

REPORT ON THE SEMI- ANNUAL CONSULTATION OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF SYNAGOGUES AND THE  
COMMISSION ON ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS OF THE US CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC  
BISHOPS, DEC. 5 2011

By Rabbi Gilbert Rosenthal

The semi-annual consultation between the National Council of Synagogues and the Commission on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops was held at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York on December 5, 2011. The theme was: "How do We Teach about Other Faith Groups in our Religious Schools?" Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta and Rabbi David Straus of Philadelphia presided.

Rabbi Arnold Samler of the Jewish Education Project discussed the issue of what Jewish children learn about other faiths in religious schools and yeshivot. They certainly know more than they did in the past, he noted, and are more sensitive to language and other references to those of different faiths. Still too much of the textual material dwells on how Jews were mistreated in the past with little reference to contemporary progress. And whereas there is no formal studies of how Jewish education teaches about Christians and other faith groups, Jewish day school and yeshivot are required by state curricula to teach about different religions.

Professor Philip Cunningham of St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia noted that great progress had been made in this area since Vatican II and its historic pronouncement, *Nostra Aetate*, so that there is a more accurate portrayal these days of the Pharisees and of the events leading up to the crucifixion of Jesus. The single great lack today, he noted us the dearth of Roman Catholic exegetical materials and a modern understanding of the Gospels that should utilize the rich materials issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission.

In the discussion period that followed. Father Dennis McManus of Georgetown University stressed the need for us to develop better textbooks written by more capable writers and editors. We should also encourage site visits to churches and synagogues to help our people learn how our neighbors worship. Rabbi David Sandmel of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago suggested that we should bring Jewish and Christian educators together to shape curricula and develop interfaith and social justice projects. Rabbi Joel Meyers noted that in one Jerusalem school, sixth graders are required to learn about Christianity and Islam and other faiths but, regrettably, this is not the general pattern in Israeli schools. Professor Ruth Langer of Boston College noted that the Solomon Schechter Jewish day schools, the Maimonides school of Boston and other Jewish day schools and yeshivot are now teaching about other religions.

In the afternoon session, Archbishop Gregory analyzed the new language of the Mass which is closer to the Latin original. But he stressed that the new language does not reverse the positive advancements of Vatican II. Several extolled the recent interfaith meeting in Assisi presided over by

Pope Benedict XVI. The group also expressed its deep concern over the dire impact of the Arab Spring on Christians in the Middle East.

Both the Catholic and Jewish delegates agreed that one of the greatest priorities of the dialogue is to involve younger people and seminarians so that the future will witness a continuation of these extraordinary proceedings.