



Jews and Christians: Making Theological Space for Each Other

| Shepherd, Margaret

Sr. Margaret Shepherd, Director of the Council of Christians and Jews, London (UK), examines some of the theological issues that have arisen in the Jewish-Christian encounter in recent decades.

Jews and Christians: Making Theological Space for Each Other

by Sister Margaret Shepherd
Director, The Council of Christians and Jews, London (UK)

In his book *Faith in the Future*, which he dedicated to the members of The Council of Christians and Jews, the Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, has a section entitled "The Interfaith Imperative," where he recalls having had the privilege of meeting a Hasidic Rebbe, head of a group of Jewish mystics and one of the great religious leaders of the Jewish world, whose teachings had inspired

him. Dr Sacks had spoken to him about the apparent exclusivity of the way of life he recommended, which seemed to shut out the rest of the world by its intense, segregated piety.

"Was there no beauty and value outside the narrow walls in which he lived?" he asked. The Rebbe's response, as related by Dr Sacks, is revealing:

Imagine, he said, two people who spend their lives transporting stones. One carries bags of diamonds. The other hauls sacks of rocks. Each is now asked to take a consignment of rubies. Which of the two understands what he is now to carry? The man who is used to diamonds knows that stones can be precious, even those that are not diamonds. But the man who has carried only rocks thinks of stones as a mere burden. They have weight but not worth. Rubies are beyond his comprehension. So it is, he said, with faith. If we cherish our own, then we know the value of others. We may regard ours as a diamond and another faith as a ruby, but we know that both are precious stones. But if faith is a mere burden, not only will we not value ours. Neither will we value the faith of someone else. We will see both as equally useless.

How do we value each other's faith? Treasure it? Strive to make "theological space" for it?

Chapter four of the conciliar statement *Nostra Aetate* inaugurated a new era in theological discussions about the Church's relationship to the Jewish people. Brief though it was, it turned on its head the Church's traditional theological perspective of the relationship between Jews and Christians, which had been dominated by the so-called "displacement theology", with us since the Patristic era, which taught that unbelieving, unfaithful Jews had been replaced by believing, faithful Christians. The displacement theory of *Adversus Judaeos* affected Christian theology right into the last century, leaving no further role for the Jewish people in the ongoing process of salvation. So

Nostra Aetate was, theologically, truly revolutionary, and but the beginning of the Church's continuing in-depth reexamination of its relationship to its sibling, Judaism. For both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism had been born at the same time, sharing the cradle of the Hebrew Scriptures.

They are "linked", as Pope John Paul has repeatedly said, "at the level of their identity".

Nostra Aetate laid as the foundation for a Christian understanding of the Church's relationship to Judaism – and other world religions – their common origin from God and their common destiny in God, according to God's design of salvation for humankind. The discovery of the role of the Holy Spirit in all of this was to be made gradually and was more strongly emphasised in the later documents of the Vatican Council, especially in the document known as *Gaudium et Spes*, where the work of the Spirit of God is seen universally at work in the world, "not only nor primarily in the religious aspirations of human beings, but in the human values they unanimously pursue, such as justice and kinship, peace and harmony".

One of Pope John Paul II's major emphases has been on his affirmation of active presence of the Spirit of God in the religious life of those of other faiths and the religious traditions to which they belong. In his first encyclical letter, *Redemptor Hominis* (4 March 1979), the Pope saw in the "firm belief" of non-Christians an "effect of the spirit of truth". He asked:

Does it not sometimes happen that the firm belief of the followers of the non-Christian religions -- a belief that is also an effect of the Spirit of truth operating outside the visible confines of the Mystical Body -- can make Christians ashamed at often being themselves so disposed to doubt concerning the truths revealed by God and proclaimed by the Church? (*Redemptor Hominis* 6)

What unites all religions is the fact that they are "so many reflections of the one truth", paths to a single goal:

