



On Christianity: Towards a Process of Historical and Spiritual Healing – Understanding the Other as a Person of God

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[Leon Klenicki](#)

Das Verstehen ist ein Wiederfinden des Ich im Du.

Wilhelm Dilthey

I see it every time I leave the synagogue. On Saturday morning after services, while going home, it is there, waiting for me, challenging me. It is the cross of a nearby church. Why does it disturb me? The sanctity of the day is marred by an image projecting memories of the past, memories transmitted by generations, by my parents, memories of experiences I never had. They are images of and memories of persecution and contempt for people. I am overwhelmed despite my own religious feelings of fellowship and my commitment to an ongoing dialogue with Christians. The cross is there, a challenge to my inner peace! I realized that I did not think of the cross as a symbol of Christianity. I was looking at a symbol of a group of people who in the name of their own religion had been unkind, at times evil to my own faith community. I felt uneasy, ambiguous about the cross. And suddenly another image came to my mind. It was a young woman whom I often see in the subway. She always reads the same little volume, a New Testament. She studies it prayerfully as I do every morning with the weekly Torah portion. I empathize with her spiritually, I feel that we share something mysterious, though committed in different ways. Perhaps she might not understand my spirituality, even deny it, but we are together in God.

Both the cross as a symbol, and the woman, reminded me of the need to understand the other as

a person of God. Can it be done? Can I really be a Jewish religious person putting aside Christianity, a religious community rooted in God's covenantal relationship? Can I disregard two thousand years of Christian witnessing, avoiding the representatives of that faith commitment? Can I reflect upon Christianity through an encounter with Christians? Can I overcome two millennia of memories?

History and Understanding

For centuries both Jews and Christians have been in disputation, a process fueled by Christian authorities and secular political powers, that resulted in prejudice, persecutions and self-righteous attitudes. Jews were and are in some instances thought of as objects of contempt rather than subjects of a faith relationship. This has been the reality from Constantine to our own days. The 20th century marks a new time, a moment of change in attitude and understanding.

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. It is also the challenge of being together witnessing God. It is the beginning of a new spiritual and historical juncture for Christians and Jews, a stage of history and spiritual testimony that we still need to comprehend and implement in our existence.

Aware of this reality, a Christian document, the 1974 Vatican *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration 'Nostra Aetate' (No. 4)*, clearly pointed out that,

To tell the truth, such relations as there have been between Jews and Christians have scarcely ever risen about the level of monologue. 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 favoring 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.¹

The text calls for a joint reflection. The dialogue relationship requires that we acknowledge and committedly reflect on one another. To perceive the other's faith as a call of God is the *sine qua non* of any meeting. It means that I relate to an existential reality: the other's faith which exists independently of my own thinking. A real, meaningful dialogue relationship accepts the other, the Jewish or Christian person or community, as independent, free, vibrant, unfettered by my own ideological or theological projections, part of God's design, even a partner in witnessing God. This was already expressed by Martin Buber.

Genuine conversation, and therefore every actual fulfillment of relation between [persons], means acceptance of otherness. When two [persons] inform one another of their basically different views about an object, each aiming to convince the other of the rightness of [their] own way of looking at the matter, everything depends so far as human life is concerned on whether each thinks of the other as the one [they are], whether each, that is, with all [their] desire to influence the other, nevertheless unreservedly accepts and confirms [them] in [their] being this [person] and in [their] being made in this particular way. The strictness and depth of human individuation, the elemental otherness of the other, is then not merely noted as the necessary starting point, but is affirmed from the one being to the other. The desire to influence the other then does not mean the effort to let that which is recognized as right, as just, as true (and for that very reason must also be established there, in the substance of the other) through one's influence take seed and grow in the form suited to individuation. Opposed to this effort is the lust to make use of [persons] by which the manipulator of "propaganda" and suggestion is possessed, in his [or her] relation to [persons] remaining as in relation to things, to things, moreover, with which he [or she] will never enter into

relation, which he [or she] is indeed eager to rob of their distance and independence.²

Interreligious or interfaith dialogue is a process entailing this affirmation. It takes steps of clarification and inner growth. The Christian-Jewish dialogue in particular is a singular proceeding. It has been and still is, in many respects, an interchange of monologues, a dialogue of repetitive party-cries, accusative responses flawed by a sense of triumphalism. To overcome this, both Christians and Jews must see their dialogue as a tool to recognize each other as human beings first, and as two peoples with valid religious commitments, vocations called by God. The first step of this dialogue is self-examination of our covenantal vocations in a relationship with the other person as part of God's design.

Toward a Reckoning of the Soul

The search for the meaning of Christianity, my own personal search, takes place at a specific time in human history. It occurs at a time of crisis. I take the word in its *koine* meaning: crisis is a time of turning, a time between two times of critical development.

For the Jewish people, as well for Judaism, the 20th century has been a time of death and resurrection. The Holocaust is an event projecting the utmost of human cruelty and the diabolic potentialities of the human being. Germany was the executioner, while the crime was in general accepted by the rest of Europe. The Holocaust marks a serious blow to 2000 years of Western religious preaching and mission. It reminds all of us that paganism in its anti-religious forms is still a reality and a presence in our midst. Its diabolic nature challenges Jewish witness of God, Christian mission to the world, and particularly the religious obligation of testifying in defense of the human being, God's creation.

One painful aspect of our death experience was the fact that Jews went alone to their final destiny; few voices declaimed, protested, such crimes. Is it not a sad reality to the Christian call that, in general, the community chose silence, when one and a half million children went to the gas chambers? Such lack of words helped the oppressors to act freely and without hindrance.

