

Plenary Session

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How do Christians see themselves in their new relationship with Jews?

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I will focus in this presentation on Christian self-perception in light of our new relationship with Jews, and not on the self-perception of Jewish people; nor will I spend time mapping what that new relationship in fact looks like. While I have the honour of chairing the Council of Christians and Jews, I will be speaking as a bishop in the Church of England – that is to say, from a specifically Christian (and Anglican) perspective, rather than from the perspective of Christian-Jewish relations as such.

We all recognise that very different answers to this question would be given by different Christians, both because Christian-Jewish relationships are in fact very different in different places and also because they are interpreted very differently by different Christians. This is a really important point for Anglicans, who are notoriously diverse or discordant.

I want to refer particularly to the Church of England, where we have been recently working on a document expressing where we stand on a range of issues in Christian-Jewish relations; while many such documents exist in the ecumenical world today, this is the first time that the Church of England as such has sought to gather up its thinking and practice in this area. The report is set to be published later this year by our Faith and Order Commission. It finds its starting point in the following principle, one of five which underpin the report: [1]

The Christian-Jewish relationship is a gift of God to the church, which is to be received with care, respect and gratitude, so that we may learn more fully about God's purposes for us and all the world.

In other words, this specific relationship is generative for Christian identity. I will say more later about its particularity.

The Church of England has a very wide range of experiences and views; we are often, and rightly, described as a 'messy church'. The methodology of the report reflects that diversity. It can be quite difficult to discern **the** Anglican position on some issues, so at times we map out a number of positions held with integrity by Anglicans; we also identify an outer limit on some questions, beyond which views not acceptable; and at times we point to a core position on which we can all agree. So another of our principles states [4]:

Careful discernment is needed as to where Christians should be able to agree on clear affirmations ... where a range of positions that can be held with integrity can be identified, and where there is a responsibility to challenge views expressed by some within the church.

We also recognise that there is enormous diversity in the Jewish community, and that a conversation needs to go on between us about this – in the words of another principle [5]:

Christians have a responsibility to ensure that whatever they may say about Judaism is informed by continuing dialogue with Jewish people. It is important to listen carefully and discernment to the range of voices of Jewish people themselves.

The structure of the report falls into two parts: (1) theological frameworks; (2) critical issues. Four of the latter in particular are treated: (i) mission and evangelism; (ii) teaching and preaching; (iii) the Land of Israel; (iv) ethical discernment and common action.

I do not intend this morning to go through all of the ground covered by report in detail. In keeping with the question I have been assigned, I want to focus on the question of Christian self-understanding. On the basis of the approach taken by our report, I have myself three reflections on Christian self-understanding in light of our new relationship with Jewish people. It seems to me that Christianity is: (1) indubitably dangerous; (2) irreducibly particular; and (3) irreversibly missional.

1 Indubitably dangerous

By this I mean that Christianity has the potential to cause great damage to Jewish people. We know that this is the case because historically it has caused such damage, as another principle in our report states [3]:

Christians have been guilty of promoting and fostering negative stereotypes of Jewish people that have contributed to grave suffering and injustice. They therefore have a duty to be alert to the continuation of such stereotyping and to resist it.

The historical evidence is overwhelming and well-known to ICCJ members. The long and virulent tradition of the *enseignement du mépris* means that as Christians we need to acknowledge and repent of ‘ecclesial complicity in the evils of antisemitism’.

Yet more than repentance is also needed; we are called to ‘walk in newness of life’, recognising that there is another way. Another of our principles affirms that Christianity has also the potential to be an antidote to antisemitism, without being any less Christian; indeed, through being more authentically Christian [2]:

Truthful thinking and right acting with regard to Christian-Jewish relations follow from ‘the faith which is revealed in the Holy Scriptures and set forth in the catholic creeds and to which the historic formularies of the Church of England bear witness’. They do not undermine or dilute it.

