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CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

Key words: Judaism, Israel, dialogue, Christian Churches, Christianity in Jewish terms, Second Vatican Council, God's covenant with Israel, Jewish people, Shoah, the permanent value of Judaism, Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Protestant churches, interfaith marriages

1. Initial introduction. 2. A Brief History of Jewish-Christian Relation. 3. Conclusion

1. INITIAL INTRODUCTION

Christian-Jewish relations as a subject of study could be described as a child of the twentieth century. As a scholarly discipline and a mode of dialogue between religious communities it is a discourse that is still in its infancy compared to the traditions of the academy and the classical subjects that have been studied both in universities and in religious circles. And it is in sharp contrast to the long history of relations between Jews and Christians in earlier centuries, marked often by social exclusion, hostility, or a scholastic dialogue that often had little to do with the equality or intellectual honesty expected today. Given this radical change in the relations between the two faith communities, the process both of learning the language of dialogue and of understanding how to express the encounter is slow and sometimes thwart. The events of the past century have brought questions to bear on the nature of God, the very role of religion in society, and the responsibility of one community to another not only in what it does but also in what it says and teaches. A discipline that arose so rapidly without precedents to guide it, and yet at the same time had to face such important questions, inevitably would arouse points of disagreement and calls for reconsideration of certain issues. Nothing less is to be expected when faced with one of the most major crises of faith in modern times.

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATION

In its original form, Christianity consisted of some Jewish followers of Jesus declaring him as the Messiah, claiming to represent the true path during what was to be seen as the last era of world history, and demanding conversion to their interpretation of Judaism. Christianity was one Jewish group amongst many, including the Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes and Pharisees (and we should not ignore the influence of Hellenisers), but only the Jewish followers of Jesus (the Christians) and the Jewish descendants of the Pharisees (the rabbis) survived the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE.

The Apostle Paul's missionary work helped spread the Christian movement, while the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and periodic persecution of Christian groups influenced the Gospels' downplaying of Pilate's role in the death of Jesus. Gradually the Church came to view the Jewish people as the preliminary and outdated people of God, replaced by the newly covenanted people of the ecclesia (Church). This view deeply influenced the Christian understanding of the Gospels' anti-Jewish passages from the second century onwards, and movement towards separation became considerable. The separation between Christianity and Judaism consisted of a series of "partings of the ways", beginning perhaps when the Jewish followers of Jesus started to attract large numbers of Gentiles. Arguments over the abolition of Jewish customs such as circumcision and *kashrut* (food laws) contributed to the rejection of Christianity by most Jews.

The main argument over theology concerned Christian claims about the divinity of Jesus. Bitterness between Jews (as well as Gentiles) over the significance of Jesus can be seen in the early Christian writings, and a similar theme can be noticed in rabbinic literature. Jewish opposition increased when Christians failed to support Jewish revolts against Rome in the first century and the messianic claims of Bar Kokhba in the second. This did not prevent many Christians in the early centuries attending synagogue services, especially at the autumn High Holy Days and at Passover. In response, church leaders such as Chrysostom and even Jerome delivered derogatory sermons and interpretations, which insisted that Jews did not understand that the Old Testament was a prefiguring of Christ and the Church.

In the second century, Melito of Sardis produced the first unambiguous accusation of deicide, and later Augustine portrayed Jews as children of Cain whose dispersion and woes were God's punishment. They simply served as witnesses to their own evil and to Christian truth. By the time of the completion of the Talmud (c. 500) Judaism and Christianity had fully diverged. It is not coincidental that around the same time Jewish Christianity also ceased to exist.

Once Christianity was established as the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the situation for Jews became more difficult, though this was a gradual process because the energy of Christian Europe was directed towards defeating pagans and Christian heretics. During this time Christian anti-Jewish writings (*Ad-versus Iudaeos* literature) resulted in little violence against Jews; nor did it stir much of a Jewish response, possibly because until then Christianity was viewed with little interest. The sixth-century rabbinic anti-Christian text *Toledot Yeshu* seems to be an exception.

As the Church spread outside Palestine it increasingly denied the significance of that land despite the presence of indigenous Christian communities. The Emperor Constantine (c. 285–337), however, supported the building of large churches on significant sites of Jesus' life and death. Monastic orders followed suit and by the sixth century more than 500 churches had been built and attracted each year thousands of Christian pilgrims. Residents claimed that the grace of God was more abundant in Jerusalem than elsewhere and increasingly the term 'holy land' was used. The church fathers opposed Jewish hopes of restoration, and the Emperor Julian's late fourth-century plan to rebuild the Temple worried several generations of Christians, even after his early death in 363.

