



Reflections on the recent Orthodox Jewish Statements on Jewish-Catholic Relations

David Rosen | 01.03.2019

It is not surprising that the new era of Christian-Jewish relations was pioneered by the more liberal trends within the two faith traditions. The modern age of enlightenment and emancipation led to the emergence of new streams of Judaism and brought Jews increasingly into the social mainstream leading to the growing reevaluation of the Jewish-Christian relationship.

Orthodox Judaism, with notable exceptions, generally remained steadfast in avoiding engagement with Christianity. Moreover the fact that the outreach to Christianity emanated from within the liberal Jewish movements which Orthodoxy itself viewed as a threat to the preservation of traditional Judaism, only added to its suspicion and avoidance of this new outreach.

This attitude was of course rooted in theological opposition, but was above all the result of the overwhelming negative historical Jewish experience of Christianity.

Yet there were notable leading rabbinic exceptions in the Middle Ages, who viewed Christianity in a positive light. While Yehudah Halevi and Maimonides saw both Christianity and Islam as vehicles to bring the knowledge of ethical monotheism to the world, Rabbi Eliezer Ashkenazi one of the greatest rabbinic authorities of the 16th century specifically called on his co-religionists to seek the welfare of Christians who believe in God, the Exodus and His Revelation.

In similar vein the 17th century luminary Rabbi Moses Rivkes declared that “the nations under whose benevolent shadow we, the Jewish nation, are exiled and are dispersed among them, believe in the creation of the world out of nothing and the Exodus from Egypt and in the essentials of faith, and their whole intention is toward the Maker of heaven and earth, as other authorities have said . . .”

Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschütz and Rabbi Jacob Emden were two leading rabbinic authorities in the first half of the eighteenth century who conducted a bitter dispute with one another related to Sabbateanism. However they both expressed very positive views of Christianity with Eybeschütz acknowledging that “the Christian nations among whom we live, generally observe the principles of justice and righteousness, believe in the creation of the world and the existence and providence of God, and in the Law of Moses and the prophets, and oppose the Sadducean view that denies the resurrection of the dead and the immortality of the soul. Therefore it is fitting to be thankful to them, to praise and extol them, and to bring upon them blessings and not, God forbid, curses”. Emden even described Christians in the language of the Mishnah as “congregations for the sake of heaven who are destined to endure, whose intent is for the sake of heaven and whose reward will not be denied.”

Yet it would be disingenuous to describe these positions as predominant.

The Shoah was in many ways a turning point in Christian-Jewish relations leading to a profound reappraisal within Christendom of attitudes towards Jews, Judaism and ultimately to a significant degree towards the State of Israel. But for many Jews especially within the Orthodox Jewish community it was no less than a terrible confirmation of historical experience. The fact that the Shoah took place overwhelmingly in ostensibly Christian lands perpetrated by baptized Christians, was seen as proof of the unredeemable hostility of Christianity towards Jews and Judaism that had been experienced down the ages.

Accordingly for some, the Shoah itself only made the idea of engagement with Christianity more of an anathema.

A proponent of such opposition was the Orthodox rabbi and philosopher Eliezer Berkowitz – himself a refugee from Nazism. He describes the world after the Shoah as a post-Christian world and sees Christian ecumenism as reflecting Christendom's loss of power. Christians are only now interested in the freedom of religion, he declares, because they are interested in the freedom of Christians. He perceives Christian civilization and Christianity as morally bankrupt especially after the Shoah; and Jewish engagement with Christianity as accordingly lacking in self-respect. His position therefore is that the Christian world needs to demonstrate far more consistently and thoroughly over generations that it has repented and purified itself of its sins against Jewry before any Jewish-Christian cooperation let alone dialogue can be contemplated.

While Berkowitz's view is articulated harshly, it is not eccentric in Orthodox Jewish circles and is probably normative within haredi ultra-Orthodoxy if not beyond.

Indeed, as haredi society reflects a reactionary withdrawal from the modern world and is thus isolationist by definition, the impact of the tragic historical experience under Christendom and its trauma is all the more prevalent (even unconsciously.)

However even among Orthodox religious nationalist circles, such a derogatory view of Christianity is still quite prevalent.

Nevertheless the Shoah did serve as a major impulse for many Jews to reach out to Christian counterparts, precisely in order to protect their communities from such terrible consequences of bigotry and prejudice. Indeed for many it became the main purpose of the dialogue.

