A DECADE OF CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS —  
A REASSESSMENT*

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PREMIS

It is a far-reaching change that the Christian triumphalistic notion of the Jewish people 
as role-players in someone else's passion play is a thing of the past. Dialogue is necessary for 
the Christian since Christianity is validated within Judaism. The Jew is impelled to dialogue 
with Christians not from theological but from historical considerations, the history of 
Christian attitudes toward Judaism. For some Christians this history impels them to seek 
dialogue with Jews — from a sense of guilt. For most, it is the "mystery of Jewish rejection 
of Christianity." The Jew need not expose his or her inner life of faith to the Christian in 
dialogue. Indeed Jews are reluctant to concretize in theological formulations their encounter 
with the divine. But if Christians are willing to adopt the Jewish agenda of history in 
dialogue, they have thus far proved unequal to the task. 

Nostra Aetate, 
and even the 
Guidelines, 
do not yield "a sincere examination of the Christian conscience" on the subject 
of antisemitism. Nor do they deal with the theological dimension of the Jewish relationship 
to the Land of Israel.

Christian opposition to Jewish nationalism brings the Christian Right and the Christian 
Left into strange fellowship. Jews are familiar with opposition from the Christian Right, as 
when the Pope in 1904 said he could never favor the Jews' going to Jerusalem. Opposition 
from the Left is a blend of celebration of the Third World and a Christian universalism 
which rejects Jewish particularism. The "liberal" religious school curriculum was also the 
most anti-semitic for the same reason that it was also anti-Catholic: it was predisposed 
toward a universalism not hospitable to particularity and one which repudiated the peculiar 
history of any religious group. Such liberalism resents the earthiness of human history, the 
finitude of all human experience, the particularity of all discreet events. Theologically, 
however, Jews need to reexamine their stance toward a pluralistic world. Jews need not 
compromise their religious integrity by recognizing that Christians who are good and decent 
human beings are so not despite but because they profess Christianity. Concerning mission, 
traditional Jews affirm that Judaism is the "truest" religion. They do not expect Christians 
to be offended by the affirmation; conversely, Jews cannot be offended by parallel 
affirmations of faith made by Christians. Jews need to welcome "de-demonologization" of 
Judaism in Christian thought, but not theologically to advocate Christian positions of any 
sort. Jews ought not suggest that Christians cannot understand themselves apart from their 
Jewish roots, for example. This may be so, but it is a determination that Christians will have 
to make.

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During the past decade, relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish people have changed in a fundamental way. Our theologies and historically-conditioned reflexes will have to catch up with a new reality: we perceive one another and we are able to talk to one another in ways that were utterly inconceivable only a generation ago. Moreover, it seems reasonably clear that the process is an irreversible one. The capacity to hurt one another is still there, and — more likely than not — will not remain unexercised. The areas of misunderstanding still remain vast. But the traditional Christian triumphalistic notion of the Jewish people as role-players in someone else's passion play is a thing of the past, and that is a far-reaching change indeed. It is a change that also frees Jews to shed their own peculiar kind of triumphalism, the defensive triumphalism of the persecuted and the abused, and to relate in a more open and creative way to the world about it.

This new reality in which we find ourselves as Jews and Christians is not so much the result of fundamental changes in theology as it is the consequence of history — the common predicament which brings into question the very survival of our planet, and the dizzying pace of technological and scientific change — "future shock," if you will — which, on the one hand, has made us aware as never before of the incredible variety of religious experience in different cultures all over the world, while on the other hand we are left stunned by the assault of these changes on traditional perceptions and values, looking to each other for some reassurance and support.

The first and most important question that needs to be asked in this kind of retrospective is precisely what kind of dialogue is possible between Jews and Christians. What impels us to dialogue, and what does each of us seek to get out of it? Ten years of all kinds of interreligious activity, including the formal dialogue between the Vatican Committee on Religious Relations with the Jews and the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations,1 should yield some clarification of this important question.

Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, a Dutch Protestant ecumenist, in an article surveying Jewish-Christian dialogue, comes to the disappointing conclusion that "we still live in the time of the pre-dialogue, in which we do not advance beyond a better mutual understanding and an increasing collaboration in the theological and socio-political field . . . The question of truth is excluded.”2

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1The International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations is a coalition of the following organizations: World Jewish Congress, Synagogue Council of America, American Jewish Committee, Anti-Defamation League, and Jewish Council in Israel for Interreligious Consultations.

There is, I believe, a certain inevitability to the disappointment Christians will experience in the expectations they entertain for the dialogue with the Jews. There are two reasons for that inevitability, and both result from the same consideration: the fundamental disparity, or asymmetry, in the situation of Jews and Christians. To put the matter simply — if not altogether elegantly — Christianity chose to validate itself within Judaism, seeing itself the logical and necessary fulfillment of the earlier dispensation. Judaism should have fallen away like the spent first stage of a multi-staged missile heading into space (or, perhaps more appropriately, toward heaven). It did not do so. Given his or her own self-understanding, the Christian cannot avoid being confronted by the persistence of a living, thriving Judaism. That living, reality poses for the Christian the question of ultimate truth, and that is what makes the dialogue necessary and compelling. A dialogue that avoids the question of truth is, in the words of Flesseman-van Leer, nothing more than a “pre-dialogical conversation.”

