Is there a Special Relationship between Christianity and Judaism?

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During the next couple of months JCR presents a series of articles that features a dozen Christian and Jewish theologians reflecting on the state of Jewish-Christian relations today and whether there exists a "special relationship" between the two religious traditions. The articles were first published in CURRENT DIALOGUE No. 58, 2016, edited by the World Council of Churches and are republished with kind permission.JCR

To consider Jewish-Christian relations to be in "special" relationship is either a descriptive move, describing some fact of history or the present, or one of conviction and faith, describing a certain worldview. While the factual data may be commonly recognized by Jews and Christians, the decision to proclaim the relationship special in some way is a choice, and never grows strictly from the data that it marshals as evidence for it. The choice is normally motivated by theological considerations, certainly so for Christians. It can also be motivated by other historical and ideological concerns, as is more often the case among Jews. Therefore, in thinking of a special relationship we must consider the double question of who is making the affirmation and upon what grounds it is being affirmed, or rejected.

To put the matter at its most extreme: Jews have never considered there to be a special relationship with Christianity, while Christians have in some way or another affirmed it, even if such an affirmation found expression in the denial of the continuing relevance of Judaism. The claims of a special relationship therefore reflect how the person making the claim is situated, in terms of their faith community, moment in history and broader worldview.

Let us examine the issue from the perspective of Christians and Jews respectively. The recent publication of *The Gifts and the Promises Are Irrevocable,* by the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews provides us with a clear formulation of a Christian view. Section 2 of *The Gifts* explores the theological status of the Jewish-Catholic dialogue and in so doing goes to the heart of some of the theological issues. The core argument is that dialogue with Judaism is different from dialogue with other religions, because of the church's continuity with Israel. Jews are "elder brothers" or "fathers in faith"; Jesus was a Jew and the entire faith of early Christianity must be understood as taking place within the broader Jewish matrix. Judaism's scriptures, the Old Testament, is part of the Christian Bible, and all this places Judaism in a unique theological relationship with Christianity, unlike any religion.

The description of a special relationship based on these premises should not be taken as an inevitable fact, based on the evidence alone, but as a choice. Christianity springing out of Judaism is not the only case in world religious history where one religion grows out of another. Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism, in their respective ways, all grow out of Hinduism. When one religion grows out of another, this means that, in some way, the growing religion maintains its grammar, its constitutive conceptual framework. Thus, while offering other solutions and sourcing from other foci, saints, scriptures and more, each of these traditions shares the basic grammar of the value of action (*karma*), reincarnation, the quest for spiritual redemption and more. Yet, despite such sharing, the "offshoot" religions as such do not consider themselves to be part of Hinduism or to necessarily have a special theological relationship with it. Especially if they have in some way

rebelled or taken another course, or crossed some fundamental divide (caste system, scriptures, ritual etc.), they are happy to understand themselves as distinct religious entities that do not maintain some special theological or mystical relationship with the founding religion.

There is, however, one factor that makes the Jewish-Christian situation unique in relation to other possible parallels. The continuation of Judaism's scriptures into the Christian Bible creates a kind of continuity, or even potential identity, between the faiths unlike any other two faiths in the world. But such incorporation requires interpretation and Christians have interpreted Jewish scriptures in relation to the church as Israel through some construct or another and typically, until recently, through a theology of supersession. Thus, while the continuity of scripture does provide a unique historical fact, this historical fact is only meaningful because of Christian self-understanding as having a unique relationship with Israel or Judaism. Only when Christians affirm the uniqueness of this relationship, in light of scriptural continuity, do we emerge with a statement of a special relationship. To be clear: for most of history, Christians have not affirmed a special relationship with Jews –- a relationship of privilege of the kind that the new Vatican document affirms, and that is at the root of the present discussion. It required a changed perception of Christianity's view of Judaism to make the fact of scriptural continuity the foundation for a declaration of a special relationship.

The role of choice in affirming a special relationship becomes clear when we consider how Jews respond to the same data. The understanding of a special relationship is based on a series of facts – relating to Jesus and the formation of the Christianity canon – that are in and of themselves meaningless to Judaism. For most Jews throughout history, nothing good has come to them as a consequence of the facts marshalled as proof for a special relationship. If anything, the contrary is true. Greater efforts were made to convert the Jews to Christianity because of such a "special relationship" or the circumstances related to Christianity's growth from Judaism and Judaism's presence within the Christian story and canon. It was, if anything, a negative special relationship.

Jews did not, and on the whole still do not, view Christianity as a relationship that is to be appreciated apart from their view of other religions. All precedents of a Jewish view of other religions formulated in the Middle Ages and the early modern period consider Christianity and Islam in the same breath. While Christianity has integrated Judaism's scriptures, both are considered as offshoots of Judaism, and both are seen as, in some way, continuing its message, even if in an imperfect or corrupted form. To take one of the best-known examples, Maimonides, in uncensored versions of *The Laws of Kings*, speaks of divine providence's mysterious ways in preparing the way for the ultimate recognition of truth by means of the spread of Christianity and Islam. Through them, God's name is known, preparing the way for the full knowledge of God, when the Messiah comes. It is worth noting that differences between Islam and Christianity are not germane to this view. While Maimonides considers Christianity to be idolatrous and Islam non-idolatrous, this distinction is irrelevant to an appreciation of their historical role. The point here is that Christianity and Islam are considered in the same breath, when considering their historical significance. The same is true for almost all rabbinic authorities (Franz Rosenzweig provides an interesting exception to the rule). Positive references to other religions include both Christianity and Islam.

