

CORRESPONDENCE

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE JEWS: AN EXCHANGE

by *ZE'EV W. FALK* and *MARCEL DUBOIS*

To the Editor:

One of the objects for which this journal was founded ten years ago was to report on Jewish-Christian relations, past and present, as reflected in religious and theological literature from Israel. Perhaps the time has come to express a feeling that I have held in the back of my mind throughout this time which honesty requires that I share with my Christian friends. This feeling relates to the refusal of the Vatican to recognize the State of Israel. I cannot but interpret the attitude of the Holy See as a denial of the elementary right to political existence which has been accorded to every other nation. I see this refusal as a link in the church's tradition of claiming as its own the heritage of Israel, while denying the legitimacy of post-Christian Judaism. Moreover, the definition of the Jewish people as a group of individuals or as a religious community and not as a nation or a state seems to me an unjustified imposition by one partner to the dialogue upon the other.

I was disappointed by the formulation of this attitude in the document issued by the Second Vatican Council in 1965. It expressed a patronizing approach to "the Jews" as individuals, rather than defining them according to their own self-understanding.

The Church maintained its claim that it was the new "People of God," implying the doctrine of substitution. I found the same attitude in the Pope's address of March 6, 1982 to the conference of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. Mention was made of the "synagogue's community organization" as a source of inspiration to Church institutions, but no corresponding reference was made to the Jewish concepts of people, land and state, which are of equal importance for the self-understanding of Christianity. I saw in these omissions clear signs of Catholic disapproval and negation of the Jewish right to political existence.

After my experience in the Jewish delegation which congratulated Pope John Paul II upon his accession, I was not surprised when he granted an audience to Yassir Arafat in September 1982. According to an Associated Press report dated March 12, 1979, Arafat had announced to President Carter of the United States and to Prime Minister Begin of Israel that "there will be only Arabs in this part of the world... The Arabs will continue feeding the torch of revolution by streams of blood, until the whole of the occupied homeland will be

liberated... not only part of it.” This was in accord with the Palestine Covenant declaring that “the whole of Palestine belongs to the Arabs... armed struggle is the only way to liberation, and both the partition of Palestine and the establishment of the State of Israel were illegal.” The Pope thus extended friendship to the man who was responsible for the murder of thousands of women, children and innocent civilians all over the world, including the city of Rome.

I cannot but associate the Roman Catholic attitude towards the enemies of Israel with traditional Christian antisemitism. Neither Vatican Council II nor the various modern popes have condemned the antisemitic statements in the Church Fathers or in Christian theology (although by this I in no sense mean to detract from the historical merit of Pope John XXIII). No regret was expressed on Christian atrocities against Jews during the ages, nor on the pope’s silence during the Holocaust. Incidentally, Rolf Hochhuth’s accusation against the Vatican in his play *Der Stellvertreter* (“The Deputy”) has now been confirmed by Alois Hartel, Heinrich Himmler’s former advisor on religion. In an interview published in the weekly *Die Zeit*, he stated that had the Church opposed Nazi antisemitism from the beginning, Hitler would not have proceeded with the destruction of the Jewish people — although such opposition would almost certainly have led to a break in the relations between the Vatican and the Nazi government.

A dialogue is possible where there is mutual trust and respect for the integrity of each partner’s identity. I am afraid that neither of these exist in the Jewish-Catholic relationship. The first point on the agenda for any encounter of these parties must therefore be mutual recognition, a willingness to accept the other according to his own definition, and the application of equal standards to the other as well as to oneself.

We can collaborate under the common title of *Immanuel*, though each one has his own interpretation, if we respect one another’s right to his own self-understanding. I, for my part, believe that God is with the Jewish

people in their suffering, even in their imperfection, and that His promise will be realized in this land, under the sovereignty of Judah and Israel. I respect the right of Christians to give this name a spiritual meaning referring to Christ, but insist upon a similar attitude on the part of Christians vis-a-vis the Jewish interpretation.

Jerusalem, on the eve of the Feast of Tabernacles, expecting the realization of Zech. 14:18.

