



Tensions in Jewish-Christian Relations

30/09/2005 | Ucko, Hans

Workshop Presentation at the ICCJ Conference in Chicago, 24-27 July 2005

Tensions in Jewish-Christian Relations

Workshop Presentation at the ICCJ Conference in Chicago, 24-27 July 2005

[Hans Ucko](#)

Approaching a topic such as 'tensions in Jewish-Christian relations' is problematic and difficult. In dealing with such a topic the presenter can easily be misconstrued or misunderstood and anyone addressing it may be perceived as disruptive and confrontational and as someone attacking the counterpart. It is therefore with a certain feeling of uneasiness that I have accepted to share with you some of my reflections on the topic chosen for this workshop: tensions in Jewish-Christian relations, although I do ask myself whether we are mature enough to handle the topic. Will we not only become defensive? Is there enough trust between us to deal with tensions in Jewish-Christian relations? The topic is fraught with the potential of emotions running high, that we open ourselves up for mutual accusations and even condemnations, etc. Should one at all speak about tensions considering that the friendship between Jews and Christians is hardly fifty years old? It is a friendship, which must have been so difficult to build, given the history of so much suffering, so much fear, so much

arrogance and so much intimidation. Throughout the last fifty years, Jews and Christians have gained so much; we have made enormous progress. Rabbi Jim Rudin called the positive relationship between Jews and Christians a miracle of the 20th century. Should we jeopardise all this now, this new found friendship, which was so hard to come by?

But at the same time, do we not in other contexts often state that friends should be able to be honest with each other? And that it is only in openness and sincerity that friendship can grow. Does this apply also here? As Jews and Christians involved in dialogue, we do want something more than exchanging niceties, something more than tea and sympathy. We want more than only carrying the labels or accepting the categories of being Jews and Christians. Can we address each other in a way that is non-threatening?

At the outset of this workshop, let me make clear that the following reflections are just that, reflections, which in no way carries any official weight. This is not an official statement by the World Council of Churches (WCC). I am speaking as someone, who after some decades of involvement in the Jewish-Christian dialogue both from within and outside the context of the WCC has had some experiences, which I now in this workshop would like to share with you. Things I have noticed, things I have heard, things I think we need to discuss to make Jewish-Christian relations more transparent, more sincere, less of posturing or playing for the galleries. I would like Jewish-Christian relations to be a relationship of Jews and Christians, each committed

to their religious traditions and community, grateful to God for having brought them together to discover each other and the possibilities of working together for the betterment of the world we inhabit.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the charge of antisemitism

The issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its relation to antisemitism or the charge of antisemitism represents today a difficult tension between Jews and Christians. There are perceptions in both communities, which may, if we do not address them, lead us astray or alienate us from each other. When addressing it and we must do so, even if it hurts, we need to pledge from the outset that we refuse to be separated from each other.

We have been living under the illusion that we could exclude politics from the dialogue. We have, and not only in the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), said many times that we would not deal with politics in the Jewish-Christian dialogue. This is and has always been an illusion. Being silent about political issues is not at all being apolitical. Politics is present also in our silence. The presence of politics has in our polarized world become even more obvious, also in interreligious dialogue. We must acknowledge this reality. Harvey Cox says, "We as religious thinkers must stop simply making nice about this age of ecumenism, interfaith dialogue and fuzzy feelings among priests, imams and rabbis. We need to take a step toward candour. In response to a secularized intelligentsia, at least in the

West, we have tried too hard to put a positive face on religion, when the truth is we know that all religions have their demonic underside. We quote Isaiah, not Joel. We talk about Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, not Rabbi Meir Kahane. We favour St. Francis and his birds, not Torquemada and his racks. Alas, however, they are all part of the story.”¹ While Cox rightly speaks of religion as being as ambiguous as anything else is, the issue before us now is that we cannot hold our dialogue in a “chambre séparée” cut off from politics. Jewish-Christian dialogue is part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, whether we like or not. Even if we don’t say anything about the conflict, our silence speaks volumes.

We need to acknowledge the complexities in which we do interreligious dialogue. The question of politics plays into the issue of antisemitism. Watchfulness is needed because antisemitism is still there. But it has changed. It is today more than ever using the situation in the Middle East as a spring board. What is needed in the struggle against antisemitism is however not only to focus on antisemitism in itself and see it only with the glasses of the experiences of antisemitism in the 19th century or in the days of the Third Reich. If we do so, we will go wrong in our attempts to address it. What today to a large extent fosters antisemitism (notwithstanding that the old forms of antisemitism are both latent and obvious) is, whether we like it or not, how people perceive the politics of the State of Israel in relation to the Palestinian people. While it is true

that suicide bombings terrorise Israel, the building of the wall or security fence, the settlements, collective punishment, the checkpoints, the protracted occupation itself breeds frustration and intense opposition among Palestinians and many people throughout the world sympathise with this occupied people. The frustration goes beyond the geographical location of the conflict. The anger seeks out Jews in Germany or France, who are blamed for what is going on in Israel-Palestine. It is being fed through incitement in media in the Middle East to amalgamate Jews and Israel. And it finds resonance in the frustrations and the powerlessness of people in face of this protracted occupation, spilling over in attacks on synagogues and Jewish cemeteries in Europe. While we can sympathize with the frustrations, we can of course not condone antisemitism. When addressing it, we should however not only cry out against antisemitism but see our response to it in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian problem.

