



The Context of Jewish-Christian Dialogue

| Solomon, Norman

The Christian-Jewish dialogue is constantly moving forward. When Rabbi Dr. Solomon wrote this paper he did not know that the Vatican would eventually recognize the State of Israel, issue its Reflexions on the Shoah, and that Pope John Paul II would make his historical pilgrimage to Israel. Yet, the broad context of the dialogue still remains the same.

The Context of Jewish-Christian Dialogue

by Norman Solomon

The Christian-Jewish dialogue is constantly moving forward. When Rabbi Dr. Solomon wrote this paper he did not know that the Vatican would eventually recognize the State of Israel, issue the Reflexions on the Shoah, and that Pope John Paul II would make his historical pilgrimage to Israel. Yet, the broad context of the dialogue still remains the same. The article has been shortened slightly.

The birth of tolerance in the modern world

Toleration and the granting of civil equality to all irrespective of their religious convictions are the bedrock of our society. They have been achieved slowly, haltingly, and disturbingly recently in the Christian world and notwithstanding the pious clauses of the United Nations Charter there are few countries in which they are a reality.

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) perceived a link between monotheism and intolerance. In his essay 'Of Unity In Religion', written not many years after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, he declared: 'The quarrels and division about religion were evils unknown to the heathen. The reason was because the religion of the heathen consisted rather in rites and ceremonies than in any constant belief ... the chief doctors and fathers of their church were the poets. But the true God hath this attribute, that he is a jealous God; and therefore his religion will endure no mixture nor partner.'

Yet elements of toleration may be discerned even in the early sources of both Judaism and Christianity. The theme will not be developed here,¹ but it is perhaps auspicious for Jewish Christian dialogue that the only observation attributed by the New Testament to a known rabbi is Gamaliel I's judgment on the followers of Jesus: '. . . leave them alone. If this idea of theirs or its execution is of human origin, it will collapse; but if it is from God, you will never be able to put them down, and you risk finding yourselves at war with God' (Acts 5:38-39).

Following the horrors of the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464), who attempted to promote the union of the Eastern and Western Churches, composed his dialogue 'On Peace in Faith',² a vision in which representatives of all peoples and faiths assemble together in heaven, and tutored by 'the Word' come to realise that after all they worship the same Creator God; they are sent down to earth to teach the people of their nations the true worship of God, and gather together in Jerusalem to pay homage to God and lay the foundations of an everlasting peace. This is a beautiful conception, but it falls short of acknowledging more than one legitimate

way of worship; nor does it address the political problem of whether government can tolerate, let alone guarantee equal rights to, persons of the non-dominant faith.

Guillaume Postel (1510-1581), when Europe had already commenced tearing itself apart in the Reformation, taught that only God could judge error, and that God indeed sought to enlighten all, whether Catholic, heretic, Jew, pagan or Ishmaelite.³ Such lone voices were scarcely heard in an age when life – especially in the next world – was thought to hinge on the niceties of dogmatic commitment.

As the Wars of Religion became yet more bloody and more bitter others sought to pour oil on the troubled waters. Some placed their hopes in the 'charitable dogmatic compromise' of irenicism – to no avail, for agreement as to what constituted the 'essentials' of Christian belief remained elusive. The 'politiques', such as the Catholic French Chancellor Michel L'Hospital (1503-1573) and the Protestant Sebastian Castellio, detesting persecution, sought to formulate a solution in terms of expediency; forced conversions were not effective and tended to undermine the stability of the State.

Matters proceeded slowly, almost as often backwards as forwards. John Locke (1632-1704), towards the end of the seventeenth century, and after the shedding of the best blood of Europe in wars strictly among Christians, still found it necessary to publish his great Epistle on Toleration under a pseudonym. Yet even Locke was not prepared to tolerate Roman Catholics or atheists,⁴ and his arguments are largely those of expediency; that and only that which does not threaten the State should be tolerated, for true belief cannot be forced. At the Selly Oak Colleges which owe so much to Quaker inspiration we remember William Penn (1644-1718), the Quaker leader, who dated his 'The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience' from Newgate prison in 1670; however, only Christians were eligible to vote or to hold office in his new colony of Pennsylvania.

Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), in 1682, was the first to articulate publicly the concept of toleration as transcending doctrinal bounds, being grounded in the recognition of the autonomy of the individual conscience;⁵ but Bayle was accused of scepticism, and much reviled for his separation of morals from religion. We turn to Althusius (1557-1638) and particularly Spinoza (1632-1677) for political philosophies to provide a theoretical basis for the principles of toleration already followed by the Dutch magistrates quite early in the seventeenth century.

Reaction to the horrors of the Wars of Religion, and the practical need to protect commerce from becoming the hostage of religious strife, were probably the main factors leading to increased toleration in West European society. Enlightenment philosophies, increasing scepticism in doctrinal matters, and the Lutheran emphasis on the other-worldly role of the church, contributed to the secularisation of politics (the 'privatisation' of religion). Revolution as well as evolution led to the hard-won modern consensus that government should not suppress diversity in the religious belief and practice of its citizens, and that citizens of all religions should be equal before the law. Even then it took a long time before some individuals recognized that it might be interesting, perhaps even instructive, to listen to those of faiths different from their own.

Thus, interfaith dialogue became possible. It is a child of humanism, enlightenment⁶ and the secularisation of politics.

With few exceptions, it is only in the last forty years that Christian Jewish dialogue has borne fruit in the form of direct open consultations between Jews and Christians and formal declarations and guidelines issued by leading Church bodies.⁷ It has still not taken root in the Eastern Churches, it is constantly in danger of being hijacked for conversionist or political purposes, and in its fullest sense it is probably beyond the reach of the most conservative groups amongst both Jews and Christians. It is a tender shoot, yet one upon whose nurture the peace of the world depends.

What is dialogue?

As Martin Buber told us, alles Leben ist Begegnung (all life is encounter). We must look carefully at one type of encounter, interfaith dialogue, to which Buber himself made a unique contribution.

