

JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS: A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE*

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PRECIS

Jewish-Christian relations have undergone a fundamental metamorphosis since the days of Vatican II, but they remain complex and fraught with tension and promise. The agenda of interfaith dialogue has tended to reflect the "historical" issues favored by many Jews, but the logic of these discussions is moving participants inexorably toward a theological agenda which raises delicate questions for Jews. The vitality of dialogue is threatened by a missionary posture, and some Christians have proposed a two-covenant theology which exempts Jews from missionary efforts; this position, however, is not yet typical, and the role of Jews as objects of Christian "witness" remains ambivalent and problematical.

Jews have welcomed the forthright denunciations of Antisemitism by Christian groups, although it is by no means clear that there should be any Jewish intervention in internal Christian debates about Christology and Antisemitism or the historicity of certain Gospel passages. It has become easy to denounce Antisemitism, and the acid test of genuine Christian concern for Jewish welfare has become the State of Israel, which has often been subjected to an egregious double standard. Hostility to Israel cannot readily coexist with Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Finally, social and moral questions can be addressed profitably in dialogue, although the relative absence of Orthodox Jews from such discussions can distort the perception of Jewish positions on these issues.

Our generation has seen some fundamental, even revolutionary changes in the official position of many Christian churches toward Jews and Judaism. Antisemitism has been denounced, contemporary Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion denied, missionizing reexamined, textbooks revised, and dialogue encouraged. These changes, though welcomed by most Jews, have left many lingering

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problems unresolved, and, especially in the case of dialogue, they have raised new, complex questions about the propriety and character of interfaith relations.

The most famous Christian statement on the Jews in recent years is, of course, the widely heralded and much debated document issued by Vatican II in 1965 (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4), which spoke of a special bond between Christians and Jews. Since then, a series of Catholic statements both in Rome and in various national churches has attempted to grapple with the ambiguities and omissions in *Nostra Aetate* 4, and in January, 1975, official guidelines were issued for the implementation of the council's declaration and the encouragement of continuing contacts between Catholics and Jews.

Protestant churches have also moved toward a reassessment of their attitudes concerning Jews and Judaism in a number of statements by the World Council of Churches, international conferences of individual denominations, and national organizations. Although the decentralized character of Protestantism makes generalization difficult, most of the major trends in the Catholic declarations appear among Protestants as well, and here, too, the call for interfaith dialogue is a prominent and recurring feature.¹

To further such contacts, both Christians and Jews have set up institutional mechanisms whose primary function is interfaith relations. The Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews and the Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People of the World Council of Churches are major examples of Christian bodies which function on a worldwide scale. In the United States, the Catholic Secretariat for Christian-Jewish Relations, the Committee on Christian-Jewish Relations of the National Council of Churches, and a substantial number of national officials of individual Protestant churches deal primarily with Jewish issues. Jews reciprocate with significant programs for interreligious affairs at the American Jewish Committee, Anti-Defamation League, American Jewish Congress, Synagogue Council of America, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, and elsewhere, while the National Conference of Christians and Jews continues to expand its longstanding efforts. Though the scope and intensity of such activities vary greatly from country to country, some increase in interfaith contacts is noticeable in virtually every Western nation with a significant Jewish population.²

¹The major statements, both Catholic and Protestant, have been compiled by Helga Croner in *Stepping Stones to Further Jewish-Christian Relations* (London and New York: Stimulus Books, 1977) (hereafter, Croner). For highlights of the developing Catholic position, see Leonard Swidler, "Catholic Statements on Jews—A Revolution in Progress," *Judaism* 27 (1978): 299-307; and Jorge Mejía, "Survey of Issues in Catholic-Jewish Relations," *Origins* 7.47 (May 11, 1978): 744-748. An excellent bibliographical survey has been provided by A. Roy Eckardt, "Recent Literature on Jewish-Christian Relations," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49 (1981): 99-111.

²On the current situation in Western Europe, see the summary articles in *Face to Face* 7 (Summer, 1980): 1-16. For obvious reasons, Israel provides a special, atypical environment for Jewish-Christian discussions; in addition to such ongoing groups as the Israel Interfaith

This article will concentrate on some of the substantive issues raised by these contacts: the problem of dialogue itself, mission and covenant, Antisemitism, the State of Israel, and moral questions affecting public policy. These topics may not exhaust the Jewish-Christian agenda, but they play a central role in defining both the progress and the continuing problematic of a relationship which is nearing the end of its second decade and its second millennium at the same time.

The Problem of Dialogue

At first glance, the case for dialogue is self-evident, straightforward, and deceptively simple. Communication is preferable to isolation; friendship and trust can be established only by people who talk to one another. Nevertheless, although dialogue is often initiated by the Jewish side, the history of Jewish-Christian relations has bequeathed to many Jews a legacy of mistrust and suspicion which makes them perceive the Christian advocacy of such discussions as a subtle and more sophisticated expression of the missionary impulse. We shall have to examine the question of mission later on, but to the extent that this perception could be defended, the argument for dialogue—at least in the eyes of many Jews—would be severely undermined.

The conviction that the motivation for dialogue is a sincere desire for mutual understanding is indispensable for the legitimation of such conversations, but it does not define their content. The most interesting questions, in fact, arise only in the context of a favorable decision about the fundamental enterprise. What should be discussed? Are some subjects too sensitive, or does the exclusion of such topics contradict the essential objective of interfaith dialogue? Should discussants direct their efforts toward the solution of clearcut problems in Jewish-Christian relations, or should they address essential matters of faith as well? If a separation between such issues is desirable, is it in fact possible?

In a thoughtful and perceptive article, Henry Siegman argued that Jews and Christians bring different agendas to what is essentially an asymmetrical discussion.³ Since Jews can understand their faith without reference to Christianity, there is no internal Jewish need to engage in theological discussion with Christians; Christianity, on the other hand, confronts Judaism the moment it “searches into the mystery of the Church.”⁴ The Jewish agenda is historical rather than

Committee, the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity, and the Rainbow, the Director General of Israel's Ministry of Interreligious Affairs has recently established the Jerusalem Institute for Interreligious Relations and Research as a public, non-governmental body (*Christian News from Israel*, vol. 27, no. 2 [1979], p. 62). In general, see *Face to Face 2* (Winter/Spring, 1977).

³“A Decade of Catholic-Jewish Relations—A Reassessment,” *J.E.S.* 15 (1978): 243-260.

⁴The phrase (which Siegman does not use) is from the first sentence of the Vatican II statement. On the impact of this asymmetry on early Jewish-Christian contacts, see my

theological and focuses on such issues as Antisemitism, the Holocaust, and the State of Israel. Although each side may recognize some value in the other's agenda, the basic impulses leading to dialogue are profoundly different.

Since no one can compel the discussion of any particular issue, inhibitions about the content of interfaith exchanges are likely to be respected. While Christians may be more interested in theology, they have no fundamental objections to a discussion of the "Jewish" themes, and considerations of conscience make a refusal to confront such topics both morally questionable and politically awkward. Many Jews, on the other hand, regard certain theological discussions very warily, and the Jewish agenda has generally prevailed.

A striking example of this Jewish "victory" is the agenda proposed by a Christian writing in the middle of the last decade. Though he expressed hope that "the frequency and scope" of purely theological discussions would be increased, the major elements of his list were the establishment of study groups, recognition that Jews can be saved without conversion, renunciation of missionary work, more effective denunciation of Antisemitism, curricular changes in Christian seminaries and congregational schools, liturgical revisions, and joint social action.⁵ The primary emphasis of this proposal is self-evident.

Some Christians, however, have been more assertive. One leading ecumenist, though referring to Siegman's article as a "now classic" statement, has argued that Jewish theology can be aided by Christian insights on "covenant, mission, peoplehood, [and] the Kingdom," while Jewish "self-articulation" in the Christian period was deeply affected by its relationship with Christianity.⁶ Another Christian response to Siegman's analysis put the issue even more sharply: "Full attention to theology and ultimate questions can wait. The point is, can they wait forever?"

A look at some very recent Christian proposals for discussion reveals a combination of "historical" and "theological" issues. A German Catholic working paper lists belief in the wake of the Holocaust, the meaning of the State of Israel, the problem of combining belief in salvation and political action, a variety of ethical issues, and the diminishing of the supposed conflict between a religion of law and a religion of grace.⁸ In a statement that has aroused considerable attention, the Evangelical Church of the Rhineland suggested a similarly "mixed"

discussion in *The Jewish-Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), pp. 4-8.

⁵Paul J. Kirsch, *We Christians and Jews* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 122-141.

⁶Eugene Fisher, "A Roman Catholic Perspective: The Interfaith Agenda," *Ecumenical Bulletin* 44 (November-December, 1980): 11-12.

⁷Edward Flannery, "Response to Henry Siegman," *J.E.S.* 15 (1978): 505. Cf. also David-Maria Jaeger, "Catholic-Jewish Dialogue," *Christian Attitudes on Jews and Judaism* 69 (December, 1979): 1-3.

