



Observations on the Christian-Jewish dialogue

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The 27th January, known as the Holocaust Memorial Day: For me this is a time of emotional stress – just like Yom Hashoa, the Jewish day of mourning in memory of the Shoah, the Holocaust. The past has not passed – as much as one may yearn for it to pass. It has not passed for me either, who was born only after the liberation of 1945.

From my earliest youth, death is part of my life, as are pain and despair. But no matter how seemingly normal we Jews deal with death and grief, Judaism is, in spite of Auschwitz, a religion for the living, almost a theology of life. This also determines the practice: As long as my parents were alive, a visit to the cemetery was taboo. When the congregation, on high holidays, after the Torah reading in the synagogue, gathered for the so-called memorial service, I left the room, and with me all whose parents were still alive. Soon I would know why.

When I was seven years old, my father died as a result of persecution. My mother and I were now "the family" — and I was, in German, "half an orphan." And as such, I now took part in the *Yizkor* – the memorial service. These first few years, in the fifties, so close in time to the Shoah, the small congregation was still in a mental state of emergency. Especially on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the most important of the Jewish festivals. In the vestibule of the synagogue burned hundreds of anniversary lights, small candles lit in memory of the dead – and especially at that time, the murder victims. I was fascinated and touched. These quivering flames – in my childish imagination I took them for the souls of the dead – and we, the living, took them with us into our prayers, into our memories and into the synagogue. Memory defeats the finality of death. My father, my grandfather and grandmother – we do not know where they perished – they live on within me.

But there was something else that has to this day been burnt into my memory: The desperation of the adults. Beside me, the men, all of them were crying, some women collapsed, there were screams of pain. Names of children were called out by parents, siblings. The violence of grief and pain of the adults gave me a sense of the extent of their loss, to feel something of the effort they had to spend, in order to live on – especially here in Germany, the land of the perpetrators. Now I understood those members of the Jewish community, who for the period of vacations prevented the delivery of letters from senders like "Jewish community" or "synagogue community." They wanted to take a break from Jewish fate or kismet, no longer be seen as a victim, not anymore – even inadvertently – be injured. Would Christians, even an organized meeting of Christians and Jews, be able to help them? Those who were longing for normalcy? For security, for freedom from danger. Yes, there was a Germany in which they lived: it had nothing to do with dialogue, as we know it, and still stood for a deeply felt commonality: It was the Germany of the former anti-Nazis, the Germany of the anti-fascists, the so-called "decent ones."

It was a political background and a political objective that brought us together in the beginning: the struggle against the brown demons that were ubiquitous. The dialogue of Christians and Jews, as we know it today, developed only years later. And for us it brought a lot of pain. It is no coincidence that only a few Jews took part in it – and that has not changed to this day.

I was among the founders of the first "Intersynodal dialogue Christians - Jews," which joined several Protestant church circles in and around Cologne. We worked very hard. At the beginning

we focussed on the wonderful music of Johann Sebastian Bach, which is also loved by many Jews, and their sometimes terribly anti-Jewish texts. The Passion and Easter time, for centuries often a time of persecution, in which they wanted to take revenge on the "Christ killers." We developed a pamphlet to help concert visitors cope with the music and lyrics of the Passion story. With good cheer and good humor we sat together one afternoon in the living room of a pastor over coffee and cake, really "cozy." During a short break the person sitting next to me put his hand on my shoulder. He was not just anybody, but a known personality of the Confessing Church. Boldly he had turned against the Nazis and had helped the persecuted, especially baptized Jews. I revered him very much. Sadly, he looks at me now, "Oh, dear Mr. Ginzel, you are so appealing to me. I would very much like to be friends with you. But that's not possible as long as you do not accept Jesus as the Christ. Only then can we be friends." Those were his words. The dinner party was laughing – and I felt very lonely and repulsed in this circle of supposed friends.

The suffered disappointment and the experiences of Jews over the centuries were united in one name: Jesus. Nobody in my Jewish community had ever pronounced this name – Jesus was synonymous with persecution, suffering, with laws and teachings of the church, thousands of years old, which were deadly close to those of the Nazis. And yet, I had developed a different image of Jesus, which was probably not up to that of the Christians.

Years later, at Yad Vashem, the memorial to the victims of the Holocaust in Jerusalem, in a small room with works of art, I found a large-format drawing. On the right it showed a dominating crucifix. From the right edge to the left, already on the cross over, moves a group of ragged concentration camp inmates, marked with the yellow Jewish star. In the distance, on the top left of the screen, the viewer anticipates the destination of the group: the crematorium. And as if the artist had managed to capture the movement, one could see how Jesus looked down from the cross on this little group of lost ones, jumped down from the cross and ran after them – to walk with them the path of Jewish suffering. I was so shaken that I cried. I've never seen the original again, but I have every detail of this image in my head.

At that time I decided to follow in the footsteps of "Brother Jesus," as my long-standing, now deceased friend, Shalom Ben Chorin, had called him. And I fell into year-long conflict, because the preoccupation with Jesus and the story of the hatred of Jews that happened in his name, hit me with a vengeance. My old rabbi had warned me emphatically against the illusion that there could ever be a Christianity without enmity against Jews. That was the general experience and therefore also the view of almost all Jews in my surroundings. Were they really so wrong? Thus I discovered one of the main roots of the Christian-Jewish dialogue: Not the search for common ground, but the search for the origins of Christian antisemitism. And I made a surprising experience: I was not alone in this quest. I was part of a small but very active group of Christians who wanted to know how Auschwitz became possible. Together, finally together, we approached events that hurt all of us, and which sometimes drove us to the brink of despair.

In 1933, the Protestant Church in Germany celebrated a 'Luther Year' and many celebrated mainly the new Martin Luther, Adolf Hitler, who had supposedly finished the "Protestant Reformation with the German Revolution." In the same year the exclusion and persecution of the Jewish neighbors began in public. Not all could or would remain silent when this happened: In a small village in Wuerttemberg a Protestant pastor raised his voice. In his church, he protested the attacks and actions against Jews. What this brave man had not expected, was not only the fury of the Nazis on the ground, but the extent of the outrage in his otherwise oh so pious own congregation. A pastor who speaks for the Jews – unbearable! Overnight he became a leper, expelled from the community of allegedly true believers. Desperate, even fearing harm to the life of his wife and children, he knew only one way out. His sermons in the spirit of love and solidarity with persecuted Jews caused him to die – by suicide.

Munich, Winter 1933. The Christian world is preparing for Christmas. The Advent sermons of

Cardinal Faulhaber, the Archbishop of Munich will later become famous. In them the Cardinal speaks bravely against the heresies of the National Socialists, defends the doctrine of the Catholic Church, preaches against the nationalist ideology. He defends the unity of the Bible of Old and New Testaments, condemns all attempts to separate the New Testament from the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. And just before Christmas Eve, he speaks about the Jews "here and now." However: No word about antisemitism, nothing about the ubiquitous incitement against Jews, their exclusion from public life, their expulsion from organizations and associations, from the German Red Cross to the Alpine Club, from sport associations to the Chess Federation. Sure, according to the Cardinal, the Jews before and up to Christ had been Christ's home. And what does he say about the fate of the Jewish people in his diocese? Not a single word of compassion. He distances himself from them explicitly. To those believers who had hoped for some guidance, he declared from the pulpit that he deliberately had not spoken about today's Jews. After all, between the Jews after Christ and believers in Christ the Temple curtain had at that time been "ripped in two."

This mindset was also the dominant one after 1945. What was new, was that we as a group of Christians and Jews could share the horror, the consternation. For me as a Jew it was of great value, being able to witness the determination with which my Christian "comrades in arms" went to work to change their old, bad theology. And how difficult the way proved to be! When the Evangelical (Protestant) Church in the Rhineland was the first regional church in Germany that tried to effect a reorganization of its relationship with Jews, the few Jewish interlocutors of us were invited to many Christian congregations, church groups, parish synods. Always the same topic: "Jesus the Jew."

In 1979, I spoke about this in a rural community. The hall was packed to capacity, the subject electrified many. After my talk, it came to the following dialogue with an elderly man who introduced himself as a farmer. "So you're saying Jesus was a Jew?" "Yes, he was born a Jew and died a Jew." Silence. The man seemed to have been hit at heart. The he said, "My beloved Saviour also such a Judensau (Jewish pig)? That to me is the end of faith."

Awesome, but not unique. Catholic religious educators in Freiburg found in a wide-ranging investigation that even among first graders of families who were not religious, hardly ever went to church, an establish anti-Jewish mindset. The researchers were not able to succeed in establishing the ways in which anti-Jewish ideas were handed down – they were only able to identify the results.

How then can one tackle the problem? How to change mindsets? Where to start? In education! Perhaps the most important achievements of the Christian-Jewish dialogue were the thorough investigations of school books and lesson plans that followed, and especially the revision of the educational contents. In the nineteen-seventies, teacher training became the focus.

