



## What can Jews and Christians hope for when they meet?

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**The Cardinal Archbishop of Paris explores how Christians and Jews can deepen their understanding of themselves and the "other" as they meet in dialogue.**

### What can Jews and Christians hope for when they meet?

**Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger**

Can a keen observer consider that most problems have been solved between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church since dramatic gestures were made on both sides, especially by Pope John Paul II and Israeli officials?

The truth is that these events allow the work of discernment only to begin. Such a task will appear as a more and more pressing priority to any person aware that this is a vital question for both Catholics and Jews in their mutual relationship.

#### I.

Before all, however, they still have to get to know each other better. The main point I want to make is that this should prove more fruitful than expected.

But for the time being, we first have to acknowledge that such an undertaking remains unaccomplished by Christians as well as by Jews.

A. To start with, how does the average church-going Christian believer usually picture the Jewish people, or the Jews?

1. His main-and decisive-source of information is the Bible. The dynamic identity of the Jewish people, whose sacred history emerges from the biblical text, is the practical structure of western civilization. The world of the Bible, which a Jew is entitled to consider as his own heritage, has also become the womb of all the visions of history and society that can be found in every culture inspired by the Christian faith.

The New Testament was written by Jews, and remains incomprehensible without sufficient knowledge of Jewish life and hopes both in the Holy Land and in the Diaspora in those days. Everyone knows how the documents may have been interpreted in contradictory, harmful ways even within the Church. But there is no need here to recall the details of all that the latest popes, from John to Paul to John Paul, have achieved in order to reject the charge of "deicide" and the teaching of contempt.

It is undeniable today that Christian mentalities have adjusted to a more accurate reading of the New Testament, and thus rediscovered that what Jesus preached was rooted in the Jewish culture of his time and in the biblical tradition. Ample evidence of this can be found in the recent writings of numerous Jewish scholars on the subject.

When Christians read the Bible as they value, respect and love it, they then form a highly religious picture of the Jews and of Israel. The conflicts between the Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Scriptures may remain tense. They may have degenerated into fratricidal, too often deadly persecutions. Yet, such confrontations now no longer ignore that the other is the closest brother. Christian attitudes have been purified by gestures of repentance, supplications for forgiveness and prayers at the Western Wall. Pope John Paul has clearly identified his “elder brothers”.

So that it would hardly be an exaggeration to say that the devout Christian is not far from considering any Jew as a reminder of the prophetic word or as a bearer of the sacred features of the History of Salvation.

2. In the second place, as far as the Jewish religion is concerned, a Catholic will be tempted to picture it in the image of his own ecclesial institutions. This is the case especially in France, where the Napoleonic emancipation (later extended to the rest of the Continent) has structured Judaism on the model of Catholicism, the latter as “the religion of the majority of the French”. As a result, rabbis are assimilated to priests, and synagogues to churches – or rather they are placed at the same level.

Such equation of respective practices and rites has projected on Judaism the way Catholics understand themselves. This is why they can be dumbfounded when finding out, even when they are learned, that *cohanim* or *leviim* need not be rabbis, and vice versa.

3. Thirdly, the historic evolution of Catholic mentalities has led to differentiating religious from political authorities. Such a distinction is familiar to Jewish culture. However, the result is that members of the Catholic hierarchy, when they look for partners, will spontaneously see rabbis or chief rabbis as their religious counterparts. Unless they are very well informed, they will tend to underestimate or take as strictly political the other institutional forms of Jewish life and identity. This may account for the (understandable) difficulty for them today to grasp the true nature of the State of Israel or of such an organization as yours.

4. Fourthly, it is easy to guess that what is most confusing for Christians is the Jewish identity. You may object that this is a bone of contention as well among Jews themselves. But that does not prevent any one from being aware of what is at stake.

So what do Einstein, Cohn-Bendit, Marx, Freud, Ben Gurion, Rosenzweig, Buber, Rabin, Begin, Bergson or Mendelssohn and countless others have in common, except that they are Jewish? Yet, what does that mean? Is it a feeling of unparalleled strangeness? Or is it the intuition of a subtle link, blending repressed recollections with the slogans of antisemitism? This is what sometimes leads non-Jews to ask the most naïve – and sometimes hurtful – questions.

