

Israel and the Church: two ways to God or one?

Talk given in Lyon at Ecumenical Day, January 21, 2012

In the first session, I aim to set out the problematic: why this question is being asked today. What are the points in dispute? What is at stake in this debate? What are the main points of reference? In the second session, I will move towards a resolution by indicating some key principles so that we do not fall into dangerous errors or into an ideological stance.

I: God's Unchanging Love for His People

But I want to begin by citing some passages from the Old Testament that reveal God's heart for the Jewish people, for Israel and for Jerusalem. Israel is described as the Lord's heritage: "For the LORD will not forsake his people; he will not abandon his heritage." (Ps. 94: 14; see also Ps. 28: 9).

Then, from the northern kingdom of Israel:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel!
How can I make you like Admah! How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God
and not man, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy. (Hosea 11: 8 - 9)

For the kingdom of Judah after the end of the northern kingdom:

For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name;
And the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is
called.

For the LORD has called you like a wife forsaken and grieved in spirit,
like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God.

For a brief moment I forsook you, but with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment I did my face from you,
but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the LORD, your
Redeemer. (Is. 54: 5 - 7)

For Jerusalem:

On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
the LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob. (Ps.
87: 1 - 2)

I start from these citations, because they reveal the heart of God. It is a revelation of the unchanging love of God for those he has chosen out of love (cf. Deut. 7: 8).

II: Christian Rethinking and Repudiation of Replacement Teaching

For most of Christian history, this question did not arise. The answer was clear: there is only one way to God, it is Jesus Christ and the confessing of His Name, the only Saviour. From the side of the Church, the Lord had rejected the Jewish people, above all because they refused to believe in Jesus as Messiah and as Son of God. It was only after a long reflection on the Nazi Holocaust, sometimes a very painful reflection, that this teaching

began to be questioned. This rethinking of the place of the Jewish people in God's plan had begun much earlier among some Protestants, especially among some but not all Evangelical Christians. Evangelical rethinking arose from their study of the Scriptures, particularly the prophets of the Old Testament, with regard to Israel. The re-reading of the Scriptures in a perspective more sympathetic to the Jewish people developed especially from the 1960s as European Christians became conscious of the enormity of the evil in the Shoah. The decision of the Second Vatican Council to state that the Jewish people are not an accursed people, and that they remain the chosen people, the people of the covenant, was a decisive turning point, above all for the Jewish people who always remain very conscious that the Catholic Church showed itself through the centuries as their greatest oppressor. The Catholic abandonment of the teaching of «replacement» has been followed by a number of other confessions. Official abandonment of the replacement view and associated attitudes does not mean that all church members have understood and imbibed the new teaching.

Thus with the abandonment of the theology of rejection, we Christians, have a **new problem!** The Church is convinced that she is the people of the new covenant, but the people of Israel remain the people of the covenant, the covenant that has never been revoked. So the question arises: *What is the relationship between the first covenant and the new covenant?* With the «rehabilitation» of the Jewish people as the chosen people, the question arises: is the grace of the Holy Spirit given through the ordinances of Israel? Is there in Israel a mediation of grace, and therefore of salvation, directly through the first covenant? This question goes beyond that of the possibility of salvation for non-believers, already recognized by the Catholic Church with certain conditions.

III. New Factor I: Fruits of Christian - Jewish Dialogue

With the discovery of the horror of the Holocaust and as a consequence of dialogue with the rabbis, many well-informed Christians have become aware of the **great sufferings** of the Jewish people through the centuries, often at the hands of Christians, including Catholics, as well as by the Church-Institution. One element in this awareness concerns the Jewish sufferings provoked by forced baptisms and by a Christian evangelization that sought to turn Jews into Christians, resulting in the weakening of Judaism. Christian scholars in dialogue with the rabbis heard their loud complaint: Christian evangelism aims at the same goal as Hitler, the destruction and the elimination of the Jewish people. Yes, the means are less brutal, but the result as far as Judaism is concerned, is the same.

Over the centuries, the Church had held the Jews in contempt. In 1960 a leading French Jewish scholar, Jules Isaac, visited Pope John XXIII and presented him with a report on this history of Catholic contempt for the Jews. He requested that this question be on the agenda of the Council that Pope John had just announced. Isaac wrote a book about this history: how the Jewish people were humiliated in various ways. In the Christianized Roman Empire, their rights were restricted and their official status was at best only one of toleration. I have learned recently that the laws formulated to restrict and humiliate the Jews in the fifth century were taken over into Islamic jurisprudence and used to humiliate and limit the life of the Jewish and Christian communities. So the irony is that while those laws have disappeared from the legislation of the Church and of majority Christian nations, they still continue in largely unchanged form in Islamic nations.