The *Shoah*, the devastating wind that destroyed a great part of European Jewry, marks a new period in time, disclosing the immeasurable powers of the evil inclination of humanity. Christian conscience cannot disregard this diabolic dimension of European people, many of them educated as Christians. The *Shoah* reveals the action of a renewed paganism but also a certain Christian failure in implementing Jesus' redemptive vocation, perhaps a failure of two millennia of Christian witnessing. This reality requires an examination beyond blame or justification.

We have come to know the meaning of historical resurrection: the State of Israel which was created on the land promised to Abraham. The memory and image of this land is a daily experience in Jewish prayer and ritual. After exile, we now know the redemptive meaning of a return, the return to the Promised Land.

We are at a turning point in our testimony of God. We are in search, as were Ezra and Nehemiah in biblical days, for a spirituality, a faith commitment in a world invaded by unbelief, easygoing ideologies, and materialism. Once again, we are witnessing the eternity of God to a universe of transitory values.

Both Jews and Christians are in a process of understanding again God's Call. Roman Catholics and Protestants are facing a time of crisis, a turning point in their faith commitments as well. Vatican II documents, as well as other Christian documents, mark a unique moment. It is a reckoning of the soul in search of new meanings, and new expressions of religious existence and interpretations of God's command.³ It is a difficult period in the life of Christians, both Roman

Catholics and Protestants. They have to overcome concepts and ways that originated in previous eras and adapt them to present situational insights. Christians have to accept a fact that has hurt them through Western history: their enchantment with secular powers, the temptation of political life followed by religious triumphalism.

Contemporary Christian self-examination is a reckoning of the soul, pondering Christian commitment after nearly 1500 years of Constantine's alliance of secular power and religion. It is a reckoning, at times painful, of Christian triumphalism in the Western world. This self-critical examination entails a reconsideration of Judaism. Christianity has denied Judaism and the Jewish people any role in God's design. The death of Jesus marked, according to Christian theology, the very end of the Jewish vocation of God. Christianity was and is presented as the final stage of God's promise. The Church is the new people of God. In some trends of Christian theology, the "old" people of God, the Jews, were "a deicide people," condemned to live separately in ghettos. It was this teaching of contempt that prepared the atmosphere of 20th century Nazi pagan persecution of the Jewish people, the *Shoah*. In general, Jews, though for centuries preserving some rights (the only non-Christian group to enjoy legal protection), were second-class citizens, burdened at times by extra taxes and constantly exposed to abuses and persecutions by ecclesiastical leadership, crusaders or kings.

But much has changed in contemporary days, and especially in democratic, pluralistic societies.

Toward a Jewish Understanding Despite Memories

The present Jewish attempts to understand Christianity entails a consideration of Christianity beyond and despite Western history. It needs to overcome the natural temptation of constant accusations, of pointing ongoing accusing fingers. It involves the difficult process of overcoming pain, and at times the "triumphalism of pain."

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? Can I personally, deeply involved in dialogue work, respond to these questions?

The response is crucial to the significance of the dialogue relationship. We have gone through a period of accusation, of still blaming Christianity for centuries of persecution and misunderstanding. There has been a Christian response to this in the form of revision of catechisms, of religious texts and certain theological concepts. Still much has to be done. The memory of contempt, visible in Western culture up to our days, visible in the popular understanding of Jews and Judaism, requires an ongoing educational procedure to erase the damage of past centuries, to cure a collective unconscious of images and feelings of anti-Judaism. Christians have to reckon with the covenantal ongoing reality of Judaism and overcome 2000 years of a teaching of contempt expressed in education and theological preparation. This has to be done in churches and religious schools.

Jews have to overcome 2000 years of memories, of images of persecutions, of resentment and hatred. The teaching of contempt can be cured by changes in Christian education and its presentation of Judaism. It is a process that, once started, will bear meaningful results. Images, however, are more difficult to overcome. They are transmitted through the collective unconscious of the people, from one generation to the other, and experienced in many ways in present life. It is only by signs of peace, of interfaith peace and recognition, symbols of wholeness, that we can overcome the sad effect of memories.

Jointly we live in a new time, a turning point in our spiritual commitments. Time is for us and, we believe, for any deeply concerned person marked by a "before" and "after," before Auschwitz and after Auschwitz. For Christians, time is marked by the significant experience of before Vatican II

and after Vatican II, or the search for the meaning of many Christian denominations for a contemporary witnessing to a changed and changing world.

We have also initiated at this time a dialogue that obligates us to recognize one another's different spiritual realities and commitments. It is a responsible recognition of each other as persons of God.

Understanding: A Painful Process

Understanding the other is not a simple operation for Jews and Christians because both must surmount as was said before, two thousand years of prejudice and memory. A hard endeavor indeed!

To overcome the negative impact of memories is a difficult task. Those memories, at times images of images, are transmitted from one generation to another. Contemporary Christians are faulted for the sins of their fathers and mothers and the very symbol of the cross, as was my own personal experience, becomes the symbol of Jewish suffering in the West.⁴

But history itself has changed for the world and very much for the Jewish people. 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?

Religious understanding entails the recognition of the other person as part of God's design. This acceptance of the "other" in faith is not possible under discrimination or persecution. While Jewish memories can be a source of inspiration in spirituality, they might, however, promote an arrogance of the heart in pain that affects the comprehension of the present. To recognize pain is significant, to make historical pain a methodology is a hindrance to spiritual growth and relational dialogue, and, in the case of Christianity, to accept it as a religious partner, respectful of differences.

