

Michael Barnes
Waiting on Grace: A Theology of Dialogue

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Two books preceded *Waiting on Grace* in the author's proposed quartet of books exploring the role of Christian faith in a multicultural, religiously pluralistic world: *Theology and Dialogue of Religions* (2002) and *Interreligious Learning* (2012). Like its predecessors, the present volume is a densely written and thought-provoking read. As Barnes describes it, *Waiting on Grace* is a "lengthy meditation on implications for contemporary interreligious living of the contested yet foundational relationship between Judaism and Christianity"—or in his oft-repeated phrase, the implications of situating Christianity within its "Jewish matrix" (12-13).

Barnes weaves three themes through seven chapters: the church as oriented to *mission*, that is, to communicating its faith in a fragmented, pluralistic world; a theology of dialogue developing out of Judaism, the church's "matrix"; and abundant grace for which the church actively waits. The chapters themselves intertwine. The first introduces dialogue as missional and the second and third offer fresh perspectives on *Nostra Aetate*. Chapters three through six constitute a powerful, if complex, reflection on the Shoah, prophecy, and the centrality of the virtues of empathy and hospitality as refracted through the lenses of Johann Baptist Metz, Emmanuel Levinas, Raimon Panikkar, Edith Stein, and Abraham Joshua Heschel. The concluding chapter includes a reflection on Simone Weil's sense of "awaiting God" (224) in this time of living "in the shadow of grace" (236).

Insights about dialogue, which Barnes sees as a moral and religious way of participating in God's "ever-surprising work" permeate this book (24). Dialogue is intrinsically related to a search for the Good. He makes a fundamental distinction between a theology *for* dialogue and a theology *of* dialogue. The former serves as a framework for speech about God that makes space for the unknown and the unexpected; it offers a comprehensive vision of a gathered and redeemed world. In contrast, a theology *of* dialogue flows from "lived and prayed experience" (12); hospitality, an "open-ended conceding of power to the other" is its fundamental prerequisite (41). It gives precedence to the "said" over the act of saying (79), and

invites an encounter with persons of faith who “give shape to a religious world” (79). A theology of dialogue focuses on the virtues of interreligious living.

In the Catholic realm, dialogue receives its most significant emphasis through the experiences and documents of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In the nearly sixty years since that Council promulgated *Nostra Aetate*, the declaration has generated a massive amount of commentary. Some critics, most notably the late Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., relegated NA to the theological minor leagues as a mere pastoral document. In contrast, Barnes centers it as the “moral heart” of Vatican II (46). It is “revolutionary” insofar as it allowed space for the church to address dimensions of its origins that it had previously not considered (51). Despite its supersessionist hermeneutics, the Declaration opened up a new trajectory for interreligious relations in calling for entering with prudence and charity into discussion and collaboration (*per colloquia et collaborationem*) with members of other religions” (NA n.2). It constitutes the “record of an extraordinary conversion of the Catholic soul” (74), and provides a “manifesto for Christian living in a pluralist world” (76).

Nostra Aetate became a stimulant for the church to rethink its origins in Judaism. Barnes remarks several times that it put the church’s Jewish matrix at the very heart of its identity. Another, less recognized implication is the necessity of relating to Judaism as a “living tradition, with a historical legacy of faithful observance that continues to nourish the construction of a relationship with the Christian church” (90). What had characterized the church’s long history of anti-Judaism, with its binaries of true/false is not only theologically “naïve” but “dangerously amoral in its consequences for Jews and Christians, as well as humanity as a whole” (90).

I am heartened by such claims, including Barnes’s conviction that “Jewish self-understanding is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian” (125). I understand this claim to mean that Christianity is so embedded in its Jewish origin that an understanding of Judaism is requisite for grasping the meaning of Christian life. I could not agree more—but I am painfully aware that few in the church, especially at the local level, share that belief and would be, at best, puzzled by it. Barnes draws profound insights from his theological and philosophical interlocutors. His book is a wonderfully rich read. Yet it reflects little awareness of what is happening—or not happening—in actual church life, whether at the level of the parish, diocese or Vatican, or in actual dialogical exchanges with Jews. Nor is there reference to the numerous ecclesial documents that extend, refine, and nuance *Nostra Aetate*, including two substantial texts: “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible” (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001) and “The Gifts and Calling Are Irrevocable” (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews for the 50th anniversary of NA in 2015).

Waiting for Grace is a profound meditation to which I will return as a way of deepening my own involvement in dialogue. Perhaps in the concluding book of his quartet, Michael Barnes will widen the circle of his interlocutors to include those involved in the quotidian experience of dialogue at various levels.