



The Future of the Relationship: Hopes and Expectations

01/03/2016 | Philip Cunningham and Adam Gregerman

Summary report of a dialogical plenary at ICCJ's annual conference in July 2015 in Rome/Italy.

This “dialogical plenary” used the following format: Presenters Philip Cunningham and Adam Gregerman began by having an informal conversation between them that followed the overall structure of the ICCJ Conference: “The 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate: The Past, Present, and Future of the Christian-Jewish Relationship.” First, they engaged in a retrospective discussion about the past fifty years in Christian-Jewish relations. Then they considered present tensions in the relationship. Finally, they opened the conversation to everyone by means of two quotations dealing with how Jews and Christians understand their interrelationship. This summary presents the opening and concluding comments of the two presenters.

1. Retrospective on the Past: What Are Some of the Significant Developments in the Past 50 Years?

Philip Cunningham:

I would mention four developments that strike me as being especially important: First is the recognition by many Christian churches and communities that Jewish covenantal life is ongoing and vital. The Church’s covenanting with God through Christ did not abrogate or replace the covenantal relationship with God experienced by the Jewish people. This realization has enormous theological consequences that we are only beginning to appreciate.

Second, and this is particularly explicit in the Catholic community as expressed in documents of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, that the meaning of the scriptural writings is constructed out of the interaction between readers and texts. This relates to the awareness that the respective Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Tanakh and the Old Testament are both retrospective rereadings through their respective and characteristic rabbinic and christological lenses. Therefore, Jews and Christians can learn from each other’s traditions of interpretation.

A third development that I see in recent decades is a growing recognition that much of how Jews and Christians understand ourselves in relation to the other is based upon oppositional and/or zero-sum premises that took hold when our two communities were estranged and hostile to one another. We are realizing that we operate with certain received habits in how we react to each other’s ideas that need not prevail in our new climate of mutual respect.

Finally, we Christians and Jews are perhaps groping our way toward accepting the possibility that God may reveal Godself in distinctive ways to each community. While God could not reveal contradictory things since God is One, nonetheless the specific mediations of divine revelation do

not need to be shared by both Jews and Christians. I won't speak for Jews, but Christians are perhaps beginning to see that God reveals Godself to Jews in ways that Christians don't generally experience. Hence, we have even more reason to dialogue.

Adam Gregerman:

To me in the past fifty years there has been a remarkable shift on what had been the most divisive assertions in the past. To put it another way: claims that were so problematic decades ago are no longer issues. One example is the so-called "deicide" charge. Although in the drafting of *Nostra Aetate* there were arguments about the precise wording, and in fact the word "deicide" does not appear in the final document, the declaration rejected and prohibited the repetition of the claim that Jews were cursed by God because of the crucifixion of Jesus. Today, only extreme fringe elements still cling to the deicide charge. Otherwise, it is seen almost universally, especially in the West, as absurd! Students typically have never heard of it and need to have it explained.

A second example of the waning of previously contentious matters can be seen in the debate during the drafting of *Nostra Aetate* as to whether it should endorse the conversion of Jews to Christianity. The final document intentionally had no call or even hope that Jews would become Christians. Over the next few decades Mainstream Protestant and Catholic churches ended targeted missions to Jews. This has made true interreligious dialogue possible.

These two issues that were so divisive have largely faded from view, though there are exceptions among some Christians. There are still topics that are painful and raw, but perhaps not nearly as hateful or destructive.

Another important development in the past fifty years is the new insights that have arisen about our religious traditions. To again give two examples, there has been a major shift into how Paul of Tarsus is understood. He had long been viewed as indicting Judaism as such and forsaking his Jewish past. More recently, Paul is seen as a resource for a positive view of Jews and Judaism. For instance, Jewish scholar Pamela Eisenbaum has written, "the apostle's teachings deconstruct the centuries-long bias against the validity of Judaism and Torah observance."

Another shift can be seen in the reclamation of formerly marginal Jewish views of Christians. Although over the centuries many Jews have denounced Christianity because its religious claims were seen as idolatry or *avodah zarah*, other opinions are increasingly cited by Jewish thinkers today. Thus, the bold views of the fourteenth century French Rabbi Menachem Ha-Meiri have received extensive attention by such people as David Novak and Moshe Halbertal. Meiri saw positive value in Christianity because of its insistence on lawful behavior and concluded that Christianity was not idolatry. He and other sages are providing resources for new Jewish thinking about Christianity today.

