



# What Do Christian-Jewish Encounters Mean as Civilizations Clash?

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**Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger of Paris explores what it means for humankind today that Jews and Christians are drawing closer to one another.**

## What Do Christian-Jewish Encounters Mean as Civilizations Clash?

**Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger**

I have been tempted to begin with a gamble, and to ask what you think I had in mind when I announced such a title for this address. My bet is that some of you here today will have detected there some allusion to American policies toward the State of Israel and the Arab nations. And, depending on what they expect from me, they will suspect (or fear) I am going to support one side or the other.

Now tell me: I have won, right? So I should waste no time to hand the basket around and collect the stakes!

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Well, the phrase “clash of civilizations”, as Mr. Huntington coined it, has been rather widely brushed aside in Europe, much in the same way as one strives to exorcise some bewitchment. It seemed politically harmful to let public opinion picture the world as caught in some kind of a new binary antagonism. Europe has kept on waging civil wars in the past centuries, and remains wary of simplistic binary confrontations.

In order to argue rationally, I suggest that we take for granted here not a “clash of civilizations” but a total reconstruction of global civilization, with scores of conflicts and disagreements, also with heaps of convergences and exchanges as well as defensive withdrawals – in short, a stage when everything is wonderfully bubbling up.

In such a situation one immediately perceives the momentousness of good neighborly relationships between Christians and Jews, between Jewish organizations, or the religious representatives of Judaism, and Catholic officials, between the Holy See and the State of Israel.

However, do new, positive, trustful relations merely point to common interests, economic coordination, and the cooperation that is required for two partners to defend their respective identities by facing adversity together? As you must guess, this is not the way I see such a connection, either in its principle, or when examining the reasons for its renewal, or (above all) when considering its significance for the future and service of all civilizations – or (better) of all that

civilization implies.

I then propose that we follow the problematic I am now going to outline by raising five queries.

One. What do Jews and Christians have in common that may justify their getting closer to each other, and becoming allies?

Two. As Jews and Christians acknowledge what they have in common, will their respective characteristics and identities be threatened by such companionship?

Three. Does this common principle mean anything for humankind as a whole?

Four. Do both Jews and Christians become better able, when they get together, to carry out their specific mission toward the rest of humankind?

Five. Finally, if such caring for the world is no part of any ambition to conquer or dominate, how can this universalism express itself concretely?

I can see on your faces that my approach sounds disturbingly typical of French Cartesian logic. Don't worry, I have a deal to offer: what about taking these queries in reverse order? That's the way the best negotiators manage to work out a satisfactory outcome!

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So let us begin with the fifth and last question: if the universalism that Jews and Christians have in common serves no purpose of conquest, how can it manifest itself practically for the good of humanity?

The answer will be: through an original approach and practice of political action.

In biblical history, the only obvious political achievement was the kingdom of David and Solomon, even though what followed did not keep the promises... If you take a look at the various nations where Jews live, you won't find many of them at the helm. They have been prime ministers at best, like Benjamin Disraeli in Britain, or Léon Blum in France.

In fact, the biblical model that Jews may refer to when it comes to dealing with political affairs would rather be Mordecai, the adviser. His wisdom and intelligence are inspired by his faithfulness and obedience to God, and this allows him to make judicious, reasonable suggestions to a sovereign who does not himself belong to the Jewish people or share its creed.

You may object that Queen Esther ought to be taken into account as well. Granted. But this can be reserved for the Purim festival!

Now what do we find on the Catholic side? There is no doubt that the countless sovereigns who claimed to be Catholics wanted to rule not only their nations but also the Church. And yet, in fidelity to the biblical tradition and to the teachings of the New Testament, Catholicism itself does not demand political control of the nations or the peoples. Just remember Jesus' answer about the tax levied by the Romans: "Pay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God" (Matthew 22:21).

However, is it adequate to speak of biblical and Catholic influences or inspirations? Some might fancy that two lobbies, one Jewish, the other Christian, are at work together so as to defend their mutual special interests. This is not at all what I have in mind!

What I mean is rather a common vocation to both advise and criticize “the prince”, and to challenge the temptation of absolutism. This concerns not merely the fascination with tyranny, and no less the inducement, which is inherent in any power (since political rulers also make the laws), to set oneself up as the judge of good and evil.

Now this is exactly where Jews and Christians share one same clear principle. It is that the law that imposes itself on human conscience comes from much higher than any man. What is good does not depend upon wishes or opinions, but imposes itself as an absolute in this world where all is relative. And it is this indisputable norm in temporal affairs which makes of politics a reality that is worthy of human destiny.

Such an ethical approach of politics calls from inside any arbitrariness into question. Its aim is to enlighten the exercise of power, not to destroy it. The goal is to testify to genuine wisdom, which comes from God as the Bible teaches us.