⁸"Basic Issues of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Working Paper of the Workshop on 'Jews and Christians' of the Central Committee of Roman Catholics in Germany," *Encounter Today* 14 (1979): 105-113, 125; and *SIDIC*, vol. 13, no. 2 (1980), pp. 28-32.

agenda: the Holocaust, a common Bible, the standing of Jesus, “the one people of God,” justice and love, and the problem of mission to the Jews.⁹

In the eyes of many Jews, these lists present a minefield of sensitive issues. Dialogue is by definition a two-way street, and, if Jews expect Christians to revise certain longstanding perspectives on Judaism, they cannot expect Christians to refrain from entertaining reciprocal expectations. This development emerges with striking clarity in the German Catholic working paper. The Christian, it says, cannot regard the Jew as merely a surviving witness of the period of the “Old Testament” and early Christianity. “Conversely, the Christian partner cannot be satisfied if the Jewish partner thinks that only he has something to say to the Christian which is essential to the Christian’s faith, while that which the Christian has to say to the Jew has no essential meaning for the faith of the Jew.” The Jew cannot know how Abraham became the father of a multitude of nations without an understanding of Christianity; indeed, dialogue can take place seriously only when Jews assume that Christianity was caused by God and when Christianity interests them “for God’s sake.” Moreover, “Jews can acknowledge that, for the Christians, Jesus has become the way in which they find Israel’s God,” and one example of a possible “Jewish interest in Christianity” is Franz Rosenzweig’s statement that “whether Jesus was the Messiah will be shown when the Messiah comes.” This sort of expectation—closer to a hope than to a demand—is also reflected in a recent book by the Swiss Catholic scholar, Clemens Thoma, who quotes David Flusser’s very similar remark that “I do not think many Jews would object if the messiah when he came again was the Jew Jesus.”¹⁰

Even with respect to the core issues of trinity and incarnation, Thoma attempts to show from biblical, midrashic, and mystical sources that “a Christological perception of God—apart from its historical realization—is not un-Jewish.” On similar grounds, another Christian theologian wants Jews to recognize that the doctrine of the trinity “acquired its depth” from the Jewish Scriptures.¹¹ In a more oblique fashion, the question was raised by John Sheerin in an article whose major thrust is to persuade Christians to modify their preconceptions about Judaism; dialogue, he says, is made difficult if not impossible by some of these Christian ideas. “Likewise, many Jews feel that they cannot engage in dialogue with Christians because they see the adoration of Jesus as sheer idolatry and they simply cannot bring themselves to discuss it with Christians.”¹² Since Sheerin’s article is not concerned primarily with this problem, he does not say

⁹*Zur Erneuerung des Verhältnisses von Christen und Juden* (1980), pp. 12-28. Partial English translation by Franklin H. Littell in *J.E.S.* 17 (1980): 211-212.

¹⁰*A Christian Theology of Judaism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 134; citation from Flusser’s article in *Concilium*, new series, 5.10 (1974), p. 71.

¹¹Dom Louis Leloir, “One of the More Burning Issues in Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Unity and Trinity in God” (the title is noteworthy), *Encounter Today* 13 (1978): 101-110. Cf. also note 22, below.

¹²“Has Interfaith a Future?” *Judaism* 27 (1978): 311.

explicitly what Jews should do about it or whether or not this makes dialogue impossible from a Christian perspective. Nevertheless, it is clear that some Christians are beginning to expect a measure of theological reciprocity if meaningful dialogue is to progress.

Can Jews offer such reciprocity? In most cases, I think the answer is no. Statements like those of Rosenzweig and Flusser about Jesus and the Messiah are thoroughly atypical in the Jewish community, and there is little prospect that this will change; indeed, aside from the subtle pressures of the "dialogue" relationship, there is no moral or intellectual reason for such change. Though many Jews are prepared to say that classical Christian theology does not constitute idolatry for Gentiles, there is a consensus that it is idolatry for Jews. Efforts to make the combined doctrines of trinity and incarnation more acceptable to Jews by citing the *Sefirot* of the kabbalists or the *shekhinah* of the rabbis are not likely to bear more fruit today than they did in the late Middle Ages.

It is therefore a matter of considerable importance for the future of dialogue that Christians not maintain illusory expectations about significant modifications of such theological positions.¹³ At the same time, this situation points up an even more troubling asymmetry in interfaith discussions. Many Christians involved in dialogue have been prepared to modify venerable attitudes toward mission, covenant, the significance of Judaism, and even the historicity of Matthew's account of the crucifixion. Jews are not in a position to make gestures nearly as significant, and this creates a situation in which Jews appear to be demanding change without offering very much in return.

There are, of course, valid reasons for this state of affairs. As Siegman has noted, the fundamental factor that gives Jews the "standing" to suggest certain changes in Christian theology is "the price that [they] have paid for such theology in history."¹⁴ As we shall see in our discussion of Antisemitism, a modification of those elements in Christianity which may lead to hatred of Jews requires at least a careful look at beliefs which come uncomfortably close to the core of the faith. On the other hand, although there is no denying that a pejorative perception of Christians and Christianity exists among many Jews, such perceptions have not led to any significant Christian suffering in the last millennium; moreover, some of them result at least as much from Antisemitism itself as they do from Jewish theology. Consequently, the relative absence of a Jewish *quid pro quo* is in a certain sense justified.¹⁵

Notwithstanding this justification, there is an uncomfortable imbalance in the structure of Jewish-Christian discussion, and one can only admire those

¹³This point was made by Richard Lowry in a paper presented to a Catholic-Lutheran Jewish conference in the Fall of 1980.

¹⁴Siegman, "A Decade," p. 257.

¹⁵See, however, Gerald Blidstein's remarks about the need for Jews to reassess the image of Christianity (*Tradition* 11 [1970]: 103-113), cited approvingly by Siegman, "A Decade," p. 254.

Christian participants who are genuinely interested in revising certain elements of Christian theology without expecting much change on the Jewish side. One way to correct this imbalance, at least to some extent, is for Jews to resist as much as possible the temptation of telling Christians what to believe. This is an extremely delicate question which we shall encounter in specific cases later on, and there are several fine lines on the road from hope to suggestion to expectation to demand. Often Jews are simply responding to Christian questions about the effect of certain doctrines, and on such occasions they are acting as what one prominent rabbi has described as a resource for the Christian community. Nevertheless, there is no obligation to answer every question; silence is still sometimes "a hedge around wisdom" (*Mishnah Avot* 3:13).

The classic, extreme formulation of this position, which has theoretically governed official Orthodox involvement (and non-involvement) in dialogue, is Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's argument that matters of faith are not an appropriate subject for interreligious discussion, because they are rooted in the profoundest recesses of the religious experience of both the individual and the faith community.¹⁶ Such Orthodox reservations about dialogue are reflected to a somewhat lesser extent in the attitudes of many Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals. The dangers of dialogue for these Christians emerge with striking clarity from an assertion by two liberal Christians whose devotion to the Jewish people and interfaith discussion is unsurpassed. Alice and Roy Eckardt have argued that insistence on "the divine inspiration of all Scripture . . . cannot escape a proclivity to antisemitism" and makes interfaith dialogue very difficult.¹⁷ Their theoretical goal is presumably to persuade fundamentalists to abandon fundamentalism, though the realistic objective is to prevent their "achieving forms of political power and influence." To the extent that this approach to dialogue envisions significant changes in the basic beliefs of the participants, it can appear especially threatening to both Christian fundamentalists and Orthodox Jews.

The issue of Jewish relations with fundamentalist evangelicals has become particularly acute in the United States as a result of the meteoric rise of the Moral Majority and related groups. Jewish reactions have varied widely, because the positions espoused by these groups can arouse both enthusiasm and deep suspicion when examined from the perspective of Jewish interests. On Israel, their stand is exemplary. On theological issues, they are oriented toward mission and Christian triumphalism, and denials that they seek a Christian America, while welcome, do not always appear consistent with the policies and behavior of local activists. Remarks by the head of New York's Moral Majority (for which he later apologized) asserting that Jews control the city and the media and possess a supernatural ability to make money show not so much conscious Antisemitism as staggering naiveté and unthinking acceptance of anti-Jewish

¹⁶"Confrontation," *Tradition* 6 (1964): 5-29.

