Some brief remarks on the overall direction of Christian-Jewish relations and the mission of the ICCJ

31.08.2017 | Philip A. Cunningham

Farewell address of ICCJ's outgoing President during the closing dinner of the 2017 annual conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), Bonn, Germany, July 5, 2017.

It has been my great honor to serve as the President of the International Council of Christians and Jews for the past three years. This evening will be my last address in that capacity. I've been asked to offer some brief remarks on the overall direction of Christian-Jewish relations and the mission of the ICCJ.

On the one hand, we have all witnessed in recent decades the birth of new and warm relations between Christians and Jews. Churches from a wide variety of Christian traditions have strongly condemned antisemitism, definitively rejected the hoary vilification of Jews as divinely cursed Christ-killers, and in many cases, have either explicitly disavowed or effectively abandoned conversionary campaigns that target Jews.

Jews, ranging from liberal to Orthodox communities, have in significant numbers recognized the sincerity of Christian efforts at reform. In the words of the 2016 statement from the Orthodox Conference of European Rabbis and the Rabbinical Council of America, endorsed by the Israeli Rabbinate: "We seek to deepen our dialogue and partnership with the Church in order to foster our mutual understanding and to advance the goals … *of working,+ together, to improve the world: to go in God's ways, feed the hungry and dress the naked, give joy to widows and orphans, refuge to the persecuted and the oppressed, and thus merit *God's+ blessings."[1]

We have seen dialogues between Jews and Christians take shape in very different contexts around the world: from Israel where Jews are uniquely the majority population, but where the persistent statelessness of Palestinians and wider regional conflicts color all interactions; to Europe, where heroic efforts have been underway for decades even while laboring under the burden of the shadow of the Shoah; to North America, which has the largest Jewish diaspora communities, making possible unparalleled opportunities for interreligious dialogue and collaboration; and to Latin America, where confraternidads of Christians and Jews intentionally make the building of friendships the priority of their interreligious work. To speak metaphorically, all of these various "soils"—and others elsewhere around the globe—have proven to be fertile seedbeds for the flowering of unheard-of rapprochement, despite the presence of weeds and sometimes unfavorable weather conditions. There is much work remaining, old habits die hard, but no one can doubt that we have seen a historic religious revolution in our time.

And yet, sticking in my mind are some cautionary words spoken in 2001 by Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy: "Our first aim must, of course, be to press forward. To stand still is to risk going backwards …. At the same time, there can be a lessening of enthusiasm, a growing indifference or even a renewed spirit of suspicion and mistrust … should our efforts to keep up the momentum slacken."[2]

Looking around today, I can see indications the cardinal's words remain highly relevant. Within my

own Catholic religious community—and I know we are hardly unique in this—some leaders seem content with the idea that all the issues between Jews and Christians have been resolved by the churches' repudiation of antisemitism and the teaching of contempt. The exciting challenges and enrichment from rereading, reforming, and renewing in the context of ever-deepening dialogues seem to provoke only apathy from some in both the Christian and Jewish communities.

Some voices argue that trilateral relations among Jews, Christians, and Muslims should have the greater priority today. While this is undoubtedly an urgent need, trilateral relations are dependent on the three bilateral interactions among Jews and Muslims, Muslims and Christians, and Christians and Jews. Each pairing must be given specific attention. It is the mission of the ICCJ to focus on the Jewish-Christian pairing, including to marshal resources to tackle particular issues, such as the urgent need to develop a coherent theology of the Land.

I sometimes wonder if at some unconscious level both Christians and Jews realize that our deepening dialogue will at some point (if it hasn't already) challenge us to reform our respective selfunderstandings. Our new relationship unavoidably raises uncomfortable questions because of our intertwined histories.

As our relationship develops, how will Jews grapple with the Christian claim that they covenant with the God of Israel? Will the traditional biblical and rabbinic categories of Jews and non-Jews be adequate ways of viewing the world if Christians are in some sense also a chosen people of God with their specific way of walking covenantally with God? And if Christians are seen as covenanting with the God of Israel, then what is the role of Jesus in this?

Christians also face discomfiting questions as our dialogue with Jews progresses. When he welcomed the ICCJ to the Vatican two years ago, Pope Francis mentioned a key Christological idea:

The Christian confessions find their unity in Christ; Judaism finds its unity in the Torah. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh in the world; for Jews, the Word of God is present above all in the Torah. Both faith traditions find their foundation in the One God, the God of the Covenant, who reveals himself through his Word. In seeking a right attitude towards God, Christians turn to Christ as the fount of new life, and Jews to the teaching of the Torah.[3]

If Christians understand Jews to be interacting with the Word of God incarnated in the human language of the Torah, then how Christians conceive of the centrality of Christ Jesus is impacted. In particular, there arises a need to confront the Western Christian tendency toward christomonism, the myopic concentration on the redemptive work of Christ to the exclusion of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. This fixation tends to circumscribe the divine Word's activity only to what Christians experience (even if the Word now always acts in unity with the glorified Jesus). Without getting into the weeds of this any further, it should be clear that we are touching here on the central nervous system of Christian self-understanding.

As Jews and Christians continue their dialogue, are they beginning to sense the need to engage in profound self-examination? As a result, do they consciously or unconsciously invoke certain avoidance mechanisms in order to sidestep such uncomfortable prospects? In particular, might they have—in Cardinal Cassidy's words—a lessened enthusiasm for pursuing the interreligious dialogue between Christians and Jews.

I believe that it is the mission of the ICCJ not to let that happen. Rather, the ICCJ is dedicated to ongoing, intensive and sustained conversation between Jews and Christians. Although a small organization with finite resources, it is uniquely placed to promote opportunities for such dialogue at every opportunity despite the difficulties and challenges.

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We who are committed to continuing to build shalom between Christians and Jews might do well to follow the famous rabbinic directive about studying together found in the Pirkei Avot: “Find yourself a teacher, get for yourself a friend” [1:6].

Thank you.

[1] “Between Jerusalem and Rome: The Shared Universal and the Respected Particular – Reflections on 50 Years of Nostra

Aetate” (2016).
http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/1421-cer-rca-2016.

[2] “Jewish-Catholic Relations: 1990-2001” (May 1, 2001),
§10. http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/educational-and-liturgicalmaterials/.

classic-articles/1387-cassidy-2001may1b

[3] “Address to the International Council of Christians and Jews” (June 30,
2015). http://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documentsand-

statements/roman-catholic/francis/1337-address-to-the-international-council-of-christians-and-jews.