"Special relationship" denotes a validation and recognition of positive value in another religion. Various obstacles must be overcome for Jews to be able to affirm a special relationship with Christianity. Historically, until Christians transformed their theology of Judaism, there was no room for such special status. Theologically, it is hard to conceive of a "special relationship" if Christianity is considered idolatrous by Jews. If anything, non-idolatrous Islam would be a better candidate for special relationship. Only after such obstacles are overcome can we consider the argument from scripture as a criterion one might apply in affirming a special relationship with Christianity. (The shared scriptural heritage may be appreciated and validated, nevertheless, without endowing a special relationship. Maimonides himself appeals to it by permitting the teaching of Torah to

Christians, because they share our scriptures). But the scriptural criterion is only one of several possible criteria for viewing another religion. On the whole, Jewish attitudes privileged affirmation of pure monotheistic faith over shared scripture, thereby making the case for a special relationship with reference to Christianity much harder. Christianity has therefore historically been appreciated only within the broad strokes that accommodate it alongside Islam, and not as holding a special relationship.

Once we recognize that special relationship is something that has to be constructed, rather than a given, and an obvious outcome of certain historical data, we may revisit the question and ask: What conditions or circumstances might provide the will for affirming a special relationship with Christianity? The answer will be different, of course, for Jews and Christians. Christians, as indicated by the Vatican's recent document, already have that will. With the change in attitude towards Judaism comes a novel, positive appreciation of the relationship, leading to the affirmation of a special relationship. If the affirmation of a special relationship requires will, most Jews lack it. The reasons vary. Either due to the burden of history, or on account of theological differences or simply out of inertia, disinterest or lack of knowledge of advances in Jewish-Christian relations, most Jews lack the will needed to construct an argument for a special relationship. If anything, the medieval pattern of relating to Christianity and Islam in the same breath finds new justification with increasing references to Abrahamic religions, as though that category has greater coherence than "Judaeo-Christian heritage." What "Abrahamic" does signal – beyond questions we may cast on the category itself – is the need to address three religions under one rubric, a need that readily undermines efforts to declare a special relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

And yet, there are those who are willing to make the effort and make the case for a special relationship. In a conscious effort to reciprocate the goodwill and breakthrough shown in *Nostra Aetate*, a statement on Christianity produced at the end of 2015 by a group of Orthodox rabbis ("To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Towards a Partnership between Jews and Christians"), assumes, without stating explicitly, the existence of such a special relationship. The statement speaks of partnering in a covenantal mission of healing the world and serving society. The very fact that it addresses Christianity already establishes some kind of special relationship, which is further affirmed by the use of covenantal language as a way of speaking of both communities. It is theoretically possible that a statement such as this may be expanded, tomorrow, to include Islam or other religions. But it is being issued today, at a particular point in time and under a particular set of historical and social circumstances. These suggest a special relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Affirmation of a special relationship need not be based on theological data only. While the continuity of scripture and recognition of the same God are primary candidates, there are other ways in which such a relationship may be singled out. I surmise that, to a certain extent, such criteria also played into the recent statement by Orthodox rabbis. Jews and Christians are culturally closer to each other, at least in the Western world, than to other groups. Part of the cultural closeness is the very readiness to advance in mutual recognition and in improving inter-group relations. Other aspects include a sense of global mission and social service, the capacity to be self-critical about tradition and one's own faith and the willingness to make theological advances, which itself requires a measure of openness and self-confidence. These factors are no less legitimate as data for making the case for a special relationship than theological criteria. One could argue that they do not establish a special relationship between Judaism and Christianity, but only between Christians and Jews, but that is certainly also something that is worth affirming and for which a case must be made.

The contingency of any case for special relationship raises the question not only of when the argument can be made but also when it becomes unravelled. The growing prominence of Islam in the interreligious conversation in the West is one reason for developing alternative models. Political circumstances in Israel might be another. Some Protestant groups may be seen as downplaying their relationship with Judaism as a consequence of political realities. Given that special relationship is a case to be argued for, rather than a given, this would make sense at face value. If

a case can be made, it can equally be argued against, on some ground or another. There is room to query, however, what are the criteria upon which the argument for or against a special relationship among religions should be made. Personally, I would consider the criteria to relate to a combination of a view of God, God's will, and how this will is reflected in action, pointing to notions of historical mission and purpose, service and self-understanding of the religion. Historical and phenomenological data such as scriptural or ritual continuity would also contribute to a theoretical argument. These criteria relate to the fundamental structures of the religion and its self-understanding, and transcend the particulars of a historical reality in a specific point in time. Therefore, I do not believe such time-specific considerations should play a major role in evaluating special relationship. In short, having come as far as we have in Jewish-Christian relations, it seems to me wrong to allow the case to be influenced by political considerations.

In viewing the recent arguments put forth by the Vatican and by Orthodox rabbis, it seems that fundamental criteria are upheld. Affirmation of the same God leads to common action in the world, thereby affirming, establishing and reinforcing a special relationship. Even if historically this special relationship did not exist, it is constructed by means of the argument and can be reinforced through common action, leading to further expression through education and other means of deepening its hold. The criteria seem to me valid, their application appropriate and their promise deserves the choice to refer to the relationship as a special relationship. In some way, we must remember, all relationships are special and, other than natural family relations, they all have to be constructed. With that awareness we are called not only to recognize or affirm the special relationship now emerging between Jews and Christians – possibly even between Judaism and Christianity – but to contribute to its formation, strength and to the fruits it has to bring to the world.

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