The problem is that people involved in the Jewish-Christian dialogue and people involved in addressing the questions related to the conflict in Israel-Palestine are most often not the same people. It would be a good if they were.

The situation today is often that people in the Jewish-Christian dialogue in different ways try avoid confronting the thorny issue of the occupation. But Christian participants in the Jewish-Christian dialogue cannot run away from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Their

silence will be interpreted as a vocal support of Israeli positions in the conflict. Christians involved in the dialogue may even be perceived as supporting far more than they may actually give their backing, they might, if you allow me the overstatement, in some cases even be held responsible for the ongoing occupation. I remember how much Christian statements usually from more evangelical US churches praising Israel as God's own country and people were taken by Middle East Christians as adding to the Palestinian burden of occupation. "Not only are we occupied by Israel and suffering its hardship", they said, "We are also to hear that this occupation is God-willed, sanctioned by God".

Although one should not necessarily equate Evangelical Christians with Christians involved in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, the latter are often seen to be in the same company or crowd, uncritical supporters of Israel in the conflict. It is wrong but it shows something of the climate we today are living in.

And then we have the other side, said to be the spokespersons for peace and justice, as if Christians involved in the Jewish-Christian dialogue were not at all aware of these values. Those, who for good reasons want to express their solidarity with the Palestinian situation, might find it difficult to be involved in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, which they perceive to be "on the other side", the one supporting Israeli politics. This perception might blind them from seeing and being sensitive to the exemplary strides that have been achieved in the Jewish-Christian dialogue. Instead, a traditional theology of supercession or replacement might come in handy in trying to speak out against Israel; the teaching of contempt can be a very

useful instrument when denouncing Israel and classical anti-Semitic slogans can be helpful. The quotation 'an eye for an eye' is taken as evidence of Jews as vindictive and unforgiving.

This polarization puts people into dilemmas, which the following story might illustrate. There was at a session of our governing bodies in the WCC a discussion on how the WCC should address the building of the security wall in Israel-Palestine. Someone said, "I don't feel comfortable saying anything at all. The minute I say anything, I will be labelled as an anti-Semite at home." There is a problem when one is aligning all critique of Israel with a critique of Judaism, when one makes it impossible to utter criticism of Israel without the concomitant accusation of antisemitism. Serious and well-meaning people are afraid to say anything against Israel because criticism of Israel seems to be understood only as a new suit of clothing, a more acceptable or fashionable form of expression of antisemitism.² Is criticism of the political Israel necessarily a subterfuge for the criticism of Judaism? It isn't. The very fact that WCC in 1992 felt obliged to make a statement on the perception that critique of Israel can be wrongly interpreted is indicative of the sensitivities involved. It said, "... we assume that criticism of the policies of the Israeli government is not in itself anti-Jewish. For the pursuit of justice invariably involves criticism of states and political movements, which does not imply denigration of peoples and much less of faith communities. Expressions of concern regarding Israel's actions are not statements regarding the Jewish people or Judaism, but are a legitimate part of the public debate."³ We must take care not to diffuse the real

meaning of antisemitism at the expense of conceptual clarity thus disarming ourselves in our struggle against antisemitism. I am not alone in saying that the term “anti-Semitism” may be in danger of becoming less meaningful when its boundaries are made to encompass ever increasing territories. Alan Sussman, professor at Bard College, where he teaches Constitutional Law and Ethics, says about those who sometimes too easily bring forth the charge of antisemitism, that this “permits widening the frame of the accusation in order to distort and taint the argument of the accused. Given the obvious power of post-Holocaust victimhood, it grants the anti-anti-Semite the ability to raise the unapproachable and unanswerable image of Jewish extinction in an effort to silence what may not even qualify as anti-Jewish sentiment.”⁴

Although the document referred to is now more than 10 years old, it still has its validity. The WCC received after having issued the “Minute on economic measures for peace in Israel/Palestine” many letters from both Jewish and Christian so called friends of Israel, who saved no venom and who were ready to categorize the WCC as one of the anti-Semitic factors in the world.⁵ This is one among many letters and it is not among the worst: “As representative of a faith which for last 2000 years has set as one of its goals the humiliation and persecution of Jews (which lead directly to the murder of many millions of the Jewish people) for the sole reason that they wished to practice their own own religion, I am very

curious where you find the nerve to criticize anything which Israel does. I can understand that at a personal level you may not agree with everything done by Israel, straight thinking leads inevitably to the conclusion that your entire energies should be spent begging forgiveness from those you have wronged. And instead of make selective quotes from the Gospels why don't you also quote those sections which accuse Jews of being the children of the Devil and the Jewish people incapable of forgiveness for all generations? If there are criticisms to be made then I suggest you leave it to others who are less tainted than yourselves. Criticisms should come from those who have the moral right to criticize. I do not wish or expect to receive your reply- just think about it.”

