



Statement on Rabbi H. Schachter's "Experimental Judaism: Playing with Fire"

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The Board of Directors of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations (www.ccjr.us), an association of thirty-five academic centers and institutes in the United States and Canada devoted to enhancing understanding between Jews and Christians, objects to Rabbi Herschel Schachter's recent polemical claims and blatant inaccuracies, published in a d'var Torah for Parshat Re'eh on torahweb.org.

Rabbi Schachter accuses some Orthodox rabbis in Israel of strengthening *avodah zarah* (idolatry) and *shemad* (conversion out of Judaism) by educating Christians about Judaism. Aside from his needlessly inflammatory language, he promulgates a long list of glaring errors, errors that he would not tolerate in others' writings. Were a Christian to make similar errors about Jews, that Christian would rightly be understood as an antisemite. R. Schachter's factual misrepresentations create misunderstanding in addition to damaging the progress made in recent decades in improving relations between Christians and Jews - a rapprochement that benefits both communities.

We feel obligated to correct the most egregious of his errors. In the wake of the *Shoah*, most churches have undergone a process of *teshuvah* and rethought their teachings about Jews and Judaism. This includes the Vatican's 1993 diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel and its shift in 1967 from its earlier calls for the internationalization of Jerusalem to requests only for "international guarantees of freedom of access for the holy places." More importantly, Catholic teaching began to change with the 1965 adoption of *Nostra Aetate* at the Second Vatican Council. This authoritative document teaches that "Jews remain very dear to God...since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made." In other words, Rabbi Schachter's assertion that Catholics understand Jews to have lost their status as God's people directly contradicts today's normative Catholic teaching, which has been publically reiterated many times by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Most Protestant churches have issued similar statements, as even a cursory glance at our online resource library compellingly demonstrates. (See www.dialogika.us.)

People who make statements about other religious traditions have a moral and intellectual responsibility to represent accurately the other's self-understanding. Rabbi Schachter is no exception.

Rabbi Schachter writes, "It is very painful to see that there is missionary activity taking place in *Eretz Yisroel*." We are unsure to what he alludes. Evidently he is unaware that the Catholic Church and many Protestant churches today have no conversionary "mission to Jews" and allocate neither personnel nor financial resources to efforts to convert them. This is true not only in Israel, but globally. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote recently, "the Church must not concern herself with the conversion of the Jews" since such matters are in the hands of God at the end of time.

An explicit precondition of interreligious exchange today is that conversion must not be its goal. Christians seek conversation with Jews in order to understand today's Judaism, not to entice Jews to baptism. Jews speak with Christians to create understanding. When we understand the other, we come to understand ourselves better. We also avoid a demonization of the unknown, or, as in Rabbi Schachter's statement, a demonization based on past but not present realities.

Rabbi Schachter's most serious accusation is that if Christian guests in synagogues or Jewish homes participate in Jewish ritual activities, but see them as acts of worship of God in trinitarian form, then Jews are abetting acts of forbidden worship (*avodah zarah*), a most serious sin. In simplistic fashion, he blithely rejects the normative ruling of the majority of Ashkenazi rabbis that trinitarian worship is not forbidden to gentiles, only to Jews. He relies on an oral tradition from Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in the name of his grandfather that dismisses this idea as an error. This flies in the face of most halakhic texts and modern rabbinic opinions. (This claim also pre-dated the improved relations between Jews and Christians.) In sum, Ashkenazi tradition on this is much more complex and has led to the alternative approaches to positive relationships with Christians among leading Israeli rabbis, including the Chief Rabbinate, which holds discussions semi-annually with representatives of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with Jews.

It is our experience that constructive encounters between knowledgeable Christians and Jews do not encourage improper worship, and they certainly do not encourage *shemad* (conversion), a term that Rabbi Schachter interjects again in his conclusion. The goal of constructive encounter is to eliminate misunderstanding, persecution, and hatred of the other, whether Christian persecution of Jews or, sometimes the reverse, as in Israel today when yeshiva students insult and spit at Christians. Throughout history, Jews have suffered terribly from crude, hateful, and false stereotypes that were spun by Christian polemicists. Neither Jews nor Christians dare repeat this moral and theological error in our day.

We speak not only for our members but for all who have participated in sustained interreligious interaction and research when we declare that our respective identities as Jews and Christians have been deepened and enriched by our encounter and collaboration with each other. It is tragic that Rabbi Schachter distorts and misrepresents this crucial contribution to building a safer and better world for us all. The CCJR believes that positive interreligious relations based on accurate mutual understanding are essential.

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