The CODJ Association and its Theological Group for Jewish-Orthodox Christian Dialogue

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History, Developments and Objectives

1.1 Genesis of CODJ

The CODJ[1] association was offcially founded in May 2014, but was preceded by eight years of gestation. Sandrine Caneri, its instigator, had discovered since the early 1990s, in a still confused way, a correlation between the Orthodox Church and Jewish tradition. She participated in the Jewish-Christian dialogue in France, which, like the international dialogue (ICCJ),[2] is directed and dominated by Catholic thought and theology. This left no room for another theological vision of dialogue that the Orthodox voice required. After returning from two years of study in Jerusalem, the project of living a proper dialogue between the Orthodox Church and the Jews became increasingly imperative for her. Indeed, Sandrine had experienced in the Holy City, the distance between the Orthodox and the Jews who live in the same place, due to centuries-old prejudices, mistrust, sometimes even contempt and rejection, but also because of mutual ignorance and a lack of openness, on both sides. On the Catholic side, in this same city, there were nevertheless living links between the two communities. She therefore sought to better understand this phenomenon. Where does it come from? Is it universal in Orthodoxy?

A closer look at the thinking of the Fathers regarding their connection to Judaism and at Byzantine hymnography confirmed this call to confront this question. Could there be roots within the patristic tradition for this contempt, sometimes tinged with rejection and substitution? Why do we find such statements even in liturgical texts, and therefore in the prayer of the Church? Is it a prayer to humiliate or despise, with unequivocal words, a group of people, whoever they may be? These questions plagued Sandrine. They needed answers. The first step was to ask if there were at least one or more representatives of the Orthodox Church within the Jewish-Christian dialogue in France. The last priest who had been appointed to the Steering Committee (SC) of the national AJCF[3] had resigned. Sandrine was put in contact with Father Michel Evdokimov, at the time the secretary of the AEOF,[4] a person particularly sensitive to this subject.[5] Through him, she was appointed resource person for this dialogue by the AEOF from 2006.[6]

Very quickly, Sandrine sought some support and help to move forward. It was indeed necessary to ask all these questions within the Church and answer them together. Over the course of these meetings, a re(ection team was gradually formed. Two biblical sessions focusing on the exegesis of the Fathers of the Church and Jewish thought were offered to Orthodox believers in 2010 and 2011 to raise awareness more broadly among the faithful. These two sessions, which reached approximately fifty people, revealed a great interest in the Jewish tradition, which was almost unknown. A group of 25 Orthodox believers, including several priests (among them Father Vasile Mihoc from Sibiu), joined a Catholic “Discovering Judaism” session in 2014, to which Jews and rabbis were invited to introduce the participants. The specific nature of the Orthodox tradition was not taken into account, and the Orthodox participants unanimously expressed the need for a specific dialogue. The CODJ association was therefore the first, welcome step to begin this bilateral dialogue.

1.2 Activities

In the early years, the association offered both training for its members and giving some teachings in parishes, to demonstrate the indissoluble link between the two Testaments as well as between the two reading traditions. Starting in 2019, new sessions were held for four years, this time with the presence of one or more Jews, to experience with them what synagogue prayer and the interpretation of their Scriptures are. These sessions were real discoveries for all participants. In 2021, Bishop Dimitrios, elected Metropolitan of France, assured Sandrine of his confidence and support. With his blessing, a group of Orthodox theologians was formed in 2023 to work on theological questions concerning this dialogue between the two traditions. This group of nine French-speaking theologians brings together not only French (Olga Lossky-Laham,[7] Sandrine Caneri, Jean Rehbinder), but also two Americans (Geoffrey Ready[8] and Bogdan G. Bucur[9]), one Romanian (Alexandru Ioni&a[10]), two Greeks (Gary Vachigouras,[11] Christos Filiotis), and one Russian (Rodion Knyazev). It invites a rabbi to re(ect in depth on the real differences between the two religions, with respect for individuals, as well as on the theological questions that the Jewish tradition poses to the conscience of Orthodox Christians. This group is a very important support for CODJ.

CODJ continues to offer training and events each year to better understand Judaism and, above all, its deep ties with the Orthodox tradition. In 2024, on the association's tenth anniversary, a group of Orthodox Christians went to the synagogue on a Saturday to participate in the religious service and hear commentaries on the texts, then to the ritual Shabbat meal, led by Rabbi Rivon Krygier. Among them was Metropolitan Dimitrios, who renewed his o"cial support for the association, urging the Orthodox to take an open stance towards Jews and to be actively involved in this dialogue, which is only just beginning.

Members of the association and the theological Group have published articles in various journals and collective works. They regularly give lectures that can be found on the website codj.fr The site offers extensive documentation to understand how Orthodoxy has evolved in its thinking regarding Judaism.

1.3 Goals

CODJ's objectives are rather pastoral. It is primarily about raising awareness among the Orthodox faithful about a more refined reading of the Gospels, liturgical hymnography, and the Church's tradition more generally, as well as about better understanding the tensions between the first Judeo-Christians and the Jews of the Temple. Can we discover that these are not necessarily negative tensions, but rather that they are part of the context of the first Christian communities struggling to establish their own identity? In particular, the controversies between Jesus and the Pharisees, however violent they may seem, are not out of contempt on Jesus' part, but rather provoked by impatience for the salvation of all, by eschatological urgency.

