

Christian-Jewish Relations – A Historic Transformation in Our Times

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I believe that it was the late Ed Flannery who coined the incisive phrase, “Jews have memorized by heart the pages of history that Christians have torn out and discarded.” One might more simplistically say that though a very large segment of the Jewish community is substantially ignorant today about the current teachings within Christianity towards Jews and Judaism, a very large portion of Christians today are also ignorant of Christianity’s past teaching on these subjects.

I would make so bold as to suggest that the need to rectify these lacunae is not only in the interest of truth, but in the interest of our moral growth both separately as Jews and Christians and of course especially for the future of our cooperation and mutual responsibilities. But more on that later.

There is a well-known Hassidic parable about a young man who was hiking on a journey with the aid of signposts. Once upon a time it was common to follow signposts with the names of the relevant places written on protrusions at the top of the post pointing in the respective directions. These were the kinds of signposts that were serving the young man in this story. However, as he arrived at one particular crossroads on his way, the young man discovered that the signpost had fallen down or had been knocked over, and he didn’t know in which direction he should proceed. However, an old couple passing by gave him some simple advice. “If you want to know in which direction to continue, stand the signpost up with the name of the place you have come from pointing in the direction you have come from.”

In other words, in order not only to understand where we are but also in which direction to proceed, we need to appreciate where we have come from- and it hasn’t been a simple or easy journey.

Some sense of where we used to be may be evidenced in the relatively benign "conversation of the deaf," held between Theodore Herzl, the founder of the Zionist movement and Pope Pius X, not long before Herzl’s death in 1904. Herzl was busy “hawking his wares” for the re-establishment of Jewish independence in the ancestral homeland, among the leaders of Europe. To this end, he succeeded in obtaining an audience with Pius X. However, Herzl records in his diaries that Pius’ response to the proposal was far from supportive. According to Herzl, Pius told him that because “the Jews have not recognized our Lord; therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people.” The Pope declared that “we cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem, but we could never sanction it. If you come to Palestine and settle your people there, our churches and priests will be ready to baptize all of you.” Now Pius wasn’t especially malevolent towards the Jewish people, on the contrary. Many a church leader would not have even given Herzl the time of day. Pius was simply expressing the normative view of Christians toward Jews, which had been the status quo throughout Christendom since Christianity detached itself from its Jewish moorings.

The reasons for this separation between early Christianity and its mother faith were essentially two. One was in order to gain acceptance in the gentile and especially Roman world, where the Jews in their separateness were generally viewed in a negative light. Secondly and theologically more important, was the competition between the Church and the Synagogue (for lack of a better term) for the title of true heir to the Biblical Tradition, its authority and promises.

In this context, already in the first century of the Christian era Justin Martyr articulated explicitly what became the accepted Christian interpretation of history when he declared to the Jews, "Your land is waste, your cities destroyed, for you have killed the Savior." Indeed the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people were viewed as proof of Divine rejection – especially after the Christian conquest of the Roman Empire when the triumph of Christian temporal power was seen as Divine confirmation. Accordingly the Church viewed itself as the new and true Israel, having replaced the old one – the Jewish people. As indicated by Justin's words, it was not just supersessionism that pervaded the Christian view of the Jewish people, but also a perception of the latter as guilty of the crime of deicide.

As Origen put it without discrimination – "the blood of Jesus falls on Jews not only then, but on all generations until the end of the world." Moreover St. Cyprian in the third century affirmed not only that "the Bible itself says the Jews are an accursed people (but) the devil is the Father of the Jews"!

