

1: INTRODUCTION: What to Seek and What to Avoid in Jewish–Christian Dialogue

Then shall all those who fear the Lord speak, each to his neighbor, and the Lord shall listen and hear. It shall be written in a book of remembrance before Him, for those who fear the Lord and contemplate His name. (Mal. 3:16)

In this text, the prophet speaks of a time when the worshipers of God will communicate in a new way. From an earlier verse, it is clear that the worship of God, which is the basis of this new conversation, is not confined to the Jews: "For from the rising to the setting of the sun My name is great among the nations" (Mal. 1:11). Since Jews and Christians have the most to say to each other about God and his ways with humankind, perhaps the prophet is pointing toward the new conversation that is now taking place between serious Jews and serious Christians.

The new conversation between Jews and Christians may avoid the anger and suspicion that have characterized most of our past conversations. Due to this new sense of trust between us, deeper understanding each of the other is slowly emerging. Now it is important to reflect on why this new conversation has been so hopeful and why it has led to such new understanding, not only a new Christian understanding of Jews and Judaism and a new Jewish understanding of Christians and Christianity, but perhaps even a new Christian understanding of Christianity and a new Jewish understanding of Judaism. As such, this

new conversation, called by many "the dialogue," has already had profound ramifications both externally and internally.

We are now at a stage in the dialogue where we have enough experience of what has already happened between us to reflect on the conditions that have made it possible. These are methodological issues, but they have practical import since our successful continuation of the dialogue, even its improvement, requires that we know how it has been sustained as something much more than a historical accident.

What to Seek

Underlying the dialogue are two positive preconditions. First, each side must be willing to see the other side in the best possible light from within its own tradition. Second, that vision must not lead to any distortion of

what each tradition, itself separately, teaches as the truth.¹ True dialogue requires the adherents of each tradition to find justification for the other tradition from within his or her own tradition. One cannot use understanding of the other as any kind of escape from full commitment to the authority of Judaism for Jews or of Christianity for Christians.

What to Avoid

Participants in Jewish–Christian dialogue must be careful to avoid five negative conditions, all of which are dangerous theological stumbling blocks: disputation, proselytization, syncretism, relativism, and triumphalism. The very recognition of these dangers makes a valuable contribution to the dialogue. By carefully separating the dialogue from these five dangers, we infer the positive from the negative, which has long been a feature of rabbinic thinking.² From what ought not be done we can learn what ought to be done.

1. Avoiding Disputation

Dialogue takes the form of a disputation when the adherents of each tradition assume that everything the other tradition asserts is denied by their own tradition. This is what occurred in those public debates in the Middle Ages, when Jews and Christians faced each other as adversaries, even as enemies. In this type of hostile atmosphere, the goal is for there to be a winner and a loser. The memory of these disputations,

which were always instigated by the Christian rulers who had political power over the Jews, has made many Jews wary of the new dialogue with Christians. There are still many Jews who believe that if Christianity asserts something, Judaism therefore denies it. Indeed, for some Jews, Judaism means nothing more than not being Christian. Jews must understand that there are many commonalities between Judaism and Christianity and that to deny them is as much a distortion of Judaism as it is a distortion of Christianity. Jews need to understand that those Christians who have entered the dialogue with Jews in good faith do not seek the defeat of Judaism. Jews entering the dialogue must also not seek the defeat of Christianity, even in situations where we now might have political or emotional power over Christians.