In the Eastern-Byzantine Empire, the Justinian Code (535–53) removed many Jewish rights granted by previous emperors (such as the Theodosian Code, 438). Severe restrictions on synagogue practices enabled local authorities to outlaw Judaism, close synagogues and enforce baptisms despite some church opposition (e.g., Nicaea, 787). In the West, Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) insisted that Jewish legal rights be respected and their internal affairs not disturbed, but official church protection through the later Middle Ages was more often ignored than observed.

Interestingly, as far as scriptural interpretation is concerned, there is evidence that Jewish and Christian commentators were aware of and sometimes even admired each other's interpretations. This was a two-way process and both Jews and Christians occasionally adopted each other's interpretations. The willingness of some Jewish exegetes to appropriate Christian interpretation, wrap it in Jewish garb and include it in Jewish biblical commentary suggests a closer relationship than might have been anticipated.

From approximately 1100 onwards, as Christendom became more homogeneous, Jews were seen as one of the last 'different' groups, and by the sixteenth century they had been expelled from most of Western Europe, beginning with England in 1290. Jews were liable to mass assaults, as witnessed in the Crusades from the eleventh century and the response to the Black Death in the fourteenth. During this period, Christians were becoming increasingly aware of the existence of postbiblical Jewish writings such as the Talmud and denounced them.

This was the time of the Inquisition, the burning of thousands of Jewish books, including the Talmud, the preaching of conversionist sermons at which Jewish attendance was compelled, blood libel accusations and the wearing of a distinctive badge.

Since Judaism was a minority in both the Islamic world and Christendom, Jews were prompted to consider why God allowed these faiths to flourish. One view was that Christianity was a form of idolatry, perhaps not in the full biblical sense but through inherited patterns of idolatrous worship. Another approach categorised Christianity in terms of the Noachide laws, which formulated moral standards without demand for conversion to Judaism.

According to Rabbi Johanan, whoever denied idolatry was deemed a Jew (BT. *Megillah* 13a, a concept revived in the nineteenth century by Elia Benamozegh).

Another view, propagated by Judah ha-Levi (c. 1070/5–1141) and Maimonides (1135–1204), was that Christianity prepared the way for nations to worship the God of Israel and for redemption. Menachem Ha-Me'iri (1249–1316) put forward the most positive view in the Middle Ages when he argued that Christianity should be understood as a form of monotheism and coined the phrase "nations bound by the ways of religion" to relax certain rabbinic laws and facilitate a more fruitful interaction between Jews and Christians.

Jews viewed the Reformation as a positive development, partly because of its challenge to the unity of the Church, which at first diverted Christian attention away from Judaism. This was reinforced by the Protestant return to the Hebrew Bible (sola scriptura) and some Reformers' awareness of Jewish biblical commentaries (which may also have contributed to a rise in messianic fervour among Jews). The early writings of Martin Luther (1483–1546), such as "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew" (1523), suggested a dramatic change in Christian perceptions of Judaism, but expectations were short-lived and the bitter anti-Jewish treatises written towards the end of his life served to reinforce Jewish loyalty to the Catholic emperor. Despite its early promise, most Jews saw the Christian 'teaching of contempt' continue unabated in the Reformation, although John Calvin (1509–1564) and Calvinist churches were generally less antagonistic and held a more positive view of Judaism. Calvinism produced tolerance for Jews in the Netherlands and later in the American colonies, where the separation of church and state and an emphasis on the rights of man helped create a more tolerant society. In Europe, during the dramatic changes of the Enlightenment a small number of Jews, such as Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), reflected more positively on the Jewish relationship with Christianity. Although Mendelssohn himself remained Jewish, there was significant Jewish assimilation into either secularism or Christianity. Heinrich Heine (1797-1856) famously called his conversion a 'ticket of admission to European culture'. The dramatic increase in assimilation in the nineteenth century was foreshadowed by the French Revolution, which offered Jews equality on condition of abandoning their faith.

A more widespread shift in attitudes to Christianity among some Jewish religious leaders can be noted in the years following the Enlightenment and consequent Jewish emancipation. Reform figures such as Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) and Stephen Wise (1874–1949) embraced the Jewishness of Jesus, and even S. R. Hirsch (1808–88), one of the founders of Modern Orthodox Judaism, argued that Jesus embodied the essence of Judaism. Jewish philosophers such as Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) also made contributions to the Jewish understanding of Christianity, the former arguing that Jewish ethics were superior to Christian (heavily influencing Leo Baeck (1873–1956)), and the latter that Christianity was a pathway to God for Gentiles. As liberal culture spread throughout Europe, East European thinkers also wrote on Christianity: for example, Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), later Chief Rabbi of Palestine, praised Jesus but criticised Christianity for moving far from Judaism.