This leitmotif of the Jews being of the devil and in league with the devil was to be a recurrent theme throughout the following almost two millennia and was a particularly central idea in the Nazi publication "Die Stuermer." But it was the deicide charge that was used most of all to justify the most terrible actions against Jews. In fact the Protestant chaplain of the Nazi S.S., at his trial in Ulm in 1958, declared that the Holocaust was the "fulfillment of the self condemnation which the Jews brought upon themselves before the tribunal of Pontius Pilate." Accordingly Jews were viewed as the enemy of God (an idea that served as the inspiration for the Crusader slaughter of European Jewry especially in the Rhineland) and as a diabolical force of evil. This led to horrendous and preposterous defamations and accusations such as the blood libel, originating in Norwich, England in the eleventh century and re-emerging a few generations later in Lincoln (as a result of which the alleged victim was made a saint – Saint Hugh of Lincoln). It also led to placement of blame upon Jews for the Black Death and various other plagues, then providing "justification" for pillaging and destroying Jewish communities and burning synagogues- in fact, we have testimony of the destruction of some three hundred and fifty communities - a practice that already in the fourth and fifth centuries had actually been led and supported by Church leaders such as Ambrose and Cyril.

Ironically, the theological understanding of the meaning of Jewish survival often served to mitigate some of these excesses. Christian theology had to address the question of why, if the only purpose of the Jewish people was to prepare the way for the Christian dispensation and Jewry had accordingly now been replaced by the Church in the Divine plan – the Jewish people need survive at all. St. Augustine explained that this was precisely part of Divine intention: the Jewish people should survive in its ignominy, to wander and be treated with disdain, as proof of their iniquity and obduracy and to confirm accordingly the truth of Christianity! Indeed, this rationale led Bernard of

Clairvaux to vigorously oppose the murder and destruction of Jewish communities during the Crusades, not out of love of the Jew, but in order to preserve him as an abject testimony of his rejection by Heaven. Similarly, Pope Innocent III explained that while the “inherited guilt is on the whole (Jewish) nation (as) a curse to follow them everywhere like Cain to live homelessly; nevertheless like Cain they should never be destroyed, but remain as a testimony until the end of time of Jesus’ truth and the consequences for those who reject it.” As Angelo di Chavasser put it in the fifteenth century “to be a Jew is a crime – not however punishable by a Christian.”

This attitude that we refer to today as “the teaching of contempt” provided theological justification for Jewish homelessness and marginalization. Accordingly, the idea of the return of the Jewish people to assume sovereignty in its ancestral homeland was an anathema to almost all Christians down the ages and Pope Pius X was simply articulating a good Christian view of this to the unfortunate Theodore Herzl. Indeed as late as in 1948, in response to the establishment of the State of Israel, the Vatican publication *Osservatore Romano* stated “modern Israel is not heir to biblical Israel. The Holy Land and its sacred sites belong only to Christianity; the true Israel.”

The Reformation did not do much to improve the view of the Jew. While Martin Luther initially had high hopes for the conversion of the Jews, his lack of success led to a diatribe against them almost equaling the ferocity of John Chrysostom’s condemnation of the Jews in the fourth century. In Luther’s pamphlet “On the Jews and their Lies” he called for all synagogues and Jewish homes to be burnt down totally “for the honor of God and Christianity;” to deny Jews the means of observing their religion; to confiscate their property and to either totally subjugate and oppress them or expel them altogether.

The sixteenth century did, however, see the beginning of a change personified in the great Catholic scholar Johannes Reuchlin, who in 1510 published the first Christian defense of the Talmud which had been consistently defamed and publicly burnt under Christian authority in the preceding centuries. Reuchlin was followed by a community of scholars from the various churches, which began during the ensuing centuries to explore and explain the literature of rabbinic Judaism and of Jewish mysticism. The Rev. Dr. James Parkes suggested however that their style of scholarship and the fact that they mostly wrote in Latin explains why despite their efforts, they had such little influence on the mainstream of Christian thought. “The consequence”, writes Parkes, “was that in the revival of anti-Semitism in the second half of the nineteenth century; although there were political and socio-economic causes to be taken into account, all three Christian traditions (Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant) were heavily involved” which Parkes documents accordingly. Nevertheless there were exceptional voices of enlightenment that courageously took an unpopular stand against such anti-Semitism and bigotry. Notable among them were Christian Wilhelm Dohm in Germany, Abbe Gregoire in France and the Rev. Lewis Way in England.

