



The Slippery Slope of Jewish Religious Dialogue with the Church

Saying "Thank You, but No Thank You" to programs that contravene clear halakhic rulings, including those of Torah luminaries of our times.

From Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

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The rabbis, cardinals, bishops and priests [met together](#), prayed together, discussed theology together, sang, [danced and feasted together](#), and recited the Shema together. They cried together as they attended a church orchestra performance of [The Suffering of the Innocents](#), commemorating the Holocaust, with the intertwined parallel theme of Mary crying as Jesus suffered and was killed. A bonfire celebration was held under the imposing shadow of a large [gold statue](#) of the Pope. The Jewish and Catholic clergy embraced and clasped hands as they spiritedly [danced and sang Jewish song together](#). Reform, Conservative, Orthodox and Reconstructionist rabbis... Rabbis such as [Irving Greenberg](#) of CLAL, [David Rosen](#) of AJC, and a delegation of [leaders](#) from [Yeshivat Chovevei Torah](#), lovingly declared allegiance to a new and close fraternal relationship with their Catholic counterparts.

This unique program occurred on May 4-7 of this year at [Domus Galilaeae](#), the Catholic center for study and prayer in the Galilee. Domus Galilaeae opened in the year 2000 upon the visit of Pope John Paul II to the Land of Israel, with the hope that the Domus would become a locus for interfaith dialogue.

The program was coordinated and hosted by the [Neocatechumenal Way](#), an outreach movement within the Roman Catholic Church focusing on the Catholic formation of adults. The nature of the Neocatechumenal Way was defined by Pope John Paul II as follows: "I recognize the Neocatechumenal Way as an itinerary of Catholic Formation, valid for our society and for our times, and as instrument in the parishes at the service of the bishop to return to faith many of those who abandoned it."

Although the Neocatechumenal Way is known for its warm approach to outreach, the word "Catechumenal" invokes haunting memories of terror for the Jewish People. The *Casa dei Catechumeni* (House of Catechumens) was an institution that was founded in Italy in 1543 at the instigation of Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits Order. The purpose of the House of Catechumens was to educate infidels who converted to the Catholic faith both voluntarily and by force. In Rome, the local House of Catechumens had to be financed by the Jewish community, by decree of the Church.

In 1858, [Edgardo Mortara](#), a seven year-old Jewish boy, was abducted by the Papal police and eventually brought to the House of Catechumens in Rome. Despite international protests, Pope Pius IX refused to release the Mortara child, who subsequently grew up to become a Catholic priest. These are but some of the events that evoke memories of fear and persecution on the part of contemporary Jews who are acquainted with the history when they hear about a neo-Catechumens program, even though the Neocatechumenal Way does not engage in the conduct of its namesake.

According to a May 11 *Vatican Radio* interview with Kiko Argüello, founder of the Neocatechumenal Way, the May 4-7 Domus Galilaeae interfaith gathering was one of genuine, shared religious service and study, leaving a profound impact on the Jewish attendees:

R. - *We did it here, dancing together: cardinals, bishops, and all rabbis. It was exciting! They (the rabbis) could not believe their eyes to what was going on. It's really a historical fact. They want us to continue this relationship. One thing that most impressed them was the passage of the faith to new generations, because they have many problems on this. Young people, in fact, secularists. We screened a video that explained how the passage of faith is done in the Way. They were impressed on how parents can explain to their children the Word; ask themselves about their children: what you say today that Word in your life? They remained impressed and want us to help them in this.*

Q. - *There was a common prayer?*

R. - *We had Vespers, led by a rabbi, Wednesday night, in all their forms, in which we participated; and then, on Thursday morning, also they wished that you could pray Christians, and we did Lauds, presided over by Cardinal Schönborn, with Psalms, with a reading of the prophet Isaiah, and Chapter 60, 1-5, with a homily made Cardinal Schönborn which was very welcome.*