Jewish strangeness is made even stronger by the concrete situation of the Jewish populations, who have experienced perpetual migrations along the centuries. A Jew will hardly ever or exceptionally be considered as a true native in any European country. After only a few generations, he virtually always remains an immigrant, and thus a stranger, and even more so because of his unmistakably distinct religion or identity.

5. Finally, the Shoah cannot be omitted. It is what sets today's Jews indelibly apart. Non-Jews see it as the distinctive mark which triggers the shameful horror of guilt and the terror of a threatening prophecy. All this only strengthens the both fascinating and disturbing features of Jewishness in

the Christian consciousness.

In short, what Christians are at a loss to take hold of is the Jewish identity. And yet, such institutions as the CRIF (Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France), or the European Jewish Congress, or your World Jewish Congress bear witness to it. Whatever their religious, cultural, political or ideological diversity, and whatever their theoretical differences when it comes to defining themselves, all Jews have something in common. Moreover, this common identity resists all criticisms and attempts or temptations to drift apart.

It is not linked to any nationality, or culture, or language. It is not even dependent upon religious practice, although this has played and still plays a key role traditionally.

It is rather the awareness of an ineffaceably common destiny, implying a certain ideal in human life.

It is the remembrance (even if it is buried) of several millennia of a history dominated by dispersion and persecutions, and at the same time the hope indestructibly rooted in the promise of life

It is also the notion of a duty towards life and humanity.

As long as a non-Jew, whether Catholic or not, fails to catch a glimpse of this reality, he will find it hard to relate to the Jewish world. In a certain way, the difficulty also concerns the birth and existence of the State of Israel. We know that its recognition was a decisive step towards normal relationships between the Catholic Church and the Jewish world.

B. Now the symmetrical picture of the way Jews see Catholics will only underline how difficult mutual recognition actually is.

1. Firstly, it would be simplistic to answer with only one word: "They're just *goyim*," for that term remains somewhat ambiguous.

Among *Ashkenazim*, it used to be synonymous with "Christian," since the non-Jewish population who lived alongside were Christian by definition. In that case, the Jewish consciousness in its turn projected on others its own identification standards.

Yet, there is some weakness in this approach, as diversity is infinitely greater among non-Jews than it is within Judaism. Hardly any consistency can be found outside, except locally, on the basis of national or religious belonging, or of a cultural or professional tradition. It is a widespread misconception in the Jewish universe to describe the rest of the world as falling into only one category.

2. Secondly, at the religious level, for many centuries the Jewish tradition has chosen to ignore the fact of Christianity, and even to avoid simply naming it. When the issue was raised, the answer usually was that Jews had no need of Christians to understand themselves. This may be true to define the essence of Judaism. It is less evident, however, to describe the destiny of Israel and its fecundity in the course of time. In any case, such an answer does not allow to account for the paths that have been followed by the peoples whose history has been shaped by the Bible they had received from the Jews.

3. In the third place, the weight of history has made the relationships between Jews and non-Jews ambivalent in the West, with efforts to both identify with or even assimilate Judaism, and reject or even eliminate it. Jews remember their marginal and enslaved condition, while Catholics would rather forget it. Moreover, the liberties that have been progressively granted in the logic of emancipation since the Age of Enlightenment have tended to erase the Jewish specificity and to

replace it by a common identity based on rational citizenship.

Although Jews have often played a decisive part in the shaping of modern culture, their difference has remained. Its origins may have become mysterious. It may even have disappeared as Jews themselves became oblivious of their strangeness. But it has always been present or capable of re-emerging, if need be paradoxically under the threat of an incurable disease, one of the names of which is antisemitism. As soon as anti-Judaism manifests itself, it will awaken in Jewish memories the remembrance, or even the reminiscence of recollections, of persecutions, stakes, the Inquisition, ghettos, pogroms and camps. Such ineffaceable images of the past weigh tremendously upon our thoughts and choices, but no more than the determination and strength to see to the triumph of life.

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This is why it is necessary to carry on the patient labour of mutual recognition, so as to grasp how Jews and Catholics truly see each other. We have to come to terms with the legacy that both unites and divides us. We have to know the other, both emotionally and concretely, if genuine dialogue is to overcome suspicions and wounded sensitiveness.

When I look back to the past twenty years, when I found myself in a privileged position to observe both sides, I cannot but admire the dedication and perseverance with which a number of both Jewish leaders and Catholic officials have struggled to rise above the misgivings and criticisms generated by the blows of the past, by the aggressive defensiveness inherited from centuries of persecutions and contempt.