This connects with the third development I will mention. We are learning new ways of thinking about and studying other traditions. We now realize we should not compare the "best" in our own religion with the "worst" in another. This sounds obvious, but it reflects two major reorientations. For scholarship, it means that we must become fair readers of another religion's texts. We cannot "cherry pick" from the other's ideas so that they will look bad when compared with the ideas we celebrate in our own tradition. For learning and dialogue, it means that our interactions are not a contest or competition with a winner and a loser. It is an opportunity to learn from the other and perhaps also learn something about oneself and one's own tradition.

2. An Assessment of the Present: What Are Some of the Current Tensions?

Philip Cunningham:

In thinking about current tensions or challenges, three topics come to mind. Foremost is the different significance that the Land of Israel, Eretz Yisrael, has for Christians in comparison with Jews. Christians have in our tradition no analog to the spiritual or covenantal centrality of the Land of Israel for Jews and, in fact, are heirs to a legacy of denying such a value. Therefore, we not only find it hard to resonate with Jewish attachment to the Land, we also are conflicted as to how to relate the existence of the modern nation-state of Israel with the Land's spiritual significance for Jews. Jews are challenged by this latter question also, by the way. But because of this, Christians can easily fall back into old anti-Jewish habits without realizing it, such as applying our theological tendency to prefer the universal over the particular to current geopolitical disputes.

A second ongoing tension is the relationship of the Shoah to the longer history of Christian contempt for Jews and Judaism. This is challenging not only because we are, of course, talking about genocide, but also because there is a widespread ignorance of history in general, especially among students. Even among those Christians who become aware of the history of what Jules Isaac called the "teaching of contempt," I suspect that a realization or partial realization of the problem of Christian complicity triggers certain avoidance mechanisms, consciously or unconsciously. Perhaps this can be seen in too great a distinction being drawn between anti-Judaism and antisemitism; trying to parse different types of antisemitisms as political, economic, religious, or racial, etc.; and over-stressing the "pagan roots" of Nazism so as to downplay how easily long-standing Christian theological tropes slid into racism. There will also be the recurrent question of how to reckon with the legacy of antisemitic words and/or actions by historical figures who were immersed in antisemitic societies. Are they to be judged more as "persons of their times" or in the light of how their legacies might impact antisemitism today? These are not easily answered questions.

Lastly, as a Catholic theologian, I want to acknowledge the continuing challenge that is found in the admonition of the 1974 Vatican Guidelines to implement *Nostra Aetate* that Christians should strive to learn "how Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience." This is an absolutely crucial principle that is easy to say but difficult to internalize. Christians have generally been so used to assessing Judaism in terms of Christian criteria, maybe because we think that by reading the Old Testament we understand Judaism today, that we need to develop new habits of how we do theology. I think Jews and Christians need to collaborate more even when theologizing within the context of their own communities.

Adam Gregerman:

Unsurprisingly, there is some overlap in our thinking. Clearly, one of the present tensions is the theological challenge of the Land and the State of Israel to Christians. On the one hand, Catholics and Protestants (with some exceptions) have affirmed the validity of the biblical covenants in general. This is a welcome break with supersessionism and with hostility to Judaism after the time of Jesus. On the other hand, there is a lack of clarity or specificity about what features of the covenant Christians are affirming. In particular, do they affirm covenantal land promises, and if so how do these relate to the Land and State of Israel? Few Christian church statements that I have read wrestle with this question. Most prefer to focus on covenantal texts concerning a blessing to

the nations, but the covenant contains other features as well that need to be considered.

For example, the 1985 Vatican Notes on Preaching and Teaching about Jews and Judaism states that Catholics should recognize that the Jewish connection to the land of Israel is a “religious attachment which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship.” But if the Jewish religious attachment to the Land is biblical — which it surely is – then it must have religious implications. What are they? To be fair, Jews are confused about this as well. There is no agreement among Jews about the connections between Scripture and the present State and Land of Israel. So this is a topic that challenges us both, though in different ways.

