

Vatican Accepts Jewish Belief: The Messiah Has Not Come

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE: ADVENTIST LEADERS TEACH PAGANISM TO CLERGY

For purposes of closer political alliances, Roman Catholic Church leaders have officially entered into an agreement with the Jews, which they would prefer not to be widely known.

The following is an article in a Jewish weekly journal, *The Jewish Week*. The article, dated July 23, 2002, is titled, "Rome Strikes Deal with Jews." It was written by Eric J. Greenberg, a staff writer for the weekly.

There are several startling news items here. According to Vatican teaching:

- **The Jews are right in not believing the Messiah has come yet.** (Jewish belief includes the concept that Jesus is not that Messiah.)

- **Jews and Catholics both believe in the same Messiah.** (Amazing.)

- **The Catholic Church will no longer work for the conversion of Jews, since they are already converted** (i.e., Protestants and Adventists are not converted, but Jews are).

In 1967, during the early thaw of Catholic-Jewish relations, **Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg** addressed a Catholic audience about the conflicting Messiah beliefs.

The Orthodox rabbi noted that one difference between Jews and Catholics is whether the Messiah is coming for the first or second time. Christians believe the Messiah—a Jew from Nazareth called Jesus—came 2,000 years ago and, after dying and being resurrected, will someday return to redeem the world.

Jews say the Messiah has yet to arrive—a belief that led to centuries of Christian anti-Semitism and killings of Jews who refused to accept the Christian view.

Rabbi Greenberg suggested the dispute be tabled until the Messiah arrives. When the Messiah comes, Jews and Christians "can ask him if this is his first coming or his second," finally putting the issue to rest.

But this week, the Messiah debate suddenly took center stage in Jewish-Catholic relations, in an appropriately bizarre and mysterious manner.

It follows the revelation last week, that the Vatican's top biblical scholars recently issued a report that for the first time in nearly 2,000 years apparently

validates as legitimate the Jewish wait for the Messiah.

A 210-page document, titled "*The Jewish People and the Holy Scriptures in the Christian Bible*," by the Pontifical Biblical Commission and authorized by the Vatican's top theologian Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, reportedly states that "the Jewish messianic wait is not in vain."

It reportedly says Jews and Christians share their wait for the Messiah, although Jews are waiting for the first coming and Christians for the second.

The new document also reportedly contains an apology to the Jewish people for anti-Semitic passages contained in the New Testament and also stresses the continuing importance of the Torah for Christians.

The book comes to light as anti-Semitism appears to be increasing around the world from Christian and Muslim sources.

For example, the Associated Press reported this week that Russian prosecutors are investigating an anti-Semitic Russian Orthodox Church priest, Sergei Nilus, who allegedly openly calls Jews the antichrist and enemies of Christianity.

But despite the potential significance of the new Vatican document, it was seemingly buried upon publication, quietly placed in bookstores in Rome last November. **There was no press conference or public announcement**, unlike many other important Vatican documents, such as the 1999 "We Remember" Holocaust report.

In fact, the world was unaware of the new "Messiah doctrine" until last Friday [September 20, 2002], when the *New York Times* published a story about it, based on a short report two days earlier by the Italian news agency ANSA.

"Everything in the report is now considered part of official Church doctrine," Vatican spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls acknowledged after it became public.

Despite its potential significance, **the document still was unavailable in English this week**, being translated only in Italian, French, and Polish. Further, the Vatican did not post it on its web site in any

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language.

"For the time being the document . . . will not be available [on] the Internet," the Pontifical Biblical Commission told one American rabbi Monday, adding, "An English translation will be available [in] days."

That left American Jewish and Catholic interfaith leaders scrambling this week for any information.

Initial speculation generally was positive, even as the interfaith leaders stressed that they were speaking without having seen the text. **They also all questioned the "strange" behavior of the Vatican in failing to publicize such a significant document.**

"The way it was released is extremely strange," said Father John Pawlikowski, director of the Catholic Jewish Studies Program at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. "Normally they launch these things with fanfare and press conferences. Also the lack of an authorized English translation is particularly disturbing."

