

Interfaith dialogue is religious exercise

ROME - Jewish-Christian dialogue is primarily a religious exercise, not simply a political or social exercise, said two rabbis and two cardinals at a Rome conference.

“When we respond to the divine in the other, we are revering and respecting God himself,” said Rabbi David Rosen, president of the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations.

Rabbi Rosen was one of the speakers at a Jan. 17 conference on Judaism’s contributions to humanity. The conference was hosted by the Italian Senate in Rome and organized by the lay Community of Sant’Egidio.

Rabbi Yona Metzger, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, used the conference as an opportunity to ask Pope Benedict XVI to adopt as a universal observance the Italian bishops’ designation of Jan. 17 as a day dedicated annually to Catholic-Jewish relations.

Dialogue, the chief rabbi said, is necessary so that Jews and Christians get to know each other better, overcome prejudices and prevent violent outbreaks of anti-Semitism.

But he also said it is a way to strengthen the values that Judaism has given to humanity and which Christianity and many other faith groups and even nations share: the sacredness of human life; the value of a weekly day of rest; respect and care for one’s parents and elders; and justice, charity and “loving assistance” to the poor, the sick and those in mourning.

The chief rabbi also urged the international community to take seriously the threat posed by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has called for the destruction of Israel.

Cardinal Georges Cottier, retired theologian of the papal household, said through dialogue Jews and Christians can strengthen their witness of the enduring values people need as the world around them changes.

First, he said, comes the value of remembrance, specifically remembering the existence of God and how he has acted continually throughout history to rescue his creatures and set them on the path to salvation.

Then come the “keys to life in a human society,” which are respect for the sacredness of each human life and holding firm to the Ten Commandments as the ethical foundation for personal and social life, the cardinal said.

In his presentation, Rabbi Rosen said Jewish-Christian dialogue had moved from being a “therapeutic dialogue” aimed at healing the wounds of centuries of disrespect and even violence to being a dialogue focused on strengthening common values and taking concrete action together.

A knowledge of and respect for Judaism is essential for Christians whose faith is built on the foundations of Judaism, he said, while Jews do not need to know Christianity in order to understand their own faith.

However, he said, Jews have “a stake in how the affirmations and values of the Hebrew Bible are reflected by Christianity throughout the world” and, therefore, have an obligation to explore common themes of faith in dialogue with Christians.

But even more, he said, the Jewish belief that humans are the only creatures who reflect the divine image calls them to enter into dialogue with others.

“Jewish-Christian dialogue is not only essential for overcoming bigotry and prejudice,” the rabbi said. “It is not only part of an imperative to work together for those values we share. It is, in effect, an expression of our awareness of the divine presence in our midst.”

Cardinal Walter Kasper, president of the Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations With the Jews, said the new relationship between Catholics and Jews since the Second Vatican Council is “an example that a new beginning and reconciliation are possible, even after a difficult and complex history.”

The cardinal said that at the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church adopted the Jewish philosophical understanding of dialogue as the model of God’s relationship with human beings and his call for how people should relate to each other.

The main insight of the philosophy, he said, is that “I do not exist without you; we do not exist for ourselves; we exist for and with each other.”

Cardinal Kasper said dialogue is not “small talk” and it is not a scientific discourse; rather it is the path people follow to truth by sharing their beliefs, knowledge and actions with each other.

“Dialogue is not a new and veiled form of proselytism,” he said.

In dialogue, he added: “Jews become more perceptive and better Jews, and Catholics become more perceptive and better Catholics. Through dialogue they learn to understand better their common heritage, while at the same time, of course, they also learn to understand better their undeniable and well-known differences.”