

«The Ways of God»: A Reading from a Distance

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It seems a challenging task: Respond to a discussion document from and for the Church of Sweden with which I have little familiarity as a Roman Catholic living in faraway New York City. Yet, from another vantage point, the assignment symbolizes the ecumenical character of the commitment of many ecclesial bodies to ponder anew their relationship with Jews and Judaism. Perhaps my outsider's voice will call attention to dimensions of «The Ways of God» insiders might not so readily discern, even as my «non-Lutheran ears» will undoubtedly fail to catch certain nuances in this fine document intended for discussion in the Church of Sweden—and, one hopes, in the churches that constitute the Lutheran World Federation.

Dialogue and Self-Understanding

The first point on which I wish to comment appears in the Foreword by Archbishop Hammar: «All genuine dialogue must rest on well thought-through self-understanding». This simple sentence implicitly lays out a demanding, complex task. We indeed must bring a thoughtful understanding of the Christian life to dialogue, but so much of our self-understanding has been premised on inadequate understandings of Judaism and simplistic notions of Christian origins. Thus, it seems that achieving such a self-understanding for dialogue with Judaism requires something of a three-step approach. First, we Christians must be willing to set aside our preconceptions about Judaism—and let us not underestimate the difficulty of this renunciation. For most of us, over-

simplifications about Judaism were embedded in our education in Christianity, whether about the alleged legalism of post-exilic Judaism, the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, or the responsibility of «the Jews» for the crucifixion. Setting aside preconceptions thus entails learning to interpret the Gospels in more perceptive ways, and situating texts in their historical, religious and literary contexts. This is a monumental educational challenge in itself, one that in my experience has barely begun in the churches, despite an abundance of resources and many committed teachers.

The second step in the process of reworking our self-understanding is the willingness to grapple with the shadow side of Christian proclamation. Until we face our history vis-à-vis the Jewish people, and examine our collective Christian conscience about our unjust attitudes and actions for nearly two thousand years, any dialogue will be shallow. Yet it is no small matter to face this history honestly; it is deeply disillusioning to learn of the church's hostility to and harsh treatment of Jews over so many centuries, and those who prefer a triumphalistic account of Christianity will instinctively avoid truly wrestling with the section on «Our Guilt». Therefore, care must be taken in helping persons understand the rivalry that accompanied the partings of the ways, and the factors that hardened the rivalry into disputation, denunciation and persecution. Most Christians are blissfully ignorant of the «teaching of contempt», in Jules Isaac's memorable phrase, and of the terrible consequences it has wrought.

A third step involves a commitment to reconstruct and revitalize our understandings of Christianity in light of deepened knowledge about our origins and history in relation to the Jewish people. For example, we Christians often speak of salvation, and many sectors of Christianity appear preoccupied by whether or not those outside our borders will be saved—a preoccupation beautifully addressed in the section on «God's Secret». Yet, we seldom probe the meaning of salvation. From what are we saved, and for what? Similarly, «The Ways of God» asserts that if the Church is to «keep its integrity,» it must «confess Jesus as the Messiah, to whom already the Old Testament scriptures bear witness». But must we not probe messianism further, asking what it entails, what hope it represents and what this confession energizes? What does it mean in our everyday lives that we Christians confess that Jesus is the «Messiah»? Moreover, the wording of this sentence tends to suggest that the Old Testament be read as predictive. Might I suggest that the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 2001 document, «The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible» would contribute to further thinking about how to articulate the relationship between the Testaments?¹ This text is unwieldy, imperfect and of-ten tedious, but with some fine insights. It proposes, for example, that we understand Christianity's appropriation of the «Old» Testament as a rereading, a «retrospective perception». Moreover, the document says that it is not that Jews do not see what the [Old Testament] texts proclaim, but rather that «the Christian, in the light of Christ and in the Spirit, discovers in the text an additional meaning that was hidden there» (II.A).

Whether speaking about salvation or the messiah, we Christians enrich our own self-understanding by engaging in dialogue with Jews. As Michael Signer writes, «It has been my experience that the arc of light between ideas that seem to be asymmetrical or incommensurate often produces new insights».² In May 2003, for

¹ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html. Excerpts and commentary may be found at <http://www.bc.edu/cjlearning>.

example, I had the privilege of participating in a conference in London involving Jewish and Catholic scholars where we addressed «theology and tough issues,» such as how our respective traditions understand God and salvation.³ In his paper on «God,» Rabbi Byron Sherwin discussed the *interpenetration* of Jewish and Christian theological ideas and concluded that «the gulf between Jewish and Christian doctrines of God is not as radical as had once been considered». Similarly, in her paper «Salvation: Four Questions», Rabbi Sybil Sheridan, while noting differences in the way the term «salvation» functions in Jewish and Christian contexts, affirmed many parallel notions. Salvation may not be a Jewish word—it translates the concept of *ye-shuah* inadequately—but salvation «occupies a centrality in Jewish thought and teaching that we cannot ignore».