However, it was not until after the First World War that any concerted Christian effort was made to promote relations with Jews. In England the work of the Society of Jews and Christians led by Dean Mathews and Claude Montefiore was further galvanized by the growing clouds of anti-Semitic propaganda in Germany and led to the formation of a British Council of Christians and Jews. Parallel to these developments were the impressive efforts of Dr E. Clinchy in the United States who established the National Conference of Catholics, Protestants and Jews. At the same time notable scholars

were at the forefront of this process of historic examination and critique, laying the foundations for the new era in Christian-Jewish relations. One might mention in particular the Catholic theologian Jacques Maritain who declared that "Israel is the Jesus among the nations and the Jewish Diaspora within Christian Europe is one long Via Dolorosa". Among the most notable Protestant leaders in this endeavor were George Foot Moore and Reinhold Niebuhr in the United States, and Travers Hereford and James Parkes in England.

Thus the harbingers of the change in Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism came with the modern winds of enlightenment and scholarly research. But the process received its greatest impetus in the wake of the terrible tragedy of the Shoah, the Holocaust, during World War II. As devastating as the Shoah was for Jewry, its implications and ramifications for Christianity were themselves also traumatic.

As the Christian author Rev. David L. Edwards puts it: "Righteous Gentiles including some bishops did save tens of thousands of Jews, but their efforts were small in comparison with the fact of (the extermination of) six million murders, a colossal and cold-blooded crime which would have been impossible without a general indifference to the fate of the victims." The Holocaust became European Christianity's most terrible source of guilt – of course, not because the murderers were pious or because church leaders had been entirely silent about the laws and actions of the Nazis over the years, but because of the undeniable record of anti-Semitism in the churches' teaching over the centuries.

Not only ignorant peasants or monks but also eminent theologians and spiritual teachers had attacked the Jews as the "killers of Christ," as a people now abandoned by God, a race deserving not its envied wealth but revenge for plots and acts against innocent Christians. Not only had the Jews of Rome been forced to live in a ghetto until the papacy no longer governed that city, not only had Luther allowed himself to shoot inflammatory words at this easy target, but almost everywhere in Europe, Jews had been made to seem strange, sinister and repulsive.

A long road of disgraceful preaching was one of the paths across the centuries which led to the Nazis' death camps and in the end, not Judaism but Christianity was discredited."

As mentioned there were many Christian heroes who stood out as exceptions in these most horrific of times, but just as I focused upon a particular "prince of the Catholic Church" to personify the implications of "the teaching of contempt", so I will mention another to personify the transition and transformation in Christian thought. The man I refer to was the nuncio – the Papal Ambassador – in Turkey, during the period of the Shoah and was one of the earliest western religious personalities to receive information on the Nazi murder machine. This man, Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, helped save thousands of Jews from the clutches of their would-be killers and was deeply moved by the plight of the Jewish people. Within little more than a decade and the demise of Pope Pius XII, he was elected as the new pontiff and took the name, John XXIII. Contrary to popular perception of him as something of a simple man, Pope John proved to be nothing less than a visionary for his time and convened the historic Second Vatican Ecumenical Council that substantially transformed the Catholic Church. Arguably the most far reaching of its documents was the one that dealt with relations

with other religions, which we know by its two opening Latin words: *Nostra Aetate*. This document, only promulgated in 1965 after Pope John XXIII's death, was profoundly influenced by the impact of the Shoah and transformed the Catholic Church's teaching concerning Jews and Judaism.

It admonished Christians for portraying the Jews as collectively guilty for the death of Jesus at the time, let alone in perpetuity. This was in direct contradiction with the explicit words of authorities like Origen and Pope Innocent III. It also affirmed the unbroken covenant between God and the Jewish people (quoting from Paul in Romans II v. 29) and in so doing, *Nostra Aetate* eliminated in one stroke, as it were, any theological objections to the idea of the return of the Jewish people to its ancestral homeland and to sovereignty within it.

