

# The Impact of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue upon Theological Thought

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During the last almost two millennia, the Jewish people have overwhelmingly lived within Christian and Muslim societies. Those interreligious encounters that have taken place during the course of that time have almost invariably been of a polemical character. Nevertheless, there have been notable examples of positive dialogue and especially of constructive cooperation particularly under Islam. Indeed, the historical relationship between Judaism and Islam has generally been less vexed than that with Christianity, paradoxically precisely because it is less “umbilically” attached to Judaism than the latter. As Pope John Paul II put it (12 March 1979), “Our two (Jewish and Christian) communities are connected... at the very level of their respective identities.” Yet, that has also been the very source of conflict as well, as the two have competed for those claims rooted in shared sources. However, the development of the interreligious dialogue this century and most especially during the last fifty years has, for Jewry, overwhelmingly been with the Christian world! This is not just because the relationship with Israel has been vitiated by the politics of the Arab-Jewish conflict, but has much more to do with the socio-cultural context that facilitates such dialogue. Such a context has developed in modern times in what is broadly called “Western society,” and here too Jewish-Muslim dialogue has begun to develop its own modern course. However, in what might superficially be called the “Eastern Christian” world, the dialogue has hardly advanced any more than it has with the majority of the Muslim world. In addition, precisely because of that aforementioned “umbilical” relationship of Christianity with Judaism, once the socio-cultural context does facilitate the dialogue there is a unique amount of “theological baggage” to unpack. Accordingly, this presentation will focus specifically on the impact of the dialogue between Christians and Jews upon their theological thought, with implications however, well beyond the particular bilateral relationship.

Nostra Aetate, the document produced by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, stands very much as the embodiment of the modern transformation in Christian-Jewish relations in general and Catholic-Jewish relations in particular. Of course, “Nostra Aetate” emerged out of a historical context. A nascent Jewish-Christian dialogue in the earlier part of the century, facilitated substantially by European emancipation, was given great impetus by the impact of the Shoah – the extermination of a third of European Jewry. Interestingly, the theological implications of the tragedy seem to have preoccupied Christian thought more than Jewish thought (and not just because Christianity is a more theological religion than Judaism). Nevertheless, Jews were of course deeply concerned in the wake of the Shoah to ensure a climate that would reduce the possibilities of such horror.

## The fruits of dialogue

Probably the first document of its kind produced together by prominent Christians and Jews as an outcome of the dialogue is known as The Ten Points of Seelisberg, issued in 1947 by the newly formed International Council of Christians and Jews.

In 1933 that same organization (now representing almost thirty national constituent bodies), through its Theology Committee (comprising Catholic and Protestant theologians and Rabbinic scholars from the three different main streams of contemporary Judaism), produced another historic document entitled “Jews and Christians in search of a common basis for contributing to a better world.” A comparison between these two documents highlights the significant developments over the last fifty years in the Jewish-Christian dialogue.

These Ten Points of Seelisberg were published, as mentioned, under the fresh impact of the Shoah and an increasing awareness amongst Christian theologians that what Jules Isaac had described during his famous meeting with Pope John XXII as “teaching of contempt” towards the Jews was not irrelevant to that tragedy. Accordingly, in addition to repudiating (as did *Nostra Aetate* some eighteen years later) the ideas that the Jewish people were – let alone remain – corporately guilty for the death of Jesus and has been spurned by God, The Ten Points sought primarily to warn and exhort against the defamation of the Jewish people and the misuse of Christian teaching and Scripture to such purpose. Thus, special emphasis is placed in the document on the Jewishness of Jesus, his disciples and the first Christian martyrs.

While such points and exhortations seem more than obvious to us today, they were not without their critics at the time. Similarly, the road to the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* was not without many hurdles, including theological ones (see J. Oesterreicher, *The New Encounter between Christians and Jews*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1986).

Thus when we view the 1993 ICCJ document in retrospect, we may indeed remark upon the distance the dialogue has traversed in a historically very short period of time. It has gone from the necessarily defensive and proscriptive aspects, through the path of increasing mutual understanding, towards shared cooperation; and has contributed to the beginnings of theological reflection upon the other – and in that light, upon ourselves.

