



Has the Way Christians See Themselves Been Affected by Their New Relationship with Jews?

01.01.2020 | Philip A. Cunningham*

Lecture given at the ICCJ 2019 conference, July 1, Lund, Sweden.

The answer to the question if Christian self-understanding has been affected by a new relationship with Jews, of course, depends on which Christians we are talking about and the degree of newness in terms of their relationship with Jews and Judaism. In brief remarks one cannot explore all the possible permutations of Christian communities in relation to Judaism, so after some introductory generalizations, I'll confine my comments to my own Catholic tradition.

Despite the variety of Christian-Jewish encounters, I think it is fair to say that many Christians are experiencing a major paradigm shift in interreligious relations. From the Christian perspective, a crucial transformative moment was the realization by many Christians that Jewish covenantal life with a saving God must be perpetual if God is truly faithful. Let me illustrate the magnitude of this realization with an analogy I first heard expressed by Hans-Joachim Sander of the University of Salzburg.

In pre-Copernican Europe the dominant understanding of the shape of the universe was geocentric. The Earth was the center of the universe. The sun, moon, and stars all circled around the unmoving home of God's greatest creation, human beings. The universe literally revolved around us.

Similarly, Christians for centuries understood that they alone were "saved." They alone could be in right relationship with God. Jews had once been the Chosen People of God, but their covenantal relationship had either been replaced or paled into insignificance with the coming of Christ Jesus, whom they rejected. God's plan in salvation history revolved around Christ and those baptized into his body. We Christians were the center of divine history.

Now there were certain problems with the geocentric model of the universe. The five known planets (whose name comes from the Latin for "wanderers") had the annoying habit of periodically moving backwards in their supposedly stately procession around the Earth. To account for this retrograde motion, a complex series of little loops or epicycles were introduced into the planetary trajectories to account for their observed motions. But these various speculations could never be made to quite fit with the motions of all five of the visible planets.

Similarly, the European discovery of the continents of North and South America, of a whole "New World," challenged the Christian assumption that without faith in Christ people were liable to God's condemnation. The existence of millions of previously unknown human beings who through no fault their own could not possibly have heard of Christ meant that God would be intolerably unjust or vindictive in condemning people who had the misfortune of being born on the wrong continent.

When Galileo Galilei pointed his telescope at the planet Jupiter and saw four moons orbiting

that world it was empirically demonstrable that everything in the universe did not revolve around the Earth. This and other observations supported the heliocentric understanding that the Earth and the planets all orbited the Sun. The Earth was not the center of the universe. This cultural shock has only deepened since with the discovery that not even the Earth, or our Milky Way galaxy, or the local group of galaxies to which ours belongs are the centers of existence but are rather unremarkable among countless billions and billions of stars and galaxies.

Similarly, the twentieth-century Christian realization that God and the Jewish people abide in a perpetual covenant of love “decentered” the Christian conceit that they alone were beloved of God. The scriptural status of the “Old Testament” in a manner of speaking “empirically” required Christians to believe that God was faithful to divine promises of eternal love for Israel. Unsettlingly, this had to be true even though Jews rejected defining Christian claims about Christ Jesus. And this logical conclusion was existentially augmented by the experience of many Christians in dialogue with Jews of discerning holiness in the traditions and practices and lives of their Jewish interlocutors.

To switch metaphors from astronomy to oceanography, I believe that the shock waves of this discovery of Jewish covenantal holiness are still reverberating throughout Christianity like a tsunami. Depending on the depth of the ocean and the slope of the shoreline, seismic waves will impinge upon the land differently. So, too, different Christian communities are impacted in different ways by the realization of something that had been denied or unappreciated for centuries, the vitality of Jewish covenanting with God.

In other words, a foundational paradigm shift is underway in the Christian world. It plays out differently among those Christians who interpret the Bible in more fundamentalistic ways than among those who interpret scripture in a tradition of historical and literary criticism. It has a lesser impact among Christians who have never met a living Jew than among Christians who have close Jewish friends. But over time it would seem that all Christians must be affected.

In my own Catholic community, developments have been profound. From an attitude where the church felt it had to protect its members from “the spiritual dangers to which contact with Jews can expose souls” and “to safeguard her children against spiritual contagion,”^[1] dozens of Catholic ecclesial documents call for sincere and ongoing dialogue with Jews. Far from avoiding Jews, Saint John Paul II iconically committed Catholics to “genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.” The current Pope Francis has enjoyed a close friendship with fellow Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka for nearly twenty years.

That Catholic self-understanding has been directly affected by the new relationship with Jews is surely evident in the church’s abandonment of organized missions to convert Jews, a practice that had been ongoing for hundreds of years. Some of you will remember that about ten years ago a major controversy erupted in the Catholic community over whether a prayer on Good Friday for Jewish conversion should be encouraged. The controversy was itself another sign of the ongoing process of transformation of Christian practice and hence also of Christian self-understanding.

Relevant changes are also apparent in the Catholic understanding of the major Christian theological topic of salvation. Let me recall the words that Pope Francis spoke to us ICCJ members when he welcomed us to the Vatican on June 30, 2015:

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.