2. Avoiding Proselytization

The dialogue takes the form of proselytization when the adherents of one tradition seek to persuade the adherents of the other tradition that they truly have what the others have been seeking all along. Proselytization is rooted in the hope that the others will become converted to one's own faith by their contact with members of one's own tradition. Proselytization has been a greater danger for Jews than for Christians because Christianity can claim that it includes all of Judaism and then carries it beyond the level now maintained by the Jewish people. Judaism cannot make a similar claim any more than parents can claim to have succeeded their children. Even if Christians generally hope that all humankind will come to the church, they should not use dialogue with Jews as a specific occasion for realizing that hope. The dialogue must respectfully recognize that the differences between Jews and Christians here and now are of greater importance than the commonalities that the dialogue acknowledges and develops. The dialogue must be justified as an end in and of itself and not used as a means for some other agenda.³

3. Avoiding Syncretism

Syncretism is the attempt to construct a new religious reality out of elements of Judaism and Christianity. But no religious tradition, least of all Judaism or Christianity, could accept the replacement of its ultimate claims by a new religion.⁴ Indeed, both Judaism and Christianity would have to see the construction of such a new religious reality as a form of

idolatry. In Judaism and Christianity, it is God who reveals to the covenanted community *how* God is to be worshiped and not just *that* God is to be worshiped. In fact, according to some Jewish and Christian teaching, that no other god is to be worshiped is something humans can know even before any specific revelation.⁵

Idolatry is the worship of "a strange god" (*el zar*).⁶ The wrong worship of the right God is called "strange service" (*avodah zarah*), which means the worship of God by humanly constructed rather than by divinely

revealed means.⁷ Judaism and Christianity are grounded in revelation. Syncretism denies the ultimate character of either Jewish revelation or Christian revelation by substituting something else for both of them. It can thus turn an authentic religious dialogue into an ideological monologue. The integrity of this dialogue cannot stand syncretism in any form.

4. Avoiding Relativism

In the atmosphere of modern secularism, which we can also call "relativism," in which most Jews and Christians now live, religion is taken to be a matter of private preference at best. Relativism is especially dangerous to the dialogue because it denies that some things are true all the time everywhere for everyone. But Judaism and Christianity make such claims. Indeed, these claims, like "God elects Israel" or "God is incarnate in Jesus," are what Judaism and Christianity are all about. In fact, Judaism requires Jews to die as martyrs rather than exchange Judaism for anything else, even something as similar to Judaism as

Christianity.⁸ Christianity makes a similar claim on Christians. Martyrs are willing to die for what they believe to be the highest truth one could possibly know in this world, because without a commitment to the existence of truth, one cannot affirm the truth of God. Martyrdom is therefore the ultimate expression of belief and represents the personal affirmation of public, universal, and perpetual truth. But with relativism, which sees all beliefs as simply private preferences, the martyr is the biggest fool.

The willingness of Christians to accept Jewish converts and the willingness of Jews to accept Christian converts shows that both religions reject relativism. Even though Jewish-Christian dialogue must not be an occasion for the conversion of either side, Jews and Christians recognize that conversion is always a possibility within the larger covenantal realities in which Jews and Christians participate. Jews know very well that Christianity is open to converts. But Christians

must understand that even though Jews have not engaged in the type of active proselytizing that many

Christians have engaged in, we have always accepted converts.⁹ Indeed, most of those converts have been former Christians. Religious conversion is an impossibility for a relativist, since for the relativist there is no essential, intelligible difference between one religion and another.

There are good political and moral reasons why Jews have not engaged in proselytization. Politically, proselytization has frequently been dangerous for Jews. In the past, Christian societies even outlawed it, and it also involves the danger that too many persons of questionable commitment to the full authority of Jewish

law might dilute the religious integrity of the Jewish community.¹⁰ Morally, since Jews have been the objects of so much proselytization on the part of Christians, something we have deeply resented, most of us have been loathe to do the same thing to others, especially since proselytization inevitably involves the denigration of the religion of the person being proselytized. Yet, despite these serious reservations, Jewish tradition has

never actually ruled proselytization out.¹¹

The reason that proselytization and conversion remain issues for both Jews and Christians is that truth is not relative, and thus the ultimate truth claims of Judaism and Christianity are not only different but mutually exclusive. The highest form of worship of the Lord God of Israel is *either* by the Torah and the tradition of the Jewish people *or* by Christ and the tradition of the church. That the choice is framed in just this way is the result of the historical origins of Judaism and Christianity: both traditions originate in the history of Israel presented in the Hebrew Bible. Accordingly, our differences are over the same God who first appeared in that same history. One cannot live as a Jew and as a Christian simultaneously. One could well say that the greatest temptation for a Jew is Christianity and that the greatest temptation for a Christian is Judaism. That this is so explains why Jews and Christians have so much to talk about and, also, why the stakes in the Jewish-Christian relationship are so high.