It was an exciting time, a time of awakening, at least for the minority of Christians and Jews who set about to change church and society. And there was an echo, despite all the resistance of traditional circles. With the election of pope John XXIII began a visible change of old church structures such as Jews – and certainly some Christians – had thought impossible. The Second Vatican Council and the decisions of Protestant synods offered astonished Jews a completely new image of the church. Henceforth Christian communities were the first to protest antisemitic incidents and presented themselves protectively to their Jewish neighbors.

What then, has the Christian-Jewish dialogue brought about? On the whole, it has been very successful. The shock of Auschwitz caused a rethinking in the churches, a rediscovery of their Jewish roots. Talk about Jews in church and school is now entirely different than in earlier times. But all of that had already been reached twenty years ago. It does not detract from the success, when one realizes that after all this, nothing new has happened. It seems as if one has rested on these same successes and lost sight of the present. These days, when I am invited to speak at an

Association for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, something very weird happens to me. I have grown older – but in such Jewish-Christian circles, I am still one of the youngest. The youth, even the middle generation, is missing. The topics of the time have virtually not reached the dialogue. It's still about Jesus, the Jew – as if there was nothing new to be said. The dialogue is not a seismograph anymore that senses where things go wrong and helps offset it. The growing fundamentalism in all religions – virtually no issue in the dialogue. The noticeable identity crisis of the churches helps to grow the longing for the original innateness – and how could this be easier defined than in the differentiation from Judaism. To recognize this danger early on and steer against it would be an important task of the present time dialogue. But as Jews we are virtually never invited as partners to any topic of a conversation that is relevant today.

The following happened to me: a peace group invited me to give a keynote address on the topic "Shalom in the Hebrew Bible." I accepted gladly and hinted at the fact that I found it exciting to be able to tell them how I as a Jew, and from the Jewish tradition, come to very similar results as they as Christians. The reaction was consternation. They had thought, for whatever reason, that they had invited a Protestant minister. They were not interested in a Jew. So they dropped me off again. Issues such as social justice, when does life begin, stem cell research, protection of the environment – all issues that occupy Christians. End of dialogue! No interest in the search for common ground, or even in perhaps different interpretations. Result: The time is foreseeable in which Christians have a Christian-Jewish dialogue among themselves. The potential Jewish partners turn to other, no less important topics that are unfortunately not reflected in the dialog: The rapid development of Judaism in Germany and the growing intra-Jewish pluralism. It's a mystery to me, how consistently veteran dialogue partners can put blinders on and not see the burgeoning appeal of Reform Judaism, which once originated in Germany.

I feel it to be a cardinal mistake that the dialogue is not consistently extended to conversation with Muslims. It would be the order of the day – not as a substitute for a specifically Christian-Jewish issues, but as a supplement and continuation. But as little as one has liberal Judaism in view, so little one senses something of the Muslim aspirations to establish a European, a liberal Islam. Especially here lie the great opportunities for a relevant and current dialogue.

And yet in another area I am painfully conscious of a lack of engagement, the lack of passion for change. We do not "export" our experiences – concretely spoken – to the Middle East. As Jews and Christians we make no discernable contribution to promote this dialogue between Israelis and Palestinians. We could have something to say, after all. If the dialogue succeeded here in Germany, in spite of Auschwitz, to bring about a conversation, even a co-existence, as it is often strikingly conveyed: between the children of the perpetrators and the children of the victims – then why not also between the enemies of today? Dan Bar-On, a professor at the University of the Beer Sheva desert, who unfortunately died prematurely, had shown the way. His investigation of the trauma of the first Jewish generation after Auschwitz led him to turn his attention to the trauma of the children of former mass murderers. He brought these two groups together. Through many phases, he came to the realization that peace in general, and peace in the Middle East in particular, could only be possible by way of dialogue, by getting to know one another. I attended one of his seminars in Beer Sheva. There, young Israelis told their Palestinian peers what they had learned about the Holocaust from their grandparents. The Palestinians could hardly bear it. The resistance against the sufferings of the other seemed insurmountable. Then the Palestinians told the Israelis what they had learned from their grandparents, their experience of expulsion and injustice – and the Israelis were outraged. – And yet, at some point they began listening to each other. That would be one of the tasks that I would wish for a Christian-Jewish dialogue.

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Translated from the [German](#) by Fritz Voll)