Francis clearly relates the Jewish encounter with God's saving Word in the Torah to that Word that Christians encounter in the person of Jesus Christ. The 2015 document of the CRRJ, "The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable" develops this further:

God revealed himself in his Word, so that it may be understood by humanity in actual historical situations. This Word invites all people to respond. If their responses are in accord with the Word of God they stand in right relationship with him. For Jews this Word can be learned through the Torah and the traditions based on it. The Torah is the instruction for a successful life in right relationship with God. Whoever observes the Torah has life in its fullness (cf. Pirque Avot II, 7). By observing the Torah the Jew receives a share in communion with God (§ 24)

The phrases "right relationship," "life in its fullness" (recalling John 10:10), and "communion with God" are all traditional Christian ways to speak of salvation. To return to the earlier astronomical metaphor, clearly, the rays of salvific light do not revolve exclusively around planet Church anymore. That light shines on both Israel and the Church by virtue of their covenantal orbiting of God.

The CRRJ goes on to make an important point for the future: "That the Jews are participants in God's salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery" (§36). It may be that the Christological significance of the new appreciation of Jewish covenantal life is so mysterious because there was no christological document issued by the Second Vatican Council as there were on the church and the scriptures.

Yet an aspect of Christology, the Jewishness of Jesus has been a constant refrain in Catholic texts ever since *Nostra Aetate*. The theme was developed movingly by John Paul II in 1997:

Jesus' human identity is determined on the basis of his bond with the people of Israel, with the dynasty of David and his descent from Abraham. And this does not mean only a physical belonging. By taking part in the synagogue celebrations where the Old Testament texts were read and commented on, Jesus also came humanly to know these texts; he nourished his mind and heart with them, using them in prayer and as an inspiration for his actions.

Thus he became an authentic son of Israel, deeply rooted in his own people's long history. When he began to preach and teach, he drew abundantly from the treasure of Scripture, enriching this treasure with new inspirations and unexpected initiatives (Address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, April 11, 1997).

The development of christological approaches that tap into these insights is a Christian theological task for the future, but it is a further sign of unfolding changes in Christian self-understanding. It seems to me that the "unfathomable mystery" of which the CRRJ spoke would become less so if a more Trinitarian approach was employed, but that is the subject for another occasion. There is also untapped potential in a "kenotic" approach (cf. Phil. 2:5-11) that stresses the self-emptying of the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14).

Let me conclude these remarks with a final reflection.

I know in my marrow that I am not the same Christian that I was before I was blessed by

coming to know better the Jewish tradition and especially certain individual Jews. The way this particular individual comprehends his Christian identity has unquestionably been affected by personal relationships with Jews, some of whom are in this room. You know who you are, and I thank you.

Some twenty years ago, Rabbi Daniel Lehmann expressed the following vision:

I would like to suggest ... what in Aramaic we [Jews] call a *chavruta* that is a learning partner. A learning partner is someone with whom you study texts, biblical or other kinds of traditional texts, but you study it in order to have a dialogue—an interlocutor, with whom truth can emerge as you play out your different perspectives on the texts. And it's a kind of relationship which is very intimate, ... and even a covenantal relationship, but in which the partners are not just trying to agree, but in fact, trying to see how their different perspectives can enhance the other person's understanding. Again, I [said Rabbi Lehmann] would like [Christian-Jewish relations] to shift from dialogue to learning. I think it's really about sharing insights and interpretations in the common texts that we share and some that we don't share.^[2]

I believe that fifty or sixty years along what Pope Francis has called “our journey of friendship” (Address to the Chief Rabbis of Israel, May 26, 2014), Christians and Jews are learning that we can explore and study profound questions together as learning partners with a closeness and trust that was unimaginable not so long ago. This relationship is what is expressed in the sculpture at Saint Joseph's University, “Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time,” which many of you saw at the ICCJ meeting in Philadelphia in 2016. A relationship of ongoing shared learning over a period of years is one that I am profoundly blessed to share at Saint Joseph's with my colleague and close friend Adam Gregerman.

In the process of studying their traditions together and sharing their respective experiences of covenant with God, Jews and Christians will inevitably be changed.

As Pope Francis has said of his friendship with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, “it was very important because my religious life became richer... so much richer.”^[3] That future of learning from and with each other beckons to us as the way ahead in the new and transformative Christian-Jewish relationship. So let me conclude with the sage advice found in the rabbinic text *Pirkei Avot* 1:6, “Get for yourself a mentor, and find yourself a *chaver*, a learning partner.” Thank you.

^[1] From a 1938 draft for a never-promulgated encyclical prepared for Pope Pius XI entitled *Humani Generis Unitas*. See Georges Passelecq and Bernard Suhecky, *The Hidden Encyclical of Pius XI* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1997), 252.

^[2] Daniel Lehmann, quoted at 07:18-8:32 in “Metaphors for a Unique Relationship,” *Walking God's Path: Jews and Christians in Candid Conversation* (video series) Episode 5. Produced by Philip A. Cunningham, John Michalczyk, and Gilbert Rosenthal (Boston: Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College, 2004).

^[3] From a video produced by the Elijah Interfaith Institute as part of its “Make Friends” series. See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4Xu3i3ki9Q>.

***Dr. Philip A. Cunningham** is Professor of Theology (specializing in Christian-Jewish Relations) and director of the Institute for Jewish-Catholic Relations of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, PA. He has served as president of the International Council of Christians and Jews and on the Advisory Committee on Catholic-Jewish Relations for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. He is secretary-treasurer and webmaster of the Internet resource Dialogika of the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations.