

# JUDAISM AND INTER-FAITH RELATIONS SINCE WORLD WAR II

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Relationships among followers of different faiths have become significantly more benign since WW2, and reflection on the horrors of the war with the accompanying attempt to exterminate the Jewish people has spurred the process. Long-term factors such as Enlightenment views on human rights, secularization, globalisation and the progress of scholarship have provided the soil within which such a development could flourish; without these, and with receding memories of WW2, it is unlikely the changes would be sustained.

The Hebrew Bible polemicizes against the religions of the nations; idols are to be smashed, idolaters defeated and destroyed. Jonah, Zachariah, Deutero-Isaiah and others recognize that there are God-fearers among the nations, and prophesy that one day all nations will recognize Him. People of all nations will indeed be welcomed, but only when they recognize the God of Israel, abandoning their corrupt, idolatrous forms of religion.

Foundations for a less confrontational theology were developed after the close of the Bible in response to a changing world. The Sages of the Talmud amplified concepts such as *ḥasidei ummot ha-‘olam* “the righteous among the nations” and the “Noachide Law” to accommodate the growing perception that many who were not of Israel entertained refined notions of God and high moral aspirations. Socially and politically, under foreign rule, Jews were guided by Jeremiah’s letter to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, “Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord in its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper” (Jeremiah 29:7).

With the rise of Christianity and Islam, both of which religions proclaimed One God and denounced idolatry, the conventional model of Israel versus the idolatrous nations proved inadequate. Judah Halevi (c. 1070-1141) outlined in his *Kuzari* a view of those faiths as “preparing the way” for eventual acceptance of the true Torah; Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) likewise argued that Christians and Muslims were on paths which led to truth; the Yemenite Rabbi Netanel Beirav Fayyumi (d. 1165) argued, in his *Bustan el-’Uqul*, that God

sends a prophet to every people according to their language and spiritual development,<sup>1</sup> the Qur'an being an authentic revelation for Muslims but not for Jews. Rabbi Menahem Meiri of Perpignan, Catalonia (1249-1306), devised the category of *ummot ha-g'durot b'darkhei ha-datot* "nations constrained by the rule of law" to accommodate contemporary Christians.

But there were reservations; the Catalan Ḥasdai Crescas (1340-1410), reacting to Catholic conversionism, devoted considerable energy to his *Refutation of the Principles of Christianity*. Moreover, the kabbalistic movement which spread from thirteenth-century Spain adopted an essentialist view of "Israel", emphasising the distinctive spiritual quality of Jews as "chosen people"; this assumption of a metaphysical difference between Jewish and non-Jewish "souls" undermined the distinction between ancient "idolaters" and contemporary Christians and Muslims.

Where one religion is in a position of political dominance, as Christianity in medieval Europe or Islam in North Africa and the Middle East, there can be disputation or discussion, but not true dialogue; even when freedom of expression is guaranteed by the dominant party, as in the *majālis* of the early Islamic Caliphate, participants tend to be prudently circumspect. Forced disputations, such as those of Barcelona (1263) and Tortosa (1413/14), gave way in the early modern West to "Christian Hebraism", with constructive scholarly contacts, such as those of Obadiah Sforno with Johannes Reuchlin and of Manasseh Ben Israel with Hugo Grotius. On the social plane, however, discrimination remained, driven by religious stereotypes. Christians and Muslims, throughout the Middle Ages, tolerated semi-autonomous Jewish communities in their midst, but treated them with contempt; Jews reversed the contempt, reflecting it back on the host societies, to whom they referred pejoratively as *goyim* ("nations", "gentiles") – meaning nations other than, and inferior to, Israel.

Manasseh Ben Israel (1604-47), engaging directly in dialogue with leading Christians, presented Judaism in terms which resonated with Christian culture and were not threatening to Christian society; the Enlightenment philosopher Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86) argued that Judaism was a religion of reason, free of irrational dogma. Such liberal ideas became standard among acculturated Western Jews, including the Notables of the French Sanhedrin convened by Napoleon in 1806, but were less favoured in Eastern Europe.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Qur'an 5:48 and 14:4.

Nineteenth century German Jewish liberals cultivated a less defensive image of Judaism. The historian Heinrich Graetz (1817-91) maintained that Judaism was the sole true monotheism, the only rational religion, and its mission was to preserve and propagate its sublime ethical truths throughout humanity; the philosopher Hermann Cohen (1842-1918) argued that Israel's messianic vocation was *imitatio dei* in the form of protector of the alien; the Liberal Rabbi Leo Baeck (1873-1956), in *Das Wesen des Judentums* ("The Essence of Judaism"), stressed ethical monotheism and the absence of irrational dogma.

Martin Buber (1878-1965), adopted Feuerbach's philosophy of personal experience as manifest in relationships. God, for Buber, is "the eternal Thou"; *halakha*, as a system removed from the direct experience of God, loses significance. This interpretation of Judaism enabled Buber to regard Christianity, or at least Jesus, in a favourable light; his philosophy of encounter (*Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung*: "All true living is meeting") generated space within which dialogue might thrive. Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) contrasted the situation of the Christian who can reach the Father only through Jesus with that of the Jew "who does not have to *reach* the Father because *he is already with Him*". In the early twentieth century it was possible to sense, in the careers of Baeck, Buber and Rosenzweig, that religious philosophy might, like Biblical studies, be an enterprise in which Jews and Christians could share on equal terms.

Then came Nazism; voices of reason and understanding were stilled. But seeds had been sown that would ultimately bear fruit when the time was ripe for serious dialogue.

Buber settled in 1938 in Jerusalem. Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972), his successor as Director of the *Freies jüdisches Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt, was expelled by the Nazis in 1938 and settled in the USA in 1940. Socially active, Heschel communicated his religio-ethical concerns through participation in the American civil rights and antiwar movements, marching together with Martin Luther King Jr. He involved himself deeply in interfaith activities between Jews and Christians and in 1964 urged on Pope Paul VI the need for a Catholic declaration on relations with Jews.

Enlightenment philosophies of toleration, together with the rise of secular government and the granting of citizenship to Jews, had paved the way for unforced dialogue between Western Jews and Christians as social equals. Other contributory factors were improved communications, heightened global awareness, the undermining of religious authority in response to scientific discoveries, the specific challenges of historical scholarship to

traditional views of sources of religious teaching including the Bible, and the development of non-theological, sociological and anthropological studies of religion. In the aftermath of the Holocaust all these elements combined to generate an unprecedented flowering of inter-faith relations, not only between Jews and Christians, but encompassing all faiths.

Increasingly since WW2 religious communities have come to see themselves as on the defensive; they find common cause in fighting against secularity and what they perceive as the lowering of moral values. Religion no longer dominates daily life; education, welfare, social relations, counselling and even ritual are nowadays governed by secular institutions and professionals; the stories and heroes of popular culture are not those of religious tradition.

Statistics attest a radical change in the religious complexion of society. Recent (2011) government figures for England and Wales show that although 59.3% claim affiliation to some sort of Christianity (down from 71.1% in 2001), the proportion disclaiming any religious affiliation has risen from 14.8% to 25.1% in the same period. Of course, this still leaves 74.9% with some sort of religious affiliation (other sources give a lower figure). Religion remains significant in the private realm, in huge variety, but no longer defines the public life of the nation. That is why interreligious dialogue is now perceived as necessary to enable peaceful cooperation in a religiously plural and increasingly global society and is now mainstream social policy.

The prime objective of dialogue in the interfaith context is therefore mutual comprehension and harmonious living, not the pursuit of agreement on absolute truth, and certainly not conversion. Traditional religions all regard certain basic provisions as non-negotiable; but dialogue is not negotiation, so challenges no one to abandon deeply-held convictions. Even so, convictions are often subtly reinterpreted to reflect a broader human understanding of the religious experience that underlies doctrinal formulations.

‘Faiths’ – e.g. Judaism and Christianity – cannot engage in dialogue, for they are abstractions; only *people* – living Jews and Christians for instance - can engage with one another. Even then, the dialogue is not merely of Jew and Christian, for one walks beside unseen. There is always a third presence, mediating, without which neither can communicate

with the other.<sup>2</sup> Dialogue is possible because we are able to mediate our traditions through a common language a common culture, that of modernity. This shared culture, with its historical critical approach and secular humanism, is not a neutral medium. Rather, it is an active “third presence” in dialogue, so all-pervasive (as Aristotle said of the “music of the spheres”) that it is in danger of not being noticed. A powerful movement of the human spirit, it both sets the rules for engagement and challenges traditional doctrinal formulation.

Dialogue among ‘ordinary’ Jews, Christians and Muslims is not inherently problematic, provided the clergy do not interfere; people meet as human individuals, not as avatars of religion. However, throughout the Middle Ages the clergy interfered mightily; fraternisation across religious boundaries was strongly discouraged by Jews, Christians and Muslims, and conventional religious teaching propagated distorted stereotypes of ‘the other’. Even today, uncritical religious and nationalistic ideologies are capable of generating false images (anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, “goyim”), rendering people mutually suspicious. When dialogue does its work, each learns to look on the other as fellow human being rather than as religious stereotype.

Dialogue takes place, naturally and informally, among ordinary people in the home or workplace; it proceeds at an academic level; and it has been promoted, more formally, at an institutional level, between Churches, governments and the like.

Jews engage in institutional interfaith dialogue from several motives. Most regard it as a way of defending Jews and Judaism from misrepresentation and defamation; some see it as a theological imperative arising from core Jewish values;<sup>3</sup> some as a forum for the defence of the State of Israel; some as a way of ensuring that the religious voice is heard and religious values play their part in public decision-making; others, in common with adherents of other religions, reflect on the havoc wreaked on society by past religious conflicts and aspire through mutual understanding and friendship to ensure that this never happens again.