The philosopher Emil Fackenheim was ordained as a German Reform rabbi but in his later life identified increasingly with Orthodoxy. He was interned by the Nazis in Sachsenhausen concentration camp, but escaped to Britain from where he was sent for internment in a camp in Canada where he spent most of his life before retiring to Jerusalem.

For him the primary moral imperative for Jews that flows from the tragedy of the Shoah is the obligation to survive and to deny Hitler a "posthumous victory"; and accordingly the fundamental obligation that the Shoah demands of Christians, is to recognize and support the integrity and vitality of the Jewish People. Indeed he sees this as essential for the salvation of Christianity itself. Jewish-Christian engagement therefore is necessary to ensure the future of Jewry in which Christianity has a fundamental stake and responsibility (even if denied for most of its history) especially in relation to the security and flourishing of the State of Israel.

Such motivation to enlist Christian support for the protection of Jewish communities and the State of Israel has served as a major impulse among an increasing number of Orthodox groups who in recent decades have welcomed Christian engagement with Jews and Judaism.

In the US, the personality who assumed predominance in modern Orthodox circles during the second half of the 20th century (and still exercises great influence even after his death) was Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik. He presented something of a middle ground position between the embrace of engagement with Christianity and eschewing it altogether, in a famous article written in the early 1960s (Tradition, Vol.6 No.2).

While advocating cooperation with Christians on matters of shared social and ethical concern and advocacy, he suggested that any theological dialogue that relates to the "inner life" of faith affirmation is inappropriate if not actually unfeasible. Because the Jewish community must always be mindful of the mystery of the uniqueness of its being, he suggested that it should avoid exposing the inner life of its faith to interreligious dialogue.

There has been much debate, commentary and critique on Soloveitchik's position, his motives and goals; and whether his comments were absolute or relative to time, place and person, especially as he himself apparently *did* participate in theological discussions with Christians. Nevertheless, an official position of maintaining a distinction between theological dialogue (to be avoided) and shared consultations and collaboration on social and ethical matters (viewed as desirable), has been held by most of mainstream Orthodox Jewry in the US and has had some impact in Israel and further abroad.

In the 1970s, in response to the developments following the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* by the Catholic Church, a Jewish roof body was established as the official Jewish interlocutor for the Holy See's newly established Commission for Religious Relations with the Jewish People. This council included all the major international and American Jewish organizations that had interlocated with the Vatican during the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and also included the Synagogue Council of America embracing all three major streams of American Jewry, Reform, Conservative and Orthodox. However precisely because of the abovementioned distinction that Soloveitchik made between theological dialogue and other kinds of interreligious relations, this body was given the name the "International Jewish Committee for Interreligious **Consultations**", and not "dialogue", in order to include the US Orthodox rabbinic and lay bodies.

Due to the centrality that the State of Israel assumed in Jewish life globally but especially within Orthodoxy in the decades after its establishment, attitudes towards the state were seen within the Jewish community as a reflection of attitudes towards the Jewish people as a whole.

As the only Christian entity that is also a state, the Vatican has a unique profile; and the fact that it did not have diplomatic relations with Israel was seen as "proof" by the skeptics within the Jewish community that negative prejudice still prevailed within the Christian world.

The establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel at the end of 1993 was therefore viewed as much more than a secular diplomatic achievement.

Indeed the far wider significance is itself acknowledged in the preamble to the concordat signed by the two known as The Fundamental Agreement.

From a Jewish perspective, this was seen as proof that the Church no longer had a problem with the idea of Jewish sovereignty in its ancestral homeland and was genuine in its claim to now genuinely respect the integrity of the Jewish People according to its own self-definition.

St. John Paul II's papacy was remarkable for Catholic-Jewish relations in many ways, taking the revolution ushered in by St. John XXIII to new heights. Moreover Karol Wojtyla's understanding of the power of contemporary media and the potential of dramatic gestures played a key part in this process - in particular, his visits to the Great Synagogue in Rome in 1986, and to Israel in the year 2000 (facilitated inter alia by the establishment of those full bilateral diplomatic relations).