¹⁷"The Achievements and Trials of Interfaith," *Judaism* 27 (1978): 319.

stereotypes; incredibly, the statement was genuinely intended to demonstrate support and admiration. (Jerry Falwell, who knows better by now, reacted immediately by denying that "you can stereotype any people."¹⁸) On social issues, most Jews are considerably more liberal than the Moral Majority, but there is no unanimity on these questions; still, school prayer is an example of a major goal of the politically oriented evangelicals which is opposed by virtually the entire spectrum of the Jewish community. Hence, the perceived dangers to pluralism and liberalism have led Jewish leaders such as Alexander Schindler to denounce this movement with exceptional vehemence; the vigorous support of Israel has led some Zionist groups to express enthusiastic approval in a world where offending Israel's friends appears suicidal; and the conservative position on moral issues has led some hasidic figures, for whom interfaith discussions are usually anathema, to support an alliance in the face of a deluge threatening all traditional morality.¹⁹

With respect to dialogue between Jews and evangelical groups in general (not necessarily the political activists), there has been real progress, and some voices have been raised questioning the general view that Jews are "safer" holding discussions with Christian liberals than with conservatives and fundamentalists.²⁰ The challenge here will be to establish communication and friendly relations without the expectation of much theological flexibility in the Christian position. In light of the potential tensions in the standard dialogue, this is a situation that deserves to be explored with interest. From the perspective of the "Jewish agenda," the prospect of improving relations without theological change was put forcefully by Yosef Yerushalmi: "After all that has happened, do we still have to await a reformulation of Christian theology before the voice of Jewish blood can be heard crying from the earth? Is our common humanity not sufficient? In any case, Christian theology is an internal affair for Christians alone."²¹

Nevertheless, most Christian and some Jewish participants in dialogue remain interested in "internal" theological issues, and the inner dynamic of the interfaith process may lead inexorably in the direction of such discussions. The historical agenda does not lead to new frontiers, so that some Christians involved

¹⁸*New York Times*, February 5, 1981. Several months after this was written, the individual involved was removed from his post.

¹⁹*Face to Face* 8 (Winter, 1981) is devoted in its entirety to an important collection of reactions to this movement by both Christians and Jews.

²⁰Cf. William Harter's paper delivered to the Synagogue Council of America on December 7, 1972 (available at the library of the American Jewish Committee); William Sanford LaSor, "An Evangelical and the Interfaith Movement," *Judaism* 27 (1978): 335-339; M. Tanenbaum, M. Wilson, and A. J. Rudin, eds., *Evangelicals and Jews in Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1978); and A. J. Rudin, "A Jewish Perspective on Baptist Ecumenism," *J.E.S.* 17 (1980): 161-171.

²¹Eva Fleischner, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* (New York: KTAV, 1977), p. 106. The case for non-intervention in internal Christian theology was expressed eloquently by Siegman in "A Decade," p. 257.

in dialogue for many years have begun to complain of discussions that review the same issues again and again. To the extent that such a perspective is correct, progress can be made by either involving new people or exploring new topics, and even though reaching out to new participants is an essential goal of interfaith programs, there remains the inexorable impulse to keep the dialogue vibrant on all levels. Since the frontier appears to be in the theological arena, there is reason to expect—or to fear—that the “victory” of the Jewish agenda will turn out to be ephemeral. To some extent this development is already evident: Clemens Thoma’s book, which demonstrates a genuine, sympathetic understanding of Judaism, has been the focus of a major dialogue; the March, 1981, meeting of the National Conference of Christians and Jews dealt with a Christian theology of Judaism and a Jewish theology of Christianity; recently published discussion on monotheism and the trinity was held some time ago in Europe; and, on a practical level, the National Council of Churches and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations have prepared guidelines for joint worship.²²

The dialogue, then, for all its accomplishments on the intellectual and especially human levels, is facing a major challenge. The historical agenda may be losing its freshness and vitality; the theological agenda is fraught with problems of the most serious sort, especially from the Jewish perspective. Advocates of dialogue will have to display a remarkable combination of creativity and caution. An interesting decade lies ahead.

Mission and Covenant

Perhaps the most vexing question with a direct bearing on the feasibility of dialogue is the status of the traditional Christian desire to convert the Jews. The point was made with exceptional vigor in a recent article in *The Christian Century*: “Dialogue can never be an attempt at conversion, nor can it occur if one party assumes an objective ultimacy or a superiority for his or her point of view. Dialogue must be an interaction in which each participant stands with full integrity in his or her own tradition and is open to the depths of the truth that is in the other.”²³ The last sentence is an exaggeration (a person cannot be entirely open while standing with full integrity in a religious tradition), and if the assumption of objective superiority makes dialogue impossible, then most believers will find it impossible. What is, however, indubitably true is that dialogue cannot be an attempt at conversion; if it is, it automatically becomes disputation or polemic, which is precisely what dialogue is intended to transcend.

²²See Pinchas Lapide and Jürgen Moltmann, *Jewish Monotheism and Christian Trinitarian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981); “Jews and Christians in Joint Worship: Some Planning Principles and Guidelines,” *Ecumenical Bulletin* 44 (November-December, 1980): 36-39.

²³John Shelley Spong, “The Continuing Christian Need for Judaism,” *The Christian Century*, September 26, 1979, p. 918.

What is less clear is whether dialogue is impossible with people who run a missionary program to convert you, provided that this particular discussion is not geared to that objective. What if they hope that you will be converted but have no missionaries? And what if that conversionary hope applies only to the end of days? Answers will differ, but there is certainly something uncomfortable about religious discussions with a partner who is working actively toward the elimination of your faith. Consequently, the "dialogue" relationship has played a role in a reassessment by some Christians of the applicability of the missionary ideal to the Jewish people.

Three approaches characterize Christian attitudes on this question: missionize everyone, including Jews; missionize everyone, especially Jews; missionize everyone except for Jews.²⁴ The first approach requires no explanation. The second argues that since Jews were the original chosen people, since Jesus was of their flesh and was originally sent to them, and since their conversion is singled out as part of the eschatological drama (Rom. 11:25-26), they should be the special targets of the Christian mission. The third approach is the most recent and the most interesting. No one, it is true, can reach the Father except through Jesus (John 14:6), but Jews are already with the Father. The covenant with the original Israel has never been abrogated (Rom. 11:28-29); hence, there is no theological necessity for Jewish conversion, at least not before the end of history.

This so-called double-covenant theory has played a major role in Christian discussions of the standing of the Jewish people and the propriety of missions to the Jews. The central text in Romans leaves room for divergent interpretations and deserves to be quoted in full: "As concerning the Gospel, they (the Jews) are enemies for your sakes, but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sake. For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance." All this text says clearly is that the *Jews* are in a certain sense still chosen; it says nothing unequivocal about Judaism. Hence, when a Christian writer says that the Vatican II declaration "makes clear that the Jewish religion has a continuing validity" because of its paraphrase of this Pauline passage,²⁵ he goes beyond the evidence. On the whole, official and semi-official Christian documents have avoided a clearcut assertion of the double-covenant theory in a way that would ascribe anything like religious equality to contemporary Judaism; such documents tend to remain ambiguous or to acknowledge frankly the existence of divergent views on this question.²⁶ Explicit recognition that Judaism remains binding for Jews, with its implication that Jewish conversion is not even desirable, remains confined to a relatively small group of interfaith activists.

May Jews legitimately tell Christians that they must abandon the belief that

²⁴The classification is borrowed from Harold Ditmanson's article in *Face to Face* 3-4 (Fall/Winter, 1977): 7-8.

²⁵Sheerin, "Has Interfaith a Future?" pp. 308-309.

²⁶Note, e.g., the statements of the World Council of Churches (1968) and the Lutheran Commission on World Mission (1969) in Croner, pp. 79, 91.

Christianity supersedes Judaism? One Jewish leader has recently described Christian supersessionism as “vainglory (and) a kind of religious arrogance that must be labelled a sin. And that sin . . . needs to be purged from the soul of Christianity.”²⁷ This is an exceptionally strong statement which seems to deny any religion the right to declare its own beliefs true and those of another religion false. As Siegman put it, “Judaism constitutes a denial of the central Christian mystery and its notion of salvation; it cannot at the same time demand that Christianity be reformulated to accommodate the ‘equality’ of Judaism.”²⁸ Nevertheless, it is exceptionally interesting that the World Council of Churches’ most recent draft guidelines for Jewish-Christian dialogue discuss supersessionism under the rubric of Antisemitism and come very close to the sort of affirmation that most official documents have so far avoided:

We must be especially attentive to those traditional convictions that have furthered antisemitic stances and attitudes on the part of Christians. Attention should therefore be given to the following points: Judaism should not be presented as a kind of anachronism after the coming of Christ: the Jews are a living people, very much alive in our present time as, for instance, the establishment of the State of Israel shows. Neither should the impression be given that the Church has superseded the Israel of old. The Jewish People continues to be God’s People, for God is not unfaithful to those whom he has chosen (Rom. 11:29). As long as Christians regard Israel only as preparation for Christianity, as long as Christians claim the validity of God’s revelation to them by negating the validity of God’s revelation to the Jewish People, Judaism is denied any theological validity, and it becomes impossible to maintain a common ground for our common hope.²⁹

Even this carefully formulated statement does not say that the conversion of Jews is not desirable, and in a later paragraph the document acknowledges differences among Christians concerning the obligation to “bear witness . . . to the Jews.” It is when the discussion shifts from the abstract level of covenant to the more concrete plane of “witness” and mission that matters become particularly difficult for both Christians and Jews.