Jewish Sources and Christianity

The Jewish understanding of Christianity is not a new phenomenon. It is rooted in centuries of shared historical experience, being equals as religious groups, or being considered and treated with contempt, as was the Jewish experience for a millennium. From Yehuda Halevi to Maimonides, from Rabbenu Jacob Tam to Menachem Ha-Meiri, from S.R. Hirsch to Joseph Soloveitchik, Jewish theology has interpreted Christianity in different and at times controversial terms. There have also been apologetical responses that relate to medieval confrontations started by Christian leadership.⁵ The *Sepher Ikkarim, The Book of Principles*, by Joseph Albo, the *Hizzuk Emunah, Faith Strengthened*, by Isaac Troki, are only two such examples. But these approaches were born out of disputations, apologetic pieces defending the main postulates of Judaism that had been challenged by Christian ecclesiastical and theological authorities. Medieval and post-medieval attempts at understanding Christianity related to an *object* of faith. Christianity was perceived as, and often was, an attacker rather than a way from, to God. But, how could Christianity be accepted as a religiosity under the Inquisition? The recognition by Jews of Christianity as a *subject* of faith is a recent phenomenon, a product of pluralism and, particularly, the North American experience.

Jewish theologians have tried and are trying to fathom the meaning of Christianity; but there still persists a sense of ambiguity in the attempt, an insecurity of the heart. This attitude, which I share at this time of my search for understanding, is evident in the consideration of Jesus as the Christ, his messianism, birth and divinity in the light of Christian theology. The focus of Jewish reflection is still on Christianity, rather than Jesus. Much more time, much interfaith dialogue, and the sense of total spiritual security, avoiding the image and memory of medieval and conversionary confrontations, will contribute to a calm approach to understand Jesus' spiritual vocation to the world.

Understanding: Contemporary Explorations

The possibility of an understanding of Christianity beyond disputation is a new phenomenon in Jewish life. The new situation of dialogue, an encounter of equals, challenges the old Jewish belief that Christianity will never recognize the evolving validity and faith of Israel. Understanding beyond disputation has concerned some of our religious thinkers in Europe, the United States and, lately, in Israel. I will refer briefly to three thinkers who attempted, in a pioneer manner, to reach an understanding of Christianity. Leo Baeck, Franz Rosenzweig, and David Flusser. The pioneering effort has been continued by scholars like Samuel Sandmel, Jakob J. Petuchowski, the Seymour Siegel, David Novak in the United States, Martin Buber and Dr. J. Schoeps in Germany, J. Werblowsky, Y. Talmon, and Schalom Ben Chorin in Israel, among others.⁶

Leo Baeck (1873-1956), in his early years, reacted to Adolph Harnack's *The Essence of Christianity*, an apologetic account of Christian faith neglecting the rabbinic background, and projecting an anti-Judaism that was part of German New Testament scholarship. In many respects, Baeck's response, *The Essence of Judaism*, was a defense of Jewish faith following the spirit of medieval Jewish apologetics.

Baeck described the meaning of Judaism and Christianity in his essay, "Romantic Religion." He characterizes Christianity as a romantic religion and Judaism as a classical religion. In his consideration of Christianity, Baeck echoed the disputational tone of centuries ago. He writes the following on Christianity:

Feeling is supposed to mean everything: This is the quintessence of romanticism (...). Its danger, however, which it cannot escape, is this: the all-important feeling culminates eventually in a vacuity or in substitutes, or it freezes and becomes rigid. And before this happens, it follows a course which takes it either into sentimentality or into the fantastic; it dodges all reality, particularly that of the commandment, and takes refuge in passivity when confronted with the ethical task of the day. Empathy makes up for much and gives a freedom which is really a freedom from decision and independence from inner obligation.

Baeck adds:

What is called the victory of Christianity was in reality this victory of romanticism. Before Christianity took its course, that through which it eventually became Christianity – or, to put it differently, whatever in it is non-Jewish – had already become powerful enough to be reckoned as a world faith, as a new piety which united the nations. The man with whose name this victory is connected, Paul, was, like all romantics, not so much a creator of ideas as a connector of ideas.⁷

Baeck, however, went through a process of change in his reflection upon Christianity. He underwent a stage of investigation that was mainly historical. Later on, he looked for a Jewish understanding of Christianity, and finally he focused on the possibility of a road of reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity.

By his evidence, Baeck pointed out in his historical research the need not to overemphasize the past, but to stress the future of the relationship and its unique creative possibilities. This emphasis on the future and its prophetic dimension is related in Baeck's consideration of the feasibility of a faith reconciliation. In his study, *Some Questions to the Christian Church from the Jewish Point of View*, Baeck suggested the need for a Jewish-Christian meeting on the religious and spiritual level, having reconciliation as the desired goal of the relationship.⁸ I personally have been much influenced by his theological reflection.

Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) was concerned with the meeting of Judaism and Christianity beyond polemics and confrontations. In his *Star of Redemption*, and his correspondence with Dr. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, he dealt theologically in his search for understanding Christ and Christianity. As a Jewish thinker, Rosenzweig indicated that, in order to view each other, both Judaism and Christianity must postulate only understanding of each other, a comprehension of the other as part of God's schema. It is not tolerance, but a mutual acceptance of God.

