

Discussion Group "Jews and Christians"  
Central Committee of German Catholics

## Important Theological Issues for Jewish-Christian Dialogue

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### I. Why Seek Dialogue?

1. Jews and Christians have a common ground for hope: the God of Israel who graciously turns towards humankind. Together they await the complete fulfillment of their hope: the definitive reign of God.

Because of what they have experienced of God and because of the world in which they live, Jews and Christians are challenged to give a common witness. They believe that the invitation to find life, a home and peace in the Jerusalem of the life-giving God was addressed not only to them but to all peoples (cf. Is 2, 1-5; Is 60). As they themselves set out for this Jerusalem, where righteousness and faithfulness have their place (cf. Is 1,26), they experience the obligation to pass on to all people the liberating power of their commitment to the God who can and who wishes to grant life and future. (cf. Jer 29,11) God's call takes them into service for fashioning the world and makes them into people who prepare the way for hope especially for those who have no hope. This call is, at the same time, judgement in that it frees them from any fixation on purely internal interests and fears. In following God's call, they are to become honest and courageous ministers of God's righteousness and advocates of God's mercy.

2. If the fact that Jews and Christians are bound together through the action of the God of Israel obliges them at all times to engage in dialogue, the painful experiences of recent history place an even greater obligation upon us to intensify and deepen this dialogue as far as possible.

- The past 1900 years of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity have evolved as a history of growing apart, and the historical consequences of this were terrible. We also have to see the horrendous occurrence of Auschwitz, the attempt to destroy the Jewish people completely through Hitler's dictatorship, in this connection.

- 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 one another. Jews and Christians acknowledge their common revelation precisely through this interest. Consequently, their interest in one another is in itself an act of worship of God.

- Jews and Christians must give a joint witness to a humanity whose very survival in humaneness is at stake. In this joint witness they must show and prepare concrete ways of righteousness and salvation.

## II. Conditions of Dialogue concerning 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. Without doubt, Jews and Christians will have to begin by working very hard for one another in order to come to a better mutual understanding. The images which Jews have made and still make of Christians and which Christians have made and still make of Jews throughout history should be examined and corrected in an encounter in which each one interprets their own journey for the other by going back to the common ground and in the light of the common hope. And precisely in doing this, the one will not wait for the other to come and "study" them. Rather, each will feel the obligation to share what is their own. Conversely, for the sake of their common hope, each one will develop an active readiness to listen to the other. By presenting themselves, in trusting one another and in revealing themselves to one another, both will be able to bear witness to that to which they know that God has called them.

2. Jewish-Christian dialogue cannot succeed if Christians see in the Judaism of today merely a memorial of their own past - of the time of Jesus and the apostles. Similarly, the dialogue will not succeed if the Jewish partners see in the essential Jewish characteristics within the Christian faith nothing but the effects of a condition which existed in the past within the first Christian communities but which no longer exists today. In both cases, the one partner does not yet take the contemporaneousness of the other seriously, but rather sees in the other nothing but a mirror of their own past. Contemporaneousness, however, is the condition for every dialogue.

The Jewish partners cannot be satisfied if, in a conversation with Christians, they are seen merely as a surviving witness of the so-called Old Testament and of the period in which the Christian communities originated. Conversely, the Christian partners cannot be satisfied if the Jewish partners think that only they have something to say to the Christians which is essential to Christian faith, while what the Christians have to say to the Jews is of no essential importance for Jewish faith. Based on the ecumenical experience of inner-Christian dialogue, we can draw

confidence for the Jewish-Christian dialogue as well: there too, both partners have learned the ability and the readiness to listen to the word of the other as to a testimony about their relationship with God.

3. The very history which makes today's encounter of Jews and Christians more difficult can also open up a path towards one another if that history is experienced and acknowledged as a really common history which concerns us now - even if this can only be done partially at first.

When, in a prayer of the Easter Vigil, Christians ask that "the dignity of Israel" be bestowed upon all peoples, they cannot forget - they can at most suppress to their own detriment - the fact that the Israel of which they speak exists to this day and remains even until now the bearer of the "dignity of Israel". The Christian Church which calls herself "People of God", must not forget that the existence today of Judaism is testimony to the fact that, still today, the same God is committed in fidelity to the election through which He became Israel's God and through which He made Israel His people. That is why Christians today do not adequately understand their own dignity and election if they do not acknowledge or seek to understand the dignity and election of present-day Judaism. But in order to do this, they must get to know Jewish faith and Jewish existence through the testimony of their Jewish partners in dialogue.

If Jews rightly consider themselves to be "children of Abraham", they cannot forget - they can at most suppress to their own detriment - the fact that not only the first Christians in the distant past were children of Abraham, but that today, as well, nobody can be a Christian without acknowledging Abraham as the "father of all who believe". Furthermore, the Jewish community is certain of the promise of the renewal of its covenant with God, 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 31,31f) The Jewish community must therefore not forget that there would never have been a community of Christians if these had not heard the call from the same God to enter into his "new covenant". That is why Jews do not completely understand how Abraham became the "father of a multitude of nations" (Gen 17), if they do not acknowledge or seek to understand the faith of today's Christians. But in order to do this, they must get to know Christian faith and Christian existence through the testimony of their Christian partners in dialogue.

