



Jesus and The Pharisees: an International Interreligious Conference

Lisa Palmieri-Billig* | 02.05.2019

The Pontifical Biblical Institute, Cardinal Bea Center, Gregorian University Foundation, American Jewish Committee and Italian Bishops Conference unite to reassess history and stereotypes.

The Pontifical Biblical Institute (familiarily known as “the Biblicum”) is celebrating its 110th anniversary via a remarkable tribute to Christianity’s common roots with Judaism. The scholarly, international, interreligious conference that promises to become another milestone in the evolving history of Christian-Jewish relations is called, “Jesus and the Pharisees: an Interdisciplinary Reappraisal”. It will take place in cooperation with the Cardinal Bea Center for Judaic Studies of the Pontifical Gregorian University at the latter’s Aula Magna May 7-9 and is co-sponsored by AJC (the American Jewish Committee), the CEI (the Italian Bishops Conference), the Gregorian University Foundation and Verbum. On May 9, Pope Francis will receive the Conference participants in audience.

Expectations run high for the innovative contributions of this event. Jewish, Protestant and Catholic scholars plus those from other backgrounds will travel to Rome from 10 different countries and four continents to participate in a 360 degree academic investigation regarding what is known about the Pharisees from various ancient sources such as the writings of Josephus, the Qumran, archaeological findings, the New Testament and Rabbinic Literature. Following a round table discussion of what can be deduced from the historical facts, the second half of the conference will focus on the impact of different interpretations in different languages on the nature of the Pharisees. Within the disciplines of academic inquiry, the specialized speakers will examine how the Pharisees and their relations with Jesus have been portrayed in Patristic Literature, Medieval Jewish interpretations, Passion Plays, Movies, Religion Text Books and Homiletics. “In the end”, it is stated in the program, “we will look at possible ways to represent the Pharisees less inadequately in the future.”

The term, “less inadequately” refers to the basic issue that inspired the scrupulous planning of this event over the past two years. The Pharisees have for centuries been depicted in a disparaging manner as a synonym for people who are “hypocritical”, “self-righteous”, “sanctimonious”, “legalistic”, “enemies of Jesus”, “venal” etc. These definitions, as recalled by the organizers at a recent press conference, are listed in many dictionaries and often still used by political and religious leaders to indicate an absence of spirituality, an example of moral depravation. Unfortunately, these stereotypes, abstracted from the original intrareligious context of internal criticism and even semantically detached from reference to contemporary Judaism, have also been used to justify the antisemitism behind pogroms and persecutions of Jews for nearly 2000 years.

A number of Jewish commentators even located Jesus among the Pharisees. So was Saint Paul of Tarsus, defining himself as such in Philippians 3:5 where he describes his having been “*circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee*”. Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century, also cast the Pharisees in a positive light.

Jesus never reneged his Jewish faith, but on the contrary called his brethren to greater religious and moral purity, often with more rigor than Jewish law prescribed – such as his injunctions against impure thoughts, not just actions. Being critical of malpractices within the ruling class of his times, much as many of us today are dismayed by some of the practices of religious and political

hierarchies, he argued for a return to the true values he had been taught and in which he believed.

Amy-Jill Levine, this year's visiting Jewish professor at the Biblicum, who co-edited the "*Jewish Annotated New Testament*" (presented to Pope Francis on March 27) recalled that the followers of Jesus spoke badly of the religious authorities at the time in order to create more converts to the teachings of Jesus and the Gospels. They reflect the disputes of those years, which however have been lifted out of their historical context and used to foment anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. "But Jesus doesn't need the negative foil", she noted. "He looks perfectly good and stands out very strongly on his own!"

At the press conference held at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in cooperation with the Cardinal Bea Centre for Jewish Studies of the Pontifical Gregorian University, the four key organizers explained at length the characteristics and purposes of the conference: Michael Kolarcik, s.J., Rector and Fr. Joseph Sievers. Professor at the Pontifical Biblical Institute; visiting Professor Amy-Jill Levine of Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee and Prof. Etienne Vetö, ccn - Director of the Cardinal Bea Centre.

Professor Vetö, who pointed out the timeliness of the participation of the Cardinal Bea Centre (which Pope Francis recently said had been entrusted to become "the Catholic Church's premier program in Jewish Studies") since it is presently celebrating the 50th anniversary of the passing of its namesake Cardinal Augustin Bea, "the principal architect of the document *Nostra Aetate* that would change the course of religious history". He reported that 300 people have already registered for the Conference, and since there are more demands but a limited capacity in the Aula Magna, streaming will be available. "This testifies to the new understanding the Catholic Church has on Judaism and to the extent to which Jews and Christians can study together their common history." He added that "the incorrectly negative treatment of the Pharisees is part of a much larger problem - rooted in the false counterposing of Catholicism as a religion of love against Judaism as a legalistic religion - while actually we are both religions of love (and ethics)."

The Biblicum's Rector, Prof. Kolarcik, recalled the Biblical Institute's history of cooperation with Protestant and Jewish scholars which also "forged fruitful and ongoing relationships with other centres of Study: the Hebrew University of Jerusalem being one example. "The topic of the relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees is highly appropriate", he said. "It is another way of describing the relationship between Christians and Jews over 2 millennia. What we say about this relationship, and how we say it, has significant consequences for our current relationship."

Professor Amy-Jill Levine, said "For Jews, to know who the Pharisees were and what the Pharisees taught is to recover part of our history. For Christians, how the Pharisees are represented in the New Testament, positively and negatively, has impacted not only teaching and preaching, but also Christian-Jewish relations. This conference addresses major issues in history, from antiquity through the Middle Ages to the present. It also contributes to alleviating pressing issues of antisemitism, stereotyping and bearing false witness against the others." She points to problems of preaching where priests are not aware of the extensive Guidelines issued in various Vatican documents, and have insufficient historical information about the Pharisees, or about Jews and Judaism and thus lack the tools necessary for preventing anti-Jewish preaching and teaching. This results, she feels, in children learning negative stereotypes in catechism.

Professor Joseph Sievers, one of the principal architects of the program, concluded that the aim of the conference is "to reassess the sources to provide a clearer picture of the 'literary' and 'historical' Pharisees of antiquity, but while this is a worthwhile goal, it is not sufficient. A second step will be to assess the factors behind the prejudices plaguing common perceptions of the Pharisees - and to suggest ways to overcome them...in homilectics, text books, and popular culture including books and movies about Jesus and passion plays."

“Thus the conference is set to combine a multidisciplinary approach to all the ancient sources about the Pharisees, with careful attention to the effects of opinions voiced about this frequently stereotyped group. It will also attempt to show ways of how prejudices have been overcome and can be laid to rest.”

In response to questions raised by journalists at the press conference regarding the frequent New Testament quotes and comments by Pope Francis himself containing negative references to the Pharisees, which Francis uses as metaphors to illustrate the conflict in Catholic society today between the hypocrisy of empty clericalism and of giving mere lip service to the Gospels’ teaching versus the true faith displayed by others through actions and not mere words, Professor Sievers replied that Francis’ homilies must be seen in context of the unquestionable love Francis has shown for Judaism and Jews, including his long ongoing relationships with members of the Buenos Aires Jewish Community. “My grandfather”, said Sievers, “used to tell me that we all have blind spots, which disappear when we open both eyes”, concluding that “we don’t want to be polemical with anyone, we just want to offer a more nuanced vision that could bring about change.”

Editorial remarks

*The author is AJC’s Representative in Italy and Liaison to the Holy See.

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