5. Avoiding Triumphalism

Triumphalism is the insistence that not only the highest truth but the final truth has already been given to my community alone. Triumphalism poisons the dialogue before it begins. Jews are triumphalists when we assume that Christianity is nothing more than a deviant

form of Judaism; Christians are triumphalists when they assume that Judaism is but a precursor to Christianity. Triumphalists believe that there is no commonality to discover between the two religions, and that therefore there is nothing to learn from dialogue. This claim, however, is historically false. It is also dangerous, as it prevents us from building areas of peace between us.

Jewish and Christian anticipations of the end of days contradict the triumphalists' assumption that our differences are final. For Jews, there is a time called "the Days of the Messiah"; for Christians it is called "the Second Coming."¹² In anticipation of this time, when human history will come to an end and the kingdom of God will be established on earth, Jews and Christians look forward to an everlasting divine redemption of Israel, of all humankind, indeed of the whole universe.¹³ The end of days will be a time when, unlike the present, "the kingdom will be the Lord's" (Obad. 1:21). What, however, of those Jews who assert that it is precisely at the end of days that the triumph of Judaism will be manifest, and what of those Christians who assert that at the Second Coming Christianity will triumph? We must answer that the final judgment of all human history is not yet in. "No eye has seen but yours O God what will be done for those who wait for you" (Is. 64:3).¹⁴ The world-yet-to-come (*olam ha-ba*), this coming-future (*l'atid la-vo*), is mysterious; it lies on the other side of our present horizon. Therefore Jews and Christians cannot see their past traditions or their present efforts and differences as the last word. The different claims of Judaism and Christianity are only tentative. Surely what God will do at the end of history will be radical enough to surprise everyone—Jews, Christians, and all others who wait for that time here and now.

1. See D. Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (New York, 1989), 14ff.

2. See B. Ned. 11a and parallels.

3. A good model for this is the concept of "mediation" (*pesharah*) in Jewish civil law. *Pesharah* is advocated (see B. Sanh. 6b–7a) when the full exercise of an individual claim in a property dispute would result in one side becoming the winner and the other the loser, thus resulting in a further rupture of the peace of the community in which both parties participate. To avoid this result, each party is to be persuaded (but not forced) to bracket his or her full claim with all its dissonance in favor of a partial claim in order to not further impede what the two parties have and should have in common.

4. See D. Novak, *The Election of Israel* (Cambridge, 1995), 40ff.

5. See Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, 2.33, on Ex. 20:3; also, Rom. 1:18–23.

6. Ps. 81:10.

7. See Lev. 10:1; R. Judah Halevi, *Kuzari*, 1.97; also, M. Halbertal and A. Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. N. Goldblum (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), 186ff.

8. See R. Abraham Gumbiner, *Magen Avraham on Shulhan Aruch: Orah Hayyim*, 128.37 based on B. Sanh. 74a on Lev. 22:32.

9. See Novak, *The Election of Israel*, 177ff.

10. See B. Kid. 70b, and Rashi, s.v. *kashin gerim*.

11. See, e.g., *Pesiqta Rabbati*, chap. 35 on Zech. 2:15, ed. Friedmann, p. 161a, and chap. 40 on Lev. 23:24, p. 167b; *Tanhuma: Tsav* on Lev. 8:1, ed. Buber, p. 9b; Maimonides, *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, 1, no. 149, ed. Blau

(Jerusalem, 1960), pp. 284ff. Cf. B. Yev. 109a and Tos., s.v. "ra'ah."

12. See C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching* (New York, 1960), 93ff.

13. See Is. 66:22.

14. See B. Ber. 34b; 1 Cor. 2:9.