Remembering the Covenant: Judaism in an Anglican Theology of Interfaith Relations

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The question I begin with is this: "Does Anglican theology treat Christian-Jewish relations as a special case within interfaith relations?" There is an obvious answer to that question, which is: "Yes.

Every relationship between Christians and people of another given faith is special, reflecting the particular themes which arise in encounter with that faith." So my question is really about "special specialness." Perhaps it should be refined to ask: "Is there for Anglicans some qualitative difference between Christian-Jewish relations and other interfaith relations?" And, if so, in what does that distinctiveness consist? Note that I am here following the language of the document *Generous Love* presented to the 2008 Lambeth Conference, in that *Generous Love* described itself as "an Anglican theology of interfaith relations," and not as "an Anglican theology of other faiths."[1] A view of Christian-Jewish relations as qualitatively distinctive from other interfaith relations might indeed rest on a view of Judaism as qualitatively distinctive from other faiths, but it does not seem to me that that is a necessary implication.

Two very different kinds of "distinctiveness" for Christian-Jewish relations are immediately apparent within wider Christian theologies of interfaith relations. One reads from the Bible a teaching that the Jewish people have been given a wholly exceptional status before God, and concludes from that that Christian-Jewish relations are also wholly exceptional as compared to other interfaith relations. Christians and Jews each have a distinctive place within the dispensations of God's plan for the world, and it is the asymmetry of those dispensations which mandate how Christian-Jewish relations should be conducted in practice. This view of a distinctive relationship does in fact rest on a view of Judaism as a distinctive religion, literally *sui generis*: whereas all other non-Christian religions are human constructs, more or less false in their assumptions and misguided in their aims, the religion of Israel is – or was – built on true revelation from God, as testified by the Bible. Amongst Christians who share this approach, there is then a divergence over the relationship between contemporary Judaism and this authentic religion of Israel, and correspondingly different views of Christian-Jewish relations: for some, Judaism and Jews continue to have a uniquely favoured position in the divine purpose; for others, they have lost that place since the coming of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The premise of "exceptional distinctiveness" can therefore lead to radically different views of Christian-Jewish relations: to use common slogans which require further interrogation, it can support both "supersessionism" and "dispensationalism."

A different account of distinctiveness can be found in the contemporary teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, from Vatican II onwards. Here too, Christian-Jewish relations are qualitatively distinctive, but they are not thereby wholly divorced from relations with all other faiths. Thus, on the one hand the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews is organizationally part of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, not of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, and the 1965 declaration *Nostra Aetate* addresses Christian-Jewish relations through "sounding the depths of the mystery which is the Church."[2] On the other hand, *Nostra Aetate* itself moved from an initial draft focused entirely on the topic *De Judaeis* to become a statement speaking also about relations with Muslims, and more widely with Hindus, Buddhists and

other religions. The political factors underlying this expansion of the text are well-known, but underpinning it is a theology which sees the distinctiveness of Christian-Jewish relations as being in some sense paradigmatic for all other interfaith relations; the Church's primary relation to the Jewish other is to shape its relation to all religious others in a multi-faith world.[3] This has been eloquently expressed by Cardinal Walter Kasper as follows: "Judaism is as a sacrament of otherness that as such the Church must learn to discern, recognise and celebrate." I wish to return later to that evocative phrase "sacrament of otherness."[4]

How would an Anglican theology of interfaith relations position itself on the question of the distinctiveness of Christian-Jewish relations, bearing in mind these two types of distinctiveness? My view is that, insofar as an authoritative shape of Anglican theological teaching can be recognized and articulated, it has on the whole shifted from the first type to the second, from "exceptional distinctiveness" to "paradigmatic distinctiveness." The "insofar" is an important qualification, for discerning the theological position of Anglicanism on this, as on many other issues, is not a matter of simply locating and expounding a definitive piece of teaching. Rather, it is a question of gathering and interpreting elements scattered among church reports, conference resolutions, liturgical prayers, and the writings of individual theologians whose views command respect; together these can be taken to provide evidence of the thinking of Anglicanism as a whole. In fact, they generally provide evidence of several different strands of thinking; there is then a further task of assessing the relative weight of each strand. This clearly involves a major exercise of discernment; in this short paper I will necessarily be very selective in the evidence I can consider.