On the other hand, when trust is shared, it becomes possible to speak out in truth and in depth, out of accepted mutual esteem and respect, as sensible beings belonging to one and the same human family. The real nature of the disagreements may then appear authentically, untainted by the confrontations of the past or by fears for the future.

I want to insist: the goal is not simply to reach the ideal of consensus or just successful communication. But we have to become aware of sensitivities, of their histories, of convictions, of silences and even of what remains ignored.

Such a work requires personal relationships, while in the developed countries social life does not always encourage open, direct debates, and rather continually roots up fresh bones of contention.

For us, antisemitism remains a nagging challenge. The Zionist wager offered a radical solution by giving to the Jewish condition of the Diaspora the identity of a nation that could defend itself and make itself respected. Another option banks on people's rights and common rationality, as is the case with the French legislation, which exposes and punishes antisemitism as a crime.

These reactions to recurrent expressions of anti-Judaism have their merits as well as their limits.

For antisemitism is the exasperated consequence of the denial of our difference— that unique difference which characterizes the Jewish condition, a difference that remains unmatched because it rests on the election of Israel.

Dealing with such irrational, symbolic power, which may be subverted into destructive violence, calls for wisdom and prudence. This is exactly where trustful dialogue between Catholic and Jewish representatives can contribute to containing senseless outbursts of resentment or vengeance, and – with God's help – to opening up respectful debates and fruitful exchanges.

## II.

Getting together and knowing each other better, however, will not be enough to wipe out all disagreements. But— and this is the second stage of this address – such dialogue should – or rather will – allow to point out the convergences that cultural globalisation is likely to facilitate nowadays. Mutual understanding will also foster a new awareness of shared perspectives on key aspects of social life.

1. Beyond our numerous shortcomings, the first vision we have in common is an ethical one. Of course, a great diversity can be found among Jews as well as among Christians concerning the norms of human behaviour. Nevertheless, the fact is that the message of the Bible and that of the Gospel strongly and really agree on ethical issues, as has been verified in many circumstances, even through the hazards of ideology. Two words may sum up this ethical attitude: justice and peace. The towering figure of René Cassin, who was the principal writer of the Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed in Paris in 1948, remains a dazzling example of this convergence.

At this level, it is not without interest to recall the role played by Jews in the genesis and evolution of Marxism. A number of us subscribed to it, out of a passionate love of justice. And the same, or their children, found themselves on the front line when it came to challenging dictatorship or terror in order to defend human dignity. They have paid a heavy price for such resistance.

Perhaps my viewpoint is too religious, or simply unduly optimistic? What remains anyway is that, whenever the human condition is concerned, with all it implies at the level of legislation, Christian and Jewish representatives prove to agree on the principles and foundations of social life.

2. Another common point between the experience at the root of the Jewish identity and the Christian faith or the cultures it may have inspired, is a certain idea of democracy and liberty.

The preservation of individual rights and of political freedom is part of the Jewish tradition, where criticisms of the monarchy are part of the biblical revelation, while such royal figures as David or Solomon are idealized.

The Christian tradition took up the same approach, although empires were precisely attempting to use Christianity to sacralize their rule and were therefore logically tempted simultaneously to persecute Jews. Nowadays, the defence of religious liberty leads us both to deny the State any sacred authority or control of human conscience, because such power can only be God's.

Perhaps, again, my vocabulary is too religious to deal with the political problem of citizenship? What remains, once more, is that today the Jewish experience and the Catholic tradition agree to maintain that what is sacred or religious belongs in the most intimate heart of the conscience of man as “image and resemblance of God”, and in personal worship of the truth.

The confessional or ethnic particularities which make up the treasure of each human identity should not be rubbed out by democratic equality. The latter should rather open up the social space that is necessary for every one to live with his or her distinctive characteristics while respecting the liberty of others and caring for the common good.

The fact is that, in today's world, Jewish communities thrive in countries with a Christian culture, where democracy is best established, that is to say western Europe, the United States of America.

3. One third (and practical) point is decisively relevant in the social sphere. It can be described by a word that has virtually become trivial: “racism”.