The Fathers of the council rightly saw in the various religions as it were so many reflections of the one truth, "seeds of the Word" (cf. *Ad Gentes* 11; *Lumen Gentium* 17), attesting that, though the routes taken may be different, there is but one single goal to which is directed the deepest aspiration of the human spirit as expressed in its quest for God, and also in its quest, through its tending towards God, for the full dimension of its humanity, or, in other words, for the full meaning of human life. (*Redemptor Hominis* 11)

When he addressed members of the Roman curia on 22 December 1986, speaking of the World Day of Prayer for Peace held at Assisi two months earlier (27 October 1986), Pope John Paul, commenting on the prayers of the participants who had been drawn from the world's religions, said:

Every authentic prayer is under the influence of the Spirit "who intercedes insistently for us, because we do not even know how to pray as we ought", but he prays in us "with unutterable groanings" and "the One who searches the hearts knows what are the desires of the Spirit" (cf. *Rom* 8:26-27). We can indeed maintain that every authentic prayer is called forth by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in the heart of every person.

The most explicit text on the action of the Spirit is to be found in the encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (18 May, 1986), where the Pope speaks of the universal activity of the Holy Spirit, before the coming of Christ and today outside the Church.

Central to the new conversation between us is the concept of covenant. The continued validity of the Jewish covenant after the Christ event has been unequivocally upheld by Roman Catholic Church teaching and parallel Protestant documents in recent years. In the light of this, how then do Christians understand the "newness" or "uniqueness" of Christ? Ever since the days of the Second Vatican Council, Christian scholars have attempted to leave some theological space for Judaism, but most have fallen short in their efforts to reconcile the apparent tensions between the two realities, relying on the notion of "mystery" in God's plan of human salvation.

In recent years Christian theologians have wrestled with more courageous ways of expressing the theological bond between ourselves and the Jewish people. Two models have emerged, referred to as the single covenant and the double covenant theories. Basic to the single covenant model is the understanding that Jews and Christians belong to one covenantal tradition that began at Sinai. Here, the Christ event "represented the decisive moment when the Gentiles were able to enter fully into the special relationship with God which Jews already enjoyed and in which they continued".

This is clearly the position taken consistently by Pope John Paul II, for whom the bond between Christians and Jews is fundamental to Christian self-identity; he considers the Jewish Christian relationship as *sui generis* and on a totally different plane from the Church's relationship with any of the world's other religions.

Among the theologians supporting the single covenant theory, Monika Hellwig draws interesting conclusions, seeing the Christ Event as "the possibility of all Gentiles encountering the God of Abraham, Sarah and Isaac". Equally, she seems to imply that the Christ Event ought to have some impact on Jewish faith expression as well, so that, according to her, both communities ultimately are called to rethink their respective self-definition.

Another theologian following the single covenant theory was the late Paul van Buren, who spoke of Jesus as Israel's gift to the Gentile church and thus of Israel's claim upon Christianity:

To acknowledge the claim of God's love, with which the Church is confronted in the witness to Christ, is therefore always to acknowledge the legitimate claim of Israel. No Jew need repeat that claim today, since it is repeated to the church again and again, whenever it rehearses the things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, by his reality as a Jew. It comes as his call to follow him in his service to his people.

Turning to the double covenant theory, what is attractive about it is that, whilst strongly affirming the continuing bonds between Jews and Christians, it "prefers to underline the distinctiveness of the two traditions and communities, particularly in terms of their experiences after the gradual separation in the first century C.E." Such a theory honours the distinctiveness of the revelation experienced in and through Christ, a revelation which Clemens Thoma and Franz Mussner insist goes beyond that of the original covenant with Israel.

