

Jewish-Christian Dialogue: The Next Stage

Christians and Jews must rethink how they approach each other.

By Rabbi Irving Greenberg

In the following opinion piece, the author instructs Christians and Jews on ways in which they should change their thinking and behavior if they are to engage in a productive dialogue. His opinions are likely to be controversial among some Christians and Jews alike. Reprinted with permission from For the Sake of Heaven and Earth: the New Encounter Between Judaism and Christianity ([Jewish Publication Society](#)).

What Christians Must Do

There can be no Judaism without Jews. Therefore, Christians must stop attempting to grow by spreading among Jews. Beyond merely ending proselytizing activities among Jews, Christians need to go after the anti-Semitism that is the residue of their own teachings. Anti-Semitism is the most ubiquitous, worldwide, permanent moral infection of human history. Sometimes one despairs of overcoming it.

It has now spread in its more virulent form into the Arab world. It is being spread worldwide, even in countries where there are no, or hardly any, Jews, such as in Japan; all this by propaganda emanating from European racists, some left-wing universalists, terrorist Muslims, and some Arab countries as well as from marginal fundamentalist



Christians.

It is not enough to stop teaching about Jews as "killers of Christ." The deeper challenge is to go back and uproot the very sources of the contagion that continue to pour this virulent infection into humanity's bloodstream. Christians must make sure that the Christian breakthroughs in understanding Judaism are transmitted and taught on the mass level. The morally and theologically remarkable work done by Christians in the dialogue of the last 20 years has one serious weakness. It remains basically the possession of a minority of inspired people. It is not yet understood properly at the mass level and not yet dominant at the upper decision-making levels.

Christians need to learn to take worldly holiness and liberation seriously without slipping into romanticizing the Third World. Usually, that way ends up with the Christians viewing Israel and American Jews negatively. Such a "romantic" Christian worldview is a real possibility in Christian thought today. Christians are used to seeing Jews as the oppressed and as paradigms of powerlessness. Jews have traditionally played such a role in the Christian imagination, as for example in the "wandering Jew" motif in Western literature.

What will Christianity do with Jews who have achieved power, as in Israel, or economic success, as in the United States? Will Jews now become the symbol of bourgeois wealth?

What Jews Must Do

All these issues represent valid Jewish concerns after the Holocaust, but it would be self-indulgent for Jews to stop there in the dialogue. As Jews work with Christians, they will discover the ethical power of Christianity, the religious depth of its liturgical life, and the extraordinary effects of its religious models, even the models that are most remote from Jewish perception of the past 1,800 years.

In so doing, Jews will begin to discover the positive aspects of Christian "otherness." Jews will have to fight the patronizing tendency to discover Christianity as a wonderful religion only because it is so similar to Judaism. A more searching understanding of Christianity needs to be developed and articulated by the Jewish community today.

Toward A Jewish Theology Of Christianity

Authentic Jews deeply rooted in their own tradition must struggle to do justice to the organic relationship of Judaism and Christianity. Jews must confront the fact that the separation and the career of Christianity--as painful, as bloody, and as ugly as it has been vis-à-vis Judaism--cannot simply be dismissed as a deviation from covenant history.

Historically, Jews have been reluctant to admit the possibility of partnership. While there is both risk (that Christian fundamentalists could abuse such recognitions to try to missionize Jews) and resistance (from Jews who fear that the minority's survival is endangered if there is greater openness and respect for the majority culture), this is a time for heroic measures to advance the cause of redemption. This has ever been the proper covenantal response to great setbacks in history.

In light of the Holocaust, Jews must develop a theology of non-Jewish religions that will articulate their full spiritual dignity. One cannot simply treat them as pale reflections of Judaism. A new theology is ethically necessary. As we learned from the Holocaust, when one treats others as having less spiritual dignity than oneself, the temptation is to stand by when they are physically in danger as well.

Theological contempt cannot be separated from human responsibility. It is hard enough to risk your life to save somebody you look up to and admire. It is almost impossible to do it for someone you think is intellectually dense or spiritually inferior. The tradition of spiritual contempt led many Christians to abandon Jews in the Holocaust. Jews who have suffered this indignity in the past must strive harder not to be guilty of similar misjudgments. "What is hateful to you, do not do to others." This is the summary of the whole Torah, according to our master Hillel.

Secondly, Jews must develop the ability to recognize the full implications of the truth that the Lord has many messengers. While it is true that Jews have always believed that there is salvation for the individual outside of Judaism, this generality does not do justice to the full spiritual dignity of others who, after all, live their lives in religious communities, and not just as individuals.

Finally, given human limitations and the corrupting effect of power, only the wide distribution of political, cultural, and theological power can ensure the safety of the world. A moral balance of power is the best guarantor of moral behavior. It follows that Jews need the presence of Christianity and other religions--as religions need the presence of secular movements--to prevent any one group from attaining societal domination that can lead to oppression.

Thus, the presence of many spiritual power centers will enable humanity to move toward the creation of the kingdom of God.



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