In a passage quoted by *Generous Love*, the 1988 Lambeth Conference document *Jews, Christians and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue* asserted that: "A right understanding of the relationship with Judaism is fundamental to Christianity's own self-understanding,"[5] and added that we must "reject any view of Judaism which sees it as a living fossil, simply superseded by Christianity."[6] The Swedish theologian Jesper Svartvik has described such a position as "deutero-Augustinian,"[7] meaning thereby that like St Augustine it sees theological significance in the continued existence of the Jewish people in the world after Christ (for Augustine, more immediately their continued toleration in an Empire which had become legally Christian).[8] Unlike pagans or heretics, Augustine argued that the Roman authorities should safeguard the continued life of the Jewish people; he himself described them as *librarii nostri* ("our scribes")[9] and *custodes librorum nostrorum* ("our librarians").[10]

That Christians should in this way see theological significance in Jewish people *post Christum* does not in itself imply a "right understanding of the relationship with Judaism," as the contested and poisonous history of Christian-Jewish interaction shows. Augustine's own view was that contemporary Jewish misery was an encouraging proof to Christians of the truth of the gospel since it was a divine punishment for their rejection of the Messiah; similarly, six hundreds later St Bernard of Clairvaux argued that Jews should not be killed "for they are living tokens to us, constantly recalling our Lord's passion."[11] This *adversus Judaeos* tradition, while in one way it preserved a Jewish presence in Christian Europe, also shaped the "teaching of contempt" (*enseignement du mépris*), which was identified by the French historian Jules Isaac as feeding the European antisemitism which culminated in the Holocaust – albeit the latter was itself a negation of the principle of preservation implied by the older Christian anti-Judaism. Together with other churches, and following the lead given by Vatican II, Anglicans have rejected this poisonous tradition of teaching, as *The Way of Dialogue* and *Generous Love* both show. But if this negative account of Israel is rejected, how do we now reach Augustine's goal of seeing theological significance in Judaism *post Christum*? Svartvik suggests a move from seeing Jews as *librarii nostri*, keepers of a deposit of truth which they misunderstand, to recognizing them as *sacramentum nostrum*, a God-given means of grace in their life alongside us.[12] This of course echoes Cardinal Kasper's description of Judaism as a "sacrament of otherness." How convincing an approach is this, what might it mean in practice, how does it relate to Anglicanism, and what are

its implications for wider interfaith encounter?

An obvious starting point for reflecting on the continuing significance of Israel for Christians is to be found in St Paul's intense, and intensely personal, writing in Romans 9-11. Here, he brings together a number of passionately held convictions which on the face of it are extremely difficult to harmonize: the newness, gratuity and reality of the life offered to believers in the Christ event (10:4) together with the continuing vitality of Jewish life in quest of God (10:2); the universality of the gospel offered to all (10:12) together with the particularity of the covenant made with the Jews (9:4); the failure of all human beings, Jews or Gentiles, before God (11:32) together with Paul's deepest and most recurrent theme, the unchanging faithfulness of God in his self-revelation (9:6; 9:11; 9:14; 11:1; 11:30). A huge amount of interpretative energy has over the years been expended in the effort to clarify exactly what Paul's theology of Israel is in Romans 9-11, yet there are still major disagreements among scholars. The apostle's writing in these chapters is intricately dialectical, expressive of a personal anguish which in some passages gives it an almost tortured feel, and which issues in statements of intense paradox: "Just as you [Gentiles] were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy through their disobedience, so they [Jews] have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may receive mercy" (11:30-31). It seems to me that the complexity and strangeness of a verse like that simply cannot be ironed out, harmonized with other verses to produce a systematic account of Paul's theology. He is wrestling at every level, from personal biography through the life of the nascent Christian community, up to the divine purpose for Israel, with the challenge of reconciling his own identity before God with a recognition of the other (or, rather, of that which has become other to him), and doing so in a situation where knowledge of God comes through that other. He is looking for a way of speaking of the other which avoids total separation yet does not fall into easy assimilation.

If relationship with this other is of key importance for Christians in God's purposes, it is perhaps in this sense that we can interpret Kasper's description of Judaism as a "sacrament of otherness" at the outset of the Church's life. A sacrament is, for the Christian community, an outward sign that reliably conveys to believers the grace and life of God. To speak of the Jewish people in the language of "sacrament" is thus at the very least to say that encounter with them can be for Christians a source of blessing, a way of being called back to holiness. The suggestion that Judaism is a sacrament for Christians, though, is saying more than simply that grace can be mediated through this encounter, for a sacrament has about it the character of reliability based on God's pledge. It is an assured sign of grace set within a relationship of promise on God's part and of response on ours – it is theologically located within the covenant God has made with his people. *Generous Love* stresses the generosity of God's grace, which by the work of the Spirit can engage Christians through encounters with people of any faith and in quite unexpected places;[13] but to speak of a "sacrament of otherness" is to claim something more than this. It is to claim that, under some conditions at least, encounter with Jewish people can be relied on to be a means of God's grace through their otherness. Is this a plausible theological claim to make?