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<sup>2</sup> Solomon, Norman, “The Third Presence: Reflections on the Dialogue”, in T. Bayfield and M. C. R. Braybrooke (eds.), *Dialogue with a Difference: The Manor House Group Experience*. London: SCM Press, 1992, 147-162.

<sup>3</sup> Novak, David, ed. Matthew LaGrone, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism: The Idea of Noahide Law*. Liverpool: Lottman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2011.

## Beginnings

The London Society for the Study of Religion, founded in 1904, had among its leading members the Liberal Jewish scholar Claude Montefiore (1858-1938). The London Society of Jews and Christians, the oldest interfaith organization of its kind in the United Kingdom, was founded in 1927 by religious leaders of the Liberal Jewish Synagogue and of Westminster Abbey (Anglican); still active, it defines its aims as: “To increase religious understanding and to promote goodwill and co-operation between Jews and Christians, with mutual respect for the differences in faith and practice.” Also in 1927 the National Conference of Jews and Christians was founded in the United States, and was shortly followed by a parallel organisation in South Africa.

One of the earliest academic initiatives was taken in 1938, when Rabbi Louis Finkelstein (1895-1991) at the Jewish Theological Seminary, together with Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) of Union Theological Seminary and the anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978) at Columbia, founded the Institute for Religious and Social Studies (now the Louis Finkelstein Institute, and since 2011 complemented by the Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue).

In Britain, the Council of Christians and Jews was formed in 1942 under the leadership of William Temple, then Archbishop of York. Caution as well as encouragement is evident in this communication dated 2nd July 1942 from Temple, who was confirmed as Archbishop of Canterbury in April of that year, to Dr Joseph H. Hertz, Chief Rabbi of the British Empire:

My own approach to this matter is governed by the consideration that the effectiveness of any religious belief depends upon its definiteness, and that neither Jews nor Christians should in my judgement combine in any such way as to obscure the distinctiveness of their witness to their own beliefs. There is much that we can do together in combating religious and racial intolerance, in forwarding social progress and in bearing witness to those moral principles which we unite in upholding.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Braybrooke, Marcus, *Children of One God: A History of the Council of Christians and Jews*, London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1991, 16-17.

The well-being of society, not theological dialogue, let alone conversion, is the aim. Hertz doubtless concurred. Both men, insisting on the “definiteness” of religious belief, were distancing themselves from philosophies that regarded all religions as aspects of One Truth, their differences insignificant – and also abjuring attempts at mutual conversion.

Following World War II, and under the impact of the revelation of the facts of the Shoah (Holocaust) and the establishment of the State of Israel, many Christians in the West felt themselves impelled to reassess their traditional relationships with Jews and Judaism, and at the very least to repudiate antisemitism; it was painfully obvious not only that the Churches had failed to oppose antisemitism effectively, but that Nazism had exploited traditional Christian stereotypes. Individual Christian theologians such as James Parkes in England had already argued powerfully for the revision of traditional Christian attitudes to Jews and Judaism, and their ideas were to bear fruit in the post-war years; scholarship, moreover, had discredited the polemical New Testament portrayal of Jews and Judaism, and this had already led to some degree of theological reappraisal.

Enter Jules Isaac (1877-1963), a distinguished French historian who had been dismissed from his post under the Nazi occupation of France. After WW2 Isaac devoted much of his life to combating antisemitism, which he saw as rooted in what he called the Christian “teaching of contempt” (*l'enseignement du mépris*). Retaining nevertheless a high esteem of Christianity, he promoted Jewish-Christian reconciliation and Jewish-Christian dialogue; in 1947, with Edmond Fleg, he co-founded the French Judeo-Christian Friendship organization (*L'Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne*) and in the following year had a hand in the establishment of a parallel organisation (*Amicizia Ebraico-cristiana di Firenze*) in Florence, Italy. Also, that year, he presented, to a group of European Christian and Jewish intellectuals in Paris, his Eighteen Points for the “rectification necessary in Christian teaching” regarding the Jews to counter anti-Semitism.

The American Conference of Christians and Jews had in 1944 proposed an international gathering of representatives from Christian-Jewish constituencies. This gathering materialized in Oxford, England, in August 1946, in the form of a Conference which aimed to define the fundamental rights and obligations of all human beings, regardless of religion or race. But while noting that Jews, Roman Catholics, Orthodox and Protestant Christians had all at times suffered persecution, the Conference recognized that anti-Semitism called for special treatment, and called for the convening of a dedicated emergency

conference to specifically address anti-Semitism. It also mooted the possibility of formation of an International Council of Christians and Jews.

The Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism took place in Seelisberg, Switzerland, the following year, and was attended by sixty-five prominent members of the Roman Catholic and Reformed churches, and of the European and American Jewish communities. Here, on 5 August 1947, on the basis of Isaac's Eighteen Points, the "Ten Points of Seelisberg" were agreed:

1. Remember that One God speaks to us all through the Old and the New Testaments.
2. Remember that Jesus was born of a Jewish mother of the seed of David and the people of Israel, and that His everlasting love and forgiveness embraces His own people and the whole world.
3. Remember that the first disciples, the apostles and the first martyrs were Jews.
4. Remember that the fundamental commandment of Christianity, to love God and one's neighbour, proclaimed already in the Old Testament and confirmed by Jesus, is binding upon both Christians and Jews in all human relationship, without any exception.
5. Avoid distorting or misrepresenting biblical or post-biblical Judaism with the object of extolling Christianity.
6. Avoid using the word *Jews* in the exclusive sense of the enemies of Jesus and the words *The Enemies of Jesus* to designate the whole Jewish people.
7. Avoid presenting the Passion in such a way as to bring the odium of the killing of Jesus upon all Jews or upon Jews alone. It was only a section of the Jews in Jerusalem who demanded the death of Jesus, and the Christian message has always been that it was the sins of mankind which were exemplified by those Jews and the sins in which all men share that brought Christ to the Cross.
8. Avoid referring to the scriptural curses, or the cry of a raging mob: *His Blood be Upon Us and Our Children*, without remembering that this cry should not count against the infinitely more weighty words of our Lord: *Father Forgive Them, for They Know not What They Do*.
9. Avoid promoting the superstitious notion that the Jewish people are reprobate, accursed, reserved for a destiny of suffering.

10. Avoid speaking of the Jews as if the first members of the Church had not been Jews.

The Ten Points were issued in 1947 by the Christian participants as an independent group, with no formal Church backing. In 1948 proposals for an International Council of Christians and Jews met with indifference or hostility; although ICCJ dates its inception from that time it was not until 1962 that it was established as the International Consultative Committee of Organizations Working for Christian-Jewish Cooperation and not until 1974 that it became fully operational under its present name.

Nor did the Roman Catholic Church respond with any degree of urgency. Jules Isaac is said to have met with Pope Pius XII in 1949; there is no evident consequence of that meeting. However, Isaac describes in his diary a cordial “private” meeting with John XXIII in June 1960; this is thought to have contributed to Pope John’s decision to direct Cardinal Bea to draft “a declaration on the Catholic Church’s relationship to the Jewish people for the upcoming Second Vatican Council”. The draft eventually took form as Note 4 of the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*; in this, the Church distances itself from the “teaching of contempt”.

### **The World Council of Churches**

Meanwhile the World Council of Churches, whose members include some Orthodox as well numerous Protestant Churches, began to redefine Christian attitudes to Jews and Judaism. At its first General Assembly, in Amsterdam in 1948, delegates reflected on the hundreds of thousands of Jews who had been taken from that city to the Nazi death camps, and declared: “to the Jews our God has bound us in a special solidarity linking our destinies together in His design”. Antisemitism was condemned as “irreconcilable with the Christian faith ... sin against God and man”, and this condemnation of antisemitism was vigorously reaffirmed at the Evanston (1954) and New Delhi (1961) Assemblies. Both the establishment of Israel and the nature of Judaism as a living faith were noted. Unfortunately, the gesture towards the Jewish people, however well-intentioned, was seriously undermined in Jewish eyes when love for the Jews was expressed by redoubled call to mission. “Hitler sought to destroy our bodies; these Christians seek to destroy our souls by weaning us away from our faith” would convey the more sceptical Jewish reaction, though many Jews did recognize and welcome the Churches’ genuine contrition.

In those early WCC pronouncements Jews were treated as a theological object rather than as living people with whom one might engage in dialogue. Discussions with Jews about possible direct consultation are recorded from about 1962. Eleven Christian and none Jewish leaders (from the Synagogue Council of America) met in August 1965 at Bossey to discuss “The Situation of Man in the World Today”. The consultative process then initiated profoundly affected the report of the Committee on the Church and the Jewish People which was accepted and commended “for further theological study” by the WCC’s Commission on Faith and Order at Bristol U.K. in 1967. Reserve with regard to the call to mission to Jews was expressed in section IV, “The Church and her witness”: “The existence of this unique relationship raises the question as to whether it conditions the way in which Christians have to bear witness of Jesus to Jews”; proselytizing, in the sense of “the corruption of witness in cajolery, undue pressure or intimidation”, was rejected.

Direct consultation with Jews seems still to have been regarded as delicate. Dr. Gerhart M. Riegner of the World Jewish Congress and Eugene C. Blake, then General Secretary of WCC, convened a meeting in June 1968, but the first meeting to be made public was in February 1970. A dozen years passed before 16 July 1982, when the chief fruit of all these deliberations, the *Ecumenical Guidelines on Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, was “received and commended to the churches for study and action” by the Executive Committee of the WCC at Geneva.

