



## Jewish-Christian Dialogue in the Non-Western World

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**In Kaifeng, China, a city on a branch of the Silk Road, a small Jewish community has lived since around the 9th century. The founders had arrived by land or by sea from Persia and India, and the community adopted Chinese customs and language, borrowed Chinese surnames, and assimilated to Chinese culture.<sup>[1]</sup> In contrast to this Jewish community are the Jews in Cochin in the southwestern part of India, who have kept their Jewish customs and maintained their separate identity. They were on friendly terms with their Hindu and Muslim neighbors, until the arrival of the Portuguese who persecuted them.<sup>[2]</sup> In addition to the Kaifeng and Cochin Jews, the Jewish community had participated in the Silk Road trade networks linking the Mediterranean with China for many centuries.<sup>[3]</sup>**

When we discuss Jewish-Christian dialogue and relation today, we seldom have in mind the interactions of the Jewish communities with the Church of the East and with Christians in Asia or in other non-Western societies. The context for such a discussion is primarily Europe or North America, because Jews and Christians there share a common history and live in proximity to each other. In both European and American history, the Jewish community has experienced segregation, exclusion, and discrimination. The tragedy of the Shoah (Holocaust) during the Nazi period was the result of a long history of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism in the West. Christians blamed the Jews for the death of Jesus and many believed that the church had replaced Israel as the new people of God, the new covenanted people.

As we live today in an interconnected and globalized world, can we learn something from Jewish-Christian dialogue in the non-Western world? As the Christian demographic has shifted and the majority of Christians are living in the Global South, it is imperative that we broaden our conversations to include those living outside the North Atlantic. Such conversations will help us discuss multiculturalism and social responsibility through global lenses.

Jewish-Christian dialogues have taken place in the Global South for several decades. Jewish-Christian dialogues were organized in Hong Kong in 1992 and in Cochin in 1993. The latter conference focused on the experience of living as a minority, the meanings of images of God and the people of God, and attitudes toward religious diversity.<sup>[4]</sup> The first African Christian-Jewish Consultation took place in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1986 and discussed ancient wisdom from Jewish and African traditions and creation in African religion and the Bible. The second Consultation was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1995, with the theme "Family, Community and Tradition." It was one of the first international conferences to take place in South Africa after the collapse of apartheid. The third consultation took place in the French-speaking Yaoundé, Cameroon, in 2001, and focused on three concerns to Jews and Africans: "Shalom and Ubuntu," "Memory and Experience of Violence," and "Challenges to Peace-building."<sup>[5]</sup> Pan-American Conferences on Catholic-Jewish relations have also been held over the years. In 2006, a very significant theological symposium was held in Argentina, to discuss "Holocaust-Shoah: Its Effects on Christian Theology and Life in Argentina and Latin America."

I would like to highlight the significance of Jewish-Christian dialogue in the Global South as it relates to the theme of this conference, "New Neighbors, New Opportunities." In order to bring

interfaith dialogue to bear on today's global issues, we have to go beyond the liberal tendency of separating religious dialogue from the social and political milieu in which dialogue takes place. We need to go much deeper than borrowing another's religious mirror to look at and enrich our own tradition. We have to situate dialogue in a global context and articulate its potential to bring justice, empowerment, and reconciliation for peoples in the world.

## Peoples of God and Contextual Theologies

The Jewish people have been called to enter into a special covenantal relationship with God and to be a light of the nations. They have interpreted their history—oppression under the various empires, exodus, monarchy, exile, diaspora, and return—through religious lenses. The Hebrew prophets repeatedly exhorted them to follow God's commandments and not to rely on power and might. Even though they have lost wars, suffered political exiles, and mourned the destruction of their temples, they have steadfastly believed that they have a special relationship with God and God will not abandon them, but will forgive and protect them.

The Jewish people's faith in God in the face of political oppression and national tragedies has given hope and inspiration to Christians in the Global South in their struggles against colonial masters. After the Second World War, many Asian and African countries regained their political independence and had to overcome cultural alienation and economic exploitation. Some progressive theologians believed that Asian and African theologies could no longer be mimics of Western theology, and began to develop contextual theologies that spoke to their new realities. Several Asian theologians suggested that the suffering peoples of Asia are also the peoples of God, and Asian Christians have to discern God's action in their cultures and histories.

