

SIX DECADES OF CHRISTIAN-JEWISH DIALOGUE **(with some distortions still remaining)**

In 1946, less than a year after Holland was liberated from Nazi occupation, the Netherlands Reformed Church charged a special committee with the formulation of a new confessional statement. The document, *Foundations and Perspectives of Confession* published in 1949, was the result. Unique to this creedal statement was the inclusion of an article on “history” with a strong emphasis on the Kingdom of God, and an anti-supersessionist article on “Israel,” declaring that God’s covenant with the Jewish people had never been revoked.

This was one of several major initiatives toward rapprochement with the Jewish people and a theological reorientation vis-à-vis Judaism in the post-Holocaust era of the 1940s. Others were the 1947 “Ten Points of Seelisberg,” issued by the International Council of Christians and Jews; and the 1949 World Council of Churches’ Bossey Consultation. Less than two decades later, Vatican II and the declaration *Nostra Aetate* gave a whole new thrust to these endeavors.

Now, sixty years and numerous dialogue encounters later, we have a large body of literature dealing with Christian-Jewish relations. The first decades were devoted mostly, and quite rightly, to critiquing Christian distortions of Judaism. For centuries, the churches had borne false witness against their Jewish brothers and sisters, leading to an anti-Judaism that sowed the seeds of anti-Semitism, a Christian triumphalism, claiming that the church had replaced Israel in God’s covenant dealings; and the myth that Judaism equals rigid legalism. Among other hot topics avoided, there was reluctance on the part of many theologians to recognize the “land dimension” in God’s promises to Israel, church-sponsored Christian missions to the Jews, and the growing phenomenon of Messianic Judaism.

We have come a long way, but still have a long way to go in dispelling myths and misconceptions on both sides. That is particularly true on the local level, but also in scholarly circles. There is a long-standing Jewish argument that “you need us more than we need you.” After all, there is no way one can interpret the “New Testament” with integrity without reference to its Hebraic antecedents. Jesus was a Jew, and Christianity emerged from a Judaic matrix—facts frequently and sadly forgotten in Christian theological endeavors. Judaism, on the other hand, is a fully comprehensive belief system without the need of any reference to specifically Christian insights and beliefs. It can stand, so to say, on its own legs.

Nevertheless, in recent decades there has been a growing recognition on the part of Jewish scholars that, both for better self-understanding as well as potential mutual enrichment, they ought to speak out on *Christianity in Jewish Terms*—the title of a compendium of essays published in the year 2000. Other examples are the book *Jesus through Jewish Eyes* (2001), and Michael Kogan’s *Opening the Covenant: A Jewish Theology of Christianity* (2008).

Because of factors already mentioned, revisions in certain Christian theological positions were an urgent priority, and it seems fair to say that considerable progress has been made on that score. What about our Jewish dialogue partners? Among them, a radical change of mind can be observed in the way the historical Jesus is being portrayed—a reevaluation that was already in progress before World War II. Martin Buber referred to Jesus as “my great brother.” A quick check through the *Jesus through Jewish Eyes* essays yields the following descriptions of the man from Nazareth: “a thoroughly Jewish Jesus,” “devoted to Torah,” “Yeshua the Hasid,” “Jesus my friend,” “the troublesome cousin,” “one like us,” a “failed” rather than a “false” Messiah who is not the redeemer of Israel, but can be considered a redeemer *for Christians*.

In other words, he sincerely tried but didn’t make it—did not measure up to the Jewish messianic vision of one who inaugurates a new age of universal *shalom*. In the words of one commentator, “I have yet to glimpse a lion lying down with a lamb.” That, however, does not mean that he was a *total* failure in terms of God’s messianic dealings with the world. He simply was not *the* Messiah of Israel. This is a picture few Christians will accept, but one many will be able to understand *from a Jewish perspective*.

Most Jewish commentaries on the apostle Paul are a very different story, and that is one area, it seems to me, where myth and distortion are still quite common. Take, for instance, the claim that he founded a Christian religion that is essentially inner-oriented and other-worldly--a religion, in short, that lacks an adequate public perspective. In contrast, according to this view, Jewish messianism sees redemption in terms of time and space; it is an essentially historical faith, while Christianity constantly teeters at the brink of a-historical spiritualities. Also, the focus of Judaism is on *halacha* (acts) versus a Christian emphasis on *dogma* (beliefs).

Add to the above picture the charge that the apostle Paul was a radical antinomian who broke with the Law as revealed to Israel, teaching that Christ had replaced the Law. One can reach such conclusions only, it seems to me, if Paul is read through Gnostic spectacles tinted with a shade of Luther. First of all, Paul never said that Christ had replaced the Law. He *did* say that he had *fulfilled* the Law, and there is a world of difference between those two perspectives. For an extensive discussion of these complex

issues, see the essay “Torah and Kerygma: Fulfillment as Validation of the Law” in my book *Judaism-Christianity-Paganism: A Judeo-Christian Worldview and its Cultural Implications*.