Further progress was made at the Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People in Arnoldshain, West Germany, 10-14 February 1986, but the most significant advance was the document formulated at the November 1988 meeting in Sigtuna, Sweden, of the WCC's Committee on the Church and the Jewish People. This document recognizes the lack of consensus among its members on mission and on the significance of the Land of Israel, but claims wide agreement for the following:

1. The covenant of God with the Jewish people remains valid.
2. Antisemitism and all forms of the teaching of contempt for Judaism are to be repudiated.
3. The living tradition of Judaism is a gift of God.
4. Coercive proselytism directed towards Jews is incompatible with Christian faith.

5. Jews and Christians bear a common responsibility as witnesses to God's righteousness and peace in the world.

In addition, nine affirmations were agreed at Sigtuna; these recognized Israel's call, acknowledged the spiritual treasures shared by Jews and Christians, made clear that Jews should not be blamed for Jesus' passion, and expressed sorrow at the Christian share of responsibility for Jewish suffering, culminating in the Shoah.

### **Articulating a Jewish Response**

Jews have no Pope, nor any obvious representative religious body to speak collectively on their behalf in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church or the World Council of Churches; there are, moreover, many who identify themselves as Jews without any religious commitment at all. Who, then, might represent Jewry in formal interfaith dialogue?

To solve this problem Dr Riegner of the World Jewish Congress (WJC), with assistance of Prof. Jean Halpérin, convened the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) in 1969, on the basis of an agreement between the WJC and the Synagogue Council of America. The American Jewish Committee joined in 1970, followed by B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Council in Israel for Interreligious Relations (*Jewish Christian Dialogue* 1975, 17-18). IJCIC includes religious leaders from Orthodox, Conservative and Reform Judaism, from Israel, Europe, the USA and elsewhere, who work together in the interests of interfaith understanding.

Members of the Orthodox Rabbinical Council of America (RCA) refuse to allow “theology” on the agenda; they claim to be following a line laid down by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. This does not indicate reluctance on the part of the RCA to engage in dialogue. To the contrary, in February 1964, when the first high-level dialogues between the Churches and Jewish representatives were mooted, they issued a statement making clear both their commitment to dialogue, and the limitations to which it is subject:

We are pleased to note that in recent years there has evolved ... a desire to seek better understanding and a mutual respect among the world's major faiths. The current threat of materialism and secularism and the modern atheistic negation of religion and religious values makes even more imperative a harmonious relationship among the faiths. This relationship

will only be of value if it will not be in conflict with the uniqueness of each religious community ... Each religious community is endowed with intrinsic dignity and metaphysical worth ...<sup>5</sup>

Soloveitchik, in his capacity as chairman of the Halakhah Commission of the RCA, had been asked for his opinion, which he eventually expressed in a paper, "Confrontation", published in *Tradition*, the journal of Yeshiva University, where many RCA rabbis were or had been his students.<sup>6</sup> It may be noted that his guidance rests not on halakhic considerations, but on questionable philosophical arguments; in no sense is it a 'ruling'.

There is not strict parity between Jewish and Christians delegations at such Consultations. Christians define themselves solely in religious terms, whereas Jewish self-understanding hinges both on religious concepts and on a sense of Jewish 'nationhood' or 'peoplehood' (which some regard as itself a religious value). Then there are differences in ecclesiastical structure. The Roman Catholic Church is a hierarchical structure capable of issuing authoritative statements and guidelines; the World Council works on the basis of consensus amongst its member Churches, to whom it can commend its resolutions "for study and action". The WJC, in contrast, is a lay body, not qualified to make theological pronouncements or recommendations. On the other hand, the WJC does feel qualified to make *political* statements on behalf of 'World Jewry' or Israel, and this is not paralleled in the WCC.

Formal dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Jewish people is undertaken by the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ILC). On the Catholic side, this consists of representatives of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, created in 1974 under Paul VI. (The CRRJ is an office within the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity; the Roman Curia treats Jews as internal, in contrast with the World Council of Churches which treats them as external, within the remit of the sub-unit for

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<sup>5</sup> The statement is reproduced in *Tradition* 6/2 (1964), 28-29, following the original article.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed critique see Solomon, Norman, "The Soloveitchik Line", in *Problems in Contemporary Jewish Theology* ed. Dan Cohn-Sherbok. Edwin Mellen Press: New York, 1992, 225-39.

dialogue with people of “other faiths”.) On the Jewish side, IJCIC is the representative body. The ILC has continued to meet frequently; the 23rd International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee Meeting took place in Warsaw, 4-7 April, 2016, on the theme of “The ‘Other’ in Jewish and Catholic Tradition: Refugees in Today’s World”.

### **The Roman Catholic Church**

The development of a coherent Catholic standpoint vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism can be traced through documents and papal pronouncements:

1. Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to non-Christian Religions (28 October 1965): *Nostra Aetate* n.4
2. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (no. 4), 1 December 1974.
3. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church, 24 June, 1985.
4. Popes from John XXIII onwards have consistently promoted the improvement of Catholic-Jewish relations. John Paul II made several personal pronouncements, including a reference to “the old covenant, never revoked by God”. The process is comprehensively summed up in a document issued by the CRRJ in December 2015, on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, under the suggestive title “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (*Romans* 11:29), where it is made plain that relations between Catholics and Jews should be regarded by Catholics on a different and more intimate basis than those with other religions.

Though the Holocaust had figured in some drafts, the final text of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 managed to ignore it. The 1975 *Guidelines* referred to it obliquely, and the 1986 *Notes* more clearly, if perfunctorily. In 1990, 45 years after the Shoah, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, meeting in Prague with IJCIC, issued a document containing an admission of guilt on the part of the Church, and this was subsequently endorsed by John Paul II.

A similar slow process characterized the Holy See's attitude to a Jewish State in the Land of Israel. Theodore Herzl (*Diary* Vol 3 p.345) records his meeting with Pius X on 27

January 1904, when he was allegedly told: “We cannot support this movement. We cannot stop Jews from returning to Jerusalem, but we certainly cannot help them. The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people.” On the other hand, the Zionist leader Nahum Sokolow recorded a sympathetic hearing from Benedict XV in 1917.

*Nostra Aetate*, issued seventeen years after the foundation of Israel, makes no mention of the state; the 1975 *Guidelines* are likewise silent. The 1985 *Notes for Preaching and Teaching* at last “invited” Christians to understand the religious attachment of Jews to Israel, whilst remarking “The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law.”

Only in 1993-1994 did the Holy See establish full diplomatic relations with the State of Israel, removing thereby a major stumbling-block from Catholic-Jewish relations. Some question the propriety of the Holy See engaging in diplomatic relations as a national entity. But it does, so there is relief that Israel no longer has to submit to the insult of being treated as if it was somehow less of a nation than numerous others, many of them totalitarian and corrupt, which the Holy See “recognizes”. The diplomatic connection has been cemented by papal visits and by the establishment in 2002 of the bilateral committee of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel with the Vatican (see below).

### **The World Council of Churches**

Relations between IJCIC and WCC have not always been smooth. The Harvard 1984 and Geneva 1986 WCC/IJCIC meetings were constructive enough. Later on, however, the two organisations fell out over WCC Resolutions on Israel and over the appointment as head of the Secretariat of a converted Jew. Low key meetings nevertheless continued between the top officials, while WCC sought dialogue with other Jewish organisations – notably the Anti-Defamation League - or individuals.

WCC has taken several initiatives to broaden the scope of Christian-Jewish dialogue. Together with IJCIC, it conducted an African Christian-Jewish Consultation, in Nairobi, Kenya, in November 1986; in December 1993 it convened a conference on Jewish-Christian Dialogue in the Light of Asian Cultures and Religions, at Cochin, South India. It was a novel experience to engage in dialogue in a situation where Christians were themselves a minority

religion and where, though the Holocaust was not without relevance, people did not feel that they were living constantly in its shadow.

WCC has not shied away from dialogue on politically sensitive issues. One of the most fraught meetings was an International Conference of Jews, Christians and Muslims on Jerusalem, convened by the WCC at Glion, overlooking Lake Geneva, in May 1993. Though Palestinian and Israeli delegates had come with diametrically opposed viewpoints and there was considerable posturing, an agreed joint statement was eventually cobbled together and forwarded to Washington, where official PLO/Israel talks were apparently bogged down. Unknown to delegates, the real dialogue was even then taking place in Norway, where it would shortly lead to the Oslo Peace Accords.

Allan Brockway has summed up the required changes in theological perspective as seen within the World Council of Churches:<sup>7</sup>

**A. Common Roots:** Call to Abraham; revelation of One God; giving of Torah

**B. Parting of the Ways:** The first Christians were Jews; inclusion of gentiles into Church and distancing from Jewish people; separation of Church and Jews; different views of scripture, Jesus, messiah; empowerment of Christianity; recent awareness of guilt for 'teaching of contempt' which led to Shoah.

**C. Traditional Theological Issues:** Covenant and election - Israel's covenant never displaced (difficult theological consequences of this notion); Scripture - Judaism not to be equated with O.T. (Bristol 1967), but in what sense is NT "fulfilment"? Torah and law - not legalism, but covenant - Jesus observed Torah law - oral Torah; Jewishness of Jesus and his thought - Christological implications - "Christ has bound the church to the Jewish people" - difficulty (inappropriateness) of term "Messiah".

**D. Contemporary Theological Issues:** Antisemitism and Shoah, variants of anti-Judaism - early Christian anti-Judaism continues pre-Christian prejudice and adds Christian input - history of pogroms and persecution; modern religious freedom saw secular anti-Jewish movement adopt Christian prejudices - contemporary Christian penitence; Israel -

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<sup>7</sup> Brockway, Allan R. et alia (eds.), *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People: statements by the World Council of Churches and its member churches*. Geneva: WCC, 1988. Section III, 149-76.

revival of state baffles church - recognition of state as safeguarding existence of the people - the tie between people and land “remains by the grace of God” (Netherlands Reformed Church 1970) - aspect of continuing covenant, but not “theological validation”; Mission - change of emphasis from mission to dialogue - rejection of “proselytization”; common responsibility of Jews and Christians towards world - justice and righteousness - wait and hope in God.