Christian witness is a rather important element in most forms of Christianity, and, in the absence of a fairly extreme position on the covenant question, it is difficult to see why Judaism should be excluded as the object of such witness. At the same time, not only is dialogue made difficult by an affirmation of missionizing, but the consciences of many Christians are troubled by the un-

²⁷Daniel Polish, “A Jewish Perspective: This Moment in Jewish-Christian Relations,” *Ecumenical Bulletin* 44 (November-December, 1980): 8-9.

²⁸Siegman, “A Decade,” p. 256.

²⁹Paragraph 2.4 of the Guidelines (*Ecumenical Bulletin* 44 [November-December, 1980]: 30). See note 61, below.

savory history of missionary efforts directed at Jews. The solution has been a distinction between witness, which is obligatory, and proselytism, which is forbidden. What is the difference? In the most important Catholic paper on this subject, Tomasso Federici describes "unwarranted proselytism" as any witness or preaching involving "a physical, moral, psychological or cultural constraint on the Jews . . . that could . . . destroy or even diminish personal judgment, free will, full autonomy to decide, either personal or communitarian." This excludes the offering of "legal, material, cultural, political, and other advantages" and certainly rules out any form of coercion. Finally, since conversion must involve the free religious conscience and come only after inner distress and spiritual transformation, no organization should be set up for the conversion of the Jews.³⁰

Now, it is perfectly clear that the reasoning in this last sentence does not apply to the Jews any more than it applies to any other group, and its use in this context points up an important ambiguity in the paper. In an early passage, Federici refers to the survival of God's covenant with the Jews, and he later concludes by encouraging study of the "history and mission of Israel, . . . her election and call, her privileges recognized in the New Testament"; nevertheless, these observations do not appear at the heart of his argument. With the exception of a reference to the unpleasant history of Christian mission to the Jews, the central arguments against "unwarranted proselytism" of Jews appear to be arguments against unwarranted proselytism of anyone. Such a position is naturally commendable, but the impression given by Federici that Jews have special standing in this matter appears more rhetorical than substantive when the concrete arguments are examined.

Catholic reactions to the Federici paper have varied widely. Some conservative figures have condemned it outright and defended the necessity of missionizing Jews.³¹ While one account reports that Federici rejected "high pressure evangelism,"³² another cites his paper along with other Catholic statements as evidence that proselytism, apparently meaning all missionary efforts with respect to Jews, has been rejected.³³ The truth is that some of those other statements speak of rejecting proselytism in the context of dialogue, which is not the same as total rejection, though one or two—particularly a 1973 declaration by the bishops of France—do make the point quite vigorously and in a more general context. In a recent paper, Eugene Fisher attempted to read Federici's work in the most liberal possible way and to go beyond it toward a position in which the

³⁰"Study Outline on the Mission and Witness of the Church," *SIDIC*, vol. 11, no. 3 (1978), p. 32.

³¹*The National Catholic Register*, July 10, 1977.

³²Sheerin, "Has Interfaith a Future?" p. 311.

³³Swidler, "Catholic Statements on Jews," pp. 305-306, citing Croner, pp. 7, 12, 18, 51, 64.

permanent value of Judaism would rule out any of the traditional forms of mission to the Jews.³⁴

Needless to say, Protestant views reflect at least as wide a range of opinion as those of Catholics. Back in 1968, the World Council of Churches denounced crude missionizing (“cajolery, undue pressure or intimidation”) and reported the belief of some Protestants that “service” rather than “explicit words” might be the best way to testify to the Jews. On the whole, the document recognizes the goal of conversion quite frankly and does not renounce active missionary efforts. The Lutheran World Federation in 1973 placed mission to the Jews on an equal footing with mission to all other groups, while the position of the German Evangelical Church in 1975 is a striking example of the studied ambiguity often generated by this question: “We have now come to understand mission and dialogue as two dimensions of one Christian witness. . . . Mission and dialogue as descriptions of Christian witness have an ominous sound to Jewish ears. Christians must therefore reassess the meaning with regard to the Jews of their witness to Jesus Christ as salvation for all mankind, the terms by which to identify their witness, and the methods of procedure.”³⁵

We have already seen that the most recent draft guidelines of the World Council of Churches continue to report disagreement about the need to witness to the Jews. The guidelines, however, do “reject proselytism both in its gross and refined forms. This implies that all triumphalism and every kind of manipulation are to be abrogated. We are called upon to minimize the power dimension in all encounters with the Jews and to speak at every level from equal to equal.” At the same time, the guidelines say that “future work” includes “reaching a common understanding of the nature of divine revelation and thus healing the breach which exists between the Jewish people and the Church.” While the precise meaning of these remarks is unclear, they are hardly likely to allay Jewish suspicions about the persistence of missionary intentions in an age of dialogue.

Among American evangelicals, Jews continue to be considered appropriate targets of missionary activity, although Billy Graham noted in 1973 that he has never singled out Jews as Jews and is opposed to “coercive proselytizing.”³⁶ Jews for Jesus and other groups whose *raison d'être* is missionizing Jews receive considerable support from evangelical Christians. Here even Jews who hesitate most about intervention in the internal affairs of Christianity have some mixed feelings. Henry Siegman argues that Jews have no right to demand that Christians abandon such missionary activity but notes that “an active Christian mission to the Jews precludes serious dialogue.”³⁷ Jacob Petuchowski maintains that telling a Christian not to missionize is “an illegitimate attempt by one faith to dictate

³⁴ “Mission and Conversion in Roman Catholic History and Contemporary Debate: The Mission to the Jews,” presented at the Kennedy Institute Dialogue, October 13, 1980.

³⁵ Croner, pp. 81, 128-129, 148.

³⁶ Rudin, “A Jewish Perspective,” pp. 162-163.

³⁷ Siegman, “A Decade,” pp. 257-258.

to the other"; nevertheless, he cannot refrain from going beyond Siegman and adding that he would argue that such efforts are unwise and that perhaps the Jews' conversion should be left to God.³⁸

This issue, which is a deeply emotional one for many Jews, can be viewed as a matter of simple self-defense. When Marc Tanenbaum persuaded President Carter's sister not to address a group whose purpose was converting Jews, this was not an assertion of the "subordination of Christianity to Judaism," as the *National Review* described it in a remarkably insensitive editorial, but a reaction to a direct spiritual threat.³⁹ The Jewish mandate to protect Jews from conversion is no less a religious requirement than any Christian mandate to convert them, and, although my basic sympathies are with the "non-interventionists," in the case of aggressive missionizing aimed specifically at Jews the overriding principle of *pikkuah nefesh*, or danger to life (including spiritual life), may well prevail.

Active missionaries are in any case rarely dissuaded from pursuing their task, and the Jewish response must often take the straightforward form of replies to missionary argument. Such exchanges run the risk of acrimony; in fact, however, they need not be strident or disrespectful. Several years ago, the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York asked Michael Wyschogrod and me to write a booklet addressing the central issues raised by Jews for Jesus; our fundamental objective was to produce a work that would combine frank argumentation with a respectful tone.⁴⁰ Whether or not we succeeded is not for me to judge, but the angry denunciation that sometimes marks the Jewish response to this challenge is sometimes inappropriate and usually self-defeating.⁴¹ Even more recently, the New York J.C.R.C. has set up a hotline to advise Jews faced with this problem, and a variety of Jewish organizations have recognized the need for a low-key but carefully prepared program to counter missionary efforts.⁴²

The counter-missionary act which has aroused the most resentment among Christians is a recent Israeli law which makes illegal the offering of material inducements to convert. At the same time, several mainline churches have supported American Jews in opposing the misleading propaganda of various "Hebrew Christian" groups which attempt to give the impression—at least initially—that they are simply Jews. Finally, a leading Reform rabbi has recently suggested that Jews begin to proselytize. Although he has carefully restricted this proposal to "unchurched" Gentiles, the idea remains unpalatable to most non-Reform

³⁷Siegman, "A Decade," pp. 257-258.

³⁸"From the Viewpoint of Contemporary Judaism," *Face to Face* 3-4 (Fall/Winter, 1977): 13.

³⁹See *National Review*, June 23, 1978, p. 763.

⁴⁰See *Jews and "Jewish Christianity"* (New York: KTAV, 1978).

⁴¹Annette Daum, *Missionary and Cult Movements: A Mini-Course for the Upper Grades in Religious Schools* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1979) is another example of a response that maintains a civil and respectful tone.

⁴²The status of this problem in the late 1970's was summarized by Mark Cohen in "Missionaries in Our Midst: The Appeal of Alternatives," *Analysis*, no. 64 (March, 1978).

Jews, partly because of religious principle, but also because it appears to undercut the moral basis for Jewish opposition to Christian missionizing. Like most issues in Jewish-Christian dialogue, the question of mission is one in which significant progress has been made but which remains extremely sensitive, profoundly difficult, and ultimately unresolved.

