



In Need of Dialogue on Disinvestment

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[Edward Kessler](#)

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On February 6, 2006, the General Synod of the Church of England voted in favour of removing investments that were seen as "profiting from the illegal occupation of Palestinian land." Although the Archbishop of York, John Sentamu, abstained in the vote, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, voted in favour. One week later the Chief Rabbi, Sir Jonathan Sacks, wrote a one-page feature in the *Jewish Chronicle*, the oldest English language Jewish newspaper in the world, criticising the decision and suggesting that it represented a crisis in Jewish-Christian relations. Since then, the Church of England committee responsible for investments has rejected the Synod's recommendation and the Chief Rabbi and the Archbishop of Canterbury have had a couple of private meetings to clear the air. The Archbishop has also clarified his position further in correspondence with the Chief Rabbi and further Anglican-Jewish consultations are underway.

Nevertheless, what has brought two such well-respected religious leaders, both of whom are deeply committed to Jewish-Christian dialogue, into conflict?

A story is told of a couple seeking a rabbi's advice to help overcome marital problems. The rabbi sees the husband first, and he explains how his wife is the problem: she doesn't understand the pressures he faces at work, and responds badly to his loving criticism. The rabbi listens carefully and tells him: "You are right."

Next, the wife comes in. Her husband is the problem, she says: he doesn't understand the difficulties of bringing up a family; nor does he support the children. The rabbi listens carefully and tells her: "You are right." When the rabbi goes home and tells his wife about their visit, she asks him: "How could they both be right?" He thinks a moment, and then says: "You are right."

To a certain extent, both Rowan Williams and Jonathan Sacks are right. The Archbishop, by nature of his position as head of the Anglican Communion, is required to respond to the concerns of a beleaguered diocese, in this case the Anglican Church in Jerusalem. Its head, Bishop Riah Abu El Assal, is known for his whole-hearted solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

It is clear that Christian life is particularly challenging for this minority living within a minority. Israelis are extremely worried about the consequences of a newly elected Hamas government, but so are Palestinian Christians. By voting in favour of the motion at Synod, Dr Williams (and the bishops) explained that they were expressing support for their Christian brethren.

Yet, critics have suggested that they acted foolishly, because they failed to consider the wider consequences for Anglican-Jewish relations, failed to offer a balanced view, and failed to make a positive contribution to relations between Israelis and Palestinians.

At the same time, the Chief Rabbi is right. The state of Israel, having unilaterally withdrawn from Gaza, is presently facing a particularly hostile environment. Not only have the Palestinians voted for a government devoted to its destruction, there are also well-publicised threats from countries in the wider Middle East. In addition, a rise in anti-Semitism in Europe, often under the guise of anti-Zionism, has left the Anglo-Jewish community feeling vulnerable and under attack. Dr Sacks has to care for his flock, and his article in this week's Jewish Chronicle explores appropriate responses for Jews who feel under siege.

Yet, critics suggest that Jews need to accept a greater degree of criticism of Israel, without bringing charges of anti-Semitic intent or consequence. There also needs to be wider acknowledgement and criticism when harsh treatment of Palestinian families occurs, whether it be the bulldozing of homes and olive groves, or bad treatment at checkpoints.

Another problem is that, although Dr Sacks and Dr Williams are writing and speaking primarily to their own constituency, their public statements and articles are read with as much care by the other faith community. Herein lies a particular difficulty of interfaith dialogue. The principle of dialogue, promoted by among others Jewish theologian Martin Buber and adopted by many, including Pope John Paul II, is to attempt to understand "the Other" as the Other wishes to be understood. In other words, Judaism and Christianity are each to be understood on their own terms.

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This is an immensely difficult exercise. The Archbishop's vote in Synod, and the Chief Rabbi's response, seem to have concentrated solely on their own community's anxieties. In other words, in the last few days we have witnessed monologue rather than dialogue.

Both Dr Sacks and Dr Williams have now noticed this danger, and have called for a dialogue and "proper knowledge" before pressures become seriously damaging and the gulf dangerously wide. In a dialogue, it is surely healthy for Jews to hear Anglican concerns about the situation of Palestinians, which "raises moral issues of some seriousness". At the same time, Anglicans are properly reminded by Jews that it was only just over 15 years ago that Lambeth commended Anglicans to engage in a dialogue with Judaism, and to show "a willingness to listen to the partner; to try to see with their eyes and feel with their heart".

In a dialogue, Dr Sacks ought to be heard when he suggests that the Church should, "instead of penalising Israel, invest in the Palestinian economy", because the present gesture "will hurt Israelis and Jews without helping the Palestinians".

In the end, Anglicans and Jews are, in the words of Martin Luther King, "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly."

Jews and Christians share scripture, including the commandment to love the stranger, which is repeated on 36 occasions in the Pentateuch. Rabbi Hillel once issued a negative command: "Do not do unto others as you would not wish to be done to yourself." Another famous rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth, put this more positively: "Do unto others as you would wish done to yourself."

Both are right. In which case, understanding the Other, and seeing things with each other's eyes, is essential to the leadership of both faith communities.

COMMENTS BY RABBI SACKS

The vote of the synod of the Church of England to "heed" a call to divestment from certain companies associated with Israel, is a decision that will be judged even on its own terms. The immediate result will be to reduce the Church's ability to act as a force for peace in the Middle East, and the Palestinians for as long as the decision remains in force. The essence of mediation is the willingness to

The timing could not have been more inappropriate. Israel has risked civil war to carry out the Gaza withdrawal, a decision that is a part of the history of the Middle East that a nation has evacuated territory gained in a defensive war without a single concession on the other side. Israel faces two enemies, Iran and Hamas, open in their threat to eliminate it. It needs a strategy that avoids self-vilification.

For years I have called on religious groups in Britain to send a message of friendship and coexistence to conflict-ridden parts of the world, instead of importing those conflicts into Britain itself. The effect of the synod vote will be the opposite of what was intended: to be chosen to take a stand on the politics of the Middle East, over which it has no influence, knowing that it will have serious repercussions on a situation over which it has enormous influence, namely Jewish-Christian relations in Britain.

That is why we cannot let the matter rest. If there was one candle of hope above all others after the Holocaust Christians at last learned to speak to one another after some 17 centuries of hostility that led to exiles, expulsions, conversions, staged disputations, libels, inquisitions, burnings at the stake, massacres and pogroms. We must not let that candle be extinguished.

From The Jewish Chronicle (London)

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