

DIALOGUE WITH JEWS

by

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1. *Historical Background*

We cannot enter into a discussion on Christian-Jewish relationships without a brief survey of the past. With a few exceptions, one has to say that over long centuries the Christian attitudes towards the Jewish people have been characterised by what Jules Isaac has called the "teaching of contempt" (*l'enseignement de mépris*). From a very young age, Christian children have received through catechetics and liturgy a picture of Judaism as being anachronistic, crude, primitive, and wicked. They were taught that the Jews had crucified Jesus, that the New Covenant of Love had replaced the Old Covenant of stern judgment, and that the Church was the New Israel which has come to replace the Old Israel, as this was rejected and condemned by God. The attitude to those Jews living in society was either entirely negative, or characterised by a peculiar ambivalence. Jews represented in the common Christian view a stage of religious life which had been superseded by the Christian faith, and yet they adhered to their anachronistic way of life and refused to be incorporated into the Christian Church. On the other hand, however, they carried with them the Hebrew Scriptures which formed the major part of the Christian Bible, and they were the people to which the Lord Jesus had belonged. And therefore there was a feeling of strange attraction towards these people, or perhaps even an element of hidden envy: the Jews, unlike the one-time pagan people who had been Christianized, had the courage to resist inclusion in the universal Church, instead retaining their particularity. In any case their existence as a particular entity outside the universality of the Church seemed to undercut the claim of Christianity to the title of the true Israel. There is a very complex psychological relationship between Christianity and its mother religion. Somehow Christianity has been haunted by the continued existence and survival of Judaism. This may explain the very emotional way in which until today the subject of Judaism, Jewry and Israel is discussed. Often a Christian takes either a very emotional pro-Jewish or pro-Israel stance, or an equally emotional anti-Jewish or anti-Israel stance.

* Excerpted from a paper read at the World Council of Churches Consultation on "Universal Christian Responsibility in regard to the Middle East", October 24-28, 1975, Cartigny, Switzerland.

These uneasy and ambivalent feelings are increased by the awareness of the crucial and fateful contribution which this Christian teaching of contempt towards the Jewish people has made to the Nazi Holocaust. The Holocaust constitutes very much a Jewish trauma, and explains many attitudes of Jews in the present, but it is no less a deep Christian trauma. The difference is, however, that Jews are slowly coming to grips with this trauma, whereas the Christians are trying hard to forget it.¹

2. *Religion and Nationhood*

For many Jews, the Holocaust meant the final break with Christianity. This unprecedented expression of human wickedness took place in a civilization deeply stamped by Christianity. The natural reaction of many Jews was to put a full stop to any dialogue between Jews and Christians. But nevertheless, talks between them were resumed, though these talks came to a near standstill whenever, in difficult moments for the Jewish people, the Jews felt themselves abandoned by the Christians, thus reviving memories of the Holocaust. Such situations occurred in the weeks of suspense and anxiety before the Six Day War and during the Yom Kippur War. And to this day Jews are not sure that Christians will not look in the other direction when against the Jewish people might be threatened, nor are they sure that Christians will not support organizations whose declared aim it is to destroy the State of Israel.

We touch here upon one of the great difficulties of the Jewish-Christian dialogue. It cannot be carried out without bringing it into the political sphere. The matter will be much easier if it *were* true, as is stated in Article 20 of the "Palestinian National Covenant", that "Judaism, in its character of a religion of revelation, is not a nationality with an independent existence." In fact, it should be understood that the revelation of Sinai established the Jews as a nationality. The covenant of Sinai turned a band of refugees into a nation (cf. Exodus 19:15).

To make a variation on the theme of the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches:² God has freed the Israelites from slavery and

¹ It is worthwhile to make an appeal to our brothers and sisters from the Eastern Churches not to fall into the trap in which we Christians from the West have fallen. We sometimes hear from our Oriental Christian brothers the anti-Jewish prejudices with which we in the West have lived for so many centuries. It is frightful to observe that a rabidly anti-Jewish forgery like the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" is widely read and quoted nowadays in the Middle East. It seems that the negative sound which the word "Zionism" has today in the Arab world and in parts of the Third World is due largely to the associations which are made between this word and the "Elders of Zion" who figure as a conspiring body in this anti-Jewish forgery.