Antisemitism

Condemnations of Antisemitism are by now routine in the declarations of most major churches. For some time, the linguistic nuances of such statements were examined with exquisite care, so that it became a *cause célèbre* when Vatican II “decried” but did not “condemn” Antisemitism, when it avoided the word “deicide” in declaring contemporary Jews free of responsibility for the crucifixion, and, more seriously, when it refrained from any recognition of Christian guilt for Jewish suffering. On the whole, these nagging points are no longer a problem. At least one official Catholic statement now “condemns” Antisemitism, and various quasi-official or local declarations speak of Christian guilt.⁴³ Among Protestants, the first assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948 denounced Antisemitism as a sin; a 1968 statement by its Faith and Order Commission followed the lead of Vatican II by rejecting the ascribing of responsibility for the crucifixion to most Jewish contemporaries of Jesus or to any Jews living today; and the latest draft guidelines speak of an “ashamed awareness of Christian antisemitism.” In the United States, even conservative churches have no hesitation in declaring Antisemitism an unchristian phenomenon that must be combatted.⁴⁴

This, however, is not the end of the issue. It is here that the “historical” and “theological” agendas become disturbingly, perhaps inextricably, intertwined. Rosemary Ruether has coined what has developed into a classic phrase in this discussion; Antisemitism, she says, is “the left hand of Christology.” In Alan Davies’ paraphrase, “The question of anti-Judaism is more than a question of a few notorious Matthaean, Pauline, and Johannine passages, but deals with the basic structure of New Testament theology itself.” The problem, he says, is whether or not Antisemitism is a fundamental part of the essential Christian heritage.⁴⁵

Ruether’s own view is that Antisemitism can be purged from Christianity only by a rather fundamental revision of Christian theology. If she is right, then

⁴³Swidler, “Catholic Statements on Jews,” pp. 301-302.

⁴⁴Croner, pp. 70, 82-83; Draft Guidelines 2.1; Rudin, “A Jewish Perspective,” p. 164.

⁴⁵Rosemary Ruether, “Anti-Judaism Is the Left Hand of Christology,” in R. Heyer, ed., *Jewish-Christian Relations* (New York: Paulist Press, 1974), pp. 1-9; *Faith and Fratricide* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974); “Anti-Semitism and Christian Theology,” in Fleischer’s *Auschwitz*, pp. 79-92; and Alan Davies, *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), p. xv.

Jews participating in dialogue face a stark dilemma. On the one hand, the right of self-defense would appear to justify demands for such revision;⁴⁶ on the other hand, Jews who ask Christians to respect Judaism cannot at the same time demand that classic Christian beliefs be dismantled.⁴⁷ Moreover, the problem cannot be easily avoided even if Ruether is wrong, because there still remain those "few notorious passages" in the New Testament which have undeniably bred Antisemitism in the past. If, for example, the Jews really said that Jesus' blood would be on them and on their children, and if Matthew's report of this statement is read as a theological endorsement (Mt. 27:25), anti-Jewish consequences could not easily be avoided.

Concerned Christians have addressed this problem in various ways. Some are prepared to deny that such passages are binding at all; the solution is to develop a "hermeneutic . . . that is not slavishly dependent on accepting the New Testament *in toto* as the Word of God."⁴⁸ A somewhat different formulation is that though the text is divinely inspired, on a certain level it must reflect the political and polemical concerns of its time; nevertheless, when read as a whole, the New Testament cannot be regarded as antisemitic.⁴⁹ Finally, there are Christians who refuse to reject even one line of the Gospels but nevertheless argue that no antisemitic implications need emerge.

What position should Jews take on these questions? Since the ideal answer is clearly that Jews should not prescribe the nature of Christian faith to their partners in dialogue, the only justification for taking a position is, as we have seen, the need for self-defense. If, however, that objective can reasonably be sought in more than one way, Jews, I think, should choose the approach which requires the least intervention in matters of Christian theology. Thus, Jews should encourage efforts to break the link between certain New Testament passages and anti-Jewish consequences but should avoid instructing Christians not to believe what the Gospels report. Needless to say, Jews do not have to become fundamentalist Christian missionaries, and the position of Christians who have rejected certain of those "notorious passages" can be welcomed. But Jewish preaching against the historicity of the Gospels is not only unseemly in the context of dialogue; it is probably also unwise from a purely pragmatic

⁴⁶The classic sociological study attempting to demonstrate the connection between certain Christian beliefs and anti-Jewish attitudes is Charles Glock and Rodney Stark, *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966). Note also the later, much more limited survey by B. Cohen and A. Lacognata, *A Pilot Study on Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism*, 1976 (available in the library of the American Jewish Committee).

⁴⁷Cf. John Oesterreicher's reaction to Jewish support for Ruether, cited in Siegman, "A Decade," p. 257. For Christian denials of an inevitable link between Christology and Anti-Semitism, see Fleischner, *Auschwitz*, pp. 93-94, 195-197.

⁴⁸Robert Willis, "A Perennial Outrage: Anti-Semitism in the New Testament," *Christian Century*, August 19, 1970, pp. 990-992. See also n. 17, above.

⁴⁹Cf. Eugene Fisher, *Faith without Prejudice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), pp. 54-58. For a general discussion of this issue, see also P. van Box and M. McGrath, "Perspectives: Anti-Jewish Elements in the Liturgy," *SIDIC*, vol. 10, no. 2 (1977), pp. 25-27.

standpoint. Fundamentalist Christians are not about to reject the historicity of Matthew because Jewish ecumenists tell them to, and all that will be accomplished is the transformation of dialogue into polemic with all the resentment—and perhaps even Antisemitism—which this can generate.

The best example I have seen of a sensitive, yet vigorous approach to these problems is the recommendations made by two Christian scholars for changes in the Oberammergau passion play. At the request of the Anti-Defamation League, Leonard Swidler and Gerard Sloyan produced a commentary on the play which, with one or two exceptions, avoids any proposal based on the rejection of the Gospel crucifixion accounts.⁵⁰ For example, when dealing with the passage in Matthew wherein the Jews say, “His blood be on us and on our children,” they do not insist on deletion, even though that is the solution they would no doubt prefer. Instead they suggest an alternative more palatable to the people of Oberammergau: the crowd should say it once, as in Matthew, and not four times, as in the play, and the choir, which now responds, “It will come on you and on your children,” should change just one word: “It will come on you—not on your children.”

None of this means that Jewish scholars who are convinced that such a passage is unhistorical should censor their scholarly work. These considerations of restraint apply only to the context of religious dialogue, where respect for the other’s faith commitment is the essential element that separates dialogue from disputation. There are, furthermore, certain scholarly issues which belong under the rubric of Antisemitism that do not address the most sensitive matters of faith and can appropriately be raised in dialogue. These issues were addressed by Charlotte Klein in an excellent study of *Anti-Judaism in Christian Theology*,⁵¹ in which she examined the treatment of Judaism in scholarly works used in European seminaries and universities.

The results were profoundly discouraging. Judaism in the time of Jesus continues to be depicted as a legalistic faith concerned primarily with trivialities; the Jewish people in first-century Israel is described as the Jewish religious community; and the term “late Judaism,” with its implication that the religion came to an end with the rise of Christianity, remains in vogue. Klein’s chapter on “Jewish Guilt in the Death of Jesus” is especially depressing. It is not the defensible assertion that Jews were involved in the crucifixion; it is, rather, the motives ascribed to them and to their descendants throughout the generations for their rejection of Jesus. This rejection allegedly results not from understandable or even honest error but from obstinacy, the desire to remain the chosen people, culpable blindness, and the like. Nothing in the Gospels really requires such assertions, and Jewish indignation need not be restrained when confronted

⁵⁰*A Commentary on the Oberammergau Passionspiel in regard to Its Image of Jews and Judaism* (New York: Anti-Defamation League, 1978). See also Swidler’s brief guidelines in *Face to Face 7* (Summer, 1980): 19-20.

⁵¹(Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978; German original, 1975).

with this sort of antisemitic pseudo-history. It is worth noting that the 1975 Vatican guidelines specifically state that "the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition founded upon it must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear, and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor."⁵² Though the Pope himself violated this guideline in the recent encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, it remains an important statement, and the one encouraging finding in Klein's book is that Anglo-American scholarship displays far greater accuracy and sensitivity on these issues.

All the ringing denunciations of Antisemitism and progressive reassessments of Judaism have little importance if they are confined to an activist elite and have no resonance among ordinary Christians. Liturgical reform and textbook revision are, therefore, key elements in the effort to exorcise the impact of historic Christian anti-Judaism. With respect to liturgy, the most serious problems in at least some churches arise in connection with Holy Week in general and Good Friday in particular, when biblical passages commemorating the crucifixion are read. Some of these passages inevitably convey an anti-Jewish message, and, although thoughtful proposals for retranslation, judicious omissions, and substantial corrective commentary have been made, they all raise serious difficulties and face considerable obstacles.⁵³ The Good Friday "Reproaches" hymn, which is perhaps the most disturbing single prayer, has now been made optional for American Catholics. In 1976, the Liturgical Commission of the Episcopal Church recommended that the hymn be adopted;⁵⁴ eventually, the proposal was rejected, but the very suggestion indicates that movement on these matters is not always in the direction that Jews would like.

