that they are deeply rooted in the traditional teaching of the Church, but they also manifest a radical departure from the pre-Council language and attitude. The official teaching, the so called Magisterium, tries to underline the continuity, however, some theologians stress the new elements in the traditional teaching. For example, Jacques Dupuis, one of the most important Catholic theologians, used to call the new situation a “Copernican revolution”, or “crossing the Rubicon” to describe the Catholic theology after *Nostra Aetate*: “Besides the paradigm shift of the Copernican revolution, one hears talk of ‘crossing the Rubicon’ obviously signifies irrevocably recognizing the equal meaning and value of the various religions – and waiving any claim not only to exclusivity but also to normativity of Christianity or Jesus Christ”<sup>4</sup>. If we look carefully into the content of the Council documents, we see that what is really new is the language. Exactly this aspect of the Church policy is in the centre of the cultural shift which can be observed.

In his latest book, *Four Cultures of the West*, (in which he makes an intriguing distinction between four forms of culture: the prophetic, academic, rhetorical and artistic ones), John O’Malley made an interesting observation when speaking on Vatican II:

This context makes the culture-three style of discourse (rhetorical) that characterizes the documents of Vatican Council II all the more remarkable. That style did not, of course, spring out of nowhere. In Germany and Belgium but especially in France, theologians had for several decades been trying to find alternatives to the rigidity of the dominant style, and a number of them turned to the Fathers in what they called a *ressourcement*, a ‘return to the sources’. As it turns out, the documents of the council often read like a commentary or homily by one of the Fathers – or by Erasmus. A greater contrast with the style of discourse of the Council of Trent would be difficult to find. Vatican II, like Luther, was a ‘language event’<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Many Globalizations. Cultural Diversity in the Contemporary World*, ed. P. L. Berger, S. P. Huntington, Oxford 2002.

<sup>4</sup> J. Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions. From Confrontation to Dialogue*, New York 2001, p. 79.

<sup>5</sup> J. O’Malley, *Four Cultures of the West*, Cambridge 2004, p. 175.

And precisely this new style presents a problem for some interpreters of the Council. In order to understand the difference between the “old” and the “new” it will be important to recall some of the theologians whose ideas contributed to the Copernican revolution in the Church theology: Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx and Hans Kueng. Rahner successfully translated the traditional, scholastic concepts used in theology into the phenomenological language. Schillebeeckx was able to present Jesus Christ as a person in a new anthropological system, and Kueng, with his idea of the world’s ethos, demonstrated that Christianity is a part of a bigger effort of world religions to make the world more human. One of the problems with the assimilation of the revolutionary teaching of the Catholic Church is a lack of awareness of how deeply the new language has also affected the doctrine. As O’Malley says:

To this day the council has become an object of confusion and controversy, to a large extent because interpreters miss that they are dealing here with literary genres altogether different from those of all preceding councils. This obliviousness is all the more amazing because the first thing that strikes one when reading the documents is that they are written in a style no previous council ever adopted<sup>6</sup>.

As we know, the medium is the message (Marshall McLuhan). Thus, the new language contains new teaching, and this is particularly evident in the document which for the first time in the history of the Catholic theology deals with the relationship of Christianity with other religions: the declaration *Nostra aetate*. Perhaps it would be more precise to say that it is for the first time that the Catholic theology speaks in a positive way about other religions. But more could be said. The new language in theology is also a sign of a new attitude toward the possibility of formulating the religious conviction in words. One of the most important Catholic thinkers who articulated this new way of thinking was Walter Ong – an American Jesuit. According to Ong not the words but the person as such, and not only the person of Jesus, is in the centre of the Christian message: “The person not only of Jesus, for a believer, but the person of every human being, for believers and not believers, lies in a way beyond statement. The ‘I’ that any one of us speaks lies beyond statement in the sense that although every statement originates, ultimately, from an ‘I’, no mere statement can ever make clear what constitutes this ‘I’ as against any other ‘I’ spoken by any other human being”<sup>7</sup>. Theological consequences of this way of thinking are really enormous, and probably we are only at the beginning of the road. It is particularly important for the process of globalization, of which, as we have said, the Church is a part. Probably it is the only way to avoid dangerous aspects of any fundamentalism, also of religious fundamentalism. Let us recall Ong’s words again:

Textual bias, proneness to identify words with text and only the text, encourages religious fundamentalists, cultural fundamentalists, and other fundamentalists, but also perhaps most persons, declared fundamentalists or not, in a culture so addicted to literacy as that of the United States, to believe that

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<sup>6</sup> J. O’Malley, *op. cit.*, p. 176.

<sup>7</sup> W. J. Ong, *Hermeneutic Forever: Voice, Text, Digitization, and ‘I’*, „Oral Tradition” 1995, 10, no. 1, p. 20.

truth, of various sorts or even all sorts, can be neatly enclosed in a proposition or a limited set of propositions that are totally explicit and self-contained, not needing or indeed even tolerating any interpretation. [...] In the case of Christian fundamentalists, for example, what they commonly may not advert to is the biblical statement of Jesus's: "I am the way and the truth and the life" (John 14, 6). Jesus leaves his followers not list of given number of propositional statements that total up all that he comes to utter as the Word of God<sup>8</sup>.

### Only the beginning

When in 1954 Karl Rahner wrote his essay on the 1500th anniversary of the Council of Chalcedony he entitled it *Chalkedon – Ende oder Anfang?*. His answer was "Both"! A dogmatic and clear formulation is the end of the (usually long and painful) process of searching for a theological solution but also the beginning of a new understanding. Let me quote from this extremely interesting text:

Once theologians and the ordinary magisterium of the Church have begun to pay attention to a reality and a truth revealed by God, the final result is always a precisely formulated statement. This is natural and inevitable. In no other way is it possible to mark the boundary of error and the misunderstanding of divine truth in such a way that this boundary will be observed in the day-to-day practice of religion. Yet while this formula is an end, an acquisition and a victory, which allows us to enjoy clarity and security as well as ease in instruction, if this victory is to be a true one the end must also be a beginning<sup>9</sup>.

What Rahner is saying is basically that we cannot look at a written text as dead letters but rather as a departure point for a living and dynamic interpretation in the concrete context of the Church community. It is also important to emphasize that Karl Rahner was one of the most influential theologians during the debates of Vatican Council II and his interpretation of the documents is particularly significant<sup>10</sup>. Speaking at the Weston School of Theology in 1979 Rahner stated: "The Second Vatican Council is, in a rudimentary form still groping for identity, the Church's first official self-actualization as a world Church"<sup>11</sup>. This search for identity is particularly true with regard to other world religions, and especially in the relationship with Judaism. I will come to this point later.

We also have to see the documents of the last ecumenical council as the end of a long process of clarification but also as the beginning of a new situation of the Church. The tormented history of the declaration *Nostra aetate* is well known and it is not our aim to reiterate it here. What is interesting for us is the comment made by its main author, Cardinal Augustin Bea, at the press conference on the day of its promulgation on October 28, 1965. His observation is very similar to Rahner's statement on the Chalcedony Christological formula. Cardinal Bea stated:

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 19.

<sup>9</sup> K. Rahner, *Current Problems in Christology*, [in:] *Theological Investigation*, vol. I, Baltimore 1963, pp. 149-200.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*, *Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II*, „Theological Studies” 1979, 40, no. 4, p. 719-727.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 717.

The Declaration on the Non-Christian Religions is indeed an important and promising beginning, yet no more than the beginning of a long and demanding way towards the arduous goal of a humanity whose members feel themselves truly to be sons and daughters of the same Father and act on this convictions<sup>12</sup>.

It is really vital to notice that the document is seen as an “important and promising beginning”. It also means that it is only a departure point for the new approach toward other religions. In other words, the traditional theology could be declared as not fitting any more to describe the current situation of the Christian religion among other world religions. Let us recall two key passages in which the new attitude toward other religions is stated. The first speaks about the common questions formulated by different religions:

Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgement and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going? (*Nostra aetate*, no. 1).