In accordance with the above, the document refuted any suggestion that the Jews are rejected or accursed by God, declaring the contrary to be the case. It also categorically condemned anti-Semitism. Furthermore *Nostra Aetate* called for "fraternal dialogue and biblical studies" between Christians and Jews.

While the World Council of Churches had already in 1948 condemned anti-Semitism as "a sin against God and man," at its Third Assembly in 1961 it rejected the deicide charge against the Jews. In May 1964, the World Lutheran Federation pronounced that "anti-Semitism on the part of Christians is spiritual suicide. In light of the long terrible history of Christian culpability, no Christian can exempt himself from involvement in this guilt. As Lutherans we confess our own particular guilt, lament and shame. We can only ask God's pardon and that of the Jewish people." That same year the U.S. Episcopal Church also joined the voices of those rejecting the accusation of deicide against the Jews, and clarified that this had resulted from "a tragic theological misunderstanding." In emphasizing Jesus' loyal Jewish identity, the statement declared that as far as Christians are concerned "spiritually, we are all Semites." The sixties thus saw the most extensive breakthrough in Christian formal reappraisal of religious attitudes towards Jews and Judaism. The broad array of mainline Protestant denominations joined in articulating these positions and, in the subsequent decades both Protestant and Catholic bodies issued further statements and documents which expanded on the themes of seeking to address the past with honesty and clarity and of grappling with the theological implications for the Christian faith of affirming the unbroken and lasting covenantal relationship between God and the Jewish people.

I will return to this and the work ahead that still remains. However I think at this point, I should give some attention to Jewish attitudes towards Christianity.

Modern scholarship has revealed that Jewish attitudes towards the early Christians were far more mixed than either traditional Christianity or Judaism would have had us believe. In effect the break did not come about in response to the question "do you accept Jesus as the Messiah?" Differences over this question would not have led to such a rupture. The parting of the ways came in effect in response to the later question, namely, "do you accept Jesus as the Messiah whose coming has abrogated the need to observe all the requirements of Torah (inadequately translated as 'law')?" Once the structure that defined Jewish peoplehood and its identity was discarded, Christianity was well on the road from its origins as a Jewish sect toward becoming a new religion, indeed toward becoming the most powerful and widespread religion in the world.

As mentioned earlier, the competition for title of heir to the Biblical heritage, as well as the need to distance the Church from the Jewish people and its problematic image, led to increasing hostility. Once Christianity had assumed the power of the Roman Empire, the Jews were going to be on the “receiving end” of this conflict and as we have seen, the corrupting influence of power combined with theological justification, generally succeeded in doing its worst. As a result, the Jewish community generally viewed Christianity not as a monotheistic daughter that shared its fundamentals, albeit changed by outside influences, but rather as the same Roman paganism and brutality now wrapped in a stolen Israelite shawl.

While throughout the centuries there were some honest attempts to understand Christianity, its historic role, its civilizing moral influences and even the bonds that bind it to Judaism; these were the exceptions rather than the rule, as Jewish attitudes were generally and naturally determined by experience, which was usually negative. Of course these were compounded by the genuine theological obstacles for Jewish comprehension, in particular the concepts of the Incarnation and Trinity.

While the same winds of modern enlightenment that had impacted on Christian self-critique began to affect Jewish perspectives, the far reaching changes in Jewish attitudes came precisely as a response to the historic changes in Christian teaching to which we have referred. These developments were evidenced in the work of local and national councils of Christians and Jews as well as the initiatives of various churches and Jewish organizations. Naturally, I take special pride in the work of the American Jewish Committee, which was the pioneer in the field amongst U.S. Jewry and which was led in this arena during recent decades by the late Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum and by Rabbi James Rudin, may his vitality long continue. In addition outstanding American Jewish personalities served periodically as interreligious consultants to the AJC, such as the late great Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, who served the AJC as a special consultant during the period of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

Much of the global growth in such activities was coordinated in due course through the International Council of Christians and Jews, headquartered in the Martin Buber House in Heppenheim, Germany. In 1994 produced a remarkable document entitled “Jews and Christians in search of a common religious basis for contributing towards a better world.” This document, prepared by Christian and Jewish theologians from the spectrum of denominations, is divided into what may be described as three voices – the Jewish voice, the Christian voice, and the joint Jewish-Christian voice.

