Reorienting Jewish-Christian Relations and Dialogue

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It is very appropriate that we have been celebrating the 50th anniversary of Nostra Aetate – the “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions” promulgated towards the end of the Second Vatican Council. By any measure, this was a landmark declaration that officially put the Roman Catholic relations to people of other religious traditions on a firm new footing.

The openings provided by that Declaration have helped many Roman Catholic theologians to venture boldly into creative explorations on interfaith dialogue and in rethinking the Christian Theology of Religions. Much can be said on the developments in these two areas and in a critical analysis of the Declaration on how it needs to be revised and re-envisioned after 50 years.

The purpose of this article, however, is limited by the specific interest of this issue of *Current Dialogue*, which is dedicated to re-visiting the question of Jewish-Christian relations today. This relationship was one of the major pre-occupations of *Nostra Aetate*. In fact, the Declaration, while dealing with all the major world religious traditions, gives a prominent place to Jewish-Christian relations by dealing comprehensively with many aspects of this relationship in its 4th paragraph.

In order to have clarity in discussing Jewish-Christian relations and dialogue today, one needs to separate out three interrelated but distinct aspects of this relationship:

The *first* is on Jewish-Christian dialogue and the contribution it has made to this relationship.

The *second* relates to the fact that the Jesus Movement that eventually grew into Christianity emerged from within Judaism, that Jesus and his immediate disciples were Jews and that the church inherited and modified a number of its theological doctrines and teachings from Judaism. What significance does it have for our understanding of the Christian faith, Christian theology and to Jewish-Christian relations today?

The *third* is the thorny question of the modern State of Israel and what approach Christians should have to it.

Although they are interrelated in some ways, conflating these three issues uncritically, without sufficiently distinguishing them from one another, has contributed to some of the dissatisfaction and anxiety about this relationship among sections of the Christian community. The crux of the question has to do with the issue of “special relationship” and what it implies.

Building a New Relationship

There is no need to recount to the readers of *Current Dialogue* the troubled history of Jewish-Christian relations from the very beginning. From the time Christianity became part of Empire, the Jewish community had continuously suffered discrimination and persecution through the centuries. The shock of how historic animosity toward Judaism and the Jews was eventually one of the contributing factors for the Holocaust shook the Christian conscience. In the post-World War II period, much has been done to challenge anti-Judaism, antisemitism, supersessionist readings of the scriptures and prejudice against the Jewish community in the reading and interpretation of the

Christian scriptures.

Much theological reparation and radical rethinking of Christian relations with Jewish people had to be undertaken. This was not an easy task in the context of deep and justified grievances on the Jewish side. One must salute the patience, courage and wisdom of those Christians and Jews who embarked on Jewish-Christian dialogue and brought us to where we are today. I have reservations, as an Asian Christian, to privileging this dialogue over dialogue with other religions and mainly about the “no-go” areas within this dialogue. Some have rightly claimed that new vitality would come to this dialogue only when we are ready to discuss and enter into dialogue on the difficult issue of peace and justice in the Middle-East. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this dialogue must be continued, nurtured and further developed for the benefit of both communities.

The Question of Theological Affinity

It is, in fact, very easy to argue that there is a “special relationship” between Christians and Jews. Some of it is obvious in that Jesus remained a Jew to the end and appeared to have shown no interest in creating an alternate religious tradition among his people. Christians strengthened this relationship by the adoption of the Hebrew scriptures as part of the Christian scriptures. The main traits of the Christian understanding of God – its commitment to social justice issues, its prophetic tradition and many of its ethical and moral values – are also drawn from Jewish heritage. As Jewish-Christian relations improved over the years, a number of Jewish and Christian scholars have begun to argue that this theological affinity and proximity between Judaism and Christianity is a strong basis for a “special relationship” between Christians and Jews. There are a number of streams to this argument but three of them stand out.

The first is the appeal to Abraham as the common ancestor of the two faiths (of three, when Islam is included).

The second stream argues that a deeper exploration of Christian scripture and Christian theological developments, despite the Hellenization of Christian theology in the Greco-Roman world, would reveal the basic Hebrew basis of Christian theology.

