

The Future of the Ratisbonne Center of Jewish Studies

We already had the opportunity to recall here the importance given by the Catholic Church to a better knowledge of Judaism among Christians. Since the Second Vatican Council and *Nostra Aetate*, this concern has often been brought to mind in the official texts of the Magisterium - including the two texts concerning implementation: the 1975 *Guidelines* (cf. *Sens*, 1975, no. 1, pp. 4-8) and the 1985 *Notes* (cf. *Sens* 1985, no. 8, pp. 245-255) – and during numerous “Dialogues”, of which we have published lectures and summaries throughout the years. But if this concern is not to remain simply a pious wish, it must lead to the setting up of appropriate teaching at a high level, which requires encounter with Jews and living Judaism. As the *Guidelines* recommended: “Wherever possible, chairs of Jewish studies should be created and collaboration with Jewish scholars should be encouraged.”

It was in this spirit that the Religious of Our Lady of Sion created a Center of Jewish Studies in their Ratisbonne house in Jerusalem, which in the course of several years had reached a certain size. At first, the center was internal to the congregation, but it welcomed everyone who was interested in these studies (cf. Fr. Sabia, *Sens*, 1985, no. 12, p. 374). It was set up juridically as an “International and Ecumenical Center of Jewish Studies for Christians” in 1985, following an agreement with the Theology Faculty of the Institut Catholique in Paris; then, in 1995, it became a center for post-graduate studies with a specialization in preparation for a Master’s in theology at the same faculty. In 1990, it was separated from the Institut Catholique in Paris and became a Pontifical Institute (cf. M. Remaud, *Sens*, 2001, no. 11, pp. 501-502), and the Religious of Sion handed over to the Vatican both their building and their specialized library. The Center’s originality consisted in its offering to a Christian public, both Catholic and Protestant, in close collaboration with the Hebrew University, the possibility of attaining formation in the basic disciplines of Jewish tradition and specific enlightenment on the theology of relations between the Church and the Jewish people.

Rome’s decision, in June 2001, to close the Center of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem was like a lightning bolt. For more than one person, this decision looked like the Church was negating the usefulness of this type of formation. Of course, at the time, the Center was having great financial difficulties, and it might have seemed necessary to re-organize it in order to consolidate a project for openness to Jewish thought at the heart of the Churches. But the violent closure under conditions which could seem precipitated, was felt to be like the denial of more than thirty years of in-depth work. However, the re-opening of the Center in another form was announced for September 2003.

The decision made by the *Congregation for Catholic Education* and the *Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism* on November 14, 2002, which, however, was made public on January 24, 2003 (cf. *L’Osservatore Romano* of January 24, 2003, p. 8), radically changes the architecture of the decision to re-open the Center. We are no longer dealing with a Pontifical Institute in itself, but with an antenna of the Cardinal Bea Center for Jewish Studies which was set up at the Gregorian University in Rome.

The reason given is as follows: “At the present time, it has been considered opportune to create conditions more suitable for allowing these initiatives to enjoy greater stability and visibility, as well as securing qualified intellectual standards so that those enrolled in the program may attain an appropriate academic degree.”

The question which remains open is that of how the Jerusalem Center can be linked with the Cardinal Bea Center for Jewish Studies. The “advantages” were identified quite well: “solid institutional security; greater visibility of the Church's commitment in the field of Jewish Studies; the placement of these studies in the context of a prestigious university with a strong international character; providing the students with a more integrated knowledge and understanding of the Jewish religion, culture and history; the intellectual collaboration between Jewish and Christian specialists in the study of religion, culture, and history; the possibility to confer the relative academic degrees and to interact with other academic institutions.” But nothing is said about how the Jerusalem Center will function – except that “a person will be appointed to oversee the development of academic activities in Jerusalem” – nor on the place to be given to Jewish Studies within the course of Christian Studies.

In this issue – which was planned before the publication of the decision discussed here – two (former) lecturers at the Ratisbonne Center of Jewish Studies talk about the *Talmud Torah* of the Jews and about the Jewish Studies of Christians who listen to this *Talmud Torah*. Their two articles show in different but converging ways how Zion-Jerusalem is central for this *Talmud Torah* and for these Studies, which can only be facilitated by means of a presence in Jerusalem, the use of Hebrew and the important possibilities offered by Israeli Institutions, and first and foremost by the Hebrew University, in order to “*better understand the basic elements in the religious tradition of Judaism*” and to “*get to know the essential characteristics by which Jews define themselves in their lived religious reality.*” (*Guidelines*, cf. *Sens*, 1975, no. 1, p. 5)

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Postscript

The preceding article, which was written in January 2002 and published in Italian in the review QOL of Reggio Emilia, number 95/96 of October-November-December 2001, reported the suspension for two years of the Center's activities as decided by the Roman Congregation for Catholic Education. This decision, which was communicated orally to the Center's lecturers and students in June 2001, allowed one to hope for an improvement in its academic working and in a financial stabilization. A declaration of November 14, 2002, which was published on January 24, 2003, and signed by Z. Cardinal Grocholewski, Prefect of the Congregation for Catholic Education, and by W. Cardinal Kasper, President of the Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism, announces the transfer of the Ratisbonne project to the "Cardinal Bea Center for Jewish Studies" which was recently re-organized at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. The declaration announces that the Cardinal Bea Center will also support academic initiatives in Jerusalem, in particular within the framework of the already existing agreement on academic cooperation with the Hebrew University. It is also indicated that such a context will assure continuity with the project which previously was located at the Ratisbonne facility. Finally, it is announced that a person will be named who will supervise academic activities in Jerusalem.

Since it is easy to access the Roman declaration, it is not necessary to say more about it. On the other hand, it is impossible to imagine how these decisions will be put into practice in Rome and in Jerusalem. Without doubt, we must rejoice over the fact that in Rome, courses and seminars are developing for a better knowledge of Judaism. We can hope that the academic initiatives envisaged for Jerusalem will contribute to this improvement. However, will these initiatives be in the area of Jewish studies for Christians listening to the Talmud Torah of the Jews? Will the transfer to Rome of the center of gravity for these studies allow one to respect and experience what Jerusalem signifies for Jews according to the Torah? Will it be possible to maintain the intense contact with the Hebrew language which has again become the main language for Jewish studies? Will the students be in Jerusalem enough to live shoulder to shoulder with the Jewish people, as Cardinal Kasper desires, according to a beautiful lecture given in Wiesbaden on March 10, 2002, "Juden und Christen – Schulter an Schulter", which could be translated as: "Jews and Christians – Shoulder to Shoulder". Whatever the case may be, the Roman decisions without doubt do not intend to uproot the Institute of Saint Peter of Sion (Ratisbonne) from its place of origin, Sion-Jerusalem, nor to take it away from its founders, the Religious of Our Lady of Sion. These latter regret that the Institute will be stripped of its pontifical character. They hope that the large property and the library of Ratisbonne, which was given to the Holy See in order to be at the service of Jewish studies, will continue to be used for this purpose. Where the Religious of Sion are concerned, they will continue their Jewish studies in a serious and intense way and as academically as necessary and possible, with the help of Christian and Jewish friends. They will continue to listen to the Talmud Torah of the Jews in Jerusalem, linked fraternally with the Jews, in the concrete context of a city and a land where Jewish existence is seriously contested and threatened at present in a way which goes beyond the legitimate criticism of abusive behavior.

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