On the textbook issue, there has been considerable progress, at least in the United States. Though various problems remain, the depiction of Jews and Judaism in both Protestant and Catholic texts has shown marked improvement. The Pharisees are no longer simply hypocrites, and there are some indications that Judaism has remained a living religion despite the advent of Christianity. Since there is a movement away from standardized texts, it is now especially important that teachers and preachers be trained to appreciate and transmit these changing perceptions. This is a gargantuan task, but it is crucial if declarations about Antisemitism are to have a significant impact in the real world.⁵⁵

⁵²Croner, p. 14.

⁵³John Pawlikowski has presented an excellent summary of both proposals and problems, in Fleischner's *Auschwitz*, pp. 172-178. See also *Face to Face* 2 (Summer/Fall, 1976): 3-8.

⁵⁴T. A. Idinopulos, "Old Form of Anti-Judaism in the New Book of Common Prayer," *Christian Century* 93 (August 4-11, 1976), pp. 680-684; John T. Townsend, "'The Reproaches' in Christian Liturgy," *Face to Face* 2 (Summer/Fall, 1976): 8-11.

⁵⁵See Fisher, *Faith without Prejudice; Encounter Today* 13 (1978): 111; WCC Draft Guidelines 3.3; J. Pawlikowski in Fleischman, *Auschwitz*, pp. 162, 171; and David Hyatt, "The Interfaith Movement," *Judaism* 27 (1978): 273. For a pessimistic comment on the situation in France, see *Encounter Today* 14 (1979): 152.

The most terrible manifestation of Antisemitism has taken place in our own time, and the vexing question of Christian responsibility for the Holocaust is a brooding presence hovering over all discussions of anti-Jewish elements in Christianity. Inevitably, assessments of this question vary widely. Some would assign primary responsibility to the legacy of Christian teachings; others absolve Christianity with the argument that Nazism was a neo-pagan revolt against the Christian past; while others take a middle position. My own view is that Nazi Antisemitism achieved such virulent, unrestrained consequences because it stripped away the semi-civilized rationales which had been given in the past for persecuting Jews and liberated the deepest psychic impulses which had been partly nurtured but partly suppressed by those rationales. The Nazis utilized the standard political, economic, and sometimes even religious arguments for persecution, but their central message was that Jews were alien, demonic creatures, subhuman and superhuman at the same time, who threatened "Aryans" with profound, almost inexpressible terror. Such fear and hatred have probably been a significant component of the antisemitic psyche for centuries, but they have not been given free rein. The persecution of political enemies, economic exploiters, and religious deviants must still be governed by a modicum of civilized restraint; though this restraint must have seemed invisible to the victims of the crusades, it reappears, however dimly, when seen through the prism of the Holocaust. On the other hand, malevolent demons, terrifying aliens, and malignant vermin can only be extirpated with single-minded, ruthless ferocity.

The key question, therefore, is what role Christianity played in strengthening the image of Jew as demon, and the answer cannot be unequivocal. There is no doubt that the growth of such a perception of the Jew in the late middle ages was intimately connected with Christian ideas and served as an important explanation of the Jewish rejection of Christianity. Though this belief was manifested largely in popular Antisemitism, there was no shortage of clergy who endorsed and propagated it. At the same time, such a view is fundamentally alien to the central teachings of the medieval church, which protected Jewish life and looked forward to both the individual and the collective conversion of Jews. Demons, let alone vermin, are not candidates for conversion! Indeed, one could argue plausibly that it was precisely the weakening of religious grounds for Antisemitism in the modern period which opened the way for their replacement by the racial, demonic justification.

In sum, the Holocaust is not a Christian phenomenon, but it must weigh heavily on the Christian conscience. Many observers believe that it was this unparalleled catastrophe which led to the reexamination of Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism manifested in the last few decades. Several churches have even introduced ceremonies commemorating the Holocaust to coincide with the growing Jewish observance of *Yom Hashoah*, or Holocaust Day,⁵⁶ and

⁵⁶See *Face to Face 7* (Winter, 1980): 11-14, 18-19, 27-29.

the subject is a recurring theme in Jewish-Christian dialogues. It is a commonplace that the Holocaust has deprived Antisemitism of "respectability," at least temporarily, in what passes for civilized discourse, and it has served as an important reservoir of sympathy for the State of Israel. Many Jews, however, have begun to worry that this breathing space has passed, and Christian attitudes toward Israel, though often supportive and sometimes enthusiastic, have become a source of growing concern.

The State of Israel

For nearly two millennia, Christians pointed to the destruction of the ancient Jewish state as proof that God has rejected the Jewish people and replaced them with "true Israel." In the context of such a theology, any manifestation of Jewish nationalism would inevitably be regarded as a defiance of the will of God, and the initial reaction of most Christians to the Zionist movement reflected precisely such an attitude. As Eugene Fisher has noted, however, the position of Vatican II on Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion would appear to render such a reaction obsolete and to leave no theological obstacle to Christian, or at least Catholic, support of the State of Israel.⁵⁷

Fisher's logic is unassailable, and a 1973 statement by the bishops of France declared that "the conscience of the world community cannot refuse the Jewish people . . . the right and means for a political existence among the nations."⁵⁸ Nevertheless, one wonders if the implications of Vatican II have been fully discerned in Rome; the official guidelines of 1975 are marked by a deafening silence concerning Israel, while the Vatican's failure to recognize the Jewish state remains a source of tension in Catholic-Jewish relations. This is an issue in which it is particularly difficult to disentangle politics and theology, but the official reasons, which speak of the ongoing state of war and the uncertainty of boundaries, do not carry much conviction.⁵⁹

That Protestant churches would be divided about Israel is obvious and inevitable. In 1968, the World Council of Churches confessed its inability to reach a unanimous evaluation of the formation of the state, which, it said, brought Jews self-assurance and security only at the expense of injustice and suffering for Arabs.⁶⁰ This, of course, is a reservation not about borders but about the fundamental existence of the state. The W.C.C.'s most recent draft guidelines are a major step forward in this respect. They acknowledge an "indis-

⁵⁷*Origins* 9.10 (August 16, 1979), 158-160.

⁵⁸Croner, p. 63.

⁵⁹See Marcel Jacques Dubois, "The Catholic Church and the State of Israel—After Thirty Years," *Christian News from Israel*, vol. 27, no. 2 (1979), p. 64. Some Catholics have argued that Vatican contacts with Israeli officials constitute *de facto* recognition. *De jure* would be an improvement.

⁶⁰Croner, p. 76.

soluble bond between the Jewish people and the Land of Israel, which has found expression . . . in the reality of the State of Israel. Failing to acknowledge the right of Jews to return to the land prevents any fruitful dialogue with them.”⁶¹

Just as opposition to Israel can be based on either political or theological grounds, support for the state can also be formulated in secular or religious language. Jews have often spoken to Christians about the religious significance of the connection between Jews and the land, and such discussions can have two objectives. The moderate goal is to give Christians an appreciation of the depth and intensity of Jewish feeling on this matter; the more ambitious goal is to persuade them that Christian theology itself demands that Christians support this manifestation of the ongoing, unbroken covenant between God and the Jewish people. “The gifts of God are,” after all, “without repentance” (Rom. 11:29).

For Christians who remain impervious to such persuasion, it can sometimes arouse resentment. One Christian, for example, was moved to make a grotesque comparison between Jewish efforts to convert Christians to friendship toward Israel and Christian efforts to convert Jews to Christianity, as if being asked to abandon your faith is analogous to being asked to revise your political opinions (even when those opinions have a theological dimension). He later modified the statement, but the initial reaction remains eloquent testimony to the potential for friction in this area.⁶²

Even when Christians endorse the theological necessity of the State of Israel, some strange and unwelcome things can happen if the justification for its existence is made to shift almost entirely from the political to the theological sphere. A striking example of this phenomenon is a 1970 statement by the Synod of the Reformed Church in Holland. God’s covenant with Israel, it says, is still in effect, and this includes the connection between Israel and the land. “Because of the special place of the Jewish people we endorse in the present situation the right of existence of the state of Israel.” The founding of the state took place in an “all too human way, as is the case with practically every other state.” But “the special place of Israel was never based on its moral qualities.” God’s “covenant-love” is not annulled by sin. “Therefore we ought not to dispute on moral grounds the right of the State of Israel to exist.”

The document goes on to note that because of the Jews’ special place, the

⁶¹Guidelines 5.1. The Protestant Church of the Rhineland (see note 9, above) has recently described the creation of the State of Israel as a “sign of God’s faithfulness to his people.” In subsequent drafts of the W.C.C. Guidelines adopted well after the completion of this article, this passage—and the one discussed at note 29, above—have been attenuated to a point where they no longer retain the significance I have attributed to them. From a Jewish perspective, the discussion of Israel is no longer a step forward and is, in fact, quite disappointing.

