

## THE MISSION/DIALOGUE PARADOX

To most Christians who have been actively involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue, it must have become apparent that their Jewish interlocutors would like to see a doctrinal position on christology and mission that comes as close as possible to a “theology of equality,” usually combined with a two-covenant perspective. Stated in summary, Christians enter the covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ; but Jesus has no salvific significance for Jews, since Jews are there already and have no need of a gospel of redemption through Christ. Therefore, any form of Christian outreach to Jews is basically an insult to an equally valid biblical faith.

Some Christian theologians and pro-Israel lobbyists have been quite comfortable with that position, but no official Protestant or Catholic pronouncement has taken such an unequivocal stance. Many ecclesiastical/ecumenical bodies have struggled with language that would affirm both God’s eternal covenant with the Jewish people and the universal apostolate of the Church about “all things” (*ta panta*) to all people. Depending on the nuances in expression, Jewish partners in dialogue have responded with various degrees of satisfaction or criticism to church statements, some even concluding (I would say mistakenly) that certain documents do indeed offer the above described unequivocal position.

Every new formulation from the Christian side is carefully scrutinized as to its sensitivity to Jewish concerns. The mission/dialogue issue, particularly with respect to the Church/Israel relationship, is essentially a paradox and therefore highly dialectical in nature. Paradox can introduce both depth and complexity into our theological (and philosophical) discourse. Søren Kierkegaard declared that paradoxes are “nothing less than grandiose thoughts in embryo.” He also said that, “if you take away paradox from the thinker, you have a professor”-- an obviously unfair generalization, but true in cases where ideological commitments have blinded people to inherently dialectical dimensions. Academia is not immune to mindlessness, turning professors into propagandists. In the best case scenario, however, paradox can bring an element of playfulness into our theological discussions when dealing with even issues of great seriousness.

The latest flare-up in Christian-Jewish relations was caused by the decision of U.S. bishops to change some of the wording in the Catholic Catechism. The following sentence was removed: “Thus the covenant that God made with the Jewish people through Moses remains eternally valid for them.” It was replaced with words from the apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans: “To the Jewish people, whom God first chose to hear his word, belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ.”

The bishops saw the change as a clarification, while many Jewish commentators saw it as backtracking and a weakening of the view that God’s covenant with Israel is eternal (“irrevocable” according to Romans 11:29). Church spokespersons pointed out that the excised sentence was not wrong, but was open to confusion and misunderstanding on the

part of lay people who heard claims to the effect that the statement meant that Jesus has no salvific significance for Jews and thus denying the universal mission of the Church.

One option, of course, was to use the mission/dialogue paradox as a teaching opportunity. The bishops, it seems to me, chose the easier route in a desire to avoid a brewing controversy. Personally, I would have wished that they had chosen the first option.

In his widely read book, *The Nature of Doctrine*, George Lindbeck has a section under the heading “Salvation and other faiths.” What about the salvation of those who belong to other religions? Does a confession of *solo Christo* automatically imperil dialogue, “lead almost inevitably to polemics and proselytizing instead of the dialogical cooperative attitudes toward other religions favored officially (e.g. by Vatican II) or unofficially by a large proportion of contemporary religious people” (55/56)? Lindbeck discusses the issue in a broader interreligious context, but since Jewish-Christian relations are (for both theological and historical reasons) *sui generis*, the matter takes on a special significance in that case.

The struggle with language on the part of ecclesiastical/ecumenical bodies is an indication that a straightforward answer tends to obscure complexities and becomes overly simplistic. We try to affirm two truths that seem contradictory, but are fully compatible for those who are led by a certain “logic of faith.” Then the basic issue becomes *how* one witnesses to people whose covenant with God gentiles have been invited to join and who have taught them (yes, continue to teach them) divine Torah. One response to that question has been that organized gentile missionary outreach to Jews has virtually ceased to exist.

In conclusion, let me make three points. First of all, the integrity of dialogue requires that such experiences not be used as an occasion for proselytization. In most cases, I dare say, that rule has been strictly observed.

Secondly, it would seem that any dialogue “from faith to faith” will inevitably involve a witness dimension on both sides, because the integrity of dialogue also requires that participants can talk about what they truly believe. That may at times give a much feared “I’m right, you’re wrong” impression which, in my view, poses a threat to dialogue only if it is expressed with an attitude of “I’m right, and that gives me the right to wrong you by writing you off as if you and your views are not worth considering.” In that case, however, true dialogue has already ceased to exist. Some Jews with whom I have been in conversation have told me in no uncertain terms that my messianic views are dead wrong, and that is precisely what I expect them to say. In the meantime, there are many important issues we can talk about.

Finally, despite fundamental differences an honest dialogue can help both parties discover commonalities in principled positions that can lead to a cooperative effort (i.e. a common “mission”) which advances *shalom* in the wider community.

