



Judaism as *Sui Generis* for Christians and Part of the Wider Dialogue

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Subsequent the second contribution of a series of articles (for part one see here) that features a dozen Christian and Jewish theologians reflecting on the state of Jewish-Christian relations today and whether there exists a “special relationship” between the two religious traditions. The articles were first published in CURRENT DIALOGUE No. 58, 2016, edited by the World Council of Churches and are republished with kind permission.

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For anybody looking to *Nostra Aetate* and its outworkings by the Catholic magisterium for authoritative guidance, the question is not whether, but *how* the Jewish-Christian relationship is special. As is obvious, different readings are possible. It makes sense to think of the teaching as developing historically. This writer would say the trajectory is clear: Judaism is, for Catholics, *sui generis*. It is neither a form of Christianity, nor one of the set of “non-Christian” religions. Nevertheless, the dialogue with Judaism still has things to say to and within wider interfaith relations.

Historically, *Nostra Aetate* itself started out as *De Judaeis* (1961). In the cut and thrust of the Council's work, it became an overview of diverse religions (in its intentionality, all religions). Judaism is thus integrated into the interreligious scene. But it is still clearly the text's climax, and indeed Section 4 (the section that relates to Judaism) is almost 40% of the Latin text. Of the people of Israel it is said that they have to do with “revelation,” such that Jews and Christians share a common “spiritual patrimony,” and the document cites Romans 9:4-5: to Israel belongs (present tense: Latin *est*), among other things, the “covenants” (*testamentum*). The document does not deny that other faiths may have revelation or covenantal standing; it is silent on such matters. So it may still be argued that Judaism is first among equals, having that privilege because it has been, since earliest days, the archetypal “other” for Christianity, as such one of many “others.” Later developments make the *sui generis* classification necessary.

Perhaps too much should not be made of the fact that the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews comes under the Council for Promoting Christian Unity rather than that for Interreligious Dialogue. That said, it is a unique distinction, which many do see as logical, holding that the parting of the ways is the “first schism” or “primal rift” in Church history.^[1] The *Guidelines*^[2] of 1974 and *Notes*^[3] of 1985 both addressed the need for Church repentance and reform in education, preaching and liturgy; it becomes clear that a right relationship with the Jewish People affects Christian self-understanding, a point carried forward to *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah* (1998). Thus entirely within this trajectory was Saint John Paul II's statement in the Rome synagogue (1986):

The Jewish religion is not something “extrinsic” to us but in a certain way is “intrinsic” to our own religion. With Judaism we therefore have a relationship we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and in a certain way it could be said, our elder brothers.^[4]

This explicitly unique, fraternal understanding has been unreservedly repeated by Benedict XVI and Francis.

The Pontifical Biblical Commission arguably went further, stating: “The Jewish reading of the Bible is a *possible* one, in *continuity* with the Jewish scriptures of the Second Temple period, a reading *analogous* to the Christian reading, which developed in *parallel* fashion.”^[5] These are striking statements, given the Catholic Church’s deep-seated reluctance to speak of any human grouping as “parallel” to the Church. This has to be a theological rather than a phenomenological judgement (as historical fact it is banally self-evident). And by “Jewish reading” must be meant rabbinic approaches. In the *Guidelines* (and thereafter) the magisterium has emphasized that “Christians must ... strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.” Thus this is the Judaism of Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash.

On his 2015 visit to the USA, Francis blessed a statue which made this point visually dramatic; namely, *Ecclesia and Synagoga in Our Time* at St Joseph’s University, Philadelphia.^[6] As a moving corrective to the medieval images, it shows the two characters as equal, and equally free, crowned women, engaging in mutual Scriptural study.

