



The Future of Jewish-Christian Relations

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Philip A. Cunningham, Executive Director of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, explores ways in which the relation between Jews and Christians might be viewed as something other than a 'zero sum' or win/lose matter. A presentation at the 2005 International Conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews.

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[Philip A. Cunningham](#)

I have to confess to a considerable amount of trepidation with the very broad and open-ended topic of "The Future of Jewish-Christian Relations." There are too many variables, too many unforeseeable possibilities to make predictions about future history that time might quickly disprove. Since I am a theologian, and not (to paraphrase Amos) a prognosticator nor the son of a prognosticator, I will not offer any predictions. Instead, after a quick glance at the recent past, I will leap over all future history to the ultimate End of Time, confident that these eschatological speculations cannot, as least, be disproved by anyone now present in this room. So please follow along on this little thought experiment.

One hundred years ago, what "relations" existed between Jews and Christians labored under the explicit and uncritiqued supersessionism that prevailed in Christianity – a supersessionism that deemed rabbinic Judaism to be a withered vestige of biblical Israel and Jews to be accursed by God. Some Jews had achieved affluence and a certain degree of prominence in Western societies, but prejudice and segregation were widespread, and pseudo-scientific "survival-of-the-fittest" racist antisemitism was rampant on both sides of the Atlantic. Honesty compels the acknowledgement that this picture has changed in the past century only at a terrible cost. It took the abomination of the Shoah to destabilize the equilibrium of Christian cultural and religious antipathy to Jews. Beginning immediately after the end of World War II, and most influentially forty years ago with issuance of *Nostra Aetate*, the Christian "teaching of contempt" finally began to be institutionally critiqued and reformed – though I would recall Cardinal Walter Kasper's repeated refrain that we are only "at the beginning of the beginning"¹ in this regard.

With *Nostra Aetate*'s rejection of the idea that Jews are "rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy scripture," its strong implication that Jews continue to abide in covenant with God, its wish "to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation" through dialogue, and its disinterest in seeking the conversion of Jews in historic time, instead awaiting "the day, known to God alone, when all peoples will call on God with one voice and serve him shoulder to shoulder," the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions" was literally a 180-degree reversal of centuries of prior Christian teaching and practice. The declaration, let alone the events of the subsequent four decades, would be beyond the imaginations of our ancestors one hundred years ago.

Given its revolutionary aspect, it is not surprising that *Nostra Aetate* encountered major difficulties as its successive drafts were debated. In addition to geopolitical factors, there was unwillingness on the part of some Council fathers and leaders to say more than a bare

minimum about Jews and Judaism. Some were reluctant to admit that the teachings of so many Christian luminaries over the centuries could have been wrong in regard to the People of Israel. Others were opposed to absolving Jews collectively, even only at the time of Jesus, of culpability for his crucifixion.²

(Here is where our thought experiment begins.) And perhaps also at work, even unconsciously, was the inability to abandon a “zero-sum” approach to Christian-Jewish relations. By “zero-sum” I mean the deep-seated belief that for one religion to be valid, the other has to be wrong in some fundamental way. It’s a win/lose model. I’d like to focus on this zero-sum orientation and suggest that it is something to avoid in both of our communities.

In part, zero-sumness, a term used by Robert Wright in his book, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (Random House, 2000), is a potent force in Christian-Jewish relations because of our history together. The inherited reflex of defining ourselves oppositionally to one another is firmly embedded in each of our collective religious identities. There is a strong tendency in both our communities to hold that if the other tradition stresses some theological idea, then the other should minimize it. I suspect that this proclivity manifests itself as each community imagines what James Dunn has called *The Partings of the Ways* (SCM/Trinity 1991). For Christians, “something went wrong” with God’s plan when Jews failed to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. For Jews, “something went wrong” either with the teachings of Jesus or with the way that the early church distorted them.

Oppositional definition and zero-sumness can be seen in the following statement, which I’ll express rather coarsely, that one hears occasionally: “If you don’t think that Christianity is better than Judaism, then why remain a Christian? Why not become a Jew?” (or vice-versa). An either/or dichotomization that characterizes zero-sumness is shaping such questions. Isn’t it possible instead to imagine that one might live as a Christian because he or she experiences covenantal relationship with God through the mediation of Jesus Christ and that the experience of this relationship is not diminished by a new appreciation that Jews also are covenantally beloved of God (and vice-versa)?