For instance, Marvin R. Wilson, in his *Our Father Abraham – Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith*,[1] does a thoroughly scholarly analysis of both the Christian scriptures and the early Christian theological developments to show how Jewish thinking and beliefs lie at the root of Christian theology. While admitting that this theology underwent significant changes in the Greco-Roman culture, he argues that Christianity, to its great benefit, should recover and re-own its Jewish roots and heritage. One of the books I have read with much interest is Tikva Frymer-Kensky’s *Christianity in Jewish Terms*,[2] in which several outstanding Jewish scholars reflect on the basic beliefs of the Christian faith from a Jewish perspective with responses from other Jewish and Christian scholars.

The third stream relates to the bulk of literature that has emerged in recent years, both from Jewish and Christian scholars, offering new interpretations of Jesus and his ministry, basically lifting up the “Jewishness of Jesus” and his teachings with a call for a revised Christology. Despite the doubts cast by the Jesus Seminar on the reliability of the gospel narratives on Jesus’ life and teachings, there have been considerable new studies of the gospel narratives, extra-biblical resources related to them, and the Pauline corpus to give new interpretations of Jesus particularly in the context of the socio-political and religio-cultural background of 1st-century Palestine. So much so that New Testament scholars, James Charlesworth and Walter Weaver, for instance, in their volume *Images of Jesus Today*, speak of Jesus research as marked with “chaotic creativity.”[3] There is disagreement as to whether Jesus was an itinerant cynic, Israelite prophet, a radical reformer or the anticipated Messiah. From the Jewish side, the rabbinic writer Harvey Falk wrote, *Jesus the*

Pharisee: A New Look at the Jewishness of Jesus,[4] which places Jesus firmly within the Jewish Tradition. Bruce Chilton goes even further, in his *Rabbi Jesus – An Intimate Biography*,[5] and maintains through very detailed research and arguments that Jesus can only be understood as a Jewish Rabbi. All these studies have thrown much new light on the immediate background of Jesus' ministry and the socio-political and religious milieu in which he ministered.

The Problems Related to the Claim to "Special Relationship"

Much of the claim to special relationship is based on the close affinity between Judaism and Christianity in the early stages of its evolution into a new religion, borrowing and incorporating ideas from Judaism and interpreting the significance of Jesus and his life in Jewish categories of thought. This comes as no surprise because most of the early members of the Jesus Movement were Jews. However, if one takes an honest look at Christian beliefs today, including interpretations of who Jesus is, there is very little Judaism and Christianity hold in common. With the evolution of the doctrine of the Trinity, which also heavily revises early understandings of Christology, Christianity moved miles away from the Jewish theological tradition. In fact, none of the basic theological affirmations Christians make about Jesus and his significance would be acceptable within contemporary Judaism. The Jesus Christians "believe" in (and even "worship") has little or nothing to do with the Jewish rabbi he was during his ministry.

There are many Christians, including myself in *Your God My God, Our God: Rethinking Christian Theology for Religious Plurality*,[6] who argue for the recovery of Jesus as teacher, and view his challenge to discipleship to the Reign of God as an important corrective to the classical theological interpretations of his significance. But it is precisely those teachings, and the consequences he drew from them for social relationships, that the Jewish teachers and leaders of his day found difficult to accept. A number of dimensions of Jesus' teachings did not sit well with Jewish self-understanding at the time: Jesus' claim to a special relationship with God, and the nature of his mission in the world. I think Jacob Neusner's *Christianity and Judaism – Two Faiths Talking about Different Things*[7] is more to the point.

This does not mean we must stop talking to each other or refrain from building a good, robust and dialogical relationship. Nor does it mean we might not be enriched in our understanding of Jesus, his teachings and his mission by the new interest in the historical Jesus and the painstaking research that is underway. But this needs to happen within the recognition that we are two distinct religious traditions, and what might have contributed theologically to a "special relationship" instead came to an end during a certain period of history.

For me, when Christianity became a predominantly Gentile religion and therefore moved away from the Torah and the ritual of circumcision (the marks of belonging to the covenant community), and refrained from observing the Sabbath, the "special relationship" was broken for good. The two had become two distinctly different traditions. Some would still argue, despite this reality, that the very Jewishness of Jesus and the Christian borrowing of Jewish theological concepts together call for a special relationship. My own sense is that any continued claims to special relationship after which Christianity had become a different religion have been at the heart of some of the major problems plaguing Jewish-Christian relations in the past and the future.

