

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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JAMES BERNAUER, SJ is the Kraft Family Professor at Boston College, where he has been in the Philosophy Department since 1980. He is also the Director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning on campus. He spoke with Boisi Center program coordinator **Suzanne Hevelone** and undergraduate research assistant **Omeed Alidadi** following his presentation on the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* at the Boisi Center.

HEVELONE: Do you think that *Nostra Aetate* is a peace treaty or a spiritual breakthrough for Christians and Jews?

BERNAUER: I lean towards a spiritual breakthrough. I would never have guessed the ramifications that people have seen in that document. All these celebrations are taking place around the world. People see it as such a dramatic shift between Catholics and Jews and Christians and Jews that there's hope for all religions to have a new relationship with one another. That's why I think spiritual breakthrough.

ALIDADI: How may Christians and Jews deepen their friendship and expand a culture of dialogue in the years to come? How is that relationship affected by today's information age, with social media and all these new ways to interact and connect with one another?

BERNAUER: The level of learning is the most important thing for both groups. Jews know little about Catholicism. In some ways the history we left behind was the only history we had in common – the history of persecution or resentments. Some have obviously advanced on this. Different Catholic schools have brought in Jewish professors, and Jewish schools have also brought in Catholic professors or Christian professors to

give lectures. So there's a fundamental learning that has to take place.

We're still in early stages of that. You have the School of Theology and Ministry [at Boston College], but few students are interested in Judaism because they



think that because they've done Bible studies, that's Judaism. Jews, of course, find that quite offensive, because they've had over 2000 years of post-Biblical history. Fundamental learning is essential, but that's true of both groups. I'm amazed, at times, how little is known by each group of the other.

Symbolic gestures speak across the divisions – that's why Pope John Paul II was brilliant in what he did. You

don't need lots of learning to appreciate if Pope John Paul II is coming into a synagogue in that heart of Catholicism in Rome. That's a statement, and I think that's the way Jews perceived it. That visit to the synagogue in Rome, which Pope Benedict XVI then did too, and I'm sure Pope Francis will do as well, was such a significant step for Catholicism to take in the light of *Nostra Aetate*.

Now, does that fit into media? Yes, it does on one level. That picture is worth so many different texts. Symbolic gestures are so important. We get Jewish statements responding to the Catholic Church now. Initially, there was strong reluctance to do that because they were afraid of getting involved. Catholics are over a billion people, and Jews have about 15 million. You're going to be overwhelmed, but that's changed quite a bit.

From the Jewish side, these dialogues help, but it's a really difficult effort because there isn't just a single Jewish community. I've been doing work in German Jewry, and it's a fascinating culture, but it's only one culture among the Jews. Understanding how religion interacts with a culture is a lifelong process, and you're only going to learn aspects of it. I don't think we should delude ourselves to think that we're

going to have a mastery of Judaism or a mastery of Catholicism. These are immensely variegated cultures and faiths.

HEVELONE: Has that honor been reciprocated? Have rabbis been invited to services at the Vatican as well?

BERNAUER: Not services, and the Pope wasn't in the service at the synagogue. He visited, and they did a prayer together. They had prayer, but not worship.

I was sitting next to this Jewish man in the Vatican. I was chatting with him, and I said, "Have you met a pope before?" He said, "Oh, I meet them all the time." I couldn't believe it. This guy is about 35 years of age, and he met John Paul II and then he met Benedict several times. He's met Francis several times. So the joke is, if you have a Jewish friend, you might be able to get into the Vatican pretty easily. The Vatican has reached out, obviously.

ALIDADI: How did the religious and secular communities initially respond to the Pope's declaration? And afterward, to what degree has *Nostra Aetate* contributed to the unity of people of various religious backgrounds today?

BERNAUER: It was favorable because, in part, the Jews were working all through the council with Cardinal Bea on this declaration, so it didn't come as a big surprise. Some Jewish groups wanted it to be stronger. For example, there's no mention of the Holocaust. How could you not mention the Holocaust? Bea mentioned the Holocaust in his speech to the bishops, but the document did not.

For a while, the fierce resistance to *Nostra Aetate* was from the communities in the Middle East. They thought this was a shift of the Vatican policy, which had been perceived of as balanced, as a shift towards Israel. It wasn't just the Muslims who objected. It was also Catholics in Muslim lands who were afraid of what the repercussions would be. I don't think there were repercussions.

I haven't seen much in the history that suggests that there was some sort of violent reaction.

Jews were pleased that this perception changed, and Jews would no longer be held accountable for the death of Jesus, which is amazing. I had an uncle who came to me after and said, "I was always taught that the Jews killed Jesus." That's not true anymore. It was a real challenge for a certain type of Catholic traditional thinking, and that's the

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great thing about the document. It was a brave document, because there were forces against it. Initially, it wasn't even conceived this way. It was going to be part of an ecumenical statement about Christianity, and Jews had a special relationship to Christianity.