In this respect, the situation of Judaism is quite different. There is nothing immanent in its nature or structure which requires a confrontation with Christianity. The existence of a thriving Christianity does not pose for the Jew the question of “truth.”

What impels the Jew to the dialogue with Christianity are not theological but historical considerations. For the Jew, the problematic of Christian-Jewish relations is determined by a history of Christian attitudes and actions toward the Jews which diminished their humanity and inflicted on them suffering and martyrdom. It may be argued that I am begging the question, since this kind of Christian behavior (or behavior of Christians) was the inevitable consequence of doctrine — whether normative or aberrant. However, from a Jewish perspective, it is not the fact that Christian doctrine diverges from Jewish doctrine, but that it resulted in pernicious consequences in the way Christians dealt with Jews, that causes the problem in our relationship.

It is important to add, however, that if the Jew is motivated to seek dialogue with Christians because of an obsession with history, and a concern for present and future survival, this does not mean that the Jew fails to appreciate the potential the dialogue holds for Jewish theological enrichment, for mutual religious support, and for the contribution that can be made jointly with Christians — and with persons of other faiths — in resisting the forces in society that threaten to empty life of transcendent meaning and to rob the individual of his or her tzvelem elokim (divine image). Furthermore, Judaism cannot remain uninterested in Christianity for theological reasons as well, for if Israel’s election has a purpose, that purpose is “through you shall be blessed all the families of the earth.” In a mysterious way, the Jewish people are to be the instrument for the redemption of the entire human family. The Jew cannot help, therefore, but

3Ibid.
4Gen. 12:3.
be vitally concerned with the spiritual life of the nations, with whom Israel is jointly embarked on the path to redemption, and most particularly with Christianity, which has mediated the vocabulary and message of Israel to the ends of the earth. But these considerations are secondary; they are not what makes the dialogue a compelling Jewish enterprise, and it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise.

History is not what brings most Christians to the dialogue with Jews — at least not in the Jewish perception. True, for some it is a sense of guilt for the role the church played in the persecution of the Jew, and a desire to correct Christian causes that contributed to that sordid history. But for the church as a whole, what impels it to dialogue with Judaism is precisely the mystery of Jewish rejection of Christianity.

If the past ten years have taught us anything, therefore, it is that we come to each other with different “agendas.” That need not be a disastrous circumstance, however, as long as we are aware of it, and as long as we are open to each other’s concerns. All too often, however, we have been so intent on our own agendas that we pass each other like ships in the night.

There is yet a second reason, also resulting from this fundamental asymmetry, why Christians are likely to experience some disappointment in their expectations for the dialogue with the Jews. As I have indicated, the Jew’s obsession with history does not preclude serious consideration within the dialogue of issues of a spiritual and theological character. But that does not embrace for the Jew the question of “ultimate truth,” the one that stands between the Jew and the Christian. There is a common misconception which ascribes the refusal to subject this question of “truth” to dialogue to the “obscurantism” of Orthodox Jewish theologians. In fact, even the most avid Jewish advocates of dialogue substantially share this position. Thus, Abraham Joshua Heschel declared that religious authenticity is not fostered by exposure of one’s inner life of faith. “The community of Israel must always be mindful of the mystery of the aloneness and uniqueness of its own being,” he declared in his famous essay, “No Religion Is an Island.” Heschel insisted that the supreme issue that we need to be in dialogue about is not “truth” but “the terms underlying both religions, namely, whether there is pathos, a divine reality concerned with the destiny of man which mysteriously impinges upon history; the supreme issue is whether we are alive or dead to the challenge and expectation of the living God.” It is our awareness that despite the “no” we say to each other on ultimate questions of faith, we both remain accountable to God; we both remain objects of God’s concern, precious in God’s eyes. It is that which makes possible, and indeed requires, that we engage in dialogue.

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7Ibid., p. 118.
Few people have made a more thoughtful contribution to the advancement of Christian-Jewish dialogue in the United States than has Jacob B. Agus, who belongs to the liberal camp. But Agus also opposes the exposure of “the inner life of faith” to interreligious dialogue. Indeed, he sees it as an act of folly. “Each Faith creates its terms within the fullness of its own experience in its own unique way ... the corresponding terms of the faiths are incommensurate ... in the private realm of religious feelings and symbols ... it would be easier to move geometric figures into a non-Euclidean world” than to communicate about such matters.8

It must be conceded, however, that the reluctance of Jews to place theological issues at the top of the interreligious agenda applies not only to questions of ultimate truth — to the profoundly personal and intimate experience of faith — but to the more formal and objective questions of theology as well. That reluctance is determined only in part by a certain defensiveness, by a residual fear that despite all assurances, such discussions will be seized by Christians as an occasion for mission. Far more determining is the fact that Jewish religious life has always been marked by a certain theological reticence, by a reluctance to concretize in theological formulations the Jew’s encounter with the divine. This Jewish sensibility is expressed in the rabbinic understanding of the story in Exodus in which Moses beseeches God to permit him to behold God’s glory. He is informed that this is a human impossibility; only after God has passed by, can God’s presence be discerned. In pursuance of this metaphor, rabbinic Judaism did not invest its most creative energies in the theological enterprise, in those areas which reveal the “face” of God. Instead, it directed its religious imagination to the traces left by the Divine presence as it passes through human history. For that task, the halachah was seen as a more certain guide than theology.