Q. - *At the end, what has been the reaction of the rabbis?*

R. - *We received exciting experiences ... Another rabbi who (attended) said: "I tell you frankly, that I realized something, listening to Kiko. I in my family, in my tradition, I never heard that God loves us ", and said with a force that moved the assembly. "I saw Him here, in this house. - He said - I saw him really in the facts: as they welcomed us ... ", in the experiences that I have heard in the groups, as they spoke, these couples, these families, these brothers of the Neocatechumenal Way, saying with their lives, as God had loved, as he had redeemed, saved them ... He said: "Well here, I asked my wife: 'But you, for example, have you heard from someone in your life, in the synagogue, this word, that God He loves us? '" And his wife said to him: "No, I have not ever heard, ever heard!" And the rabbi said: "Me too ..." There was also a very moving experience of Rabbi Greenberg of the United States. The environment that is created at the end you cannot describe, really! Then, we also had times very familiar, we had dances ... there was a spirit of communion really very strong!*

The sight of rabbis gleefully reveling in fraternity and endearment with cardinals, bishops and priests can make even the simplest Jews of Rome's ghetto cringe. But let's analyze this all further.

The Catholic leaders at Domus Galilaeae displayed sensitivity and love, as they covered crucifixes and went all out to host and accommodate their Jewish guests. The Catholic hosts reached out gracefully to the Jewish guests in every way, serving kosher food, providing a bonfire for Lag B'Omer, asking a rabbi to lead some of the prayers, and much more.

While we greatly appreciate the graciousness of the hosts, we direct our criticism to our Jewish brethren - the guests, whose participation was in stark and dangerous breach of clear and controlling halakhic rulings, and whose attendance set a precarious precedent.

R. Moshe Feinstein, in a set of halakhic letters penned in 1967 to R. Yosef B. Soloveitchik of Boston and to Dr. Bernard Lander (Igr. Moshe YD 3:43-44), unequivocally forbade Jewish participation in ecumenical dialogue with the Church, citing both concern for apostasy as well as inherent prohibitions of such dialogue. R. Feinstein was firm as steel that participation of any sort constituted grave infractions of Halakha.

In a series of halakhic and binding policy correspondence between 1962 and 1967 (published in [Community, Covenant and Commitment](#)), R. Soloveitchik articulated his unyielding position that Jewish delegations should not and may not take part in religious discussion with the Church. R. Soloveitchik expressed concern for apostasy and wrote that the Jewish and Christian religious differences and world outlooks are irreconcilable, such that discussion thereof would be wholly unfruitful and would be wrong.

Although, unlike R. Feinstein, R. Soloveitchik maintained that in theory, dialogue with the Church about "humanitarian and cultural endeavors" - universal, practical issues that do not touch upon personal religious beliefs and practices - would be acceptable and even positive (ibid. p. 260), the context of such dialogue in the

situations addressed by R. Soloveitchik caused him to prohibit Jewish participation therein. R. Soloveitchik was adamant and unapologetic in his refusal to allow any form of personal religious discourse between Judaism and Christianity, and the circumstances and impressions conveyed by even otherwise permissible interchange compelled him to comprehensively ban such interchange in his correspondence.

R. Soloveitchik affirmed the same in his seminal 1964 essay [Confrontation](#), in which he wrote in part:

...we must state, in unequivocal terms, the following. We are a totally independent faith community. We do not revolve as a satellite in any orbit. Nor are we related to any other faith community as "brethren" even though "separated."... For the mere appraisal of the worth of one community in terms of the service it has rendered to another community, no matter how great and important this service was, constitutes an infringement of the sovereignty and dignity of even the smallest of faith communities ... Hence, it is important that the religious or theological logos should not be employed as the medium of communication between two faith communities ... The relationship between two communities must be outer-directed and related to the secular orders with which men of faith come face to face. In the secular sphere, we may discuss positions to be taken, ideas to be evolved, and plans to be formulated. In these matters, religious communities may together recommend action to be developed and may seize the initiative to be implemented later by general society.

