The Churches and the Jewish People: Toward a New Understanding

04.11.1988 | Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People (CCJP)

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A. Preamble

We live in an age of worldwide struggle for survival and liberation. The goals of “breaking down of barriers between people and the promotion of one human family in justice and peace”, as expressed by the Basis of the World Council of Churches, constitute priorities among all people of living faiths. Through the “Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths”, adopted by the Central Committee in 1977 and 1979, the World Council of Churches has encouraged the growth of mutual respect and understanding between and among religions as an important basis for human cooperation and harmony. Christians confess that God, whom they have come to know in Jesus Christ, has created all human beings in the divine image and that God desires that all people live in love and righteousness. The search for community in a pluralistic world involves a positive acceptance of the existence and value of distinct historical communities of faith relating to one another on the basis of mutual trust and respect for the integrity of each other’s identities. Given the diversity of living faiths, their adherents should be free to “define themselves”, as well as to witness to their own gifts, in respectful dialogue with others.

While the promotion of mutual respect and understanding among people of all living faiths is essential, we as Christians recognize a special relationship between Jews and Christians because of our shared roots in biblical revelation. Paradoxically, this special relationship has often been a source of tension and alienation in history with destructive consequences for our Jewish neighbours. We believe that an honest and prayerful consideration of the ties and divergences between Jewish and Christian faiths today, leading to better understanding and mutual respect, is

in harmony with the will of one living God to whom both faith communities confess obedience.

B. Historical Note

Since the end of World War II the WCC and its various agencies have shown serious, albeit periodic, concern regarding Jewish-Christian relations. The First Assembly in Amsterdam (1948) acknowledged “the special meaning of the Jewish people for Christian faith” and denounced antisemitism “as absolutely irreconcilable with the profession and practice of the Christian faith” and “a sin against God and man.” The Third Assembly in New Delhi (1961) reaffirmed the WCC’s previous repudiation of antisemitism and, at the same time, rejected the notion that Jews today share in guilt for the death of Christ:

In Christian teaching the historic events which led to the crucifixion should not be so presented as to fasten upon the Jewish people of today responsibilities which belong to our corporate responsibility.

The Commission on Faith and Order at its Bristol meeting (1967) accepted and commended for further theological study a report that called for a systematic rethinking of the Church’s theological understanding of Judaism This important proposal was based especially on the following points:

1. Affirmation of the continuity between the Church and the Jewish people, “Christ himself (being) the ground and substance of this continuity”;
2. Affirmation of the positive significance of the continuing existence of the Jewish people as “a living and visible sign” of God’s faithfulness and love;
3. Rejection of the notion that the sufferings of the Jews are proof of any special guilt before God and recognition of guilt on the part of Christians who have persecuted Jews or have often stood on the side of the persecutors;
4. Acknowledgment that disobedience before God has in various ways marked not only Jews, as often assumed by Christians, but also Christians themselves, and that therefore both “can live only by the forgiveness of sin, and by God’s mercy”;
5. Recognition that Christians honestly disagree among themselves regarding “the continued election of the Jewish people alongside the Church” and also regarding the nature of Christian witness to Jews, whereas arrogance, paternalism, and coercive proselytism are rejected by common agreement;
6. Recommendation that misconceptions of Jewish teaching and practices in Christian instruction, preaching, and prayers or anything that may foster prejudice and discrimination against Jews, should be properly corrected.

Although the Bristol report’s call for the renewal of Christian thinking on Judaism did not receive wide attention within the WCC, constructive work continued during the 1970s through the Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People (CCJP), resulting in the “Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish Christian Dialogue”, a document received and commended for study and action by the Executive Committee of the WCC (1982). These “Ecumenical Considerations” pointed out that the Church, in the process of defining its own theological identity, traditionally assigned to Judaism negative roles and images in the history of salvation by teaching:

1. the abrogation of the Sinai Covenant;
2. the replacement of Israel as God’s people by the Church;
3. the destruction of the Temple as proof of divine rejection of the Jewish people;
4. and that ongoing Judaism is a fossilized religion of legalism.

The “Ecumenical Considerations” urged a renewed study of Judaism in historical context and appreciation of the fact that Rabbinic Judaism, the Mishnah, and the Talmud have given the

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Jewish people spiritual power and structures for creative life through the centuries. While recognizing the diversity and difference between Jews and Christians, as well as among themselves, the “Ecumenical Considerations” also pointed out basic commonalities rooted in biblical revelation and called upon Christians: 1) to see that “for Judaism the survival of the Jewish people is inseparable from its obedience to God and God’s covenant” and 2) to learn “so to preach and teach the Gospel as to make sure that it cannot be used towards contempt for Judaism and against the Jewish people”.

It is important also to note the position of Vatican II (1963-65) regarding other living faiths, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism, on the basis of the solidarity of humankind under God for the purpose of fostering unity and love among all people. With respect to the Jewish people, Vatican II stated that “the Jews still remain dear to God because of their fathers, for He does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the call He issues (cf. Rom. 11:28-29)”, thus affirming the theological value of the witness of Judaism. The “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing Nostra Aetate” (1974) also point out that the question of Jewish-Christian relations is intrinsic to the Church’s own self-definition, since in “pondering its own mystery” the Church encounters the “mystery of Israel”. While Vatican II held that “the Church is the new people of God” it also clearly rejected the notion that “the Jews should....be presented as repudiated or cursed by God, as if such views followed from the Holy Scriptures”.