How we answer this question depends of course on where we place Judaism in relation to the new covenant which God has established in Jesus Christ. There is considerable diversity, and some dispute, of view amongst Christians on this question, and that diversity and dispute are evident among Anglicans. I wish to illustrate this from a report produced in 2001 by the Church of England's Inter Faith Consultative Group with the title *'Sharing One Hope'*?[14] Subtitled "a contribution to a continuing debate," the report sought to map out various issues in the area of Christian-Jewish relations on which English Anglicans were agreed, and various issues on which they were not agreed – or, as the report put it more hopefully, "areas of continuing debate." In his "preface," the then Bishop of Southwark remarked, with some understatement: "Given the strength and diversity of feeling aroused by the issues with which it deals, this document has not been easy to write."[15] Among those issues was precisely the question addressed by this paper, that of the nature of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. *'Sharing One Hope'*? outlined four Anglican positions on this, the first of which it rejected.

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In the first place, it explained that there was agreement on the unacceptability of "replacement theology." This is a contested term, variously defined, and sometimes also referred to as 'supersessionism'. *'Sharing One Hope'*? defined it as "the theory that the Christian Church has simply superseded or replaced the Jewish people, who no longer have any special place in God's calling."[16] This might imply the view that Christian-Jewish relations have no distinctiveness at all; but it would also include the "negative exceptionalism" of the *adversos Judaeos* tradition exemplified by Augustine and Bernard.[17] The report argues that this must be rejected because of the disastrous consequences to which it has led historically through the *enseignement du mépris*, because it does not recognize the contemporary vitality of Judaism, because it fails to do justice exegetically to the complexity of St Paul's witness in Romans 9-11, and because its theology denies the fundamental principle of the unchanging faithfulness of God: the first covenant cannot be regarded as having been simply annulled.

The next two views identified in *'Sharing One Hope'?* take the idea of covenant as central, differing among themselves as to how many covenants there are.[18] The second position is a "one covenant" model, which draws on Paul's language of the "grafting in" of a wild olive tree into the root of a cultivated olive tree (Rom 11:17-24) to insist that a single covenant has been established with the people of God, in which Christians are enabled to share through the work of Christ. A "one covenant" approach is adopted by many theologians;[19] it is within this view that the idea of Judaism as a "sacrament of otherness" perhaps has most coherence.

A different view – the third identified in *'Sharing One Hope'?* – speaks of Judaism and Christianity, not as sharing in one covenant, but rather as engaged in two separate, parallel, in some sense complementary, covenants. This idea was promoted, for example, by James Parkes, one of the pioneers of Anglican involvement with Judaism, and developed by John Pawlikowski. Parkes saw in the two religions two equally valid expressions of the mercy and faithfulness of God: the covenant at Sinai, communally oriented, with a focus on the life of the people as a whole, and the covenant given by Christ, with a personal focus, inviting individuals into a relationship which would transcend the boundaries of time and space. *Generous Love* at one point explains that the work of the Spirit is understood in Anglican theology as being about both "inwardness" and also the flourishing of social life. Following Parkes' theory, then, encounter with Jewish life could have a particular function in calling Christians back to the fullness of their faith expressed in community; in this sense it might perhaps be called sacramental.

The fourth and final view of Christian-Jewish relations described in *'Sharing One Hope'?* eschews the language of covenant, on the grounds either that this is not a centrally important motif in one or both religions, or that its meaning is different between the two. Rather, it chooses to stress the difference and incommensurability of Judaism and Christianity. This is, for example, the position adopted with some trenchancy with Jacob Neusner, who describes them as "completely different religions, not different versions of one religion … different people talking about different things to different people."[20] From a perspective like this, there is no scope for speaking of Judaism as in any sense sacramental for Christians; Neusner's stress on radical difference leaves no shared theological framework in which a perception of sacramentality could be set. Judaism and Christianity are in principle left with no more in common than any other two faiths. This is in one sense clearly a loss, but it may also include a salutary element of correction to a tendency to assimilate the otherness of Judaism too easily into a Christian understanding. The language of the sacramental, after all, is Christian language; while it is entirely right for Christians to use it when they reflect on the effect of encounter with Jewish people on their own discipleship, they must not abuse it by evacuating the human reality of those people, instrumentalizing them into signs for themselves alone. What is of significance theologically is the indomitable persistence of the Jewish people after the Christian revelation, their defiance of pressure to reduce them to Christian categories.

