



# Learning to Listen: Are Christians ready for dialogue with Jews and Muslims?

31/10/2011 | Markus Heitkaemper

**The answer to my chosen topic for this talk seems, at first sight, to be clear and simple: Yes, Christians are ready for the dialogue! The observation, which I render here as a question, has long since been answered for many of our contemporaries -- at least with regard to the Christian-Jewish dialogue. It may, therefore, be rather irritating.**

Although it would have gotten around by now that, in the current debate on integration, the quite popular formula of a 'dominant Christian-Jewish culture,' has to be seen as an illusion, in view of the *actual* German-Jewish relationship, also before 1933. I refer, in this context, to the speech of Salomon Korn in 2009 at the dedication of the new building of the College of Jewish Studies in Heidelberg, and also to the still thrilling Open Letter of Gershom Scholem in 1962: "Against the myth of a German-Jewish conversation."

As far as *current Christian-Jewish relations* are concerned, we usually assume that today, over 6½ decades after the war, the majority society's relationship to Judaism has changed drastically, and that there has, for a long time, been a listening to what Jews have to say -- so that everything is actually fine and in order.

Indeed, given the respect and support-deserving work of initiatives like "Nes Ammim" or "Action Reconciliation Service for Peace," I am inclined to agree that there was and is the willingness to accept guilt and assume responsibility, practical solidarity with the Jewish State of Israel, and readiness to make intra-Christian theological revisions.

There are the about 80 Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation in Germany. Since 1952, in March of each year, they organize the Week of Brotherhood. Since 1968, in memory of the Jewish philosophers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, they award the Buber-Rosenzweig Medal to persons, institutions or initiatives that have contributed in a special way to an understanding between Christians and Jews.

I could go on for a long time – from the discussion group "Jews and Christians" of the Central Committee of German Catholics, the "Working Group Jews and Christians" at the German Protestant Kirchentag, through to the epochal synodal decisions, such as those of the Rhineland and Westphalia Protestant regional churches, which found expression even in their respective constitutions.

There are also notable individuals. Allow me, at this point, to mention only the name of the Catholic Old Testament scholar, Erich Zenger, who died too early in April of last year at the age of 70 years. He was awarded the Buber-Rosenzweig Medal in March 2009. Zenger was publisher of the commentary series, "Herder's Theological Commentary on the Old Testament". This commentary is a great yet unfinished work, where Jewish, Catholic and Protestant authors are equally involved. In every single commentary, the Jewish interpretation of history and the present time are considered, as well as the fact that the so-called 'Old Testament' was always the Scripture of Israel and remains Israel's Holy Scripture also after the rise of Christianity. Well done!

I will mention one last impressive event. Prof. Dr. Alfred Bodenheimer has been the Dean of the Protestant Theological Faculty of the University of Basel since August 1, 2010. The remarkable feature is that Bodenheimer is Jewish; thus, Basel is the first theological faculty in Europe to have a Jewish dean. This is phenomenal! That such a thing is possible shows that Christian identities are, indeed, able to change.

Given these few examples, we ought to say that there were and are Christians who are willing "to learn to listen." This willingness has sprung from the insight -- though terribly late -- into the never abrogated covenant of God with God's people Israel, with the consequence of a fundamental theological reversal. A particular consequence has been a conscious and complete repudiation of a 'Mission to the Jews' as a heresy that darkens the act of God's election.

How much I would now like to dare the following optimistic prognosis: On this ascending path, it will constantly go forward! It's just a matter of time until the processes mentioned here will be reflected in many areas of the Church, its theology and piety. It all just takes time, and for this we have to muster understanding and patience in face of a completely different course after nearly 2000 years of history. Christians are in many cases just not yet ready and one should, in this "sensitive area," not expect too much. It will come about soon enough.

You suspect rightly that I'll put a big question mark here.

At that, I will touch only lightly on those forces in the churches to whom the Christian willingness to listen to Jews during the past five decades always went too far. I don't want to provide a platform this evening to those old and new 'yesterday's people.' However, I am surprised that there is no longer an outcry in the churches about these people. Is it not frightening to Christians, who through the Jesus tradition are committed to the *God of Israel*, to know that groups exist among them who have attitudes that are covertly or even openly hostile to Jews? It would shake Christians to the bone and cause them to no longer find peaceful sleep! "Only those who cry for the Jews may sing Gregorian chants" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer).

