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**Basic Theological 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  
Bonn-Bad Godesberg, May 8th, 1979**

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## Preface

This theological document, worked out by the Workshop on "Jews and Christians" of the Central Committee of Roman Catholics in Germany, places a milestone along the path of the Jewish-Christian dialogue. Here both have talked with one another in such a way that it becomes obvious that the talk about the identity of the Jew and the Christian as well is an essential part of their identity. In such an effort, the dialogue has found its "what" as well as its "how". Not only contact on the periphery, but contact between center and center; not only a coming to terms with the enormous historic burden, which weighs upon the present relationship; not only a way back to the common root and to the manner in which, millennia ago, a common heritage developed; not only an approach to common tasks, regardless of the differentiated motivations and creedal backgrounds — not only all of that, but both a contemporary Judaism and a contemporary Christianity, nourished by their origins and each accepting and taking seriously its own substance, advance into the contemporaneousness of a conversation about that which makes the Christian a Christian and the Jew a Jew. It is such a conversation, without any blurring and circumvention of the differences, which is both necessary and possible for the sake of one's own Jewish and Christian existence. It is a discovery in need of translation from the circle of the initiated into the daily routine of the faithful, into the very midst of our world. But such translation, too, has already begun with this document.

Aachen, April 24th, 1979

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## Basic Theological Issues of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue<sup>1</sup>

### I. Why Seek the Dialogue?

1. Jews and Christians have a common ground of hope: the God of Israel who graciously makes Himself available to mankind. Together they expect the complete fulfilment of their hope: the ultimate dominion of God.

Jews and Christians have been challenged to give a common testimony — both on account of what they have experienced of God and on account of the challenge presented by the world in which they are living. Not only to them — so they believe — but to all peoples the call was addressed to find life, home, and peace in the Jerusalem of the life-giving God. (cf. Isa 2. 1-5; Isa 60) As they themselves set out for this Jerusalem as the place of righteousness and faithfulness (cf. Isa 1.26), they feel the obligation to transmit to all of humankind the liberating power of their attachment to the God who can and who will grant life and future, (cf. Jer 29.11.) God's call enlists them in the service of fashioning the world. It makes them into pioneers of hope, especially for those who have no hope. This call is, at the same time, judgment — by freeing them from any fixation on purely internal interests and fears. Rather, following God's call, they are to become honest and courageous agents of God's righteousness and advocates of His mercy.

2. If the obligation to engage in dialogue, which applies in any age, is based upon the fact that Jews and Christians are bound together through the acts of the God of Israel, then the painful experiences of

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1) Original Title of the Working Paper: "Theologische Schwerpunkte des Jüdisch-Christlichen Gesprächs" translated by Dr. Elizabeth Petuchowski, Cincinnati/Ohio

recent history intensify the charge that, in our time, the dialogue be strengthened and deepened as much as possible.

- The past nineteen hundred years of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity have constituted a history of growing apart, the historical consequences of which were terrible. In connection with this history of growing apart, one must also view the terrifying occurrence of Auschwitz, the attempt to destroy the Jewish people completely through Hitler's dictatorship.
- In Judaism as well as in Christianity, both of which together owe their existence to the Revelation of the God of Israel, there is a gradual awakening of a "spiritual" interest in each other. Jews and Christians acknowledge this common Revelation through just this interest. Consequently, their interest in each other is in itself an act of adoring God.
- Jews and Christians must present a common testimony to a humankind whose very survival in humaneness is at stake, a concrete testimony which must show and prepare concrete ways of righteousness and salvation.

## **II. Conditions of a Dialogue which Concerns the Jew as a Jew, and the Christian as a Christian**

As Jews and Christians transmit a common treasure of biblical writings as the basis of their lives, the dialogue has a foundation, the value of which cannot be overestimated. It is the faith in the saving and sanctifying God whose closeness to the Patriarchs the Torah relates, and whose life-promoting teachings it proclaims. It is the hearkening to the God of the living and the dead, whose rule in the midst of the people, called by His name, the Prophets announce. It is the cleaving to the near and far God whom the prayerful Psalmists praise, and whose faithfulness they beseech even when everything seems to have

been taken from them. It is faith in the Creator God of whose goodness the proverbs and meditations of the sages remind us. Of all of this, Jews and Christians, in their respective ways, give testimony in their divine services and in their lives. But just here, a typical difficulty for the Jewish-Christian dialogue makes its appearance: Do the identical writings really provide the basis for a common life? To answer this question, it is necessary to bear in mind some fundamental conditions of the Jewish-Christian dialogue:

1. There can be no doubt that, to begin with, Jews and Christians will have to work very hard on behalf of one another, so that they can come to a better mutual understanding. The Jewish image of Christians and the Christian image of Jews, as formed in the course of history and still being formed, should be examined, and should be corrected in an encounter in which, by going back to the common basis, and in the light of the common hope, one interprets his own way to the other. Here in particular the one is not going to wait for the other to approach him in order to "study" him. Rather will he sense the obligation to share what is his own. Conversely, for the sake of the common hope, he will develop an active readiness to listen to the other. By presenting themselves, trusting one another, and revealing themselves to the other both can give the testimony to which they know that God has called them.
2. A Jewish-Christian dialogue cannot succeed if the Christian sees in the Judaism of today merely a memorial of his own past — of the time of Jesus and of the Apostles. But the dialogue will not succeed either, if the Jewish partner can discover in the essential Jewish elements within the Christian faith nothing but the effects of a past condition which did indeed obtain within the first Christian communities, but nowadays no longer obtain. In both of those cases, the one partner does not yet take the contemporaneity of the other seriously. Instead, he makes him into a mere mirror of his own past. However, contempo-

aneousness is the condition of any dialogue. The Jewish partner cannot be satisfied if, in a conversation with Christians, he is regarded merely as a surviving witness of the so-called Old Testament and of the period in which the Christian communities originated. 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. From the ecumenical experience of the inner-Christian dialogue, confidence may grow also for the Jewish-Christian dialogue: There, too, both partners have learned to summon the ability and the readiness to listen to the word of the other as a testimony which concerns the listener in his relation to God.

3. The very history which makes today's encounter of Jews and Christians more difficult can also smooth the path towards each other, if only that history be experienced and acknowledged — even if, at first, only in part — as a really common history which concerns us actually now.

When, in a prayer on Easter Eve, the Christian pleads for "the dignity of Israel" to be bestowed upon all peoples, he cannot forget — he can, at most, suppress it to his own hurt — that the Israel of which he speaks has existed to this day, an Israel which to this day has remained the bearer of the "dignity of Israel." The Christian Church, calling herself "People of God", must not forget that the present existence of Judaism is testimony to the fact that, still today, the same God is in faithfulness committed to that Election through which He became Israel's God, and through which He had made Israel His people. That is why the Christian does not adequately understand his own dignity and election if he does not take notice of, nor seeks to understand the dignity and the election of the Judaism of today. But in order to do so, he needs to familiarize himself with the Jewish faith and the Jewish

existence to which his Jewish partners in the dialogue offer testimony. When the Jew, rightly so, calls himself a "son of Abraham", he cannot forget — he can at most suppress it — that not only the first Christians in the distant past were sons of Abraham, but that also today nobody can be a Christian without acknowledging Abraham as the "father of all those who believe." Furthermore, the Jewish community is certain of the promise of a renewal of its covenant, as it is written: ..Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt." (Jer 31.31 f.) The Jewish community, therefore, must not forget that there would never have been a community of the Christians if the latter had not known the call from the same God into his "New Covenant". That is why the Jew does not completely understand the manner in which Abraham became the "father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17), if he does not take notice of, nor seeks to understand the faith of today's Christian. But in order to do so, he needs to familiarize himself with the Christian faith and the Christian existence to which his Christian partners in the dialogue offer testimony.

4. Once the meaning of that which binds them together in history has entered their consciousness and has been acknowledged, there is a chance that both partners in the dialogue might let themselves be called to a responsibility for each other. Each becomes a witness for the other to those mighty acts of God which are the cause of his living as a Jew or as a Christian at the present time. The life out of faith, the life out of the center of existence, Christian as well as Jewish life has its being out of this testimony. And everywhere, where the life of a community becomes a testimony to God's act of salvation, this testimony is for the other believer, who lives from the same salvific acts of God, precious, indeed irreplaceable. Believers who live from

the same origin incur guilt for one another if they do not give this testimony to one another.

### III. Central Themes of the Dialogue

#### 1. *Companionship of Jews and Christians*

The common goal of God's saving rulership enables Jews and Christians to speak to one another from faith to faith. Both know themselves to have been addressed by God, both want to respond to the will of God, — graciously vouchsafed to them through an election by God, — in love, with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their might. Such an agreement is important for common action in the world. But it is also important to evaluate not only the fact of agreement, but also the measure of agreement. This is all the more so because just there, where our consensus is most profound, the root of our disagreements is embedded.