Judaism and Christianity, according to Rosenzweig, are approaches to God, ways to God. He felt that Christianity was "the way of the Pagan to the God who revealed his divinity to Israel." Both faiths "share revelation, God, prayer and the final redemption." Both are the "ways" of God. They are a unity in God's eyes and will. A Jew is born a Jew, is chosen by birth. A Christian needs to accept the birth of his faith, the acceptance of right belief out of growing heathenism. The Christian is prior to his election a Pagan. For Rosenzweig, the Jew is with the Father from the very beginning. The Christian needs the son in order to reach the Father, the ground of being. Church and synagogue are not on opposite sides, according to Rosenzweig, or in confrontation. Both have a mission; the Christian mission is to bring God and God's teaching-commandment to the world, and the Jewish mission is the mission of witnessing God's name and covenant. Rosenzweig points out the meaning of both faith commitments in relationship to the essence of the Christian-Jewish relationship.⁹

Christianity and Judaism have different tasks but a joint element, God. Their task is to testify to God separately, but not in drastic opposition, in a world where the very values of our faith commitments are despised or taken indifferently under the burden of spiritual frivolity and senseless materialism. Christianity, for Rosenzweig, has a duty to the world:

Christianity, as the eternal way, has to spread ever further. Merely to preserve its status would mean for it renouncing its eternity and therewith death. Christianity must proselytize. This is just as essential to it as self-preservation through shutting the pure spring of blood off from foreign admixture is to the eternal people. Indeed, proselytizing is the veritable form of its self-preservation for Christianity. It propagates by spreading. Eternity becomes eternity of the way by making all the points of the way, one by one, into midpoints. In the eternal people, procreation bears witness to eternity; on the eternal way this witness must really be attested to as witness. Every point of the way must once bear witness that it knows itself as midpoint of the eternal way. There the physical onward flow of the one blood bears witness to the ancestor in the engendered grandson. Here the outpouring of the spirit must establish the communion of testimony in the uninterrupted stream of baptismal water coursing on from each to another. Every point which this outpouring of the spirit reaches must be able to survey the whole path as an eternal communion of testimony. But the way can be surveyed only if it is itself the content of the testimony. In the witness of the communion the way must be attested at the same time. That communion becomes a single one through the attested belief. The belief is a belief in the path. Everyone in the communion knows that there is no eternal way other than the way which he is going. Only [they] belong to Christianity who know [their] own life to be on the way which leads from Christ come to Christ coming.¹⁰

Franz Rosenzweig states in his work and later on in his correspondence with Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy that there are two ways, two divine revelations, Judaism and Christianity. The Christian

vocation is the conversion of the pagan world into the alliance with God through Jesus. A question faces Rosenzweig's stand: Is the mission of conversion a derogation of other religions, such that non-Christians are wrong or are missing an essential divine call?

Rosenzweig was aware of the problem. In his letter to Rosenstock-Huessy, May 11, 1918, he defers to a time of "interim kingdom":

I see that I have to explain to you the Jewish relationship to the "interim kingdom" from somewhat closer range (therefore, somewhat dialectically). I have already written you regarding the fact that it is not enough that the Christian lives from the beginning of the interim kingdom and the Jew lives from its end. Therefore, to be more exact: the Christian relationship to the interim kingdom is one of affirmation; the Jewish relationship is one of negation. What will be affirmed or denied? The interim. How does one affirm an interim? By positing the beginning as positive, as having been, and the end as negative, as not yet having been. So this is not necessarily your personal relationship to the interim kingdom but the Christian relationship in general. The positive is always what is obvious, at least at first. So, too, in this case it is the affirmation of the beginning which determines the concept, which posits it, which makes it the thesis. And only the dialectic of development can bring the negative part as well to an independent significance. Going on with our questioning: how does one negate an interim? Or, more precisely, how do you express in terms of an interim that something is not an interim? (This is a problem which has a very striking analogy; namely, the concept of the irrational number.) So how does one not deny an interim in this way? Insofar as one posits the beginning as negative, as not yet existing, and the end as positive, as already existing. So the beginning and end are in fact not reversed but revalued. And here you have Judaism. The beginning of the interim kingdom, the coming of the messiah, has not yet happened; the end, the kingdom of God, has already begun, is already here, is already given today for every Jew in the unmediated, definitive relationship to God Himself, in the daily "taking on oneself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven" through fulfilling of the Law.¹¹

The "Interim Kingdom" requires a dual process of personal examination, Jews and Christians reckoning past and present, and the joint reflection of Judaism and Christianity as faith commitments of their joint witnessing until the fulfillment of human history: God's messianic promise and Presence.

Dr. David Flusser, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, proposed a study of the New Testament in order to know our rabbinic background. He pointed out that the study of the Gospels is one way to recover a sense of the society and spiritual trends of early rabbinic currents. He points out that,

Jewish sources alone cannot teach us enough about Second Temple Judaism. Our information on rabbinic Judaism from these sources, for example, dates from a few generations after the rise of Christianity. The Sages began to chronicle their own history only after the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.) And most of those who recorded their earlier tradition in the Midrashim (books of biblical exegesis) and in the rabbinic legends lived at least a generation after the destruction of the Temple or later. Nevertheless, even the superficial reader of these sources will soon find that they reflect an old tradition which in many cases is considerably earlier than the period of those in whose names it is reported.¹²

I am grateful to Leo Baeck, Franz Rosenzweig and David Flusser for their work. They have influenced my search, present and future, for an understanding and consideration of Christianity as a covenantal faith commitment: the other in faith. The main stages of this process of understanding are knowledge of Christianity that leads to recognition and reconciliation, not melting; the realization of interrelated yet independent covenantal events, Sinai and Calvary; and the need to study the New Testament as a source to comprehend rabbinic theology.

Understanding Christianity: A Personal Experience

There is a common feature in the contemporary Jewish search for an understanding of Christianity. The mood is of friendship and even curiosity, but also concern. The time of disputation is over, but there is still a sense of Jewish defensiveness, of 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.