However, it is of much more concern to me -- because it is aiming at the Church's *mainstream* -- that, according to my own impression, the cause of a specifically Christian-Jewish cooperation or even dialogue is, in church circles, more and more perceived as something distant, something outdated or even as simply boring. In memorable contrast to the theological fire of the aforementioned initiatives and personalities, here one encounters an attitude that signals, 'After all, we have learned enough! Has not everything already been said?' Maybe even, 'We can no longer hear it!'

Will, in the end, the 'Theology after Auschwitz' also turn out to be just one of many, constantly changing *Zeitgeist* theologies? Did the horror about Christian guilt for the Shoah and the shock we experienced last only across one or two generations?

More and more, I get the impression that the churches have not succeeded at all in conveying the insight that the question of the determination of our relationship to Judaism and Israel is not some special issue with which Christians may be concerned or not be concerned at all but that this question is at the core of Christian identity.

The assumption that Christians, in view of their being in a relationship to Judaism, will have "finished learning" at a certain point in time is indeed an illusion in two regards. First, the church as a *church of the nations* of this world is *permanently* challenged by its founding document, the New Testament, because it is in large part a collection of *Jewish writings*. The New Testament is, to a great extent, witness of a living dialogue within the Jewish community of the second half of the first Century. A dramatic escalation of this dialogue happened through the disaster of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE by the Roman Empire and its consequences for both the surviving Jewish

community and for the community of believers in Jesus as the Messiah. Without the events of the year 70, relations between the Jewish majority and the minority of Jewish believers in Jesus as the Messiah would probably have taken a quite different course.

Through the canonization of the texts, this lively and sometimes very polemical confrontation was now, as it were, frozen. When later-born non-Jewish people read it uncritically, the New Testament more or less automatically became, and still is, the source of rather bad anti-Jewish interpretations. Every Christian generation must, therefore, endeavor to break up the fixation of the original dialogue, which took place through the formation of the Christian canon, and make it useful for the dialogue with Jews today. Otherwise, there will be, now and in future generations of Christians, the threat of an anti-Jewish interpretation of the New Testament. This would have unpredictable consequences, especially in view of certain passages in the Gospels of Matthew and John.

The other reason has to do with the nature of any dialogue. Gershom Sholem noted in the aforementioned Open Letter, *Against the myth of a German-Jewish dialogue*: "In any dialogue two are needed who listen to each other, who are ready to perceive the other as what he or she represents, and only then to reciprocate." According to Hans Georg Gadamer, a dialogue presupposes the possibility *that the partner in dialogue could be in the right*.

If *this* is the basic insight needed for the dialogue of religions to succeed, then it is for the *Christian*, and only for the Christian, I can speak. It is not good enough just to listen to the Jewish interlocutor and then turn back one's own sphere of life -- perhaps enriched in knowledge but basically unimpressed and unquestioning of one's own Christian identity. One may then surely be able to speak a little about Jewish festivals or dietary laws, know one or the other Hebrew expression and probably also know something about the utter Jewishness of the figure of Jesus. However, this religion-historical knowledge will have only a folkloristic ring to it. The pressing question that one doesn't even allow to come close is, what right does one still have, as a non-Jew, to relate to the person of Jesus, and generally, to the Jewish faith documents?

Dialogue means much more. The double meaning of the first part of the annual theme (of the Coordinating Council, *transl.*) points us in the right direction. 'Listen to one another.' This does not mean only, 'I am listening to you' but also, 'I listen to what *you are saying to me*; what you have to say is essential to my existence.' Yes, it even means, 'I let myself be *put in question*, because I ascribe to you also the ability to be truthful.' This would be real learning, a process never completed at any point in time.

Will Christians ever be 'ready' for this, ever be up to it? Certainly, even in this more profound dimension, an ongoing Christian theological learning is happening already. There are -- to name just *one* example -- attempts to speak of Jesus in a way that does not sound blasphemous in Jewish (and also in Muslim) ears: that the meaning and purpose of the Christological confession can only be, *to lead us toward* the praise of God, who is the God of Israel and the whole world; that Jesus is no second God, but a *way* for the people of the world's nations to the one and only God; and that this one and only God is also Christianity's center.

