Jewish-Christian Relations: From Historical Past to Theological Future

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Rabbi Alon Goshen-Gottstein, director of the Elijah School for the Study of Wisdom in World Religions in Jerusalem, describes Christian-Jewish relations as characterized by the healing of past wounds and the building of trust.

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From Historical Past to Theological Future

Alon Goshen-Gottstein

In thinking of the future of Jewish-Christian relations, one important distinction immediately comes to mind: the relations between Judaism and Christianity as religious systems, and the relations between Jews and Christians as members of these faith traditions. While the two dimensions are closely related, they are also significantly different. Two distinct sets of issues emerge when we focus attention on the future and the past of Judaism and Christianity as faith systems or as faith communities. If we concentrate on the relations between Jews and Christians, we are engaging primarily in the field of history. Our concern is the painful history that they have shared, and finding ways of moving forward beyond this painful past. By contrast, in concentrating on Judaism and Christianity we are in the fields of theology and the study of religion. The questions asked in such a context could theoretically be identical to those asked concerning the relationship of any two religions, regardless of the particularities of the history of the relationship of Christians and Jews.

Focus on History

Probably most discussions on "Jewish-Christian Relations" have to do with the historical relations of the two faith communities. A large part of this dialogue over the past fifty years has been devoted to matters growing out of the painful history of the two groups. This emphasis is very much in keeping with the historical character of Judaism, and with its characterization as a religion of a particular people. It is also an understandable consequence of the need to address historical issues, particularly issues emerging from the recent past. When we consider that Jewish-Christian dialogue grows, to a large extent, from the events of the holocaust and from Christian self-examination following those events, the historical context provides the natural arena for the Jewish-Christian encounter. What could be more natural than to frame discussions between the two faith communities by focusing upon the historical relations between Christians and Jews?

Yet, as we discover time and again, this emphasis involves us in multiple complications, creating a dynamic of advancement and retrogression in Jewish-Christian relations. Focusing upon the past, culminating in the painful memories of the holocaust, is necessary for the sake of healing. Healing can take place only when the pains of the past are acknowledged, and when reconciliation addresses the ills of the past with full awareness. To ask for forgiveness, to repudiate past behavior and to rebuild trust are essential to forging new paradigms in Jewish-Christian relations. However, these goals are not achieved without a price. I would like to list some of the consequences and implications of holding the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the shadow of the holocaust.

The necessarily asymmetric, historical difficulties of Jewish-Christian relations are evident; the parties do not come to the meeting table as two fundamentally equal partners in an encounter. Rather, one side comes as aggressor, the other as victim. I do not suggest that historical reality is different. I wish only to point out the difficulty inherent in carrying out a dialogue of equals when the historical agenda of aggressor and victim sets the parameters of dialogue. Some aspects of true dialogue are impeded by this posturing, necessary as it may be to the healing and building of trust between the two faith communities.

The question of the measure and limit of the demand for pardon grows out of the focus upon the past and the need for reconciliation. What would constitute a Christian apology that would allow Jews to put such a painful history behind them? This question comes up time and again following various statements of Christian speakers addressing Jewish-Christian history and particularly the holocaust. However, the ultimate question is: What must Christians do in order to enable Jews to forgive them? The question is impossible to answer, and is further complicated by a related problem: no one in the Jewish community feels empowered to forgive on behalf of all the victims of history. If Christians have the ability to organize themselves into parties that can ask for forgiveness, Jews in turn are unable to parallel such organization by collectively offering pardon. The process of asking and offering pardon does not follow a clear course leading to ultimate reconciliation.

The process of reconciliation aims at building trust between the two communities. If trust-building is the goal, then certainly great advances have been made. If one focuses upon Jewish-Catholic relations, the Pope’s visit to Israel made a major impact upon Israeli public consciousness. More trust was built within a number of days than years of interfaith dialogue had achieved. However, such trust seems to erode easily. Political and religious observers point to a number of events that have transpired during the short time since the Pope’s visit: the silence of the Pope and his spokesmen following President Assad’s anti-Semitic comments during the Papal visit to Damascus, the beatification of Pius IX, the suspension of the work of the committee of Jewish and Christian scholars examining the actions of Pope Pius XII during the holocaust - each of these issues has been perceived by some observer as a sign that any advances made during the Pope’s visit have now been washed away. Structuring the relationship in the shadow of the holocaust inevitably leaves the relationship, and the memory of any advances made within the relationship, vulnerable to such assessment.

Recent Israeli-Palestinian relations have allowed a balance of power to emerge that is different from the one that characterized most of Jewish-Christian history; which further complicates this historical perspective. While Israeli public awareness usually perceives Palestinians as Muslim, there is a significant Christian minority within the Palestinian population. This community, a minority in the Holy Land, is affiliated with worldwide Christianity - reversing the balance of majority/minority between Judaism and Christianity; and it has mobilized the worldwide Christian community through multiple denominational channels. These efforts recast Jewish-Christian relations in a way that complicates the continued appeal to the role of victim by the Jewish party. The identification of historical Judaism with present-day Israel makes the Jewish dialogue partner increasingly more vulnerable, weakening its ability to marshal the same kind of pity and sorrow

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from its Christian partner. Perhaps more significantly, the recent political difficulties in the region seem to have caused some degree of setback in Jewish-Christian relations. The identification of many Christian churches and church statements with the plight of the Palestinians has been perceived by many Jewish observers as a sign that years of building relationships with Christian communities may have been in vain. Even those not inclined to such a grim perspective recognize the damaging effect of recent historical developments on the advancement of Christian-Jewish relations.