### **Individual non-Roman Churches**

Several Churches have taken independent initiatives. Lutherans have boldly repudiated the anti-Semitic teachings of their founder, Martin Luther, expressed in his notorious 1543 tract “The Jews and Their Lies”. In 1982 the Lutheran World Federation issued a consultation stating that "we Christians must purge ourselves of any hatred of the Jews and any sort of teaching of contempt for Judaism"; at Driebergen (1991) , and again at Helsinki in 2011, the Lutherische Europäische Kommission Kirche und Judentum (LEKKJ) reiterated this stance, calling for the reformation of church practice. Such statements have been repeatedly endorsed, not least on the occasion of the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Luther’s promulgation of the 95 theses.

Anglicans have found it difficult to recognize any problem in their relationship with Jews. They have never persecuted Jews; if England was the home of the Blood Libel and the Expulsion such events pre-dated the formation of the Anglican Church. More percipient Anglicans realize that they must take responsibility for the Christian heritage as a whole, and that a constructive and non-patronising relationship with Jews and Judaism is essential not merely to the social order but to Christian self-understanding.

The first Anglican-Jewish Consultation took place at Andover in November 1980 on the theme of Law and Religion in Contemporary Society. I was co-convenor with Bishop Richard Harries of Oxford for a second, at Shallowford House, Staffordshire in 1987, and also for a ‘local’ meeting of British Jewish leaders and the Church of England at St George's, Windsor, in 1992. It was at Shallowford House, one sultry Summer afternoon in what was scheduled as a rest period, that Gerhard Riegner held participants spellbound with an unscheduled, electrifying account of his role in Geneva in 1942 in the frantic attempt to convince Allied leaders that Hitler really was applying the Final Solution.

Bishop Harries persuaded the Anglican Church to draft a document on Jewish-Christians Relations for consideration by the Anglican Communion at the decennial Lambeth Conference in 1988, and I accepted his invitation to be Jewish Consultant to the drafting committee. Political sensitivities led to the draft eventually extending to relations with Muslims as well as Jews. The Bishops at Lambeth unanimously commended the final document for study, and encouraged Churches to “engage in dialogue with Jews and Muslims on the basis of understanding, affirmation and sharing illustrated in it.” The document is remarkable for its insistence on the “common witness to God” of the three faiths; it neither obscures the differences between and within the faiths, nor compromises the uniqueness of the Christian-Jewish relationship.<sup>8</sup>

Special mention should be made of a pioneering series conducted by the British United Reformed Church<sup>9</sup> in the 1980s. These differed from most other consultations by involving lay members of communities in greater numbers than scholars and religious leaders; the volume which emerged from the first five meetings has about it a practical and popular approach lacking in the formal documents produced by the larger Churches.<sup>10</sup>

Acknowledgment is due also to the International Council of Christians and Jews and to its member Councils in more than twenty countries; their impact both on the formation of opinion in the Churches and on the implementation of such guidelines as are produced is immense.

### **The Demise of Communism**

After 1989 the anti-religious communist governments of eastern and central Europe, collapsed, leaving the way open for the Churches to regroup. Already before 1989 delegates from 'Iron Curtain' countries had begun to participate in dialogue; some of the most notable contributions had come from Poland, where in Kraków in 1987 I was present at a memorable

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<sup>8</sup> *Jews, Christians and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue*. Appendix 6 (pp. 299-307) of *The Truth Shall Make You Free: The Lambeth Conference 1988*, published by the Anglican Consultative Council.

<sup>9</sup>The United Reformed Church was inaugurated in 1972 through the union of the Presbyterian Church of England and the Congregational Church in England and Wales.

<sup>10</sup> *Christians and Jews in Britain: A Study Handbook for Christians* London: United Reformed Church Mission and Other Faiths Committee, 1984.

consultation with the Polish Bishops' Commission on the Jews and learned of the progress already made in a country where Catholic-Jewish relations have a problematic history.

Increased participation with East Europeans enabled a broader dialogue with Orthodox Churches, not least those of Russia and Ukraine. At a consultation in Athens in 1993 between the Ecumenical Patriarchate of the Orthodox Churches and IJCIC, Orthodox Church leaders and theologians from several East European and Middle Eastern countries determined to embark on a programme of reassessment and re-education in Jewish-Christian relations. Whether the far-reaching resolutions, endorsed at subsequent meetings, are fully implemented, hinges on the extent to which the Orthodox Churches are prepared to accommodate themselves to modernity; nor would it be realistic to assume that Christian-Jewish relations is high on the list of Orthodox Christian priorities at this time.

### **Some Recent Statements**

The International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee (ILC) has continued to meet more or less annually, issuing a series of joint declarations and statements, sometimes less significant for originality of content than for the mere fact of how, where and by whom they were issued. The 13<sup>th</sup> ILC meeting (Prague 1990) issued a “Common Declaration on Antisemitism”; the 15<sup>th</sup> meeting (Jerusalem 1994) was in favour of the family; the 20<sup>th</sup> meeting (Budapest November 2008) declared “Every Society Must Respect and Defend Human Dignity”, hardly something to capture the headlines, though perhaps a timely reminder in Hungary. At the very least, the continuation of such meetings indicates the determination of both parties to maintain good relations between their communities and to ensure that past achievements are built upon and promoted worldwide.

Mention has already been made of the 1991 Driebergen Declaration, in which the European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People distanced itself from Martin Luther’s anti-Jewish expressions. Other Churches, some independently and some in collaboration with Jews, have articulated their commitment to improved Christian-Jewish relations, few more powerfully than the Swiss Bishops Conference, the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches and the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities, who met in 2007 to celebrate the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Seelisberg Conference and assess its achievements.

Christian M. Rutishauser notes the farsightedness and socio-political realism of the 1947 Conference in laying foundations for Jewish-Christian dialogue and for the fight against

anti-Semitism. Since the 1950s, he claims, dialogue between Jews and Christians has taken on a less political and more interreligious character, notwithstanding an increasing focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Many of the recommendations of the Seelisberg Conference in the social, educational and legal domains have been fulfilled or are in development, while in the interreligious realm, the major churches have affirmed the positive relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Today it has become commonplace to speak about a Judeo-Christian tradition, something that was inconceivable in 1947. Not only the Catholic Church but many of the Reformed Churches have radically revised their relationship with Jews and Judaism; the deicide charge and the teaching of contempt are no longer a part of mainstream Christian theology; indeed, “the critical voice has at times attacked so harshly that valid elements of Christian faith have been held as anti-Jewish or, from the Jewish perspective, as a relapse into paganism”.

Rutishauser notes that, since Seelisberg, numerous theological topics relevant to Jewish-Christian dialogue, such as the concept of Messiah, the meaning of chosenness, the concepts of sin, expiation and sacrifice, the liturgy, and the significance of law and Gospel, have been studied from both Jewish and Christian perspectives. As he rightly observes, the traditional notion of Judaism as the “mother religion” of Christianity has given way in the light of historical research to “another metaphor of Judaism and Christianity as sibling religions, both as legitimate outgrowths or branches from Biblical Judaism.”<sup>11</sup>

The Seelisberg anniversary festivities included the reading of a new declaration which, though national in character, reflects sentiment in many communities in the western world; it aims to integrate religious and socio-political orientations while addressing “the regressive tendencies that accompany the current social revolutions.” Some extracts will illustrate the flavour:

... The attitudes of the Reformed Churches and the Roman Catholic Church toward Judaism have changed fundamentally, from a relationship of ambivalence and mistrust or even enmity to one of coexistence and brotherly and sisterly cooperation. Anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism have

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<sup>11</sup> Quotations in this section are from Rutishauser, Christian, *The 1947 Seelisberg Conference: The Foundation of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue*. Center for Jewish Learning at Boston College e-journal 2/2 (2007) (downloaded 10 August 2017 at <http://escholarship.bc.edu/scjr/vol2/iss2/>), 34-53.

been reduced strongly in our country through a variety of religious, educational, social, and political initiatives.

In light of the current major changes within our increasingly pluralistic and complex society as a whole, we are confronted with the appearance of regressive and reactionary currents. The signers thus commit themselves now and in the future to combat every form of discrimination based on ethnic background or beliefs; to work ceaselessly on the sensitive relationship between Jewish congregations and Christian churches; to seek out and promote mutual understanding and theological dialogue; and to draw on the best of one's own religious traditions for an existence in peace and justice within Swiss society.

The signatories also pledged themselves to work together for integration of an historical understanding of the Shoah into the consciousness of all members of society; for an objective and constructive reaction to events in the Middle East, especially those in Israel/Palestine; for the integration of Muslims immigrants; for the public and political presence of religious groups for the benefit of the entire populace; for effective assistance in the light of new social injustices; and for the advancement of concrete measures "for the protection of our earth, which has been placed in our hands, and of God's creation".

### **Israel and Interfaith Dialogue**

The establishment of the State of Israel opened a Pandora's box of problems for Jewish theologians. What, from a religious point of view, is the relationship between Land and People? Is the restoration of Jewish independence the beginning of the messianic redemption process? What meaning can a secular State have for religious Jews? How can the values of rabbinic Judaism be reflected in the affairs of a modern State? How, and to what extent, should Israel safeguard the rights of Christian, Muslim and other minorities? How, in the context, of Israel, are classical Jewish universalist teachings to be interpreted? What is the relationship between the 'diaspora' communities and Israel? Add to this all the agonising problems raised by a perceived need to defend one's new-found sovereignty by war. Discussion of such topics by contemporary Jewish thinkers reveals vigorous debate and a wealth of opinions, much of it relevant to interfaith dialogue.