For the Christian, the goal of God's saving rulership, promised in Israel's Bible, is mediated by the Jew Jesus. Already here, not only the dividing but also the uniting function of Jesus shows itself: Through the Jew Jesus, the Torah remains effective within Christianity. Through him, its realization becomes the task of the Christians — as God's promise and commandment. The Jew, on the other hand, does not first have to get to know Jesus in order to love the Torah. As a Jew, he has this love as his heritage. Of course, a dialogue of Jews and Christians can take place seriously only when the Jewish partner, too, begins with the assumption that God caused something to happen in Christianity, which concerns him "for God's sake" — even though he may not see in it a way on which he himself can or must go. That is why Christians ask whether the living presence of essential Jewish elements in the Christian divine service, in the Christian proclamation, in the Christian understanding of Scripture, and in Christian theology, does not make possible a Jewish interest in Christian faith and life —

over and above a mere taking note from the distance. Conversely, Christians must grant the Jews that a Jewish interest in Christianity can be an interest "for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven" — even though it does not lead to Jews becoming Christians. A possibility of understanding the Jewish interest in Christianity was expressed by the Jewish philosopher of religion, Franz Rosenzweig (1886—1929), when he said: "Whether Jesus was the Messiah will be shown when the Messiah comes." Such an ambiguous formulation does not, however, mean that Jews and Christians are free to postpone until "the Last Day" their conversation about the hope which unites them, and the question about the Messiah which divides them.

In the mutual questioning, some recognition of the salvific meaning of the other way can, therefore, most certainly be expressed. Jews can acknowledge that, for the Christians, Jesus has become the way on which they find Israel's God. But they will make their evaluation of the Christian way dependent upon this, that the faith of the Christians in the salvation granted to them through God's messiah who came from the Jews does not diminish, but rather demand their obligation to act in the service of righteousness and peace. Christians understand Jesus as the fulfilment of the Law and the promise only when they follow him "for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven," and when doing so, they listen to his word: "Not every one who says to me 'Lord, Lord', shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Mtt 7.21)

The mutual evaluation of each other's way is thus indivisibly united with considerable divergencies in the approach to Jesus, and to the question, whether he is God's messiah. But this compels neither Jews nor Christians to dissolve the fundamental bracket of contents of the one commanding will of God. That is why it is fundamentally prohibited to Jews and to Christians to seek to move the other to become disloyal to the call of God which he has received. It is not to

be thought that this prohibition is based on tactical calculations. Reasons of humane tolerance and respect for the freedom of religion, too, are not solely decisive in this. The deepest reason must rather be seen in this: that it is the same God by whom both Jews and Christians know themselves to have been called. Christians, on the basis of their own understanding of the faith, cannot forego to testify to Jesus as the Christ also vis-a-vis the Jews. Jews, on the basis of their self-understanding, cannot refrain from stressing the non-abrogation of the Torah also vis-a-vis the Christians. In either case, this includes the hope that, by means of this testimony, the other's loyalty to the call he has received from God might increase, and that the mutual understanding might be deepened. On the other hand, the expectation should not be included that the other may renege on his "yes" to his call or weaken it.

Christians believe that the Messiah, who is promised in the Scriptures, has come in the person of Jesus. It is the nearness of Israel's God who familiarized them with Jesus as their brother and, at the same time, let them experience Jesus's love as God's turning towards them. That is why it seems to them not to be enough merely to regard Jesus as a shining example. Rather do they understand his life, death and return as a way on which God would lead all to salvation. That Jesus's love offers room for all, they see confirmed in the fact that God has exalted him and returned him alive. What differentiates him from everything in the past and from everything human is, therefore, not something in the line of mere quantitative magnification. Particularly the concept of a merely increased humanity in the case of Jesus could easily lead to the fatal confrontation: the Christians are the better Israelites, after all. A Christology which acknowledges in Jesus the Son of God having become man is in no need of such quantitative measurements. It has — perhaps only after its own painful experiences — the possibility to see the goal in a communion with Jesus, based upon the free "yes" of

faith; but it must also know that there is the possibility of an open and growing companionship for all of those of whom God has taken hold. In this way Christians can give an acceptable sense to the words of Rosenzweig, quoted above.

The question of the Jews, whether the strict obligation to accept the one and unique God of Israel (cf. Deut 6.4-9) has not been given up by confessing the Son of God having become man, is answered by Christians with their faith and conviction that it was precisely Jesus who mediated and represented to them the one and unique God of Israel. For Christians, God's becoming man in Christ is by no means a negation of the unity and uniqueness of God but rather its confirmation. Indeed, God's becoming man presupposes that the one and unique God of Israel is not an isolated God without relationships, but a God who turns towards humankind and who is also affected by human destiny. This characteristic of God, according to the testimony of the Talmudim and the Midrashim — albeit without reference to, or connection, with, Jesus — is likewise known to Rabbinic Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism, too, obviously knows that the one and unique God of Israel does not only "dwell" in transcendence, but also in the midst of His people, subjected to distress and persecution — as Lord, Father, Companion and Redeemer. The Christian-Jewish dialogue about the living God of Israel is, therefore, a great sign of hope.