John Pawlikowski, a leading Catholic proponent of the double covenant theory, reminds us that the distinctiveness of the Christian revelation came over a period of time: "The awareness of the enhanced divine-human nexus does not really appear until the latter part of the first century C.E., where it very likely had liturgical origins". This means that, when speaking of the theology of the Christian Jewish relationship today, we must look to the historical developments of the first two centuries when the process of separation of the two communities was taking place. What must be recaptured today is the Jewish sense of community, peoplehood, history. Pawlikowski calls these key values which have been sidelined in much Christian covenantal theology. Linked with this is the new understanding of the growing vitality and development in Second Temple Judaism of which Jesus was part, especially the Pharisaic revolution.

Whatever the preferability of single or double covenant theory, at the end of the day, Pawlikowski concedes, like Monika Hellwig, that the most important question is "whether people in the Church describe Christianity as fulfilling everything valuable in Judaism so that the latter no longer retains any salvific role or whether, instead, Christians understand themselves as simultaneous participants with Jews in an ongoing covenantal relationship with God".

Jews and Christians are clearly now in a dialogue situation, the rules of engagement of which need to be clearly defined. Significant here is the paper on *Mission and Witness of the Church*, presented by Professor Tomaso Federici to a March 1977 meeting in Venice of the Vatican-Jewish International Liaison Committee. There is a strong emphasis in this paper on the need for witness

to take place in a setting of reverent dialogue. If it is to be sincere, such dialogue, says Federici, demands authentic self-discipline. Every temptation to exclusivism must be eliminated as also any imperialism or self-sufficiency. On the other hand there must be fidelity and dedicated personal searching, avoiding any form of relativism and syncretism that would try artificially to combine irreconcilable elements. Once the spiritual identity of the one and the other is guaranteed, there must be mutual esteem and respect (theological as well), and the conviction that every growth and bettering in the spiritual field comes about with the other's contribution.

Rabbi Leon Klenicki, a longstanding and esteemed colleague in the dialogue, commenting on the Federici paper, speaks of Israel's vocation to witness to the world:

The call of Israel is to stand among the peoples of the world as an image of sanctity, Kedushah, reflecting the inner being of God. Sanctification of the Name is a process of daily vital commitment covering every aspect of the individual existence. This (personal and communal) witnessing has meant through the centuries the offering of lives, the sacrifice of whole communities in defense of an eternal covenant.

John Pawlikowski's comment on this is that insofar as Judaism and Christianity could be said to have distinct but ultimately complementary roles, each tradition has the possibility of witness, which should be a mutual strength and co-operation, not a source of division.

There is also the sense of witness as service, especially poignant and vital in the light of the Shoah. Rabbi Irving Greenberg, a seminal thinker in confronting the Shoah, has called this an "orienting event" for both Christians and Jews, challenging us by saying that the only way we can give faith witness to each other and to the world is by acts of life affirmation. We have to examine our respective responses to the Shoah, which presents us with a "shattered paradigm of the triumph of life". We have, together, to reclaim the way of covenant, with all its ideals and achievements, a way crushed by Auschwitz, which tried to proclaim life an illusion, declare life worthless and obliterate it. This, too, must be part of our theological reflection today as we respond in faithfulness to God's covenant.

Irving Greenberg encourages his fellow Jews to "discover the ethical power of Christianity, the religious depth of its liturgical life ... the positive aspects of Christian otherness;..... (to) develop a theology of (the Christian religion) that will articulate (its) full spiritual dignity, (not) simply ... treat (it) as (a) pale reflection of Judaism..... to recognize the full implications of the truth that the Lord has many messengers".

Central Christian tenets such as incarnation and resurrection are reexamined by Greenberg, with a view to trying to accommodate them within traditional Jewish understanding. Whilst Judaism has denied divine incarnation, it has, he says, overlooked "the genuinely Jewish dimension of (the) Christian attempt to close the gap between the human and the divine", suggesting that Jews "recognize that it grows out of the tormenting persistence of a great distance between the divinely sought perfection and the human condition". He concedes the possibility of "a divine pathos that sent not only words across the gap but life and body itself".