Jewish views of Christianity were also affected by an increasing anti-Jewish prejudice and the rise of racial antisemitism. The Enlightenment doctrine that, whilst

society could be remade, certain people were beyond redemption provided the basis for modern racism and reached a climax in the rise of Nazism and ultimately in the Holocaust.

During the years of the Third Reich, while most German churches accepted the state's "race, soil, and blood" stance, some churches, such as the Dutch Reformed Churches, began to question traditional *Adversus Iudaeos* theology about Judaism as well as the assumed necessity of Jewish conversion.

In 1947 a small group of leading Christians and Jews meeting at Seelisberg, Switzerland called on the churches to revise their thinking and preaching about Judaism and its people. This remained a minority position and in 1948, while acknowledging and regretting the churches' contribution to antisemitism, both the Evangelical Church in Germany and the World Council of Churches insisted that Christians were still obligated to include Jews in their evangelistic work, since Israel's election had passed to the Church.

Deep-seated theological transformation began two to three decades after the Holocaust. Even the term 'Holocaust' was questioned and began to be replaced by the word 'Shoah', which is also biblical in origin. 'Holocaust' is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *olah*, meaning 'whole burnt offering', and its sacrificial overtones, implying an appeasement of God, was offensive to many. 'Shoah' is Hebrew for 'catastrophe' and its connotations of rupture and doubt are often preferred.

The relations between Pope John XXIII and Judaism are generally thought to have been among the best in the bi-millennial history of Christianity. The Pope initiated a policy of Christian-Jewish reconciliation after his election to the papacy in 1959, which focused on the Second Vatican Council producing a document on the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jews. During his earlier career in the diplomatic service, especially during World War II, he had taken a series of actions that demonstrated his solidarity with victims of anti-Semitism.

Consideration of the Church's "teaching of contempt" for the Jewish people was put on the Second Vatican Council's agenda by Pope John XXIII (1881–1963) at the urging of Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) and Jules Isaac (1877–1963). This resulted in the publication of *Nostra Aetate* (1965). Both men encouraged church leaders to condemn antisemitism, to eliminate anti-Judaism from church teachings and to acknowledge the permanent value of Judaism. *Nostra Aetate's* insistence that 'Jews should not be presented as rejected [...] by God' was a significant turning point for the Roman Catholic Church and has been further amplified and developed by later pontifical documents.

When Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) led the Vatican to recognise the state of Israel in 1994, he overturned centuries of teaching that tied Jewish eviction from their land to their sinful rejection of Christ. Yet at the same time the Church, as representative of God and Christ on earth, is not seen as guilty of any error or wrong. As a child, Karol Wojtyła had played sports with his many Jewish neighbours. He was one of the few popes to have grown up in a climate of flourishing Jewish culture, one of the key components of pre-war Kraków, his interest in Jewish life dated from early youth. He wrote and delivered a number of speeches on the subject of the Church's relationship with Jews, and often paid homage to the victims of the Holocaust in many nations. In 1998 he issued "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah" which outlined his thinking on the Holocaust. He also became the first pope known to have made an official papal visit to a synagogue, when he visited the Great Synagogue of Rome on 13 April 1986. The Pope has said that Jews are "our elder brothers".

The Protestant churches in the last sixty years have also come to the recognition that the Holocaust made for ever unacceptable the view of Christianity as the successor religion to Judaism, as though Judaism had no legitimate place or vocation in the world once Christianity had come. Most of the Protestant church bodies have now produced statements, such as the 2001 *Church and Israel* published by the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, that seek to clarify the present-day relationship of their communities with the Jewish people and Judaism, and speak of God's eternal covenant with both Israel and the Church – either one covenant in two modes or two inseparable but distinct covenants.

The Orthodox Church, however, along with fundamentalist and biblically conservative churches generally, did not participate in these theological revisions, and still have not done so. Some churches retain an insistence on active missionary obligation, and both Jewish and Christian liturgy remains, for the most part, unchanged in the light of the modern Jewish-Christian encounter.

Mission remains a problematic topic for the churches, particularly the Protestant branches. The Evangelical Church of the Rhineland's 1980 document was a major turning point with its assertion that Jews were permanently elected as God's people, and that the Church was taken into this covenant with God through Jesus Christ the Jew. It insisted that the Church has no mission to the Jews, and the United Church of Canada has also repudiated efforts to convert Jews since God's covenant with Israel is irrevocable (2002). An ecumenical American scholars' group repeated these assertions and affirmed the redemptive power of God's enduring covenant with the Jewish people (*A Sacred Obligation*, 2002)¹.

