



Bridge over Troubled Water: Towards a Journey of Friendship

30/11/2017 | Eeuwout van der Linden

Subsequent another contribution of a series of articles (see: part one, part two, part three, part four) that features a dozen Christian and Jewish theologians reflecting on the state of Jewish-Christian relations today and whether there exists a “special relationship” between the two religious traditions. The articles were first published in CURRENT DIALOGUE No. 58, 2016, edited by the World Council of Churches and are republished with kind permission.

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Mixed feelings

What are your associations when you hear the word “Israel”? I sometimes ask this in my work in Jewish-Christian relations. A variety of answers are given: mixed feelings, fatigue, a raw nerve, conflict between Jews and Palestinians, people of God, the relationship between land, state and people, covenant, source of joy. Mixed feelings predominate, no doubt because of politics.

Not so long ago, many Christians in my country were strongly in favour of the Jewish people and the State of Israel. Israel was the land of the Bible and the foundation of the state was seen as a miracle. Such sympathizing was strengthened by a great sense of guilt after World War II. This attitude changed after two Intifadas, the Lebanon War and the Gaza War. The State of Israel came more and more under judgement in the courtroom of international opinion. People got embarrassed. How could it be that the Holy Land seems so unholy? Church members became divided and they still do. They had to choose – or so it was felt – between support for Palestinians or support for Jews.

I myself have experienced this shift over the years. I have lost my naiveté and become more critical. At the same time, I try to make a distinction between politics and theology, realizing how mingled they can become. The relationship between Jews and Christians, between the Jewish and Christian traditions, is something different from the conflict in the Middle East. What journey do we travel?

A Journey of Friendship

In June 2015, I was in Rome. A major conference was held by the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ). The conference was dedicated to 50 years of commemoration of *Nostra Aetate*. This important declaration by the Second Vatican Council brought a revolution in Jewish-Christian relations. Then began, in the words of Pope Francis, “our journey of friendship,” that not only for the Roman Catholic but also for other churches has proved essential. Of course, there was a lot which preceded *Nostra Aetate*, such as the conference on antisemitism in the Swiss town of Seelisberg in 1947, where immediately after the Shoah Jews and Christians came together to offer new perspectives and produced the so-called *Ten Points for Jewish-Christian Relations* (revised in 2009 in the *Twelve Points of Berlin*). It would lead to the creation of the ICCJ.

That we, both Jews and Christians, travel a journey of friendship may be a little bit too early to say. I would very much support it, but when I look at the relations between Jews and Christians, for example, in the Netherlands, there is a lot yet to be done. We are at times cooperating, we try to know each other, and some of us become friends, but most of the time we are busy with our own business of troubles, sorrows and joys. Still, much work has already been done to prepare for friendship.

From Mission to Dialogue in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands

The Dutch Reformed Church had already sought new relations years before the Second Vatican Council and had developed new visions. Such visions include: an understanding that the Old Testament has its own place and cannot solely be read from the perspective of the New Testament; Israel is not something just from the past, there is still a vibrant and living Judaism today; and mission to the Jews should be abandoned, for how can you evangelize people who gave to the world the notion of a God, whose name is: I am, I will be with you? Instead there is an urge for dialogue. In 1949, the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church proposed a special Israel Sunday. At that time, the State of Israel had just been established, but the main reason for initiating such a Sunday was reflection on the relationship of the Church with Israel. Since 1950, Israel Sunday falls on every first Sunday in October, because it is in this period the major feasts in Judaism are being held. Due to mixed emotions and varying theo-political insights, not everyone nowadays greets Israel Sunday with warm feelings. Of which Israel are we speaking: the Jewish people, the State of Israel, or the Jewish religious tradition?

In the Church Order of the united Protestant Church in the Netherlands (since 2004, the Dutch Reformed, Reformed and Lutheran churches are united), the phrase “unrelinquishable bond with Israel” was incorporated. “The Church is called to give shape to the unrelinquishable bond with the Jewish people.” The term “unrelinquishable” was originally used in direct relation to the negligent attitude of the Church with respect to the Holocaust and antisemitism. The word “unrelinquishable” reminds the Church of this fateful history and calls for a fundamentally different attitude. In addition, it reminds the Church of the theological, spiritual and mystical link between both traditions. In part, we share the same scriptures. We worship the same God. Jesus was a Jew, as were all the key persons in the New Testament. Judaism and Christianity are two strands that have grown from the heritage of biblical Israel. We belong to the same family.