Indeed, it has been argued that the Jewish preoccupation with the ways God’s immanence enters history is of the essence of Judaism, and defines its point of divergence from Christianity. For the Jewish rejection of Jesus — of an incarnated mediation between humans and God — inheres “in the structural-cognitive form of Torah hermeneutics.” According to the Torah, “God and his manifestations cannot be mediated, only interpreted.”

Not a Messiah but the Torah with its all embracing earthliness, with its roots in timelessness and its revelation in history interprets the unity of God and Being, of the infinite Absolute and its finite creatures. Therefore while God is beyond any description, location or limitation, his creative power resides in the finite universe. While God is hidden, his mighty actions are transparent, not through a mediator but, according to Rabbi Ishmael, whose hermeneutics prevailed throughout Jewish history, in the Torah, because it “...
speaks in the language of men," and thereby maintains the unmediated presence of God amidst his Creation, on earth rather than in heaven.⁹

Be that as it may, the different strategies chosen by the two faiths constitute another impediment to the dialogue. It is an impediment that places Judaism at a disadvantage, for dialogue, by its very nature, is most congenial to the tradition that has developed an elaborate theology.

If I am correct in identifying the Jewish interest in dialogue (i.e., the historical rather than the theological), and if there is a readiness on the Christian side to deal with the Jewish "agenda," then of course we must be prepared to encounter our common history. That would seem to be elementary. In practice, it turns out not to be a simple matter at all. While there are notable exceptions, I think it is not unfair to say that, by and large, the history of the church's persecution of Judaism and the Jewish people is even today not part of the consciousness of the church. That is the case not only for early history, but for our most recent past as well. For Jews, the Holocaust remains a haunting presence hovering in the background of all our encounters. The dialogue takes place over a massive graveyard in which lie buried one third of our people. We cannot pretend it is not there, and if we choose to do so, then the dialogue is surely doomed to failure and frustration. If it is faced honestly — not for the sake of recrimination, for who can lay claim to virtue and self-righteousness after Auschwitz — but in order finally to be able together to say "Kaddish" for the martyrs, then our enterprise might yet assume a sacred dimension.

In my view, we are still far from that point. Recent statements from official Catholic sources, based on newly-released archival materials, are painful, above all, in what they revealed about the continuing inability of the Roman Catholic Church to deal meaningfully with this problem. While there has taken place a lively and unresolved debate about the role that the Catholic Church, in general, and the Vatican, in particular, played during the Holocaust, that debate is actually beside the point. For even if the role of the Catholic Church during this difficult period had been exemplary, the real point is that the Nazis were able to go as far as they did because western culture had been steeped thoroughly in Christian dogmatic and theological hostilities toward the Jew that had long been regnant in the Christian world. The matter is therefore hardly resolved by citing this or that conversation between a Nuncio and an Ambassador. Of course, Nazism was a reversion to paganism, and at heart as anti-Christian as it was anti-Jewish. But it is equally clear that its poison would not have found so fertile a seedbed if the church of Jesus Christ had not been a knowing and willing participant in the centuries-long demonry of antisemitism.

A genuine confrontation with history, and most particularly with Auschwitz, demands of Christians the submission of their tradition to a searching

critique. In this respect, *Nostra Aetate*, and, to a lesser, although not entirely negligible extent, the 1975 Guidelines, are seriously flawed. George Higgins and others have patiently and repeatedly urged Jews not to see *Nostra Aetate* as a document that was addressed to them.\(^1^0\) Had it been that kind of document, "absolving" Jews from responsibility for the Crucifixion, then its contents should indeed have been seen as condescending and entirely inadequate, Higgins writes. But that was not its purpose. Rather, "it was meant to be a sincere examination of the Christian conscience — which has so much to answer for in this area."

While I do not doubt for a moment where George Higgins' heart lies, his own generosity cannot alter the objective reality that is *Nostra Aetate*. Whatever else one may discover in it, the one thing even the closest examination fails to yield is "a sincere examination of the Christian conscience" on the subject of antisemitism. Even the Guidelines, in their passing reference to the "memory of the persecution and massacre of Jews which took place in Europe" falls considerably short of the kind of "examination of conscience" Higgins talks about.

The two documents do not face up to the simple, inescapable truth that whatever secondary causes may have come into the picture — and so many of them clearly did — antisemitism from the first century to the twentieth century is a Christian creation and a Christian responsibility. Instead, we find what amounts virtually to a pretense that antisemitism is one of many forms of intolerance and inhumanity which, it should go without saying, the church clearly rejects. From the Jewish perspective, this is so grievous a distortion of the historical truth which brings us together in dialogue as to compromise the enterprise before it ever gets off the ground.

I say all of this with diffidence, not only because, even now, sensitivities are still raw on both sides, and candor can be misconstrued as malice, but primarily because I do not wish to encourage the notion that the Holocaust be exploited as a device to generate Christian guilt and thereby manipulate the relationship in ways that give the Jewish side an advantage. Such manipulations must be seen as a desecration of the memory of the victims and utterly destructive of the real hope which the dialogue holds.