Several initiatives have been taken over the years to enhance mutual understanding and acceptance among Israel's diverse religious communities. The Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel (ICCI), associated since 2015 with the Rabbis for Human Rights organisation, was founded by Rabbi Dr. Ron Kronish in 1991 to promote understanding and communication between members of different faith communities in Israel and to build foundations for lasting fellowship.<sup>12</sup> Its sixty or so associated organizations include Jewish-Arab groups, various interfaith forums, institutes, universities, and museums; it sponsors a variety of education, dialogue and action programs, including a Jewish-Muslim dialogue group for professionals and community leaders which meets in Haifa. Its ambitious mission is "to harness the teachings and values of the three Abrahamic faiths and transform religion's role from a force of division and extremism into a source of reconciliation, coexistence and understanding for the leaders and followers of these religions in Israel and in our region." Although both dialogue and action are on its agenda, ICCI emphasizes that "Dialogue is not enough". One excellent example of action is provided by the school and village Wahat al-Salam – Neve Shalom ("Oasis of Peace");<sup>13</sup> this is a community jointly established by Jewish and Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel, set up by Fr Bruno Hussar OP in 1972, and which now has various projects across the country.

Israelis, including several Chief Rabbis, have participated in interfaith dialogue since the foundation of the State, and the inception of diplomatic ties between Israel and the Holy See in 1993 stimulated further dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century the Israeli Chief Rabbinate has engaged in bilateral discussions with the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews; annual meetings have alternated between Jerusalem and Rome, with the leading role on the Jewish side being taken by Shear Yashuv Cohen (1927-2016), Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Haifa; after his death in 2016 the Jewish delegation was led by Rabbi Rasson Arussi, of the Chief Rabbinate Council. Following the 14th Meeting, in Rome, November 28 – 30, 2016, a joint statement, "Promoting Peace in the Face of Violence in the Name of Religion", was issued. Acknowledgement was made of "the tragic sins of past violence that have been perpetrated in the name of religion, and the terrible blasphemous abuse of religion in our current times that

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<sup>12</sup> <http://rhr.org.il/eng/icci/>

<sup>13</sup> [www.wasns.org](http://www.wasns.org)

desecrates human life, denying human liberty and difference, and posing critical challenges for our respective traditions”. The Catholic presentation sought to assess the extent to which religions could play a role in the resolution of conflicts and the construction of a new international order based on justice, peace and the care of Creation; the Jewish presentation stressed the sanctity of the human person, the principle of free will, and appreciation of diversity as a reflection of the Divine Presence and Will, and called for religious leadership to exercise “theological humility” in interpreting their respective traditions in a manner that avoids violent intent towards others. Delegates noted the Marrakesh Declaration, which had recently called for the protection of human dignity and religious diversity in Muslim lands. Finally, “the principle of universal respect for the holy sites of each religion was affirmed; and note was made of attempts to deny the historical attachment of the Jewish People to its holiest site. The bilateral commission vigorously cautioned against the political and polemical denial of biblical history and called on all nations and faiths to respect this historic religious bond.”

Similar meetings, with similar proclamations, have taken place between the Anglican-Jewish Commission of the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.

Perhaps even more significant was The First Alexandria Declaration of the Religious Leaders of the Holy Land,<sup>14</sup> calling on all parties to abstain from demonization and violence, to oppose “incitement, hatred and misrepresentation of the other”, to respect the sanctity and integrity of the holy places and to ensure freedom of religious worship for all. The list of signatories is impressive; it is headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Grand Mufti of Al Azhar, following which come the signatures of the major leaders of Israel’s Jewish, Muslim and several Christian denominations.

Christian Zionism<sup>15</sup> may have contributed to the 1917 Balfour Declaration; since 1948 Christian Zionists have vigorously supported the State, not least through their influence on American politics. ‘Zionism’ is a guiding theme of fundamentalist organizations such as Christians United for Israel and the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem.

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.msgr.ca/msgr-3/first\\_alexandria\\_declaration.htm](http://www.msgr.ca/msgr-3/first_alexandria_declaration.htm)

<sup>15</sup> Davies, Moshe, *With Eyes Unto Zion*. New York: Arno, 1977 and later volumes.

In 2008 Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin of Efrat, "the most prominent rabbinic spokesperson to Christian Zionists", established the Center for Jewish–Christian Understanding and Cooperation (CJCUC), an educational institution at which Christians who tour Israel can study the Hebrew Bible with Orthodox rabbis and learn about the Hebraic roots of Christianity; CJCUC partners with both Christians United and the International Christian Embassy. On 3 December 2015, 28 Orthodox Rabbis released a statement through CJCUC entitled "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians", stating “We Jews can acknowledge the ongoing constructive validity of Christianity as our partner in world redemption, without any fear that this will be exploited for missionary purposes”.

### **Jewish Responses**

By the end of the twentieth century so many Churches had made formal pronouncements condemning antisemitism, rejecting the “teaching of contempt”, confirming the ongoing vitality of Judaism and the like, that the absence of any corresponding Jewish pronouncement was beginning to look insensitive if not downright discourteous. IJCIC, a secular-led conglomerate, was not in a position to undertake this task.

However, in 2000, an independent, cross-denominational group of rabbis produced a document, *Dabru Emet* (“Speak Truth”) concerning the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.<sup>16</sup> This was signed by over 220 rabbis and intellectuals from all branches of Judaism, as individuals and not as representing any organisation or stream of Judaism; some declined to sign because they felt it was theologically naïve, others they felt that it gave out a relativistic message. However, it was well received and has been much used, as intended, in Jewish educational programmes in schools and adult education. Its themes are:

1. Jews and Christians worship the same God
2. Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book
3. Christians can respect the claim of the Jews on the land of Israel
4. Jews and Christians together accept the moral principles of the Torah (Pentateuch)
5. Nazism is not a Christian phenomenon

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[http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru\\_Emet\\_A\\_Jewish\\_Statement\\_on\\_Christians\\_and\\_Christianity.2395.0.html](http://www.jcrelations.net/Dabru_Emet_A_Jewish_Statement_on_Christians_and_Christianity.2395.0.html)

6. The controversy between Jews and Christians will not be settled until God redeems the entire world as promised in scripture and no one should be pressed into believing another's belief
7. A new relationship between Jews and Christians will not weaken Jewish practice
8. Jews and Christians must work together for justice and peace

The document was not aimed at Christians, but at the Jewish community as a whole; even so, the European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jews saw fit to issue a warm response on May 12, 2003.

Eighteen years elapsed from the end of WW2 to the issuing of *Nostra Aetate*; fifty more passed before an Orthodox Jewish religious body formally responded (though of course it had already stimulated half a century of direct dialogue). There was perhaps a feeling, on the Jewish side, that it was too good to be true; caution is still evident in the Statement, "Between Jerusalem and Rome", adopted in March 2016 by the (Orthodox) Conference of European Rabbis and the Rabbinical Council of America and presented to Pope Francis in September 2017: "Initially, many Jewish leaders were skeptical of the sincerity of the Church's overtures to the Jewish community".<sup>17</sup>

Notwithstanding the Orthodox disavowal of "theology", this document is heavily theological, from its opening statement interpreting how God "fashions a single human being as the progenitor of all humanity" to its assessment of the Christian doctrine of Incarnation as idolatry: "fraternity cannot sweep away our doctrinal differences". This said, the Rabbis are generous in their acknowledgement of "heroic individuals" among Catholics who fought against the persecution of Jews even in the darkest times, and enthusiastic in their praise of steps taken by Catholics from *Nostra Aetate* onwards to revise the "teaching of contempt" and inaugurate an era of reconciliation with Jews.

A "Road Forward" is sketched, rationalizing dialogue within the broad context of the religious, as guardians of freedom and morality, versus the non-religious, who are assumed to lack such virtues.:

We understand our mission to be *a light unto the nations* to include contributing to humanity's appreciation for holiness, morality and piety. As the Western world grows more and more secular, it abandons many of the

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<sup>17</sup> [www.jcrelations.net/Between\\_Jerusalem\\_and\\_Rome\\_-.5580.0.htm](http://www.jcrelations.net/Between_Jerusalem_and_Rome_-.5580.0.htm)

moral values shared by Jews and Christians ... We therefore seek the partnership of the Catholic community in particular, and other faith communities in general, to assure the future of religious freedom, to foster the moral principles of our faiths, particularly the sanctity of life and the significance of the traditional family, and “to cultivate the moral and religious conscience of society.”

There is some irony in turning to the Catholic Church – or the Rabbis – to assure religious freedom; historically, both have sought to impose their interpretation of religion on others. One may also question the apparent reduction of Judaism to moral principles, something more characteristic of Liberal than Orthodox Jewish teaching. But more significant than the theology of the document is the basic fact of its creation and formal presentation; this in itself confirms that the Orthodox Rabbinate is firmly supportive of interfaith dialogue.

## Other Religions

### Dialogue with Islam

Until the nineteenth century most of world Jewry was concentrated in the Islamic empires. The long history of relations between Jews and Muslims has been recently covered by Meddeb and Stora<sup>18</sup> (2013); in that volume Michel Abitot details how “the eruption of Europe into the Levant and the Maghreb alienated the Jews from their Muslim neighbours”, a process aggravated by European colonization, nationalism and the rise of Zionism.<sup>19</sup>

The growing presence of Muslims in the West and on the world stage, and conflicts of various kinds in the Middle East, have heightened the need for a broader dialogue of “Abrahamic Religions”. Also, the resurgence of Islam and the tensions experienced by Christians in the Middle East as well as Muslims in the West have led the Churches to focus

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<sup>18</sup> Meddeb, Abdulwahab and Benjamin Stora (eds.), *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From the Origins to the Present Day*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Abitot, Michel, *The Beginnings of the Separation: From Coexistence to the Rise of Antagonisms*”, in Meddeb and Stora (2013), 297-319.

increasingly on their relationship with Islam. In Israel, the need for dialogue between Jews and Muslims, as well as Christians, has always been obvious.