The nature of dialogue

How does modern interfaith dialogue differ from the interfaith disputations of the Middle Ages? Because it is a voluntary exercise between two parties of unequal status, and there is no assumption that either party can 'win' the argument and on that basis demand that the other conform.

How does it differ from the bargaining of the market-place, in which the aim is to reach a mutually acceptable compromise? In the market transaction only the commodity and the price are involved, and they are negotiable. In dialogue we consider both the faith commitment, which is not being negotiated, and the ways of harmonious living and co-operation, where we seek the mutually acceptable compromise.

Dialogue is conversation. The good conversationalist is a good listener. A good listener takes care not to impose a preconceived framework on what he hears; he opens himself to the framework of self-understanding of the other. This was well expressed in the 1975 Vatican Guidelines on the conciliar 'Declaration on Judaism': 'They (i.e. Christians) must strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.'⁸ Christians and Jews do not define themselves in the same words. A Christian does not define himself around words like 'Torah' or 'Mitzvah', but he cannot understand a Jew unless he knows the words and their significance in Judaism. Jews do not define themselves in terms of attitudes to Jesus or the trinity and so are often at a loss as to how to react to Christians when questioned about such matters; nevertheless, they won't understand Christians without making some attempt to find out how Christians use these words. Many other words – 'covenant', 'atonement', 'salvation', 'messiah' and the like, not only vary in meaning between and within the faiths, but are given different emphasis in each faith. Confusion about this affects dialogue even at a sophisticated level. For instance, the present concern of Jewish theologians with 'covenant theology' seems to be a response to a Christian agenda rather than a 'natural' growth within Judaism; but of course, important developments within a faith arise precisely from its interaction with the outside world, with other faiths and other philosophies.

Dialogue admits of degrees; there is dialogue which is of value though it does not reach deep. Much of the dialogue between Jews and Christians is simply a matter of learning to be nice to each other, trying a little to understand what the other is doing, co-operating in social endeavour; the Councils of Christians and Jews in many lands rightly devote much of their attention to such confidence-building, educative, non-divisive matters. Many ordinary Jews or Christians lack the skills necessary to engage in a deeper, theological dialogue, and are rightly wary of setting their faith at risk in a confusing enterprise. Interfaith dialogue need not involve talk about religion. It may consist of joint action, involvement together in projects of moral and social value such as the improvement of areas of urban deprivation.

Yet the heart of dialogue is in the talk together of theologians of both faiths, for it is they whose concern is with the meaning of life at its deepest level, and it is they who translate from the doctrinal formula to the underlying reality.

It is good for those who engage in interfaith dialogue to utilise the techniques developed by group therapists, and to monitor carefully the dynamics of the group. It is unfortunate that intellectuals, theologians in particular, rarely appreciate the need for facilitators. Interfaith dialogue is not an

abstract intellectual enterprise (if indeed such a thing exists), but incorporates a social dynamic. It calls for professional skills in conflict resolution as well as for expertise in its own subject matter.

Theological dialogue

Many Jews, especially amongst the orthodox, are shy of theological dialogue. Several of the orthodox American rabbis who have contributed to dialogue have defended their participation by reference to the 'Soloveitchik Line', that is, the policy on dialogue adopted by the (orthodox) Rabbinical Council of America in February 1964, based on the philosophy and advice of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik.⁹ This view was expressed succinctly in a resolution of the Conference of European Rabbis adopted at their Bournemouth meeting on 20 April 1988: 'The Conference reconfirms the value of dialogue and co-operation between different religions on moral and social issues but not on theological subjects.'¹⁰

Such a ruling may sound restrictive, but its use by Soloveitchik's followers has been permissive rather than restrictive. Since the general tendency amongst the orthodox, at least in the United States, has been unfavourable towards interreligious dialogue¹¹ Soloveitchik's disciples have used his 'ruling' to justify to their orthodox colleagues in other camps their willingness to engage in dialogue at all, rather than to avoid certain topics once they are engaged in dialogue. Indeed, it was the 'Soloveitchik line' which enabled the Rabbinical Council of America, in the 70s, to be a party to the formation, under the leadership of the World Jewish Congress, of IJCIC (the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations), the cross-denominational Jewish body which represents the Jewish people in dialogue with international religious bodies such as the World Council of Churches and the Vatican. Under that 'umbrella' orthodox rabbis have continued to play a leading role in the interfaith dialogue process, but at the 'price' that the agenda is not explicitly theological; in practice, few topics have been excluded, and even if the 'agenda' has been social the discussion has been on a theological plane.

Soloveitchik rejected theological dialogue for it was his philosophical conviction that such dialogue is a metaphysical impossibility (rather than merely undesirable). However, it seems to me that the orthodox reluctance to engage in such a dialogue arises not from philosophical abstraction but from deep fears, which should be brought into the open and confronted. Foremost amongst these is the memory of past centuries of Christian conversionism, disputation and general brow-beating, always rooted in Christian 'theology', and used to challenge and discredit Judaism. And there is not only the fear of being hurt, but that of hurting others, if we say 'what we really mean' about certain theological topics, such as trinity and incarnation, which are precious to Christians. There is also the simple fact that rabbis tend to be trained in halakha rather than theology, and hence feel uncomfortable with an overtly theological agenda.

Moreover, there are difficulties in the theological conversation. Traditional Christianity nurtures at its heart certain 'mysteries' which are regarded as not in principle amenable to human reason or understanding. *Certum est quia impossibile est*, said Tertullian.¹² What can any rational person do (for this is not a problem restricted to Jews), when solemnly informed by a Christian that such and such a doctrine, incarnation, for instance, can only be understood by the special grace of God? The conversation has stopped. 'Mystery' is the most potent of conversation-stoppers. Paul van Buren, amongst others, has shown¹³ that a Christian need neither stop the conversation at that point nor commence browbeating the Jewish partner. There are still ways to 'walk together', as he beautifully expresses it. One can attempt to 'unpack' the mystery, even if this leads to some uncomfortable questions.