**The State of Israel**

Another "historical" issue is the State of Israel. I admit that many well-intentioned Jewish efforts at enlightenment on this subject have more often served to confuse our Christian friends than to enlighten them. This has been so, at least in part, because Jews have hardly sorted out for themselves the meaning of the return of Jewish political sovereignty to the Land of Israel and the ways

this miraculous phenomenon affects their lives and religious sensibilities. The development is too recent and too overwhelming for things to be otherwise.

Christians, on their part, would be happier if they were allowed to deal with Israel as a strictly political phenomenon, if Jews were not to insist on its religious meaning. But even if the State of Israel were to be seen as a political phenomenon that is devoid of religious meaning, it must be conceded that the warmest theological friendships would be meaningless and utterly without human content if they could contemplate the collapse of Israel with equanimity. In the words of Jacques Maritain, "to wish to reject into nothingness this return which finally was accorded to the Jewish people, and which permits it to have a shelter of its own in the world . . . is to wish that misfortune hound again this people, and that once more it be the victim of iniquitous aggression. Anti-Israelism is not better than antisemitism."\(^{11}\)

However, the State of Israel not only presents a political issue but also has the profoundest theological implications, and these go to the very heart of the Christian-Jewish problematic. Ironically, the theological connection was perceived far more clearly by a Catholic pope than by the founder of Zionism himself. When Herzl went to see Pope Pius X in 1904, he said to Herzl, "We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem but we can never favor it." "We are not asking for Jerusalem, but Palestine," Herzl replied, "only the profane part of the country." Of course, Herzl was wrong and the pope was right; it is not only Jews returning to Palestine but the inescapable symbolism of Judaism returning to Jerusalem that defines the issue for both Jews and Christians.

Contrary to Herzl's and Zionism's assumptions, the creation of the Jewish State has not resolved the Jewish predicament. The situation has not been "normalized" and the State has not solved the problem of Jewish isolation. Indeed, in some ways, it has intensified it. The Jew "continues in his national character to be the object of the same hatreds, the same unnatural fears and fantasies; and he continues to harbor within himself the same intensities and obsessions."\(^{12}\) The reason for this is that Zionism is really not just another national liberation movement. The State of Israel is the result not only of the modern forces of nationalism, or even of the persecution of the Jew. It is that, to be sure, but it is above all the consequence of "an inner need, a positive impulse working within Jewish life and history."\(^{13}\) It is the actualization of a quest for authenticity, the incarnation of the Jewish burden of otherness. The Jew is driven by a force as old as the Bible to reunite with the land.

The importance of this "internal" significance of Israel is one which

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\(^{13}\) Ibid.
Christians (and Jews) often fail to grasp. To insist that Zionism deserves Christian support because it is the stepchild of Christian prejudice is to deny, however unintentionally, its integrity and legitimacy. In a sense, it is to insist on continued Christian parentage. To be sure, the persecution of Jews throughout their diaspora existence, both in Christian Europe and in the Muslim world (there are in Israel today more Jewish refugees from Arab oppression than from Europe) gives the State of Israel a pragmatic, non-ideological urgency. But this should not be permitted to detract from its ideological content. There is a vitality to Jewish peoplehood and to its attachment to its historical homeland that is not dependent on persecution and external pressures. Ultimately, Israel must be understood as the result not of outside rejection but of an inner Jewish affirmation.

In light of the above, the failure of the Vatican Guidelines to deal with the theological dimension of the Jewish relationship to the land of Israel constitutes a grievous omission. Within the context of the document's own declared desire to understand Jews as they understand themselves, it must be faulted for failing to spell out to Catholics that in the year 1975 it is impossible to understand Jews, nor can anyone communicate meaningfully with them about their deepest fears or aspirations, without an appreciation of the role of the State of Israel in Jewish consciousness.

This brings us to a point which I believe to be absolutely crucial to a proper understanding of how one deals with so complex a phenomenon as Israel in the arena of secular politics. To insist that the return of Jews to their historical homeland raises theological issues is not to say that the assertion of secular Jewish sovereignty in modern times can be validated — particularly over against competing political claims — on purely theological grounds and by simple reference to biblical verses. And a recognition that Judaism — unlike Christianity — is a faith uniquely dependent on the national existence of a particular people does not translate itself automatically into an argument for present-day Jewish political rights in Palestine. This confusion has been responsible for more painful misunderstanding between Jews and Christians, and among Jews themselves, than any other single consideration I can think of. Let me therefore state certain propositions whose obviousness, under different circumstances, might be a source of acute embarrassment:

1. The fact that the Hebrew Bible records the divine promise of the Land of Israel to Abraham and his descendants is in itself no absolute warrant for Jewish claims in our day. If that were the only basis for the Jewish claim, then Musims and Christians could maintain with considerable justice that it is unreasonable to expect them to conform to Jewish religious expectations, particularly when these do not accord with their own religious convictions. The fact is that no contemporary political rights to the Land of Israel necessarily flow from a Christian understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures, or from a Muslim reading of the Koran. Indeed, both hold to theories of reli-
gious supersedence — to a greater or lesser degree — which negate such claims.