The impact of the latter was dramatic. The Christian presence in Israel is less than two per cent. It is true that more Israelis today meet Christians than ever before through foreign workers - especially Philippino care givers. Nevertheless, there is minimal awareness of the latter's Christian identity. And when Israelis travel abroad, they generally meet non-Jews as non-Jews, not as modern Christians. Accordingly for most Israeli Jews - especially among the more religiously observant - the image of Christianity has overwhelmingly been taken from the tragic past.

However to see the most visible head of the Christian world - as the vast majority did on television when John Paul II visited the country - at Yad Vashem in tearful solidarity with Jewish suffering; to learn of how he had saved Jews as a novice and then as a prelate instructed Catholic families who had saved Jewish children and brought them up as Catholic, to return them to their natural Jewish parents; to see the Pope at the Western Wall paying respect to Jewish tradition and placing there the text asking Divine forgiveness for the sins committed by Christian down the ages against Jews (part of the liturgy of repentance that he had conducted weeks earlier at St. Peter's); were stunning revelations for much of Israeli society.

Another significant outcome of that pilgrimage came from the visit of the Pope to Hechal Shlomo to meet with the Chief Rabbis of Israel and members the Chief Rabbinate Council.

At that meeting the Pope proposed the establishment of a permanent bilateral commission for dialogue between the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry.

The Chief Rabbinate of Israel is generally not made up of modern Orthodox rabbis and this body surely had never contemplated having an institutional dialogue with another religion, but when a Pope makes a request, it is rather difficult to decline.

The establishment of such a bilateral commission had a profound impact upon the rabbis involved,

who are of course multipliers within their own communities. Thus their own reappraisals of Christianity today and the Christian-Jewish relationship, have ramifications far beyond their own persons. This commission meets annually, alternating between Rome and Jerusalem and has now held some seventeen consultations on themes concerning the teachings of the two traditions on a spectrum of social and scientific issues.

Originally chaired on the Catholic side by Cardinals Jorge Mejia and Georges Cottier and on the Jewish side by Chief Rabbi She'ar Yashuv Cohen; with their demise, the co-chairmanships were assumed by Cardinal Peter Turkson and Chief Rabbi Ratsan Aroussi.

Following the success of this bilateral commission, a similar one was established between the Chief Rabbis of Israel and the Archbishop of Canterbury to advance Jewish-Anglican dialogue and relations.

Nevertheless until 2017, official Jewish statements acknowledging the transformation that had taken place within the Christian world had only come from the liberal streams of Judaism.

Most notable of these was the 2002 declaration titled *Dabru Emet* (Speak the Truth.) Formulated by Reform and Conservative scholars and rabbis, it affirmed both fundamental shared beliefs and values as well as what it called "the humanly irreconcilable difference between Jews and Christians (that) will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in Scripture". In addition to rejecting the idea that Nazism was related to Christianity, it called on Jews and Christians to work together for justice and peace. Signed by almost two hundred and fifty rabbis and scholars, they were almost entirely from the non-Orthodox Jewish world, from the Reform and Conservative movements.

Thus the statement "*To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven*" issued by Orthodox rabbis in December 2015 was momentous, reflecting the significant changes within the Orthodox Jewish world in recent decades.

Indeed, it was acknowledged as such by Cardinal Kurt Koch, President of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, at the press conference for the release of his commission's document on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, "The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable".

In addition, "*To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven*" galvanized the formulation of an official statement on Jewish-Christian relations from the three main institutional Orthodox bodies on three continents - the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, the Rabbinical Council of America, and the Conference of European Rabbis. Titled "*Between Jerusalem and Rome*" it was presented to Pope Francis at the end of August 2017 as an official response to the Catholic Church pursuant to the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*.

It too expresses appreciation for the blessed transformation in the Church's approach towards Jews, Judaism and Israel; and affirms the partnership and mutual responsibility of the two Faith communities to provide a religio-ethical vision and example for contemporary society.

In this regard, "*To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven*" specifically quotes the statement issued at the Chief Rabbinate/Vatican Bilateral Commission meeting held at Grottaferrata in 2004, that "we are no longer enemies, but unequivocal partners in articulating the essential moral values for the survival and welfare of humanity". But it also goes further in describing this sacred task as "a common covenantal mission".

Both texts seek to eschew any syncretism and emphasize the importance of respecting the fundamental differences that separate the Church and the Jewish community.

