



Judaism and Christianity: A Creative Tension

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The special character and imperative of the Christian-Jewish encounter in this new age of religious pluralism.

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by Alan Davies

Today, among Christian theologians and scholars of comparative religion, a great deal of ink is being spilled in the attempt to define the relationship between Christian and the non-Christian religions of the world. The fact that most if not all of the non-Christian religions now exist on our doorstep lends this task a new urgency. In Toronto, the city where I live, I frequently drive past Hindu, Buddhist and Sikh temples, Shi"ite mosques and, of course, a great variety of churches and synagogues. In this encounter of the world religions and

their innumerable divisions and subdivisions, the very character of Christian theology has changed. The great theologians of the recent past, for example Karl Barth, Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich in the Protestant Christian tradition, spun their ideas in dialogue with modernity, i.e., with modern Western secular humanism as it has developed since the 18th century Enlightenment., a proud, self-contained and self-sufficient worldview that came to grief in the debacle of Western civilization in the world wars and genocides of the mid-twentieth century. The crisis of modernity remains, but the axis of theology has shifted, moving from a dialogue with secularism, agnosticism, atheism and even nihilism - basically 19th century obsessions - into a dialogue with forms of religion hitherto mostly kept at bay in the realms of Christendom. But Christendom, at least in the older sense, is almost no more, and the spiritual situation at the end of the 20th century is vastly

different from the spiritual situation at its beginning. Christian theological students cannot confine their studies only to the Christian tradition if they wish to be intelligent priests and pastors in contemporary countries; they must study other traditions as well. Otherwise, they condemn themselves to terminal ignorance. If this is true of the Christian-Muslim, Christian-Buddhist, Christian-Sikh encounter, it is especially true of the Christian-Jewish encounter. For even in the new religious pluralism of our age, the encounter of Christians and Jews has a special character and a special imperative.

There are several reasons for this special character. The first is historical: Christianity entered history as a Jewish messianic sect of what we now call the first century of the Common Era. It was one of the several "Judaisms" of antiquity (it was a Jewish scholar, Samuel Sandmel who taught me never to use Judaism in the singular when

speaking of the ancient world). The word "sect" is a slightly dangerous word because of its pejorative associations; perhaps we should say "religious party" instead. Christianity, which was called Christianity after early enemies of the movement in Antioch coined the term "Christian" as a term of contempt, was not, as is often said, the daughter of Judaism, but one of its mutations; rabbinic Judaism, which came into existence more or less at the same time, was another mutation. Indeed, as another Jewish scholar (Alan Segal) has written,¹ one can speak of a "twin birth" of two new Judaisms, both markedly different from the religious systems that preceded them. Not only were rabbinic Judaism and Christianity religious twins, but, like Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca, they fought in the womb, setting the stage for life after the womb. From the beginning, they were both similar and different: Christianity arose out of the messianic and eschatological

elements in Hebrew religion, whereas rabbinic Judaism, if Jacob Neusner is correct,² arose largely out of the non-messianic elements, in fact, out of a profound distrust of messiahs and their "dangerous promises." After all, messianic enthusiasm had landed the Jews in a disastrous war with the Romans that ended with the destruction of the Second Temple, the centre of the Jewish world, so there was good reason to distrust messianic movements even if the Christians had opposed the war. The messianic idea, of course, did not disappear in post-biblical Judaism, but, compared with Christianity and perhaps in reaction to Christianity, it was usually marginalized. Yet Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher of the twentieth century, made it the basis of a famous definition of the tension between Judaism and Christianity:

Pre-messianically, our destinies are divided. Now to the Christian, the Jew is the incomprehensibly

obdurate man who declines to see what has happened; and to the Jew, the Christian is the incomprehensibly daring man who affirms in an unredeemed world that its redemption has been accomplished. This is a gulf which no human power can bridge.³

For Buber, Judaism and Christianity were variations on a theme: a messianic theme. I will return to this point later.