Such letters and other reactions flagging antisemitism should not only be understood as someone just shooting from the hip. I think there are reasons to discuss this particular tension for the following reasons:

1. Is there a risk of “banalising”⁶ the reality of antisemitism, of using it in a way that is wrong to the victims of antisemitism? It seems to me that the proper task of combating antisemitism is best conducted by avoiding the broad-brush approach and paying attention to distinctions.
2. Is there a problem when the accusation of antisemitism is used to silence people, when the accusation is used as a weapon?
3. Are there ulterior motives behind when people attempt to conflate finding fault with Israel with hatred of Jews?
4. Does the Jewish-Christian dialogue contain an inbuilt condition: support of the Israeli positions in the conflict and very circumscribed possibilities to voice critique? Can one be critical of the politics of the State of Israel without risking to be called anti-Semitic? When does one cross the line?

Is the Jewish-Christian dialogue a one-way-street?

The second tension is maybe not really a tension but a feeling of

possible uneasiness regarding the way the Jewish-Christian dialogue is heading, something that could lead to a fatigue in recruitment of new Christian disciples to the Jewish-Christian dialogue. I may see all of this from a European perspective and I may be wrong in my interpretation but I have the feeling that the Jewish-Christian dialogue in Europe does not easily get new followers among Christians. I am willing to stand corrected and the situation may be completely different in the US. The Jewish-Christian dialogue sees however dwindling groups in many countries in Europe, where mostly elderly people are active. Young people do not seem attracted. I can be wrong. It is only a perception.

Some of those involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue may themselves when push comes to shove express uneasiness. There are those who would say that the Jewish-Christian dialogue has so far taken place mostly on the Jewish turf, that it wasn't really a dialogue but a monologue, where Christians learned about living Judaism. I recently met with a Swiss scholar very much involved in Jewish-Christian dialogue, who talked about the dialogue as "Etikettenschwindel" (fraudulent labelling) and the Jewish-Christian dialogue as a one-way-street.

I fully understand that in the beginning of the dialogue, there was a need to begin building trust, to begin the discovery of the other. Maybe this is only to be reckoned with. The church needed to discover living Judaism because it had so long operated with dead Judaism; the term "Spät-Judentum" says it all. The conversion of the church

from having built a theology on the death of Judaism necessitated many years of listening to living Judaism, learning about feasts and holidays, when one lived with the erroneous concepts of Jews having lost their Temple and thus their way of celebrating God, learning about the delight in the Torah, when one for so long had lived with the erroneous prejudice that Jews suffocated under the yoke of the Law, learning about Jewish affirmation of life, when one for so long had lived with the notion of Jews sadly trying to please God through petty merits and thus gain the salvation otherwise offered gratis to those who believed in Christ. The Jewish-Christian dialogue had an in-built listening, unlearning and learning phase at least as far as Christian participation was concerned. Needless to say that Christians need to continue working on an education, which does away with the teaching of contempt. We have a responsibility to communicate our findings to theological teachers, seminaries and catechists. There should be no space for anti-Jewish teaching of any kind in Christian teaching.

But is this all there is to say? The Jewish-Christian dialogue has been characterized as being in principle asymmetric; Christians would for their self-understanding need a dialogue with Jews. Jews would not for the same reason need dialogue with Christians. Jews engage in dialogue, or so it has been said, to bring about a commitment among Christians to stand up against antisemitism, to reconsider mission to Jews and to understand the linkage between Jews and the Land of Israel. All of this is certainly legitimate but do Jews need dialogue for their self-understanding? It depends of course on how one understands self-understanding. It is obvious that there is a difference in how

both communities look upon the other. There are reasons to look upon the Jewish-Christian dialogue as being more of a necessity for Christians than for Jews. It is a fact that Christian declarations and documents, confessional and ecumenical, are in various ways articulating that “the covenant of God with the Jewish people continues and that Christians are to thank God for the spiritual treasures which we share with the Jewish people.”⁷ Some of these statements have found or are finding their way into preambles of the constitution of many churches throughout the oikoumene. One example is the North Elbian Evangelical-Lutheran Church, which “testifies to the faithfulness of God, who remains true to the covenant with his people Israel. In listening to God's instruction and in hope for the fulfilment of God's rule, the church is linked with the people of Israel.”⁸

The Jewish-Christian dialogue has here and there contributed to a Jewish reconsideration of Christians. The Christian, so it has been said, is not only “a persecutor of the past” and there is among some Jews a realization that “Judaism will have to face the meaning of Jesus ... invested with a mission to the world, to bring God and humanity together.”⁹ But such reflections are few.