Speaking as a Christian theologian whose Catholic community now teaches that God’s covenantal life with Israel is alive and well, I have to ask if it not possible that God always desired for there to be two interrelated covenanting peoples in the world and so revealed Godself so as to bring this about. What “went wrong,” then, was not the mere existence of two covenanting peoples, but the ways in which these human communities came to relate to one another.

But let me pursue this issue of zero-sumness in Christian-Jewish relations in terms of its manifestations in recent writings and events. To keep things brief, permit me on the Christian side to speak only from within my own Catholic context.

In August 2002, the ongoing dialogue of the U.S. Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the National Council of Synagogues issued a joint statement entitled *Reflections on Covenant and Mission*. The Catholic portion argued that: “A deepening Catholic appreciation of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people, together with a recognition of a divinely-given mission to Jews to witness to God’s faithful love, lead to the conclusion that campaigns that target Jews for conversion to Christianity are no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church.”³ This policy contrasts with those of some other U.S. Christians, such as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church.

However, after the publication of *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* some prominent

Catholics protested that Christians should always hope, if not actively work for, the conversion of Jews. While some of these objections were ignorant of post-Nostra Aetate Catholic teaching, other complaints reflect an effort to make light of the significance of the recent Catholic recognition of the covenantal life between God and Israel.⁴

It seems to me, echoing some of the debates during the Second Vatican Council, that there are two approaches to Israel's covenanting operative within the Catholic Church today. The maximalist approach, which I would argue is the mainstream approach seen in the implementation and development of Nostra Aetate in subsequent ecclesial documents and in the writings of John Paul II, is a non-zero-sum approach, a win/win approach. It affirms that:

- Jews abide in covenant with God
- extends traditional Christian respect for biblical Israel to rabbinic Judaism
- tends to interpret both parts of the Christian Bible critically
- stresses the need to appreciate Jewish self-understanding
- and emphasizes the revolutionary nature of Nostra Aetate.

The minimalist approach to Israel's covenanting is a zero-sum, a win/lose perspective.

- It also affirms that Jews abide in covenant with God
- but while respecting biblical Israel, it tends to overlook rabbinic Judaism and Jewish self-understandings
- tends to uncritical readings of New Testament texts about biblical Israel or unbaptized Jews
- tends to rely exclusively on promise-fulfillment approaches to the "Old Testament"
- and seeks to downplay the groundbreaking aspects of Nostra Aetate.

For example, some months ago Zenit News Service, which had previously referred to the Reflections on Covenant and Mission as "betraying the New Testament,"⁵ disseminated an "interview" of an Italian theologian, Ilaria Morelli, who propounded the opinion that those conciliar documents that have pastoral orientations have no doctrinal authority and are, in fact, subordinate to the doctrinal declarations of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Hence, a curial office would be more authoritative than a council of all the world's bishops! Morelli contended that "to attribute a doctrinal value to the Nostra Aetate declaration falls, in my understanding, into great ingenuousness [sic] and historical error."⁶ Overlooking Morelli's dichotomous understanding of "doctrinal" and "pastoral" matters, my colleague Francis Sullivan has pointed out that in one of the speeches she cites to the contrary, Cardinal Bea actually asserted the doctrinal significance of Nostra Aetate:

Allow me to point out more specifically the importance of the Declaration insofar as it treats of the non-Christian religions. If I am not mistaken, this is the first time in the history of the Church that a Council has so solemnly expounded principles regarding these religions. It is therefore of great importance that the significance of this matter be fully appreciated.⁷

Compatible with Morelli's minimalist view of Nostra Aetate, Cardinal Avery Dulles argued in an unpublished paper delivered last March that:

The question of the present status of God's covenant or covenants with Israel must be shaped within the framework of Catholic doctrine, much of which has been summarized by the Second Vatican Council. In the interpretation of the Council, according to post-conciliar documents, priority should be given to the four great constitutions, then to the decrees, and finally to the declarations. The Declaration on Non-Christian Religions [Nostra Aetate], excellent though it be, is not exhaustive or sufficient. It needs to be understood in the broader

context of the full teaching of the Council.

This methodology effectively suppresses anything creative or groundbreaking in *Nostra Aetate*, a risky move given the eighteen supersessionist centuries that preceded it.⁸ Indeed, at the end, Dulles seems able to say little more than, “The Second Vatican Council, while providing a solid and traditional framework for discussing Jewish-Christian relations, did not attempt to answer all questions. In particular, it left open the question whether the Old Covenant remains in force today.”

I think we Catholics have done and can do a lot better than this zero-sum conclusion.