Similarly, Greenberg reminds us that the belief of Christians in resurrection is based on authentic Jewish models and that resurrection is a legitimate hope in classical Judaism, reflected in rabbinic teaching and at the heart of Jewish prayer.

He calls on his fellow Jews to look at the wider picture: "Assume," he says, "there is a divine strategy for redeeming the world using human agents; assume it is the divine will that Judaism and Christianity are together in the world; assume that both are ways of affirming both yet and not yet with regard to redemption. Assume both are true but that both need the other to embody the fullest

statement of the covenantal goal and process....(our) two communities can (act) as a balance and corrective toward each other."

The challenge is two-way, says Greenberg: "to grow and deepen and hear the call of God to advance redemption and to renew the covenant in this generation." This wider vision is exciting: "If committed and believing Christians and Jews can discover the image of God in each other, if they can uncover and affirm each one's proper role in the overall divine strategy of redemption, surely the inspiration of this example would bring the kingdom of God that much closer for everyone."

I admire the breadth of Irving Greenberg's vision, his openness to Christianity, his striving to pursue a deeper understanding and appreciation both of his own Judaism and of his Christian dialogue partner's faith, searching for ways not just to "make theological space" for the other, but calling forth the best that is within it.

Leon Klenicki is equally generous in his attempts to reach out, theologically, to Christianity. Recognising the importance of this kairos moment, he says that "The new challenge of our time is the recognition that we are distinct groups of faith and spirituality who now can meet face-to-face, acknowledging a common ground of being, that is God." Klenicki sees as significant here the text of the 1974 Vatican *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration "Nostra Aetate" (No.4)*, which expressed clearly:

From now on, real dialogue must be established. Dialogue presupposes that each side wishes to know the other, and wishes to increase and deepen its knowledge of the other. It constitutes a particularly suitable means of favouring a better mutual knowledge and, especially in the case of dialogue between Jews and Christians, of probing the riches of one's own tradition. Dialogue demands respect for the other as (they are); above all, respect for (their) faith and (their) religious convictions.

This, says Klenicki, means that in dialogue one relates "to an existential reality: the other's faith which exists independently of my own thinking." He poses questions to his fellow Jews: "Do we Jews think of Christianity as a faith community, a co-participant in God's design? Can Jews consider Jesus as a covenantal messenger of God with a specific mission to the world?" He asks himself, "Can I personally, deeply involved in dialogue work, respond to these questions?" This dialogue is serious, with implications: it "obligates us to recognize one another's different spiritual realities and commitments. It is a responsible recognition of each other as persons of God."

It is important not to underestimate the difficulties of the task, given two thousand years of pernicious prejudice and pain-filled memory. Klenicki probes still further, asking himself and his fellow Jews in the light of our changed history:

Have we worked out this change in our heart? Or are we overwhelmed by images from a collective unconscious that are part of a repetitive process of memories? Does this process blind us in self-righteous attitudes? Is the Jewish mind prone to forget more fortunate periods in the Christian-Jewish relationship? Or are we afraid that we might become too close to Christians and lose our identity? Does a better insight into the meaning of Christianity lead to a change of our own covenantal testimony and our own religious vocation? Do we fear that understanding and empathy lead to conversion, or do we feel that proximity will lead to syncretism? Why Jewish insecurity? Is this insecurity related to our lack of confidence of Christians for their past actions and even present doings, or is it a mistrust, in general, of Christianity?

Christians must recognize the seriousness of these anxieties, the pain which lies behind them, appreciating how difficult it is for Jews to make this "theological space" in the dialogue between us. We are but at the beginning of this journey. As Klenicki says, "The time of disputation is over, but there is still a sense of Jewish defensiveness, or even distrust of Christian openness and desire for

friendship. We still feel a certain Christian triumphalism that denies our special mission. We still need to have a total sense of social and spiritual security, of being equal subjects of faith."