In the final analysis, these are all consequences of the historical nature of what occupies the attention of so much of the Jewish-Christian dialogue. It is not a coincidence that most of the healing work between Christians and Jews has taken place in the Diaspora, where Jews and Christians live alongside one another. The Christian need for rebuilding the relationship seems to be greater than the victim's need to make peace with his former aggressor - but they also point to a more fundamental question, concerning the ultimate goal of the dialogue. Jewish life in the Diaspora is served by Jewish-Christian dialogue inasmuch as the dialogue helps build better day-to-day relations between the two communities living alongside one another. Attention to the ills of the past serves, in this context, as the basis for constructing better present relations. The Israeli situation may indicate limitations in the motive for carrying out dialogue and in the form and focus for such dialogue. Where current coexistence is not perceived as a burning need, a different agenda may be required to fuel the conversation. This agenda may take the dialogue beyond the important work of historical reconciliation; its ultimate goal cannot be ascertained in recollection of the past alone but in a vision of the future.

Avoidance of Theological Dialogue

This last consideration suggests another component of Jewish-Christian relations in terms of Jews/Christians, as opposed to Judaism/Christianity. Emphasizing Jews and Christians situates the center of interest in the faith communities living alongside one another, rather than in the respective systems of faith. This perspective assumes the *de facto* coexistence of the different communities, without getting involved in the *de jure* recognition of the legitimacy of the competing religious systems. A lengthy history of religious disputation and competition is sidestepped by focusing on the neighbor whose faith is different, but with whom one seeks to have peaceful neighborly relations, rather than on his or her contested belief. Taking interreligious coexistence as a starting point does not necessarily yield interreligious dialogue; rather, it yields interreligious relations or cooperation. The difference between dialogue and cooperation is theological. If coexistence is the goal, then the theological differences between Judaism and Christianity should be overlooked. Issues of practical cooperation for the advancement of society should be at the center of the encounter between the two communities.

This has been the position of Orthodox Judaism regarding interreligious dialogue, virtually since such dialogue took shape in the sixties. Avoidance of theological dialogue was adopted as the Orthodox stance, following the publication of the opinion (not necessarily a halakhic ruling) expressed by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the leader of the modern Orthodox camp in the United States. In an article published prior to the second Vatican Council, Soloveitchik raises various considerations, philosophical as well as historical, against holding theological dialogue with Christianity. This opinion has shaped Jewish-Christian dialogue even beyond the relative significance of this important rabbinic voice. Dialogue with Christianity, especially with Catholic Christianity, was carried out by a coalition of Jewish organizations, based primarily in the United States. In order to ensure that all members in this coalition are comfortable with the form the dialogue takes, theological issues were excluded in favor of issues of a social and public nature. The official dialogue between Judaism and the Catholic Church has therefore been heavily imprinted by the dichotomy of Jews/Christians vs. Judaism/Christianity.

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The past decade has seen gradual erosion in the Orthodox position, with more and more Orthodox rabbis recognizing that theological dialogue is unavoidable, and that Soloveitchik's position can no longer be upheld. Some have pointed to the fact that Soloveitchik had never intended his opinion, expressed in an article published in *Tradition* 1964, to be a binding ruling. Others have noted that Soloveitchik himself deeply engaged Christianity theologically in his own writings; clearly, he could never have intended a blanket exclusion of all theological contact. Changing historical circumstances also weaken Soloveitchik's position. If, prior to Vatican II, various suspicions concerning the authenticity of the Christian dialogue partners could have been raised in the past thirty-five years, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain this level of suspicion and to avoid deeper theological dialogue for fear of earlier Christian attitudes to Judaism. Perhaps most importantly, participants in the Jewish-Christian dialogue have increasing recognized that there is something both artificial and intellectually dishonest in drawing a line between theological and non-theological dialogue. We cannot take seriously the one while excluding the other; after all, ethics are derived from a theological worldview.

While American Jewish Orthodoxy has not officially let go of the distinction between theological and non-theological dialogue, an increasing number of rabbis of Orthodox persuasion have in fact crossed this line. One need only compare the players on the interfaith scene thirty years ago with those today to see the marked increase of Orthodox Jewish presence in the field of interfaith dialogue.

One expression of the new trend is the Rabbinic Committee for Interreligious Dialogue (RCID), founded in 1999 as an alternative to the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC), the official Jewish organ of dialogue. Vatican officials, as well as various rabbis, felt that given Catholic advances in relation to Judaism, one could no longer avoid a theological dialogue. This forum of rabbis was established to expand the dialogue agenda. Its debut was so successful that the very themes that occupied the new group's discussions in 1999 were taken up by IJCIC in 2000. The distinction between theological and non-theological dialogue seems to be on its way out.

Which Judaism and Which Christianity?

When speaking of Christians and Jews, one has a degree of clarity as to which Christians and Jews are intended - those who have had historical relations, and whose coexistence necessitates some form of cooperation. However, in speaking of Judaism and Christianity it is not as clear; both phenomena are not monolithic. When speaking of the religious systems, one theoretical approach would be to examine foundational texts and documents of the theologies of the formative period. Furthermore, admitting textual data from various periods, we could expand the scope significantly beyond conventional modes, to include all that has ever been created in the name of Christianity and Judaism, which might introduce new sources and positions into the conversation.

