



Jewish-Christian Dialogue Today

Yehudah Mirsky | 01.03.2011

How do today's Jews and Christians encounter one another? The most obvious way is in the countless interactions of Jewish and Christian colleagues and acquaintances in a host of daily settings, including exchanges on their respective religious attitudes and experiences. More specifically, there are the ties of many evangelical and other Christian groups with the state of Israel. Then there are the formal and by-now common meetings between clergy of the two religious traditions, as well as higher-level institutional ties that resemble a kind of ongoing ecclesiastical diplomacy. There are also collaborations and/or friendly debates among communal representatives on issues of shared concern.

Not to be neglected are discussions among well-informed scholars and thinkers navigating the middle ground between the normative claims of revealed truths and the open-ended texture of secular reasoning. One such meeting took place last week at Jerusalem's Van Leer Institute, where, for two days, Jewish and Christian philosophers and theologians discussed the topic of "Covenant, Conversion, and Hope in the Human Future." The meeting was the third in a series in the U.S. and Israel under the auspices of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation, an organization created by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin, a leading figure of modern Orthodoxy. Like most conclaves of this kind in Western countries, the tone throughout was friendly and engaging—though the furies swirling in the Holy Land and elsewhere in the region and beyond were never far out of mind.

No such meeting would be conceivable without the modern sea-change in Christian attitudes toward Jews. True, the 19th and early-20th centuries saw burgeoning forms of Jewish-Christian amity and even philo-Semitism, aided on the Jewish side by the ground-breaking ideas of Franz Rosenzweig, for whom Judaism and Christianity constituted distinct but also complementary revelations. But it was the Holocaust that compelled many Christians fundamentally to rethink historical attitudes and teachings.

The major turning point was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), where, after much deliberation and negotiation, the Catholic Church formally renounced the millennial charge that "the Jews" were responsible for the crucifixion; condemned anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish discrimination generally; and affirmed "the community of all peoples" as God's creatures. While the declaration did not go as far as many Jews had hoped, it triggered waves of what came to be known as Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Not all Jewish thinkers took up the offer. In "Confrontation," a seminal 1964 essay, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik asserted that while dialogue on social and ethical concerns was to be welcomed, theological discussions were a different matter altogether; the ends of good will and mutual respect, he argued, were best served when each faith community pursued the divine-human encounter on its own intimate terms rather than trying to reformulate its doctrines in terms set by external faiths or the majority culture.

In the ensuing decades, Protestant and Catholic theologians have offered new readings of their traditions that make room for Jews as partners and teachers in the religious life. Similarly, Jewish thinkers, including some leading traditionalists, have looked for ways to forge common philosophical and theological understandings with Christians while maintaining the integrity of their differences. One particularly notable outcome was the publication in 2000 of *Dabru Emet* ("Speak Truth"), a declaration by a number of well-respected Jewish scholars urging a Jewish reassessment:

Christianity, it said, while remaining out of bounds for believing Jews, ought to be seen by them as offering a genuine and compelling interpretation of the Bible for non-Jews. Interestingly, some of the most trenchant critics of *Dabru Emet* were Jewish scholars of Christianity who contended that such ecumenicism undermined the integrity not only of historical Jewish belief but of Christianity itself.

All this was background to the Van Leer conference. There, the eminent theologian Robert Jensen forthrightly acknowledged belief in the resurrection of Jesus as an impassable divide between Judaism and Christianity; yet that divide, he argued, need not preclude the conviction that an eternal God can enter as He chooses into covenants with more than one human community, each in its own way. Gerald McDermott of Roanoke College, parsing the differences between, on the one hand, public dialogue and witness and, on the other hand, the more private matter of conversion, defined the former as a common search for truth in the light of God's word, with each party conveying ("witnessing to") the truth as it sees it. The latter, suggested Jensen, positioning himself against the practice by many contemporary Christians of actively proselytizing for Jewish converts, is a matter of God's own work in the individual soul. As for Jewish proselytizing, David Novak, a leading figure in Jewish-Christian dialogue and one of the authors of *Dabru Emet*, argued that Jews are meant to be a light for, and not to, the nations; proselytizing, besides doing unto Gentiles what Jews do not appreciate being done unto themselves, can tempt Jews into too-easy a proclamation of their own righteousness.