This history undoubtedly makes us see ourselves in new light – or perhaps it would be better to say, in a new shadow. Anti-Judaism in the Christian tradition has never been attractive, but it is particularly damaging when viewed retrospectively from the effects of the modern antisemitism which it helped to prepare, and which culminated in the *Shoah*. The precise relationship between Christian anti-Judaism and secular antisemitism is much discussed, but there can be no doubt that such a relationship exists.

This affects the way in which we see both our history and our present reality. It is painful for us to recognise the shadow side of the teachings of great Christians of the past – such as St John Chrysostom, Martin Luther, or St Bernard of Clairvaux, to name but three whose spiritual influence has been important for me personally. How are we to cope with this realisation of a shadow side? And does this reach back into our scriptures, into the New Testament itself? That is a tangled and painful question; whatever answer we give, we cannot approach our scriptures, and still less our church’s tradition, unaware of the need for caution, vigilance, and humility. We have lost our innocence, so that we can no longer read Christian history just as hagiography. And we need in turn to reflect on our present ways of

teaching, preaching, worshipping. I am glad to say that CCJ is producing a resource on anti-Judaism and antisemitism for churches; there is much work to be done here.

The Archbishop of Canterbury has referred to antisemitism as a 'virus', which is constantly mutating into different forms. We still see it in its original form in some places, but this virus can change and attach itself to new hosts. Particularly today, we see the virus re-emerging in some of the language used around the conflict in Israel-Palestine, including some of the language used within the churches. This is a complex and contested area, and the most difficult chapter in the report to write was Chapter 5, on 'The Land of Israel'. Undoubtedly, when people feel passionately about this matter, they can sometimes reach down into anti-Judaic and antisemitic tropes. The College of Bishops of the Church of England have adopted International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism, with its list of examples (they have more recently been followed in this by the bishops of the Church in Wales), and this provides a benchmark to refer to. One dimension which makes this particularly complex area is the continuing presence of the historic Christian community in Israel and in Palestine. Indeed, Israel itself provides a new context for Christian self-understanding, very different from the historic Christian-Jewish dynamic of Western Europe

2 Irreducibly particular

Christianity is rooted in its relationship with the people of Israel. Over the last fifty years or so, the rediscovery of Jewishness of Jesus, and a renewed emphasis on the Jewish origins of Christianity, remind us that this is for us a relationship like no other, as the report explains:

Jesus of Nazareth, whom Christians believe to be Israel's Messiah and the Saviour of the world, lived and died as a Jew in faithful service to 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'. The Scriptures which informed and guided the life of Jesus were the books the church now refers to as the Old Testament, having resisted at a formative stage attempts to remove them from its canon of Scripture or relegate them to an inferior status. Although there are significant differences between Christianity and Judaism in their reading of these common texts, both receive them as inspired by God, enabling the people of God to hear the word of God today ... The relationship between Christianity and Judaism is characterised by both kinship and divergence.

We need to think carefully what we mean when speak of Christianity as a 'universal' religion. This cannot simply mean something which is better than a more limited view; an account like that could easily lead (and has easily led) to triumphalism, and to the obliteration of difference. We must become aware of this danger, especially when 'universal' is really used just as a cloak for the values of modern western consumer capitalism. I feel that Western churches may come to have a clearer perspective on this as we become more marginal in our societies, and learn to appreciate more deeply the diaspora Jewish experience of distinctive living as a minority.

For us, universality must always and irreducibly be rooted in the particularism of the historical story which begins with the God of Abraham choosing and delivering a people; the story of Jesus only makes sense within that story, and cannot be detached from it. *Nostra Aetate* in Chapter 4 develops this theme when it states:

As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock.

We cannot understand the church's identity except in relationship with Judaism. In fact, our contemporary church often devalues this particularity, as evidenced by the widespread disparagement

or disregard of Hebrew Scriptures in church life. There is often a functional Marcionism in Western church life; and sometimes the claim in other cultures that the story of Israel is not definitive for them. In fact, though, this is a story which resonates across world. The report urges a rediscovery of the Jewish groundedness of Christianity in our own internal life as church.