When Christians adopted the Jewish scriptures as their own, which in hindsight was quite unwarranted, they had to resort to a supersessionist reading of the Hebrew scriptures. The gospel according to Matthew is witness to the almost preposterous use of the Hebrew scriptures, as it takes them completely out of their original context to prove that almost every action of Jesus and everything done to him were, "so that the scriptures may be fulfilled." Any reasonably informed Sunday school teacher would know the gymnastics that one had to do to take the stories, history and events in the Hebrew Bible – which hold enormous meaning to Jewish people, but have little to

do with Christianity – and make them relate to the Christian story. Because of the attempt to interpret Jesus' death in terms of the Jewish sacrificial system, we are now stuck with the theory of susbstitutionary atonement, which makes little sense to many in our day. Stories and interpretations that make perfect sense within one religious tradition do not necessarily make sense within another. Our unwillingness as Christians to accept that, even though Jesus was a Jew, the implications of his teachings had crossed the boundaries of Judaism and that today Christianity has too little in common with Judaism is at the heart of many of the problems we have had in Jewish-Christian history.

An Example from the Asian Context

But does not the fact that Christianity rose from within Judaism argue naturally for a special relationship? Let me illustrate my answer to this question from a similar situation from Asia. The Lord Buddha was a Hindu who, out of his dissatisfaction with the religion and how it was practiced began a new movement that ended up as Buddhism. Even though he himself did not want to consciously break away from his Hindu heritage, his teachings invariably resulted in a distinct move away from Hinduism. His denial of an Ultimate Reality and a human soul, which were at the heart of the Hindu tradition, his refusal to accept the authority of the Vedic scriptures, which Hindus considered authoritative and revealed, and his refusal to organize society on the basis of the Caste System, which was central to Hinduism of his day, meant that he had gone too far from Hinduism to have any "special relationship" with it. Although Hinduism attempted to incorporate Buddha as one of the *avatars* (incarnations) of Vishnu, and made Buddhism one of its systems of Philosophy, the horse had already bolted the stable. Buddhism has grown in its own way, as did Christianity, and has become a parallel religious tradition.

Although any research on the Buddha and origins of Buddhism needs to have a full understanding of the Hindu environment in which it was born, no one today argues that we cannot understand Buddhism without Hinduism or that Hindu-Buddhist relations are privileged over other interfaith relationships. Although initially Buddhists suffered persecution by the Hindus, eventually they settled down and became two mature, parallel religions that can relate to one another.

By continuing to claim special relationship between Judaism and Christianity we continually fall into the trap of having to explain one religion in terms of the other. We should leave Judaism alone and relate to it as we would with any other mature religious tradition. A Jewish Rabbi once said, "Two thousand years of Christian love is enough to make anyone nervous." Acknowledging that Christianity and Judaism are two distinct religions in theology, practice and ethos will respect the integrity of Judaism and provide a stronger common platform for our dialogue.

What of the Christian Approach to the State of Israel?

Due to the limitations of space, it is not possible to develop this third section on Christian attitudes toward the State of Israel as much as it should be, and it is difficult to discuss this question without being misunderstood. On the Christian side, the problem has to do with a skewed reading and interpretation of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures by a considerable section of the conservative Christians in the USA and in some other parts of the world (with the support of some sections of the Orthodox Jewish community) that results in uncritical support for the modern State of Israel. At the same time, there is also a considerable section of Christians who hold that after nearly seven decades of its founding, Israel should be treated like any other modern state. They hold that while one needs to give heed to Israel's legitimate concerns and security needs, one should also hold it accountable to international laws and conventions and the way it deals with the Palestinian question. Both the USA as a state and parts of Christianity as a religious tradition are paying a very high price in the eyes of the world for their blind spots in this area because of the assumed "special relationship" – both political and theological. What both the United States and Christianity

have lost through this is the possibility to be a *trusted* partner in the search for justice and peace in the Middle East. All relationships need to be built on mutual respect, justice and mutual accountability, so that the integrity of all parties involved are respected. Keeping this thorny question out of Jewish-Christian dialogue does a disservice to the basic concept, purpose and practice of dialogue.

New Wine and Old Wineskins

When I think of Jewish-Christian dialogue, I am reminded of a saying attributed to Jesus found in all three synoptic gospels, and which comes from the Jewish wisdom tradition: “no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins” (Mark 2:22). This should not lead anyone to approach Judaism as “old” and Christianity as “new” in a prejudicial sense. The saying instead has to do with *what is the appropriate thing to do*. As with so many of Jesus’ sayings, this too provides enormous scope for deep reflection as we look at Jewish-Christian relations today.

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