Despite the appeal of a purely textual approach, dialogue is an activity that is carried out between people, and in our case, between faith communities. Even if the subject matter of the dialogue is the religious system, the impetus for the dialogue, as well as its immediate significance, stem from individuals whose personal relations and encounters may be shaped by their respective religious world-views. Hence, structuring the dialogue along purely historical-textual images of the two religions renders only partial service.

We could also speak meaningfully of Judaism and Christianity, and expand the traditional dialogue by considering the representatives to the dialogue. With the gradual entry of Jewish Orthodox representatives comes a different range of sources, positions, sensibilities, spirituality, etc. These voices, that had not previously been as strongly heard in the dialogue-including those that draw upon the mystical tradition of Judaism - have expanded the boundaries of the conversation and

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introduced new dimensions.

The question of representation is perhaps even more significant in the case of Christianity. Catholic Christianity has probably made the greatest advances in Jewish-Christian relations, due to its centralized structures and the leadership of figures such as John XXIII and John Paul II. However, other Christian communities have important contributions to make. They exist in virtually every major metropolis in the west, even if their presence is numerically far inferior to that of major western denominations. One case in point is the Syrian Orthodox Church, which brings to the dialogue a radically different Christianity, drawing on different theological resources, and, more significantly, not sharing in the pains of Jewish-Christian history. Jewish relations with this church were never characterized as majority-minority; both traditions were minorities. This is not to suggest that theological rivalry did not exist between the traditions; but - this is precisely the point - developing a dialogue between the two religious systems should allow us to recognize theological rivalry without historical injustice taking over our view of the relations between the religions. The Armenian Church offers us another form of Christianity that can both enrich our sense of what being Christian is, and allow us to view Jewish-Christian relations without the distortions produced by the violence and suffering that have characterized most of Jewish-Christian relations.

I do not suggest that one can completely sidestep history and its burden. This would be morally wrong and practically impossible. However, Jewish-Christian dialogue can be structured as a dialogue of religions, and not only as a dialogue of communities emerging from a painful past into a more hopeful future. Expanding the range of Christian presence to include Christian communities normally not featured in the dialogue can help the dialogue shift beyond the original historical matrix that gave it birth. The maturing of the theological dialogue can allow new voices into the conversation, opening possibilities not only for mutual understanding, but also for the wider historical and theological range of Christianity.

Projecting a Future for Jewish-Christian Relations

If Jewish-Christian relations are characterized by the healing of past wounds and the building of trust, one can envisage the future as further gains made along the same path. Indeed, this is the matrix within which some theorists conceive it.

In an address commemorating ten years of The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), Cardinal Cassidy, then the president of the Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, offered the following vision for the future of Jewish-Christian relations:

I would suggest that we need above all to continue to build mutual trust between our communities. Mutual trust is a basic element of all true dialogue. It is this in particular that we have been seeking to achieve over the past 35 years…We have had, I believe, considerable success.... Much still can be done, especially in the fields of education and formation to further this worthy cause. We were made aware during the Pope’s visit to Israel of the ignorance that still existed within the communities here (i.e. Israel) regarding our relationship. That visit did much to educate Catholics and Jews everywhere about the present situation and the changes that have taken place.

Here the future is understood as a continuation of past efforts, and their successful completion. Progress that has taken place in the upper echelons must be translated down to the entire body of believers through education. According to this vision, the program is well defined; the goals are well known. The future is the fulfillment of the program already undertaken.

There is no doubt that continuing to build trust, reconciliation, and knowledge is of great importance. However, other visions of the future can be formulated alongside that. In an address given in Montevideo at the annual gathering of the International Council of Christians and Jews

(ICCJ) in 2001, Cardinal Kasper, the new president of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, took a different position:

Certainly, and I repeat, the past must be remembered and our memories have to find a way to be reconciled. We must not and we cannot forget the horrors of the holocaust . . . Our memory must be *memoria futuri*. So our dialogue should not be merely past oriented, but future oriented. Our dialogue should more and more become a contribution for the solution of today's and tomorrow's spiritual and ethical problems and challenges. Our so-called post-modern world needs our common witness. As Jews and Christians we have so many values in common, values lacking to our world which is often without orientation, but values urgently needed for building a new and a better world.

Cardinal Kasper addresses the question: how to move beyond a dialogue carried out in the shadow of the holocaust. Kasper's answer is framed in terms of shared moral testimony and responsibility. Moving from the past to the future calls for common action, and common contribution to the world's ethical and spiritual well-being. It should be noted, in passing, that Cardinal Cassidy's address also includes reference to the common duty to offer witness to the world. However, unlike Kasper, Cassidy frames such common witness not in the context of the future of Jewish-Christian relations, but in considering what ultimately unites Christians and Jews.

The emphasis upon common work and witness, in service of humanity, reflects the Jewish Orthodox position, associated with Rabbi Soloveitchik. The significance of dialogue is in the practical fruits it offers humanity, rather than in the dialogue itself. In Kasper's address, historical dialogue does not pave the way for a deeper theological encounter, but for greater practical cooperation. One could suggest a significant distinction between dialogue and collaboration. Dialogue is geared to a deeper understanding of the other as well as of oneself, and to discovery and enrichment of self in light of the encounter with the other. Collaboration is concerned with implementing practical solutions and policies, in relation to contemporary social and moral issues. Kasper's formulation unwittingly slips outside the realm of true dialogue, once the initial step of trust building has been fulfilled. The trust gained in the first round of dialogue leads not to a deeper dimension of dialogue, but to practical collaboration.