In the mid-1970s, Taiwanese theologian Choan-Seng Song proposed a daring theological leap from Israel to Asia, without going through the detour of London, Paris, Berlin, New York, or other Western cities. Following the examples of the Jewish people, he said, Asian Christians can also read their histories with the eyes of faith and discern God's redemptive action in their midst:

The history of Israel experienced and interpreted redemptively provides a pattern or a framework by which other nations may scrutinize their history for its redemptive quality and meaning. That is to say, an Asian nation such as Japan, China, Indonesia, and so on, should have its own experiences of exodus, captivity, nation-building, rebellion against heaven or dance around the golden calf. ... A nation will thus find itself placed under the redemptive acts of God in the company of Israel and other nations.<sup>[6]</sup>

The radical act of seeing God acting in their histories gave Christians in anti-colonial and anti-dictatorship struggles much hope and empowered them to discern salvific elements within their cultures and stories. Just as the Jewish people recount the story that "my father was a wandering Aramean" (Deut. 26:5), Christians in Global South are bold to tell the social biography of their people. The story of the Exodus serves as a paradigmatic story for people's struggle for liberation from their oppressors. Korean theologian Kim Yong-Bock affirms, "The God of the Exodus hears the cries of the suffering people in Asia; God of the Hapiru (Egyptian slaves) promises liberation to the suffering peoples in Asia."<sup>[7]</sup>

The transposition of Jewish stories to a different social and cultural context does not undermine the fact that God has established a special relationship with Israel. It also underscores that God has also entered into relation with all nations and peoples. As Elliot N. Dorff has pointed out, within the Jewish community, there are those who emphasize the special covenant between God and Israel, and others, including Martin Buber, who point to the universal aspirations of the covenant.<sup>[8]</sup> To me, the fact that Jewish stories can be seen in the larger contexts of the liberation and humanization of oppressed peoples in the world honors the heritage of the Jewish people and

does not diminish it. It will also strengthen relationship and solidarity between Jews and other suffering peoples.

In Africa and Asia, many Christians live as minorities in a religiously pluralistic world. Their reading of Scriptures is influenced by their cultures, languages, and religious worldviews. As John S. Mbiti has pointed out, Africans have their own names for God and have many different creation myths. When they read the biblical stories of creation, they will bring along their religious outlook and their understandings of God passed down through the generations in myths, legends, and folktales.<sup>[9]</sup> Sri Lankan biblical scholar R. S. Sugirtharajah calls for a multifaith hermeneutics and urges biblical scholars to be sensitive to people of other faiths in their interpretive tasks. He said that we should pay attention to scriptural texts of other traditions and the spiritual sustenance they provide to their adherents. In addition, we have to be mindful that our interpretation is not only read by people who share our faith, but may also be read by others who are from different religious traditions.<sup>[10]</sup> Several Asian scholars have reread Jewish and Christian scriptures with religious and cultural texts from Asia. Such interpretation enriches our understanding of the biblical tradition and brings critical insights. The tensions between the two texts call for deeper dialogue and reexamination of our presuppositions.

## Feminist Interpretation and Anti-Judaism

The cultures of the Global South are not monolithic and some elements of them are patriarchal and discriminate against women. Some feminist theologians in Asia and Africa have used the example of Jesus criticizing his culture to justify their critique of patriarchal culture in their own contexts. They point out that Jesus was courageous in breaking taboos and transgressing boundaries in his time. For example, he spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4) and healed the bleeding woman (Mark 5:21-43). By using these examples, they want to challenge their church and society to recognize gender equality and dignity of women.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, several Jewish scholars, such as Judith Plaskow, pointed out the problems of the anti-Jewish tendency in some white women's interpretation of Jesus.<sup>[11]</sup> Jesus was seen a feminist, while first-century Jewish culture was labeled as blatantly misogynist, even though it was well documented that Jewish women could exercise religious leadership in the synagogues. Amy-Jill Levine, a Jewish professor teaching the New Testament in the United States, is concerned that some thirdworld feminist theologians also show such anti-Jewish tendency. They seem to suggest that the discrimination of women in today's Africa or Asia is somewhat comparable to the oppression of Jewish women in antiquity. Jewish culture is portrayed as monolithically patriarchal and oppressive. Against such a negative foil, Jesus is seen as iconoclastic and counter-cultural, who taught, healed, and befriended women of his time. Moreover, Jesus transcended the rigid boundaries of Jews and non-Jews, and broke the taboos of pollution and purity.<sup>[12]</sup>