However, compared to the lasting and widely prevailing mentality in all Christian denominations, these endeavors are actually considered as only of marginal significance!

The question is for me a real and an open question. Will the churches, at some point, succeed in seeing themselves as a companion *at the side of Israel* -- a Church that listens also to the things said (by God) to Israel and what is said *in* Israel as response to God's word; a Church that becomes aware of its incessant correlation to Israel and that brings it to bear in all manifestations of its life.

The next Shabbat is the Shabbat before Purim. On Purim, the defeat of Haman's plan is

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celebrated. Haman, the highest government official of the Persian king, wanted to exterminate all Jews in the Persian empire in one day. Haman is a descendant of Amalek. That is why, on this week's Shabbat, the regular weekly portion is supplemented by the Zachor-reading. In this reading from Deuteronomy chapter 25, the Israelites are commanded to remember the evil of Amalek (Hebrew Zachor) and to actively oppose him in this world. During the journey of the people of Israel through the desert, Amalek attacked and killed, out of sheer desire to kill, the stragglers, the weak, and probably also women and children. This historical Amalek obviously no longer exists. However, he is recognized again by Jews throughout Jewish history, though not too often. Egypt and Babylonia are, to my knowledge, not identified as Amalek, while two powers in past history are identified as Amalek: the Roman Empire and, much later, Nazi Germany.

Prof. Klaus Wengst has, therefore, reformulated the text of Deuteronomy 25 in view of its startling actuality for us Germans and Christians as follows:

"Remember what Nazi Germany did to you when you lived in the Diaspora in Europe: That it combed all countries to find and beat you to death, shoot, hang, gas and burn you, old men, women and children, and the young, the sick and the healthy -- and you were weak and defenseless; and he did not fear God. It shall be: When the Lord your God has given you rest from all your enemies round about the land that the Lord your God gives you as your property to inherit, then you shall erase the memory of Nazi Germany under heaven! You shall not forget!"

The horror that even today's Christians experience, when listening to the biblical text, was burnt into the lives of those who became engaged with Action Reconciliation or Nes Ammim after the war. They were filled with the conviction: never again do we want to be Amalek, never again be perpetrators!

We, as the children and grandchildren of the Amalekites of the 20th Century, will certainly never again want to fall back, never again be perpetrators of a crime against humanity.

What we as Christians never want to be, is clear. The question is: whereto, in what direction will we positively develop?

A possible biblical model for us could be Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses. Jethro was a non-Israelite, as we Christians are. The Bible says that Jethro had turned to the God of Israel, and that he "rejoiced for all the good that the Lord had done to Israel" (Exodus 18:9). The exciting thing is that even with and after the praise of the God of Israel, Jethro remains a non-Israelite, a goy. He does not give up his identity as a Midianite priest. And yet he shares in the God-Israel relationship. Thus, one could perhaps say, Christians come to the God of Israel out of joy over what God has done, according to our faith tradition in Jesus, even without becoming Jewish.

With such hints -- and more is not attempted here -- I am already far ahead of reality. For a real conversation with Jewry, the intra-Christian clarification processes still remain to be done. Who are we as Church in face of the continuation of Judaism? How do we define ourselves in such a way that through it Jewish existence is no longer impaired?

If it is true that Christians are not really "ready" for the biblical-ecumenical dialogue with Judaism, how can they already enter into the inter-religious dialogue with Islam? Do they not make the second step before the first?

How can the irreplaceable and incomparable significance that Judaism has for the Christian be prevented from fading away in such a Christian-Muslim dialogue, or even Christian-Jewish-Muslim so-called 'trialogue'?

Is the Christian not suddenly in danger again of failing to hear the Jews, his own "civilization-

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companions from the beginning" (E.W. Stegemann), before ever having learned to listen to what they have to say?

For me, this is the great problem that lies in the seemingly innocuous word "and." Are Christians really ready for dialogue with Jews *and* Muslims?

I can now engage only briefly the question of the *conditions* for a dialogue with Islam. I will not specifically discuss the question of the fundamental theological possibility of such a dialogue but presuppose it as a working hypothesis.

I consider the following notes indispensable because, after all, the German Coordinating Council of Societies for Christian-Jewish Cooperation in Germany, awarded in this year for the first time, the Buber-Rosenzweig Medal to a Muslim scholar, the orientalist and journalist Navid Kermani.