Jewish theological considerations of Christianity are not considered normative statements of the synagogue directed to the whole community. They are individual responses based in Jewish tradition. The community might or might not accept these proposals. The individual Jew, member of the community, represents his/her search and commitment, his/her search for an understanding of Christianity, accepting the other as a person of God.

Understanding and acceptance reinforce personal identity. The personal testimony is, at this point, a starting course. I will share with you my own search for knowing and understanding Christianity. I do it from my own human situation. I was born and educated in Argentina, an 80% Catholic country, where Vatican II is not yet a total reality. Integralism is part of daily reality, a tradition difficult to overcome in a society where the constitution recognizes Catholicism as the official religion of the country. Other faiths are "tolerated" as foreign cults. I was, however, influenced in my youth by the thought of Jacques Maritain and Emmanuel Mounnier. Later on, I devoted much time in my seminary, the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, to the study of the New Testament and Christian theology. My philosophy thesis was on "The Mystical Language of Saint John of the Cross," and the rabbinic one was a study of the Jewish and Catholic commentaries of the 15th century *Biblia de Alba*, a translation of the Bible in Spanish.

In my search to understand Christianity, I follow the thought of Rabbi Elijah Benamozegh, the 19th century Italian thinker who devoted part of his work to the subject.¹³ Benamozegh was approached by a young French Catholic, Aime Palliere, who wanted to convert to Judaism.¹⁴ The rabbi persuaded him to continue his Christian commitment and deepen the meaning of his religious mission to the world. Christianity, stressed Benamozegh, has a mission to the world, not to the Jews. It has to bring humanity to God and God's commands and moral law. This universal vocation, parallel to Judaism's universal witnessing of God, is linked to Noah's covenant. Benamozegh pointed out that the first covenant of God with Adam-Eve or Noah are essentially covenants with humanity. God imposed codes of behavior. The seven Noahide laws – practice of faith and justice, avoidance of homicide, illicit intercourse, eating of living creatures, idolatry and blasphemy – are to be observed by all humanity. Noah, specifically, did not fulfill his obligation and left to Jesus, according to Benamozegh, the mission to call the peoples of the world to God by following a way of holiness.¹⁵

This reflection of the "other" who, in faith, accepts Noah's vocation, is one very important starting point for a reflection on the Jewish perspective on Christianity's meaning and mission. I do know that it is difficult, if not impossible, for Christians to understand this idea. It is, however, a Jewish effort that might be changed in future stages of our reflection. It is not a definitive position, and requires a careful consideration that should have in mind the Christian proclamation of Abraham as the root of the Christian vocation. I am not ready yet to understand this Abraham-Jesus relationship in my own search for the meaning of Christianity as "the other" in God. There is, however, the recognition of a valid covenantal understanding of both Judaism and Christianity.

Dual Missions

The process toward a Jewish understanding of a valid Christian mission was already stated by the medieval sage, Saadia Ben Joseph Gaon (882-942), who said that:

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."

Considering Noah a precursor of Jesus' vocation does not belittle the latter's mission.¹⁶ Jesus' mission is conceived as part of God's Call to humanity, thereby forming a bond with Jews as a community of souls testifying to God. The kingdom is not accomplished by one people alone. The very text of the book of Genesis points out the need for companionship. God creates Adam and Eve in order to create a community of faith. This community of faith is the typology for the Christian-Jewish encounter, a joint testimony witnessing to God.

The contemporary Jewish theologian, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, describes this special sense of community by stating that:

Communities are established the very moment I recognize the thou and exchange greetings to the thou. One individual extends the 'Shalom' greetings to another individual; and in so doing he creates a community (...). Recognition means sacrificial action: the individual who withdraws in order to make room for the thou.¹⁷

This recognition of the other in faith is the starting point of a Jewish reflection on the meaning and mission of Christianity. It is not an easy task. It involves a reconsideration of the past, and a nearly prophetic hope in the future. It entails *teshuvah*, a change of heart that allows for the recognition of the other as part of God's design.

Teshuvah is a reconsideration of the past oriented toward a transformation of the heart, a reconsideration of past events and even present realities. *Teshuvah* involves a return to God, an acceptance of self and fellow people, those of our own faith as well as those with whom we share the hope of God. We have not sinned in our rapport with Christianity. We were the victims of Christian religious and political triumphalism. Our reaction, quite understandable, has been of pain and recrimination. We have developed at times in our anguish a sense of pain denying any possibility of encounter and friendship.

Contemporary *teshuvah*, a change of heart, recognizes Christian past transgressions, but it also responds affirmatively, in the recognition of contemporary Christian repentance and penitence vis-à-vis Judaism. *Teshuvah* means to recall that history has changed human existence after the diabolic reality of Auschwitz. We are summoned after total evil to be together in, and toward, God.

To recognize the other as a person of faith is not an invitation to syncretism. It is not to lose individual commitment, but rather to strengthen particular vocations while being respectful of other vocations. *Teshuvah*, the change of heart, is reconsideration mindful of differences, but concerned with fellowship. It is the first step, difficult by its own nature, toward encounter and communion. But for many in the Jewish community, it is not yet a first step. It will take time and the realization of a special historical and religious time: the first century.

To the Roots: Toward an Understanding of the First Century

A careful study of the first century is central to a Jewish reconsideration of Jesus and early Christianity. For a long time I personally found it difficult to call the days of Christianity's beginning the "First Century." I felt that it was a Christian classification rather than a Jewish accounting of time. Yet, the study of the origins of Pharisaism and rabbinic Judaism made me realize that it was

a first century, though we follow a different account of time, for both early Christianity and rabbinic Judaism. It also allows me to understand the meaning of our vocations.