– From a Jewish point of view, the difference between Israel and the nations is not determined by ethnic or cultural factors. But it is rooted exclusively in the remembrance of the founding call that gave to the Jewish people a mission in the service of all. No human superiority or inferiority is

significant in the eyes of the Most High. Only the relationship to the Holy One creates a distinction that carries in itself universal hope and the seeds of equal rights for all.

- The Christian approach has been undermined from within by national identities. But in the wake of Israel's universalism, Christianity is aware of carrying the promise of a universal communion. Each culture, ethnic group, language or nation deserves to be recognized in its specificity, but none can claim to be superior or to assert a supremacy that would inevitably offend the common dignity and the unique vocation of all.

Moreover, the design of the divine Providence, as Catholicism understands it from the Bible, is to gather all human families. They already share the same origin, which they received from their Creator. They are called to share the same blessing in the promise made through Abraham to all nations.

If the State of Israel was condemned as "racist" by the United Nations in 1975, for the same reason as the South Africa of apartheid, it must have been in ignorance of the Lord's ways and of the Election of His People – as if the sacred distinction between Israel and the nations had been abolished, and could deceitfully be reduced to an alleged "*limpieza de sangre*" (purity of blood).

In truth, the Catholic notion of communion is inspired by that of the People of God and of the relationships between Israel and the *goyim*. The temptation that Catholicism has experienced has been that of the pagans, that is to say to eliminate the uniqueness of Israel from its consciousness. The risk for Jews is to consign the nations out into some threatening mist, and to ignore their being Christian if this cannot be forgotten.

Perhaps common reflections will allow the ones and the others to refine their perceptions and to improve their practices?

To conclude, I wish to add a remark which concerns the domain of faith more directly.

The legacy of past polemics and suspicions had left frozen irritations among Christians as well as among Jews, in the way they see both themselves and the others. At the intellectual level, this has too often led not exactly to denying the other but – to borrow a medical term, *scotoma* – to have diminished vision of him, or shall we say, to act as if he did not exist.

Dialogue allows to reinitiate a relationship, but it also forces each partner to reconsider himself in front of the other, and thus to change, and even to renew himself in the course of the exchange.

- On the Catholic side, thanks to Israel now Hebrew is better known, as the language of the Bible, with all the wealth of the Jewish tradition that has commented upon it. Dramatic technological improvements in transport have also made the Land itself of Israel more accessible, with all its history, and Catholic consciousness has discovered and assimilated much of this reality in the last fifty years. That Land now has become almost familiar to many rank-and-file church-goers while biblical scholars can now make the most of immediate experiences as they study the texts of the Scriptures and the events of Sacred History.

More deeply, the recognition of the State of Israel and of the Lord's irrevocable gift to His People has prompted Catholics to rediscover where the salvation they believe in comes from, and to acknowledge the fecundity of these origins. The way the Church understands herself has been refashioned on the too often forgotten vision of the Economy of Salvation provided by the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testaments.

- Is it possible to imagine that a similar, symmetrical movement could take place on the Jewish side?

The specialists of Qumran and of early Christianity know how lively and diversified Jewish thinking can be in this field, and how freely the issues are discussed. Would it be utopian to hope for regenerated, positive, benevolent dialogues between Christians as such and Jews as such, in faithfulness to each tradition, so as to allow spiritual breakthroughs whose rewards cannot be determined beforehand?

In other words, I am ready to bet on a fecundity of which we can only have a vague intuition today. Perhaps we shall have to wait until the next generation, under the pressure of the outside world, for such exchanges to take place and to be seen by all those involved not as threats to their respective identities, but as opportunities to strengthen and develop them.

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Examining, as we are doing now, how Jews and Catholics look at each other and what they may converge on in the world that is taking shape does not amount merely to teaming up for some tactical purpose. It is rather acknowledging that God's spirit is at work in history, and helping one another better to understand our destiny.

Meeting with Christianity does unveil something of the Jewish vocation by revealing some of the fruits the latter has borne. In such encounters grafts prove to have been made on the Jewish root. They may seem foreign to it, but they confirm its everlastingness and they testify to its origin. They are opportunities for Israel to rediscover its call to universality

Not without suspicions, struggles and tragedies, so much sharing has already begun at the secular level of modern humanism. Our task now is to explore the full dimensions of Israel's vocation, from its indelible origin to its promised accomplishment.

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Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger is Archbishop of Paris. This address was given to the World Jewish