⁶²See *Christianity and Crisis*, October 28 and December 23, 1974. Cf. also the remark by Willard Oxtoby in *The Christian Century*, October 13, 1971, p. 1193, cited in F. Talmage, *Disputation and Dialogue* (New York: KTAV, 1975), p. 185.

State of Israel must behave in an exemplary way—to teach the world a new understanding of what a state is. The state's boundaries must offer the Jews a dwelling place, but the need to protect that dwelling place “should not induce the Jews to make it into a nationalistic state in which the only thing that counts is military power.” In this respect, Israel must be better than other states. Finally, it is also called upon to exercise justice in an exemplary way by recognizing responsibility for the Palestinian refugees and giving Israeli Arabs *de facto* and not just *de jure* equality.⁶³

Though Jews are inevitably pleased by a theologically oriented defense of Israel on the part of Christians, this document demonstrates the dangers of relying solely on theological grounds for such support; once the burden of Israel's existence is borne by theology alone, it becomes seductively easy to slip into the apparently unimportant concession that its survival is questionable on other, moral grounds. Such a concession is, of course, devastating to Israel's position in the eyes of anyone who does not share the particular theological perspective of this document. Moreover, the end of the statement is an exceptionally frank expression of the double standard often applied to Israel. To say that Israel is called upon to pass tests of prophetic stature is to make a demand that no state can readily meet; to imply, as this document does, that failure to pass these tests leaves Israel's right to exist untouched is not only of questionable value in the political sphere, but it is also—unfortunately—dubious theology. When the prophets made demands, failure to meet them had consequences. While Jewish title to the land remained in force *sub specie aeternitatis*, God reserved the right to suspend the lease. In short, this statement is destructive of Israel's moral and political position while providing very little theological consolation.

Christians hostile to Israel have applied a double standard in a far more egregious fashion. Daniel Berrigan, for example, made a famous speech after the Yom Kippur War in which he strongly implied that Jews must behave differently from others and denounced their failure to do so with the sort of scathing indignation appropriate only for acts of consummate evil.⁶⁴ Very recently, several hundred Christian clergy, including the head of the human-rights commission of the National Council of Churches, called for a reduction in U.S. aid to Israel because of alleged violations of human rights. Now, Israel depends on U.S. aid for its very survival. Its human-rights record is, by any standards, immensely superior to that of its adversaries; considering the circumstances, that record is so good as to be almost unbelievable. This Orwellian document is therefore urging that a state with an excellent human-rights record be placed in jeopardy in the face of a challenge from states with human-rights records ranging from

⁶³Croner, pp. 104-105.

⁶⁴*American Report*, October 29, 1973. For Arthur Hertzberg's response, see *ibid.*, November 12, 1973. See also Robert Alter, “Berrigan's Diatribe,” *Commentary*, February, 1974, pp. 69-73.

poor to terrible—in the name of human rights!⁶⁵ The signatories, of course, give the impression that Israel's sins *are* sufficiently severe to deserve comparison with those of notorious offenders, but this is a Big Lie of proportions that would have done Goebbels proud and merely underscores the application of a double standard.

Though the major Christian organizations have issued no statements as disgraceful as this one, a number of recent declarations have aroused considerable concern among Jews. The embrace of the Palestinian cause by third-world nations has not left liberal Christians unaffected, and the National Council of Churches has adopted a statement on the Middle East which pursues evenhandedness to the point where perfectly symmetrical demands are made of Israel and the P.L.O. Both must cease acts of violence, and each must recognize the other (apparently simultaneously); in Israel's case, this recognition must include the Palestinian right to establish a sovereign state. The National Council of Churches refused to single out P.L.O. terrorism or to make recognition of Israel a precondition for any change in Israel's policy. Even more recently, an August, 1980, statement by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches denounced Israel's annexation of East Jerusalem, equated the city's importance in Christianity and Islam to its importance in Judaism, and called on "member churches to exert through their respective governments all pressure on Israel to withhold all action on Jerusalem."⁶⁶

These statements have virtually no theological content, and we have already seen that Jews have attempted to introduce a theological dimension into the Christian approach to this issue. The central point, however, is not a theological one. Positions of Christian religious groups which reflect indifference or worse toward the fate of Israel are interpreted by Jews as "indifference or even antagonism to the survival of the Jewish people"⁶⁷; such positions suggest that, despite protestations to the contrary, the history of Christian Antisemitism has not sufficiently sensitized even some sympathetic Christians to the specter of the mass destruction of Jews.

This is a strong assertion, and it is important at this point to consider briefly why active *Jewish* anti-Zionism is no longer admissible in the mainstream of Jewish life, despite its respectable antecedents in the first part of the century. There are various explanations, including the Holocaust and a growing pride in Israel's achievements, but the main reason is the new implications of anti-Zionism created almost overnight once the State was established. Before there was a state, the anti-Zionist position simply said that no such state should be estab-

⁶⁵*New York Times*, January 8, 1981. For Christian comments criticizing the double standard, cf. Fleischner, *Auschwitz*, pp. 232-233; and Kirsch, *We Christians and Jews*, p. 119. On Christian criticism of Israel, see Judith H. Banki's excellent report, "Anti-Israel Influence in American Churches" (1979), prepared for the Interreligious Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee.

⁶⁶*Current Dialogue* 1 (Winter 1980/81): 10.

⁶⁷Polish, "A Jewish Perspective," p. 9.

lished; after May, 1948, active anti-Zionism meant that the existing State should cease to exist. But the only reasonable scenario for its destruction would have to be drenched in torrents of Jewish blood. This dilemma is illustrated sharply in the almost pathetic hope expressed in the fiercely anti-Zionist work of the late Satmar rabbi; Jews, he wrote, should pray that Israel be destroyed—but not through the actions of the nations of the world.⁶⁸

By this time, the critical importance of Israel to Jewish survival extends far beyond its boundaries. So many Jews have become psychologically dependent upon the existence of the State—so many perceptions of Jewish history, Jewish identity, indeed of Judaism itself, have been linked to its success—that the destruction of Israel would mean not only the mass extermination of its inhabitants but the spiritual death of a majority of diaspora Jewry. This is a statement of simple fact, and yet it gives the impression of heated, perhaps overblown rhetoric and consequently exemplifies a serious challenge facing Jews who wish to communicate their apprehension. Many well-intentioned listeners react by attributing such fears to an understandable “post-Holocaust” syndrome which must be respected but which hardly reflects objective reality. In this case, however, the paranoiac has real enemies; ironically, it is the detached observer who distorts the dangers by viewing them through the prism of a seductive psychological construct which appears to diminish them.

Ultimately, then, it is the identity of the consequences of anti-Zionism and Antisemitism which has created a nearly universal consensus among Jews, whatever their ideology, that protecting Israel must be one of the crucial priorities of the Jewish people, and it is this perception which leads to resentment and even anger at certain Christian statements on the Middle East. A feeling of moral outrage cannot justifiably result from a failure by Christians to develop their theology on Israel in a manner pleasing to Jews; it can and does result from the conviction that routine Christian denunciations of Antisemitism are virtually meaningless when combined with policies which, in Jewish eyes, jeopardize the security of the State and hence the survival of the Jewish people.

This combination of opposition to Antisemitism and espousal of positions dangerous to Israel does not necessarily demonstrate hypocrisy. We have already seen that non-Jews often fail to perceive the magnitude of the danger or to recognize the link between the threat to Israel and the threat to both Jewish lives and Jewish survival. There is also, of course, the existence of a conflicting moral claim made in the name of Palestinian Arab nationalism. The attractions of this claim are enhanced by its association with the aspirations of groups who have elicited considerable sympathy in the leadership of both the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches (the third world, victims of colonialist oppression, and the like), particularly in light of the categories of liberation theology.⁶⁹

⁶⁸Joel Teitelbaum, *Sefer VaYoel Mosheh* (Brooklyn: Jerusalem Book Store, 1981), p. 8.

⁶⁹See Rael Jean Isaac, “Liberal Protestants versus Israel,” *Midstream* 27 (October, 1981):

This is not the appropriate forum to argue the merits of this moral claim in detail. Nevertheless, the moral relevance of several well-known factors is worth noting. There is a Palestinian Arab state named Jordan, which is somehow not accepted as a legitimate locus for the realization of Palestinian national aspirations. Palestinian Arab nationalism was generated in part by the Jewish immigration and has tended to define itself, at least to the international community, only in relation to the territory that Jews happen to control (note the lack of interest in a separate Palestinian West Bank before 1967); that is, once Jews control an area, it becomes a focus of the Palestinian desire for self-determination. In a sense, then, a specific Palestinian nationalism (as distinct from a broader Arab nationalism) originated in resistance to Jewish national self-expression and was nurtured in the bitterness and frustration of a refugee status artificially prolonged by Arab states—precisely because of hostility toward Israel. The moral standing of a nationalism both generated and defined largely by relentless animosity toward the Jewish national presence (not to speak of the moral questions regarding the manner in which this nationalism is being pursued) cannot be accepted uncritically merely because it uses the terminology of self-determination. A positive Palestinian nationalism should be able to achieve fulfillment in Jordan (including, perhaps, much of the West Bank); the sort of Palestinian nationalism which is now dominant, given a mini-state in the West Bank and Gaza, will pose a mortal danger to Israel. Moral considerations surely require that the natural tendency of decent people to sympathize with the powerless be tempered by a reasonable assessment of what is likely to happen should they gain power.