Similar dynamics can be seen in some recent Jewish essays. I will mention in turn the writings of three North American Jews: one Reform, one Orthodox, and one Conservative scholar. Michael Kogan has postulated three stages in “the churches’ progressive acknowledgement [since the Shoah] of a post-Easter role for Judaism in God’s plan of salvation.”⁹ For Kogan the first stage “affirms the ongoing divine love for the Jews and insists that special Christian attention be given to their plight as victims of Christian indifference and/or persecution. The result of this loving attention will be a new conversionary effort to reveal to Israel ‘its own Messiah.’” This would represent the views of many Christians today who would call themselves “Evangelicals.”

Kogan’s second stage holds that “Jews, still beloved of God, still the chosen people (along with Christians newly engrafted) follow a religion of great value. However, this is not a permanent condition. Ultimately, though not now – with the messianic advent one supposes – the Jews will in their turn be ingrafted into the Christian covenant – or the Christian fulfillment of their covenant.” This approach “leaves the Jews alone as regards attempts at conversion.” This position, which indeed many Christians do hold, is a zero-sum perspective. Jews will eventually, even if only eschatologically, see that they should have recognized Jesus as Messiah.

Kogan describes a non-zero-sum third stage that affirms an “equal standing for Judaism and Christianity as means of salvation.” He describes Torah “as another means of salvation for Jews.” If this means Torah has no connection at all with Jesus Christ, many Christians, myself included, would object. For us the divine Logos whom Christians believe is incarnated in Jesus Christ cannot be disengaged from Israel’s story. But the point is that while Kogan’s “stage two” is for him “much preferable” over stage one, it is in fact a zero-sum position that gives “to Christianity an ultimacy it denies to Judaism and is thus at the theoretical level less than satisfactory to most Jews.”¹⁰

However, at the 17th meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in 2001, David Berger, for whom I have tremendous respect and whose mind I love to observe at work, argued that Jews should have no objections to this kind of “eschatological postponement” approach because Jews should hold a similar position regarding Christianity:

[L]et us assume that I respect the Christian religion, as I do. Let us assume further that I respect believing Christians, as I do, for qualities that emerge precisely out of their Christian faith. But I believe that the worship of Jesus as God is a serious religious error displeasing to God even if the worshipper is a non-Jew, and that at the end of days Christians will come to recognize this. ... Once I take this position, I must extend it to Christians as well. As long as Christians do not vilify Judaism and Jews in the manner that I described earlier, they have every right to assert that Judaism errs about religious questions of the most central importance, that equality in dialogue does not mean the equal standing of the parties’ religious doctrines, that at the end of days Jews will recognize the divinity of Jesus, even that

salvation is much more difficult for one who stands outside the Catholic Church. If I were to criticize [Christians] for holding these views, I would be applying an egregious double standard. I am not unmindful of the fact that these doctrines, unlike comparable ones in Judaism, have served as a basis for persecution through the centuries. Nonetheless, once a Christian has explicitly severed the link between such beliefs and anti-Jewish attitudes and behavior, one cannot legitimately demand that he or she abandon them.¹¹

This perspective is somewhat related to what David Novak has called “soft supersessionism.” For “hard supersessionism... the old covenant is dead.” For soft supersessionism, “those Jews who not accept Jesus’ messiahhood are still part of the covenant in the sense of ‘what God has joined together let no one put asunder.’ Nevertheless, they are out of step with the fulfillment of the covenant which Jesus began already and which he shall return to totally complete.”¹² Novak says that he thinks “Christianity must be generically supersessionist” in this “soft” sense, and has suspicions about Christians who claim they are not supersessionist at all.¹³

Setting aside the question of to what extent one outside a particular religious tradition can define it, Novak, like Berger, is essentially supporting a zero-sum position. This has advantages for a religious minority since believing that a majority is in error is of great help in resisting absorption into it. Of course, there is also the danger that a similarly-oriented majority culture will periodically use its superior numbers to “assist” the minority in seeing the error of its ways.

All of which leads me to ask, in the context of the future of Jewish-Christian relations, isn’t it possible for us both to do better than this? I am afraid if we – consciously or unconsciously – settle for zero-sumness that we will be putting on blinders at the very moment that our unprecedented recent history has enabled us to see each other anew. Might unexamined presuppositions of zero-sumness incline us to consider interreligious dialogue as peripheral or optional rather than as an integral part of our Jewish and Christian identities? If there is even the remotest possibility that God has always wanted both Jews and Christians to walk their complementary though distinctive ways through the world, then does it really make sense that God would want us both to even partially base our self-understanding on the idea that “on that day” the others will learn that they were wrong?