As the post-Second World War reassessment of Christian attitudes towards Judaism accelerated and became more widespread, it began to have an impact on Jewish attitudes and contributed to a reassessment of Christianity among Jews. This eventually resulted in the publication of *Dabru Emet* in 2000, a document that explored the place of Christianity in Jewish terms. It represents the views of a significant proportion of Jews in English-speaking countries, although there are also many for whom Christianity is unimportant in their Jewish identity or who are critical of the document (particularly some Orthodox Jews).

Pope Francis' "Amoris Laetitia" ("The Joy of Love"), addresses the issue of interfaith marriages. While marriages of Catholics to other Christian are viewed as "mixed marriages", Francis calls marriages to non-Christians, including Jews, a privileged place for inter religious dialogue. The Church is no longer endorsing a policy of missionary conversion, especially toward Jews. So interfaith marriages are seen as an 'opportunity' to start a positive dialogue [about faith] with the non-Catholic

¹ Cfr. Boys Mary C. (ed.), *Seeing Judaism Anew. Christianity's Sacred Obligation*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Oxford 2005.

spouse, rather than an occasion to convert him or her. Francis has frequently stated that Catholics should not try to convert Jews.

3. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Christian-Jewish relations is therefore a complex enterprise, which cannot be reduced to simple theological or historical narratives, as some studies have tended to do. It must take into account politics, sociology, education, language, history, biblical studies, hermeneutics, and, of course, theology. It must also grapple with the traditions in each of these fields, within the religious communities, and within our own intellectual frameworks. If that dialogue avoids the most difficult issues and the complex discourse. It cannot claim to offer thorough diagnosis or healing. Both Judaism and Christianity have for many centuries been grappling with the most sophisticated available thought and have been coping with huge intellectual as well as other challenges.

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RELACJE CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKO-ŻYDOWSKIE BARDZO KRÓTKIE WPROWADZENIE

Streszczenie

Od początku XX w. relacje między judaizmem a chrześcijaństwem uległy wielkim zmianom. Mogą one posłużyć jako wielce obiecująca na przyszłość cząstka wielkiego dialogu międzyreligijnego. Zbliżenie w tych relacjach i rozwój nowych wspólnych dróg myślenia dokonało się za sprawą małej grupy uczonych oraz liderów religijnych w pierwszej połowie XX w. Nowe dążenia zbiegły się z tragedią Holokaustu, powstaniem państwa Izrael, rozwojem ruchu ekumenicznego, pracami Soboru Watykańskiego II (1962–1965). Te wielkie dziejowe wydarzenia i prądy przyczyniły się do dalszego pogłębiania pozytywnych i przełomowych przemian. Ich rezultat polegał na tym, iż chrześcijaństwo przez wieki przyczyniające się do przemocy wobec żydów, teraz zajęło postawę szacunku i uznania dla judaizmu. Wzajemne relacje, które w przeszłości były naznaczone niechęcią i obojętnością, teraz zostały życzliwie zacieśnione i poszerzone. Ze strony żydów, tradycyjny pogląd, że chrześcijaństwo jest nieprzyjacielem, został zastąpiony przekonaniem, że nawiązanie partnerskich relacji z chrześcijaństwem jest możliwe i że obydwie tradycje religijne mają wspólną mesjańską wizję Królestwa Bożego na ziemi.

Słowa kluczowe: judaizm, Izrael, dialog, kościoły chrześcijańskie, chrześcijaństwo w kategoriach żydowskich, Sobór Watykański II, przymierze Boga z Izraelem, Zagłada, trwałe wartości judaizmu, Kościół rzymskokatolicki, Kościół prawosławny, Kościoły protestanckie, małżeństwa międzywyznaniowe

Summary

Since the beginning of the twentieth century the relationship between Judaism and Christianity has changed dramatically and is one of the few pieces of encouraging news that can be reported today about the encounter between religions. The rapprochement in relations and the development of a new way of thinking were pioneered by a small number of scholars and religious leaders in the first half of the century. However, it was the impact of the Holocaust, the creation of the State of Israel, the development of the ecumenical movement and the work of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) which in combination made the changes more widespread. As a result, Christianity, so long an instigator of violence against Jews, rediscovered a respect and admiration for Judaism, and the once close relationship, which had become a distant memory, has been to a large extent restored. For Jews, the traditional view that they were on their own and that Christianity was an enemy has been replaced by a realisation that partnership with Christianity is possible and that both faiths share a Messianic vision of God's kingdom on earth.

Key words: Judaism, Israel, dialogue, Christian Churches, Christianity in Jewish terms, Second Vatican Council, God's covenant with Israel, Jewish people, Shoah, permanent value of Judaism, Roman Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Protestant churches, interfaith marriages

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