It is clearly declared that the basic religious experiences with regard to essential human questions are similar in various religions and that there is no reason to treat one as better than the other. And the second key passage speaks about the positive attitude of the Church toward other religions:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the one she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men (*Nostra aetate*, no. 2).

Forty years after these words were written, the Catholic Church is different – the interreligious dialogue is a reality deeply rooted in her daily life with very far-reaching consequences also for theological teaching. Many Christians also learn to listen to what the followers of other religious traditions have to say about us. It is also worth remembering that the impact of Jewish thinkers on no. 4 of *Nostra aetate* dealing with the relationship with Judaism was decisive. Among numerous names mentioned should be Abraham Joshua Heschel<sup>13</sup>, Irving Greenberg<sup>14</sup>, Geza

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<sup>12</sup> R. Neudecker, *The Catholic Church and the Jewish People*, [in:] *Vatican II Assessment and Perspectives. Twenty-five Years After (1962-1987)*, vol. 3, ed. R. Latourelle, New York 1989, p. 289.

<sup>13</sup> To see the impact of Heschel also on Christian theology consult *No Religion Is an Island. Abraham Joshua Heschel and Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. H. Kasimow, B. L. Sherwin, New York 1991.

<sup>14</sup> His last book *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth. The New Encounter between Judaism and Christianity*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 2004, gave me an occasion to look closely at the similarities and differences between the Christian and the Jewish process of awaiting the Messiah. Cf. mine: *Wspólnie oczekując na Mesjasza. Teologia pluralizmu religijnego w judaizmie i chrześcijaństwie* [in print].

Veermes<sup>15</sup>, Byron L. Sherwin, Harold Kasimow, whose impact is also visible in the Polish debate. But it is a completely new situation, and thus it is not surprising that this theological field has been very controversial in the recent years.

### The new identity

If the positive opening toward other religions has brought a new perception of what it means to be a Catholic, it has also brought a new attitude toward Judaism and Jews, and both are involved in a radical revision of the identity of both Catholicism and Judaism. It is impossible to present the issue in details here, however, we can recall that biblical scholars so to say discovered Christianity before the New Testament and focused their attention on the Person of Jesus as a Jew. The number of books published on this subject is indeed very large, and the newest results could be seen in the books by Geza Vermes mentioned above. Let us read again two passages from no. 4 of *Nostra aetate* dedicated to this new relationship with Judaism:

Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, in accord with God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all who believe in Christ – Abraham's sons according to faith – are included in the same Patriarch's call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage. 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 Old Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of the well-cultivated Gentiles.

It is interesting that the only indirect references we find in passage no. 4 are to the letters of St. Paul who is usually remembered for his rejection of the Jewish law, on the other hand however, he emphasized the connection between the faith in Jesus and the faith of the patriarchs. The declaration accepts this standpoint of St. Paul's and rejects any form of anti-Semitism.

In her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, and displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

What we encounter here is basically the rejection of any form of superiority or arrogance, deeply rooted in the consciousness of many Christians toward Judaism. And it is really a new thinking, a Copernican revolution. Of course, I am aware that this interpretation of the meaning of *Nostra aetate* goes far beyond the Council's text. However, the subsequent development of the Catholic theology appears to make this interpretation legitimate. Also in this context I would like to

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<sup>15</sup> The author of many books concerning the Jewish background of Christianity, for example: *The Changing Faces of Jesus*, London 2000; *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*, London 2003; *Who's Who in the Age of Jesus*, London 2005.

recall Rahner's statement in which he postulates the necessity to remain in contact with Judaism of today:

Today, as a matter of fact, perhaps even in contrast to patristic and medieval theology, we do not have a clear, reflective theology of this break, this new beginning of Christianity with Paul as its inaugurator; perhaps that will only gradually be worked out in a dialogue with the Synagogue of today<sup>16</sup>.