Progress and Problems

Notwithstanding orthodox reservations the dialogue proceeds apace. Associations such as the

'Rainbow Group', conferences arranged by the International Council of Christians and Jews and its constituent Councils, or by educational bodies such as the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and the Centre for the Study of Judaism and Christian-Jewish Relations in Birmingham (UK), provide settings within which theologians of both faiths can meet and talk together openly about central issues of faith, easing fears and tensions and building mutual confidence. Much theological talk takes place at the major Jewish-Christian Consultations which have been such a distinctive feature of recent dialogue, and in which the major Jewish dialogue partner is IJCIC (see above), though the Anti-Defamation League and others have from time to time taken independent initiatives, particularly at levels lower than that of the World Council of Churches or the Vatican. It is a common experience at such gatherings that the divisions between delegates between conservatives and liberals (of whatever faith) rather than between religions.

Certain attitudes are inimical to dialogue. The triumphalist, for instance, listens not with respect for the integrity of his opposite number, but to discover how to deflect him from his belief into the 'truth'. The triumphalist converses, but not as an equal; he is not open to that which he hears, though he expects his interlocutor to be. Triumphalism is the Holy Inquisition, 'reasoning' with Joan of Arc or with 'heretics' and handing them to the secular arm to torture them and to burn them at the stake for the good of their immortal souls. Augustine insisted, as against the Donatists, that the most distinctive mark of the Church was not holiness but love; then, calling in the strong arm of the Theodotian imperial establishment to suppress those same fellow-Christian Donatists, he all too plausibly asked, What death is worse for the soul than the liberty to err?¹⁴ The short retort to that question is another, 'Who are you to lay down what is or is not error?'

It is Augustine, moreover, who put the stamp of authority on the ultimate rationale for Christian power: There is no salvation outside the church.¹⁵ But the thought had been clearly enough expressed by Cyprian, already in the middle of the third century, with his 'He who does not have the church as his mother cannot have God as his father'.¹⁶ These doctrines contrast starkly with the even earlier Jewish affirmation that 'the righteous among the gentiles have a share in the World to Come!'¹⁷

Triumphalism is Luther, Zwingli and Calvin, intolerant not only of Rome but of each other, preaching God's infinite love and mercy and setting Europe headlong on course for the carnage of the Wars of Religion.

Triumphalism of a more gentle sort is the World Council of Churches, at Amsterdam in 1948,¹⁸ sorrowing for the Jewish victims of a more recent destruction, condemning antisemitism, but still spelling out its 'Christian love' (as if love were a Christian monopoly) in terms of redoubled efforts to evangelise the Jews! Jews, still very unsure of themselves in 1948, responded aloud with expressions of approval for the Churches' powerful renunciation of antisemitism. Inwardly many groaned, 'Hitler destroyed our bodies; does the Christian Church, penitent but yet triumphant, seek to destroy our souls?'

So is dialogue at all possible with the triumphalist, the person of inflexible and exclusivist belief? Yes! It is people who talk, not abstractions. We can often establish an understanding relationship with even the most diehard religious conservatives. Often enough, we can learn to see them as guardians of values and traditions that the more liberal too lightly cast aside; the dialogue of the reactionary is harder of access but may yield richer contents than that of the liberal.

The 1990s have been promoted by the Roman and some other Churches as a 'decade of evangelism'. No one actually knows what this means, and there is a danger that the genie, once out of the bottle, will have a mind of its own. Terms like 'mission' and 'evangelism' as commonly used by Christians make Jews (and other potential targets) uncomfortable. The picture in our minds is of misguided fanatics who use specious arguments and even material blandishments to

entice our children away from us and to mislead the ignorant and the disaffected. We are vexed, not flattered, by the protestations of love which accompany a blind missionary zeal that does not even see us, let alone really love us.

On the other hand, without a recognition of what 'mission' means to a Christian the Jew has not seriously entered into dialogue. I acknowledge with gratitude that it is through dialogue that I have come to appreciate how significant a coignet mission, rightly understood, is in my own faith – it was, after all, from the Jews amongst whom they grew up that the early Christians learned both mission and proselytising.¹⁹ True, Jews abandoned active proselytising long ago, though individual converts are welcomed, and our faith teaches responsibility towards the world around us. We have refined, but certainly never abandoned, our sense of mission.²⁰

The Synod of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland in 1980 declared: 'Both Christians and Jews are authentic witnesses to God's love for man, therefore the Jewish people cannot be an object of mission by Christians'.²¹ For those church bodies that currently feel unable to endorse such an enlightened statement it might at least be useful to distinguish 'proselytism' from 'mission', as was done clearly at Lambeth.²² Dialogue coexists with mission in the broader sense, though it is impaired by active conversionism.

And then there is 'common mission', to which we turn in the next section.

Faith Commitment

The dialogue of people of faith presupposes commitment, and commitment suggests mission. Two people of faith engaging in dialogue are not like two people just talking about religion, for their conversation is not innocent, but bears witness to their beliefs. Yet each listens, hears the 'mission' of the other, refines his or her own in the light of the conversation. Are the missions pitted against one another totally, or do they perhaps overlap, harmonize, though they are not identical? Is 'mission' no more than a desire to impose on others a particular form of words, to get them to talk the way the missionary does, to use the same symbols? Or does it point to the nature of reality? If it does, perhaps its existential content is something already apprehended by the dialogue partner, though the partner's vocabulary is a very different one.

That missions may overlap, complement one another, seems to be suggested by Judah Halevi (c. 1080-1140) and Moses Maimonides (1135-1204):²³ They saw the Christian and Muslim missions, if erroneous in points of detail, as essentially complementing Israel's mission by spreading amongst the nations faith in one God (in the case of Christianity, also faith in scripture) with its moral demands; a philosophy which in modern times is often utilised by Jewish theologians as a basis for the acceptance of religious pluralism. They understood that missions may overlap rather than be flatly contradictory.

