Christian-Jewish Relations: A Christian Perspective

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The Christian part of a two-part contribution.

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The Holocaust is a challenge to all belief in God. It also calls in question any facile acceptance of traditional statements about God"s almighty power. American theologian Harvey Cox says that all theology today starts from the Holocaust.

Rampant cold-blooded calculated evil intended to exterminate the entire Jewry of Europe. Six million Jews perished before World War II ended. Meanwhile, the world stood still and watched.

Hans Küng encapsulates this blot on human history: "It must be clearly stated that Nazi anti-Judaism was the work of godless anti-Christian criminals. But it would not have been possible without almost two thousand years" pre-history of Christian anti-Judaism, which prevented Christians in Germany from organising a convinced and energetic resistance on a broad front."

The Christian church is now involved in a critical reappraisal of those 2000 years of anti-Jewish teaching and practice, which produced a world mind-set deleterious to Jews and Judaism.

Justifiably Jews have much to hold against Christians; and indeed, the integrity of Christianity itself comes under a cloud.

Christians might well take to heart the injunction of Jesus: "If you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar and there you remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there, go at once and make peace with your brother, and then come back and offer your gift to God."

The need to repent and seek reconciliation is vital if Christians are to stand together with Jews in awe before the Lord of all creation.

Christian churches around the world have made important official statements about their relationship with Judaism, notably Nostra Aetate emerging from Vatican II in October 1965. Roman Catholic liturgy, teaching and preaching were henceforth to be purged of any reference offensive to Jews and Judaism. Significant omissions at the time were the failure to acknowledge Christian responsibility for past offences to Jews and no mention of the Holocaust or of the importance of Israel (the Land) to Jews; these were later partly redressed in further statements.

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Rabbi Lamm from the United States was quick to take up one salient objection: "As Jews we object to being absolved of the guilt of killing their God. To our mind the question is who will absolve the Church for its guilt in inspiring and sponsoring crusades and inquisitions and blood libels and pogroms. The Church has expressed to the Jewish people neither apology nor confession, nor regrets."

The World Council of Churches, representing over 300 Protestant, Anglican, Orthodox and Pentecostal member churches (not executive but giving moral leadership) made it clear in 1988 that the official theology of the churches is not determined by theologians or the common belief of Christians, but by decisions taken at synods, conventions and assemblies by delegates chosen to represent the membership at large.

Church statements of this sort serve at least as touchstones. They will lag behind the scholarship and informed thinking of the committed pioneers of a new Christian-Jewish relationship, but they will be ahead of the teaching of the average local church.

This middle group of clergy and laity, academics and theologians, has wrestled with the profound problems that led to the parting of the ways for Christians and Jews in the turbulent first century of the Common Era and its two millennia aftermath to the present day.

Stumbling blocks offensive to Jews and uncritically accepted by Christians until this century have been identified.

Deicide: Jews held collectively responsible for the killing of Christ - has been the basic cause for fear and trepidation among Jews down the centuries, especially at Easter. This is now seen to be historically and morally unjustified.

Supersession: The early Christian view that the old Testament had been replaced by the New Testament or had value mainly as prophecy pointing to a coming Messiah; and that Judaism had been replaced by Christianity as ‘the new Israel’. Judaism is now acknowledged as a major religion in its own right and proselytising is a thing of the past.

Triumphalism: The exclusivist view that Christianity is superior to all other faiths and provides the only path to salvation. There are now seen to be many ways to the divine; in fact pluralism is beginning to overwhelm society.

The Covenant between God and the Jewish people at Sinai was considered by many Christians to have been abrogated in favour of ‘all who are in Christ’ as the new covenant. Taking back an eternal promise is hardly in the nature of God; and the covenant with faithful Israel will no doubt be honoured to all eternity.

The Law: Jews have been caricatured in the New Testament as a literal legalistic race, Christians failing to appreciate the boundless joy felt by Jews in observing the precepts of the Torah in gratitude for God’s special interest and concern for their nation. Christians living by faith and Jews by the Torah has been a critical difference.

The Land: Christians have been slow to appreciate the intrinsic significance of historical Israel for Jewish self-understanding — regarding the question of possession as primarily political.

Messiah: Jesus did not fulfil the Jewish expectations of a warrior king to drive out the Roman overlords nor was universal peace immediately established. Jesus did proclaim, however, the beginning of a New Age and the ushering in of the Kingdom of God.

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Jesus as a Jew: Jesus lived and died a true and faithful Jew, never abrogating his faith or origins. He loved the Hebrew Scriptures and upheld the Torah, reinterpreting and strengthening some of its precepts. He taught after the style of the Pharisees; and far from setting himself up in contrast to Judaism he regarded himself as its continuation about to cross the borders and into the outside world.

New Testament: The contrast in certain gospels and epistles — between Jesus" life of love and service to all people, and disparaging images of the Jews and Pharisees — has been perpetuated down the ages, reinforced by some church fathers.

Christians — with or without full Church support — are rapidly relearning their understanding of Jews and Judaism and discarding old stereotypes, thanks to serious study, interfaith meetings and informative critical literature. The churches are also beginning to grapple with the Christian share of responsibility for the Holocaust.

Incredibly, though, the Christian theological task is still waiting: the extremely difficult questions and adjustments arising from their ‘rediscovery’ of God’s faithfulness to the ancient covenant; and the absorption of those ultimate answers into a new Christology.

American professor John Dunne makes the apposite statement: "‘Passing over’ is a shifting of standpoint, a going over to the standpoint of another culture, another way of life, another religion. It is followed by an equal ‘coming back’ with new insight to one’s own culture, way of life, religion. It needs reflection to interpret, assimilate" what we have learnt".

For Jewish inmates of Auschwitz and other camps the eternal question remained: "Where was the God who had power to save his chosen people?" It infers that God had power which he elected not to use in their favour. It is not for Christians to tell Jews how to handle their grief or to pronounce on such soul-searching questions.

Those who have not experienced the Holocaust can only stand in awe, shocked and chastened, at the depth of evil and depravity to which human beings can sink and at the profound moral issues it raises. It calls too for sincere repentance from Christians for their historical complicity.

The Shoah has one simple message for the whole human race: The sanctity of all human life.

Christians see Jesus on the cross as the prototype of that redeeming, reconciling, suffering love — someone to whom the agonised of this world can completely relate. Not dogma, liturgy, creeds or anything else, but self-giving active love to break down violence.

It is the last command of Jesus ‘to love one another as he has loved us’ that pulls Christians up short and calls them to account for the quality of their relations with the whole of humankind, especially the Jews.

Christians and Jews, with the rich shared heritage of the Hebrew Scripture and belief in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the Law and the Prophets; and a covenantal relationship with the one God and Father of us all — are natural partners, to lead the world in the struggle against prejudice and discrimination, and for peace, justice and human rights.

Source: Gesher

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