² "Jesus Christ frees and unites".

has united them into a nation under Him. It is a major feature of Jewish identity that Judaism as a religion has a national dimension and that the Jewish people as a nation has a religious dimension. This is also the reason why it is impossible to present Judaism and Zionism as two entirely different things. Zionism is an important and valid contemporary expression of a fundamental dimension of Judaism. The basic aspiration of Zionism is freeing and uniting the Jewish people: freeing it from alienation, oppression and persecution, and uniting it in the Land from which it had been exiled but which it had never abandoned. Throughout the centuries, a remnant had always remained in the Land. Zionism is an attempt of the Jewish people to find itself again and to take its place in freedom, dignity, and co-operation among the community of nations and to make its distinctive contribution to the one world of which the prophets have spoken. There is a great debate going on in Israel and the Diaspora about Jewish identity. But in most of Zionist doctrine, there is a profound sense of commitment and destiny, whether this is formulated in a traditional-religious, in a humanistic, or in a socialistic way. There is a strong awareness that the Jewish people is under the obligation to continue its historic existence for the sake of something that is beyond mere survival and self-preservation. One should not be surprised by the so-called secular origin and character of Zionism. This secularism was directed against a type of traditional religion which prevented the forces of liberation within the Jewish people from developing. Secularism was a necessary stage in the liberation process. But in Israel it become clearer and clearer that an entirely secularist position undercuts Jewish identity, as this is intimately bound up with a religious heritage.

As this intertwining of the national and the religious dimension in Judaism is very uncommon to Christians, it is understandable that time and again Christians make attempts to approach Jews solely as adherents of a religion, of a faith, and try to move the discussion to the field of purely religious issues, but Jews instinctively resist this, as long as they feel that the national dimension of their identity has not been recognised by their dialogue partners. Sometimes they feel that the misunderstanding of the true character of the national dimension of their identity is so great, and the insensitivity towards it so profound, that they see no further basis for contacts and talks.

What is needed at this moment is therefore a Christian attempt to understand the religious roots and the spiritual basis of Jewish nationhood, to try to understand why for a Jew his spiritual commitment is so intimately connected with his being a member of the Jewish people, and why there is such an attachment to the Land. This is, indeed, a very difficult point for Christians, for Christianity claims to have transcended the level of national existence and territorial attachments and to have reached a much more universal concept of humanity. But it should make us Christians a bit humble to note that the most extreme and excessive cases of nationalism and idoli-

zation of territory have taken place in the orbit of the Christian world. Do we have here, perhaps, an instance of that typically Christian aspiration for the highest and the perfect, which is often accompanied by a peculiar overrating of man-in-grace? It creates dangerous tensions, as it makes impossible demands on man, which in turn triggers off a violent and sometimes explosive reaction in the reverse direction. Such a thing happened with regard to the traditional Christian sexual morals. It is characteristic of the Jewish tradition that it first of all wants to concentrate on the possible, and to create a life style which brings common human life as much as possible under the influence of the Divine commandments. The emphasis on nationhood in Jewish religion may be interpreted as an attempt to relate God's will to the totality of the concrete existence of a nation, with all its economic, social, political, and territorial aspects. This implies that religion, in the first place, concentrates on *law*, which means finding just and viable solutions in matters of rich and poor, of social diversity, of the relations between the individual and the community, of the use of the land where one lives, of the wielding of political power, but finding all this in the light of the divine revelation. The Christian Church is, of course, also aware of the need of conducting national life in accordance with God's will, but this is a demand put to the nations from outside, so to speak. According to the Jewish tradition, however, the Jewish people owes its very existence as a nation to the covenant which obliges it "to conform to the way of the Lord and to do what is right and just" (Gen. 18:19). That is the source of Jewish nationhood. It is a tragic development that those sections in the Church which concentrate on the political and social consequences of the Gospel overlook the important insights which the Jewish tradition has to offer for a Christian theology of liberation, and for building up a truly humanized society.³