The Protestant Church has various vocations: besides the vocation to shape the unrelinquishable bond with the people of Israel and to dialogue, there is also the ecumenical vocation to seek the unity and communion between Christians worldwide (among them Palestinian Christians) and the diaconal vocation to stand up for justice and righteousness (in the Middle East as well). Even though there might be tension between all these vocations, the Church cannot abandon any of them.

All vocations apply to the whole church. The vocation in connection with the Jewish people is first mentioned in the Church Order. This indicates the importance the Protestant Church attaches to dialogue with the people of Israel. It expresses its awareness that the roots of Christianity are Jewish.

Bridge over Troubled Water

Jewish-Christian relations have long been strained. The Jewish people were collectively held responsible for the death of Christ. It was common for Christians to believe that Jews had always lived in darkness, that Jews should repent, that the church had taken the place of Judaism. At some cathedrals, statues of a blindfolded woman, representing the synagogue, are to be found as a painful sign of hopefully former times. As if to illustrate the history of strained relations between

Jews and Christians, during the ICCJ meeting in Rome, the power frequently went out in the conference room. During one of these occurrences, Rabbi David Rosen played "Imagine" by John Lennon.

The idea that new visions can only come about with much strenuous and energy-consuming effort was made clear by a performance of Symphony n.2 F Major "The Council" by Federico Corrubolo, played by a youth orchestra during the course of the ICCJ event. The music passages were interspersed with excerpts from "My Journal of the Council" by Yves Congar. Towards the end of the Second Vatican Council, there was a moment of great despair by Congar, which reminded me of the efforts to keep Greece in the Eurozone, or with the struggle of how best to deal with the refugees in Europe: "I am tired of the assemblies at Saint Peter's ... Each person speaks based on their own training, synthesis, fixed ideas ... The work tends to grow larger, with the risk of depleting itself or crumbling under its weight ... Undoubtedly, the Pope makes great symbolic gestures, but behind them there is neither the theology nor the concrete meaning that those gestures would require ..." The piece ended *allegro con brio*.

With small steps, there has been a change. A bridge between the two traditions is being built in the last decades. There is the realization that Christianity has Jewish roots. Jesus and Paul were Jews and the New Testament is, for the most part, Jewish. As Edward Kessler said: "Jesus was born a Jew, he lived as a Jew and he died as a Jew. He had a Jewish mother and his fierce criticism of some Pharisees comes from a close relationship with them." Gabriele Boccaccini said much the same about Paul. "Paul was a Jew born of Jewish parents, he was circumcised and nothing in his work suggests the idea that he became apostate. Paul was not a Christian."

At the conference, I heard many lively conversations. Jews and Christians drink from the same source. We worship the same God of Israel, who is the God of the whole world. "We are twins," Gabriele Boccaccini said, while he was wobbling his feet on his chair as if to emphasize that this thought sets things into motion. "We come from the same womb, we have the same mother." I found this a marvelous picture. We have gone our own ways, but there is no question about our constant crossing of each other's path. As twins, we have too much in common. From the heart of the Torah, Prophets and the gospel, key questions are being posed to all humankind. Where are you, Adam, Eve? Are you a guardian of your fellow human beings? How do you live?

Meeting with the Pope

A highlight of the ICCJ conference was the meeting with the Pope. A special moment occurred when the Argentine Rabbi Abraham Skorka and Pope Francis embraced each other. When he was still a Cardinal, Jorge Bergoglio had written a book together with Skorka. In one picture, it showed to me the new relationship between the two traditions: a meeting instead of a call to repentance, a hug instead of hate. The Pope stated that Christian confessions find their unity in Christ, Judaism in the Torah. Both faith traditions find their foundation in the one God. When I myself shook the Pope's hand, I brought him greetings from the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. Again, this is typical of other relationships nowadays. A Protestant minister who shakes hands with the Pope, and can come home with it...

The Spirit Blows

At the end of the conference I visited St Peter's Basilica. High in the chorus, rising above the majestic altar, I saw a stained glass window of the Holy Spirit, which reminded me of the logo of the Protestant Church. We need the Spirit of God, I thought. The Spirit can create friendships and can playfully blow through barriers. The Spirit calls us to the imitation of the one God. We can cross the bridge over our troubled waters when we let the Spirit hover over it. In the end, we might become friends.

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