There may be an even more problematic expression of good will in Kasper's view of the values that Jews and Christians have in common. Behind this noble image of commonality lurks an understanding that privileges Judaism, from a Catholic perspective, over and against other religions. In the same address, Kasper refers to the problems raised by Dominus Jesus, and their relevance to Jewish-Christian relations:

The document Dominus Jesus does not deal with the question of the theology of Catholic-Jewish relations proclaimed by Nostra Aetate and of subsequent Christian teachings. What the document tries to "correct" is another category, namely the attempts to find a kind of "universal theology" of interreligious relations, which, in some cases, has led to indifferentism, relativism and syncretism. Against such theories we, as Jews and Christians, are on the same side, in the same boat, if I am allowed to say so; we have to fight, to argue and to bear witness together. Our common self-understanding is at stake.

This is a further expression of the asymmetry of Jewish-Christian relations. Christianity sees itself as growing out of Judaism, as its fulfillment even if not its replacement. Consequently, it claims a special relationship with Judaism, which also accounts for the special interest Christians have in study of and dialogue with Judaism. A kind of self-affirmation and self-discovery takes place for the Christian through dialogue with Judaism. Professional Jewish "dialoguers" are aware that dialogue is less significant for their own community than for their Christian counterparts. The difference in degree of communal engagement in dialogue is largely a function of this: Christians need Jews in a way Jews do not need Christians. Hence, Kasper's locating Jews and Christians in the same boat,

is, from a Jewish perspective, far from obvious.

It is not so easy for Jews to reciprocate a sense of special relationship with Christianity. What binds Jews and Christians in this special relationship is, presumably, the shared body of Scripture; however, this is a Christian understanding. For the Jew who does not recognize the validity of the Christian testament, sharing Scripture may not proffer special relationship; it may even represent greater potential danger. Significantly, there is a common perception among Jews that Judaism is closer to Islam than to Christianity, due to a shared understanding of monotheism. I do not suggest that Cardinal<%0> Kasper's understanding cannot be sustained from a Jewish perspective. Some thinkers have indeed felt a special affinity between Judaism and Christianity; Franz Rosenzweig is perhaps the most salient example. Also, the positive potential of sharing Scripture has not gone unnoticed: Maimonides permits teaching Torah to a Christian, despite the general prohibition of teaching Torah to gentiles. He reasons that Christians, like Jews, view Scripture as revelation, and hence duly respect it. Elements of Kasper's argument can find echoes in Jewish sources. Nevertheless, one should be cautious in assuming that Judaism and Christianity can with equal comfort view each other as a privileged "other".

Beyond this objection to the reciprocity of uniqueness, a more fundamental question arises from Kasper's formulation of the goals of a common future. By placing Jews and Christians on one side of the fence, and the rest of the world on another side, Kasper also assumes a shared sense of the inferiority of other religious traditions: Judaism and Christianity are in possession of some form of true revelation, while other religions have something less than that. Judaism has far to go in formulating a contemporary theology of world religions, but I anticipate that the strategy that will <%-2>be adopted will not privilege Christianity; Christianity cannot be privileged in revelatory<%0> terms.

It seems advisable, therefore, not to assume a particular theological bond as the basis of future collaboration. If the future is seen as one of collaboration, it must be grounded in the fact that Jews and Christians live alongside one another, and have common contributions to make to the world. But other faith communities also live alongside Christians and Jews, and, equally, have significant contributions to make to the moral future of humanity. The move from dialogue to collaboration does not allow us to preserve the sense of encounter and knowledge of the other that characterize proper dialogue. Kasper's implicit solution - we need not discuss what unites us because it is so deeply at the root of both traditions - seems to me untenable from a Jewish perspective. It is certainly laudable that traditions collaborate along a range of moral issues, but that cannot substitute for a deepening of dialogue. This leads me to a different vision of the future, with dialogue rather than collaboration at its center, taking other world religions into consideration, and avoiding the temptation of assuming uniqueness and special status in Jewish-Christian relations.

Locating Jewish-Christian DialogueWithin Multilateral Interreligious Dialogue

A deeper theological dialogue is best carried out in frameworks that help reduce the confrontation caused by historical memory. This may be achieved by introducing other partners to the dialogue, who do not share the same burden of historical memory. A deep Jewish-Christian dialogue can best take place in the framework of multilateral interfaith dialogue.

The mandate for universal dialogue grows out of the fact that today religious communities live alongside one another in the proverbial global village. Dialogue is necessitated by common living as a means to better living. But it is equally mandated by the wide net of *de facto* spiritual contacts between members of all faiths. Given that religious influences can more readily occur in this day and age than probably during any previous age, serious interfaith dialogue is a need of the traditions themselves, as part of the service they must offer to their adherents, and as part of the self-growth that they owe to themselves, and if I may add, to God. Hence interreligious dialogue

today is a global need that applies to all world religions. Let us consider the benefits of situating Jewish-Christian dialogue within the wider context of interfaith dialogue among all world religions.

By situating Jewish-Christian dialogue in this wider context, one can shift the focus away from the burden of historical memory, and focus upon those religious and theological issues that are of interest to all religions.

With more than two dialogue partners present, a much wider range of issues enters the conversation. A multilateral conversation is a richer conversation, allowing unexpected perspectives to emerge in relation to each of the partners.