Ze’ev W. Falk

Dear Ze’ev,

As a member of the editorial board, you know how much we have been wanting readers of *Immanuel* to send us their reactions, their opinions, eventually their criticisms. I am grateful to you for setting an example by this “letter to the editor.” I would be happy if other readers would do the same. So it is as Editor-in-Chief of *Immanuel* that I have read your remarks and that I am now attempting to reply. To tell the truth, as you are yourself responsible for one of the sections of our periodical, your letter and my response will appear much more as an expression of the dialogue which exists between us than as an anonymous exchange between editor and reader. I thank you for giving us this opportunity.

You pose a serious question, for it concerns the loyalty, the truth and the reciprocity of the encounter between Jews and Christians, which has been and which remains the idea that inspires our review. This question has been aroused by the astonishment, I would even dare to say the scandal, which is provoked by the attitude of the Vatican with regard to the State of Israel. The non-recognition of the political existence of Israel and, more recently, the reception of Arafat by the Pope, appear to you as signs of a closed mind, if not of hostility. They seem to you, in any event, as a manifestation of a lack of symmetry in the dialogue between Jews and Christians and as the negation of the work that we claim to accomplish. As I share to a great extent your expectation and sometimes your impatience, I will try to convey to you

what I say to myself in order to preserve my patience and to strengthen my hope. As Paul Claudel wrote in his oratorio, *Joan at the Stake*, "Hope is the stronger," particularly when it is the question of Israel and the Church.

I would like to make one thing clear from the start. The most decisive motivation of your remarks is the attitude of the Vatican towards the State of Israel. I would remind you that *Immanuel* is the organ of a collaboration between Jews and Christians in which Catholics are by no means the only Christian partners. This periodical is published by the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel and does not in any way represent the positions of the Vatican. The editorial board counts among its members a majority of Christians belonging to various churches stemming from the Reformation. However, as the Editor-in-Chief of *Immanuel* is, in fact, a Catholic priest, it is in this capacity that I reply to you.

Let us first settle your remark concerning the visit of Arafat to the Vatican. It has lost something of its immediacy on the level of the events of this world, which pass so rapidly. Moreover, the present destiny of the leader of the PLO, in the sound and the fury of Tripoli, would rather give rise to reflection on the fragility of his prestige. Nevertheless, I understand that this event was and remains, as it were, an insult and a wound for most Jews, whether Israelis or not, even those Jews who have become Christians. I know that the replies given at Rome, in March 1983, by the authorities of the Vatican Secretariat of State to the Jewish delegates of the International Liaison Committee, did not convince them. I can tell you that I was deeply wounded by the audience granted to Arafat and really saddened by the misunderstandings to which it gave rise. Many Christians, including some of those in the Vatican, felt the same unease. Certainly, if we take this meeting as a test, indeed the only test, of the state of relations between the Church and the Jewish people, we cannot but share your disappointment and that of our Jewish friends. But is it really a question of that? On this point, as on many other political incidences in the life of the

Church, it is necessary to recall, strongly and clearly, the difference between what is a matter of faith and what is a matter of opinion, the basic distinction between the necessary and the contingent. In the case of the latter, I definitely feel free, as it does not directly involve my faith. I can deplore the political and even apostolic repercussions of certain decisions of the Vatican — here, for instance, I think of the affair of the worker-priests in France in the years 1953–54; these are certainly trials at the level of events and history, they can cause impatience or darkness; but they do not at all shake my faith in the Church.

So it would be a mistake to see in the visit of Arafat to Rome a univocal manifestation of the theology of the Catholic Church towards Judaism and towards Jews. This theology is more profound than the level of the political currents in which the human history of the Church is inevitably involved. Can we not say the same about the various turns of Israeli policy in the complex situation of the Middle East? You know that many Jewish friends do not recognize themselves there. The true encounter between Jews and Christians is at another level. At its most authentic, the level of prayer and mutual discovery, real progress is taking place right now in silence. I cannot but invite you to be aware of that and to share in the labour and the patience of those Christians who are engaged in it.

The Vatican and the State of Israel

But here I arrive at the second part of your indictment, which concerns the recognition of the State of Israel. I acknowledge the seriousness of your question all the more since, as an Israeli citizen, I share your impatience.