This is perhaps the paradox which is incorporated into Kasper's memorable phrase "sacrament of

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otherness." This people by the very continuity of their existence defy all attempts to reduce them into mere bearers of Christian meaning, to accommodate them too comfortably in a Christian universe of discourse; and it is precisely through this irreducibility that they are a blessing to the Church. Michael Barnes, drawing on the "heterology" of Michel de Certeau, expresses the point thus: "The Jewish other is always returning, always present, 'haunting' the space carved out by the dominant Christian 'same'."[21] There is then a wider application in interfaith relations of the "return of the Jewish other," but first we must look at the socio-political forms in which that return is concretely embodied, the Jewish people and the land of Israel. How have Anglicans related historically, how do they relate today, to these realities?

The continuing "return" of Judaism to the contemporary Church, with all its theological significance, is in fact embodied in several different socio-political contexts. One is the presence of vibrant Jewish communities alongside Christians in several Western countries and beyond, providing opportunities for interaction of a type which *Generous Love* describes in relation to other faiths also. Another, for which Barnes and de Certeau's language of "haunting" is more especially apposite, is the absence in many places of once flourishing Jewish communities, particularly as a result of the Holocaust, but also through Jewish migration to Israel. Ruth Ellen Gruber, in her fine study *Virtually Jewish*, has spoken of the "Jewish space" in many European countries created by this absence, and of the ways in which this is being filled, often by Gentiles with a more or less informed enthusiasm for Jewish culture, life and spirituality.[22] The intensity of the vacuum left, for example, by the Holocaust in the city of Cracow is captured by the émigré Polish writer Rafael Scharf in these words: "'There is a multitude of them – nowhere' says Jerzy Ficowski. That crowded, eternal absence is far more tangible here than anywhere else in the world."[23] For me personally, visiting the spaces left by vanished Jewish communities has been a profoundly moving experience, not only in terms of human story, but at the level of the Spirit also: even in those places where Jewish life has gone, the traces it leaves are sometimes so powerful that they can mediate the reality of that otherness through which we encounter the Holy One of Israel.

However, the most challenging manifestations of Jewish life for Christians today are neither in the presence of the diaspora communities nor in their absence, but in the current political reality of Israel as a Jewish state. It is here that theologically significant reality achieves political actuality, and in so doing poses real challenges for Christians of all kinds, not least for Anglicans – perhaps particularly for Anglicans, given the complexity of the history which implicates them in this issue. As with many dimensions of Anglican life, that history can only be understood by recognizing that it involves a number of different strands. Three in particular can be identified, roughly in the order in which they successively came to prominence, as the Messianic, the Jewish solidarity, and the Palestinian solidarity strands.

Although the readmission of the Jews to England in 1656 owed something to Messianic speculation, it was in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that Christian Zionism really became prominent in Britain, in the belief that the coming of the Messiah was linked to the conversion of the Jews and their restoration to the promised land of Israel. The London Jews Society, founded in 1809 as an interdenominational society but by 1815 reconstituted in purely Anglican terms, was from the beginning committed to the twin goals of proselytizing and of restoration, and in 1841 a joint scheme for a Protestant Bishopric in Jerusalem was realized with the Prussian political and ecclesiastical authorities. The first bishop, Michael Solomon Alexander, was a converted rabbi, and his charge was primarily to conduct mission among the small Jewish community in the city, at the same time encouraging the return of diaspora Jews there. Contemporary evangelicals enthusiastically hailed this as the "restoration" of the apostolic Hebrew Christian Church in Jerusalem, suppressed since the first Christian century, and looked eagerly to the beginning of the Messianic age. Bishop Alexander died in 1845, and under his successor there was a marked change in the direction of Jerusalem Anglicanism overall; the London Jews Society, however, continued at Christ Church, Jerusalem, subsequently becoming the Church's Mission to the Jews, now Church's Ministry among Jewish People. This Messianic strand still plays some

part in the Church of England, though generally in an attenuated form stressing the importance for Anglican Christians of valuing the witness of Jewish believers in Jesus.