In a multilateral context one cannot speak of non-reciprocal relations. All religions are accepted as givens, and come to the dialogue table to teach and to learn. The fundamental lack of reciprocity that characterizes Jewish-Christian relations is largely overcome when a multilateral interreligious dialogue is the context for the Jewish-Christian conversation.

Multilateral Interreligious Dialogue: Looking to the Future

What does one seek to achieve by establishing a dialogue between religions, and what future vision is served by it? What can dialogue at its best accomplish? Dialogue is a process of knowledge of an "other", as well as of knowledge of self in light of the "other". In some way, both partners to the dialogue become themselves in a fuller and truer sense, through dialogue. When we consider the form religion takes in isolation from the religious other, we recognize that a host of spiritual ills can crop up within religion. These ills are a function of a narrow, self-contained, self-complacent vision of the religious universe. Exclusivism and narrowness are inevitable consequences of isolation and insularity. A kind of spiritual rust settles upon the spiritual gold of religion when it is lived in insularity. Accordingly, interreligious dialogue is a form of spiritual purification of religion. The encounter with the other allows one to correct one’s views. It forces one to restate one’s spiritual vision taking into account the reality of the other. It offers a reality check that is tantamount to a spiritual self-examination.

Dialogue can play a role in helping realize one’s deeper identity. Rather than erode one’s own identity, dialogue can be instrumental in the discovery and the recovery of that identity. If we are willing to acknowledge that all religions are in some way instruments of the divine, and to the divine, regardless of the theological nuancing that might accompany such recognition, then the future of dialogue is in enabling all these instruments to come closer to their goal and to achieve it in a more perfect way.

Implicit in this statement is the recognition that no religion is perfect. No religion can escape the inevitable consequences of the fact that religion is a meeting point between God and us, involving the human element in religion and its attendant corruptions. The process of purification is necessary for all religions. Even if one does not view all religions as equally mediating the divine reality, as long as one is willing to acknowledge some spiritual value in a religion, it should be considered a worthy dialogue partner, and a mirror in light of which purification and self-transformation can take place. Our ability to grow is no less a function of our honesty and openness in the presence of the other, than it is a consequence of the divine gifts with which each of our traditions feels it is blessed.

One must also be open to a more far-reaching way in which religions may influence one another positively. Dialogue tends to bring out the best in a religion. Recognition of the best in another religion naturally leads to a desire to emulate, and to the recognition that the finest of aspirations must be contained within one’s own tradition. If the present historical image of my religion does not contain the best of what is found in another religion, this must be a consequence of secondary

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considerations, such as the vicissitudes of history, rather than a fundamental lack in my own tradition. This type of cross-religion inspiration has taken place between religions for centuries. An example of this is Rabbi Abraham Maimonides' adoption of Muslim prayer practices, including body postures, as part of his reform of Jewish prayer. Abraham Maimonides' justification for this was that the more perfected form of religious life that he saw among the Sufis was nothing but authentic Judaism, lost as a consequence of the destruction of the Temple. Various strategies have allowed such interreligious inspiration to take place throughout the ages. One cannot deny the possibility that interreligious dialogue might have such an effect as well, even if we do not consider this part of the *a priori* definition of how it should operate. Indeed, it seems that both Rabbi Soloveitchik's attempt to limit theological dialogue and the perspective reflected in *Dominus Jesus*, as well as in Cardinal Kasper's emphasis on practical cooperation, may be reactions to this theoretical, but not remote, possibility. While we cannot mark ahead of time the ways in which knowledge of the other might transform our own religious sensibilities and even practices, one cannot exclude the possibility that a sincere dialogue might have such consequences. However, rather than being feared, they should be considered welcome fruits of the dialogue.

Within the Jewish-Christian dialogue, if the two religions are considered equal partners, they can serve as mirrors to one another, reflecting the value, authenticity and degree of spirituality that characterize observances common to both religions. For example, prayer and Scripture study are central activities to both traditions. Jews may discover what they can learn from Christians - a thought that rarely occurs to most Jews, especially when their perspective is primarily historical. Similarly, Christians may - and have begun to - discover the power and vitality of Jewish hermeneutics. Such mutual inspiration is more than interesting enrichment. It touches upon the very core of religious observance and experience and the possibility of producing growth at the core of the religious life.

Is Judaism Ready for a Theological Dialogue with Christianity?

To a certain extent, the avoidance of a deeper theological dialogue with Christianity, as well as with other world religions, is a consequence of lack of sufficient intellectual and spiritual presence to the challenges that a dialogue with world religions involves. Such a situation is untenable even in the short run, and therefore one of the tasks of Jewish intellectual leadership is to equip itself to better deal with the challenges presented by the new dialogical relationship between religions.

A reasonable cause for the insufficient attention given to a systematic approach to the meaning of other world religions is the intense preoccupation with matters of Jewish survival. Jewish survival has been threatened both physically and spiritually in recent history. Israel's return to its land has raised a series of problems that occupy the attention of Jewish society. The question of identity is uppermost on the list of concerns of the Jewish people. Tensions between competing forms of religious and secular identities, especially when evidenced in the public arena, seem to exhaust most people's capacity for struggling with issues of religious identity and difference. That coupled with the struggle for physical survival - as this takes on military, political and economic expressions - leaves little room for reflecting on Judaism in relation to other world religions.