The concept of shared, or 'common', mission has found a place in Church documents, notably in the 1988 Lambeth document 'Jews, Christians and Muslims: the Way of Dialogue'.²⁴ There it stems from the insight that both Jews and Christians see themselves as still looking forward to the establishment of God's kingdom on earth.

Partners in dialogue are seekers after peace, but also seekers after truth. People with faith commitment usually claim to 'believe' that certain statements are 'true'. Maimonides tells us that many – perhaps most – of those who profess belief in God have so confused understanding that they cannot rightly be considered believers. What they believe in is not God; they use the word 'God' with application only to some lesser concept which is all they apprehend.²⁵ Effective dialogue demands the ability to climb beyond words, shibboleths, symbols, to confront reality together (I harden my hearing towards those philosophers screaming at me that there is no reality beyond

words and symbols).

Maimonides saw 'truth' in propositional terms. Faith was a relationship to an objective transcendent reality, and it could be summed up in the words of a creed. Sociological interpretations of religion give us another dimension in dialogue, as 'seeking after truth' comes to comprise the sense of identity, of belonging within a community, and in this sense 'truths' of different faiths are not contradictory. But the sociological interpretation does not exhaust the content of faith, for it cannot evaluate the truth claims made about external realities, even if it can explain the function of those truth claims within the community.

I find the most satisfying dialogue is the quest of those who have already embarked on a journey, not knowing the destination but confident that the journey will continue and the mission mature throughout life, and that what waits at journey's end is no mere received form of words, no theologian's finely-tuned creed, but a richness of wisdom and experience that words may explore but never fully capture.

Dialogue involves risk. The pursuit of truth is a risk-fraught enterprise. But to refrain from the pursuit of truth is to court falsehood.

Reasons for the move towards dialogue

The rapid development of the Jewish Christian dialogue in recent years stems from six factors, four of which are part of the modern world-view, and two of which arise from specific events in the life of the Jewish people in the past half-century.

The de-emphasis of doctrine

The modern way of looking at things tends to place less emphasis on doctrinal matters, and to see rather that which religions have in common. Grounded in humanism, this attitude was powerfully expressed by religious spokesmen in Reformation times, numbering amongst its advocates no less a figure than Erasmus. 'The sum of our religion,' he wrote to the archbishop of Palermo in 1523, 'is peace and unanimity, but this can only come about when we define as little as possible and leave the judgment free on many matters. . . .'²⁶ It is this attitude which made possible the move to Christian ecumenism, whence it is a short step to an ecumenism of world faiths, Judaism included. People seek that which they have in common, rather than that which divides them.

Does such an attitude presuppose scepticism? One of the arguments used by Christian humanists in favour of tolerance was the difficulty of attaining certainty on points of doctrine. Some degree of scepticism is a necessary part of the search for truth.

Does the attitude lead to cultural relativism? Much of our religious expression is culture-bound; when God speaks to people He has perforce to use human language, and human language incorporates human culture. Contemporary philosophy is deeply concerned with problems of language and its relation to thought, to truth, to 'the world outside'. Our cultural pluralism demands that we attend to the task of sorting out truth-claims from cultural embellishments. What, indeed, is the logical status of a doctrinal statement? Is Christian talk about incarnation and resurrection and atonement a sort of poetry through which the Christian can express and focus ideas on God and the world and sin and forgiveness, or is it a series of propositional truth-claims about a particular man who lived in Galilee a long time ago, and if the latter, what indeed is the content of a truth-claim that this particular man, and no other, was the incarnation of God? Likewise, what does the Jew actually mean when he talks about '*Torah min ha-shamayim*', a divinely revealed, eternal Torah? Without a preparedness to explore such issues a full dialogue is not possible. The dialogue process uncovers the content of religious language.²⁷

The Aristotelian philosophical language in the late Middle Ages gave mutuality of expression to Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers. Part of the difficulty of contemporary dialogue arises from the absence of a mutually agreed philosophical language in which to formulate religious concepts. But where we do excel today is in the availability of psychological, sociological, anthropological and other vocabularies in which to talk about our religious experiences, both individual and communal. In using these vocabularies we have the advantage of being able to look at our faiths as 'living entities' rather than as collections of doctrines and rules. This development greatly facilitates the contemporary dialogue.

Improved communications

Improved communications and transport have made people much more aware of different cultures and religions. We visit each other's lands and we speak each other's tongues, and so we discover each other's cultures and learn that no culture has a monopoly in ethics, morality or spirituality.

Communication is with the past as well as with the present. There is a thrill when one enters a well-stocked bookstore and for less than the cost of a good dinner can acquire texts of the great classics and scriptures of east and west, treasures undreamed of and inaccessible to the wisest and most learned savants of ages past; and if you are not satisfied with the selections and translations available you know that only laziness or lack of aptitude restrains you from approaching the original sources yourself.

Our culture is indeed the first potentially universal culture. This is not because it dictates rules or values to be applied to the whole of human society – that would rightly be rejected as cultural imperialism – but because it is totally open to all that has come before or that currently exists in any part of the world, east or west, north or south. There is no opposition, from the west, between modern western culture and the 'time-honoured cultures' of the east. Rightly understood, our post-Enlightenment culture embraces the cultures of the east, learns from them, incorporates them – as it incorporates past Western culture – as options within the larger culture to which we are all heirs.

Extended horizons of space and time

We differ radically and irreversibly from our predecessors in our view of the universe and our place in it. The larger universe to which we relate is one within which the human species has evolved over millions of years; we expect our possibly superior descendant species to continue for billions more years on this planet and perhaps for far longer elsewhere in the universe. The extent of space and time conceived by the fathers of Judaism and Christianity was so much smaller and their understanding of nature so much more limited than ours that we are led to doubt the eternal validity of much of their teaching, to seek the kernel within the rather short-lived husk. When the saints had only to be faithful and steadfast to enjoy their triumph at the imminent end of the world it was less obviously silly than it is now, with the aeons stretching out before us, to think of salvation as hinging upon some minute formulation of doctrine or on the total fidelity to this or that individual sage or saviour.