3. *Jewish-Christian Encounter in Israel*

After these general remarks I should like to concentrate on the encounter between Jews and Christians in the State of Israel. This encounter takes a completely different form from the contacts between Jews and Christians elsewhere in the world. Outside Israel the Jews are engaged in such contacts from their position as a minority. In Israel the primary culture is Jewish. It is an unparalleled experience for Christians to live as a minority in a Jewish majority society, where the rhythm of life is articulated by the Shabbats, with the great Jewish festivals like Pesach, Rosh Ha-Shanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot punctuating the course of the year. For those Christians

³ An important insight into the significance of the Torah can be found in Burgess Carr's recent article on "The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Struggle for Human Rights," *The Ecumenical Review*, April 1975, XXVII: 2, 117-123.

who are affected by the ambivalent feelings towards the Jewish people which I described earlier, it is quite a healthy experience to live in a Jewish majority society. Here they get to know the Jews as normal people with all the variations which exist among any normal people; good and bad, rich and poor, extremists and moderates, and all burdened with the rifts and tensions that exist in any human society. In Israel no inclination is felt either to idealise or utterly to condemn the Jews. They appear as thoroughly human beings, with whom we Christians have much in common.

When we speak about the contact between Christians and Jews in Israel, we should be aware of the fact that the Christians are to be divided into two groups: indigenous Christians, and Christians coming from abroad. Both have their legitimate place in this land, which is called the Holy Land. From the early centuries of Christianity both categories of Christians have lived together in this country; the local Christians because they belong to this country and are rooted in it; the Christians from abroad because they were coming to Israel in order to come closer to the origins of their faith. The foreign Christians have often dominated the local Christians, notably in the period of the Crusades and during the missionary age of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. This should certainly be put right, but not at the expense of the legitimate interest of the foreign Christians in the origins of their faith.

a. *Indigenous Christians*

The vast majority of indigenous Christians in Israel⁴ are Arabs. Speaking about Jewish-Christian contacts in Israel, with regard to these indigenous Christians, it would not be a surprise that these contacts cover primarily the ethnic or national aspects of the identities of Jews and Arab Christians. In their contacts with Jews, Arab Christians in Israel are first of all aware of their being Arab. They are a minority within a minority in Israel. As Christians, they are a minority among the Muslim Arabs, who form the greater part of the Arab minority in Israel. There is always a reluctance among Arab Christians to mark themselves off as *Christians* among the Arabs in their encounter with Jews. It would only emphasize their double minority status, which is indeed not a happy one. Their contacts with Jews are therefore embedded in contacts between Jews and Arabs in general. For Jews also, the national or ethnic aspect of their identity is very much in the foreground. This is strengthened by the fact that they see the Arab minority in Israel as representative of the larger Arab majority in the Middle East, among which the Jewish people in Israel in its turn is a minority,

⁴ In this context we do not deal with another group of indigenous Christians, namely Christians of Jewish origin, who consider themselves an integral part of the Jewish people in Israel.

and an extremely threatened minority. These very complicated relations make it, of course, very difficult to come to mutual openness and understanding. The easiest thing is to lock oneself up in one's own little religious world without seeking contacts outside. This has been, by the way, the overall pattern in the Middle East in regard to religious life. It has found its expression in the *millet* system, giving each religious group its own internal autonomy, screening it off from other groups. A dialogue in a programmatic sense in which certain theological issues are systematically examined is certainly difficult to expect in such a situation. But there are encouraging examples of mutual understanding between Jews and Arabs, both Christians and Muslims, which have to do with the existential experiences of both partners in the respective dialogue. On the organisational level, these efforts are carried out in groups and institutes like the Israel Interfaith Committee, the Martin Buber Centre for Adult Education of the Hebrew University, the *Histadruth* (the General Labour Federation of Israel), the Jerusalem Municipality, circles around the periodical "New Outlook", the Institute of Middle Eastern Studies of the leftist kibbutz organisation *Hashomer Hatzair*, the group "Meditran" for inter-cultural contacts in Jerusalem, and others.