As opposed to the earlier document, "*Between Jerusalem and Rome*" goes into detail both in recording the sad history of the past and summarizing the recent transformation up until today, inter alia quoting from both the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews' document "The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable" issued on the 50th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, and Pope Francis' words in "*Evangelii Gaudium*".

"*Between Jerusalem and Rome*" notes the initial skepticism in Jewish circles regarding the changes

ushered in by *Nostra Aetate*. In fact, a suspicion of Christianity and the intentions of the Church within Jewish society persists, especially where Jews do not enjoy any real encounter with contemporary Christians, where it is compounded by a residual pre-modern view of Christianity as quasi-idolatrous, and where there is widespread ignorance of and/or disinterest in the extensive positive rabbinic views of Christianity as well as the changes that have taken place within the Christian world itself. In addition, interreligious dialogue has actually been seen in more committed Jewish circles, as a threat to the integrity of Jewish faithfulness and an encouragement to assimilation and loss of Jewish particularity.

This of course implies that Jews are lacking in the passion and commitment to engage with others and are in need of isolation for their survival. However the self-indictment in this position is generally lost on those who advocate such insularity.

Accordingly the very fact that "*Between Jerusalem and Rome*" refers to the importance of "our dialogue" with the Catholic Church is of great significance. The use of the word dialogue might not have been so purposefully conscious; but then even it was used as a matter of course, that itself is significant too and shows how far the official Orthodox bodies have come as well, even if there is still a way to go.

While the major imperative for Jewish participants in the Jewish-Christian encounter continues to be precisely the need to combat anti-Semitism and threats to Jewish security and wellbeing; many have been motivated by the recognition of fundamental shared religio-ethical values. Indeed surely if we are truly committed to the Biblical universal principles of love and justice, righteousness and equity, the sanctity of life and family, the pursuit of peace, human wellbeing and flourishing; then we surely have an obligation to work together with those that share these values, to be greater than the sum of our different parts.

Not to do so, would in fact be a betrayal of those values we claim to espouse.

These Orthodox Jewish statements refer to some of those earlier Jewish religious authorities quoted above who expressed a positive view of Christianity, noting in particular the latter's belief in the Creator and Guide of the Universe as well as the acceptance of the Hebrew Scriptures as Divine revelation, as demanding special mutual responsibility.

Indeed here is a further religious imperative for advancing Christian-Jewish relations.

Any recognition of shared commitment to God's presence revealed both in Creation and in History and to His word revealed in the Hebrew Bible, places special responsibility upon believing Jews towards those who also affirm that text and its teachings as Divine, making Jews and Christians partners in the pursuit of the Universal Kingdom of Heaven on earth in keeping with that Biblical vision.

The fact that all too often the behavior of so-called Christians towards Jews made a mockery of the Christian gospel must not blind Jews to the content of the latter that espouses - what Rivkes describes as "the essentials of religion" that emanate from the belief in God as Lord of the Creation and of the Exodus.

As the sacred text that Jews affirm to be Divine revelation was officially embraced by Christianity and yet desecrated in its name, we Jews have a stake in Christian purification as it inevitably reflects on that sacred text itself and on us by inference.

The radical conclusion of such an argument is that the promotion of a positive image true to Christianity's authentic message as a bearer of values of the Torah, is directly relevant to the Jewish holy mission of "*Kiddush HaShem*", sanctifying God's Name in the world.

As indicated, negative attitudes towards Christianity do persist especially within the Orthodox Jewish community for the above mentioned reasons. Moreover for as long as anti-Semitism continues to rear its ugly head; and for as long as Israel's physical and political survival and wellbeing are threatened (or at least perceived as threatened), these fears will often prevent an openness to recognizing let alone embracing the new reality of Christian-Jewish relations (even if sometimes they serve to provide the very contrary impulse, seeking to enlist Christian support and protection.)

Notwithstanding, both *“To do the Will of our Father in Heaven”* and *“Between Jerusalem and Rome”* highlight a new era of increasing Orthodox Jewish engagement with the Christian world indicating a growing appreciation of the dramatic change that has taken place within Christianity in relation to Jewry, Judaism and Israel; of the strategic importance of this relationship for the Jewish People and the Jewish state; and even of the theological as well as moral imperatives for deepening this mutual relationship to work together for the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Editorial remarks

For David Rosen please [see here](#).

Source: Bulletin of the Association of the Friends and Sponsors of the [Martin Buber House](#), 1/2019; re-posted with kind permission.