A second reason for the special character of the Jewish Christian encounter is theological. Jews and Christians worship the same God, the God of biblical monotheism. This is a simple point, but one that cannot be stressed too strongly. Jews, especially Orthodox Jews, have sometimes been tempted to regard the God of Christianity as different from the God of Judaism, largely because of the doctrine of the trinity: a notoriously difficult doctrine, even to Christians. But the doctrine of the trinity arose as an attempt to translate the biblical

notion of the living God into the intellectual idiom of ancient Hellenism, using the language of Greek metaphysics. At some point during the second century Christianity ceased to be a Jewish sect and became a universal and increasingly gentile religion. Therefore, the fathers of the church turned to the Greek thinkers, the fathers of Western philosophy, for their working principles. Ex-pagans rather than ex-Jews began to write Christian theology, and the Jewish roots and sources of the faith became endangered, sometimes seriously endangered. However, in mainstream Christianity, they were never lost. The doctrine of the trinity was a source of both clarification and confusion. Of clarification, because it enabled gentile Christians to relate the Hebrew Scriptures to Greek metaphysics, and of confusion because no single version of the doctrine ever emerged, and because it probably created as many problems as it solved. However it is interpreted,

Christians agree that there is only one God, and any version of the doctrine that suggests that Christians worship more than one God (tritheism) is necessarily false.

The third reason for the special character of the Jewish-Christian relationship flows from the second reason. Those who worship the God of biblical monotheism not only share the same sacred scriptures but also the same ethical convictions. They speak the same moral language and draw sustenance from the same moral ethos. It was the late English Anglican scholar, James Parkes, famous for his studies of antisemitism and the author of several books on Jewish-Christian relations, who defined Judaism as a religion based on social righteousness, whereas Christianity is a religion based on personal spirituality. The essence of both religions is a moral essence, but Judaism concentrates on communal ethics

whereas Christianity concentrates on the individual. This is a great simplification, but it has the merit of linking Jews and Christians in a creative tension in which each are allowed to make a distinctive contribution to the moral and spiritual well-being of human society. That my own great teacher, the late American Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, thought in somewhat similar terms is a well-documented fact. During his early years in a Detroit pastorate, Niebuhr once said that only two Christians lived in Detroit, and they were both Jews! He meant that Jews seemed to have developed a superior capacity for what he called "civic virtue" than most Christians. This was partly because of their long experience as a minority in the Christian world, and partly because of Judaism itself, with its unique "Hebraic-prophetic passion for social justice." Detroit in the 1920s was the personal fiefdom of the powerful and super-rich industrialist Henry Ford, who pretended to be a

great benefactor of the working man when in reality he was the opposite. In fact, among other things, Ford was one of the arch-antisemites of his day. The young Niebuhr, who had a working class congregation, found the most fervent allies in his public struggles with Ford over social issues, including a just wage, among some local Jews. In his great essay "The Relations of Jews and Christians in Western Civilization," Niebuhr wrote: "...both faiths exhibit the same resources and are exposed to the same hazards."⁴ They are similar and different. If Judaism has an aptitude for civic virtue, Christianity, in the lives of its saints such as Mother Teresa of Calcutta, has frequently exalted what Niebuhr calls the "morality of the nth degree" ("You must be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect"). But a commitment to civic virtue involves the arts of compromise and, on occasion, sacrificing the claims of personal morality for the sake of the public good, whereas a

commitment to
morality of the nth
degree involves
sacrificing the
claims of social
responsibility, the
"order and justice of
the community." It is
impossible to have it
both ways.
Therefore,
according to
Niebuhr, Judaism
and Christianity
speak to opposite
sides of the same
human dilemma,
and in that way
complement each
other profoundly.

The religious
tension between
Judaism and
Christianity has
other dimensions as
well. Despite the
loss of Jewish
independence
following the Roman
War, Judaism
preserved its sense
of special
peoplehood by, as
Alan Segal reminds
us, spiritualizing the
national institutions
of the defunct state,
notably the Temple,
whereas
Christianity, which
entered history as a
Jewish sect, burst
the bounds of
Judaism to become
a universal religion
in which there was
neither Jew nor
Greek. This
difference is
definitive and
profound: the
synagogue and the
church pulled in

opposite directions, the one seeking to keep ancient boundaries intact in order to protect the holiness of its tradition, the other seeking to dissolve these boundaries in order to create what the church fathers liked to call a new human race. Inevitably, the difference led to conflict, sometimes to tragic conflict, especially after Christianity conquered the Roman world in the 4th century of the Common Era, a victory that resulted in the transformation of the pagan empire into a Christian theocratic state and the pagan god-emperor into a Christian sacerdotal priest-king. This produced a tremendous power imbalance, and we all know the consequences of this imbalance; the once persecuted church became a persecutor as Christians sank into what Martin Luther later called a "theology of glory," identifying their political and social ascendancy with the reign of God on earth. Today, however, that ascendancy is starting to

