



Report of Cambridge Conference on “Covenant”;

28.02.2005

Report of Cambridge Conference on "Covenant"

The conference sponsored by the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations, Cambridge, England, on 6 December 2004 on the theme "The Place of Covenant in Judaism, Christianity and Jewish-Christian Relations" brought together three eminent religious figures - Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks, Cardinal Walter Kasper and Archbishop Rowan Williams. This was the first time they had sat on the same platform.

Chief Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks has sought to reinvigorate Anglo-Jewish life through a series of national and communal projects since becoming Chief Rabbi in 1991. He was awarded the Jerusalem Peace Prize in 1995 in recognition of his contribution to diaspora life and is a well-known public figure, frequently contributing to television and radio broadcasts and the national press.

In the first lecture of the morning Sacks described a highly significant shift between Genesis 1 and 9. These two chapters represent fundamentally different approaches to morality. The first is characterised by adherence to God's demands and the proclamation of "the Good", whilst Genesis 9 employs the language of covenant. Covenant represents a way of conceiving of the moral enterprise as relational, as "a link between persons". Covenant has taken the place of the Good. Covenants are performative - used to "create relationships, make promises, undertake obligations". This shift in moral language is accompanied by a shift from the "image of God" as a "metaphysical statement about what human beings *are*" to "an ethical statement about what we *may not do*" - that is, practice violence in the name of God.

Sacks cast the difference between ontology and ethics in terms of the two great cultural legacies to western civilisation - Greece and Israel. Whilst the Greek mode of "faith as ontology" generates "narratives of displacement" the Abrahamic, covenantal mode generates a multiplicity of narratives: "Covenantal consciousness is not a world of subjective images cast by... a world of objects, but an intersubjective reality in which persons come together, their conduct shaped by collective norms, trying to coexist graciously by making space for one another".

Cardinal Walter Kasper has been President of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews since May 2001. The Commission, under Cardinal Kasper's leadership, has been in dialogue with a wide range of Jewish organizations. In his lecture, Kasper recognised the range, frequent renewal and endurance of covenant theologies in the Old Testament. In the Christological emphasis of the New Testament he identifies the point of conflict with Judaism, but also a

fundamental continuity based on God's fidelity to the covenant. In the figure of Christ, the old covenant is not abolished but upheld. It is not until the later New Testament and post-Apostolic writings that Judaism and Christianity are disassociated from one another and the substitution theory takes hold.

Kasper sees in the theology after Auschwitz an "epochal turning" and revision. It was then that the substitution theory was recognised as untenable in light of God's faithfulness as testified to in the Old and New Testament. In particular he cites the Second Vatican Council and Pope John Paul II's "unabrogated covenant" as the basis of a renewed theology of Judaism within the catholic and protestant churches. Kasper finds the "one covenant or two" debate inadequate - the former too readily assuming a unified canonical covenant, the latter losing the sense of continuity and interconnection. Instead, he speaks of "the historical concurrence on the basis of eschatological hope" - drawing on an image of Paul's in the Epistle to the Romans, whereby the root of the olive tree is Israel, upon which the church of the gentiles is grafted like a branch. ([Full text.](#))

Archbishop Rowan Williams was elected Archbishop of Canterbury in July 2002. He has written several books on the history of theology and spirituality and has published collections of articles and sermons, as well as two books of poetry. He has also been closely involved in matters of religious education.

Williams considers an area of agreement for Jews and Christians to be "that the covenant exists so that God may be known" - moreover, known as wholly dependable and consistent in his dealings with humans. It is thus that Christian supersessionism is untenable in light of the fidelity of God, for the supersessionist automatically doubts the coherence of God's work: "the very idea of a covenanting God is undermined if this means a rejection of the history of the covenant thus far".

As Paul in Romans speaks on behalf of a marginalized Christian Community, so when the roles are reversed members of the Jewish communality have a duty to challenge the Christian establishment "in the name of the ultimate goal of God's covenantal action". Williams proceeded to touch on the issue of modern Israel, stressing that it is the powerless that must ask the "hard

questions", and that Christians should strive to ensure that they are heard.

God establishes his nature through a record of events, testimony and historical continuity - the story of Israel. The meaning of covenant is therefore embedded in "the enormous and tragic tensions of actual and local history". It is in fact the persistence of Israel in the face of the growth of Christianity that "can become the most significant and necessary definition of the meaning of the whole idea of covenant".

In addition to the 200 delegates in Cambridge, the conference was made publicly available on the Internet, in part for the benefit of the Centre's distance learning community. Lucia Faltin, Director of International Programmes, coordinated the on-line discussion, whilst a small team of students recorded proceedings on a webcam and relayed the Question and Answer session on the CJCR website. The themes touched upon during the on-line discussion included the place of non-religious Jews and Christians in a covenantal theology; the covenant and the state of Israel and the role messianic Judaism may play in the future of Jewish-Christian Relations.

The lectures of the morning were followed by a panel discussion and questions from the floor. Many of these questions - such as the relevance of covenant in cultural and religious contexts outside the Abrahamic religions - fuelled discussion in the afternoon workshops, which provided a forum for dialogue. The day's program concluded with a panel, consisting of a number of leading academics in the field - Prof David Ford, Prof Dan Hardy, Dr Edward Kessler, Prof John Pawlikowski and Dr Janet Soskice.

Courtesy of the [Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations](#)

Full text of lecture by [Cardinal Kasper](#)

CDs of the keynote lectures are available for purchase from the CJCR priced at €15.99 for the set of three