2. The Jewish political claim to the Land of Israel is based, in the first instance, on secular rather than theological considerations, i.e., the fact that there has been no separate Palestinian sovereignty since the destruction of the last Jewish kingdom nearly 2,000 years ago; a virtually unbroken Jewish presence in Palestine since the first exile; the existence of a Jewish majority in Jerusalem since 1896; and international sanction by the League of Nations (which assigned the Mandate to Britain and confirmed the terms of the Balfour Declaration) and by the United Nations (which partitioned Palestine into Jewish and Arab States).

The unbroken attachment of Jews at all times and in all the lands of their dispersion to the Land of Israel is a datum not of theology but of history; it is a hard, uncontested "secular" fact. The biblical promise and the centrality of land in Jewish theology explain this stubborn and heroic tenacity, but they do not diminish either its historical reality or its implications for secular politics. If nothing else, the biblical record substantiates the antiquity of Jewish nationalism; few, if any, nationalisms have such deep roots.

Ironically, it is those who deny the possibility of Jewish nationalism who introduce unsupportable and irrelevant theological considerations. It is a phenomenon that brings the Christian Right and the Christian Left into strange fellowship. Opposition to Israel from the Christian Right has the advantage of familiarity. Opposition from the Left is a more recent phenomenon; their hostility is a peculiar blend of an uncritical celebration of the Third World and a theological antisemitism that is nourished by a Christian universalism which cannot abide the earthiness of Jewish particularism. They love Jews who are disincarnated, who are suffering servants, who are ghostly emissaries and symbols of an obscure mission. They cannot abide Jews who are flesh-and-blood people, who are men and women like other men and women in all their angularities and specificities, who need to occupy physical space in a real world before they fulfill whatever loftier aspirations they may have. They are disturbed by the notion that Jews should want a flesh-and-blood existence as a people in the real geography of this world.14

From a Jewish perspective, at least, we continually run the danger of dividing the world around us into separate spheres and of marking off the "spiritual" realm as the special domain of God's activity. The Jewish case against that kind of separation could not have been better stated than in the study Israel en de Kerk (Netherlands Reformed Church, 1961): "The election of Israel . . . has to do with life in all its dimensions, the profane as well as the sacred. Accordingly, the chosen people is a nation involved in a certain land and a set of

occupations, varied joys and pains, marriages and births, sorrows and fears, and a history and political life completely bound up in world events and entangled in the international politics of its time.”

In this connection, it is interesting to note Bernhard Olsen’s discovery (in his Faith and Prejudice) that the most “liberal” religious school curriculum was also the most antisemitic — for the same reason, interestingly enough, that it was also anti-Catholic: it is marked by a predisposition toward a universalism which is not hospitable to particularity and repudiates the peculiar history of any religious groups. It is a liberalism that resents the earthiness of human history, the finitude of all human experience, the particularity of all discrete events. In its search for “timeless truths and high spirituality,” it is offended by the paradoxes and concreteness of the Hebrew Bible, which deals with real human beings. It is an attitude that cannot manage the biblical dialectic of particularism and universalism.

Not surprisingly, we Jews have managed to contribute our share to a confusion of the issues. We have been less than meticulous in making those necessary distinctions that need to be made when invoking religious tradition and biblical texts. Also, we have not been as forthright as we might have been in dealing with a form of Jewish religious zealotry that invests political institutions and geographic boundaries with an absolute religious sanctity that becomes impervious to the normal give-and-take of the political process in secular history. Given our own experience with the consequences of ideological and mythological nationalisms in Christian Europe, we should have more reason than most to be concerned about the implications for politics of all ideological absolutes.

To raise this concern is not to bring into question the fundamental Jewish unity of faith, land, and people. This unity remains at the core of our identity and existence. What it does is emphasize the danger of blurring the crucial distinction between the religious meaning that Jews appropriate — individually and collectively — from political events (a biblically-conditioned Jewish reflex), and imbuing these events with an absolute sacredness that removed them from the realm of history. The latter is Jewishly uncharacteristic and can lead to a chauvinism that is oblivious to the rights and aspirations of others. In theological terms, it risks becoming avodah zarah — idolatry.

The Jewish View of Christianity

I noted earlier that the disparity of our agendas need not present an insurmountable impediment to the dialogue, provided we are genuinely prepared to attend to each other’s concerns. This cuts two ways, of course, and an important question is to what extent Jews are able to attend to the Christian agenda — short of addressing the question of the ultimate truth that separates them. Taking full advantage of the perquisites of the injured party, Jews have successfully managed the dialogue so that it has focused entirely on what we
consider to be Christian failings; we have not been compelled to examine ourselves and the problematic of our own theology and traditions — at least not within the context of the dialogue.

I suppose that Christian forbearance with this one-sided situation is compounded of a sense of guilt and of nobless oblige. However, it is a situation which cannot persist for long, not only because our Christian partners are not likely to continue the dialogue on these terms, but more importantly because there is an inner Jewish need to come to terms with the implications of our own traditions for a meaningful pluralism. We have been forthright in calling Christianity to account, but we have been somewhat less than daring in initiating a process of self-examination.

There is a two-fold task that thus far has gone largely unattended. The first is a reexamination of the Jewish stance toward a pluralistic world. It is refreshing to note that this challenge was taken up in the pages of Tradition, the journal of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America. Gerald Blidstein, an Orthodox scholar, dismisses the cliches of traditional Jewish apologetics on this subject as “barren and misleading.” It is no longer enough, he writes, “to cite the Me’iri for his broadmindedness, or to scurry about in the self-satisfaction of saving a Gentile’s life on the Sabbath.” Furthermore, Blidstein urges a reexamination of the image of Christianity in traditional Jewish pedagogy and folk culture, which still tends to be defensive and hostile, “all the pieties about b’nai Noach notwithstanding.”

No doubt, the memory of Jewish suffering at the hands of the church makes it difficult for Jews to take as seriously as they should their own classical affirmations of the religious worth of Christianity. But Jews need not compromise their religious integrity by recognizing — as did our classical authorities — that Christians who are good and decent human beings are so not despite, but because, they profess Christianity. Thus, Jehuda Halevy writes (Kusari IV) that “these religions (Christianity and Islam) are the preparation and preface to the Messiah we expect.” Maimonides, in his Code, writes, “All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite (Mohammed) who came after him served to clear the way for the King Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord . . . thus (because of Christianity and Islam), the Messianic hope, the Torah and the commandments have become familiar topics (among the inhabitants) of the Far Isles and many peoples . . .”

According to a more recent Jewish thinker, Rabbi Jacob Emden (1693-1776), unlike Jewish sects such as the Karaites and the Sabbatians, Christianity and Islam will “endure” because they constitute “a community that is for the sake of heaven.” They are seen by him as acknowledging the fundamentals of Judaism. They “make known God among the nations . . . proclaim there is a Master in heaven and earth, divine providence, reward and punishment . . . who

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bestows the gift of prophecy. This is why their community endures. . . . Since their intention is for the sake of heaven, reward will not be withheld from them.”

This attitude also characterized the views of Nachman Krochmal (1784-1840) and Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935).

What these authorities had in common was a genuine, unapologetic rootedness in classic Jewish sources. It is interesting to note that post-Emancipation Jews, who by and large were alienated from the primary sources of Jewish tradition and uncertain about their own Jewish identity, were far more disparaging in their views of Christianity than were their classical predecessors. For them, the Christian neighbor became a putative point of reference, for by determining who the Christian was, they at least knew who they were not. For this reason we find in the modern era, beginning with Moses Mendelssohn, a continuing dialectic between Judaism and Christianity in which the one is defined negatively in terms of the other.

I believe that a more authentic Jewish response to Christianity is in the process of development and will become more fully realized when the Jewish people will have regained a measure of self-confidence, a process that a secure and flourishing State of Israel will undoubtedly accelerate.

Christian Mission

Many Jewish critics saw the section of the 1975 Vatican Guidelines dealing with “witness” as a most problematic one, for in this section the Catholic Church reasserts its inescapable mission “to preach Jesus Christ to the world.” Among Jews who favor Christian-Jewish relations, there exist two fundamentally divergent attitudes toward the dialogue. There are those — primarily the more traditional ones, and particularly the Orthodox — whose starting point is the ultimate “incommensurability” of the two faiths, but who maintain that this incommensurability does not preclude a recognition of the other’s salvific status in the divine economy. Then there are those, primarily in the liberal camp, who insist on the need for new theological formulations which allow for the legitimacy and compatibility of the two covenants — what has been described as the “theology of equality.” It is the latter who find difficulty with the Catholic Church’s insistence on the retention of its mission to the Jews. The reassertion of the missionary imperative in the new Guidelines and in other Catholic

16Quoted by Heschel, “No Religion Is an Island.”
18This section does not take into account the paper on Catholic mission presented by Professor Tomaso Federici in March, 1977, at the sixth meeting of the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in Venice. In his paper, Federici denounced proselytism and “organizations of any sort” that aim at conversion of Jews. His paper was commissioned by the Vatican Secretariat on Religious Relations with the Jews in response to the issues raised by the author in this article.
documents is seen by them as religiously offensive and destructive of the dialogue itself.

While I do not share this latter view, I would suggest that the Guidelines — while admittedly stopping short of a renunciation of the Catholic Church’s mission to the Jews — do break new ground. For the qualifications they impose on witness are significant and represent a sharp departure from the Church’s earlier traditions. Specifically, the Guidelines declare that “Dialogue demands respect for the other as he is, above all, respect for his faith and his religious conviction.” Furthermore, the Church’s witness must be compatible with “the strictest respect for religious liberty.” Finally, the Guidelines express an understanding of Jewish rejection of the proffered witness that is striking in its contrast to the Church’s earlier attitude. Until modern times, the Catholic Church explained Jewish refusal to accept the Christian in demonological terms: it was seen as the result of a perfidious and malevolently stubborn streak in the Jew. How startlingly different the words of the Guidelines, which admonish Catholics to “strive to understand the difficulties which arise for the Jewish soul — rightly imbued with an extremely high, pure notion of the divine transcendence . . . when faced with the mystery of the incarnate Word.”