For Judaism, the first century had its roots in the experience of the Babylonian exile and return to Jerusalem. It was a caesura in our divine vocation. It started in the 4th century before the common era (BCE) with Ezra and Nehemiah. It was a process of clarification and interpretation of the biblical word that would engage teachers and scribes for several centuries. Interpretation inevitably involves a reshaping of the text to make it meaningful for the present existential situation. Professor Simon Rawidowicz defines it as a "revolution from within," an enterprise that defines spirituality and actualizes God's word and covenant.

Interpretation lives by crisis in various degrees. The crisis that stimulates it will become its criterion. Interpretation can be characterized by a particular attitude of the interpreter who struggles between preserving and rejecting some forms of content of the word at his interpretative "mercy," by a tension between continuation and rebellion, tradition and innovation. It derives its strength both from a deep attachment to the "text" and from an "alienation" from it, a certain distance, a gap which has to be bridged. Interpretation is the "way out" when [humanity] is compelled to "take it" or "break it." Many a battle was fought and lost on the battlefield of interpretation. And the battle goes on and will go on as long as the person is an interpreter."¹⁸

Tradition and innovation inspired the vocations of innumerable generations of commentators and interpreters. Pharisees, scribes, Jesus and his school. They were challenged by life and history, by the very difficult task of being religious in the midst of alien traditions, confronting various kingdoms and political regimes. Tradition became a way of being, open to interpretation that made out of religion a way of being and going.

The interpreters of biblical teaching, from the time of Ezra to the second century C.E., concerned themselves with God, His Commanding Voice and Word, and their implementation in the daily life of Israel. The interpreters' mission was to find ways and modes of making the covenantal relationship – God's election of Israel – a reality in the life of the Chosen People, a continuous reality of God's love. This preoccupation resulted in a body of regulations and recommendations on how to lead a life of holiness. The methodology of sanctity was called *Halakah*, often translated as "law" in the Greek and later on in Western languages. This translation has hurt the understanding of rabbinic Judaism for two millennia.¹⁹

Halakah is a noun considered to be derived from the verb *halah*, "to go." *Halakah* is a way of being and going, a manifestation of the covenant with God, a manner of living and reliving God's commands and partnership. Living a *halakic* life means to make God's Presence a reality in all aspects of life: at the moment of waking up in the morning, thanking God for restoring the soul; at meals, thanking God for the goodness of food; at prayer and at study, thanking God for His Presence. *Halakah* is the joy of being guided, and shaping one's life, by the experience of covenant, under the tutelage of tradition. *Halakah* is the discipline of being religious and living a religious existence, a way-of being with God, for God.

Three religious groups dominated Jewish theological thought of the time, all of them familiar to Jesus. There may have been more, but essentially we talk of the Sadducees, the Pharisees, and the Essenes. Added to that were the Zealots, a nationalist group involved in the Jewish war of 66-73 common era (CE). The Sadducees originated around the third century BCE and were composed largely of priests, merchants and members of the upper classes. The Sadducees controlled the clerical Temple structure and many of them were members of the Sanhedrin. They followed the prescriptions of the Written Torah and were opposed to any interpretation following the tradition of the Oral Torah, which was the rule of the Pharisees. The Sadducees emphasized the value of temple sacrifice, a reminder of the biblical offering, as a way of bringing the experience

of God to the people.

The Pharisees were a unique group, a spiritual movement that renewed Jewish life after the exile (Ezra and Nehemiah) and the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE. It became the movement of the rabbinic sages who rebuilt Judaism in the following centuries. Out of the study of the Written Torah and prayer, the sages constructed an Inner Temple, a fortress of God that has lasted for millennia.

The main concepts of the Pharisees are expressed symbolically in the Star of David. One triangle represents God, revelation and covenant; and the other, creation, peoplehood, and, finally, redemption. These basic ideas inspired the work of the rabbis and their attempt to make the God-Israel relationship a daily reality of the individual and the community. To believe in God is not a verbal manifestation or recognition but an exercise of the divine, living God daily, inspiring each moment of the life of the Jewish person in the community and vis-a-vis other groups.

The Essenes were a religious brotherhood up to about the second century BCE. By the end of the first century they were located and organized as a monastic community on the northwestern shore of the Dead Sea area. The Essenes stressed the need for personal piety and avoidance of transgression and iniquity. They believed in the immortality of the soul but rejected the concept of bodily resurrection. They were critical of the temple ritual and bureaucracy and opted for a secluded life in the wilderness of Judea as a way of implementing the covenantal relationship with God. They lived simple lives, despised luxury, and shared their property. The Essenes' monastic ways were reflected in the life of John the Baptist and influenced the followers of Jesus.

Finally, the Zealot movement was a nationalistic group. Israel was considered a theocracy by the Zealots, and their leaders asked fellow Jews not to pay tribute to Rome or acknowledge the emperor as a master. Their preaching is reflected in some New Testament texts, Luke (6:15); Acts (5:37); Mark (8:33), etc.

The Pharisaic movement emphasized religious life as a way in the world. To be religious is to accept God as a daily partner in redeeming the universe. The way is expressed in Judaism in sanctifying life and everyday existence. Rabbinic theology, *Mishnah* and *Midrash*, translate "the way" for Jews. In the phenomenology of exercising God's covenant, *Halakah* is that phenomenology and way. Was Jesus thinking of his vocation as a way - *Halakah* - to the world? Don't we need a Jewish reflection on John 14:6 in order to understand the *Halakah* of Christianity to the world?

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me. If you know Me, you will know my Father also. From now on you know Him and have seen Him".