#### Christian self-reflection in light of this dialogue

The Christian component of the ICCJ document of 1993 reflects the profound development in self-criticism. One of the most dramatic examples of this was the statement made by Cardinal Edward Cassidy at the meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Council (ILC) in Prague in the summer of 1990. His words were echoed by Pope John Paul II at the meeting of the ILC in Rome later that year, to celebrate the twenty fifth anniversary of the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*: “The fact that anti-Semitism has found a place in Christian thought and practice calls for an act of “teshuvah” (repentance) and of reconciliation on our part...”! The Pope’s statement was made all the more significant by his powerful condemnation of anti-Semitism as “a sin against God and against humanity”!

The self-reflective spirit has, of course, been substantially born out of scholarly endeavor that has not only helped develop the dialogue but also impacted upon it profoundly. Indeed, in *Nostra Aetate* the Sacred Synod declared its desire “to foster and recommend, that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit above all of

Biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.” Furthermore, the 1975 Guidelines for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* issued by the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, established by Pope Paul VI in October of the previous year, further clarifies this exhortation. Not only did it declare that “Christians must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in light of their own religious experience” but also called for “research into the problems bearing on Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations... particularly in the fields of exegesis, theology, history and sociology.” Furthermore, in relation to “higher institutes of Catholic research,” the Guidelines indicated that “wherever possible, chairs of Jewish studies will be created and collaboration with the Jewish scholars encouraged.”

While the authors of this document might have anticipated a much wider implementation of this latter expectation, the burgeoning of relevant scholarship has had an enormous impact upon Christian understanding of Judaism and the nature of the relationship between the two faiths. The extent of reflection is evident in the ICCJ document’s summary of current Christian theological thinking that seeks to deal with “obstacles stemming from shared roots,” including the problems of ‘supersessionism’ and the idea of the displacement of the Jewish people and their relationship with the land, by the Christian faith. Also subject to critique is the extent to which the attribution of the Messianic proclamation is appropriate. While we are all well aware that not all Christian theologians would ascribe without qualification to everything contained in this particular section of the document, it nevertheless is surely a testimony to the extent of greater understanding, sensitivity and consideration for the other, as well as the constructive self-reflection, that has ensued from the dialogue.

However, beyond that bilateral relationship, it may be argued that the very examination of the part of the Church which *Nostra Aetate* declares to be her ‘bond with the Jewish People,’ served as a major impetus for the consideration of the Church’s relationship with other faiths, with the recognition “of the riches which the generous God has distributed among the nations” (Decree on Missionary Activity, #11). This indeed is the contention of a contemporary Catholic scholar who has noted that the result of such dialogue is that “the (Church’s ongoing) call to bear witness to the Gospel, is however (now) accompanied by an understanding that elements of truth and holiness are being reflected in the lives of many people. Gone is the ‘religious imperialism’ of recent centuries” (Laurence E. Frizzell, *Jewish-Christian Relations and the Dialogue with World Religions*, SIDIC, Vol. 28 No. 2, 1995). Significant in particular in this regard, has been the Christian examination of the character of its ‘mission’ in the modern context and its distinction from ‘proselytism’ (or more precisely ‘proselytisation’, as expressed in the W.C.C. “Document on Christian Witness, Proselytism and Religious Liberty” (New Delhi, 1961) and the 1970 Joint Working Document between the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches. Also particularly notable in this regard is Professor Tommaso Frederici’s “Study Outline of The Mission and Witness of the Church,” prepared for the Holy See’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and delivered in Venice in 1977 at the sixth session of the International Jewish-Catholic Liaison Meeting. These insights are accordingly echoed in the ICCJ document.

Naturally, the impact of the dialogue upon theological understanding and teaching has, more often than not, been less explicit. At the very least however, it places on the table the theological questions that were hardly if at all considered theretofore. Most pertinent in this regard, in the context of this bilateral dialogue, is the widespread acknowledgment that the full theological implications of the very declaration in *Nostra Aetate* that, based on Paul, the Covenant between God and the Jewish people is not and never will be abrogated, still await discovery. What precisely is the theological nature of our mutual relationship in this light? As Cardinal Martini declared in an address to the ICCJ International Colloquium in 1984, “today it is still not clear how the Church’s mission and that of the Jewish People can enrich and integrate one another without neglecting the essential, unrelinquishable features of their own existence....”

Nevertheless, there is a profound sense of the moral imperative that arises out of this ‘common bond’ - with wide ramifications for inter-faith relations at large – and I will refer to these shortly.