Without detracting from the gravity of the existential issues facing the Jewish people, I consider the challenge posed by the contemporary dialogical situation an additional dimension of the struggle for the continued existential significance of Judaism. A theological formulation of Judaism's stance in relation to other world religions is inseparable from the articulation of the continued relevance and vision of Judaism in the contemporary world. Meeting the challenge posed by the dialogical situation is significant not only to Judaism's relation to the outside, but also to its own internal agenda. It is certainly significant for thousands of Jewish individuals who struggle with these issues on a personal basis through encounter with other world religions, since their continued attachment to Judaism is related in some way to how Judaism is construed, interpreted and presented, both in

itself and in relation to other religions.

One might point to several indicators of the secondary place that Judaism's attitude to world religions occupies on the Jewish intellectual agenda. Few Jewish intellectuals give any serious attention to the theological dimension of Judaism's relationship to other religions. The number of official rabbinic voices who engage in serious reflection on the matter, as distinct from symbolic public gestures of interreligious goodwill, is even smaller. In the state of Israel nothing has been written concerning Judaism, either in the form of an introduction or in the form of a theological exposition, with a non-Jewish public in mind. One might have thought that national independence might precipitate a fresh wave of thought concerning Judaism, now viewed from its home base, and its relationship to other world religions, or its message to them. However, all the mental resources within the state of Israel seem to be directed to internal Jewish issues. In the Jewish world, the current serious work of a reflective dialogical nature is done by a small number of Jewish intellectuals in the Diaspora, where Jews and Christians live alongside one another. Dialogue is thus a function of coexistence, rather than a function of a theological challenge, approached from the wider angle of the existence of diverse faiths in an increasingly globalized world.

An additional indication of the relative lack of interest in theological dialogue comes from a comparison of the expressions of the dialogue on the Jewish and Christian sides. The Christian dialogue partner has produced a series of carefully crafted statements concerning Judaism; in fact, statements and declarations have been a primary instrument for them. A range of Christian denominations have expressed their theological self-understanding and understanding of Judaism through a series of church declarations. It is striking that while so many churches issued declarations, the Jewish side did not reciprocate. To some extent, this is due to structural differences between the two dialogue partners. Judaism is far less centralized than are the various churches, and therefore lacks a single authoritative voice or mechanism of expression. Also, declarations and statements are not its conventional mode of expression. The deeper reason why no rabbinic assembly in any country found it necessary or possible to issue a declaration concerning Christianity, Jewish-Christian relations, or Judaism's relationship to any world religion, is that Judaism is still not adequately prepared for dealing in a systematic way with the theological presence and significance of other world religions.

There is one notable exception, which merely proves the rule. A couple of years ago the first Jewish statement on Christianity was published. Bearing the title *Dabru Emet*, it addresses some fundamental issues in Judaism's relationship with Christianity. Theological reflection is clearly possible, if circumstances support it. The circumstances under which *Dabru Emet* was composed and published underscore points made above. It was the product of a handful of Diaspora scholars, not representing an official Jewish organization, let alone a rabbinical body, and the declaration was signed by over two hundred rabbis - almost all from the Diaspora and most from non-orthodox streams of Judaism. While *Dabru Emet* may be a monumental breakthrough when considering the nature of the document and the task it has set to accomplish, it is also an indication of how far certain portions of the Jewish religion, especially its religious representatives, are from meeting the kind of challenges the document attempted to address.

Challenges Facing a Contemporary Jewish Reflection on World Religions

Many Jewish attitudes towards other world religions were shaped in earlier historical periods, when relations between Jews and others were very different from the best possible options available in the contemporary dialogical context. Historically Judaism has had to come to terms with only some of those religions identified in contemporary parlance as "World Religions". While there are many sources relevant to Judaism's relations with Christianity and Islam, there are almost no precedents for Jewish attitudes to oriental religions. Many Jewish authorities would not consider this a matter meriting much further reflection, since the latter religions are easily dismissed as idolatrous and

hence deserving little theological attention. However, passing easy judgment on another person's religion without adequate study should be a thing of the past, born of different historical circumstances. We owe our own constituency, no less than other world faiths, sustained reflection, the likes of which we have barely begun to undertake.

Perhaps one point at which such reflection might begin is the examination of earlier attitudes to other religions and the degree of their continuing relevance. We as Jews have asked Christians to examine their theology and their liturgy. Yet no work has been done to address earlier Jewish positions in relation to Christianity. Do we continue to uphold all that has been written in nearly a thousand years of Jewish-Christian polemic? To what extent does Jewish anti-Christian literature continue to shape contemporary attitudes or does it occupy only the attention of the historian? To what extent do present-day relations allow us either to understand Christianity better or to distance ourselves from earlier polemical statements?

A major area that one must address in a much more conscious manner than has been done is the halakhic definition of Christianity. So much of Jewish-Christian dialogue assumes a common theological affiliation in one family of religions, considered monotheistic. Yet, the monotheistic status of Christianity from a Jewish perspective is far from undisputed. The issue from the Jewish side is that of the definition of Christianity as *Avoda Zara*. The term literally means foreign worship. It designates the worship of other gods; "idolatry" is its closest proximate term. Do Jews and Christians believe in the same God? This is the "interfaith" way of posing the question usually posed in halakhic literature in terms of whether Christianity is or is not considered *Avoda Zara*. The issues are twofold. Strictly speaking, what is under discussion is whether Trinitarian thinking, coupled with a faith in the incarnation of one person of the godhead, is compatible with monotheistic faith, as defined by halakhic parameters. However, Christian use of images in worship plays significantly into the question, informing both attitudes and positions vis-à-vis Christianity. We virtually lack parallel discussion regarding Judaism's view of Islam; hence many would consider Islam to be much closer to Judaism than Christianity.