The first century was a time of great spiritual intensity, reflected in the message of the different groups around Jerusalem. Jesus and his school were no exception. Jesus contributed to the understanding of God's biblical word by Hebrew and Greek. Paul understood his master's *Halakah* when he saw it as part of the biblical heritage. In his letter to the Romans 11:17, Paul talks of Christians as the "wild olive shoot," grafted "in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree." Jesus followed his teachers and expounded the meaning of God's word, as the Pharisees did. Rabbinic explanation, the theology of the Pharisees, was also a "shoot" in "the rich root" of the *Tanach*, God's word compiled in the Hebrew Bible.

Our reflection should focus on the two "shoots," the two branches, rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity, as two covenantal missions to the world, one to deepen the Sinai meaning, the other, in the thought of Rosenzweig, to bring God to the world.

Would it be too incredible to start thinking of both missions as branches of God's covenants working together in our own time to make the Eternal a real Presence in this moment in our history?

An Encounter in Faith

The word "encounter," frequently used in interfaith dialogue, carries some pessimistic meaning in view of the very origin of this word. Its root is in "contra," against. To encounter could imply that one group stands over against another. but it can also acquire a more positive meaning.

An encounter between Christians and Jews can become an act of affirmation that allows two different groups to regard one another as equal partners in a process that involves learning and understanding, as well as time and space, and the recognition of God's Call.

In the encounter of individuals there is a personal dimension of intimacy and respect. It is the background to personal encounter, common ideas or a common spirituality. This personal approach requires a recognition of the idea of establishing a community. The recognition of the other is an operation converting the "object" person to a "subject," a spiritual entity of wholeness, recognizing the other as the other person in/of God.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik describes the operation of recognition in a way that serves as a methodology for encounter and dialogue.

Quite often a [person] finds himself [or herself] in a crowd amongst strangers. [They] feel lonely. No one knows [them], no one cares for [them], no one is concerned with [them]. It is again an existential experience. [They] begin to doubt [their] ontological worth, this leads to alienation from the crowds surrounding [them]. Suddenly someone taps [them] on the shoulder and says: "Aren't you Mr. So and So? I've heard so much about you." In a fraction of a second [their] awareness changes. An alien being turns into a fellow member of existential community (the crowd). What brought about the change? The recognition by somebody, the word. To recognize a person is not just to identify him [or her] physically. It is more than that: it is an act of identifying him [or her] existentially, as a person who has a job to do, that only he [or she] can do properly. To recognize a person means to affirm that he [or she] is irreplaceable. To hurt a person is to tell him [or her] that he [or she] is expendable, that there is no need for him [or her].²⁰

The recognition of the other as a subject of faith, a person of God, involves a sense of responsibility, of care for the other. Rabbi Soloveitchik stresses:

Once I have recognized the thou and invited [them] to join the community, I ipso facto assume responsibility for the thou. Recognition is identical with commitment. Here again we walk in ways of our Maker. God created [humanity]; God did not abandon [humanity]; God showed concern for [persons]. God cared for Adam; God said: It is not good for man to be alone. He provided him with a mate: He placed [them] in Paradise, and allowed [them] to enjoy the fruit of the Garden. Even after [they] sinned and were exiled from the Garden, the Almighty didn't desert [them], of course He punished [them]. Yet He was concerned with [humanity] even while [humanity] was in sin. In a word, God assumed responsibility for whatever and whoever He created: "He gives bread to all flesh for His loving kindness is everlasting" (Psalm 136:25). As we have said above, the same responsibility should prevail between me, and the thou whom I have recognized, and with whom I have formed a community. I assume responsibility for each member of the community to whom I have granted recognition and whom I have found worthy of being my companion. In other words the I is responsible for the physical and mental welfare of the thou.²¹

The dialogical responsibility is for a subject, a person, and not for an object. We are responsible

and responsive to the other as a spiritual entity; a subject of faith, a child of God. It is a perception of mutuality for a fellow you, respectful of the integrity of the other in which the I confirms the thou in the right of their existence and becoming, in all their wholeness. Recognition of the other is an invitation to be a part of a community of faith, despite differences, a community in awareness of God's Presence. Recognition means to perceive the other as a person with a meaning. This is basic in the human relationship, and especially so in Jewish perception of the Christian as a person of God and partner in the search for the kingdom and its establishment in the universe. It is essentially a process of understanding and recognition of a joint human communion.

The understanding of the other is the comprehension of "alterity." The term derives from the Latin "alteritas," meaning "the state of being other or different, otherness." Alterity has been referred to as the question of intersubjectivity, but alterity is more than an epistemological question. The new theological focus is on the concrete reality of the other as a subject of faith, a reality of God. My recognition of alterity involves incorporating into my own subjectivity a special consciousness of another's human dimension, internalization in my ego of the alter, the other taken as a novel phenomenon. It is, following the biblical injunction, a "face to face" relationship centering on the face taken "as the locus of the other's expression as subject."²²

This idea expounded in the philosophy of interpersonal kinship of Emmanuel Levinas accents the other's face as presenting his or her subjective orientation onto the world. Face is more than a physical actuality, it is the body and spirit of a commitment. It embodies Abraham and Moses, Sinai and the rabbinic commentary for Judaism. For Christianity it is Calvary and Church.