You already know the reply which is given to the question which not only you ask: "Why has the Vatican not yet recognized the State of Israel?" To our friends of the International Liaison Committee, the spokesmen of the Vatican made the observation that even though there has not yet been recognition *de jure*, there has been for a long time recognition *de facto* since, if Abba Eban, Golda Meir, Moshe Dayan, and

Yitzhak Shamir were received at the Vatican. it was surely as representatives of the State of Israel! As a lawyer, you will certainly not be satisfied with these arguments. And I am sure that you will be sceptical if I remind you that the United States has no ambassador at the Holy See either, but only a personal representative of the President, and that the Vatican has no *nunzio* at Washington, but only an apostolic delegate... All these nuances and juridical quibbles cannot hide the evident lack of symmetry in the particular case of the relations with the State of Israel.

I could remind you here of the reasons which are generally given to explain this "non-recognition" of Israel by the Vatican. First, there is the diplomatic custom, according to which the Vatican never recognizes State whose borders are not yet established with its neighbours by an official treaty. Unfortunately, that has been the situation of the State of Israel since 1948 (a state of affairs of which those who want to see us return to the "borders of 1967" seem to me unaware. There never were borders, but only an armistice line!). An example can be given to confirm this argument: the partition of the dioceses between Poland and Germany along the Oder-Neisse line was definitely fixed only 25 years after the end of the Second World War. But I understand perfectly that this example would hardly appear sufficient to you.

There is another reason, more discrete but based on facts, which could be illustrated by numerous examples. This may be expressed in the following way: every smile or positive initiative on the part of the Vatican towards the State of Israel risks causing harm to the Christian communities who live in Moslem countries. This perhaps explains the reserve and timidity from which the State of Israel suffers in the policy of the Vatican in the Middle -East. It would be sufficient to recall, once more, the circumstances of the trip of Pope Paul VI to the Holy Land in January 1964, in particular the lack of symmetry from which we all suffered in the manifestations of courtesy. There were so many Arab sensitivities to be taken into account!

Whatever the value of these explanations,

there is, I grant you, another more profound reason for all these reticences. Here I return to your own reflection: it is clear that Christian theology is not yet capable of giving an account, in terms of its own categories, of the link between the people of Israel and its land. That is a fact. But theological reflection on Judaism and on Israel, of the Catholic Church in particular, is neither static, nor hardened, nor closed. It is, on the contrary, in the process of development, and it is this that I invite you to consider.

You remind us of the official texts of the Church, the declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965), and the speech of the Pope to the Pontifical Commission for relations with Judaism of the 6th of March 1982, in order to measure their limitations and to deplore their gaps. Surely, not everything has yet been said and many things have yet to be studied and unfolded. However, if you reread the texts in which the results of Christian reflection are expressed, from the ten points of Seeligberg (1947) until today, and if you compare their contents, you will be able to observe the development of the doctrine and the growing benevolence of the outlook. As our friend, Father Dupuy, has already said, it is a question of a progress which is now irreversible.

The most decisive point of the new development seems to me to be the formal invitation made to Christians to "seek to understand the Jew as he understands himself." This was already one of the most important propositions in the declaration published by the French Episcopal Committee on the eve of Pesah 1973.¹ It was taken up by the Pastoral Orientations of the Vatican Commission in January 1975.² I invite you to

1. "Let (Christians) try to understand the Jew as he understands himself, instead of judging him according to their own modes of thought."

2. "It is particularly important that Christians seek to know better the fundamental components of the religious tradition of Judaism and they learn those essential features by which Jews define themselves in their lived religious reality."

be aware of the importance of the principle thus laid down and to have confidence in the dynamism which it carries in itself. Certainly, time will still be needed before Christian theology, reflecting *from within* on the components of the Jewish consciousness — People, Torah, Land — reaches the point of understanding and justifying the link between the Jewish people and the land in which its history, its tradition, its wisdom, and its prayer are rooted for ever. We can not correct twenty centuries of misunderstandings, mistakes and tragedies in twenty years. Nevertheless, a new principle has been clearly defined, a principle which involves an outlook and an attitude, a principle which should be the foundation of our hope: "To understand the Jew as he understand himself".

Three Stages of Dialogue

My dear Ze'ev, several times in the past we have had to participate together in public exchanges on those things which are at the heart of our life and our concern. Allow me to recall to you here the manner in which I see the progress which has been accomplished in the last thirty years in the mutual recognition of our identity. If I had to sum up the balance-sheet of this development, I would do so distinguishing three stages in a discovery which has been more and more intimate.