disappear, and we speak more and more of a post-Constantinian, post-Christian society in which the church is no longer dominant, even although many of the Western countries are still numerically mostly Christian countries. The power imbalance is starting to right itself, at least to some degree, although, because of the legacy of historic antisemitism, Jews are still vulnerable in many Western nations, if not to state persecution, to social resentment and political terrorism. Even, however, if by some miracle all the problems of power and forces of prejudice were to vanish, and Jews and Christians were allowed to live side by side as perfect neighbours, the fundamental tension between the two religions would still remain because it is built into the nature of things. Niebuhr spoke of a clash between the claims of civic virtue and those of moral perfection, but others have spoken of the Jewish-Christian tension in different although perhaps not

incompatible terms. To Jacob Neusner, classical Judaism represents the conservative side of the tension between an essentially conservative view of religious existence and an essentially radical one. (Here, of course, I use the term "conservative" in its true sense as reverence for tradition, which has nothing to do with what is called "neo-conservative" today.) The Judaism of the Mishnah is a Judaism that values order and stability, a Judaism concerned with sacred laws and sacred regulations designed to integrate life and preserve the purity of the land and the people, who in the eyes of the ancient rabbis constituted a kingdom of priests in the midst of an idolatrous world. This is an ideal construction, but when we speak of essences we speak in ideal terms. Hence Judaism has sought to preserve itself, resisting to the point of martyrdom every attempt to curtail its ongoing history and witness.

Among
contemporary
Christian

theologians, both Catholic and Protestant, there is a growing tendency to see Christianity in a quite different fashion. The great Protestant theologian of the first half of this century, Paul Tillich, described the essential Christian idea as the "power of the new being," or the breaking into time and space of a new reality from beyond time and space. Curiously, this theme was endorsed by at least one modern Jewish thinker, the neo-Marxist German philosopher Ernst Bloch, who was interested in utopianism. The genius of pre-Constantinian Christianity arose and was expressed in its rupture with the pagan powers of fate through its openness to an undetermined future incipit vita nova, the inauguration of a new era. This is what it means to claim that the messiah has come. To Bloch, and to his admirer, the Protestant theologian Jürgen Moltmann, the resurrection of Christ in Christian faith was not an imitation of pagan resurrections (the

dying and rising gods of the mystery religions) but an eschatological vision of a new heaven and earth. Properly understood, according to Moltmann, Easter is a prelude to the recreation of the world, and the impetus for it recreation.⁵ Jews quite rightly remind Christians of the unredeemed state of the world, and their witness has an enduring validity. But Jews are wrong when they argue that the unredeemed state of the world proves that Jesus was not the messiah. Rather than an argument against belief in Jesus as the messiah, "the visible and painful experience" of unredeemedness is an imperative to remake the world in the image of the messiah that has come. Between these two views, the Jewish and the Christian, there is no resolution, only tension, but the tension is a creative tension: Christianity requires Judaism in order to keep its feet on the ground, but Christians cannot surrender their faith in the world's redemption.

Hence the dialectic continues. This, of course, is also an ideal construction, and one obviously at variance with much of Christian history. But again we are speaking in ideal terms.

Today, Jews and Christians are faced with many of the same problems and many of the same enemies. Powerful and dangerous "isms" have arisen in both Europe and North America: the demon of nationalism, the ideology of the nation, which in its extreme form leads to ethnic cleansing; the demon of racism, the first cousin of nationalism, which has a thousand faces, and which, despite all the lessons of the twentieth century, is still at large in our society. The so-called Church of the Aryan Nations, which is not a church but a vicious gang, may be small in size, but it is a dangerous symptom of our times. The demon of antisemitism continues to menace Jews, but Christians are fooling themselves if they think that the antisemites of the

world are not their enemies as well. Sometimes these demons claim for their own uses the language of scripture and what used to be called the Judaeo-Christian tradition, speaking in the name of the God of biblical monotheism when they really serve the deities of nation and race. Even apart from fighting these enemies, a mounting degree of moral confusion in daily life as our society has become more complicated has made it imperative for Jews and Christians to work together, along with other religious communities with a stake in the common good. We are all familiar with the issues of wealth and poverty, of law and justice, of profit and employment, of education as privilege and education as entitlement, of public policy and medical services. The resolution of these issues should not be left only to those who have ceased to believe in the ancient wisdom of the great texts of our two religions; Judaism and Christianity still have something to

say.

1. Alan F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986.
2. Jacob Neusner, *Judaism: The Evidence of the Mishnah*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
3. Martin Buber, "The Two Foci of the Jewish Soul," cited in *The Writings of Martin Buber*, Will Herberg (editor), New York: Meridian Books, 1956, p. 276.
4. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Pious and Secular America*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958, p. 97.
5. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann,

The way of
Jesus
Christ:
Christology
in Messianic
Dimensions,
and other
writings.

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