The Jewish voice affirms not only the universal values of Judaism in which Christianity must be viewed as a partner, but also the particular bonds of a shared Biblical heritage and its theological affirmations. The Christian voice confirms the eternal validity of Torah that gives shape to the life of the particular people of Israel with a particular vocation and which has not been abrogated by Jesus’ advent. His advent, rather, has given a new interpretation of Torah for Christian believers to enter into communion with the God of Israel alongside the people of Israel. In confirming Judaism’s salvific integrity for its adherents, the Christian voice in the ICCJ document rejects the Christian proselytisation of Jews as unnecessary and inappropriate.

Together, the Jewish and Christian voices in the document outline those fundamental beliefs that they share and their moral imperatives regarding humanity – all created in the Divine image – as well as concerning the Creation as a whole.

In September 2000 a historic Jewish declaration entitled Dabru Emet was released, that had been facilitated and sponsored by the Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies in Baltimore. Some two hundred Rabbis and Jewish scholars, overwhelmingly from the USA, signed the declaration. The eight clauses in this text result from a Jewish recognition and celebration of the transformation that has taken place in Christian teaching and attitudes towards Jews, Judaism and Israel; and it affirmed the unique connections between Christianity and Judaism. This statement enjoyed great widespread acclaim and was seen by many Christians as historic – both in the degree of explicit Jewish recognition of the transformation in Christian teaching and attitudes towards Judaism and in its call for Jewish reciprocal response.

Last month the U.S. Christian Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations issued a statement containing ten clauses. Most of these sum up the “new theology” on Jews and Judaism that has substantially become “official doctrine” for many churches. It affirms the eternity of the Divine Covenant with the Jewish people while acknowledging its implications for Christian understanding of salvation; it reiterates Jesus’ faithfulness as a Jew, disavows ancient rivalries, acknowledges the ongoing vitality of Judaism, affirms the bond and tension rooted in our readings of a common Scripture, and recognizes the importance of the Land of Israel for the life of the Jewish people and of the moral obligations for Christians to work with Jews for the betterment of our world.

Like the Christian voice in the ICCJ document, the declaration also categorically rejects missionary efforts directed at converting Jews.

Moreover, a statement jointly issued by the U.S. Catholic Bishops Conference in cooperation with the Reform and Conservative movements of U.S. Jewry expressed the same sentiments a couple of months earlier, and not without criticism. Indeed, this issue of whether Christians should, may, or should not, seek the conversion of Jews to the Christian faith remains arguably the most controversial outstanding theological issue and continues to be a point of strong disagreement within contemporary Christianity.

Nevertheless as mentioned, the positions of the Christian Scholars Group do reflect the predominant thinking in official mainline Christian circles, as evidenced for example in the remarkable 2001 declaration of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship representing most of the Protestant churches in Europe and churches elsewhere.

All these bear witness to the enormous journey that Christian-Jewish relations have traversed in recent decades. Once again, a Pope serves as a personification of a broader condition or process. Pope John Paul II’s own contribution to this journey of reconciliation has been remarkable. Undoubtedly his own personal history contributed extensively to this – both his childhood friendships with Jews and his experience of the Shoah in Poland. Moreover his profound understanding of the power of images has enabled him to have an unparalleled impact in so many arenas. While significant documents have come out of the Vatican during his pontificate contributing to this process that mirrored or inspired those abovementioned, and while he has described the Jewish people as “the dearly beloved elder brother of the Church of the original