Although Jewish reflections on Christianity are less frequent than the other way around, one could as an illustration refer to the statement and project Dabru Emet, which tries to encourage “Jews to reflect on what Judaism may now say about Christianity”.¹⁰

From a Jewish perspective, it affirms the intrinsic relationship between Jews and Christians, saying that Jews and Christians worship the same God, they both seek authority from the same book, and they accept the moral principles of Torah.

But the Dabru Emet seems not to have gained much support, although such a development would almost be a sine qua non if the dialogue is to oxygenize both communities. There is no need for immediate reciprocity. There is no immediate reciprocity in any real relationship. But it cannot be that one is perceived to be the permanent giver and the other permanent receiver. The time for listening and learning from Judaism in a one-way-direction should only be a phase and not a permanent condition. It should be a phase for those who come new to the encounter with living Judaism but there needs to be a possibility to continue walking together to discover new vistas. Otherwise there is a risk that the dialogue itself will become anaemic.

Conversion as an issue that can no longer be avoided

My final issue, which I think is still a point of tension, is the question of conversion. It is an issue, which is almost taboo in the Jewish-Christian dialogue. The only way it is present is in the way Christians and Jews seem to have agreed that it should be repudiated. Conversion is considered a danger and converts are considered persona non grata. The reason for this is deeply rooted in history. Jews have suffered from forced baptism, organized missionising and conversion crusades all couched in derogatory theological concepts. And Jews are a

minority and conversion depletes the people. No wonder then that Jews would prefer an atheistic Jew to a Jewish convert to Christianity and that conversion is not on the table of dialogue. And yet, don't we have to go beyond this treading of water? Don't we have to address the issue? The fact that we don't mention it or are embarrassed if there are converts in the dialogue, shows that it is a tension that needs to be addressed. I am not arguing for "Jews for Jesus" or for "mission to the Jews" or any other targeting of Jews as objects for conversion. I find any such enterprise arrogant and not worthy of how the church should behave in relation to others, Jews included. But I am wondering whether we need not in our Jewish-Christian relations address also this tension? I think it would be important to recognize that although dialogue has its own integrity and is not at all focused on conversion, it happens, because of the dialogue, that Jews become Christians and Christians become Jews. It was not the intention of the dialogue but it happened. Are the Jewish-Christian relations not strong enough that they should be able to cope also with this human right that people may in fact change religion? And should the definition of convert necessarily be one of the renegade or the traitor? Is this the only thing that can be said? I think it is a stereotype. We should try to take stock of how many Jews, converts to Christianity, have not actually been the ones who brought about the conversion of the church in relation to the Jewish people. In this year of celebration of Nostra Aetate, where would this document be were it not for people like John Oesterreicher, Bruno Hussar, Gregory Baum etc. Has not Cardinal Lustiger in many ways supported the French Bishops in their work on changing the teachings of the church in relation to the Jewish people?

It is difficult to address the issue of conversion. It seems to challenge the very heart of the religion the convert is leaving. But does conversion a priori suggest that accepting one religion means rejecting another religion? We need to discuss this in the Jewish-Christian dialogue and in fact in any interreligious dialogue.

I have briefly indicated some of the tensions that I think need to be addressed in order to make the Jewish-Christian relationship less fearful and more safe and secure.

Notes

1. Harvey Cox, *Religion and the War Against Evil* .
2. Jacqueline Rose, *The Question of Zion*. Princeton University Press, 2005.
3. [“Christian-Jewish dialogue beyond Canberra '91”](#)
4. *Tikkun* vol.20, No.4, 30.
5. [GEN/PUB 5 Second report of the Public Issues committee](#)
6. I am looking for a word in English, which expresses the French word “banaliser”, meaning “makes banal, trivialises, reduces to the common place”.
7. [“Christian-Jewish dialogue beyond Canberra '91”](#)
8. [Declaration of the Synod of the North Elbian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Rendsburg, 22 September 2001](#)
9. Leon Klenicki & Geoffrey Wigoder, ed. *A Dictionary of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, New York: Stimulus Books, 1984, 107.
10. Dabru Emet, [A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity](#)

Rev. Dr. Hans Ucko is Programme Executive for
Inter-Religious Relations and Dialogue in the General Secretariat of
the World Council of Churches, Geneva.