Modern study – scripture and Judaism

Modern critical study of the Bible and other religious texts – again we think of Erasmus and Spinoza – has led to the appreciation of the need to understand Scripture in its historical context. Christians have asked who the historical Jesus was and how he related to the people around him. They have discovered a Jewish Jesus – Jesus, as Wellhausen pointed out, was a Jew, not a Christian. Throughout his life he preached only to his fellow-Jews. From this perception it is but a small step to ask what the clearly anti-Jewish stance of much of the Greek Scriptures has to do with the teaching of Jesus. Is Rosemary Ruether right in seeing anti-Judaism as part of the very fabric of early Christianity, or are those of her critics right who explain New Testament hostility to

Jews and Judaism as a by-product of the polemical situation in which the early Christians found themselves, but without significance for the modern Christian in relationship with contemporary Jews?

Certainly, such considerations have led many Christians to wish to meet actual Jews, the people amongst whom Jesus lived and taught. But we Jews have to caution them against identifying our faith and ourselves too strongly with the Jews and Judaism of Jesus' day. Rabbinic Judaism, the antecedent of modern Judaism, was not formed until well after Jesus' time. It was never the same as first-century Pharisaism, and its growth continues even now. It is clearly absurd to imagine Jesus celebrating a Bar Mitzvah after the style of the modern European Jew. It is less clearly absurd, but it is far more dangerous, to see the Torah through the eyes of Paul as a legalistic burden, rather than through the eyes of the rabbis of the Talmud as God's gracious and loving gift to bring society closer to His ways. Earlier this century such men as Travers Herford, James Parkes and George Foot Moore, to name just some of the English-writing Christian scholars, struggled against a powerful anti-Judaic heritage to po this out. Today, in the wake of a blossoming and a revolution in late Hellenistic and rabbinic studies, not to speak of New Testament scholarship proper, it is inexcusable to expound the foundation documents of Christianity in detachment from their Jewish and pagan contexts, or to ignore the continuing vitality and spiritual fecundity of post-70 Judaism.

It is good to note how several Church documents have recognized the reality of Judaism independently of its history as the cradle of Christianity. Perhaps the first of such documents was that published on 16 April 1973 by the French Bishops' Commission on 'the attitude of Christians towards Judaism':

For Christians the Covenant was renewed in Jesus Christ, but they should nevertheless regard Judaism as a reality not only social and historical, but above all religious; not only as a relic of a venerable and closed past, but as a reality living on through time.

Clearer still is the Vatican's 1985 'Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism' (reflected in the 1988 Lambeth document):

The history of Israel did not end in 70 C.E. It continued, especially in a Diaspora which allowed Israel to carry to the whole world a witness – often heroic – of its fidelity to the one God. . .

We must remind ourselves how the permanence of Israel is accompanied by a continuous spiritual fecundity, in the rabbinical period, in the Middle Ages and in modern times.... (VI, 25).

The recognition of the independence and integrity of Judaism creates a curious problem for Christian bureaucracy. Are questions relating to Jews internal or external to Christianity? The Roman Curia treats them as internal; 'Religious Relations with the Jews' is handled by the Commission for Promoting Christian Unity. The World Council of Churches treats them as external; they are handled by the sub-unit that deals with dialogue with people of 'other faiths'. Fortunately, both organisations keep their wits about them; there is no tidy bureaucratic solution.

The Shoah/Holocaust

Let us now turn to the two most salient events of twentieth century Jewish history and see how these have shaped the dialogue of Christian and Jew.

The bleak years 1933-1945 witnessed the humiliation of the Jewish people and a murder of a third of their number, many of them cruelly tortured, in the lands under Nazi domination, for no other reason than that they were Jews – not necessarily, that is, Jews by religion, but persons of one eighth Jewish 'blood'. When, after the war, the truth could no longer be evaded or concealed, many Christians were shocked into remorse and guilt. As against the noble minority of Christians who had helped and sheltered Jews, often at enormous peril to themselves, the majority had been silent, compliant, even acquiescent in the attempted genocide of the 'killers of Christ'. Nazis defended their actions by apt, if selective, citations from the writings of Martin Luther; were they not hatching the egg he had laid? What were they doing but what the Church had always said the Jews deserved, even if it shrank from implementing it itself? In his early writings and speeches Hitler, seeking the support of the masses, spoke overtly in Christian language: 'Hence I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: *by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the word of the Lord.*'²⁸ His attacks on Jews and Judaism were consciously expressed in the language of traditional Christian antisemitism, and the infamous laws of Nuremberg consciously modelled on the legislation of the mediaeval Church. It was the Church that had instigated trade restrictions against the Jew (a direct model for the Nazi boycott of 1 April 1933), and the ghetto and the yellow badge; it was Christians who first utilized the blood libel as an excuse to murder Jews.²⁹ It was the Church that sewed into the fabric of western culture the images and stereotypes of the Jew that allowed so many of its faithful sons to accept without demur the alienation and vilification of the Jew preached by Hitler. The Holocaust would not have been conceivable, let alone feasible, had not 2000 years of Christianity, more than 1000 of them years of the Church Triumphant, burned deep into the soul of Europe that attitude to the Jews notably dubbed by Jules Isaac the 'teaching of contempt'.

The *Shoah* is a greater theological challenge for Christians than for Jews. Jews and Christians equally have to wrestle with the problem of pain and suffering it focuses for our age. Christians have to face in addition the realization that they, with their sensitive consciences and spiritual values and talk of loving their neighbour, have somehow got caught up in the guilt of enabling that wickedness to come about.

So, there have been paroxysms of soul-searching, condemnations of antisemitism, declarations of love to the Jews. The Roman Catholic Church at Vatican II in 1965 went so far as to declare that Jews, especially those of today, should not be held collectively guilty for the death of Christ. This was greeted as a revolution in Christian thought, but it was no revolution. The Church had always taught that Christ died for the sins of all humanity; Jews had been made to suffer simply because the Church had failed, scarcely even attempted, before 1965, to restrain the popular notion that 'the Jews' collectively and at all times were to be blamed for the crucifixion.