In the 1970s organisations such as ICCJ began to ask whether the Jewish-Christian dialogue might be “expanded” to encompass Islam, and the same question has been raised again as recently as the CCJR annual meeting in New York in September 2017. “Expansion” may not be the best term, since it suggests replacement. Tripartite dialogue of Jews, Christians and Muslims *is* important in its own right, but there remain distinct Jewish-Christian, Jewish-Muslim, and Christian-Muslim agendas; all are vital, and they must not be confused or conflated.

Several tripartite dialogues emerged in this period. There was, for instance, a series associated with St George's, Windsor (the Chapel Royal), convened by Dean Mann on behalf of HRH Prince Philip and Crown Prince Hassan of Jordan, later joined by Sir Evelyn de Rothschild. Few Jews were present at the somewhat fraught early sessions, but numbers and trust were built up over the years. A fair degree of unanimity was reached by delegates on the supporting role of religions in conservation; at a meeting in Amman in October 1993 a constructive discussion took place on “Richness in Diversity”, at which the *Interfaith Declaration: A Code of Ethics on International Business for Christians, Muslims and Jews* was finalized.

An independent initiative in London in 1997 by Sir Sigmund Sternberg, the Revd Dr Marcus Braybrooke, and Dr Zaki Badawi resulted in the formation of the “Three Faiths Forum,” a more grass-roots organization catering for the needs of “ordinary people” and youth. Similar bodies have been set up in the U.S., Israel and elsewhere.

By the beginning of the 21st century the need for interfaith dialogue had been endorsed by governments irrespective of democratic credentials. Saudi Arabia’s King Abdullah, for instance, initiated in 2008 an interfaith conference to “solve world problems through concord instead of conflict,” and this was attended by Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu and Tao religious leaders among others. At the same time, through a collaboration of Hebrew Union College, Omar Foundation, and the University of Southern California, the Center for Muslim-Jewish Engagement was created.

Also in 2008 Muslim scholars from The Centre for the Study of Muslim-Jewish Relations (part of The Woolf Institute, Cambridge, on which more below), with the support of Muslims scholars throughout the world, published a heartfelt, if verbose, “Open Letter: A

Call to Peace, Dialogue and Understanding between Muslims and Jews”, expressing the hope that “this letter be accepted as a small step towards opening doors to genuine dialogue and understanding [and also] lead the way towards concrete outcomes in Muslim—Jewish relations in different parts of our shared world.”<sup>20</sup> The Woolf Institute now has formal links with the Doha (Qatar) International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue (DICID), which has involved Jews in its conversations since 2005, and held its 13<sup>th</sup> International Interfaith Conference, on “Religion and Human Rights”, in February 2018.

The US Foundation for Middle East Peace reinvented the wheel in July 2009, welcoming “30 Imams and Rabbis from 11 European countries” to share their ideas on religious dialogue at a United Nations venue in New York. Subsequent initiatives include those already mentioned under “Israel and Interfaith Dialogue”. Also in the US, the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) has reached out to the Jewish communities, collaborating with the Union of Reform Judaism and the Jewish Theological Seminary, while Jewish organisations are numbered among the founders of the anti-Islamophobic organisation, “Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign”.

Salaam/Shalom, founded in the UK in 2005<sup>21</sup>, aims to build bridges between communities, particularly Muslim and Jewish communities, to prevent conflict and discrimination between minority and marginalised groups, and to use media and the arts as a tool for positive social change; it has funding from the Arts Council of Great Britain. A similarly named women’s organisation, the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom,<sup>22</sup> boasts 150 chapters across North America.

The King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICIID), based in Vienna, is an inter-governmental organization that promotes inter-religious dialogue to prevent and resolve conflict; it was opened in 2012 by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Republic of Austria and the Kingdom of Spain, following the initiative of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia. Among its board members is

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<sup>20</sup> [www.woolfinstitute.cam.ac.uk/cmjr](http://www.woolfinstitute.cam.ac.uk/cmjr)

<sup>21</sup> [www.salaamshalom.org.uk](http://www.salaamshalom.org.uk)

<sup>22</sup> <https://sosspeace.org>. *Sharing the Well: A Resource Guide for Jewish-Muslim Engagement* is a useful guide to current engagement in North America: see [www.jtsa.edu/sharingthewell](http://www.jtsa.edu/sharingthewell).

Rabbi Dr David Rosen, whose commitment to interfaith relations underlies much of the achievement in this field of organisations including the Anti-Defamation League and the Israeli Chief Rabbinate. In February 2016 KAICIID launched the Center for Research and Training in Interfaith Relations in Rabat, with representatives of Moroccan Jewish, Muslim and Christian communities.

Significant activity takes place also at a more humble level, where contentious issues sometimes have to be faced. For instance, in 2015 the West London Synagogue invited the An-Nisa Society's Supplementary Muslim School to be part of a year-long Jewish-Muslim interfaith project for young people, culminating in a 5-day heritage trip to Morocco. Despite strong misgivings on the part of pro-Palestinian Muslims the project was highly successful and has been repeated annually.<sup>23</sup>

### **Non-Abrahamic<sup>24</sup> Religions**

Interfaith dialogue is intrinsically problematic for Abrahamic faiths, for whom the belief in One God implies a denial of others, and this inherent intolerance is amplified when combined with the belief in a single, or final, revelation. Hindus and Buddhists – to label them with Abrahamic categories such as “polytheist” or “atheist” is inappropriate – tend to be inclusive rather than exclusive and readily see other faiths as expressing the same ultimate reality. Christian/Jewish/Muslim dialogue has developed in response to specific perceived wrongs and prejudices, such as the tendentious portrayal of Jews in the New Testament. ‘Eastern’ religions, on the other hand, have encouraged interfaith dialogue in pursuit of the vision of a harmonious global society within which people of all religions together share, from their several aspects, in the One; Jewish, Christian and Muslim (Sufi) mystics sometimes express themselves in similar terms.

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<sup>23</sup> Khan, Humera, “Dialogue in Action: Encountering Obstacles”, in *Faith Initiative* 36 Summer/Autumn 2017, 19-20.

<sup>24</sup> There is no agreed collective term for the religions of Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists and others who are outside the Jewish/Christian/Islamic tradition. “Dharmic” is sometimes used as a collective, as is the nowadays geographically inept “Eastern”.

The World's Parliament, or Congress of Religions (WPR), an early attempt to create a global dialogue of faiths, was set up in 1893 in Chicago; delegates included the Hindu Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902), the apparent need at that time being for dialogue between "East" and "West". Its mission, as proclaimed on its website, is "to cultivate harmony among the world's religious and spiritual communities and foster their engagement with the world and its guiding institutions in order to achieve a just, peaceful and sustainable world." Among its offshoots is the World Congress of Faiths (worldfaiths.org), whose first meeting in 1936 was attended by both the Orthodox Chief Rabbi Hertz and Rabbi Dr Israel Mattuck, Chairman of the World Union for Progressive Judaism.

WPR continues to hold international gatherings at irregular intervals. More than 8,000 delegates attended its centenary in Chicago in 1993, aiming to celebrate, discuss and explore how religious traditions can work together on the critical issues which confront the world; the main theme, for which the German Catholic theologian Hans Küng drafted *Towards a Global Ethic: An Initial Declaration*, was the contribution that can be made by religions to the conservation of the environment. Recent meetings have taken place in Cape Town (1999), Barcelona (2004), Melbourne (2009) and Salt Lake City (2015); the meeting planned for 2018 in Toronto has the ambitious programme, "The Promise of Inclusion, the Power of Love: Pursuing Global Understanding, Reconciliation and Change".

Relations between Hindus and Jews have been surprisingly amicable, bearing in mind the hostility of Bible and Rabbis to what they regard as 'idolatry', and the basic fact that Hindu worship focuses on idols, however these might be 'explained' by the theologians. Social factors undoubtedly have something to do with this; Hindus have not routinely maligned Jews nor targeted them for conversion in the way that Christians have.

Hindu-Jewish 'summits' were held in 2007 (New Delhi) and 2008 (Jerusalem); the Jewish delegation was led by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, and the Hindu delegation by HDAS (the Hindu Dharma Acharya Sabha). Michael Bender,<sup>25</sup> basing himself on the reflections of delegates he interviewed, identifies four pertinent themes:

1. The newness of the dialogue

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<sup>25</sup> Bender, Michael, "The Hindu-Jewish Relationship and the Significance of Dialogue: Participants' Reflections on the 2007 and 2008 Hindu-Jewish Summits in New Delhi and Jerusalem", in *The Journal of Indo-Judaic Studies* 14 (2015), 7-23.

2. The shared threats of secularism and terrorism
3. Christian and Muslim proselytization
4. Misrepresentation of practice, history and symbolism

While Hindu-Jewish dialogue at this level is certainly new, it should not be forgotten that, at least since the 1893 Parliament of Religions, Jews have been engaging with Hindus in the broader dialogue context; since the 1960s substantial numbers of young Jews, including Israelis, have spent time at ashrams and apprenticed themselves to Hindu gurus, occasionally rediscovering Judaism in the process. Jews of many kinds have, moreover, lived among Hindus in the sub-continent for two thousand years. Records for the early periods are scant; with the coming of the Portuguese we know of Jews being protected by Hindu princes from Catholic persecution.

Common ground for Jews and Hindus, as against Christians and Muslims, was claimed on the basis that both religions tend to orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy; *halakha*, determining behaviour for Jews, is analogous to *dharma*, the path mapped out for Hindus. It was also noted that, in contrast with Christianity and Islam, neither religion is proactively missionary; both have suffered from the violence of Christian and Muslim proselytism.

