Christian-Jewish Relations: A Jewish Perspective

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The Jewish part of a two-part contribution.

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A Jewish Perspective

In February 1994, Jerusalem was the setting for a conference of religious leaders from many parts of the world and from many faiths. The scene must have been colourful and impressive. The organisers clearly felt that the religious world was ready for leaders of major faith communities to be seen to meet and speak to one another in Jerusalem, the Holy City. After all, there had been decades of dramatic breakthroughs in inter-religious understanding leading up to the historic Vatican-Israel accord. One branch of Christianity after another had begun to break with traditional positions negative towards Jews and Judaism. Councils of Christians and Jews, and in some places trialogues involving also the Moslems, had arisen all over the world.

But the conference was not without its jarring notes. Some faiths showed little meaningful enthusiasm for the occasion. Prominent amongst those with reservations were some leading Israeli rabbinical figures. Declining to attend, a former Chief Rabbi of Israel told the media, *"We have nothing to talk to gentiles about…"*

To those who worked so hard to organise the conference, this must have been a great disappointment. But the fact is that there are Jews who are genuinely convinced they have nothing to talk to gentiles about, and Christians who are sincerely convinced they have nothing to talk to Jews about. There are Christian objections and objectors to dialogue, and Jewish objections and objectors. Their respective motivations differ widely. My task in this paper is to examine some of the Jewish objections.

To a large extent the issue hinges on what we mean by dialogue. For the sake of the discussion let us, for the moment, use a less specific term and speak of ‘encounter’ rather than ‘dialogue’. Inter-religious encounter can be placed on various levels. On the social level, it indicates contacts in the workplace, on the sports field, and wherever people happen to meet. On the civic level, it takes the form of collaboration in the cause of a quality society. It operates, too, on an academic level where scholars meet each other’s mind and toil together to examine old presuppositions, stereotypes and slogans in the light of new knowledge and research. Very little if any objection has ever been raised to these levels of encounter, though some would not accord them high priority.

But there is another kind of dialogue — the almost mystical experience of entering into each other’s mind, heart, soul and being. It is an all-absorbing experience, emotionally, physically, spiritually,

intellectually. Bertrand Russell depicts this kind of dialogue when he talks of the beginning of his friendship with Joseph Conrad. *"We talked",* he writes, *"with continually increasing intimacy. We seemed to sink through layer after layer of what was superficial, until gradually both reached the central fire. It* was *an experience unlike any other that I have known. We looked into each other's* eyes, *half appalled and half intoxicated to find ourselves together in such a region. The emotion was as intense as passionate love and at the same time all-embracing."*

This of course is worlds away from what might be called the lower levels of dialogue. They at least can be more or less kept under control. Parameters and ground rules can be formulated to govern them. Despite the occasional setbacks, they are relatively safe. But if the Russell-Conrad experience is what we mean by dialogue, its very unpredictability and inability to be controlled or directed is open to the objection of being unsettling, confusing and threatening.

In the 1960"s when the Lubavitcher Rebbe and other great Jewish figures issued warnings against dialogue, it was presumably this level of encounter that aroused their deep concern. Grave dangers were perceived to be lurking in the endeavour of Jew and Christian to penetrate deep into each other's theological, emotional and spiritual being, soul and psyche.

The most extensive academic analysis of objections to dialogue was offered by Eliezer Berkovits in his "Faith After the Holocaust" (Ktav, 1973, pages 44-50). Berkovits argued that Christian-Jewish dialogue needs to be subjected to scrutiny from five points of view: emotional, philosophical, theological, practical and ethical.

1. Emotionally, he argues Jews are not yet ready for dialogue. The Jewish people still mourn in a very personal sense the Holocaust tragedy and the long night of antisemitism which preceded it. They cannot forget the centuries of Christian 'teaching of contempt' that made it possible. Jews who want dialogue at this point are 'Jews without memories.'

2. Philosophically, contact between ideas and ideologies is to be encouraged. But this must be far wider than Jewish-Christian dialogue: "It is the dialogue in the intellectual realm which Judaism has carried on with all cultures and religions at all times."

3. In a theological sense, dialogue is pointless. There is no such thing as a Judeo-Christian tradition. It is true that Christians need to understand Jews and Judaism in order to understand themselves. But for Jewish self-understanding, Christianity is irrelevant. "As far as Jews are concerned, Judaism is fully sufficient. There is nothing in Christianity for them."

4. From the practical point of view, there is a danger that enthusiasts for dialogues can be inexpert and inadequate as spokespeople, lacking knowledge and discernment and too concerned with the public relations aspect of the enterprise. 'Dialogue' of this kind is fruitless.

5. Ethically, the dialogue is a "distortion of historic truth:" it glosses too easily over a tragic past. It can also be an intellectual distortion, not appreciating that Jewish and Christian interests do not coincide on all issues, and "any close association with Christian thought … may cripple our ability to articulate the relevance of the specific Jewish position" — and presumably vice-versa. Further, it is unethical to suggest that dialogue with the other makes me respect him: "Human beings ought to treat each other with respect and hold each other dear independently of theological dialogues."

In one way or another, Berkovits' argument would seem to crystallise instinctive Jewish objections to dialogue. Not that the objections are always articulated in comprehensive fashion. But somewhere in the consciousness of most Jews would be an equation like this: "gentiles = persecutors: just leave us alone and don't talk of dialogues. 'Give us neither your honey nor your sting' (Num. R. 20:10)."

The real question is not, "Is dialogue wise or politic?" but, "Is dialogue really possible at all?" Joseph B. Soloveitchik ("Reflections of the Rav," ed. A. R. Besdin, W.Z.O., 1979, pages 176-7), says, *"In the private religious realm, each faith has its own 'words' and forms which are uniquely intimate, reflecting its philosophical character, and are totally incomprehensible to people of other faiths."*

By its very nature, the faith state is private and intimate, the outcome of individual make-up, conditioning, striving and experience. Each religion is distinctive and individual, the product of the history, culture and yearnings of the group concerned. Thus, to understand Jews and Judaism fully, you have to be part of the Jewish story.

In the rabbinic tradition, Adam was created alone, to teach that every Adam is unique and precious (Sanh. 38a/b). No Adam can fully share the experience or understand the personality of any other Adam. Nor can Adam, the male, and Eve, the female, as Soloveitchik points out, completely overcome the barriers of their respective maleness and femaleness. Similarly, despite all the goodwill and indeed the mutual love, people of different faiths and cultures can never fully enter into each other's being.

To Martin Buber, therefore, in Maurice S. Friedman's words, *"The Christian* sees the Jew as the *incomprehensibly obdurate* man *who declines to see what has happened, and* the Jew *sees* the *Christian* as the *incomprehensibly daring man who affirms redemption in an unredeemed world."* M. S. Friedman, "Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue," Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955, page 279).

We who are committed to the ideal of the inter-religious brotherhood have to recognise that there are and must be limits to the possibility of dialogue. We have to be true to ourselves, our respective faiths and our joint cause. We can only be ourselves, true to our own identity and uniqueness whilst respecting and loving those who cannot be as us, and echo the words of the prophet, *"Let all the peoples walk each in the name of their god: but we shall walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever."* (Micah 4:5)

If dialogue on some levels is not wise, politic, or even possible, where does that leave us? Are there any intermediate positions that are useful and honourable? What ways are open to us to sit, to speak and to stand together, and where possible to bear common witness to the world? These are the difficult but inescapable questions we have to address. Not every Jew or Christian will wish to join us. But for those to whom this is an important enterprise, it is holy work and an exhilarating challenge.

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