"It's very strange," said Michael Signer, professor of Jewish Thought and Culture at the University of Notre Dame. "This is not the most salutary way this could have been done."

In Rome, Vatican officials denied they tried to hide the document, fearing criticism from right-wing Catholics who oppose theological change.

"There was no intention to hide it," said a Vatican spokesman, the Rev. Ciro Benedettini.

In the United States, Eugene Fisher, ecumenical director for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, blamed a Vatican leadership that is understaffed and "clueless" about what is important to world interest.

But Fisher, who said **he saw an English draft of the text last year**, expounded on its importance. He noted that **the theologically conservative Cardinal Ratzinger—the second most powerful person in the Vatican after the Pope—signed off on it.**

Ironically, it is the same Cardinal Ratzinger who alarmed Jewish leaders last year when he declared that the Church is waiting for the moment when Jews will "say yes to Christ."

Asked if Jews must, or should, acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, Cardinal Ratzinger told an interviewer, "We believe that. The fact remains, however, that **our Christian conviction is that Christ is also the Messiah of Israel.**"

How that declaration squares with the new "Messiah document" was a source of much speculation this week. But Fisher contended it's a major positive development.

"If you put off the moment that Jews will come to recognize Jesus as the Messiah until the end of time, then **we don't need to work or pray for the conversion of Jews to Christianity,**" he said. "God already has the salvation of Jews figured out, and they accepted it on Sinai; so they are OK."

"Jews are already with the Father," he continued. "We do not have a mission to the Jews, but only

a mission with the Jews to the world. **The Catholic Church will never again sanction an organization devoted to the conversion of the Jews.** That is over, on doctrinal, biblical, and pastoral grounds. Finito."

Signer, also a Reform rabbi said, **"What's really new is the validation of the Jewish position as truth, that the Jewish waiting for the Messiah is a correct theological viewpoint.** If the document says what we think, **it is another very important theological step in the respect for Judaism as a living tradition.**"

"It's a very important, critical statement," said Rabbi Jack Bemporad, head of the Center for Interreligious Understanding. **"Up until now they were saying Jews are completely and absolutely wrong and we are waiting in vain and blind to the truth."**

Others were more cautious, noting continued significant differences in Messiah beliefs—particularly that Christians believe that their Messiah is Jesus who is also God while for Jews the Messiah is not a divine being and cannot be Jesus because he died before bringing the redemption.

Rabbi James Rudin, senior interreligious adviser to the American Jewish Committee, raised several concerns.

"Does the new book instruct Catholics to fully accept the fact there is not only theological space in God's universe for Jews/Judaism, but **they must also affirm that the identity of the long awaited Messiah, so ardently prayed for by Jews for centuries, is unknown and will remain unknown until the Messiah appears?"** he asked.

"That is a clear affirmation of Judaism with no theological strings attached, **no Jesus** waiting for Jews at the end of the theological day. If this is the book's message, then it is an important step forward on the part of the Catholic Church."

Father Pawlikowski stressed that **the new document also appears to affirm the importance of the "Jewish Bible,"** a new term for the Vatican that he said would be highly significant if it replaces the traditional "Old Testament," which has a negative implication as being replaced by the "New Testament."

"The document seems to say that Christians should never deprecate or see the Jewish Bible as inferior, which coming from major Vatican biblical scholars could have profound implications for Catholic religious and educational material," Father Pawlikowski said.

All the scholars said the next step is for the Vatican to make available the English translation as soon as possible, so it can be studied.

"We hope to see it before the Messiah," quipped one frustrated interfaith expert.

End of article.

We live in an age when many denominations are softening—even compromising—their beliefs in order to obtain greater acceptance by other denominations. Unfortunately, we are doing it also.