The second current question I would mention is the challenge of affirming the contemporary value of the religious other. Jews have historically seen Christianity as a mutation or illegitimate break with biblical Israel. Christians have largely seen Judaism as passé or irrelevant after Jesus. How do we view the other positively and not as a mistake or a relic? Our painful history together makes this hard to do. We might begin by adopting the model that sees the two new religious communities of Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism born out of biblical Israel. This approach is both historically sound and also far more positive of the other tradition. It explains commonalities while preserving differences.

3. The Future: Where Is the Jewish-Christian Dialogue Heading?

Philip Cunningham:

As time passes and the level of comfort and trust deepens, Jews and Christians are asking each other questions and discussing theological topics that it was impossible to speak about for most of our history. As Adam noted earlier, the repudiation by most Christian communities of the decide charge and campaigns to convert Jews, has enabled open and enriching religious conversation between us.

What are some topics that we can now discuss? To repeat something mentioned before, the interconnected subjects of a theology of the covenantal significance of the Land of Israel for Jews (from both Jewish and Christian viewpoints) and how that significance relates to the existence of the modern nation-state of Israel are priority items. They are subjects that require conversation among Jews and among Christians, and I strongly suspect that interreligious theological discussions are needed in order to make significant progress internally within each community. Time will tell.

There is also the contentious, unresolved, and fascinating question of whether and how we can pray together. For religious people, prayer expresses and builds community (among other things). Have some Jews and Christians developed sufficient “community” between them to enable them to join their hearts in addressing the Holy One together? Of course, Christians and Jews have different modes of prayer that would need to be accommodated and common prayer could not be couched in terms that are part of the heritage of only one tradition, but the fact that our two communities are unique in sharing a biblical heritage suggests that reflecting upon the psalms together, for example, could lead to shared prayerful experiences.

Can we as Jews and Christians come to enjoy each other's distinctive ways of thinking about God? As a Christian, I do not experience what it is to live a Torah-centered life (regardless of the strand of Judaism), but I feel I grow spiritually by interacting with Jews. Some Jewish friends have said similar things. At a theological level, I think this relational experience gets at this question: are we able to affirm the possibility of revelatory encounters with God in the other community even if we ourselves do not experience them and even if we find them unfathomable within our own frames of reference?

Finally, I'll mention the subject of reciprocity. Years ago Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik cautioned against theological interreligious dialogue because he feared it would encourage a superficial "exchange of theological favors" that would fritter away the distinctive identity of especially the "community of the few," Jews. However, it seems to me that, while certainly understandable, this attitude presupposes that the respective Jewish and Christian identities have not been interacting for centuries. In fact, it is becoming more and more evident that there is no unalloyed "Judaism" or "Christianity" that has not been influenced by the other. Still, merely exchanging religious compliments would be shallow. Pope Francis has recently spoken of the "complementarity" that exists between Christians and Jews, and this would be an intriguing idea to explore together.

Adam Gregerman:

In the future, I would like to see Jews move beyond the tendency to being only spectators when it comes to developing relations with Christians. Jews have generally been content to watch Christians change their teachings on Jews, but not enough Jews have been committed to widely disseminating these changes in the Jewish community. Few Jews have engaged seriously in the study of Christian texts. I would like more Jews to be religiously affected by the positive experience of engagement with a religious other. I know there are obvious reasons for this reluctance, but our shared scripture and deepening friendships make it possible for Jews to glean new insights from Christians. For instance, Jews can learn from the moral challenges of New Testament teachings, from rigorous Christian ethics, and from the impressive Christian commitment to others in Christianity at its best. There is also the value the Christian tradition places on inclusivity that stems from its strong sense of spiritual community, whereas Jews often self-define in more ethnic or national terms. These are features of Christianity from which Jews can benefit.

I would also like to see the dialogue move beyond the Holocaust as a subject of contention so that it might be a source of deeper, non-polemical reflection. I do not minimize the significance of the Shoah, but when it is only an occasion for controversy it can threaten the Jewish relationship with Christians when we might be engaging deeper issues together. Theologically, the Holocaust raises the challenge of suffering for religious faith, whether Jewish or Christian. It also leads us to ask ourselves how we understand the suffering of those of other religions or communities. This has practical consequences in the world today. How do we seriously respond to the suffering of others and mobilize resources to address that suffering, for example the current suffering of Christians in the Middle East? I believe that deeper reflection together on the meaning of the Holocaust can take us in new and healing directions.

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