This is a truly high human ideal. The position of the Jewish people and of Christians as watchers of and witnesses to God’s reign is a protest that undermines any human dominion. Are we not, Jews and Christians together, responsible and accountable for this political principle to humanity as a whole?

Is this not precisely the kind of wisdom that is missing in the international organizations? They have been set up to regulate peace among the nations. But their efficiency is limited by conflicting forces and interests, which hardly allow them to meet the requirements of justice and moral law (see Genesis 18:18).

What I am saying may sound utopian. Yet, I can mention one fact, and ask: is this not what Pope John Paul II has been relentlessly striving to achieve for more than twenty years? Has he not even been successful sometimes? Perhaps you might remember as well the key role played by “dear Henry” in world politics a few decades ago. But I don’t want to interfere on the American scene, and I leave this to your appreciation.

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Let us now come to the next question: when Jews and Christians meet, does this allow them to carry out their specific mission in the service of the whole of humankind?

To answer, we should meditate upon the gift of the Law, or the Commandments.

On the Jewish side first: even if he is a legal expert or a specialist of the history of the Roman or Anglo-Saxon juridical system, no Jew can come across the word “law” without remembering the Torah. If we leave aside here the question of the implementation of precepts as detailed by the rabbinical tradition, we can focus on the wisdom of the Law and its power on human conscience.

What matters is not the sanction that comes along with the rule, but the justice that is thus established in human relationships. In every of its aspects, and even if this is invisible most of the time, the Law is based on God’s holy will as it was revealed on the Sinai. In some way or other, the Law receives from God a sacred character, which also concerns man, to whom it is destined.

Now what about Christians? Perhaps I will surprise those among you who know little about the Catholic doctrine, no matter whether they are Christians or Jews, by recalling that, in substance, the biblical commandments are received by Christians as God’s revelation, given in the Old Testament.

You can take a look at the most recent document that makes this clear: the *Catechism of the*

*Catholic Church*, published under the authority of Pope John Paul Two. Morals are presented within the frame of the Ten Commandments, which structure the development of the ethical reflection on personal and social human behavior.

Of course, as disciples of Jesus, we differ in the way we understand these commandments and put them into practice. For a Christian, the authorized interpretation of God's own words is the way Jesus obeyed them, and asks us to observe them.

This comprehension is a determined adherence to the "*Shema, Israel*: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind," of both Deuteronomy (6:4) and the Gospel according to Matthew (22:37). The first rule of action sums up the Law and the Prophets with the double commandment of the love of God and of the neighbor, as found in both Leviticus (19:18) and Matthew (22:37-39), so as to imitate and participate in the love received from the Messiah: "Love one another, as I have loved you," as John puts it his Gospel (15:12).

It would be shortsighted to declare that the gap between the two interpretations cannot be bridged. A more accurate look will allow to discern that they have a common source – in God. The consequences on human compoment are the same, even when justice and peace materialize along distinct lines and are welcomed by tapping specific spiritual resources. Of course, the dissimilarities should not be overlooked. They are even essential to each experience. And yet, the moral convergence between Jews and Christians allows them to carry out their mission toward humankind, through vigilance and testimony.

Can the tasks be shared between the ones and the others? That would be presumptuous and probably mistaken, since this is a domain where everything is interrelated and nothing can be isolated.

The Christian experience may have led at times, among certain believers, to some relativization of the Commandments in the name of charity. It goes without saying that the love of God and of the neighbor fully sums up the Law. No precept can be more accurate, stronger or more beautiful. What remains, however, is that the demands of love must absolutely be strictly interpreted and structured by the respect of God's will. It might be fruitful to remind some Christians that they may not forget what God explicitly asks for, and some Jews that the commandment of love at the beginning of the *Shema, Israel* is meant to inspire all the attitudes that claim to obey it, in human relationships as well as in front of God.

Christian universalism has offered to all the nations of the world, sometimes under secularized forms, what has been given to Israel on the Sinai. Israel remains the guarantor of that gift, together with Christians, without doubt, for the greater good of whole humankind.

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This leads me to the next query: as Jews and Christians get closer to each other, what does this mean for all men?

I am obviously not going to answer by measuring the impact of such a prospect on public opinion. Some will fear the result might be a threat to the independence and liberty of national or religious particular identities. Others (or perhaps the same) will also wonder how two religions which have been so drastically separated in history could establish any special relationship that would be capable of bringing all cultures and creeds together.

As a matter of fact, this link with humanity as a whole is inscribed in the very origin of Judaism. Remember the blessing of Abraham in Genesis (12:3): "All the nations on earth will be blessed

through you.” You may also recall the prophecy of Isaiah (2:2-3) according to which “all the nations will stream toward the mountain of the Lord’s house, that he may teach [them] his ways and that [they] may walk in his paths.”