With the totally changed attitude towards the Jews, at least at official church level, it is recognized that Christians should hold the Jewish people in respect instead of contempt, that we should honour their faithfulness and their heritage.

IV. Widespread New Christian Positions

With this new awareness of Jewish history and of the suffering of the Jews, there arose a strong compassion, which sometimes took the form: We Christians must not do any more things that upset the Jewish community, like evangelization. Some theologians, especially in Germany, began teaching what is called “two covenant” or “dual covenant” theology. This theology explains that there are today two covenants still in effect: the covenant with the Jewish people, and the new covenant with the Church. Both are ways of salvation, the first covenant for the Jews, and the second for the non-Jews. So, according to this theory, any evangelizing of Jews is an abuse.

As theologians and church leaders have begun to respect the Jewish heritage, including Judaism with its varieties of rabbinic Judaism, many now talk of Christianity and Judaism as two distinct religions, each possessing its own “integrity” that needs to be fully respected. In practice this approach often provides another reason for ceasing all Christian evangelization of Jews.

V: New Factor 2: the Messianic Jewish movement

But since the reflexion on the Holocaust launched this process, a new factor has appeared that is highly relevant to the discussion: the Messianic Jewish movement. How does this change things? In several ways. First, by its very existence it profoundly challenges the unwritten agreement between the Church and the synagogue over 1,700 years that one cannot be a Jew and a believer in Jesus at the same time. The Messianic Jews are marked out by this conviction. They insist that by believing in Jesus, they have not joined a different religion. They are Jewish disciples of Jesus, who want to live this faith in the Messiah of Israel precisely as Jewish believers. It is for this reason that they do not like being called Christians. For them, Christians are by definition Gentile believers in Jesus.

The existence of Jewish followers of Jesus seeking corporately to live this discipleship as Jews also makes it possible for Jews to believe in Jesus without renouncing their Jewish identity and heritage. At least this can be so to the extent that Messianic Jews are truly following Jesus as Jews. Here the accusation of rabbis against Messianic Jews is often that they only retain an outward veneer of Judaism, that they are really Evangelical Christians who sing some Hebrew songs and wear some Jewish clothing (tallith, kippah; etc). We will need to return to this question.

But if Jews who believe in Jesus can credibly develop a form of Jewish life acknowledging Jesus as their Messiah, then evangelism of other Jews by these Messianic Jews is no longer a destruction of Judaism, as long as the newly-converted Jews then live as Jewish followers of Jesus. In other words, one major critique of Christian evangelism from the Jewish community is removed - in principle. But if the Jew evangelized by a Messianic Jew just joins a Baptist Church then the argument is unchanged.

Another new factor brought by the Messianic Jews is their exegesis of the Scriptures, particularly of the New Testament. The Messianic Jews remind Christians that the New Testament is almost entirely written by Jews. They recognize instantly its Jewish character. In fact, it seems likely that more Jews are converted to Christ by reading the New Testament than by Christian evangelization. Whereas Christian use of the Bible typically begins from the New Testament, and then utilizes some passages from the Old Testament by way of illustration or proof, Messianic Jewish usage almost always begins from the Torah and then ends with Jesus. This method brings out the Jewishness of Jesus and his thinking, and begins to show us how much we have read the Gospels and New

Testament with Gentile spectacles and so not understood correctly the depth of its teaching.

The very existence of Jews believing in Jesus who insist that they are still Jews is a **shock and a scandal** to the Orthodox Jewish community. The more Jewish they are (whatever that means) the more they can appear like a **visible disproof** of the long conviction: you can't be a Jew and a Christian at the same time. As Messianic Jews are zealous evangelists, they attract the strong disapproval of all those who have proposed an end to all Christian evangelism of Jews.

Summary

This afternoon I will suggest ways of approaching these questions in a way that is more in accordance with the New Testament. To give a tiny preview, I will say that these questions I have raised are real issues: Christian evangelization of Jews, respect for the Jewish heritage. But I want to argue that while these are real issues, the positions being favoured by many mainline church leaders and theologians are the **wrong solutions** to real questions.