1) In view of their position as Christians, there can, in relation to Judaism and Islam, be no equidistance. Neither is there a parallelization of the Christian-Jewish and the Christian-Muslim dialogues conceivable. The question of the relationship of the Church to Judaism is for Christians "the great ecumenical question" -- as even Karl Barth is supposed to have said -- because the relationship of Christianity to Judaism is theologically and historically unique. The dialogue with Islam is on another categorical level, it is an inter-religious conversation. Unfortunately, this fundamental difference in nature of the Christian-Jewish from the Christian-Muslim conversation is often not, not yet or not any longer observed within the Church.

2) The biblical, theologically based special solidarity of Christianity with Judaism has always *political relevance*. It would, at best, be naive to believe – and also, again, typical for the distorting view of Judaism as a mere community of faith – that the dialogue with Judaism could be limited to a religious and theological discourse in the narrow sense.

The Muslim interlocutors must be aware that the Christian lives in relation to the Jewish people in the mode of a special solidarity, and this for the mere sake of being a Christian. For this, his fundamental partisanship has nothing to do with an uptight German consciousness of guilt, nor with an enthusiastic philosemitism, and nothing at all with a covert Islamophobia. The Christian's special solidarity with Israel is simply a manifestation of the identity given to him or her by the stated biblical witness.

When the Christian interlocutor in a Christian-Muslim dialogue feels that, for example, the question of the rightful existence of the Jewish State of Israel is questioned or just left open, he or she cannot, in my opinion, seriously continue the conversation. There can be no neutrality for the Christian, let alone any clandestine form of sympathy with those who hidden or openly demonize and delegitimize the State of Israel.

To be clear, I am not talking here about Islam. Islam means, as Lessing already recalls in his *Parable of the Ring*, "intimate devotion to God," peace. It is important to me to emphasize this -- not for reasons of political correctness, but out of deep appreciation for Muslim existence. I also do not forget that I would actually have enough to do, dealing with *my* own religion's involvement in violence.

On the other hand, finding the violent history of one's own religious tradition should, in no way, lead to self-paralysis in the perceptions of the real present-day threats!

Who would seriously dispute that there was and is an *Islamic* antisemitism? Thus, as a Christian I ask: How could a Protestant academy, together with the Near East Commission of Pax Christi, plan a conference – in the summer of 2010 -- under the topic, "Partners for Peace -- Talking to Hamas and Fatah," which should have invited the "Minister of Health" of the Hamas in the Gaza

strip? What has there been "learned" within Christianity, if one thinks it possible to talk about "peace" with representatives of an organization that is not only observed by the German secret service and, according to the European Union, classified as a terrorist organization, but that also does not recognize the right of Israel to exist. Even worse, according to its own charter, it aims at the destruction of Israel and, in doing so, refers positively to the antisemitic "Protocols of the Elders of Zion?"

I conclude:

Inspired by the prophetic texts of the pilgrimage of nations to Zion (Isaiah 2; Micah 4), I am moved by the following image of hope:

Christians and Muslims get on their own respective paths – the ones by the revelation of Jesus, the others by the sending down of the Qur'an -- to the one and only God. They see themselves as the '*added ones*' and rejoice *with* Israel, because they recognize, *Israel is God's own chosen people*, and we others are God's nations, no less loved by God. They refrain from the madness of setting themselves up as absolute; they perceive, rather, the others as no less unique as they themselves are. *Such a mutual recognition of each other's uniqueness and particularity would be peacemaking.*

This vision is 'out of this world' in the face of Islamist violence under which today not only Jews suffer bitterly, but increasingly also Christians and, not least, Muslims as well. As utopia, though, this vision criticizes the existing reality and can, for brave and wise Christians as well as for Muslims become a guide for their actions.

*Both* have to be very careful, so that in this century no new Amalek arises. Antisemitism against the Jewish community in Europe and worldwide, as well as the threats of annihilation of the State of Israel, are indeed no hallucinations. They are very real indeed -- on this day perhaps even more so, than just a few weeks ago.

A talk given on the occasion of the regional opening of this year's "Week of Brotherhood" at the City of Essen's "ALTE SYNAGOGE -- Haus jüdischer Kultur" on March 14, 2011.

Translated from the [German](#) by Fritz Voll with editing by Dr. Beth Balshaw.