Of course, conversion to Judaism is also one of the most internally contentious issues of our time—and, in Israel, far from a private affair, pitting the chief rabbinate and ultra-Orthodox officialdom against the authorities of religious Zionism and non-Orthodox movements. Although the conference touched upon this subject, a different intramural debate among Orthodox rabbis was in some ways at its heart.

To Riskin and his colleague Eugene Korn, Jews and Christians share a covenant: a joint mission of witness to the world, inherited from Abraham, whose walking with God long before the revelation at Sinai lit the way to Christianity. By contrast, Naftali Rotenberg argued that the Jewish covenant does not join Jews to Christians but rather marks their respective boundaries. If, he said, there is a shared biblical patriarch to whom one can look for shared patrimony, it is not Abraham but Noah. For, in rabbinic tradition, the covenant received by Noah after the Flood entailed fundamental principles of natural law that can indeed serve as the basis for a universal morality, binding on Jews and Gentiles in all their diversities.

Too easy an erasure of differences for the sake of comity, Rotenberg warned, leaves both Jews and Christians adrift in a faceless universal sea. To which one might add another temptation: drawing too much satisfaction from Christian romanticizations of Judaism can have the effect of turning Jews, in Gershom Scholem's phrase, into mere symbols in somebody else's myth.

We are back to Soloveitchik, for whom the shared exploration of ethical issues opens ample enough room for dialogue—and, incidentally, offers its own invitation to theology, since morality as we understand it may be untenable without a religious foundation. At the conference, Russell Reno of *First Things* powerfully depicted the way in which the widespread abandonment of both the moral law and religious values has yielded what he terms "the Empire of Desire": a desolate, post-modern kingdom in which practically all human activity is subsumed under the rubric of the individual's wants, reinforced in different ways by the market and the culture. In this respect, as Darlene Weaver of Villanova suggested, religion may offer a way forward by recasting the Empire of Desire as a form of human frailty ("social sin"), and holding out the faith, that God, working His will through human fellow feeling, can indeed teach us, perhaps not how to perfect the world, but how to share it with one another.

The Van Leer conference proceeded explicitly in the shadow of a different faith, Islam, many of whose members today are, to say the least, uninterested in sharing the world, and are both afflicted

and infected with hatred of Jews. It also proceeded, mostly but not entirely implicitly, in the shadow of a less well-known but again virulent dispensation, one that, in both religious and non-religious circles, has gained increasing traction among Western intellectuals. This has been dubbed "neo-Paulinism," after the apostle Paul's proclamation that through Jesus all are united in a universal communion in which "there is neither Jew nor Greek." To today's neo-Paulines, of whom the most influential are Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, Jewish collective existence—especially when wedded to statehood—is the great stumbling block to the reign of universal ethics, and Jews can only justify their existence by receding to the vanishing point. No mere faculty-lounge prattle, this malignant idea fuels the charge that Israel and the Jews are, among all of humanity, uniquely immoral and illegitimate.

Contemplating the grim specters of radical Islam and today's mutating forms of Western anti-Semitism, conference participants were all the readier to turn to its third theme: hope. As one such participant, I suggested that, for Jews, hope begins with the recognition of the Jewish people's irreducibly dual nature as at once particular and universal: one very specific family, whose insistence on its own integrity is of the essence of its moral message to all humanity. Judaism shares with others much of the substance of its ethics, in which both love and justice have their place. While it may not share the substance of its ritual life—that is, the commandments "between man and God"—it does, in a subtle but crucial sense, share their form.

For it is universally the case that, if one is to have a relationship with God that is truly one's own, one must root oneself in a body of practices layered in a given language, history, mythology, people, place, and culture. If, in ethics, we limn the face of others, in ritual we limn the specific contours of our own faces, and of God's face as He appears to us. In the perpetuation of that dual countenance lies the hope of Israel, and its hope for the world.

Editorial remarks

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