Bender notes that Jews, “including the Chief Rabbinate of Israel”, have traditionally perceived Hindus as idolaters. A major achievement of these summits, in Bender’s view, was the realization by members of the Jewish delegation that this was incorrect; henceforth, they would engage in dialogue with Hindus with the understanding that monotheism was fundamental to both religions. Quoting (21) Swami Dayananda’s opening remark that the first precept of Hindu religion is “There are not many Gods. There is only one God”, he further cites Sri Swami Viditatmananda:

All that there is, is God. Whatever has form also has manifestation of God. God can be worshipped as something beyond forms, but at the same time, whatever has form, also has the presence of God. We find Hindus worshipping God in forms. It is not that the person worships the idol, metal or stone, that is in front of him, but it becomes a stepping stone for worshipping God.

Such ideas can be traced back to ancient Vedic texts, but does this mean that Hindu worship is substantially different from what the biblical prophets were fulminating against? The Bible, denouncing the worship of “sticks and stones”, is polemical, as Kaufmann

demonstrated; no one really confused sticks and stones with God. The Rabbis nevertheless continued to treat them as polytheists and “idolaters”, as did Christians. If the learned delegates now recognize that image-based worship is neither necessarily polytheistic nor depraved, they are correct; they should openly concede that this view is a departure from traditional norms.

## **New Horizons: Scholars and Theologians**

Since 1945 Biblical studies have been transformed as more has been revealed of the ancient world, its languages, peoples and cultures. The Jewish context of Jesus and his work were illumined through study of the Dead Sea Scrolls (discovered in 1947) and other contemporary material; the Nag Hammadi library of Gnostic texts (discovered in 1945) threw new light on the development of the Gospels (particularly John) and early Christianity as well as on early Jewish mysticism. The Scrolls revolutionized the study of rabbinic Judaism too; scholars no longer read Mishnah, Talmud and Midrash as if they describe Judaism in the time of Jesus, but rather as recording the self-definition of Judaism as it evolved in the early centuries CE, parallel with and often in opposition to Christian self-definition in the same period.

The “problem of evil” first arose when God failed to prevent Cain killing Abel; the Bible, and not just Job, is much exercised on the topic. Even so, the Shoah (Holocaust) focused minds once more on the question of why God lets “bad things happen to good people”, and by the 1980's leading Jewish thinkers were deeply engaged in Holocaust theology. Some (Emil Fackenheim) argued that the Shoah was unique, and posed a radically new question. Others reworked traditional themes: Richard Rubenstein rejected the traditional idea of God as the “Lord of history”; David Blumenthal went so far as to write a book comparing God with an abusing parent, who has worked "wondrously through us" but who has worked "aw(e)fully against us." Others (Robert Gordis, Dow Marmur, Emmanuel Levinas) were dissatisfied with such approaches to Judaism; Jews should go beyond the Holocaust, not allow themselves to be permanently imprisoned in it.

For Christians the Shoah posed an additional question. How had Christianity itself, if unwittingly, contributed to such a great evil? Alice and Roy Eckardt, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Franklin Littell, John Pawlikowski, J-B Metz, Eberhard Bethge and Hans-Joachim Kraus are among those who reflected in the mid-twentieth century on the implications for Christian theology of the Shoah and came to accept that profound revisions were needed if

Christianity was to retain moral credibility. In particular, “supersessionist” or “replacement” theology came under attack; the idea that the Church had replaced the Jewish people in God’s economy was recognised as generating the “teaching of contempt” and antisemitism. Such reflections were a vital component of post-WW2 dialogue.

### **Covenant Theology**

Covenant theology was developed in the sixteenth century by Protestant theologians, who spoke of a Covenant of Works, a Covenant of Grace and a Covenant of Redemption. It is essentially supersessionist, since it suggests that the place occupied by Israel (the nation) has now been taken by the true Israel (Christians) – though Israel (the nation) is not necessarily excluded.

Eugene B. Borowitz, in an influential article first published in 1961, introduced the term Covenant Theology to characterize what he saw as an emerging paradigm shift in non-Orthodox Jewish thought.<sup>26</sup> Always an element in Orthodox thought, it had been given a new twist by J. B. Soloveitchik, and has been picked up by a succession of Orthodox thinkers such as David Hartman and Jonathan Sacks. Covenant theology generates awkward problems for dialogue, since it posits a special relationship between God and a specific community. If you are content to regard “covenant” simply as metaphor to express a community’s relationship with God, no contradiction is involved when two or more community’s claim a covenantal relationship; if, on the other hand, you think “covenant” is a unique metaphysical object granted by God to the community He chooses, competition arises between rival claimants.

### **New Theologies: Feminism; Liberation; Creation**

*Christian Jewish Relations*, published by the London-based Institute of Jewish Affairs,<sup>27</sup> devoted issues to each of three developing areas of theology which, in the 1980s, began to impact on dialogue: Feminist theology (Vol. 19/2 June 1986); Liberation theology (Vol. 21/1 Spring 1988) and Conservation, including Creation Theology (Vol. 22/2 Summer 1989).

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<sup>26</sup> Borowitz, Eugene B., *Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*. Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991, opening pages.

<sup>27</sup> Since 1994 the Institute for Jewish Policy Research.

Was Rosemary Ruether (1974) right in seeing anti-Judaism as part of the very fabric of early Christianity, or are those of her critics right who explain New Testament hostility to Jews and Judaism as a by-product of the polemical situation in which the early Christians found themselves?<sup>28</sup> Ruether was led to such considerations after becoming convinced that the subordination of women was woven into traditional religious language, ritual and imagery, not least language about God. Dialogue between Jews and Christians (and eventually others) could no longer avoid awkward questions about prejudices (against Jews, against women) so deeply ingrained in traditional sources, nor were such prejudices confined to one side of the dialogue; Christians and Jews equally were challenged. More recently new questions regarding human sexuality have been placed on the dialogue agenda, particularly with regard to homosexuality. In all this the dialogue is not so much between different faiths as between liberals and conservatives.

Liberation theology originated among South American Catholics, aware of the Church's history of oppression in that area, as a response to the continuing poverty and ill-treatment of 'ordinary' people. Though rejected as an all-embracing theology by successive Popes it has inspired many theologians, including some Jews,<sup>29</sup> with its vision of making common cause with the poor and against injustice. Again, in broad terms, this is an aim to which all participants in dialogue can subscribe, though there is disagreement as to priorities and practicalities.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s the West was in the grip of the fear of nuclear annihilation. This fear (if not the danger itself) receded, to be replaced by a new fear, that of destruction of the global environment. A common enemy brings people together. Since the seminal Interfaith Celebration of Nature which took place at Assisi in September 1986 to mark the 25th anniversary of the World Wildlife Fund, representatives of each faith have

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<sup>28</sup> Ruether, Rosemary R., *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*, New York: Seabury Press, 1974. Criticism in Davies, Alan T. (ed.), *Antisemitism and the Foundations of Christianity*, New York: Paulist Press, 1979.

<sup>29</sup> For instance, Ellis, Marc H., *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987.

outdone one another in proclaiming their concern for the environment, including care for all living creatures, concerns easily supported by judicious quotation from traditional sources. Exactly *how* the environment is to be safeguarded is not within the province of Creation Theology, but of science and technology. From the point of view of dialogue, however, shared environmental concern builds a strong bond between people of all faiths.

### **The Global Context of Dialogue**

The modern way of looking at things tends to de-emphasize doctrinal matters, and to focus rather on that which religions have in common. The Hermetic Tradition, developed by Renaissance humanists such as Erasmus, made possible the move to Christian ecumenism, whence it is a short step to an ecumenism of world faiths, Judaism included. Such an attitude presupposes a degree of scepticism and tends also to cultural relativism. God, when speaking to people, has perforce to use human language, and human language incorporates human culture. The same ultimate truth may be conveyed in different ways.

Improved communications and transport have heightened awareness of different cultures and religions; none has a monopoly in ethics, morality or spirituality. Contemporary culture is open to all that has come before or that currently exists in any part of the world, east or west, north or south. This creates the need and opportunity for dialogue.

Science has radically and irreversibly changed our view of the universe and our place in it. The human species, we now know, has evolved over millions of years; our possibly superior descendants may continue for billions more. Can salvation really hinge upon some minute formulation of doctrine or on the total fidelity to this or that individual sage or saviour? Against the broad panorama of millions of years that looks increasingly implausible.

Faith leaders commonly declare their shared commitment to spirituality, to high ethical and moral standards, nature, the family, justice, peace and other desirables. But is the agreement more apparent than real (Solomon 1992/3)?<sup>30</sup>

*What actually happens* when Jews and Christians (to keep the discussion within limits) descend from the high ground of pious generalisations and investigate what there is

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<sup>30</sup> Solomon, Norman, "Forward Together", in *From the Martin Buber House* No. 20, Winter 1992/3, ed. J. Schoneveld. International Council of Christians and Jews, Heppenheim, Germany.

that they can accomplish together? What it is that they wish to promote, and what it is that they are objecting to in current secular lifestyles?

All main groups of Christians and Jews have in the past agreed, subject to differences in detailed definition, to the prohibitions of adultery, incest and polyandry, and to a range of degrees of forbidden propinquity; they have prohibited male homosexual acts, male masturbation (Onanism), and sexual acts performed with animals; they have agreed, moreover, on the recognition of natural parenthood, both through a call to children to honour and respect parents, and through responsibilities of parents towards their children.

On the other hand, they have disagreed on divorce (prohibited by many Churches, always accepted by Jews) and polygamy (variable attitudes have existed amongst both Jews and Christians); attitudes towards human sexuality have ranged widely within each faith; they disagree on the virtue of celibacy, on the handling of the menstrual cycle, possibly on female masturbation and homosexual acts, and certainly on contraception and abortion.