Perspective changes – if the real danger of religions in the world today is fundamentalism, then this document might come to be perceived in a different way in the future. The lineage might be *Pacem in Terris*, the document from John XXIII about peace overall. And

then *Nostra Aetate* becomes part of a broader effort, that will be seen in an historical perspective, to try to get the faiths in some sort of relationship with one another that is not fundamentalistic. That's a great challenge.

HEVELONE: We wondered about *Nostra Aetate*'s legacy through the work of Pope Francis. Where do you see him bringing forth that heritage of *Nostra Aetate* in relationship to the Jewish communities?

BERNAUER: The Jewish community has been positive to him, in part because he has this good friend, the Argentinian Rabbi Abraham Skorka, with whom he wrote a book when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires. So Francis already is coming in with a positive reputation.

What shocked some Jews is when the Vatican Secretary of State came out and spoke of the state of Palestine. That upset people. Would that have been stated without the permission of Pope Francis? No. Obviously he's behind that. Many Jews, of course, are totally behind that two-state solution as well. So you had this strong statement, and there are counterforces that don't want that.

At least for some people, there's an effort to theologize this occupation. That's disastrous for Israel, and it's disastrous for the support that Jews have for Israel. It's a real tension within Judaism. I've tried to steer the Center [for Christian-Jewish Learning] through these difficult waters. It's a question of who you bring in as speakers. Our center doesn't fund certain types of speakers who have been proposed to us on both sides. We'd lose credibility with one of the communities if we were perceived of as supporting [the other].

ALIDADI: So what opportunities would you say BC students have in terms of expanding their knowledge about interfaith dialogue, specifically about Christians and Jews? How does your

center promote discussion with our community?

BERNAUER: We have lectures. We have a seminar, a graduate seminar to discuss the Israeli-Palestinian issue, which was at the suggestion of the current provost when he was dean. November 1-2 of this year, we have a whole series of panels and lectures regarding *Nostra Aetate*.

Now, often it comes up, why don't you do something with the Muslim world too? The issue there is that an endowment was given for a center for Jewish-Christian education. If you honor the will of the donor, it's for another group on campus to foster that dialogue. There are probably enough issues in the Jewish-Christian dialogue without getting into the Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogue. But we are always open to new ideas.

I admire what Professor Eve Spangler does, bringing a group of students over there [to Israel/Palestine] every year. I've toyed with that. I'd have to take resources from other things to provide the trip to Israel for students.

HEVELONE: Maybe take them to synagogues in Boston to start?

BERNAUER: Some of the core courses in religion and theology, used to bring students to different faith groups. I presume they still do it. When I was in high school, we used to go to Greek Orthodox services and Russian Orthodox to see what it's like. I don't know if that's being done anymore. I don't quite know whether we feel secure. One of the things I've heard about why religious students are not really interested in other faiths is that the student coming into seminary these days doesn't have a secure backing in his own or her own faith. So the idea of dialoguing with Jews is difficult when I've never read the Gospel of Matthew. I can see where they'd be reluctant. I had twelve years of being drilled on Catechism. But



I don't think that happens anymore. It is perhaps an insecurity that many Catholics feel even dealing with Jews or other faiths.

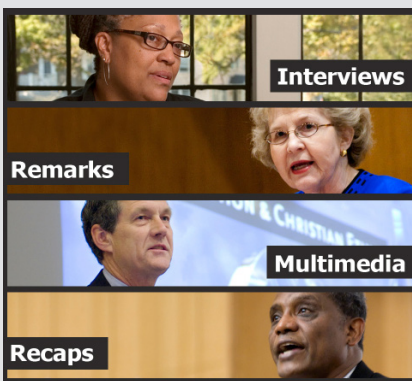
ALIDADI: How has the Holocaust affected Christian teachings? How did Christian churches respond to the persecution and genocide of the Jews at the time?

BERNAUER: I teach a course on the Holocaust, so I'm somewhat familiar with the material. Let me first go to the question about the response. The Holocaust consciousness that came after the Eichmann trial changed people's attitudes. The Holocaust was not a major factor in developing *Nostra Aetate*, although Cardinal Bea in his address, his important address to the bishops at the Council, did bring in the Holocaust, and he had real credibility as a German. In the course of the years since, that consciousness has developed.

That's one of the reasons *Nostra Aetate* has been accepted so widely. It would have been one more declaration of the Vatican Council II, such as the one on liturgy, or that you can use English, or many of the other documents. But because of the growth in Holocaust consciousness, *Nostra Aetate* took on a significance that even its authors at the time did not anticipate. That's a

good thing because it's a document that changed the relationship. It's one of the most important documents from the Council, which wasn't anticipated at the time. Fortunately there have been many statements from the Vatican and the European bishops' conferences expressing remorse or the failures of so many Catholics during the period of the Holocaust.

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