The Rabbinical Council of America, in a statement of addendum issued that same year, formally adopted R. Soloveitchik's position as its official policy.

Later that year, R. Soloveitchik penned an open letter for publication in the *Rabbinical Council of America Record*, which reads in part:

We are, therefore, opposed to any public debate, dialogue or symposium concerning the doctrinal, dogmatic or ritual aspects of our faith vis-à-vis "similar" aspects of another faith community. We believe in and are committed to our Maker in a specific manner and we will not question, defend, offer apologies, analyze or rationalize our faith in dialogues centered about these "private" topics which express our personal relationship to the God of Israel.

It must be noted that these rulings of R. Feinstein and R. Soloveitchik were issued during and after the Second Vatican Council and *Nostra Aetate*, and that R. Feinstein and R. Soloveitchik never rescinded these rulings, despite official changes in Church policy toward Judaism and Jews during that period and the next several decades, throughout which R. Feinstein and R. Soloveitchik were alive and actively teaching and issuing halakhic and theological pronouncements. Direct family members of R. Soloveitchik have personally verified that R. Soloveitchik held resolutely to his rulings on these issues to the very end. R. Dovid Feinstein has affirmed that the positions of his father, R. Moshe Feinstein, pertain to these issues and remain in force to this very day, and R. Soloveitchik's close disciples have likewise restated the firm position of R. Soloveitchik on these issues and their enduring relevance and applicability to the present and beyond. (Following a 2004 yeshiva visit by high-ranking Church clergy, R. Herschel Reichman, an intimate disciple of R. Soloveitchik, stated that R. Soloveitchik's ban on interfaith religious discourse includes discussion regarding methods of religious study, even when the actual topics of study are not broached.)

R. Shmuel Ha-Levi Vosner (Shevet Ha-Levi II:59) addressed the permissibility of joint prayer between Jews and Christians and unequivocally forbade it. Other major halakhic authorities who have weighed in on these matters similarly ruled prohibitively. Furthermore, it is quite interesting that R. Aharon Soloveichik, otherwise known to be a social liberal in many situations, was staunchly and animatedly opposed to any interfaith discourse.

We would be remiss for failure to quote the words of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe on our subject:

The concept of "fraternity between nations" is fundamentally positive as long as it is limited to the context of trade, philanthropic institutions and other matters of civil and economic society ... However, the claim by believers of a religion to explain their faith and their religious customs to people of other religions and to

expose themselves to explanations like that indicates a misunderstanding of the concept of "brotherhood". Unfortunately, these inter-religious activities have caused at best an increase in confusion and at worst have been an instrument in the hands of missionaries of those religions that see it as a "mission" to spread their faith among people of other religions. The steep rise in the number of mixed marriages has many causes. However there is no doubt that one of the important factors is the movement "inter-religious" or "dialogue" (to put it mildly) in the context of which the priests of a religion are invited to preach from the pulpit of other religions. It is not difficult to realize the destructive effect of this phenomenon in relation to those young people, and also in respect to their parents, whose orientation and loyalty to their faith border on the absolute minimum and approach zero.

We are at a watershed moment in history, as well-known rabbis *en masse* contravene the accepted, binding and precedent halakhic rulings of the most preeminent halakhic authorities of the past century and beyond. The notion that shared religious observances and prayer, intense personal faith discussion and mutual religious-emotional rites would be engaged in by rabbis in unison with Roman Catholic clergy flies in the face of the powerful halakhic and theological tradition promulgated and embraced by our people, as espoused by its leading and commanding rabbinic luminaries.

The time has come to disengage from further ecumenical discourse and observances, with respect and thanks, in deference to the serious and robust halakhic and theological mandate of our nation's preeminent rabbinic authorities. It is time to say, "Thank you, but no thank you."

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