The particularity of Christianity's relationship with Judaism also has implications for Christian involvement in all inter faith relations : if this is our 'significant other' from the beginning, then the way in which we respond to or engage with other faiths will always be imprinted with this first relationship. In treating of this, the report takes up the evocative language of a 'sacrament of otherness' coined by Walter Cardinal Kaspar:

Judaism is as a sacrament of every otherness that as such the Church must learn to discern, recognise and celebrate.

I believe that this gives Jewish-Christian relations, within the overall inter faith scene, a paradigmatic (as distinct from an exceptional) distinctiveness, in this sense: that in every encounter with a religious other, we are taken back to the encounter with Israel which is formative for the Christian story.

3 Irreversibly missional

'Mission' is often seen as a difficult or embarrassing area in Christian-Jewish relations, and it is not difficult to see why: aggressive proselytism, forced conversions, and fear of the destruction of Jewish identity are all part of the history. We need to be very sensitive to the charge of theological aggression, particularly after the *Shoah*, and to recognise that much Christian evangelism has been coercive, manipulative, and disrespectful of Jewish identity.

However, mission is not just a contested issue between Christians and Jews; it is fundamental to Christian self-understanding. It seems to me that we cannot simply say 'Christians are Christians' as a matter of defined identity in the way that you can say 'Jews are Jews'. Christianity is not primarily the reception of an inheritance but an alignment with a story, and stories want to be shared with others. Thus the mission impulse in Christianity is deep-seated and constitutive of who we are.

Yet this deep-seated impulse does not need to be directed solely, or even principally, or maybe even at all, to Jewish people. We are now in a different place to where we were in previous periods of our interacting history. In medieval Europe, for example, Jewish people were the only distinctive group within homogeneously catholic society (apart from heretics, with whom they were sometimes grouped), and mission was usually an attempt to enforce uniformity. In the patristic period, Jews and Christians struggled with one another in their self-definitions, and mission could not be separated from polemical argument. Now, by contrast, as Jews and Christians alike we find ourselves in a religiously diverse and secularising world, where our values can be shared with a society drifting from God.

So our report recognises mission as one of those areas where 'differences of perspective on the place of evangelism are to be expected' among Christians, but also argues that mission is not just, or mainly, about seeking to convert people from one faith to another. Rather, there is a sense in which it is something that can be shared. As the document *The Way of Dialogue*, presented to the 1988 Lambeth Conference of Bishops put it:

Jews, Muslims and Christians have a common mission. They share a mission to the world that God's name may be honoured: 'Hallowed be your name'.

How far is it realistic for Christians and Jews to speak the language of mission together? It is not surprising that 'missional' language is central to Christianity in a way that it is not in Judaism, where its historical associations are still negative. There is, for example, a striking ambivalence of usage within one paragraph of the 2015 document of Orthodox Jewish appreciation of Christianity, *To do the Will of our Father in Heaven*. Paragraph 3 states:

We Jews can acknowledge the ongoing constructive validity of Christianity as our partner in world redemption, without any fear that this will be exploited for missionary purposes –

here 'missionary' clearly has negative connotation; but then the same paragraph concludes:

Neither of us can achieve G-d's mission in the world alone –

the use of 'mission' here is broadly aligned to the contemporary Christian view of mission as *Missio Dei*, a joining in with the ongoing work of God in rebuilding his world. And so Paragraph 4 of *To do the Will of our Father in Heaven* goes on to say:

Both Jews and Christians have a common covenantal mission to perfect the world under the sovereignty of the Almighty.

If this is right, then surely our relationship with Jewish people can help awaken us as Christians to our fundamentally missional identity. To work this out in practice is a conversation between Christians and Jews which is only just beginning; but we know now that that conversation can be conducted in a spirit of friendship and trust which our precursors did not enjoy.