Positions on the question of the halakhic definition of Christianity as *Avoda Zara* diverge. Maimonides is the great spokesman for this position. His opinion is often cited as authoritative, without much thought to the philosophical influences upon his halakhic ruling - influences that are in part outdated, and in part would have serious intra-Jewish ramifications, were they to be taken to their logical end. A serious group of halakhic authorities has taken the alternative position. While leading Ashkenazi rabbinic authorities of the middle ages have offered various strategies for arriving at the then-economically-necessary conclusion that Christianity is not *Avoda Zara*, the most principled statement on the matter comes from the 14th century Provencal authority, Rabbi Menahem HaMeiri. Contemporary discussions often revert to Maimonides or HaMeiri as the default positions, despite the rich middle ground occupied by other halakhic perspectives. The problem for a contemporary Jewish appreciation of other world religions lies in the fact that modern Judaism seems to oscillate between these two halakhic positions, with great inconsistency. No less an authority than the first Chief Rabbi of Israel (then Palestine), Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, states unequivocally that "the main ruling is that of HaMeiri". This position is also echoed in the words of the next Chief Rabbi in line, Rabbi Herzog, who accepts this position, conscious of its implications for the continued presence of Christianity in the Holy Land. Yet, later rabbinic authorities, occupying the exact same seat of power, the office of the Chief Rabbi, have also expressed themselves to the contrary. Consequently, this remains a relevant issue, and one that deserves more careful and sustained attention in the contemporary context. One notes with sadness that the rabbinic discourse limits itself mostly to citation and siding with one authority or another. A fresh examination of Christianity and its theology, especially its formulations since the time when the formative rabbinic responses to Christianity were formulated, is never a part of the rabbinic discourse. This is where I find the greatest lack, and it is equally relevant to contemporary halakhic attitudes to religions with whom Judaism has had past dealings and to those that have not yet begun to capture serious halakhic attention.

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Religious Exclusivity:the Common Theological Challenge

From the theological perspective it seems to me the great issue that both Judaism and Christianity must still address is that of religious exclusivity. Though their manifestations of this issue are different, both Judaism and Christianity are heavily marked by some expression of religious exclusivity that shapes their attitude to other religions. Thoughtful reflection on these dimensions of exclusivity is a key to advancement in relations between the two religions, as well as in their relations with other religions. Let us begin with Christian exclusivity. The most blatant, and hence most offensive, expression of Christian religious exclusivity is Christian mission. Mission is an expression of exclusive truth claims, that mandate spreading a particular religious truth, for the sake of the well-being of others. While the motivation of the missionary may be noble, missionary work is received as an assault on the identity of the other. Past history has made the Jewish psyche particularly suspicious of missionary activity. Suspicion of a hidden missionary agenda is probably still the greatest impediment to advancement in Jewish-Christian dialogue. While, theoretically, one might have to consider the missionary drive a legitimate, perhaps even necessary, expression of religious authenticity, past history makes it extremely hard for Jews to recognize missionary work as a healthy form of religious activity. For Jews it is the great obstacle in Jewish-Christian relations. The fact that Christianity is not a monolithic entity emerges clearly with regard to missionary work; to the uninformed Jewish observer, the spectrum is confusing. At the one end are those churches that have rejected a mission to the Jews (some Lutheran Churches). Next are those Churches that have had little interest in conversion of the Jews (Eastern and Orthodox Churches). Then comes the Catholic Church that seems to have given up *de facto* any missionary work to the Jews, while coming short of a statement rejecting such practices. Finally, there are the various Protestant and evangelical denominations that continue missionary work, at times using means that are secondary to the life of faith itself, causing great offense to the Jewish community. Who are our dialogue partners and what is their true stance on missionary work? One cannot overestimate the significance of this question for a Jewish public. Even if interfaith pundits are able to distinguish between the various streams and nuances, the continued existence of some forms of missionary work undermines advances in Jewish-Christian relations.

The problem is not strictly limited to a narrow range of Evangelical groups. Witness the great stir the publication of *Dominus Jesus* caused in the Jewish community. To the Jewish observer, Catholic dialogue partners uphold what seem to be two contradictory perspectives: recommending interfaith dialogue while preaching a missionary message. How are the two to be reconciled? Is interfaith dialogue but a front for missionary work? The Catholic Church has been perfectly open in its embrace of these two positions, leaving to its theologians the complicated task of harmonizing between these conflicting drives. But the attempts at harmonization ultimately leave the Jewish observer suspicious. Cardinal Kasper attempted to single out the Jewish reality as different from that of other world religions, with regard to this particular tension as it is addressed in *Dominus Jesus*. While such clarification is important, it still falls short of alleviating Jewish anxiety, caused by the complexity of the Catholic attitude in the interreligious dialogue. Much theological work, as well as public relations work, will have to occur in order to put this issue to rest.