By now we have had a whole generation of Christian Holocaust theology. The Eckardts, Franklin Littell, John Pawlikowski, J-B Metz, Eberhard Bethge, Hans-Joachim Kraus are but a few of those who have agonised over the implications for Christian theology of the *Shoah* and come to accept that profound revisions are needed if Christianity is to retain any moral credibility; in particular, 'supersessionist' or 'replacement' theology has come under attack, for the idea that the Church has replaced the Jewish people in God's economy has been recognised as generating the 'teaching of contempt' and antisemitism.

The wheels of the Vatican grind slowly. The final text of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 (unlike some of the drafts) managed not to refer to the *Shoah*. The 1975 'Guidelines' referred to it obliquely, and the 1986 'Notes' more clearly, if perfunctorily. Finally, in 1990, forty-five years after the *Shoah*, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, meeting in Prague with IJCIC, issued a document containing an admission of guilt on the part of the Church, and this was subsequently endorsed by the Pope.³⁰

Christians must of course repent; even more important, they must draw the right inferences with regard to theology. But let us be clear. No healthy and enduring relationship between people is built on guilt. Any future relationship must be founded on understanding, mutual love and respect, and a firm apprehension of our common mission. The sense of guilt is transient, not inherited by the next generation; moreover, it is unstable, inherently prone to sudden and drastic reversal.

The State of Israel

Just as the post-war Christian Jewish encounter was getting under way and Christians were beginning to come to terms with Judaism as a religion God, in His infinite wisdom, complicated the situation by the addition of a piece of His very own real-estate. On 29 November 1947 the UN voted in favour of the partition of Palestine – accepted by the Jews, rejected by the Arabs. The British prepared to leave, and the Arabs attacked, precipitating the War of Independence. On 14 May 1948, as the British mandate expired, the State of Israel was born. 'Eretz Israel was the birthplace of the Jewish people,' the Proclamation of Independence begins. 'Here their spiritual, religious and political identity was shaped. Here they attained to statehood, created cultural values of national and universal significance and gave to the world the eternal Book of Books'. The proclamation notes the unbroken attachment of the Jewish people to its land through the centuries of dispersion, and their return in recent generations to found a thriving and self-reliant community. It pledges the new State to 'ensure complete equality of social and political rights for all its inhabitants irrespective of religion race or sex . . . ' and to 'guarantee freedom of religion, conscience, language, education and culture' as well as to 'safeguard the Holy Places of all religions.'

The establishment of the State of Israel opened up something of a Pandora's box of problems for Jewish theologians. What, from a religious point of view, is the relationship between Land and People? Is the restoration of Jewish independence the beginning of the Messianic redemption process? What meaning can a secular State have for religious Jews? How can the values of rabbinic Judaism be reflected in the affairs of a modern State? How do we safeguard the rights of Christian, Moslem and other minorities? How do we now interpret traditional Jewish universalist teachings? What is the relationship between the 'diaspora' communities and Israel? Add to this all the agonising problems raised by a perceived need to defend one's new-found sovereignty by war. The lively discussion of such topics by contemporary Jewish thinkers makes a fascinating study, revealing vigorous debate and a wealth of opinions.³¹

Christians have evidently found the resurrection (I use the word advisedly) of the Jewish State a very problematic issue. Many individual Christians are, of course, deeply aware of the significance of this event; there is a strong tradition of Christian Zionism.³²

Church bodies, with few exceptions, have been much less forthcoming. The much-lauded Vatican II document, *Nostra Aetate*, in 1965, does not deign to mention the State of Israel at all. The Vatican's 'Guidelines on Religious Relations With the Jews' (1 December 1974) notes 'the persecution and massacre of Jews which took place in Europe just before and during the Second World War', but was still not ready to face the existence of the Jewish State; the defence of Vatican was that the Guidelines commented only on 'religious relations'. Eventually, however, the nettle was grasped, and the 1985 'Notes' state:

Christians are invited to understand this religious attachment which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship ...

The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law (VI, 25).³³

Many Jews felt that this did not do justice to the theological aspects of the land, and that the Catholic Church ought to have recognized the Jews' biblical claim. This is nonsense, however. It is not only better Catholic theology but also in Jewish interests that the Church does not attempt to 'theologize' the question of the land; to ask for a literalist interpretation of scripture is to invite displacement and even dispensationalist theology, locating Jewish return to the land in the context of ultimate Christian triumph.³⁴

The Holy See, uniquely amongst Christian bodies, establishes diplomatic relations with nations around the world. Despite a friendly relationship, in practice, with the State of Israel, it still does not have formal diplomatic links, making the excuse that the boundaries of the Jewish State are not determined. Though the World Council of Churches has been under attack for its grudging and often critical attitude towards the Jewish State, it has frequently endorsed, in terms reminiscent of United Nations resolutions, the right of the State of Israel to exist within secure and recognized borders.

The discomfort that the existence of the State of Israel seems to occasion many Christians manifests itself in a readiness to place the worst construction on whatever happens there, to accept hostile propaganda uncritically, and to accord disproportionate attention, in terms of news coverage, to events in which Israel is involved. Why this extraordinarily neurotic way of reacting to anything to do with Israel – and to quite a lot of things to do with Jews elsewhere? Christian teaching on Jews and Judaism has traditionally been based on the notion that, having failed to accept Jesus as the Messiah, the Jews were rejected by God, and only preserved as an object-lesson to Christians of the consequences of lack of faith, if with a promise that at the second coming they would again have the opportunity to accept Jesus. So, Jews were considered outcasts from society, their role an inferior one, their creativity at an end. Such an attitude cannot cope with the resurgence of the Jewish people upon the stage of history – it simply ought not to have happened – unless you can believe, like some of the crazier fundamentalists, that it all belongs to the imminent Second Coming to be ushered in by worldwide nuclear warfare. Yet it is a solid fact of history that in the wake of the Emancipation Jews, emerging from the nightmare of centuries of persecution, very quickly took a leading role in most spheres of human endeavour in the more enlightened countries of the western world. Individual assimilated Jews could perhaps be accepted in this new, creative role,³⁵ but a vigorous, positively Jewish identity was much harder to accept before the development of a Christianity which is not so timid that it feels threatened and jealous when God talks to somebody else, nor so conceited that, to allude to Paul's striking image, the branch vaunts itself over the olive tree upon which it is grafted (see Romans 11).