And this is very important as Catholic theologians seem to recognize the need for the existence of the other side – in order to speak about Judaism we have to hear what the Jews have to say about us!

Again, because it is really extremely important and particularly fundamental for an accurate understanding of *Nostra aetate*, we need to recall again today the classical division of the Church history made by Rahner in the above-mentioned article:

Theologically speaking, there are three great epochs in Church history, of which the third has only just begun and made itself observable officially at Vatican II. First, the short period of Jewish Christianity. Second, the period of the Church in a distinct cultural region, namely, that of Hellenism and of European culture and civilization. Third, the period in which the sphere of the Church's life is in fact the entire world<sup>17</sup>.

The direction of the development of of the third period is still unknown, and this also explains why the Catholic Church is still looking for her own identity as a world religion. It seems that the most important issue, although not clarified by the Council, is the relation between the local bishops and the Pope. It is extremely important to understand this new self-understanding of the Church in the light of Vatican II, so let us again refer to the words of Karl Rahner:

The Council was, with and under the pope, the active subject of the highest plenary powers in the Church, in all their usage and application. [...] This has not really been theoretically clarified, nor is it apparent in practice what lasting and timely significance there is in the fact that the whole college of bishops is, with and under the pope, but really *with* the pope, the highest collegial leadership body in the Church. The still timely significance of this collegial constitutional principle in the Church remained unclear into our time and once again was more repressed than not by Paul VI after the Council. Will John Paul II change anything here? In the true world Church some such change is necessary, since the world Church simply cannot be ruled with the sort of Roman centralism that was customary in the period of the Piuses<sup>18</sup>.

Let us come back to the relationship with Judaism. This, not only a theological, sense of superiority is a fruit of many centuries of the "teaching of contempt" (Isaac Jules) toward Judaism, so it is no wonder that it is so difficult to change it. For some it is not possible at all. It seems that we have to understand this, and perhaps also to accept it with regret but realistically as a part of our "history of sin". This perspective could give an impression of being a very controversial concept

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<sup>16</sup> K. Rahner, *Towards...*, p. 723.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 721.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 726.

and an absurd one for non-believers, but it helps us to see the Church in a broader and historical framework. In any case, we have to be patient also with ourselves and realize that our religious mentality is not a question of theologians or the Church authority but it also reflects many centuries of our civilization. Perhaps this could also help us to understand and explain why so many Jews are sceptical and diffident toward any attempt of dialogue on the part of Christians.

It seems that the best way to change traditional attitudes is not a multiplication of dramatic appeals but a personal appreciation of the religious richness of Judaism and respect for its autonomy. We have been doing this not only since 1965 but also from the very beginning. Christians share with Jews the Hebrew Bible and the faith in the same God, the Father of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The problem is that we were not able to appreciate Judaism also as a religion with its other sacred texts – *Talmud* (the most essential collection of theological and legal interpretations of Torah) and *Zohar* (an important collection of spiritual and mystical writings). Christian theologians were also unable to appreciate the rabbinic tradition and the Jewish liturgy; on the contrary, they were condemned as faulty and expressing idolatry.

Let us finish with an enigmatic statement, indeed a paradoxical statement by Sigmund Freud, from one of his last works entitled *Civilization and its Discontents*:

Once the apostle Paul had laid down universal love between all men as the foundation of his Christian community, the inevitable consequence in Christianity was the utmost intolerance towards all who remained outside of it<sup>19</sup>.

This statement is in fact disturbing one, particularly if we remember the first encyclical letter of pope Benedict XVI – *Deus Caritas est* – as a kind of identity card of Christianity and in which the Pope repeats time and again that love is the fundamental dimension of Christianity. It is possible that if Sigmund Freud had had a chance to read *Nostra aetate* with its references to Paul's letters, he would have been willing to change his radical judgment. However, what is more important and more decisive is to observe how this document is implemented in the daily life of Catholics.

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<sup>19</sup> S. Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, trans. by J. Reviere, London 1957, p. 91.