The more traditional Jewish view rejects the notion that the only Christian posture acceptable to Jews is one that grants the “equality” of Christianity and Judaism, if for no other reason than that it is an equality that Judaism itself is not prepared to grant to Christianity. Traditional Jews affirm that Judaism is the “truest” religion. That affirmation is part of what makes them Traditional Jews, and they do not expect Christians to be offended by it. Conversely, Jews cannot be offended by parallel affirmations of faith made by Christians — or by Muslims, for that matter. Furthermore, a Jewish “demand” that Christian theology recognize the validity of Judaism for Jews is problematical in that it implicitly grants a Jewish legitimacy to Christian theology. Judaism constitutes a denial of the central Christian mystery and its notion of salvation; it cannot at the same time demand that Christianity be reformulated to accommodate the “equality” of Judaism.19

Judaism is very much in need of a respectful understanding by people of other faiths. It can gain much, spiritually and intellectually, from an open and honest dialogue across faith lines. What Judaism does not need from others, and what no other faith can give it, is a validation of its own central faith commitments. That can only come from within Jewish life and thought, not from outside it. It is no denigration of Christianity to state that a Christian

19A Jewish rejection of traditional Christology does not preclude recognition that Christianity has a salvific status in the divine economy. In the Jewish view, that status derives not from its Christology, but from considerations cited by Jehuda Halevy, Maimonides, and Emden (see previous section). Modern thinkers, such as Rosenzweig and Buber, who allowed for the possibility of two “truths” mysteriously standing side by side before God, nevertheless maintained that the gulf separating the two truths is unbridgeable and, as Jews, rejected the “truth” of Christianity.
acknowledgment that the Sinaitic covenant was not abrogated can have no weight in Jewish theology.

A distinction needs to be made between an active campaign of mission directed at the Jewish community, which precludes meaningful dialogue, and an insistence that Christians abandon their eschatological hopes concerning Judaism. The latter is not only unnecessary but theologically imprudent. Equally unnecessary and imprudent are Jewish suggestions concerning the special rootedness of Christian faith in Judaism. A genuine Christian self-understanding which emphasizes this essential relationship to Judaism can emerge only from within Christianity.

We need to develop approaches that are capable of greater distinctions, that welcome the "de-demonologization" of Judaism in Christian thought, but stop short of theological advocacy. It is entirely proper for Jews to suggest to Christians that they find ways of defining their Christian identity in terms that will not involve the dehumanization of Jews; the price that we have paid for such theology in history gives us a certain "standing" to advance such suggestions. But that is essentially a request to be left alone. It is quite another matter for Jews to suggest to Christians that they cannot understand themselves without reference to their Jewish roots. This may or may not be the case, but that is a determination Christians will have to make.

Only recently, I came across a particularly telling example of the potentially pernicious effects of Jewish involvement in the internal Christian theological debate concerning its own confrontation with Judaism. In a publication issued by Seton Hall's Institute for Judaeo-Christian Studies, one of the leading institutions committed to the furtherance of the dialogue with Judaism, the Director of the Institute castigates a rabbi for having lent his endorsement and support to Rosemary Ruether's new book, *Faith and Fratricide*. This Catholic theologian, who has been unstinting in his support of Jewish causes and of the interreligious dialogue, warns the rabbi in question that if he does not wish to destroy the new encounter between Christians and Jews, he should not, as a Jew, "assist attempts to drain the Christian message of its true significance, to rob it of its heart." The propriety of this reaction is not as important a question as its inevitability. It argues, in my opinion, for the wisdom of a certain restraint in the way Christians and Jews seek to help along and further each other's theological development.

I have said that an active Christian mission to the Jews precludes serious dialogue. That is fairly obvious. Christianity's understanding of Judaism is inevitably inhibitory and distorted at the point where its essential missionary impulse becomes dominant. What is not at all obvious, it seems to me, is that the very notion of mission is itself inadmissible from a Jewish perspective, and that we have the right to suggest that it be abandoned by Christians. Jews have

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insisted — correctly, of course — that Christians must finally come to terms with the Jew's own self-understanding. The fact is that a fundamental dimension of the Christian's self-understanding is the mandate to "go forth" and spread the truth of Christianity. Deny Christians that mandate, and you have robbed them of their identity and religious purpose, as they understand it. I would maintain that there exist no moral or religious grounds on which to base such a demand. If Judaism has not engaged in missionary activity, it is not because it found the very concept of mission unacceptable.

Witness is a legitimate religious enterprise, as long as it respects fully the freedom of conscience of people of other faiths, and as long as that enterprise is insulated from considerations of political and other forms of coercion. There is a sense in which every Jew is obliged in Jewish tradition to live constantly a life of "witness," a life that will lead Gentiles to a recognition and acceptance of the God of Abraham. The principle of witness — Christian or Jewish — need not be offensive to religious sensibilities nor pose a barrier to Christian-Jewish relations.

Be that as it may, the Guidelines represent substantial progress over *Nostra Aetate*. For the one message that comes through the Guidelines — despite all of its acknowledged shortcomings — is that the Catholic Church does not aim at the disappearance of the Jewish community but seeks a living link with it. *Nostra Aetate* had left fundamentally unchanged the universal and perennial Catholic view that Judaism's vitality and religious worth are to be found in its pre-Christian incarnation. If God finds the Jewish people "most dear," it is for the sake of the pre-Christian patriarchs. And the climactic words of that part of the "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" that is concerned with Judaism and the Jewish people are that the Cross of Christ has become the "fountain from which every grace flows." (Emphasis added.)