Among Christians, the Jewish apostles of Jesus strove, not without much difficulty, to actualize this prophecy, as they discovered, almost against themselves, that the gift of the Spirit that had been promised to Israel was also granted to the pagans. When Jesus ordered to his followers, as Matthew reports it (28:19), to “go to all nations, make them [his] disciples, baptize them, and teach them to observe what [he had] commanded,” in reality he united Christians to Jews in their hope for the world – even if the respective spiritual attitudes and experiences could remain different.

For the Jewish people is in a paradoxical situation. It still is a people and keeps on claiming this quality. The question whether it is a people like the others or different from them has been asked since the origins. We are a people unlike all other nations, because we have been chosen by God to serve Him. And we are a nation similar to the others when it comes to asking for a king or struggling for power as anywhere else in the world. This old tension has resurfaced in the Diaspora since the creation of the State of Israel. What is left is that, with today’s globalization, the Jews and Jewish communities spread all over the world genuinely take part in the diversity of cultures and nations, while their belonging to “the Jewish people” is no less certain for it.

In the same way, it can be said that the fact of being Christian incorporates every person and community into the common life of the Messiah’s Church, which is present across all the stages of history, in all nations and all cultures.

The problem I am trying to tackle here is the one raised by globalization. Is humanity today actually linked in any solidarity? Is the price to pay the denial or oblivion of the specificities that used to be considered as assets but may now be seen as relics from the past and obstacles? Of course not.

But the mission given by God’s Word to Jews and then to Christians is to make humankind aware of its unity and of its unique vocation, which comes from its origin. As the first page of Genesis (1:26) puts it, man was created by God “in his image and resemblance.” Within the human diversity, there exist watchers and witnesses to the light of the origin. Their job is not to impose anything, but to help humankind decipher its destiny.

The Jews are conscious of their historical singularity, since this Revelation was entrusted to them first, once and for all. It was in the experience of a people shaped by this Election that sacred history took flesh in human history. The temptation that the Jewish people has to face then is obviously to lock itself up in this uniqueness, and thus to deprive it of its saving significance.

Christians benefit from the first blessing, since pagans were blessed in their turn when the Church was born, and they were thus granted to take advantage of the Promise. In the course of history, Christians have been tempted too to create new singularities of a national or confessional kind. But they then lost the sense of their roots and of the origin that guarantees their hope.

When they meet and size up their differences, Jews and Christians can grasp better what is given to them as both founding evidence and a vital task: to convey to divided men the call to a unity that is greater and stronger than their enormous diversity.

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Our next point is that evoking such prospects is no threat to Jewish specificity or to Christian identity.

Let us try to clarify this. In John's Gospel (4:22), Jesus teaches to a Samaritan woman that "it is from the Jews that Salvation comes."

If there were no Jews, Christian universality might melt away into some abstract humanism. But the mission entrusted to Christians is based on the faith that cultural diversity can be respected, in spite of sometimes impressive difficulties and ambiguities, and that each culture can be enhanced by acknowledging the unity of humankind, as the child of the Only God.

If there were no Christians, could Judaism carry out its specific mission as the bearer of the blessing promised to all nations without being absorbed into the universal rationality of Enlightenment, without depriving of its substance the history that has begotten it?

The lesson we can draw from these aporias is that closer relations between Jews and Christians are necessary to both for each side to grasp what God may be demanding from it. Both what is common in their experiences and their differences in interpreting God's blessing sketch out a picture of the unity of the universal communion that is rooted in the Promise made to Abraham, as it was announced by the Prophets, and as it is attested by the Catholic Church, in the humble boldness of her faith.

All this may seem exaggerated to you, but it points to a challenge that we all have to take up in these times of globalization.

On the one hand, what is the Jewish identity? Is it the national Israeli identity, or the diasporic identity? What is it grounded on?

On the other hand, is the Christian universalist message nothing but the mask of an imperialism that used to be Roman and now is Occidental? How can this message be spread across the cultures of the world without losing its strength or dissolving its contents? The problem becomes all the more accurate when Christians carry the biblical message, including the Torah, to such nations as those of Asia, and when the latter declare that they are ready, as Gandhi was, to welcome what Jesus Christ said as a liberation, but claim they can do without the Bible, since they have their own scriptures and sacred history. Christianity is lost if it accepts to be uprooted from Israel, that is to say from the Covenant, from God's fundamental choice. The relationship, or the link, between Jews and Christians, with the tensions that will always have to be respected between them, is what gives whole humanity its original face, and comforts its hope for unity in peace.

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What is then the justification for Jews and Christians getting closer? What do they have in common that may provide grounds for an alliance? This is our last question, at the top of the list.

