

Progress in Christian-Jewish ties

Rutgers U. seminar explores revolution in church attitudes



Participating in the Sept. 21 Rutgers University program on Jewish-Christian relations, are, from left, Rabbi Eugene Korn of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation, the Rev. John Pawlikowski of the Catholic-Jewish Studies program at the University of Chicago, and Yael Zerubavel, director of the Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

Photo by Debra Rubin

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Christian relations with Jews have undergone a dramatic positive change since the middle of the last century, spurred by reaction to the Holocaust, the creation of Israel, and evolving church attitudes.

Still, the relationship remains complicated, with attitudes varying among the different denominations of Christianity and Judaism and Jews unsure how to respond as respected equals after many centuries of Christian persecution.

These topics were explored during a Sept. 21 program at Rutgers University, with an interfaith dinner and presentations by two clergy, a priest and a rabbi, engaged in interfaith affairs.

The program, "Jewish-Christian Relations Today: A Historic Transformation," was developed by Rutgers' Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life and the Diocese of Metuchen. Cosponsored by Rutgers Department of Religious Studies, Rutgers Hillel, and the Rutgers Catholic Center, the program drew about 300 people to Trayes Hall on the Douglass Campus in New Brunswick.

Joseph and Harriet Tabak of Highland Park funded the program and a dinner beforehand, where religious and community leaders of both faiths and Rutgers staff and faculty were joined by Rutgers president Richard McCormick. The program, organizers said, was part of what will be an ongoing interfaith dialogue at the university.

Two other programs on Jewish-Christian dialogue for students are scheduled for Oct. 7 and 28.

In his talk, the Rev. John Pawlikowski, director of the Catholic-Jewish Studies program at the University of Chicago, said centuries of Christian persecution of Jews was based on “supercessionism,” the Christian teaching that Christianity invalidated Judaism.

And yet, he said, the Catholic Church no longer maintains that principle. “Jesus was a Jew and always remained a Jew,” said Pawlikowski.

Rabbi Eugene Korn, North American director of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation, said the current state of Jewish-Christian relations would have been unthinkable to his Eastern European grandparents.

“The [Catholic] Church now says Israel is in covenant with God,” said Korn, who has a long resume in interfaith affairs. “This was a church that said the Old Testament was no longer valid, that it was because of Jewish stubbornness and blindness they were forced, like Cain, to wander the world,” said Korn. “The church taught that if Christianity is true, Judaism is false.”

Anti-Semitism condemned

This “total transformation of perspective” in recent decades has seen the Catholic Church repudiate anti-Semitism and its leaders ask for forgiveness for the role its teachings may have played in the Holocaust, added Pawlikowski.

That culminated in 1998 with the Vatican’s issuing an apology for its failings during the Holocaust.

“It recognized the centrality of the Holocaust in terms of the Jewish people,” said Pawlikowski. “It recognized the importance of teaching the Shoa to Catholic students.”

Both Pope John Paul II and the current Pope Benedict XVI have visited Auschwitz. John Paul also made a historic trip in 2000 to Israel, where he met with political leaders and prominent rabbis, visited Yad Vashem, and placed a note in the Kotel.

Pawlikowski said he expects a continued “unflinching” condemnation of anti-Semitism by the current German-born pope.

Korn stressed the Holocaust was “the antithesis of Christianity,” which holds that every human being is created in God’s image and has sanctity.

“While the Holocaust occurred in the heart of Christian Europe, you can’t say that the Hitlers, Eichmanns, or Goebbels were Christians in any sense,” he said. “But the people who ran the crematoriums and gas chambers were Christians whose ideology was shaped by Christianity.”

In the aftermath of the Shoa, the Christian world “recoiled in horror at what they had wrought,” Korn said.

Furthermore, the Christian belief that unless they were converted to Christianity, Jews could never return to Jerusalem was invalidated with the creation of Israel in 1948, “which reinforced that the covenant with Abraham was still valid.”

With the theological impediments removed, Jews and Christians have found they share common goals.

And both, said Korn, are threatened by left-wing and right-wing extremists.

“Neither can thrive in a world of extreme materialism on the left,” he explained. “But we are also both threatened on the right by extremists, radicals, and intolerance.”

While Catholic-Jewish relations continue to strengthen, Korn said, there are still schisms with mainline Protestant groups over the Palestinian issue and with some evangelical Protestant sects that still seek to convert Jews.

‘We’re one people’

THE COUPLE who funded the Sept. 21 Rutgers program on Jewish-Christian relations, Joseph and Harriet Tabak of Highland Park, have a long history of activism in the Jewish community and are staunch proponents of interfaith dialogue.

The program is expected to be the first of a series giving religious leaders, faculty members, and students the opportunity to engage in interfaith dialogue.

“I think it’s extremely important for Catholics and Jews and people of all faiths to work together,” said Joseph Tabak, who chairs the boards of St. Peter’s University Hospital in New Brunswick and the McCarrick Care Center. “We’re one people although we might worship different ways, and we all have the same God.”

Bishop Paul Bootkoski of the Diocese of Metuchen told *NJJN* he welcomed the opportunity to interact with the Jewish community.

“Joe Tabak is a good friend of mine and he introduced me to the director of the Bildner center,” Yael Zerubavel, said Bootkoski. “We agreed to dialogue, which is really an extension of what I’ve been doing in my personal life.

“I’ve been to Israel three times and have been involved in Jewish-Catholic relations in the past, especially at Rutgers-Newark, where I was chaplain.”

Tabak is past chair of Israel Bonds and a recipient of the State of Israel Peace Medal. He received the Bishop’s Award and two years ago was given a papal knighthood in the Order of Pope Saint Sylvester, becoming the first non-Christian in the 25-year history of the Diocese of Metuchen to receive the honor.

He is an active supporter of the Jewish Federation of Greater Middlesex County and a member of the Highland Park Conservative Temple-Congregation Anshe Emeth.

“Especially with how the world is today we need to work together to work out our problems,” said Harriet Tabak, who is a Lion of Judah and a life member of the federation board.

The Tabaks also recently received an award from the Middlesex federation for their leadership and dedication to the Jewish community.

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