4. Once the meaning of the historical bond between them has become conscious and been acknowledged, there is a possibility that both dialogue partners might let themselves be called to responsibility for one another. Each becomes a witness for the other to the mighty acts of God which are the reason for the one living today as a Jew and the other as a Christian. Both for Jews and for Christians, a life of faith, a life out of the center of existence draws life from such a witness. And everywhere where the life of a community becomes a witness to God's saving action, this witness becomes precious, even irreplaceable for the other believer who lives of the same salvific acts of God.

### III. Central Themes of Dialogue

#### 1. Companionship between Jews and Christians

The common goal of God's reign enables Jews and Christians to speak to one another from faith to faith. Both know that they have been called by God, both wish to respond with the love of all their heart, all their soul, all their mind and all their strength to the will of God, which they have come to know through God's gracious election. Such agreement is important for common action in the world. But it is also important not only to acknowledge the fact of agreement, but also to weigh the extent of this agreement. This is all the more so because precisely there, where our bond of agreement is most profound, the root of our disagreements is embedded.

For the Christian, the goal of God's saving reign, promised in Israel's Bible, is mediated through the Jew Jesus. Already here, not only the dividing but also the uniting function of Jesus can be seen: through the Jew Jesus, the Torah continues to be effective within Christianity. Through him, the Torah as God's promise and command is given to Christians to realize it. Jews, on the other hand, do not first have to get to know Jesus in order to love the Torah; as Jews, they already have this love.

Of course, dialogue between Jews and Christians can only happen in a serious way when also the Jewish partners come with the assumption that God acted within Christianity in a way which concerns them "for God's sake" - even if they do not see in Christianity a way which they themselves can or must go. That is why Christians ask whether the living presence of essential Jewish characteristics in Christian liturgy, Christian proclamation, Christian understanding of Scripture, and Christian theology doesn't make it possible for Jews to be interested in Christian faith and life in a way that goes beyond a mere acknowledgement of their existence from a distance.

On the other hand, Christians must grant to Jews that their interest in Christianity can be an interest "for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven" - even if it does not lead to them becoming Christian. The Jewish philosopher of religion, Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) expressed one possibility for understanding Jewish interest in Christianity when he said: "Whether or not Jesus was the Messiah will become clear when the Messiah comes". Such an ambiguous way of putting it, of course, does not mean that Jews and Christians may put off their dialogue about the hope which unites them and about the question concerning the Messiah which divides them "until the Last Day".

Thus, in the reciprocal questioning, some recognition of the salvific meaning of the other way can certainly be expressed. Jews can acknowledge that, for Christians, Jesus has become the way by which they find Israel's God. But they will make their appreciation of the Christian way dependent on whether the Christian faith in salvation given through the Messiah of God coming from the Jews diminishes their obligation to work in the service of justice and peace or confirms it. Christians understand Jesus as the fulfillment of the law and the promise only if they follow him "for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven" and in following him listen to his word:

"Not everyone who says to me >Lord, Lord', will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father who is in heaven will enter it". (Mt 7,21)

Thus, the reciprocal appreciation of the other's way is indivisibly linked with considerable divergencies as to the attitude towards Jesus and to the question whether or not he is the Messiah of God. However, this forces neither Jews nor Christians to do away with the fundamental unifying content of the one will of God which calls them. Consequently, based on this very principle, it is forbidden for both Jews and Christians to try to move the other to become unfaithful to the call of God to them. It is not forbidden for tactical reasons. Reasons based on humane tolerance and respect for religious liberty are also not the only considerations in this prohibition. Rather, the deepest reason is that both Jews and Christians know themselves to be called by one and the same God. Christians, based on their own understanding of their faith, cannot refrain from testifying to Jesus as the Christ, also when they are with Jews. Because of their own understanding of who they are, Jews cannot refrain from emphasizing that the Torah has not been surpassed, also when they are with Christians. In either case, this includes the hope that through this witness, the others' fidelity to the call of God, which they have heard, might grow and that mutual understanding might be deepened. Conversely, this should not include the expectation that the others might go back on or weaken their "yes" to their own call.

Christians believe that the Messiah promised in the Scriptures has come in the person of Jesus. The nearness of Israel's God is what familiarized them with Jesus as their brother and at the same time let them experience Jesus' love as God's own turning towards them. That is why it seems too little to them to regard Jesus merely as a shining example. Rather, they understand his life, death and return as a way by which God wants to lead all people to salvation. They see their belief in Jesus' love as offering room for all, confirmed in the fact that God has exalted him and thus returned him alive. Thus, what distinguishes Jesus from all who proceeded him and from all that is human is not only a quantitative increase. Precisely the idea that what distinguishes Jesus is merely an increase in humaneness would easily lead to the fatal consequence: Christians are, after all, the better Israelites. A Christology which professes Jesus as the incarnate Son of God does not need this kind of measuring. This Christology has - perhaps only after painful experiences of its own - the possibility to see communion with Jesus in the free "yes" of faith in him as the goal, yes, but at the same time to know that all those of whom God has sized hold are given the possibility of an open and growing communion along the way. In this way, Christians could give an acceptable meaning to the words of Rosenzweig, quoted above.