A second strand increasingly marking the Church of England during the latter part of the 20th century emphasizes a sense of solidarity with Jewish people, irrespective of any commitment from them to belief in Christ, and largely unconnected with any eschatological expectation associated with their dispersal or restoration. This was given profound, sometimes extreme, articulation by the scholar James Parkes, who combined a rather eccentric reputation with a close friendship with Archbishop William Temple and other mid-century Anglican leaders. It found its first organizational expression in the formation of the Council of Christians and Jews in 1942 as a joint venture of the Archbishop and the Chief Rabbi. Following the effective endorsement of the teaching of *Nostra Aetate* by the 1988 Lambeth Conference, this strand stresses the importance of positive Christian-Jewish relations, for example in the Joint Declaration made by Archbishop Rowan Williams and the two Chief Rabbis of Israel in September 2006, which affirmed that: “A relationship between our communities, nationally and internationally, has grown from the steady work of encounter, discussion, reflection and reconciliation.”[24]

A third strand affecting the Church of England’s relations with Judaism has been the sense of solidarity with Palestinian people. This has become an increasingly significant influence in recent years, both with a heightened awareness in British society of the sufferings of the Palestinian people, and with the growing involvement of the Church of England with Muslim communities, who will often raise the question of Israel/Palestine as an issue in interfaith dialogue. However, its most persuasive force is exercised through links with Anglican Christians in the Holy Land, who are overwhelmingly of Palestinian Arab background and generally strongly pro-Palestinian in their political orientation. In 1887 the Jerusalem see was reconstituted as a purely Anglican bishopric, and the new bishop George Blyth was entrusted with an ambassadorial role to build good relations with Orthodox Christian Arabs. This inevitably led to tension between the increasingly high church, Arab-oriented diocese and the low church, Jewish-oriented Christ Church, leading eventually to the construction of a new Cathedral, St George’s. The polarity has continued to the present day, providing a crucially important instance of the Anglican vocation to hold together difference in tension.

It is the interplay and occasional confrontation of these three strands – Zionist, Jewish solidarity and Palestinian solidarity – which shape Anglican attitudes to Israel today, and these political realities cannot be wholly divorced from theological principles. “Palestinian solidarity,” for example, can at times turn to a kind of replacement theology to deny any Jewish claim on the land; Zionist Christians may either adopt a dispensationalist version of the “two covenants” theory or may stress the Christian dependence on Israel by being grafted into the one covenant; the “Jewish solidarity” strand draws support from both one and two covenant models, and from the “different religions” approach. This intermingling of theology and politics is found in other inter faith relations also; yet Christian-Jewish relations have significance beyond their immediate field.

Christian-Jewish relations will always have a profile disproportionate to the actual size of the Jewish community, and this reflects their recurrent and unavoidable centrality for any Christian engagement with other religions. It is no accident that *Nostra Aetate* began as a text addressing the Church’s relation with Judaism only, and subsequently grew to engage with Islam and with other religious traditions also; rather, this reflects a deep theological orientation, which in encounter with the other will always find an evocation of the first experience of otherness in the Church’s life, that between Gentile and Jew – both within the Christian fellowship and in relation to those Jews who do not accept Jesus as Messiah. As Paul’s writings most notably show, a passionate wrestling with this division is inscribed in the New Testament, and through that is encoded in Christian ways of thinking, to emerge with a shaping role in any encounter with the religious other.

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Most of all, as Judaism throughout the Church's history has refused to go away, its continuing vitality has posed a challenge to Christians who want a tidy solution to the problem of religious plurality – to quote Michael Barnes again:

If there is a "first moment" in a Christian theology of religions, it arises from the strictly anarchic otherness to which the living tradition of Judaism witnesses; in faithfulness to that trace of the Infinite, Judaism continues to "haunt" the process of Christian self-identification.[25]

So it is precisely because of the formative nature of this primal division within the people of God, this first Christian encounter with an "other," that the significance of Christian encounter with Israel is not limited to one part of interfaith relations. To the contrary, any serious engagement with a religious other will drive us theologically to revisit the first covenant in which the Jewish other shapes our Christian identity in relation to God for, as Kasper rightly said, Judaism is a sacrament of every otherness which the Church repeatedly needs to encounter.

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* **Rt Rev Michael Ipgrave** is Bishop of Lichfield in the Church of England. He is chairman of the UK's national Council of Christians and Jews.

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