These experiences of dialogue help create that infrastructure of peace on the human level which is a precondition for lasting peace and reconciliation on the political level. "If we cannot make the great peace between Jews and Arabs, let us in any case start with a small peace, on the inter-human level of daily life," says the motto of those involved in these efforts at dialogue. I am sure that in these modest attempts, which do not make the international headlines, dialogues between Israeli Jews and Christian and Muslim Arabs take place which are in fact no less important than the "official" organized dialogues.

It is clear that the religious dimensions of the identities of both Jews and Arabs who take part in these contacts are pushed rather far into the background. But Jews feel themselves no less Jews for all that when they enter into such meetings. It may be that their Christian partners are less aware in these encounters of their being Christians.

b. *Christians from abroad*

We find a different picture with regard to Christians who have come from abroad and who have chosen to live in Israel permanently or for an extended period of time. I have said already that most of these Christians have come to Israel in order to come closer to the origins of their faith. The greater part of them are priests, clergymen, monks and nuns. But here we have to distinguish between two types of Christians, which are represented by two personalities in Church history, namely Empress Helena and the Church Father Jerome (Hieronymus). Helena was in search of the origins of Christianity by concentrating on the *places* where Jesus had been

born, had lived, had died, and had been resurrected. Jerome (Hieronymus) was in search of the origins of the Christian faith by concentrating on the *Scriptures* which had taken shape in the Holy Land. He was in intensive contact with Jewish scholars in the land, and translated the Bible into Latin.

Generally speaking (there are exceptions, luckily!), we have to say that the Christians of Helena's type tend to be closed towards others, not only towards people of other religions but also towards their fellow Christians. The vested interests, the competition and sometimes even fighting which surround the custody of Holy Places are not conducive to a dialogical attitude! The Holy Land is, regrettably, also in this respect an under-developed area as far as ecumenical and interfaith relations are concerned.

With regard to the second category, that of the Jerome-type Christians, significant developments have taken place during the past years in their contact with Jews in Israel. These Christians have come to the land of the Bible, where the people of the Bible has re-established its national home. Some of these Christians still have difficulty with the fact that the Jewish people has continued to exist after the emergence of the Christian Church. This is to them a theological anomaly, or at best a kind of anachronism which is bound to disappear gradually. They avoid contact with Jews where possible. Apart from the theological difficulty which they have with a living Jewish reality in the present, there is certainly also the influence of the political situation on their attitudes. Others are more open-minded towards the new situation which has arisen out of the return of a great part of the Jewish people to its ancient homeland. They have become involved in a number of forms in which the dialogue between Christians and Jews has crystallized. Here the national aspect of Jewish identity comes far less to the forefront than in the contacts between Jews and Arab Christians. The dialogue here concentrates more directly on religious and philosophical issues, and takes place more on an intellectual level.

A significant step was the establishment in 1965 of a private group of Jewish and Christian academicians in Jerusalem, the so-called Jerusalem Rainbow Group. It has been described by its first secretary, Peter Schneider, as a "theological seminar with a difference". It is composed of an equal number of Jews and Christians, an elected and restricted membership not exceeding 25-30 members. Each month throughout the academic year theological papers are read, followed by lively and controversial discussions; the difference lies in the fact that the group has come beyond the academic level and has evolved as a circle of friends, in which genuine confidence has been reached, so that most discussions no longer divide on merely Jewish and Christian lines, but rather on the particular religious and social issues involved. This has, however, not been achieved because political and other sensitive issues were shunned. Rather the opposite is true. Difficult crises in Jewish-Christian relations, such as took place in the wake of the Yom

Kippur War, have been overcome within the Rainbow Group by a completely open and frank discussion of the issues involved. The Jewish members represent widely differing viewpoints, including both orthodox and liberal Jews, holding different political views, while the Christian membership is of an ecumenical nature, comprising Catholics and Protestants coming from different parts of the world, and even including a Christian Arab priest from Israel itself.