### Jewish thought in light of the dialogue

The 1993 ICCJ document acknowledges that Jews come to the dialogue almost invariably from different perspectives and generally with different interests from those of their Christian interlocutors. Indeed, the document refers to “the obvious asymmetry...in the relationship between Judaism and Christianity,” which makes the bilateral encounter less obvious and of less pressing theological consequence for the Jew. Such perception leads Frizzell (*loc. cit.*) to the reasonable conclusion that “although Christian-Jewish” dialogue often has led members of Jewish groups to meet each other, Jewish approaches to other religions probably derived little from the Christian experiences.” He points out that there were more prominent geo-political, cultural and intellectual factors stimulating Jewish thought.

However as indicated above, not only is the relationship with Christianity unique for Jewry in terms of its historical links and complexity, but no other religion has been given greater Jewish scholarly attention in modern times. While this may not have been the major direct impetus for promoting relations with other religions, nevertheless in addition to the indirect effect the encounter has indeed impacted significantly upon Jewish theological thought, with implications beyond the bilateral relationship as well.

As already mentioned, while the predominant experience of Jewry under Christianity down the ages was not a happy one, nevertheless there were encounters of a positive nature that succeeded in impressing Jewish religious scholars not only of the religious legitimacy of Christianity, but even of some Divine purpose, role and destiny in the salvation of humankind. Some of these perceptions are referred to in the ICCJ document.

Yet it was under the impact of the European enlightenment that emancipated Jewish thought became bolder in this regard. Classic examples in the earlier part of this century are the German scholars Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber. It was Rosenzweig who took up the implications of those earlier viewpoints (mentioned in the ICCJ document) of Maimonides (12c.), more especially Rabbi Menachem

HaMeiri (14c.), and even more explicitly Rabbi Moses Rivkes (17c.), indicating some special relationship of partnership in the Divine economy.

However, the first part of this century did not only facilitate the greater integration of the Jew in society, but also the most violent and diabolical rejection of the Jew in humankind's history, and in ostensibly Christian lands and culture! Accordingly, attitudes within the Jewish community towards Christianity become even more polarized. For many, precisely the need to obviate the threat of such tragedy required greater engagement with society at large and dialogue with its dominant religious ethos. For others, the tragedy only intensified their desire for isolation, especially from that religious ethos that was perceived by them as inextricable from, and even the inspiration for gentile hostility. Indeed, contemporary attitudes regarding the dialogue reflect, to a large degree, the sense of relationship with the modern world as a whole. In other words, the more comfortable the Jew feels in the contemporary world, the more positive his/her attitude is likely to be towards the Jewish/Christian dialogue. Somewhat paradoxical in this light, then, is the fact that some of the most prominent Jewish advocates of the inter-religious encounter – themselves products of modern culture – see the importance of the dialogue precisely in the need to provide a common front against modern secularism (cf. E. Fackenheim, *These Twenty Years*, in 'Quest for Past and Future', London, 1968; and D. Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue – a Jewish Justification*, Oxford, 1989). Yet, precisely because Jewish involvement in the dialogue has substantially resulted from modern acculturation, the major developments in Jewish theological reflection in this regard have taken place within the non-Orthodox streams of Judaism, principally in the direction of affirming religious pluralism in general (e.g. S. Greenberg, *Pluralism and Jewish Education*, 'Religious Education', Winter 1986; and J.B. Agus, *Dialogue and Tradition, The Challenges of Contemporary Judeo-Christian Thought*, New York, 1974).

There have been, however, significant attempts to accord a unique place for Christianity, acknowledging that "a new revelation has taken place outside the Covenant with Israel and the revelation to her" (Hans Joachim Schoeps, "*The Jewish Christian Argument*", New York, 1963), as well as interpretations much in parallel to those amongst Christian theologians who see the two as different Divinely intended expressions of the one Covenant (cf. W. Herberg, *Judaism and Christianity, their Unity and Difference* and *A Jew looks at Jesus* in B. W. Anderson, ed. 'Faith Enacted in History – Essays in Biblical Theology', Philadelphia, 1976). Thus the idea of Covenant is used in modern Jewish theological thought in three notable different ways to articulate a theological understanding of the nature of the relationship in terms of Divine Purpose: the pluralistic concept of multiple Covenants in which Judaism and Christianity are two amongst a potentially unlimited number, the idea of there being just the two alternative Covenantal paradigms, and the view of the One Covenant that has two Divinely intended expressions. (See also, S. Siegel, *Covenants – Old and New*, Jewish Heritage, Spring 1967; and J. Agus, *The Covenant Concept – Particularistic, Pluralistic, or Futuristic?*, Journal of Ecumenical Studies, 18:217-230).