Levine's criticism has caught these Asian and African theologians by surprise. There has not been much dialogue and exchange between Jewish women and Christian women of the Global South. Feminist theologians from the Global South are preoccupied with issues such as poverty, access to clean water, gender violence, and the AIDS pandemic. There may not be a visible Jewish presence in their communities. Some of them have hardly known any Jewish person and anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism are not their priority concerns. They are also less burdened by the guilt associated with the Shoah (Holocaust) during the Second World War. For many of them, their portrayal of Jesus has less to do with making Jesus a feminist, and more to do with bringing into sharp relief the patriarchal elements in their cultures. As Latin American liberation theologian Elsa Tamez has said:

The sometimes sharp criticism that Jesus thrusts at his own Jewish culture does not reflect an anti-

Jewish stance. As we know, Jesus is a Jew and therefore places himself in a position of self-critique with respect to the patriarchy of Judaism and Roman culture as enacted in oppressive practices. Importantly, in this same way, women today engage in constructive criticism of their religious and social culture.[\[13\]](#)

The exchange between Levine and feminist theologians in the Global South highlights the multilayered and complex nature of religious dialogue between different races and across the divide of the Global North and the Global South.[\[14\]](#) First, it raises the question of the context and parameter of “social responsibility,” a key issue for our conference. Can feminist theologians in the Global South emphasize Jesus’ critique and renewal of his culture without being labeled anti-Jewish? Have Jewish scholars in the Global North paid sufficient attention to the nuances of feminist theological discourses in the South, shaped by their particular social and rhetorical contexts? In trying to find sustenance for liberation and empowerment for our faith communities, how can we be aware of formulations that may be potentially hurtful to others?

I understand that Levine’s criticism has come from a long history of anti-Judaism in the West and welcome her suggestions of learning more about Jewish history and avoiding making blanket statements about Jewish culture and transhistorical and transcultural comparisons. There are two points I have to make. First, the theological and cultural ethos of many churches in the Global South has been shaped to a large extent by the evangelical missionary movement in the nineteenth century and its theological legacy in the West. Some of the missionaries harbored strong anti-Jewish sentiments and believed that Christianity had replaced Judaism and other religious traditions as the highest development of humankind. The long history of anti-Semitism in Europe finds its expression in Western Catholic and Protestant theologies in explicit and subtle ways. Today there are Christian organizations whose primary goal is to convert the Jews. Feminist theologians in the West, whose texts have been studied in the Global South, may have also been influenced by the larger anti-Jewish ethos consciously or unconsciously. Given the hegemony of the West in the global media and knowledge building and the powerful influences of the Christian Right in North America, how can we open spaces for critical dialogue across national and geographical barriers and differences?

Second, Jewish-Christian dialogue has often taken place in contexts in which Christianity is the majority religion and Jews are the minority. In many places in Asia and Africa, Christianity is the minority religion, struggling to find its place amidst other prevalent religious traditions. When feminist theologians in these communities talk about the Bible and Jesus, they are not simply entering into “Jewish-Christian” dialogue, because they unavoidably bring their own cultural and religious lenses. We cannot use the usual logic—Christians as oppressors and Jews as victims—shaped by centuries of European history to interpret encounters outside the Western orbit. We have yet to develop adequate and sophisticated cultural criticism to understand Jewish-Christian dialogue in the non-Western world from the vantage point of specific encounters and multiple histories.

## **Multiple Modernities and Interreligious Dialogue**

Before coming to this conference, I spent one month traveling to ten cities in China, and to Hong Kong and Singapore. While European countries and the United States have experienced financial crisis in the last several years, some of the Asian countries continue to enjoy economic growth, although at a slower pace than before. Some commentators have talked about the Beijing consensus, characterized by a market economy and strong government involvement. Politicians in China have said that they want to pursue economic development with Chinese characteristics. Is there an East Asian way to modernization?