This experience of the possibility of mutual confidence and understanding has given an important impetus to the foundation of a Christian group in which significant exchanges and sometimes real dialogue take place between members and invited Jewish scholars and thinkers. Such a group is the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel, which was inaugurated in February 1966. The founding members had broken with traditional Christian attitudes towards, and understanding of, Jewry and Judaism, and they realised that such a new Christian stance inevitably involved a Christian reappraisal of the contemporary renewal of Jewry in terms of the State of Israel. Further the Ecumenical Fraternity realised that Christian theologians in Israel had a unique opportunity to observe and to try to understand the Jewish reality here at its centre and strength, and that Christian theology could take great advantage of the intense process of re-orientation and re-examination which is taking place among the Jewish people in Israel with regard to its sources. The research that takes place, for example at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem into the Hebrew Bible and into the period of the Second Temple, is also of extreme importance for Christian theology, for both the Hebrew Bible and Jewish religious life of the time of the Second Temple constitute the essential sources of Christianity. Since Christianity originated as one of the many Jewish streams of the first century, it is obvious that the new Jewish research of these sources is of extreme importance for Christian theology. Christians who have closely followed the work of eminent scholars such as David Flusser, who is an expert in both the Jewish life of the Second Temple period and in the New Testament, realise the importance of these scholars' insights and findings for Christian theology. The work of scholars such as Shmuel Safrai, and the work of Shalom Ben-Chorin and Pinhas Lapide have also been a significant contribution. Also the experience of Jewish religious life in Israel, as expressed in the observance of the Torah, in the festivals, in the synagogue services, in the contacts with religious people, in the interpretation of the Scriptures, makes Christians aware of the rich reward which concentration on the Jewish roots of their faith gives to them.

It is clear that in these studies and scholarly contacts lie many opportunities for meaningful Jewish-Christian dialogue. But also on a more practical level there are contacts between Jews and Christians from abroad. An example is the Christian village "Nes Ammim" which consists mainly

of Dutch people who have come to Israel to express their solidarity with the Jewish people in contributing to the Israeli economy by an important rose-growing industry. Their wish is to turn a new page in the relations between Jews and Christians.

Conclusion

Christianity has, to say the least, not been very keen during the course of history to be open towards insights which come from Judaism and can have a beneficial influence on Christian thinking and behavior; and likewise is the case with Judaism in regard to Christianity. The deep controversy between Jews and Christians with regard to important questions of faith and practice which have caused them to part ways in the first century have determined their relations throughout their respective histories. Christianity condemned Judaism because it remained outside what the Church considered as the consummation of God's covenant with Israel. Judaism condemned the Church because it had replaced the core of this Covenant, the Torah, by the person of Christ, or rather, interpreted the Torah in terms of Christ. This "no" of one to the other, this category of negation, has determined the relationship between them, and led to an immovable stalemate. Would it be possible that one would acknowledge, with regard to the other, that the "no" which was spoken originated from, and was perhaps a necessary expression of, a profound "yes" to the God who is their common Lord and who has shown his grace to both of them in his redeeming acts? These acts in history are perpetuated and re-enacted in the living memory of both communities. Both communities have been structured according to particular moulds in which this fundamental memory of God's action in each community has been cast. The Jewish community remembers in its fundamental memory God's revelation at Sinai and has structured its community life and its expression of faith around this event. The Christian community remembers in its fundamental memory God's revelation in Jesus Christ and has structured its community life and its expressions of faith around this event. These respective structures of community seem to exclude each other and seem incompatible. Jewish Christianity of the first centuries tried to show that they were not, but it has failed! Perhaps now the time has come to concentrate less on the "no" that Jews and Christians have spoken to each other and concentrate more on the "yes" that both have said to God, their common Lord, who has revealed himself to both in his redeeming acts.

May the time come that the political situation will no longer block Arab Christians and pro-Arab Christians from coming together with their Jewish brethren and communicating with each other in the "yes" that both of them are speaking to the praise and glory of the God who has heard (in the words of Exodus 2:24) our groaning and who has remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

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