Alongside this, mention must be made of the liturgy, and the Good Friday Prayer of the Ordinary Rite, where the affirming prayer for the Jewish people comes tellingly between that for the unity of Christians and that for those who do not believe in Christ (and a distinct prayer is also part of the Extraordinary Rite, whatever its other merits/demerits). Eugene Fisher insists it is significant that there is in formal Catholicism no prayer – and no organization – dedicated to the conversion of the Jews.^[7]

The theological underpinning of such unique, abiding and authoritative affirmation of Jews and Jewish faith has perhaps been under-discussed, forcing us into areas of speculation.^[8] It clearly involves the claim that the Hebrew covenant(s) cannot be “revoked,”^[9] but it goes beyond that. Logically, one can believe that another community stands in a covenant with God, and, being disobedient, is thus under God’s judgement. This is one interpretation of Paul on the non-Christian Jews of his day. Roy Eckardt notes in his exegesis of Romans 9-11: “It is faulty reasoning to maintain that since God has not rejected his people (and hence has not destined them to final exclusion from salvation), the church has therefore not taken over Israel’s role.”^[10]

Likewise, it involves an understanding that Jews are connected to revelation, treasuring as they do what Christians call the “Old Testament” (and the “traditional” terminology is defended, it being understood that it carries no connotation of “out of date” or “out-worn”).^[11] But, again, it exceeds this point. For honouring the Hebrew Bible, or parts of it, as revelation is not unique to Jews and Christians: it is shared with Samaritans, Mormons and, at least, some Rastafarians. These are not recipients of the magisterium’s validation.

My contention is that the rationale for this unique affirmation neither comes from biblical exegesis, nor efforts at doctrinal coherence alone. Rather, it is the place to which the dialogue has inductively led the Church. The historical and existential realities of the dialogue have compelled the Church to make a positive judgement about living Judaism, rabbinic religion, a post-biblical or extra-biblical faith, as an inspiring spiritual teacher, which does not present as ecclesial or church-like. While the magisterium nowhere puts it this way, the trajectory of the development makes it plausible to say that the Church recognizes in the rabbinic way a “charism.”

There is of course a counter-argument. *Nostra Aetate* remains “the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” without qualification. Pope Francis has at least once, albeit in an informal meditation, spoken of Abraham as “the father of the faith shared by Jews, Christians and Muslims alike” – a rather different model.^[12] And Cardinal Kasper has powerfully spoken of Judaism as “the sacrament of every otherness.”^[13] The last statement requires some comment. One may put the emphasis on “otherness” such that Judaism is exemplary, or on “sacrament,” such that it may remain unique. On the latter reading, just as Judaism is the only religious phenomenon outside the Church which is known to guard and celebrate scriptural revelation

authentically, so in its life in the world it can function uniquely sacramentally, being the effective sign for “otherness” wherever it occurs. This otherness, for all it is graced, is not itself sacramental.

Much discussion of Catholic approaches to faiths other than Judaism has centred on the question: Are they constitutive of salvation, or merely the circumstance into which God’s saving grace comes?[14] The Council was clear that God is active in all lives, seeking to shape consciences to salvific effect: “the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the [saving] paschal mystery.”[15] But what follows for the religions themselves?

Karl Rahner, in many ways the originator of this Catholic “inclusivism,”[16] can be said to give the most positive reading of the function of the religions:

If revelation properly so-called is not possible without faith ... and must be offered always and everywhere ... then such revelation and such faith ... occur concretely and on the whole only by the mediation of those categorical, institutional, and verbal realities which we know as the non-Christian religions.[17]

Gavin D’Costa counters that the “non-Christian” faiths do not as such play any salvific role:

When we ask how a person lives the good life, various Conciliar documents give a uniform answer: through conscience and the natural law ... written within the hearts of all ...[18]

A middle way may be possible. This would insist that revelation consists of the story of salvation as celebrated in the Bible in the two Testaments (a story which is indeed partially shared with Jews, whose charism enables them authentically to interpret their Bible), and also in its concrete outworking in later history (a point D’Costa emphasizes).[19] As such, revelation, although open-ended, can have no parallel in the world. This is a circular argument, but properly so; it is a foundational position.