Frankly, I find it astonishing that, after sixty years of dialogue, such notions are still being propounded by reputable scholars. It also surprises me that Christian dialogue partners have not challenged those views more forcefully. They strike me as so clearly contrary to both the Christian scriptures and the facts of history. Furthermore, in my view we are not dealing here with *adiaphora*, but rather with issues that go to the heart of the Christian life and the church’s relationship to the world.

Even a cursory reading of Paul’s letter to the Romans, surely a key source for any Pauline theology, yields some very straightforward opinions about the importance of the Law. The Law embodies the righteousness of God and, therefore, is “holy, just, and good” (7:12). Through an encounter with the Law, we learn about the true nature of sin as guilt before the Holy One, rather than mistakes we can fix with good intentions or some therapy sessions (3:20). Faith in Christ who has fulfilled the Law on our behalf, does not mean that the Law is overthrown (3:31). Quite the contrary, “the just requirements of the Law” must, with the help of the Holy Spirit, be fulfilled in our very lives and thus bring forth good works (8:4). What law might Paul have had in mind? Certainly not some kind of *lex naturalis*! In one form or another, his whole life evolved around the holy Torah.

It is the redemptive purpose of God’s Law that righteousness be established upon the earth. The Law is the Law of the Kingdom. The dispute between Judaism and Christianity is not about the need for good works, but rather about the *theological meaning* of our good works in light of the faith that Jesus has fulfilled the Law in an atoning act of sacrificial love as foreshadowed in Israel’s Temple cult. Christian faith is basically an existential reality—a way of *living*. It is, at heart, more about saying ‘yes’ with one’s whole being to the divine initiative of grace in Jesus than saying ‘yes’ to intellectual affirmations about Jesus.

Without Torah, Christianity will indeed easily slide into an unworldly spirituality. A social theology based exclusively on the “New Testament” will lack crucial dimensions of the gospel of the Kingdom as enunciated by Jesus and the apostles in line with Israel’s prophets. David Novak is so right when he states in his contribution to *Christianity in Jewish Terms* that “whenever Christians have had to consider what a Christian polity would actually look like, they have had to return to the law of the Old Testament” (p.121). George Lindbeck too is right when he declares in the same book that we should

recover “the reading of what Christians call the Old Testament as genuinely and centrally the church’s book” (p. 358).

Judaism and Christianity are both incarnational faiths, although Christianity perhaps more emphatically so with its confession that the eternal and creative Word became flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. What could be more down to earth and historical than that? It is also a very offensive idea to all longing for an escape from time and space by means of lofty spiritualities that are supposed to lift one above the burdens of earthly existence.

History, as conceived of in Western thought, can be called a “Hebrew invention.” The creator/covenant God of the Bible is Lord of the Universe and Ruler over the destiny of nations. History is “going somewhere,” has a *telos*. The “New Testament,” with its emphasis on the Kingdom of God, is thoroughly eschatological and simultaneously highly historical in orientation. God’s future breaks through into our time, and when that happens, signs of the Kingdom are manifested in our midst. Churches and church theologians have not always been faithful to that vision—a fateful error that has had tragic consequences for both church and society. However, for our errors to be portrayed as the *essence* of our faith strikes me as a serious distortion that runs counter to both historic Christian creeds and the facts of history. Think – among other things - of the Christendom tradition, Calvin’s Geneva, the Wesleyan social reforms, the 19th century Social Gospel theology, Catholic social teachings, as well as racial justice and civil rights movements in which Christians have played major roles.

All embodiments of religious beliefs in social-political and cultural experiments are a torso. They need to be constantly subjected to critical analysis. Prominent Christian theologians see “Constantinianism” as a this-worldly Christianity of the worst kind, and people like Rabbi James Rudin seem to see evangelical “Christocrats” as posing an imminent threat to American democracy. The debates never end and ironies abound, but we should be able to agree on one thing: totally a-political and antinomian forms of Christianity are hard to find, especially in the realm of Christian-Jewish relations. Rabbi Irving Greenberg, who is greatly admired in wide Christian circles, visualizes a “messianic moment” when Judaism and Christianity in partnership counter modern values that have created a milieu “more dangerous than Christianity at its worst.” Irving Kristol agrees, fearing “the resurgence of anti-biblical barbarism that will challenge Christianity, Judaism, and Western civilization altogether.” Stephen Spector introduces his book *Evangelicals and Israel* with this sentence: “This book is a study of the confluence of religion and politics in evangelical Christian attitudes toward Israel and the Jewish people.” The alliance between the Rev. John Hagee and certain modern orthodox rabbis has a strong (West Bank) political component. Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein has turned his International Fellowship of Christians and Jews into a veritable evangelical cash cow

that supports a wide assortment of immigration and welfare programs. The this-worldly and political dimensions of all such relationships are there for the grabbing.

There are fundamental differences between us and these must be faced. Honest-to-God dialogue is not afraid of a little polite confrontation. But, then, there are also *nuances*, and those must not be turned into antitheses. Genuine dialogue does not require that all differences be resolved. It is, however, of the utmost importance that confusion about nuances be resolved. Otherwise, we may well slip into a dialogue of the deaf.