Another problem in the Christian appreciation of Israel is the tendency to have different expectations of Israel than of other nations, and so to judge Israel by standards different from those applied to others. The Scriptures themselves set the tone for this. Did not Amos say (Amos 3:2): 'For you alone have I cared among all the nations of the world; therefore will I punish you for all your iniquities'? Well may the Hebrew prophet, speaking in the name of God, chastise his own people for their failure to respond adequately to God's love for them; well may the rabbi in the pulpit utilize the teaching of chosenness to cajole his flock to a greater sense of responsibility. However, for outsiders to carp self-righteously about the special behaviour to be expected of Israel is what we call in Hebrew *chutzpa* (impertinence). Israelis do not have to prove that they are better than everybody else in order to justify their national existence. What is called for is a 'normalization'

of Christian expectations of Israel and its people, and to achieve this it is not for Christians to assume the role of the Hebrew prophet, who spoke not as an outsider but in total identification with his own people.

Interfaith dialogue indispensable to world survival

In the 80's it was commonly said that ours was the first generation that knew it might also be the last. Rarely did anyone trouble to observe that it was also the first generation to possess the knowledge and skills to guarantee food and a fair standard of living for all. Ours is the first generation that knows how to control its population without war, want or famine. Ours is the first generation to effect cures of many of our worst diseases and to entertain realistic hopes for the global elimination of ill-health. Ours is the generation that stands on the threshold of space, with the foreseeable mission of populating the galaxy. Our United Nations Organisation is admittedly imperfect; but never before has a representative organisation of all the world's peoples and governments been an administrative possibility, never before have people of all the world's religions and of most of its peoples³⁶ actually sat together on equal terms deliberating the world's future – it is, after all, the first century in which most of us have even known of each other's existence and have had the technology to communicate with one another. We should be able to make at least a feeble beginning in the great art of peaceful living, in preparing for a 'kingdom of God on earth'.

Such things are within our grasp, but only if we cast aside doctrinal strife, whether religious or political, and see clearly our common mission. Adam was set in the Garden of Eden 'to till it and to look after it' (Genesis 2:15). As Jews and Christians we find in these words the mission God has entrusted to us – to look after the planet in which he has set us, to make room for his kingdom on earth. This mission can be expressed within the languages of other religions or, at least in part, non-theologically.

Numerous theologians and philosophers of religion – Karl Rahner, Raimundo Pannikar, Wilfrid Cantwell Smith, John Hick, Hans Küng and others – have pioneered theologies of pluralism which provide the intellectual framework within which a constructive relationship with people of other faiths can develop. The Christian-Jewish relationship, whilst having an important bilateral agenda of its own, has its place within this broad context. The dangers of human power and conflict are such that unless we follow the path of global responsibility we shall lose what tenuous grasp we have on the 'kingdom' and plunge ourselves and the world with us into a new barbarism.

Some people, I gather, are afraid of nuclear bombs. Not I. I do not fear bombs, for they do not explode of their own accord. I fear only people, because it is they who set the bombs off. I fear those who put doctrine, religious or political, before the needs of people, who talk of love and concern but who see others only as potential converts to their own cluster of words and symbols. These are the people whose misguided zeal turned the Middle Ages into a byword for fanaticism and oppression. Even now they are ready to head us back along the same path to an age made darker still by the gifts of modern science and technology.

The dialogue of Jews and Christians turns out to be a dialogue of three, for the third partner is the modern world view rooted in humanism, the enlightenment, and the post-enlightenment critique. Without the third partner, it would not be possible for the two to communicate. And of course the dialogue of the three is open to the dialogue of the world's other great religious and humanistic traditions, indeed incomplete without them.

Peace itself, and the future of mankind, hang upon the success of the dialogue enterprise.

Notes

[1](#) I have discussed the Jewish sources in the final chapter of my book, *Judaism and World Religion* (London and New York 1991).

[2](#) Nicholas of Cusa *De Pace Fidei*, Vol. VII of his *Opera Omnia*, Raymond Klibansky and H. Bascour (eds.) (Hamburg 1959).

[3](#) Henry Kamen, *The Rise of Toleration*, 132-133.

[4](#) John Locke, *Epistola De Tolerantia*, Raymond Klibansky (ed.), trs. J. W. Gough (Oxford 1968). In section 2 and 3 (132-135) Locke enumerates those groups who should not be tolerated by the magistrates. In principle Locke would extend toleration to Jews and Muslims, though the latter would be excluded on political grounds if they 'owed allegiance to the Turk' – see p. 155.

[5](#) P. Bayle, *Nouvelles Lettres* ii 786 (Letter XXII, 13). See also Klibansky's remarks in Locke, *op. cit.*, x-xiii.

[6](#) It should be evident that I am using the term 'enlightenment' here very broadly; it should certainly be understood to encompass 'post-enlightenment' critiques. Unfortunately, too many philosophers seem to interpret 'post-enlightenment' as 'back to the way things were before the enlightenment'.

[7](#) Much of the documentation has been published in JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS. A. Brockway et al (eds.), *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People* (Geneva 1988). Is a good introduction to the documents of the non-Roman Churches. For the Catholic documentation, together with a selection of dialogue papers, see 'Fifteen Years of Catholic-Jewish Dialogue: 1970-1985', published in 1988 for the international Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee by the Libreria Editrice Vaticana and the Libreria Editrice Lateranense. Geoffrey Wigoder's *book Jewish-Christian Relations since the Second World War* (Manchester 1988) gives an excellent overview, and includes the most important documentation, both Catholic and Protestant.