Nor is it true that the main sources of Judaism and Christianity share the romantic, idealised attitude to the family which achieved prominence only in Victorian times. Rather, they accepted and regulated an existing social institution, to which in any case there did not appear to be any alternative. Sometimes they are critical. Thus Trito-Isaiah (56:3) – “Let not the eunuch say, ‘I am nothing but a barren tree’” - preaches against the marginalisation of those lacking family connections; Elisha (1 Kings 19:20-21) takes leave of his family to become the devoted disciple of Elijah; Christians praise the virtue of celibacy. The ideal family may well provide a stable emotional background and enable the development of favoured moral attitudes, but few families are ideal; instability and even tyranny within the family are common. When Jews and Christians together declare for the family and its values they must be aware of the downside, and be ready in many instances to champion the rights of the individual against the family.

Likewise, when the religious call for higher standards of sexual morality, caution is needed. Which is the higher moral standard, the sexual repression encouraged by some religious authorities, or a more permissive, liberal attitude, which places a higher value on individual freedom and self-fulfilment? Should we condemn, or should we show compassion to those of whom we disapprove? To what extent should we aim to have our standards incorporated in public law? We can at least agree with contemporary secular morality that stable and loving relationships are of the essence of sexual morality, even if we disapprove of

alternative lifestyles; to a significant degree we all seek a deepening of human relationships, and a sense of holiness in our lives.

### **Academic Developments**

Several University faculties of theology have recast themselves as departments of religious studies; sympathetic teaching on other religions is widely available even in religious seminaries. In Oxford, what was historically a strongly Anglican faculty is now the Faculty of Theology and Religion, covering in addition to a broad range of Christian studies a rich variety of approaches to Jewish studies, Buddhism and Islam, including a dedicated chair in “Abrahamic Religions”. Theology has moved from a strictly confessional discipline to an aspect of humanistic study; the Faculty is, indeed, placed within the Humanities division of the University.

Dialogue itself has become an academic discipline. In 1983 a new Centre for the Study of Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations was established at the Selly Oak Colleges in Birmingham, in parallel with the Centre for the Study of Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations already on campus. The centre closed in 1994, but its pioneering work was eventually picked up by the Centre for Jewish-Christian Relations in Cambridge. Founded in 1998, and directed since its inception by Dr Edward Kessler, this Institute later expanded to incorporate the Centre for the Study of Muslim-Jewish Relations – the first and so far only centre of its kind in Europe – and the Centre for Policy and Public Education. In 2010, these Centres were amalgamated as the Woolf Institute,<sup>31</sup> an independent research centre and an Associate Member of the Cambridge Theological Federation. The Institute, a global leader in the academic study of relations between Jews, Christians and Muslims, aims to provide an academic framework and space within which people can tackle issues of religious difference constructively, while it reaches out to a global audience by offering a range of online courses which address the relationship between religion and society. Among its major achievements has been a National Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, drawing on input from all religion groups in Britain today, as well as humanists; the Commission’s report, *Living with Difference: community, diversity and the common good*, was published in 2015.

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<sup>31</sup> [www.woolf.cam.ac.uk](http://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk)

### **Dialogue Moulds Theology**

Interfaith dialogue is vital for self-understanding in every faith. Only in dialogue is one forced to address the most contentious areas of one's own theology. Provided he/she meets only with other Jews, a Jewish theologian may complacently restate the old doctrines of chosenness, of authentic rabbinic exposition of scriptures, of the permanence of halakha, of the Messiah who is yet to come. Dialogue shatters this self-indulgence, forcing the faithful to question their own theology. How, for instance, is 'chosenness' to be interpreted when others plausibly see themselves as in a covenantal relationship with God? Why should privileged status be accorded to rabbinic interpretation of scripture as against other available hermeneutics?

It is not of course the first time that Jews and Christians have developed their faiths interactively; they have done so ever since Christianity and rabbinic Judaism first defined themselves out of the maelstrom of first century Judaism. Some seven centuries later Islam similarly defined itself in relation to Judaism and Christianity; just as Christians had claimed to be the “fulfilment” of previous revelation, Muslims claimed that Muhammad was the “final prophet”. Historically, the process of differentiation generated hatred and bloodshed. The hope is that today we can engage in our theology openly, consciously, and with mutual regard and friendship. But this requires that we ask radical questions of our own traditions, and are prepared to refine and advance them within the context of the contemporary world, having due regard to each other's concerns.

A sustained attempt at dialogue of this kind is recorded in *Dialogue with a Difference: The Manor House Group Experience* (Bayfield and Braybrooke 1992), though the book cannot adequately capture the human aspects: how participants learned, over some years, to respect and understand each other, often sharing laughter, and acquiring the ability to entertain strong disagreements as well as common convictions, fears and hopes.

In December 1992 one of the participants, Richard Harries (Bishop of Oxford 1987-2006) initiated the Oxford Abrahamic Group, including Muslims, on similar lines. The nine topics fall into two groups: Foundations of Faith (Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad), and Resources for the Modern World (The Image of God in Humanity, Pluralism, Gender, The

Environment, Life after Death). Each topic is explored by a Jew, a Christian and a Muslim in turn, and followed by reflections from each of the three perspectives.<sup>32</sup>

Both volumes demonstrate how scholars of each of the religions work out their theology in the presence of the others. The extent to which this approach can be more widely adopted remains to be seen.

Among independent initiatives one of the most remarkable is the International Jewish-Christian Bible Week, now approaching its fiftieth year, at which Jews and Christians from Germany and many other countries, laity as well as scholars and clergy, come together to study biblical texts against a background of the two traditions. Originally an annual event at Bendorf, on the Rhine, since 2003 it has been hosted at Haus Ohrbeck, a Catholic foundation in Lower Saxony. It has been fascinating to see how both traditions have grappled with issues raised by modern critical Biblical studies.<sup>33</sup>

The Scriptural Reasoning movement, originating in the US in the early 1990s as a university-based forum for scholars of Modern Jewish Philosophy and scholars of Rabbinic texts to meet and study together, has spread to many parts of the world, engaging “Sikhs, Buddhists, Hindus, Daoists, and many other faith communities who use the tool to deepen friendships and understanding within their communities.” Groups operate at all levels, using the opportunity “to deepen one’s own faith commitment and deepen one’s engagement with members of other faiths simultaneously.”<sup>34</sup>

Bill Moyers’ 1996 *Genesis* was a 10-part television series aiming “to stimulate interfaith dialogue in a democratic spirit”; it featured not only Biblical scholars but a wide range of professionals and artists from all walks of life, discovering and debating the great stories of Genesis.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The papers are published in Solomon, Norman, Richard Harries, and Tim Winter, (eds.), *Abraham’s Children: Jews, Christians and Muslims in Conversation*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2006.

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.haus-ohrbeck.de/haus-ohrbeck/bibelforum/jewish-christian-bible-week.htm>

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.scripturalreasoning.org/scriptural-reasoning-now.html>

<sup>35</sup> [billmoyers.com/series/genesis](http://billmoyers.com/series/genesis)

## **The Popularization and Secularization of Dialogue**

Most dialogue is not at the institutional level or among professional scholars and theologians, but informal, at the workplace, in the markets, at sports and entertainments; this is where people get to know each other as human beings, rather than as religious stereotypes.

Several organisations promote interfaith dialogue among members of the public, who are free to participate according to their personal consciences and inclinations rather than as representatives of organisations. Local Councils of Christians and Jews have long played a role in such dialogue, which now extends across the religious spectrum.

In Britain, the Interfaith Network (IFN) was founded in 1987 “to advance public knowledge and mutual understanding of the teachings, traditions and practices of the different faith communities in Britain including an awareness both of their distinctive features and their common ground and to promote good relations between people of different faiths in this country”. Its 34 members range alphabetically from Bahai to Zoroastrian, taking in less obvious units such as the Druid Network and the Pagan Federation as well as a variety of Christian, Muslim and Hindu organisations and a single all-embracing Jewish one, the Board of Deputies of British Jews. Through its Interfaith Week programme and educational initiatives IFN not only reaches out to faith communities but works to develop greater understanding between those of religious and those of non-religious beliefs. In addition, it provides information and advice to local inter faith groups, chaplaincies, youth organisations and Government departments.<sup>36</sup>

Even the UK government has come on board; since 2014 a Minister for Faith and Communities has been given responsibility to “work with religious and community leaders to promote faith, religious tolerance and stronger communities”. At the conclusion of Inter Faith Week in November 2017, Prime Minister Teresa May declared that it was “an inspiring effort across all neighbourhoods and faiths across the United Kingdom, in building understanding, tolerance and a sense of community. These sentiments are so important as we build a country where everyone has the chance to succeed and where no one suffers discrimination because of their background, ethnicity, religion or belief”.

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<sup>36</sup> [interfaith.org.uk](http://interfaith.org.uk)

## **Conclusion**

The roots of modern inter-faith dialogue are to be sought in the massive social, technological and scientific changes that have shaped the modern age; global awareness and increasing mutual dependence have forced revision of traditional religious exclusivity and intolerance, generating new, more inclusive theologies.

In the wake of the horrors of WW2 dialogue has advanced from a marginal activity mainly concerned, at least from the Jewish point of view, with combatting antisemitism, to a major international socio-political concern, embracing all faiths, and aimed at freeing the world from the religious conflicts which in times past generated prejudice and conflict. Jews, irrespective of denomination, have been deeply involved in all aspects of this activity.

Not that there is room for complacency. Reactionary tendencies are present within all religious communities; traditionalists feel threatened by openness. The advances of recent years need careful nurturing if we are to succeed in creating a world free from religious bigotry and conflict.

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