



Christians and Jews in a Radically New Relationship

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Today anti-Semitism is condemned across the board as not only a sin against man, but a sin against God and incompatible with Christian faith. The Jewish community does not fully understand, let alone appreciate, what a dramatic transformation has taken place here; does not understand anywhere near yet adequately that the Christian world abounds today with persons who are genuine friends and allies of the Jewish people. And all too often we indulge in precisely the sins of which we were the victims, namely the failure to distinguish between different communities, between different approaches within those communities that distinguish those who are still of the mind of yore, of an old attitude, and those who have adopted, even if not always yet fully internalised, the implications of the new approach and of the new relationship with the Jewish people.

These ideas are hardly known within the Jewish community, let alone to Rabbinic leadership. Why are they hardly known? They are hardly known because of the burdens of our historical experience – because ultimately, the way we have viewed Christianity has simply been the result of the way we have been received. It has been the pain of the way we have experienced so-called Christian encounter throughout the course of the majority of the last two millennia that has overwhelmingly coloured our view of Christianity, to the point where it is very difficult for us to recognise the transformation that has taken place.

We have a unique bond that, as Martin Buber put it, 'at least is in the fact that we share a book', which is no small thing. Of course Jews do not come to the dialogue or to the encounter with Christians with exactly the same motives that Christians come to that encounter. For Christianity, there is the heavy burden of history; it is in Christian interests to purify their own communities of the blemish of the accretion and of the poison of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism that pervaded it for most of its history. But more than that, Christians that come to the dialogue do so out of a recognition that Judaism constitutes the authentic root of their own identity, without which they cannot truly understand themselves. It therefore is a religious obligation, the like of which cannot be paralleled from a Jewish perspective, for Jews do not have to address Christianity in order to understand themselves. I'm not saying that they shouldn't, obviously, but I'm saying that we don't have to, because obviously Christianity is not the root of Judaism in the way Judaism is the root of Christianity.

However there are, at the very least, the most compelling motives of enlightened self-interest that demand Jewish-Christian encounter and co-operation, and if for no other reasons other than these, Jews should be engaged in the area of Jewish-Christian dialogue. It is in the interest of every one of us to be understood by the other; the first and foremost compulsion is the combat prejudice, to overcome those stereotypes, to create a climate in which bigotry cannot flourish. But beyond

combating prejudice and bigotry is the recognition that we share a common agenda. Of course there are fundamental differences that keep us what we are, separate faith communities; it is important for us to know that too, to know what is the distinction, to know what are the differences, to understand what each of us as separate communities, profess that distinguishes us from one another.

My experience in inter-faith relations is contrary to many a Jewish fear that somehow this will weaken their Jewish commitment and understanding, is precisely the reverse. The encounter with the other enables you to understand better who you are. It leads to a deeper exploration of what are your tenets and your affirmations, but it also enables you to discover what are the values you share with the other. And we have a profound common agenda of a fundamental ethical monotheistic view of the world, a view that divine will and the divine call is for justice and righteousness, for peace and loving kindness. If we claim we are really committed to those values, and those are the values of our heritage, then don't we have the obligation to work together for others who share those values, especially when they draw their inspiration from the same scriptural sources and revelation? Surely if we are not working together with those that share those values, to be greater than the sum of our different parts, we are in fact betraying those values.

In fact, we may even go further; we may even say that the Jewish-Christian relationship is an obligation in terms of the highest Jewish ethical responsibility of *kadosh hashem*, of sanctifying God's name, for we sanctify God's name not only by how we present our heritage and our teachings to the other, but if there are others, a community, a faith tradition throughout the world that draws its inspiration and its teachings precisely from that which we declare to be the most holy, namely scriptural revelation itself, then we have surely the obligation to ensure that it is correctly understood, that the tenets are correctly presented, and that not only we are ourselves understood but that the community itself is repaired, is healed, is presented in the world, both communities, in a manner that expounds and that presents the teachings of biblical, of the Hebrew bible, in its most authentic and its most noble manner.

Beyond these is perhaps the challenge of our times, perhaps the most obvious of all in addition to that of combating bigotry and prejudice, and that is a recognition that we live in a great moment of history, a world that has opportunities and possibilities as never before, but as a result, dilemmas and ethical and moral challenges that we never ever dreamt of. And the world, even the world that describes itself as secular, looks to the traditions of moral wisdom and of spiritual insight for guidance, and we have major challenges to date. We have challenges in the field of medical science, of technological advances, in the area of human social relations, the structure of society, the way we relate to other communities, what are the criteria for determining membership within a community, entry into a community, the wellbeing of the community? How do we distribute resources, how do we allocate to the needs of communities? All the challenges, that not only the governance of society has to address but people in professions, people in their own economic business and entrepreneurial activities, people simply in the endeavours of bringing up families and advancing the wellbeing of communities, have to confront.

It is here where our traditions have profound insight and guidance to give, and not on every issue will we necessarily agree for there are certain ethical perceptions that distinguish Christian communities amongst themselves, let alone Christianity from Judaism. But the fundamental ethical teachings that affect the spectrum of human challenges are profoundly linked to that common heritage, to those fundamental religio-ethical and spiritual values that are rooted within that scriptural heritage that we share.

And this surely is the most obvious, and perhaps the most widespread challenge for Jewish-Christian relations in the new millennium; the challenge to be able to provide from the wisdom, not only of our separate traditions, but to be able to provide from that which we share as guidance for the world in which we live.

Pope John Paul II said that Abraham and his descendents are called in Genesis to be a blessing to humankind. He said 'In order for us to be a blessing to humankind we have to be a blessing to each other.' Let me paraphrase that and say that when we work together to be a blessing to humanity, then we are truly a blessing to one another. And this is surely the ultimate goal in addition to our theological understanding, to our plummeting the depths of our own traditions for a better understanding of our relationship, for translating the enormous historical transformation into reality, we are called to be a blessing to humankind.

But finally, the relationship between Jews and Christians is surely in itself that relationship especially over the last 35 years, an inspiration not only in the field of inter-faith relations at large, but to humanity at large. And let me summarise this reminder that I have allowed myself to share with you, that the history of Jewish-Christian relations over recent decades is the mind-boggling transformation of a relationship; ideologies have changed in the course of human history, even with faith communities there have been modifications in the way the world and the way people at large have been viewed. But perhaps never has there been a transformation of quite this order, that a particular community was viewed as cursed and as rejected, in league with the devil, the source of evil to be absolutely abhorred and to be condemned. This is surely the ultimate demonstration of how the tragic past can be overcome, of how a new relationship may be engaged in, of how it is possible not only to nurture, respect an understanding, but how indeed – as Pope John Paul II has put it – we may indeed be 'a blessing to one another, and as a result, a blessing to humankind at large.'

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