2.1 The Theological Group: An Approach to Judaism in Orthodoxy

The group's goal is to carefully examine the Orthodox Tradition to discern the place of Judaism within it, which implies a correct definition of both Orthodox Tradition and Judaism. The primary element that invites us to study this question is the persistence of anti-Judaic motifs in liturgical texts, which taint hymnography. Beyond the stumbling block that these texts constitute for contemporary dialogue with Jews, they pose more profoundly the question of the relationship of the Orthodox faith to Judaism, as well as the relationship between Orthodox liturgical expression (notably hymns) and Orthodox theology.

This group also aims, based on these re(ections, to begin a fruitful theological dialogue with Jewish

theologians. The basic intuition is as follows: the prevalence of a clearly contextualizable anti-Jewish discourse in the Church – with a view to distinguishing Church and Synagogue – has led on the one hand to accentuating the distancing, already naturally initiated, of Christian Tradition from Jewish sources, and on the other hand to introducing theological interpretations which have taken root even though it is legitimate to question their orthodoxy.

On this basis, the theological group has defined several areas of research that it wishes to explore further:

Negative axes:	**Positive axes:**
The perception of Orthodox Christians as the new people of God, now called “True Israel,” having replaced the ancient Israel. What evidence does tradition have for this?	The Jewish basis of Christian holidays expressed in the Orthodox liturgical tradition (through hymnography, rites, etc.).
Anti-Jewish rhetoric in the Fathers and in hymnography, particularly Holy Week and the Octoechos: how can we disentangle gratuitous imprecations from theological purpose?	The relationship to blessing, anamnesis and epiclesis in Orthodox prayers and their proximity to Jewish prayers.
The status of holiness and grace in the Old Testament according to the orthodox view: is there really a difference in the “degree” of holiness, linked to the more or less marked indwelling of the Holy Spirit?	The Church Fathers’ permeability to Jewish methods of scriptural interpretation, and more broadly to the pool of Jewish thought that predates and contemporaneously with them. !is re(ects the need for a clear overview of the complex relationship between Jews and Christians in the early centuries and their gradual distancing.
What might the Jewish view of Jesus be? Can we understand why they did not see Jesus as the Messiah? Would the messianic prophecies be so easy to decipher in the life of Jesus? He does not #t into any messianic scenario of his time. !is brings us back to the question of interpreting the Scriptures, whether in a messianic sense or not.	The similarity of logic between the Church and the synagogue on the notion of holiness (among the Jews: veneration of the tomb of a tzadik, same perception among Jews and Orthodox of the presence of grace in matter, similarity of the structure of communities around a charismatic personality of the spiritual father type, etc.).
The question of the formation of the State of Israel, a state lacking a critical perspective on itself on the part of some of its members: is there a Judaism for which the State of Israel has no theological dimension but only a socio-political one? The perception of Arab Orthodox is different. It is therefore necessary to question both Jews and (Arab) Orthodox Christians on this question.	
Approaching the Holocaust: What can the Orthodox say about this issue?	

2.2 The work accomplished so far

The Anti-Judaism of the Gospels

We have made an initial discussion on the potential anti-Judaism in the Synoptics and in the Gospel of John, notably based on the collective book Is the New Testament Anti-Jewish? Which questions the separation between the context of writing and the context of reception of the biblical books in order to clearly distinguish the anti-Judaism expressed in the text itself from that which

arises from its interpretation at various times. It would seem, after analysis, that the anti-Judaism of the Synoptics is a misreading, which must be understood within the Jewish tradition in which they were born. John is the re(ection of a context of con(ict within Judeo-Christianity, which is expressed in the Gospel and will then be aggravated by patristic interpretations.

We continued this discussion at another meeting with the analysis of passages specifically deemed anti-Jewish (Jn. 8, Rev. 2:9 and 3:9, Gal. 6:15–16 and 1 Thess. 2). We relied on patristic commentaries on these passages, which revealed the diversity of approaches of the Fathers whose opinion on the question of the Jews is far from unanimous, depending on their context and their sensitivity.

Theophanies in the Jewish tradition

We then received the rabbi for the first time Rivon Krygier to discuss the question of theophanies in the texts of Jewish tradition. He analyzed some examples of anthropomorphisms in the Bible to note that God remains invisible most of the time to ordinary mortals, not because this is so in essence, but because the divine radiance cannot be contemplated without a filter, because visual contact with God must remain privileged, reserved for those who deserve to enter the sphere of his intimacy. Far from being a pure abstraction, God is incarnated in multiple ways: he invests certain altars, steles... which bear the name of God. God is even incarnated in human form, as in the Lord who is among the three visitors of Abraham, who were later likened to three angels.