On the other hand, it is important that the grace at work in the hearts of all persons is not reified, as if some spiritual medicine. For “grace” surely stands for all that takes place when God Holy Trinity graciously communicates with creatures. Further, God communicates with persons as the social animals they are, and thus (albeit mysteriously) through human language and social structures, in which, even in our century, religion typically plays a vast part. While this loving divine communication cannot strictly be called “revelation,” it must bear some of the traits of that definitive communication, if the communicating God is one. Might not *Nostra Aetate* lead the way here too? It insisted (in Section 2) that other religions “often reflect a ray of that Truth which illumines all.” Divine communication through non-Christian forms of life can truly be called “illumination.”[20]

To the extent that this is correct, the following can be said: that which the Church can and does say with *confidence* regarding post-biblical Judaism, it might come to say with real *hope* and generosity of *imagination* regarding religions properly called “non-Christian,” if and when the concrete realities of the dialogues compel this. It would be a different application of the method used to make the affirmation of rabbinic Judaism, namely allowing the *datum*, indeed the *novum* of the dialogue itself to inform, as much as biblical and in-house doctrinal considerations.

With this – highly contestable[21] – reading of the contemporary Catholic position I am in sympathy. For some, this might make me a disloyal Anglican. After all, the 1988 Lambeth Conference paper *The Way of Dialogue*[22] itself moved from concerning Judaism to including Islam, and many Anglicans are in sympathy with the idea of a triologue of the three “Abrahamic” faiths. The later Anglican Communion document *Generous Love*[23] did not in any depth consider the idea that Judaism is *sui generis*. Nor was this promoted by the Church of England’s own

discussion of Christian-Jewish relations, *Sharing One Hope?*^[24] Moreover, Michael Ipgrave has argued that Anglican theology “has on the whole shifted from ... ‘exceptional distinctiveness’ to ‘paradigmatic distinctiveness,’ using a different reading of Kasper’s phrase, ‘the sacrament of every otherness.’”^[25]

It might be countered that at least the Church of England’s own *Common Worship* liturgy is in line with the Roman Catholic approach, for it too has on Good Friday a distinct and uniquely affirmative prayer for “God’s ancient people, the Jews, the first to hear his word,” along with Christians “the children of your covenant.”^[26] But, differently, one might boldly hint at something almost Anglican in the Catholic position as outlined above. It is knowingly untidy, as Anglican approaches often are. Rahner’s ecclesiocentric inclusivism is herein complicated by what I have called Judaism’s *de facto* charism. The point is the Church can neither own, nor necessarily in any detail discern, its contours (for by what criteria would the Church judge between an authentic and an inauthentic manifestation in Judaism?). The very inductive approach, which enables the affirmation of post-biblical Judaism, going beyond the biblically and logically necessary, is a valued Anglican way, as *Generous Love* notes:

As Jesus’ ministry initiated an indefinite series of particular encounters, now limitless in reach in the light of his resurrection, so the Anglican Church has sought in making decisions to attend to the particular contexts of its work.^[27]

The practical outworking of this position is manifold. The message of *Guidelines and Notes*, on a careful reading of the Passion, and of the Pharisees, forms part of the bare minimum, even if on the ground there is a long distance yet to travel. Marginalization of the Old Testament (if it is right still to name it thus) must also be avoided, which requires some hard work on thinking how Christians can and cannot appropriate it. What must not happen is that it is replaced by others’ scriptures as “more culturally relevant” in some contexts. Neither is it permitted to deracinate the scriptures, as when the Church of New Zealand/ Aotearoa and Polynesia removed some references to Israel and Zion from its 1989 *Psalms for Worship*.^[28] Knowledge of and attention to Judaism (in Old Testament, Second Temple and rabbinic modes) is obligatory for serious Christian formation, regardless of how many Jews with whom a particular church has contact.

That Judaism is *sui generis*, neither Christian nor non-Christian, is not necessary comfortable for – or welcomed by – Jews. It can be actively resisted, most obviously when Jacob Neusner insists that the two faiths are “[d]ifferent people talking about different things to different people.”^[29] And no part of the argument here is that Jewish thinking must in some way “return the favour,” seeing Christianity as unique. Nevertheless, I suggest it is the way to which the Church is historically committed. Simply put, one cannot be a Bible-reading, liturgy-praying Christian without having to do with Israel and her faith, in ways without parallel. But some of the method of the Church’s unique dialogue with unique Judaism can be replicated in the wider world of faiths.

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