In his search to understand Christianity, Leon Klenicki follows the thought of a nineteenth century Italian rabbi, Elijah Benamozegh, who addressed the subject. When a young French Catholic, Aime Palliere, who wanted to convert to Judaism, approached Benamozegh, the rabbi encouraged him to remain a committed Christian and deepen his understanding of his own religious mission to the world - to "bring humanity to God and God's commands and moral law". This notion is linked with God's covenant with Noah, a covenant with humanity, with a sevenfold basic code of conduct.

Such a search to understand the validity of Christianity and its mission was already begun by the medieval sage, Saadiah Ben Joseph Gaon (888-942). He said:

The missions were twofold: one concerning Israel - "And I will take away the names of the Baalim out of her mouth." The second concerns the nations of the world, that they were destined to abandon idol worship, alluded to in the text: "And they (the Baalim) shall no more be mentioned by their name," by no single person anywhere, in accordance with the prophecy of Zephaniah (13:9): "For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language that they may call upon the name of the Lord, to serve Him with one consent."

This was to be echoed by the greatest Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages, Maimonides (Spain, 1135-1204), who said, "All these events (relating to Jesus) were nothing else than a means for preparing the way for the King Messiah. It will reform the whole world to worship God with one accord" In the eighteenth century, the scholar Jacob Emden (1707-1776) was to write:

The founder of Christianity conferred a double blessing upon the world: on the one hand he strengthened the Torah of Moses, and emphasized its eternal obligatoriness. On the other hand he conferred favour upon the heathen in removing idolatry from them, imposing upon them stricter moral obligations than are contained in the Torah of Moses. There are many Christians of high qualities and excellent morals. Would that all Christians would live in conformity with their precepts! They are not enjoined, like the Israelites, to observe the laws of Moses, nor do they sin if they associate other beings with God in worshipping a triune God. They will receive a reward from God for having propagated a belief in Him among nations that never knew His name: for He looks into the heart.

The recognition of the other in faith is the beginning of reflection on the meaning and significance of the other. It is by no means an invitation to syncretism. One's individual commitment must be not be lost, but rather strengthened. Paul Celan expressed it thus: "Ich bin Du, wenn Ich Ich bin," I am thou, when I am myself. Klenicki comments:

The acceptance of the other as a person of God, the Christian as a partner in redemption, entails their total recognition as an equal in God, and partner in God's design. The spirituality of mutuality is the beginning of spiritual healing, deeply needed by both ways of God.

For my penultimate thought, I would like to give the floor once more to Pope John Paul who said to the members of the Secretariat for Non-Christians at the conclusion of their plenary assembly in 1987:

There remain many questions which we have to develop and articulate more clearly. How does God work in the lives of people of different religions? How does his saving activity in Jesus Christ effectively extend to those who have not professed faith in him? In the coming years, these questions and related ones will become more and more important for the Church in a pluralistic world, and pastors, with the collaboration of experienced theologians, must direct their studious

attention to them.

I would like to conclude as I began: with a word from Dr Jonathan Sacks, which is only fitting for a Sacks Lecture! In his most recent book, *Celebrating Life*, he has a section on *The Dignity of Difference*. His opening words are:

The good news: faith creates communities. The bad news: those communities often collide. The problem, I suspect, has less to do with faith than with community, its twin, identity. We define who we are by saying who we are not. The circle of concern has an inside and an outside: those who are like us and those who are different. Pride leads us to attach great, even ultimate, significance to that distinction. God, we say, is with us, not them. They become the infidel, the unredeemed.

Dr Sacks ends his chapter with these words:

The great challenge to religions in a global age is whether, at last, they can make space for one another, recognizing God's image in someone who is not in my image, God's voice when it speaks in someone else's language. At stake is the great teaching of the Hebrew Bible - the diversity of creation, the dignity of difference.

The annual Sacks Lecture, given by Sister Margaret Shepherd, nds, at Essex University (United Kingdom), 21 November, 2000. © 2000 by Margaret Shepherd.