Let me emphasize that this argument does not mean that Jews have the right to express righteous indignation whenever Christians or Christian organizations criticize Israel; Jews themselves are not always reticent in expressing disagreement with Israeli policies, and the self-censorship practiced by some Jews in these matters can hardly be demanded of Christians. I think, however, that a question can be formulated which might serve as a rough criterion for a fair Jewish reaction to Christian statements and for self-scrutiny by Christians professing concern for Jews: “Is this position rejected by at least ninety per cent of Israeli Jews on the grounds of national security?”

Israel is a democracy with a diverse and opinionated population; a positive answer to this question almost surely means that the position rejected is fraught with peril. Christians who find that they espouse such a position, particularly if this occurs with any frequency, are probably deceiving themselves about their concern for Jews; in reality, they are prepared to face the destruction of the Jewish people (not only the State of Israel) with relative equanimity.⁷⁰ For their part, Jews can hardly be faulted for reacting with deep disappointment when

6-14, especially pp. 12-13.

⁷⁰After this was written, Steven E. Plaut proposed a virtually identical criterion to define “What is ‘Anti-Israel’” (*Midstream* 28 [May, 1982]: 3-6).

Christians maintain such views, and the National Council of Churches' statement falls into this category. The usefulness of dialogue is called into question when a major Christian body in the United States takes a stand which jeopardizes the survival of Israel. To make matters worse, this stand is less sympathetic than the position taken by both American public opinion and the policy of the United States government itself. It may be unrealistic to expect dialogue to have produced an attitude more favorable than that of the average citizen in a given country, but if the position of the churches is less favorable, many Jews cannot help but feel disillusioned about the entire process of interfaith discussion.

The picture, nevertheless, is not unrelievedly bleak. Veteran interfaith activists such as Franklin Littell, John Oesterreicher, and the Eckardts remain passionately devoted to the defense of Israel. For theological reasons, many Christian fundamentalists have spoken out on Israel's behalf, and, although we have already seen that many Jews feel ambivalent about this support, others have welcomed it with genuine enthusiasm. Given the discouraging atmosphere on the Israel issue as well as the Moral Majority's recent efforts to shed its antisemitic image, rejection of such support is becoming more difficult to justify, and it is especially noteworthy that Southern Baptists were conspicuous by their absence among the signatories of that document condemning Israel for violating human rights.⁷¹ The irony that precisely those groups which participate least in dialogue are the strongest supporters of Israel should not go unnoticed, but this does not mean that dialogue has not helped produce Christian friends of the Jewish state—some of them quite influential. Israel is now inextricably linked to the spiritual and physical survival of world Jewry, and Jews must pursue every avenue to ensure its security. Interfaith dialogue is one such approach, and it must be cultivated with both deep sensitivity and uncompromising vigor.

Ethics and Public Policy

Religion has something to say about social issues, but precisely what is not always clear. Wide differences on these questions exist not only among "religious" people in general but also among members of the same faith or even the same denomination. For interfaith dialogue, such a situation presents opportunities and pitfalls at the same time.

In some contexts, the existence of flexibility, divergent opinions within a single religious tradition, and overlapping views cutting across religious lines

⁷¹See the Eckardts' warning against relying on the theological arguments for Israel which provide the underpinning of the evangelical position (*Judaism* 27 [1978]: 320). On the other hand, support for Israel on other grounds than particularistic theology is not unheard of among evangelicals. Cf. Carl Henry in *Face to Face* 3-4 (Fall/Winter, 1977), p. 17. See especially A. Roy Eckardt, "Toward a Secular Theology of Israel," *Christian Jewish Relations*, no. 72 (September, 1980), pp. 8-20.

diminishes the adversarial relationship that can occasionally threaten the atmosphere of dialogue. In dealing with issues such as poverty and civil rights, all parties share the objective of maximizing social justice in an imperfect world, and discussions can constitute a combined effort to articulate the best means of attaining that end. It is not always clear, however, that such discussions are religious dialogue as much as they are a consideration of proper social policy by individuals who happen to be religious. The fundamental ethical principles are largely shared by all decent people, and choices must be made on the basis of calculations that are not radically different for the person of faith and the secular humanist. In other areas of Jewish-Christian dialogue, theological concerns can become too prominent; here, the specifically religious dimension can become little more than window dressing.

With some exceptions, Jewish and Christian participants in dialogue have tended to be theologically and politically liberal. Until fairly recently, this has made cooperation on social issues in the United States relatively straightforward. In the 1960's, for example, the civil rights movement was fighting for a cause whose justice was unassailable, and Jewish religious leaders were particularly prominent in a struggle which exemplified prophetic ideals and evoked no hesitation or ambivalence.

Things are no longer quite so simple. For reasons involving both ethical ideals and practical self-interest, many Jews have profound reservations about affirmative action quotas, and, even in less sensitive areas, the recent conservative trend has not left Jews unaffected. Since many Christian ecumenists have gone along with the sort of redefinition of liberalism which requires support for quotas, it has become somewhat more difficult to find common ground on a topic that once served as a fruitful, noncontroversial area for interfaith cooperation. There should surely be grounds for satisfaction that the civil rights issue has reached a point where ethical people can legitimately disagree about key policy questions, but from the more parochial perspective of Jewish-Christian dialogue (and Jewish-black relations in general), unanimity has been sacrificed on the altar of progress.

Other problems of public policy are marked by a more direct engagement of religious interests. With respect to public school prayer, which almost all Jews oppose, the liberal orientation of most Christian interfaith activists creates a commonality of opinion with Jews which does not mirror the views of the ordinary American Christian. On the matter of aid to parochial schools, where vigorous Catholic support means that there are deep divisions among Christians, the religiously liberal orientation of most Jewish ecumenists creates an illusion of greater Jewish consensus than really exists. The relative absence from dialogue of Orthodox Jews distorts the picture, and one Catholic leader has told me that awareness of significant Orthodox support for such aid is important in moderating Catholic resentment toward Jews because of this issue.⁷²

⁷²For a recent work dealing with a variety of social questions, see Eugene Fisher and

Finally, there are the sensitive, occasionally explosive moral questions exemplified by the abortion controversy but also including such problems as euthanasia, homosexuality, and pornography. Here, too, the failure of Orthodox Jews to participate actively in dialogue can lead to skewed perceptions of what Judaism has to say about such matters. On abortion, for example, a number of Jewish organizations concerned with interfaith relations have declared that Jewish ethics are in essential conformity with the Supreme Court decision allowing abortion on demand before the last trimester. In fact, however, such a decision would have been rejected by every Jewish authority before the twentieth century, and, while Orthodox attitudes are neither monolithic nor entirely identical with Catholic views, they are far more restrictive than the public perception of the "Jewish" position.

On this and related matters, an appreciation of the Orthodox stance would contribute to a relaxation of tensions with both Catholics and fundamentalist Protestants. In any case, developments in biology and medicine have moved forward at such a dizzying pace that all religious traditions must take a fresh look at an almost bewildering variety of questions; in this context, abortion is only the proverbial "tip of the iceberg,"⁷³ and there is every reason to expect that such problems will receive continuing, urgent attention from theologians.⁷⁴ Though interfaith discussions will hardly play a decisive role in this process, they are likely to be stimulated and invigorated by confronting some of the most complex issues facing contemporary religious ethics.

Conclusion

No area of Jewish-Christian relations has been left untouched by the fundamental transformations of the last two decades. The revolution inevitably remains incomplete, and both opponents and supporters of the interfaith enterprise can cite abundant evidence for their respective positions. The most straightforward achievement of increased Jewish-Christian discussions is the least controversial; ordinary human relationships inevitably improve in the context of regular, sympathetic contacts. From this perspective, at least, even those with the deepest reservations about interfaith dialogue can only wish the participants well as they confront the theological, political, and moral dynamics of a relationship marked by danger, challenge, and genuine promise.

Daniel Polish, eds., *The Formation of Social Policy in the Catholic and Jewish Traditions* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980).

⁷³Hyatt, "Interfaith Movement," p. 275.

⁷⁴See "The Bio-Medical Revolution: Applying Jewish Values to Public Policy-Making," *Analysis*, no. 62 (April, 1977).