In contrast to these sentiments, the Guidelines are the first Catholic document on the highest level of authority that views Judaism as a rich and vital religious movement in the period following the rise of Christianity as well. That is perhaps the document's most significant contribution, a contribution for which it is undoubtedly indebted to such precursors as the American Guidelines, and particularly the French Orientations. It is a sentiment that also found significant expression in the remarks of Pope Paul when he met with Jewish and Catholic delegations in January, 1975. In his address during that unusual encounter, Pope Paul described how leading medieval Jewish and Catholic theologians influenced the development of each other's religious thought.

The Guidelines state categorically that "the history of Judaism did not end with the destruction of Jerusalem," but went on to develop a religious tradition. Of course, the Catholic Church has not given up on the notion that "the importance and meaning of that tradition were deeply affected by the coming of Christ," but this affirmation now accommodates a perception of Judaism that remains "rich in religious values." Compare this nuanced text of the Guidelines with the pronouncement of Cardinal Bea, the moving spirit behind *Nostra Aetate*, in the aftermath of Vatican II: The Jewish people "is no longer the
people of God in the sense of an institution for the salvation of mankind. . . . Its function in preparing the Kingdom of God finished with the advent of Christ and the founding of the Church." 21

The Guidelines call on Catholics to study Judaism in all of its aspects and to end the ignorance that has been at the root of past hostility and rancor. They encourage the establishment of formal studies of Judaism within Catholic educational structures, including the creation of special chairs in Jewish studies. Equally significant is a passage in the Guidelines that says that the "Old Testament" and Jewish tradition founded upon it must not be juxtaposed to the New Testament in such a way as to make the Old Testament appear as a religion of justice and legalism as opposed to a New Testament emphasis on love of God and neighbor. The passage cites specific biblical sources that stress the centrality of love. Catholics are urged to exercise care in the selection of liturgical readings, in homilies based upon them, and in translations of liturgical texts, particularly those passages "which Christians, if not well informed, might misunderstand because of prejudice."

Perhaps most important, the document proposes that Christians seek to "learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience." A genuine openness to Jewish religious categories and self-definition would, for the first time, make possible an honest and fruitful dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Synagogue.

It may be true, as some critics have argued, that as far as the United States and France are concerned, the Guidelines offer little that is new. But this criticism ignores the reality in most other Catholic countries throughout the world, where the Guidelines, for all their sobriety, represent a revolution in traditional attitudes. And even in the most progressive countries, one cannot begin to compare the weight of a Vatican document of the highest level of authority with statements issued by episcopal offices on Catholic-Jewish relations. It is doubtful that the American and French statements have made much of an impact on the attitudes of the bishops in those countries, not to speak of the rank and file.

If the Guidelines were the culmination of a process that had run its course, if they represented the Catholic Church's new theology of Judaism, then they would indeed be disappointing. However, the Guidelines were not intended to end but to initiate a process. What the Catholic Church has done is create the tools that make possible a reexamination of the entire range of its own internal life — in education, in training for the priesthood, in its understanding of the Bible, in its catechism — insofar as these relate to an understanding of Judaism. These tools did not exist before, and that is why nothing much came of the Vatican II declaration on the Jews.

The big question, therefore, is to what use the Catholic Church will put these new tools. An ever larger question is whether the Church can, in fact,

successfully exorcise its Jewish problem. For reasons I have indicated earlier, I — as a Jew — do not wish to enter the debate that was opened by Rosemary Ruether in her *Faith and Fratricide*. I hope she is mistaken in her conclusion that "anti-semitism is the left hand of Christology," and that the New Testament and its anti-Judaism are inseparable. But even if Ruether is wrong, it remains clear that the Catholic Church still has a formidable task ahead of it, for its mythological life to this day is inextricably linked to knowledge of a people who rejected and continues to reject Jesus. And twist and turn as one may, the Gospels remain a significant source of antisemitism.

Despite these difficulties — indeed, because of them — the Guidelines constitute a hopeful first step. In their efforts to realize the promise inherent in the Guidelines, those dedicated Catholic Church officials and theologians whose untiring efforts have brought the Church to this new state will find, I am persuaded, openness, appreciation, and, where appropriate, support and reciprocity in the Jewish community.

**Study and Discussion Questions**

1. What does Siegman suggest are the two “agendas” of Christian and Jewish dialogue? Discuss.
2. Discuss what it is that the author believes impels some Christians to adopt the historical agenda.
3. What would Siegman have wished to see in the Guidelines and *Nostra Aetate* on antisemitism?
4. What does Siegman see as the problem of the Christian Right about the State of Israel?
5. Discuss the influence Siegman sees as contributing to the anti-Israel stance of the Christian Left.
6. What does Siegman see as the failure of Jewish theology today in its study of Christianity?
7. Discuss Siegman’s position concerning “Christian witness.”
8. What does the author believe about Jews’ advocacy of certain positions in Christian theology, and *vice versa*? Discuss.