Christians respond to the Jewish question as to whether the stringent commitment to the one and only God of Israel (cf. Deut 6,4-9) has not been betrayed through their profession of faith in the incarnate Son of God through their conviction in faith that it is precisely Jesus Christ who mediates to them and represents the one and only 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 only God of Israel is not an isolated God without relationships, but rather a God who turns towards humankind

and who is also affected by what happens to human persons. As the Talmudim and Midrashim testify, this characteristic of God's is known to Rabbinic Judaism as well, albeit without reference to or connection with Jesus Christ. It goes without saying that Rabbinic Judaism also knows that the one and only God of Israel does not only "dwell" in transcendence, but also in the midst of his people who suffer distress and persecution. He is their Lord, their Father, their Companion and their Redeemer. Christian-Jewish dialogue about the living God of Israel is therefore a great sign of hope.

## 2. The Common Task

In spite of their disagreement in agreement, which is not glossed over, Jews and Christians are united in their calling to act and to bear witness together in the world. Some of the vital tasks which they will have to face together for the sake of the future are, for example:

- In face of the mass murder of Jews and the attempted destruction of the Jewish people, how is it still possible to believe in God? How is it possible to bring guilt and suffering into the presence of God, rather than suppressing or fixating them? What does the systematic extermination of large segments of European Jewry and the founding of the State of Israel mean for Jews and Christians and for their encounter with one another? In view of the founding of the State of Israel as a central event in recent Jewish history, how is it possible to link the millennial hope in God's salvation with concrete political action in the present without succumbing either to ideologizing politics on religious grounds or politicizing religious faith?
- In a world which continues to be polytheistic (the gods are only called by other names today), what does it mean that Jews and Christians believe in one God? In a world in which wars are still essentially wars of religion (which becomes easily recognizable if we substitute the word "ideology" for religion), can and must Christians and Jews not develop jointly a critique of ideology that is grounded in revelation?
- In the face of world conditions which threaten the survival of humankind, do not Jews and Christians have the joint obligation to demonstrate and to show through example what the Bible understands by righteousness and freedom?
- One of the basic demands of biblical revelation common to Jews and Christians is the unconditional respect of the life of the other. Jews and Christians should jointly specify what follows from this today in view of the dignity of the human person and of human rights. In particular, for example, an ethic of the sciences, of technology, of care for the future needs to be developed together. People who live after the year 2000 are also our "neighbours"!
- What concrete consequences can be drawn from the conviction common to Jews and to Christians that the human person is created in the image of God? What obligations follow from the commandment of unrestricted love which is common to Jews and to Christians (cf. Lev 19,18 and Mk 12, 30)?

### 3. Reflect anew on the Controversy around Law and Grace

The encounter between Jews and Christians will also result in both sides having a clear perception of their reciprocal questions.

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 this attitude. They can do so all the more since they know that the warning against "justification by works" is part of their own religious tradition. The fact that the Torah makes a demand on the life of the person does not prevent that person's being dependent on God's mercy. Liturgical texts like those which characterize the celebration of the Day of Atonement, the most important feast of the Jewish year, can demonstrate this side of Jewish life to Christians in a very impressive way.

Christians can convincingly reject the Jewish reproach that they suffer a "loss of ethics" only if they do not deny the danger that their hope in grace could result in their being tempted to neglect their responsibility for the world. They can do so all the more since they know that the warning against this danger is part of their own religious tradition. Church texts on the relationship between faith and works (cf. the Council of Trent), but also already Paul's admonition concerning "faith working through love" (Gal 5,6) are clear examples of this.

Jewish and Christian criticism of "justification by works", Jewish and Christian "rejoicing in the Law" (and the Christian, as well, joins in this rejoicing, as Paul expressly states - Rom 7,12) have a common goal: to maintain the ability to pray and to praise God. That is why Jews and Christians can only find their way to dialogue when they together acknowledge what is said daily in the Jewish morning prayer: "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 increase awareness of the fact that Jewish-Christian dialogue may no longer be left only in the hands of a few interested specialists. For the topics mentioned here are at the center of both Jewish and Christian self-understanding. Over and beyond the encounter between Jews and Christians, they also have something decisive to contribute to the understanding of religions in general and to the questions around the future of humankind. That is why the discussion group "Jews and Christians" in the Central Committee of German Catholics calls upon all who are responsible for the initial and on-going formation of priests and other pastoral collaborators, of teachers and of people responsible for education, as well as upon those responsible for adult education and for the media, and upon the Jewish congregations and institutions to give more of their attention to these central topics of Jewish-Christian dialogue during the coming years and to make the public more aware of their importance.

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