[8](#) Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (n. 4), Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (January 1975).

[9](#) Joseph Soloveitchik, 'Confrontation', in *Tradition*, vol. 6, no. 2, spring/summer, 1964, 528. The policy statement of the Rabbinical Council of America is reproduced on pp. 28-29 of that volume.

[10](#) The Conference and the Resolution are reported in CHRISTIAN JEWISH RELATIONS, vol. 20, no. 2 (London 1988), 28-29.

[11](#) David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York and Oxford 1989), 1-9, has documented and analysed this opposition, and submitted Soloveitchik's view to sharp criticism. I analyse the subject more fully in Norman Solomon, 'The Soloveitchik Line', in *Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Edwin Mellen Press; New York, 1992).

[12](#) Tertullian, *De Carne Christi*, 5.

[13](#) The first three of Paul van Buren's projected four volumes on *The Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality: Discerning the Way* (San Francisco 1980), *A Christian Theology of the People Israel* (San Francisco 1983), and *Christ in Context* (San Francisco 1988), were ably reviewed by Stephen T. Haynes in CHRISTIAN JEWISH RELATIONS, vol. 23, no. 1, 1990,46-55.

[14](#) *Quae peior mors animae quam libertas erroris?* Augustine's letter to Count Boniface written in the year 417 (*Epistola*, 185) reveals the process by which a deeply compassionate man can allow himself to be led by doctrinal logic to ally himself with the totalitarian exercise of power. After all, as he so plausibly puts it, when 'the emperors enact good laws on behalf of the truth against falsehood then those who rage against them are put in fear and those who understand are reformed'. *Tempora christiana* are unlike *the tempora apostolica* when the Christian could not identify with the secular government.

[15](#) *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* Augustine DE BAPT., iv, c.xvii.24. See Hans Hermann Henrix, 'Judaism-Outside the Church, So No Salvation?' in CHRISTIAN JEWISH RELATIONS, vol 17, no. 3, 1984, 3-12, for an ingenious attempt to squeeze Israel, when faithful to Torah, into being 'saved' through Christ notwithstanding their "'no" to Jesus Christ'. This is very compassionate of Professor Henrix, though I do not see how he can extend his compassion to the vast majority of the world's inhabitants, who after all are neither Jews nor Christians. The arrogant exclusivism of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is not adequately countered by special pleading on behalf of a handful of religious Jews.

[16](#) 'Habere non potest Deum patrem qui ecclesiam non habet matrem'. De Cath. Eccl. Unitate, vi.

[17](#) This view is attributed to the early second century rabbi Joshua ben Hananya (Tosefta Sanhedrin 13:2). Though disputed by his contemporary Eliezer it quickly became the dominant Jewish view.

[18](#) See this document in Brockway, 5-9.

[19](#) See, for instance, Matthew 23:15, though it is doubtful whether this tendentious insertion in the Gospel corresponds to reality.

[20](#) I have discussed these issues in detail in the final chapter of my book, *Judaism and World Religion*.

[21](#) This document is included in Brockway, 47-48.

[22](#) Lambeth Conference document The Truth Shall Make You Free (London, 1988).

[23](#) Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, trs. Hartwig Herschfeld (1905), H. Sloninisky (ed.) (New York 1964), 'The

nations ... introduce and pave the way for the expected Messiah. . . 227. See also pp. 24-25 of Slonimsky's Introduction, Moses Maimonides Mishneh Torah, Melakhim chapter 11 (see uncensored edition).

[24](#) The text is published as Appendix 6 of 'The Truth Shall Make You Free', the official report of the Lambeth Conference (London 1988); 'common mission' occurs in section 27,305.

[25](#) Moses Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 1, 60, trs. S. Pines (Chicago 1963), 145.

[26](#) Letter to John Carondelet, Archbishop of Palermo, dated 5 January 1522/3. 'Opus Epistolarum Erasmi Roterdami', P. S. Allen (ed.), vol. 5, Epistola 1334, 177. The text reads: '*Summa nostrae religionis pax est et unanimitas. Ea vix constare poterit, nisi de quam potest paucissimus definiamus, et in multis liberum relinquamus suum cuique iudicium . . .*' One of his arguments in that context is the inherent obscurity of much dogma.

[27](#) In chapter 8 of *Judaism and World Religion* I have given a brief account of what language is and how religious people use it.

[28](#) A. Hitler, *Mein Kampf* end of chapter 2.

[29](#) English Christians, I am ashamed to say. Although Josephus, in *Contra Apionem*, rebuts a similar accusation, the first recorded use of this base fabrication by Christians was at Norwich in 1144.

[30](#) Refer to documentation in Volume 24, Winter 1991, of CHRISTIAN JEWISH RELATIONS, pp. 78-80.

[31](#) I have discussed several of these issues in chapter 5 of *Judaism and World Religion*.

[32](#) See Michael J. Pragai, *Faith and Fulfilment: Christians and the Return to the Promised Land* (London 1985) and Moshe Davis, *With Its Eyes towards Zion*, 2 vols. (New York/ London 1977-86).

[33](#) 'Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church' (24 June 1985), issued by the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.

[34](#) I do not deny that more sophisticated Christian theologies of the land are possible; my colleague Allan Brockway has developed these well. But I believe that the Vatican was wise to sidestep the question and relate to Israel through the normal political models; it has only been unwise in failing, presumably out of fear of consequences for Catholics in Arab lands and out of concern for its missionaries, to take the logical step of establishing full diplomatic relations.

[35](#) Cf. Clermont-Tonnerre's famous remark in the French Assembly on 21 December 1789: 'Everything must be refused to the Jews as a nation; everything must be granted to them as individuals' (Raphael Mahler's translation, in *A History of Modern Jewry* (London 1971),32).

[36](#) Strange – in 1984 I wrote 'people of all races'. But not all races or ethnic groups have political self-determination, nor is it clear that all should.

This article was first published in JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS, Vol 24, No 1 & 2, Winter 1991.

© Copyright 1991 Rabbi Dr. Norman Solomon