First of all, it is certain that we have reached together, Jews and Christians, a stage of the dialogue in which we can say to one another, without hatred or animosity, but also without fear and without illusion: we agree to disagree. We recognize that Jesus separates us, that he is between us a sign of division and a stumbling-block. Far from being a pessimistic assessment, the very fact that we can say this to ourselves, right now, so clearly and so frankly, is in itself a considerable progress.

In the second place, on each side, Jewish and Christian, we are now capable of recognizing, without evasion and without reticence, the Jewish identity of Jesus. That is also a new fact. We are no longer ashamed or afraid of this truth which, on both sides, we preferred to hide or to forget because we

found it disturbing or without interest. In order to take hold of the humanity of Jesus, to understand the reality of the incarnation, Christian exegetes and theologians no longer hesitate to consider Jesus in the surroundings and the tradition from which he came according to the flesh. The title of a recent book suffices in its very conciseness to express this new attitude: *And the Word became a Jew*. On the Jewish side, parallel progress can be observed in the direction of this objectivity. Without recognizing, of course, Jesus as Lord and Messiah, there is no longer any hesitation in recognizing in him a son of the Jewish people. Thus, in order to speak to me of Jesus, one of our colleagues whom you know, Professor of New Testament at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, sometimes says to me simply: "My teacher and your God." This admirable formula is full of significance and is, in any case, the expression of an astonishing progress in mutual lucidity.

But there is still more. At the more profound and secret level which I would call that of oratory or laboratory, that is to say, at the silent level where Jews and Christians listen to one another in prayer and meet one another in view of a discovery which is mutual, objective and loyal, we are beginning to discover, each in his own way, that Jesus, son of Israel, unites us at the very moment that he divides us. This paradox gives to our meeting an absolutely singular value. Indeed, we are the only ones to witness and to suffer this tearing apart. Many men of good will — animists, fetishists, Buddhists, Shintoists, Hindus, even Moslems — have no reason to be disturbed by the existence of Jesus: they don't meet him in their history, and Jesus does not refer to their tradition. For a Jew, sooner or later, especially in our time when all meetings are possible, his person will be the occasion of a question or even of a stumbling-block. For us Christians, considering the rupture between his people and the Church of which Jesus has been the sign, we cannot but suffer from what the French protestant writer, François Lovsky, has called: "the rent of absence." Now, this rent is something which belongs to us. It paradoxically unites us, Jews

and Christians, before the world. It is a question of a family-quarrel about an inheritance. A family quarrel! I believe that we could sum up the tragic history in which we have been involved for centuries by using this formula, but by underlining in a different way the two words which compose it. We have been torn apart from two thousands years by a family *quarrel*. We are beginning to discover that we are mysteriously united in a *family*-quarrel, listening to the same God, depending on the same word, involved in the same final hope. A quarrel about one inheritance, but this inheritance is unique. It is about the Word of God addressed to men, it concerns their destiny, and we must witness to it together.

Such is the way in which I would sum up the progress accomplished since the tragedy of the deathcamps, the return of the Jewish people to its land, and the Vatican Council: namely, in the mutual recognition of our mutual identity. Certainly, I know that for a Jew, in contrast to a Christian, the religious dimension implies belonging to a people and so a national identity from which it cannot be analytically dissociated. Speaking to you here as a Christian, I can affirm my own certitude that the renewal of a properly theological outlook on Judaism and on Israel, which we are currently witnessing and in which we are participating, will sooner or later lead to a renewal of outlook on the entire Jewish reality, including the point central to you of the link between the people and the land and consequently the right of the State of Israel to exist. Certainly, I understand that the process seems long to you. Since I share both your expectation and your impatience, I can only invite you to that patience to which I am trying to adjust myself. Patience in the double sense of the word, according to the two meanings curiously included, both in Latin and in Hebrew, in the same root: *patientia*, *pati*; *sevel*, *savlanut*: patience and suffering.

Three Rules of Hope and Patience

I have been living in Israel for twenty-one years now. This is already a long experience, even if it appears quite short compared to the long expectation of Israel. During all this

time, I have discovered inductively, day by day, three principles — or rather three rules of life — which should assure strength and the courage of hope throughout the trial of patience. I don't say that I am faithful to them, but I am sure that these three rules provide the resources which are necessary to maintain standing in confidence. Allow me to share them with you.

