



“Jews and Christians. From Past to Future”: First publication of Yohanan Elihai’s book in English

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It is with great pleasure that the JCR announces that the book "Jews and Christians. From Past to Future" by the well known Catholic monk and Israeli linguist Yohanan Elihai is being published today for the first time in English on our website, having already appeared in print in French, Italian and Polish between 1990 and 2000.

Who was Yohanan Elihai? A short reminiscence:

Yohanan Elihai (whose name was Jean Leroy, until 1960) was born in 1926 in a small French village near Paris and passed away on July 4, 2020, in Israel, where he lived for over 60 years. In his youth, he studied ancient languages in Versailles and received his baccalaureate in 1943. Life under the Nazis was hard, and they suffered from hunger. His grandmother told him, "We are suffering, but the Jews are suffering even more." He understood the meaning of her words when the Americans who entered Paris displayed posters in the windows of their embassy with photographs of Jews liberated from the camps.

The shock of the Holocaust defined his entire future life. He wanted to live in Israel and share the fate of those whom the Nazis could not destroy. However, already holding Zionist views, he first decided to join the recently founded monastic order of the Little Brothers of Charles de Foucauld. The order's rule stipulated that the brothers work in simple jobs in the most remote and difficult places around the world, refraining from missionary work and bearing witness to faith only through their lives. However, he was not accepted into the order due to his youth, and he spent two years teaching French at a Jesuit school in Lebanon, where he also continued studying written and spoken Arabic.

In 1947, Jean Leroy became a member of the Little Brothers of Charles de Foucauld. Inspired by an article about the merging of the rapidly developing Tel Aviv with old Jaffa, the Zionist priest became determined to go there, but the order considered his knowledge of Arabic more useful in Syria. In Damascus, while working in metalware production, Leroy compiled his own dictionary of the Syrian dialect of Arabic. In 1950, upon learning that the female branch of the order – the Little Sisters of Charles de Foucauld – had opened a branch in Israel, he asked to be sent there, stating that it had been his long-standing dream. However, the order's superior replied, "You want to go to the Jews? Know that Zionism won't work. Jews can run a bank or a clothing store, but a state, an army? Never."

He continued his studies at the Dominican seminary, spending six years studying philosophy, theology, the Bible, and history. In 1955, he was ordained as a priest, and the following year, he finally convinced his superiors to send him to Israel permanently. Settling in Tel Aviv, he worked under the guidance of renowned artist Aharon Kahana, producing ceramics. The most significant event of those years for him was the three-month task of laying tiles on the floor of the Hall of Remembrance in Yad Vashem, bearing the names of Nazi concentration camps.

Three years later, Jean Leroy naturalized, obtaining Israeli citizenship and changing his surname to Elihai ("My God lives"). With the order's approval, in 1965 he moved to the Arab Christian village

of Tarshiha in Northern Galilee, where, as he later confessed, "I learned things I had never known before, being surrounded only by Jews." From then on, his life gained another purpose – to help foster mutual understanding between Jews and Arabs.

It was here that his linguistic talent fully blossomed. He said, "Language is the key to the heart" and extensively taught Arabic to Israelis in Hebrew. Becoming a brilliant expert in the Palestinian dialect of Arabic, over the next 40 years, he prepared numerous dictionaries – French-Arabic, Hebrew-Arabic, English-Arabic – and participated in the creation of an English-Hebrew-Arabic dictionary of economic terms. He wrote a Hebrew verb textbook for Russian and French speakers. His dictionaries, textbooks, and conversational courses became staples in schools, universities, and the army, both in Israel and abroad, and are often regarded as the best. In 2008, he received an honorary doctorate from the Haifa University, in recognition of his life's work. In 2018, he received a Prime Minister Golda Meir's award for his contribution to bringing people together through teaching of the spoken Arabic Palestinian language.

The second goal of his life and priestly service was to achieve mutual understanding between Jews and Christians. Becoming one of the central figures in Israel's Hebrew-speaking Catholic community, he wrote a remarkable and honest book, *Jews and Christians: From Past to Future*, in which he set down his experiences and reflections on Christianity and Judaism as well as the Christian-Jewish dialogue. The book was published in French in 1990 (Cerf, Paris), followed by a translation into Italian in 1995 (Qiqayon, Bose) and a Polish version in 2000 (Znak, Kraków). In 2001, he wrote an English version himself, with a foreword by Mgr. Poulain, then Bishop of Perigueux and President of the Episcopal Committee for Relations with Judaism. Inexplicably, however, the English version was never published. Elihai himself finally sent the English version to the author of this article before his death - and JCR is pleased to publish this English version today for the first time. Elihai's book is an impressively knowledgeable and - considering it was written around the year 2000 - in many respects theologically progressive book, which is still inspiring and worth reading today for everyone interested in the history and meaning of Jewish-Christian relations.

As the epigraph to the book, he chose the words from a homily by Pope Gregory the Great: *Si autem de veritate scandalum sumitur, utilius permittitur nasci scandalum quam veritas relinquatur* – "Even if truth gives rise to scandal, it is better to allow scandal to arise than to abandon truth."

To read Elihai's book go here:

[Jews and Christians: From Past to Future](#)

Yuri Tabak is JCR's Russian language editor.