Some scholars have said that we need to think beyond a notion of modernity defined by Europe

and North America and suggested the notions of “multiple modernities” and “alternative modernities.” The view that modernity first appeared in Europe and other countries need to follow suit has been considered a Eurocentric teleology, and the fundamental diversity of modernity has been emphasized. Postmodern and postcolonial theories have challenged our interpretations of modernity, the centering of it in one location, and the reading of history through progress. Arif Dirlik, author of *Culture and History in Postrevolutionary China*, points out that the proliferation of modernities raises the question of resignification of traditions. He writes, “From a cause of backwardness in an earlier modernization discourse they have turned a globalized modernity into a source of modern national identity—as well as ‘alternative modernities.’”[\[15\]](#)

The notion of multiple modernities provides new incentives for people in the Global South to learn from and dialogue with Jewish communities. In the past modernization was seen almost synonymous with Westernization and traditional culture was seen as in tension with modern culture. But now there is more than one way to become “modern” and many formerly colonized peoples have searched for alternative ways for economic development. The rise of Arab Spring and the ensuing protests and ferment in different parts of the world have underscored people’s new political and cultural consciousness and their determination to seek an alternative future. Jewish people living in diaspora have lived in numerous diverse contexts and tried to retain their cultural and religious identities in so many ways. There are books and resources on Jewish encounters and experiences of modernity in Western and Eastern Europe and in North America that are very helpful for people in the Global South.[\[16\]](#)

Postcolonial scholars have pointed out that Western modernity has its under or darker side, which is the lengthy history of colonialism. The Jews have been the colonized Other within, while the peoples of the Global South used to be the colonized Other outside. Tactics of suppression and control of the Jews have been tried out and used against the colonized. Jewish-Christian dialogue in the non-Western world can examine how Western Christianity has colluded with and provided justification for anti-Semitism and colonialism as not two different phenomena, but as part and parcel of the ideology of Western hegemony. This kind of cross-cultural work has hardly begun and presents new possibilities for scholarship and critical dialogue in the future.

The idea of alternative modernities offers space and hope to re-imagine possible futures. Many religious and ethnic conflicts in the world can be linked to the history of colonialism in the past and are exacerbated by the homogenizing attempts of globalization in the present. The tensions among Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the Middle East, for example, have been heightened by different waves of colonialism in the region. Many Christians in the non-Western world are concerned about the plight of Palestinians and justice and peace in the Middle East. I remember two striking images when I first visited Jerusalem many years ago. The first one was of people sitting on the roadside with typewriters. When I asked what they were doing, I was told that they were translators helping Palestinians who did not understand the Hebrew language to fill out government forms and other documents. The experience reminded me of what I saw when I was a child in Hong Kong, when the only official language at the time was English. The majority of Chinese people could not understand English and needed translators to help them with reading government notices and filling out forms. I was saddened to see that similar tactics were used as means of control and alienation. The second image was of young Israeli children going to school or trip protected by adults carrying guns walking in front and behind them. I wondered how could one ever feel safe living in such an environment.

For many years, we have been praying and some have been actively working for justice and peace in the world and especially in the Middle East. Some think that the twostate proposal might be the best possible solution. For me, changing the political structure without re-negotiating how modern notions of national, religious, and ethnic identities have been defined will not bring about long lasting peace. The discussion of multiple modernities means that we need to hold different cultures and histories in the same time frame and read them contrapuntally as overlapping and intertwined.



This requires what Mikhail Bakhtin has described as a plurality of consciousness, “one that cannot in principle be fitted within the bounds of a single consciousness, one that is, so to speak, by its nature . . . is born at a point of contact among various consciousnesses.”<sup>[17]</sup>

We have to be bold enough to ask whether the old model of interreligious dialogue has run its course, and what new opportunities are emerging on the horizon. I hope that the discussion of Jewish-Christian dialogue in the non-Western world will give us food for thought and impetus to try something new. Wesley S. Ariarajah, who was the former Director of Interreligious Dialogue of the World Council of Churches has said, “Religions are not fortresses to be defended; they are springs for the nourishment of human life.”<sup>[18]</sup> Our fragmented and war-torn world needs these springs now. Our common future depends on people of faiths finding ways to work together more than ever.

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Key note lecture held at the ICCJ International Conference, Manchester, July 1- July 4, 2012. The theme of this conference was: "New Neighbours, New Opportunities. The challenges of Multiculturalism and Social Responsibility".

For a French translation of the above lecture see: [Le dialogue judéo-chrétien hors de l'Occident](#)

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