The face-to-face encounter is not to objectify, but to communicate, to establish a relationship.²³ The encounter with the other opens up a new world of meaning to which we as Jews and Christians have not yet had access. It is not a process of reducing otherness to sameness. It is not ethnocentricity, egoism in a cultural mode. Essentially, the desire to relate to the other as a person of faith emerges out of recognition and understanding of the other's value, specifically, in the case of Christianity, my acceptance of its covenantal destiny and mission. It is also my own acceptance of my mission, the actualization of God's covenant in daily existence as a living vocation. Paul Celan expressed it in one line, "ich bin du, wenn ich ich bin," I am thou, when I am myself.²⁴ I am totally myself in covenantal relationship with God when I accept the other in covenant with God, the Christian.

Understanding leads to acceptance and mutual personal confirmation as tools of God. I have to know and experience the Christian person as chosen by God, with a specific task and a different way. I have to understand Christian fervor, "imagining the real," as Buber states: "Perceiving and thinking in the mind and body of another individual." To relate religiously to a Christian means to receive "an intimation of the being of the other."²⁵ It implies inclusion, embracing the other, in this case the Christian person, overcoming the over-againstness of previous history. To relate religiously is to fathom the mystery of our commitments under God and in a dialogue relationship until a new word will be developed to describe the very meaning of the present encounter.

Maurice Friedman, in his introduction to Martin Buber's *Daniel*, focuses on the projection of the Jewish perception of Christianity. To experience the other,

means to feel an event from the side of the person one meets as well as from one's own side. It is an inclusiveness which realizes the other person in the actuality of his [or her] being, but it must not be identified with "empathy," which means transposing oneself into the dynamic structure of an object, hence, as Buber says, "the exclusion of one's own concreteness, the extinguishing of the actual situation of life, its absorption in pure aestheticism of the reality in which one participates." Inclusion is the opposite of this. "It is the extension of one's own concreteness, the fulfillment of the actual situation of life, the complete presence of the reality in which one participates." In inclusion,

one person, "without fulfilling anything of the felt reality of this activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other."²⁶

Encounter as relationship is the acceptance of the other as a being in faith, as a person with his [or her] own rights and his [or her] own commitments. It is the communion of the spirit. Encounter is a process of the heart, from disdain to recognition, from alienation to creative proximity. It entails an evolution from confrontation toward a challenging relationship of equals, the starting point of spiritual healing.

Martin Buber, in his book *Two Types of Faith*, rightly pointed out the importance of the Christian and Jewish vocations in encounter.

The faith of Judaism and the faith of Christendom are by nature different in kind, each in conformity with its human bias and they will indeed remain different, until [humanity] is gathered from the exiles of the religions into a kinship of God. But in Israel striving after the renewal of its faith through the rebirth of the person and Christianity striving for the renewal of its faith through the rebirth of nations will have something as yet unsaid to say to each other and help to give to one another – hardly to be conceived at the present time.²⁷

Understanding: From Disdain to Recognition

Understanding is a process involving a movement from disdain to recognition. It involves an operation of inner cleansing and a search for mutual relevance in God's design. The inner cleansing is an attempt to see the other as a creature of God and part of God's special design for humanity. A respectful relationship that, at this point, we call dialogue until a more precise word can describe this unique, special meaning, is never a confrontation but a common fervor, mindful of the different vocations. Real interfaith dialogue calls persons into being, into their own being by mindfully acknowledging the other as a person with a way and a commitment, a person of God.

A Jewish understanding of Christianity after Auschwitz and Vatican II, in a democratic society, and beyond disputation, is the beginning of a process of recognition, to recognize Christianity, to perceive it as a faith enacted in history, as a ray of God conveying to humanity the eternal message. It is a manifestation of God, with a mission and a vocation to serve humanity.

Understanding becomes a creative reality when we realize that we relate, that we Jews and Christians are together. To be together does not mean to lose our identities, our religious vocations. It does not mean any form of syncretism that should be avoided as a dangerous, meaningless aberration. We are together, witnessing God together in our respective, unique conditions, together and at the same time individually committed to our faiths.

Understanding is a recognition of the other as the other faith, but also the recognition of a communion, of a *havurah*, of *koinonia*. I used the terms of our respective religious vocabularies, though they might entail other layers of significance. We are together in a community of souls, in a time of crisis, facing a turning point of our existence, together, but each one committed to a faith growing into new perspectives of faith.

Ours is a search for the mystery of a new dimension: the possibility to witness God together, not unified, but standing together in a time of general unbelief and ideological triumphalism. Ours is a search in humanity for God's Presence and Call. This concept has been meaningfully expounded by Emmanuel Levinas when he pointed out that, "The Existence of God is a sacred history itself, the sacredness of humanity's relation to humanity through which God may pass."²⁸

The recognition of Christianity entails the acceptance of "the other" in God and in a joint task of

redemption. I make my own the words of Will Herberg in this respect.

Yes, each needs the other: Judaism needs Christianity, and Christianity needs Judaism. The vocation of both can be defined in common terms: to bear witness to the living God amidst the idolatries of the world. But, since the emergence of the church, and through the emergence of the church, this vocation as it were, been split in two parts. The Jew fulfills his [or her] vocation by "staying with God," "giving the world no rest so long as the world has no God"– to recall Jacques Maritain's unforgettable phrase. The Christian can fulfill his [or her] vocation only by "going out" to conquer the world for God. The Jew's vocation is to "stand." the Christian's to "go out" – both in the same cause of the kingdom of God. Judaism and Christianity thus represent one faith expressed in two religions – Judaism facing inward to the Jews, and Christianity facing outward to the Gentiles, who, through it, are brought to the God, and under the covenant, of Israel, and therefore cease to be Gentiles in the proper sense of the term. This is the unity of Judaism and Christianity, and this is why a Jew is able to see and acknowledge Jesus in his uniqueness as the way to the Father.²⁹

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.

Notes

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