But Jews too have their own issues of religious exclusivity, which can hamper advancement of Jewish-Christian relations. Having renounced active missionary work for nearly two millennia, the issue of mission is not where religious exclusivism strikes Judaism. I would locate the theological challenges of this in two core beliefs, perhaps even tenets of faith, of Judaism. The first is the belief in Jewish election. The recognition of a special status for the people of Israel is central to a religion whose very essence is inseparable from its ethnic identity. However, the unexamined notion of election often creates the impression that as a consequence of our special status, we as Jews have little to gain or learn from other people or other religions. They may need us, but we do not need them in any significant way. Yet, few Jewish thinkers are able to offer a coherent understanding of the way in which others do indeed need us. Put differently, if a generation or two

ago we were comfortable understanding our task as a "light to the nations", the near-disappearance of this phrase from the common vocabulary is symptomatic of a wider malaise. We have lost a sense of our particular mission and contribution to the nations. Probably due to the vicissitudes of recent history, it is no longer clear how exactly Israel is to be a "light to the nations". The struggle over Jewish identity, and the competing notions of Israeli identity have all but led to an eradication of self-definition in light of our contribution to others. Defining in what way we can contribute to others is tantamount to a definition of our uniqueness, hence, the key to our self-understanding and our identity.

The question of election poses another set of problems concerning Christianity. Judaism and Christianity inherit from their respective histories what seem to be mutually exclusive claims concerning their identity and affiliation as Israel. Catholicism, as well as other Christian traditions, has engaged in a remarkable theological revision of its attitude to Jewish election, upholding the validity of the Jewish covenant which in the past had been considered revoked. Judaism, for its side, has barely begun to consider the significance of Christianity from the perspective of the Jewish belief in election and from a perspective of what we may perhaps call "latter-day *heilsgeschichte*". Does Christianity have a role to play in the ultimate scheme of God’s message to the world? Is there a sense in which it can be legitimately considered a chosen religion? Can Judaism reciprocate the Catholic affirmation of the validity of the Jewish covenant? There are seeds of answers in traditional sources. One or two contemporary Jewish theologians, notably Yitz Greenberg, have raised these questions openly, but on the whole, they receive little attention.

A second expression of religious exclusivity is found in the Jewish belief in revelation. The relationship between our recognition of the Torah as revealed Scripture and the possibility of legitimacy of other religious traditions is a great challenge, still facing a systematic Jewish theology of other religions. The problem is particularly grave when revelation is understood as the revelation of "Truth". If God has revealed His "Truth" to us, we can only be teachers to others, but not sincere dialogue partners. Here too, the problem is the unexamined understandings that shape attitudes, rather than the articulated theological positions. On the theological front, I believe it is possible to uphold a notion of revelation that does not lead to the kind of exclusivity that would bar serious dialogue. Both the nature of revelation, in terms of truth and in other terms, and the question of single or multiple revelations, are areas that deserve further deliberation, and for which the thought of earlier generations provides important resources. Much thought must be given to the role of world religions in the overall divine economy. Can Judaism’s graciousness towards other religions extend only to a recognition of partial smackings of truth, preparing the way for the ultimate distinction between truth and falsehood, as Maimonides would have it? Is it possible to configure the divine economy in such a way that God’s revelation to Israel does not invalidate all other forms of religious life?

Until these issues are systematically examined and addressed, impressions and attitudes will orient the interreligious encounter, rather than the formulated theological position. It is, of course, perfectly possible that positions could be articulated that would not be conducive to the advancement of relationships between Judaism and other religions. We discover a further dimension of the preference for practical cooperation, over and against a theological dialogue with other religions. But an open conversation over these issues will yield more than one position. It is precisely the diversity and wealth of positions that will both sharpen the issues and allow paradigms to emerge that will be conducive to interreligious relations, providing the options and possibilities for serious theological engagement of other religions.

The Work of the Elijah School and Jewish-Christian Relations

My approach to the question of Jewish-Christian relations and the way I imagine their future are both fed by and feed the work of the Elijah School, which I direct. The Elijah School is a consortium of Jewish, Christian and Muslim institutions.

One of the hallmarks of the Elijah School is multilateral, academic, religious dialogue. Seeing Christianity as one more world religion, rather than as Judaism's classical nemesis, gives it a fresh hearing as a religious and theological entity. This is achieved primarily through team teaching by representatives of different world religions, forming a community of believers. In this context, the particular problems of Jewish-Christian memory all but fall away. The focus on theological topics facilitates the opening of new avenues of conversation.

The Elijah School is engaged in projects of common reflection, in which the theological wealth of all traditions enriches the conversation. We attempt to establish theological, rather than practical, collaboration. The work of these scholars is deepened and transformed, while remaining true to their respective traditions. This paves the way for the adoption of common positions by religious leaders, providing religious responses to contemporary challenges.

In Jewish-Christian relations, widening the range of Christian participants to include forms of Christianity not as implicated in painful historical memory, the Elijah School has established relations with several Orthodox Churches in Jerusalem. Discovering new partners and new venues for dialogue, such as the Jewish Orthodox seminaries and yeshivot, also enriches the discussion and brings Jewish-Christian relations into communities that were previously outside the circle of these activities.

In my opinion, the time has come to increase Jewish awareness of the questions that inform Judaism's conversations with other world religions. Various complex aspects of past and present Jewish attitudes to other religions must be examined from the perspective of the new historical conditions, including the existence of an independent Israeli state and the advancement in global interreligious understanding. A sustained conversation on these matters is an important intellectual and spiritual need of the Jewish people. For Jewish-Christian relations to make significant theological advances, developing such new resources for interreligious relations is necessary. The Elijah School hopes to make a contribution to this conversation.

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