Vatican II expressed gratitude for the Church’s spiritual heritage received from and shared with Jews. Furthermore, Vatican II condemned all “displays of antisemitism and admonished that: “all should take pains, lest in catechetical instruction and in the preaching of God’s word they teach anything out of harmony with the truth of the gospel and the spirit of Christ.”

In recent times, a number of member churches of the WCC and/or church conferences to which they belong, following a similar direction, have issued separate official statements dealing with such topics as 1) antisemitism and the Shoah (Holocaust), 2) covenant and election, 3) the land and State of Israel, 4) the Scripture, 5) Jesus and Torah, 6) mission, and 7) common responsibilities of Jews and Christians. When examined in their totality, these statements significantly advance the Christian understanding of Judaism and Jewish Christian relations on the basis of key points:

1. that the covenant of God with the Jewish people remains valid;
2. that antisemitism and all forms of the teaching of contempt for Judaism are to be repudiated;
3. that the living tradition of Judaism is a gift of God;
4. that coercive proselytism directed toward Jews is incompatible with Christian faith;
5. that Jews and Christians bear a common responsibility as witness to God’s righteousness and peace in the world.

The churches still struggle with the issue of the continuing role of Jesus and the mission of the Church in relation to the Jewish people and with the question of the relation between the Covenant and the Land, especially in regard to the State of Israel. We need also to give attention to the self-understanding of those Jews who declare their faith in Jesus as messiah, yet consider themselves as remaining Jewish.

C. Affirmations

In the light of the growth of the Christian understanding of Judaism in the past several decades, we welcome the new appreciation of the faith and life of the Jewish people. We as Christians firmly hold to our confess ion of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and God (Jn. 20:28), in the creative, redemptive, and sanctifying work of the triune God, and in the universal proclamation of the gospel.

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We therefore feel free in Christ to make the following affirmations.

1. We believe that God is the God of all people, yet God called Israel to be a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3) and a light to the nations (Is. 42:6). In God's love for the Jewish people, confirmed in Jesus Christ, God's love for all humanity is shown.
2. We give thanks to God for the spiritual treasures we share with the Jewish people: faith in the living God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Ex. 3:16); knowledge of the name of God and of the commandments; the prophetic proclamation of judgment and grace; the Hebrew Scriptures; and the hope of the coming kingdom. In all these we find common roots in biblical revelation and see spiritual ties that bind us to the Jewish people.
3. We recognize that Jesus Christ both binds together and divides us as Christians and Jews. As a Jew, Jesus in his ministry addressed himself primarily to Jews, affirmed the divine authority of the Scriptures and the worship of the Jewish people, and thus showed solidarity with his own people. He came to fulfill, not to abrogate, the Jewish life of faith based on the Torah and the Prophets (Mt. 5:17). Yet Jesus, by his proclamation of the dawn of the eschatological kingdom, call of disciples, interpretation of the Law, messianic claims, and above all his death and resurrection, inaugurated a renewal of the covenant resulting in the new movement of the early Church, which in important ways proved also discontinuous with Judaism.
4. We affirm that, in the words of Vatican II, "what happened in his (Jesus') passion cannot be blamed on all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today" (Nostra Aetate 4). We reject, as contrary to the will of God, the view that the sufferings of Jews in history are due to any corporate complicity in the death of Christ.
5. We acknowledge that the saving work of Christ gave birth to a new community of faith within the Jewish community, a fact that eventually led to tensions and polemics over the issues of the manner of incorporation of gentiles into the elect people of God and the role of the Mosaic Law as a criterion for salvation (Acts 15:1). The majority of Jews, in their understanding of Torah, did not accept the apostolic proclamation of the risen Christ. The early Christians, too, regarded themselves as faithful Jews, but in their understanding of the eschatological events, opened the doors to the gentiles. Thereby two communities of faith gradually emerged, sharing the same spiritual roots, yet making very different claims. Increasingly, their relations were embittered by mutual hostility and polemics.
6. We deeply regret that, contrary to the spirit of Christ, many Christians have used the claims of faith as weapons against the Jewish people, culminating in the Shoah, and we confess sins of word and deed against Jews through the centuries. Although not all Christians in all times and all lands have been guilty of persecution of Jews, we recognize that in the Christian tradition and its use of Scripture and liturgy there are still ideas and attitudes toward Judaism and Jews that consciously or unconsciously translate into prejudice and discrimination against Jews.
7. We acknowledge with the apostle Paul that the Jewish people have by no means been rejected by God (Rom. 11:1,11). Even after Christ, "They are (present tense) the Israelites, and to them belong (present tense) the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises" (Rom. 9:4). In God's design, their unbelief in Christ had the positive purpose of the salvation of gentiles until, in God's good time and wisdom, God will have mercy on all (Rom. 11:11,25,26,32). Gentile Christians, engrafted as wild olive shoots on the tree of the spiritual heritage of Israel, are therefore admonished not to be boastful or self-righteous toward Jews but rather to stand in awe before the mystery of God (Rom. 11:l8,20,25,33).
8. We rejoice in the continuing existence and vocation of the Jewish people, despite attempts to eradicate them, as a sign of God's love and faithfulness towards them. This fact does not call into question the uniqueness of Christ and the truth of the Christian faith. We see not one covenant displacing another, but two communities of faith, each called into existence by God, each holding to its respective gifts from God, and each accountable to God.

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9. We affirm that the Jewish people today are in continuation with biblical Israel and are thankful for the vitality of Jewish faith and thought. We see Jews and Christians, together with all people of living faiths, as God’s partners, working in mutual respect and cooperation for justice, peace, and reconciliation.

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