While as mentioned, within Orthodox Judaism there is a predominant reticence against entering into dialogue with Christianity, analytical observation discerns the reasons as more psycho-historical and sociological than theological, even if there is some use of the latter as justification (see Z. Yaron, *An Orthodox Jewish Israeli Views*

*Interfaith, Tradition*, Vol. 6, 1964, reprinted in 'A Treasury of Tradition', New York, 1967; and D. Rosen, *Why is the Search for a Common Religious Basis for Jewish-Christian Communication and Cooperation Necessary*, Martin Buber House Publication, Heppenheim, No. 20, Winter 1992/93).

Nevertheless there are Orthodox Jewish Rabbinic scholars and thinkers who seek dialogue with Christianity not only on a multi-faith basis, in keeping with Rabbinic Judaism's teaching that all humankind is covenanted with God in the Noahide Covenant, but who furthermore acknowledge a special theological relationship between the two. Notable in this regards are the Orthodox scholars Michael Wyschograd who declares that "Jews must try to understand Christianity's role in God's redemptive work" and Rabbi Irving Greenberg who has called upon Jews as well as Christians to affirm the "fullness of the faith claims" of one another (*The Relationship of Judaism and Christianity: Toward a New Organic Model*, in 'Twenty Years of Jewish-Catholic Relations', ed. E. J. Fisher, A. J. Rudin, M. H. Tannenbaum, New York, 1986). An additional theological category for affirming a special mutual responsibility is also provided in terms of shared values and obligations under the rubric of the traditional Jewish understanding of the supreme Biblical obligation "to sanctify the Divine Name" (cf. David Rosen, loc. cit.). This idea finds its expression in the ICCJ document as a Jewish perspective of the theological basis for the bilateral dialogue, in addition to the universal bases for such.

#### The call to common action

Indeed, the dialogue finds the widest theological common ground within Jewry, as well as between the two communities, when it addresses not only ethical questions within the bilateral relationship, but our shared responsibilities towards society at large. Accordingly, the ICCJ document refers to the Jewish recognition of "a common agenda indicated by those tenets and values which Jews and Christians hold in common due to their shared biblical and historical roots" (cf. Norman Solomon, *Forward Together*, Martin Buber House Publication, Heppenheim, No. 20, Winter 1992/'93).

This self-same perception runs as a golden thread through the pronouncements of the Magisterium concerning inter-religious dialogue in general and Christian-Jewish relations in particular. One of the most profound statements in this regard was that made by Pope John Paul II in Mainz in 1980, referring to this aspect as the "third dimension" of the dialogue, describing it as the "sacred duty of Jews and Christians.... As children of Abraham." Said the Pope, "(we) are called to be a blessing to the world (Genesis 12 v.2) by committing (ourselves) to work together for peace and justice among all peoples." Naturally, the significance of referring to Abraham as our common parent and role model, infers clearly that Jews and Christians are bound together with Muslims in this "sacred duty."

Similarly the 1985 *Notes on The Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*, drawn up by the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, declare that, "We must accept our responsibility to prepare the world for the coming of the Messiah by working together for social justice, respect for the rights of persons and nations, and

for social and international reconciliation. To this we are driven, Jews and Christians, by the command to love our neighbor, by a common hope for the Kingdom of God, and by the great heritage of the Prophets.”

This is indeed the primary focus of this 1992 ICCJ document which is entitled "Jews and Christians in Search of a Common Religious Basis for Contributing towards a Better World." To this end, the document outlines the particular view of humanity, of the world and of God, as well as the particular ethos and set of values that Jews and Christians share.

In so doing, the broader theological bases for inter-religious cooperation are further expanded to the point where a shared religious definition of where the borderlines of religious pluralism lie, is required and given. Nevertheless the expansive impact of the dialogue upon theological thought and vision finds its expression in the concluding paragraph:

“From their common basis, Jews and Christians make their contribution to the discussion on the future moral and spiritual shape of our world. Essential in this context is theological humility. Members of each religious community should concede that God may have other ways to relate to human persons and communities than those in which God has been revealed to their own community. They should be aware that there are valid expressions of the encounter with the Divine other than their own. When encounter with the Divine takes place in another religious community, there, too, men and women tread on holy ground.”