The answer is written on the first page of the New Testament. If you open any translation of the Gospels, you will find it begins with a genealogy: "Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac of Jacob, Jacob of Judah and his brothers..." These lines are the opening of what Matthew (1:1-2), the first evangelist, calls "the genealogy of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham."

A Christian receives from the Jewish people the totality of the Holy Scripture: the Law, the Prophets and all the other writings. And we receive it as it is: the Word of God. And this is true of all Christians – Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox alike –, whatever their crimes and the trials of history. And this Holy Scripture cannot be separated from the ones to whom it was first addressed, or from the languages in which it was originally worded. The Church receives each and every of these statements as inspired by God's Spirit. She wants to be faithful to them. She even claims she cannot survive without them, while some (like Marcion in the second century) insisted on

breaking away radically, and removing from the faith of Jesus' disciples all the biblical documents, and with them the Covenant and the Election.

Now have there not been symmetrical attempts at reduction on the Jewish side? The motivations may remain only too obvious to all of us and it would not help much to recall them here. The point is that silence became the rule. Too many Jews argued in the past that they had no need of Christians at the religious level.

In fact, we can recognize in these contradictory attitudes the internal rupture that took place within the first Christian generation, as Jews refused or accepted the message of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jews and Christians or Catholics thus share both a common root and a conflict. But from a Christian point of view, this conflict has a background that is familiar to Jewish thought, in the expectation of the accomplishment of history according to God's will.

Christians as well as Jews bank on the same hope. The Revelation that they have received and that they transmit turns their eyes toward the achievement whose features are shaped on each side by the experiences of centuries, cultures and nations, and also by whatever is accepted or refused from the other.

Who does not feel here that the tensions may be all the more incisive and painful as the reasons for agreement and communion are ineffaceable? Since we share the same root, any hostility will be endured as the blow of a wound, or as a denial. But misunderstandings can also be seen in the hope for ever greater light.

When we look back at history today, and even if renewed closeness cannot erase the differences, the urgency of the original call forces the separated brothers, the elder one and the younger one, to undertake, each one for his part, the mission that has been given to him. Neither can fulfill it without the other, or force him, or ignore him .

Today's figure of humankind somehow anticipates, through obscurities and contradictions, the hope offered by the Prophets and proclaimed by the New Testament. It would be an illusion and a lie to overlook what may divide us and to ignore each person's faith so as to make the common hope a reality. That would be a mistake, or, in truth, an abdication. But every one is called to progress in the work of justice and peace that has been assigned to him by the divine Providence.

The common link between Jews and Christians is the source of their alliance. It guarantees the mission they have to carry out, unless they choose to take the risk of betraying humanity. The stakes are no less than the balance and peace of the world.

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To conclude, I want to insist that the biblical Revelation, as the Jewish tradition receives it, and as the Church accepts it through her faith in Christ, is a treasure that remains to be explored for the future of humankind.

If exchanges can develop in mutual trust and closeness between faithful, considerate men, how enriching it may become for Christian thought to welcome the Election of Israel as a fundamental datum of human history and of the Church's vocation! Moreover, as mutual understanding between Jews and Christians is gradually established, their common approach of biblical history may allow a wiser grasp of the diversity of religious practices and cultures. A few months ago in Assisi, the Pope showed the way. [Some of you here took part in the event, and in particular Chief Rabbi Samuel-René Sirat, whom I salute.]

With the Election, Redemption seems to me to be another key issue. For two millennia Jewish reflection has been very wary of chapters forty-two to fifty-three of Isaiah, as though they had been monopolized by Christians. However, how is it possible not to discuss together, without ruling out anything beforehand, sin, suffering, the hope for salvation, the repentance that is expected from man, God's forgiveness, and the contents of what we are looking forward to?

The fear of hurting one another, of wanting to get the better of each other, as was the case in the *disputationes* of past centuries, must not bury the prophetic word of Isaiah at a time when the nations yearn for happiness ever more explicitly, even though there is a growing awareness of impending calamities; at a time when risks and fears seem never to have been greater because of the new powers that men have acquired.

On these two most sensitive points – the Election, and Redemption – , only a fresh dialogue between Christians and Jews will allow us to catch a glimpse of the light given by God to his people and promised to all the nations.

The common future for Jews and Catholics cannot be reduced to eliminating as many bones of contention as possible. Neither will peaceful mutual understanding be enough, or even solidarity in the service of humanity. For such a future calls for work on what separates us as well as on what we have in common. May differences and tensions become a stimulus to reach ever deeper, carefully and obediently, into the mystery of which history makes us the joint heirs!

Jews and Christians are to get closer for the service of humanity, so that they may foster peace and be sources of blessings for all.

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