It is often in humanoid appearance that God allows himself to be glimpsed. But before crying sacrilege, before detecting an infantile sublimation of the Father figure, it is important to realize that the proximity between the divine and the human has been assumed since the origins of the Bible. With the Torah, God speaks a human language. God Himself, in the language of the Torah, manifests himself in anthropomorphic form. If this is the ancient conception, then why did Jewish tradition oppose any iconic representation of the divine? What seems to have been targeted is the claim to want to contain, retain the divinity, domesticate it by assigning it to residence. If the divinity remains elusive, it conditions worship, it requires discipline from the worshipper. God cannot be manipulated at will by a magical cult, unlike the idol which enters the instrumental logic of polytheism.

The Messiah in Jewish tradition

Rabbi Rivon Krygier then returned to discuss the question of the Messiah according to Jewish tradition. He emphasized that in Judaism, there is no single, unanimous doctrine about the Messiah, but rather a plurality of conceptions that have evolved over time. Unlike Christianity, where the figure of Christ is central, Judaism operates independently of this question. It is a speculative subject, which has given rise to various interpretations and traditions without, however, being imposed as a fundamental element of the Jewish faith. There are two main trends in the Jewish thought:

a. The earthly Messiah, a human being descended from the line of David, whose mission is to restore the kingship, rebuild the Temple, and reunite the exiles of Israel.

b. The heavenly Messiah, a quasi-divine figure who finds parallels in other traditions.

Rabbi Rivon Krygier explains that ancient Jewish texts bear witness to an internal debate about the nature of the Messiah because certain passages, notably in the Book of Daniel, speak of a “Son of Man” who appears to be of a celestial nature. In the Kabbalistic and mystical tradition, some texts go so far as to suggest a pre-existing Messiah before the creation of the world. And in the Talmud

mentions a name of the Messiah existing before the world. However, he insists that these concepts do not necessarily mean that the Messiah is a divine figure or that he shares God's nature. But the possibly "angelic" nature gives him a more-than-human status. Rabbi Rivon Krygier devotes part of his talk to analyzing the Gospel of John, which offers a vision of a Messiah of heavenly origin, embodying the divine Word. He notes that this gospel is often perceived as anti-Jewish, although it also states that "salvation comes from the Jews." He emphasizes that these debates already existed in the Second Temple era, long before the separation of Judaism and Christianity.

A central point of the conference is the question of the relationship between the divine and the human in Judaism. Several passages in the Bible show a certain porosity between the divine and the human, but in Jewish thought this never leads to the idea of a divine incarnation as complete humanization.

It exists, according to Rivon Krygier a fundamental difference between the Jewish and Christian vision of the Messiah. On the one hand, in Christianity, the Messiah immediately brings redemption. This does not mean that there is nothing more to be done. But the world has entered a new, redeemed era. One the other hand, in Judaism, the Messiah is part of a historical process: Man must first complete certain steps before the Messiah can accomplish his work and the divine forgiveness cannot be granted definitively until humanity has reached a su"cient level of spiritual maturity.

A Midrash (of a "fantastic" and figurative nature) relates that the prophet Elijah does not wake the Patriarchs together (from their post-mortem sleep) so that they do not unite their prayer and prematurely hasten the coming of the Messiah, because humanity is not ready. The Messiah comes "today" ... "if you listen to My voice" ... In this vision, the Messiah is not an end in himself, but a stage in the history of the people of Israel. He is expected now, but his coming is future.

Rabbi Rivon Krygier concludes his talk by explaining that the main divergence between Judaism and Christianity lies not in the idea that the Messiah could have a divine nature (which is accepted in some Jewish mystical traditions and even in the general idea that the human being is animated, in part, by the divine breath/spirit, to varying degrees), but rather in the fact that God himself becomes Messiah and fully assumes the human condition. For him, this poses several problems: first, a suffering God is conceivable in Jewish theology. Compassionate, but not to the point of suffering in place of men. Second, the salvation must involve the active participation of humanity. A divine Messiah who saves humanity without humanity playing an active role would disrupt the process of spiritual maturation. Third, the idea that God can suffer like a man is incompatible with human experience: human suffering implies finitude.

The dogma of Chalcedon: "totally God, totally man" does not make sense to a Jew. The Christian (under the authority of the councils) himself admits that it is a "mystery" that only faith (in Christ) can take on. Finally, he proposes a Jewish reading where the divine and the human interact, sometimes unite, but fundamentally remain distinct.

Rabbi Krygier acknowledges the importance of dialogue between Jews and Christians on these issues but emphasizes that theological differences remain profound. He shows respect for the Christian position while a"rming that, from the Jewish perspective, redemption cannot be an imposed divine act, but a historical process in which humanity must fully participate. He apologizes if he offended the beliefs of his listeners. This speech highlights the roots of the messianic divergence and opens the way to a broader re(ection on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

The group meetings were also an opportunity to re(ect together on the French adaptation of liturgical hymns with problematic anti-Jewish content, based on an already old file established by Sandrine Caneri (with Éliane Poirot) which lists all these texts. The meetings are also an

opportunity to exchange news on the areas of work of the other groups (CODJ, OCDJ, Cambridge group).

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