In thinking of these matters, Catholics at least must now reckon the words of the 2001 Pontifical Biblical Commission Study, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*:

What has already been accomplished in Christ must yet be accomplished in us and in the world. The definitive fulfillment will be at the end with the resurrection of the dead, a new heaven and a new earth. Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. It can become for us a powerful stimulus to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith. Like them, we too live in expectation. The difference is that for us the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come and is already present and active among us.¹⁴

The use of such expressions as “we, too, live in expectation,” “the traits of Jesus,” and “the [futurist] eschatological dimension of faith,” remind us that both Judaism and the Church will, in a sense, be superseded in the Reign of God. The practices of both traditions will be supplanted in the Age to Come, e.g., Catholic sacramental life will be rendered obsolete by life in God’s direct presence. Furthermore, Jewish recognition of the eschatological “One who is to come,” since their “messianic expectation is not in vain,” must depend on perceiving “traits” mediated through the Jewish tradition. The eschatological messiah is to be recognizable by both Jews and Christians on the basis of different legitimate but converging “traits.” And, logically, each community, by seeing the other’s recognition, would fully understand for the

first time the “rightness” of not only its own point of view, but of the other’s as well. This all suggests that eschatological scenarios have greater complexity than simple zero-sum phrases like “a Jewish turn to Christ” or “Christians will come to recognize that worship of Jesus Christ as God was an error.” If, as Christians would certainly posit, the birth of the Church was part of the divine plan, then Christians must contemplate the possibility that the Jewish “no” to the Gospel and the development of the post-Temple rabbinic heritage were also parts of the divine plan. Likewise, Jews must grapple with whether or not the birth of the Church reflected God’s will for Israel.¹⁵

My plea is that both Christians and Jews try to think “outside the box” of our inherited reflexes of opposition and denigration. Even if our mortal imaginations are limited, surely God is capable of imagining or perhaps even dreaming of our traditions relating to each other in non-zero-sum ways.

If, then, as an exercise of divine freedom, God always intended for our two related covenanting communities to walk through historical time together, it may be that the eschaton will indeed bring about our absolute reconciliation, not in the sense of one ceding itself to the other, but rather in the sense of both joining in yielding themselves to the ultimate Reality. Then Paul of Tarsus’ doxology would be totally realized: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable God’s judgments and how enigmatic God’s ways!” (Rom. 11:33).

Notes

1. “The Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with Jews: A Crucial Endeavor of the Catholic Church,” Address delivered at Boston College, Nov. 6, 2002.
2. See Alberto Melloni, “Nostra Aetate and the Discovery of the Sacrament of Otherness” at: www.bc.edu/research/cjl/
3. Delegates of the Bishops Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs and the National Council of Synagogues, “Reflections on Covenant and Mission,” *Origins* 32/13 (Sept. 5, 2002).
4. For a relevant collection of articles, see: www.bc.edu/research/cjl/
5. “Controversy Swirls Around Mel Gibson’s ‘Passion,’” May 30, 2003, Code: ZE03053023, available online at www.zenit.org/.
6. “Misunderstandings about Interreligious Dialogue” an online interview in two parts, Jan. 14 and 16, 2005. See: www.zenit.org/. The quotation comes from part one.
7. AS III, 8, p. 649-651.
8. This suppression is really accentuated by Dulles’ complete lack of consideration of the post-conciliar implementation documents of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, especially its 1974 “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, 4” and its 1985 “Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Teaching in the Roman Catholic Church.”
9. Michael S. Kogan, “Affirming the Other’s Theology: How Far Can Jews and Christians Go?” Paper presented at the 15th National Workshop on Christian-Jewish Relations, Stamford, CT, Oct. 29, 1996: 12-13.
10. Kogan, “Affirming the Other’s Theology,” 13.
11. David Berger, “On Dominus Iesus and the Jews,” paper delivered at the 17th meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee, New York, May 1, 2001.
12. David Novak, “The Covenant in Rabbinic Thought,” Eugene B. Korn and John T. Pawlikowski, eds., *Two Faiths, One Covenant? – Jewish and Christian Identity in the Presence of the Other* (Lanham, MD, New York: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2005), 66.

13. Novak, "Covenant in Rabbinic Thought," 67.
14. Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible (2001): II,A,5 -§21. Available online at:
www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html.
15. For more on this point, see my "Reflections from a Roman Catholic on a Reform Theology of Christianity," CCAR Journal (Spring 2005): 61-73.

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