covenant never abrogated,” it was arguably his visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome in 1986 which served to convey an even more profound message to the Christian world; as did the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel, which was facilitated by the Pope’s personal involvement. However it was probably the Papal pilgrimage to the Holy Land that provided the ultimate testimony of the degree of the transformation in Christian-Jewish relations, and how far we had come from the days and the mindset reflected in Pope Pius X’s response to Herzl. The images of the Pope standing in tearful solidarity with Jewish suffering at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial and in prayerful respect for Jewish tradition at the Western Wall, placing there the text of the prayer he had composed for a service of repentance in the Vatican, which asked Divine forgiveness for sins perpetrated in the name of Christianity against Jews down the ages, had an enormous impact on the Jewish world and, I suspect, on the Christian world as well.

We now face two great tasks. The more laborious but perhaps most essential is to translate this transformation more extensively into the pews and grass roots and even to some of the shepherds and hierarchy who still think and even teach and preach under the impact of the old “teaching of contempt”, or at least in its shadow; for this transformation is very new and we have almost two millennia of negative indoctrination to overcome. Aside from great ignorance, supercessionist attitudes are still quite prevalent and often other extraneous factors, such as the conflict in the Middle East, are utilized to avoid or prevent effective integration of this new theological understanding into the minds and hearts of faithful Christians throughout the world.

Moreover, as I have heard many prominent Church leaders and theologians declare, even the full theological implications of documents such as *Nostra Aetate* have not really been plumbed. This leads me to the second challenge, which is to develop a serious theology of partnership between Christians and Jews and an understanding of the other’s complementarity. Efforts at doing so have already begun. These have included seeing Judaism and Christianity in a mutually complementary role in which the Jewish focus on the communal covenant with God and the Christian focus on the individual relationship with God may serve to balance one another. Others have seen the complementary relationship in terms of a Christian need for the Jewish reminder that the Kingdom of Heaven has not yet fully arrived, balanced by a Jewish need for the Christian awareness that in some ways that Kingdom has already rooted itself in the here and now. Another view of the mutual complementarity portrays Judaism as a constant admonition to Christianity regarding the dangers of triumphalism, while Christianity’s universalistic character may serve an essential role for Judaism in warning against degeneration into insular isolationism. As opposed to the underlying assumptions of the latter, there is a contention that it is actually Christianity’s universalism that jars with a culturally pluralistic reality in the modern world. The communal autonomy that Judaism affirms, it is suggested, may serve more appropriately as a model for a multicultural society, while Christianity may provide a better response for individual alienation in the modern world.

In addition, Jewish as well as Christian theologians have written about the mutual theological assistance which Jews and Christians can provide one another in overcoming the burdens of history. It has also been pointed out that Jewish-Christian reconciliation itself has impacted on society well beyond the bilateral dialogue. Accordingly, it serves both as a universal paradigm of reconciliation and should serve

as an inspiration for Jews and Christians in dialogue, especially with Islam and even beyond in other multi-faith encounters.

Indeed, even the widespread acceptance that our shared ethical values and moral responsibilities demand our cooperation and collaboration – today more than ever before, as we face the challenges of the dominant secular culture in which all religions are minorities – has theological implications for our relationship. Pope John Paul II has expressed this beautifully when he observed that “Jews and Christians are called (as the Children of Abraham) to be a blessing for humankind. In order to be so, we must first be a blessing to one another.” What then are the theological implications of such mutual blessing?

All these aforementioned ideas are an intimation of the ultimate theological challenge, that we who labor in love in this vineyard of Jewish-Christian relations are called to address with increasing candor and depth. How may we understand not only each other’s integrity as each defines one’s self, but furthermore understand each other’s role accordingly in the Divine plan for humanity and understand our relationship in these terms? What is God saying to us in this regard and how may we benefit from one another? How may we truly become a blessing to one another in the deepest sense possible?

The fact that we are living in a generation that can ask and seek answers to these questions is a gift for which two thousand years of our ancestors could only have wished. May we be worthy of this privilege.