## 2. *The Common Commission*

In spite of the disagreement in agreement, which has not been glossed over, Jews and Christians are united by their having received the commission to act and to testify jointly in the world. Examples of essential tasks which, for the sake of the future, they will jointly have to undertake are the following:

- How, in the face of the mass murder which has been committed against the Jews and the attempted destruction of the Jewish people,

is it still possible to believe in God? How is it possible to bear guilt and suffering in the presence of God, instead of suppressing or fixating them? What meaning is there for Jews and Christians, and for their mutual encounter, in the systematic extermination of large segments of European Jewry, and in the founding of the State of Israel? How, in the face of the founding of the State of Israel as a central event in recent Jewish history, is it possible to combine the millennial Jewish hope in God's salvation with concrete political action in the present, without advocating either a religiously grounded ideologizing of politics or a politization of religion?

- What is the meaning of the fact that, in a world which is as polytheistic as ever before (it is simply that the gods are given different names today), Jews and Christians believe in the One God? Is it not possible, indeed, is it not mandatory for Jews and Christians, on the basis of their revelation, jointly to develop a critique of ideology — in a world which still fights wars which essentially are wars of religion (which becomes clear when we substitute the word "ideology" for the word "religion")?
- Do not Jews and Christians have the common obligation, in the face of world conditions which threaten the survival of humankind, to demonstrate and to show through personal example what the Bible understands by righteousness and liberty?
- The basic demands of biblical Revelation, common to Jews and Christians, is the absolute respect of the life of another human being. They should jointly specify the consequences which follow from this today for the maintenance of human dignity and human rights. In particular, they should, for example, together develop an ethics of the sciences, of technology, and of a concern for the future. (People who live after the year 2000 are also our "neighbors").
- What concrete consequences can be drawn from the conviction,

common to Jews and Christians, that man has been created in God's image? What obligations follow from the commandment, common to Jews and Christians, of unrestricted love? (cf. Lev 19. 18 and Mark 12. 30 f.)

### 3. *Reconsidering the Controversy about Law and Grace*

The encounter of Jews and Christians will also lead both sides to a clearer perception of the questions put to one another.

Jews can convincingly reject the Christian reproach that they believe in "justification by works" only if they do not deny the danger which could follow from their position. All the more so since they know that a warning against "justification by works" is part of their own religious tradition. The fact that the Torah claims the whole life of man does not prevent his being dependent upon God's mercy. Liturgical texts, like those which characterize the celebration of the Day of Atonement, the most important High Holy Day in the Jewish year, could afford Christians an intimate view of this aspect of Jewish life.

Christians can convincingly reject the Jewish reproach that they suffer from a "loss of ethics" only if they do not deny the danger which could follow from the possibility that their hope for grace might seduce them from their responsibility in and for the world. All the more so since they know that a warning against this danger is included in their own religious tradition. Ecclesiastical texts concerning the relationship between faith and works (cf. the Council of Trent), and already the Pauline admonition about "faith working through love" (Gal 5.6) are eloquent examples of this.

Jewish and Christian criticism of "justification by works," and Jewish and Christian "rejoicing in the Law" (rejoicing is shared also by the Christian, as Paul expressly acknowledges in Rom 7.12) have a common goal: to preserve the ability to pray and to praise God. That is why Jews and

Christians find their way to the dialogue only when they together acknowledge what is said daily in the Jewish morning service: "We do not rely upon our own righteousness, but on Your great mercy." (Dan 9.18.)

#### **IV. Postscript**

The questions raised in this text seek to bring to awareness that the Jewish-Christian dialogue must no longer remain the monopoly of a few interested specialists. For the topics listed here hit the center of both the Jewish and the Christian self-understanding. Over and above their contribution to the encounter of Jews and Christians, they have something decisive to contribute to the understanding of all religions and to the problems of the human future. That is why the Workshop on "Jews and Christians" of the Central Committee of Roman Catholics in Germany appeals to all those who are responsible for the training and the continuing education of priests and other pastoral workers, to the organizers of adult education, to the media, and to the Jewish communities and institutions. It urges them to devote themselves increasingly to those central topics of the Jewish-Christian dialogue in the next few years, and to bring the importance of those topics to the attention of the public.

Bonn-Bad Godesberg, April 24th, 1979

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