The first concerns the very difficulty which we experience and the darkness into which it threatens to introduce us. I would express it in the following way: wherever the good of God is engaged, Satan works harder than elsewhere. God knows how our task is complex and patience difficult, whether we speak about religious communities confronting one another, about political divisions, or about rivalries of interests. Is not Jerusalem the capital and the model of all divisions and all conflicts? We experience this in all our attempts at encounter between Jews and Christians in Israel. In fact, the difficulty itself should paradoxically comfort us, because it so evidently bears the stamp of the Evil One. Nothing annoys and irritates this spreader of trouble, discord and darkness more than the success of God's purpose. Since the very difficulty manifests the hostility of Satan, it at the same time reveals the importance of the enterprise. All the contradictions and all the obstacles which try our patience confirm that we are engaged in a divine work.

The second rule which we must apply and put into action is taught and testified by the experience of the saints throughout the history of the Church. It is a fact that most of the saints who received the glorious and hard vocation to bring into the Church what Bergson would have called *values of inspiration* have found themselves in the situation of suffering, at some time, the heaviness and the resistance of the institution. With regard to this, there is a particular difficulty for all those who, listening to the Word of God in the light of the Spirit, try to discover and contemplate the place of Israel in the design of God: namely, the ignorance, the misunderstanding and the mistrust of which their labour and their hope are the

object. The paradox that must be overcome is the fact of being not recognized and not listened to by those who bear responsibility for the Christian people at the same time that we feel that we carry, in the name of the church and for the Church, a truth concerning her very life and essence. But is not that at the same time both a confirmation of the importance of the message and an invitation to holiness?

The third rule is simply an application to our realm of the more general law that I have expressed above. The experience of the saints who have preceded us and whom the Lord has called to work for the encounter between Israel and the Church reveals a mysterious law: the Christian who has discovered the mystery of Israel and who is inspired by the love of the Jewish people must be ready to experience and to undergo, analogically, within the Church, the solitude, the misunderstandings, the lack of understanding, even the contempt, from which the Jews have suffered in the world throughout their history. The encounter between Israel and the Church has perhaps to be paid for by this compassion, by a mysterious synchronism of patience and suffering.

Such are the rules of life which are proposed to us. They express nothing else than the law of all holiness. In any case, it is on this level that you will find the true partners in dialogue. On this subject, I will remind you of a sentence of Cardinal Journet, a friend of Pope Paul VI and of the French philosopher Jacques Maritain who, at the end of the war, in 1947, wrote a marvellous book on *The Destiny of Israel*. One day, he shared this remark in which I find both comfort and a demand: "My children, the Church is not first of all at the Vatican, she is first of all in the hearts of the saints". All I can say to you in order to bare up your hope, is that you have the right to demand of Christians, and in particular of your friends, that they be saints! The official declarations which you are waiting for from the authorities will never be anything more than the fruit of the life in the depth.

It sometimes happens that official declarations bring into the open the slow maturing of thought of prayer within the Church. You surely welcomed with joy the intervention of Cardinal Etchegaray at the recent Roman Synod on the 4th of October 1983. You will discover in this issue of *Immanuel* that the lucid and courageous words of this high authority of the Church are the expression of the meditation of Christian hearts which have carried and prepared them in secret.

In order to conclude this letter, after the manner of the sermons of the rabbis, by *divrei nekhama*, I will simply quote some phrases of this text which should already fulfill your expectation and assist you to have patience: "After having defined the length to which we have to go in our mission of reconciliation with the Jewish people, we must take seriously our mission of patience, of repentance, for our attitude towards that people throughout the ages... We have to know how to ask pardon from the Lord and from our brothers who have so often been saturated by the 'teaching of contempt' (Jules Isaac) and plunged into the horror of the holocaust. We need to put into action everything necessary in order to repair what has to be repaired. We must remember the prophets and the psalmists, all the poor ones of the Lord, who, in the long course of the generations, arrived at Mary, daughter of Zion. But we have also to remember their descendants of the present day: those who, by their affinity both in the flesh and in the spirit with the Scripture, by their refusal of idols, and so often by their martyrdom, sustain our own faith in the threefold Holy God."

"It is Hope which is the stronger," my dear Ze'ev. I wish to conclude by expressing the affirmation of the Prophet Isaiah: בהשקט ובבטחה תהיה גבורתכם. "In silence and in hope will be your strength." It is in this attitude that I join you.

Marcel J. Dubois