By explicating the way our respective communities understand and use key theological concepts, each of us came away with enhanced self-understanding. Self-understanding is best achieved in the presence of the knowledgeable other.

«Genuine» Dialogue

Note also the modifier «genuine» in relation to dialogue. How do we distinguish a genuine dialogue from an inauthentic one? Is every interreligious exchange intrinsically genuine? Here, we might find wisdom in the work of Martin Buber as well as that of Paulo Freire and Nicholas Burbules.

Martin Buber's work, most notably *I and Thou*, has exercised considerable influence on the interreligious realm. While both monologue—self-centered conversation—and tech-

² Michael A. Signer, «Conversation One,» in John T. Pawlikowski and Hayim Goren Perelmuter, eds., *Reinterpreting Revelation and Tradition: Jews and Christians in Conversation*. Sheed & Ward, Franklin, Wis. 2000, p. 5.

³ While papers from this conference are not presently available, they will be published. For papers from the previous conference, see Tony Bayfield, et al., eds. *And He Kissed Him and They Wept*. SCM, London 2001.

nical dialogue—information-centered conversation—are inevitable ways of communication in the modern world, the «I-it» relationship they constitute is far removed from the community of relation that «I-Thou» represents. Buber's lament that much conversation is — «false dialogue» with no true turn to the other and no real desire to foster mutuality hovers over all interreligious (and intra-religious) encounter. Yet in my experience too often the atmosphere established and the processes employed do little to enhance mutuality.

Paulo Freire, the late Brazilian lawyer, philosopher and educator, places humility at the center of dialogue. «How,» he asks, «can I dialogue if I always project ignorance onto others and never perceive my own?» «How,» moreover, «can I dialogue if I consider myself a member of the in-group of «pure» men and women, the owners of the truth and knowledge, for whom all non-members are «these people» or the «great unwashed.»? And «how can I dialogue if I am afraid of being displaced, the mere possibility causing me torment and weakness? Self-sufficiency is incompatible with dialogue».⁴ Freire's questions may be modified as Christians anticipate dialogue with Jews. How can I dialogue if I approach Jews with questions such as «Why don't you believe Jesus was the messiah?» and have not myself grappled with why I believe he is? How can I dialogue if I believe only Christians of my belief and practice are saved? How can I dialogue if I fear confronting the shadow side of my church? As «The Ways of God» puts it, «When pride in one's own tradition is combined with humility before one's own and other people's heritages, a true dialogue may begin».

Educational philosopher Nicholas Burbules offers a complementary perspective in his contention that dialogue is best characterized by a commitment that joins interlocutors in a continuing relationship. To be successful, a dialogue depends on cooperation, particularly when disagreements, misinterpretations and difficulties beset it. Persistence necessitates «a relation of mutual respect, trust, and concern—and part of the dialogical interchange often must relate to

the establishment and maintenance of these bonds».⁵ For this perseverance is indispensable. Dialogue is not a mere method. It is a way of life that demands attentiveness to our emotions and to nurturing virtues and skills that foster relationships.

We must be attentive to our emotions because every serious interreligious exchange, especially that between Jews and Christians, exposes our vulnerabilities as we open our beliefs, practices and values to the scrutiny of another. It takes time to develop trust, time to develop an atmosphere in which persons need not feel defensive or apologetic. Sufficient time is an essential dimension of «genuine» dialogue; mutuality grows slowly. Yet time alone will not suffice. We need also to practice what Burbules calls the «communicative virtues»: patience, tolerance, openness to receive as well as give criticism, willingness to admit one may be mistaken, desire to translate or reinterpret one's concerns so as to make oneself comprehensible to others, imposition of self-restraint, and the commitment to listen thoughtfully and attentively.⁶

These considerations also need to be at the forefront as the Church of Sweden uses «The Ways of God» for discussion. If this document is to stimulate thoughtful reflection within the church, then leaders must create conditions conducive to «genuine» dialogue—conditions for which educational expertise will be valuable. While my own Roman Catholic tradition has many fine recent statements on its relationship with Judaism, it has less skill in fostering dialogue within the church, thereby unintentionally muting the effect of its theological reflection since Vatican II. We will best witness to what the church has learned through interreligious dialogue by teaching in a dialogic manner.

⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Seabury, New York 1970; original Portuguese 1963.

⁵ Nicholas C. Burbules, *Dialogue in Teaching: Theory and Practice*. Teachers College Press, New York 1993), pp. 19-20.

⁶ *Dialogue in Teaching*, p. 42.

Christology

«Christology is what separates Jews and Christians». Yes—but separation is both wider and narrower than this sentence suggests. It is not helpful, I believe, to call the Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures of Jesus as Son of God who is worshipped as truly God and truly human «theological dynamite» that has «caused lasting separation between the Church and Judaism». The factors in the eventual division between Judaism and Christianity were more complex. As James D. G. Dunn argues, the initial rifts concerned practices rather than theological claims. While his identification of three «partings» may indeed be too schematic, it enables us to understand that the separation had multiple causes and happened over a prolonged period. Dunn believes that the initial parting happened over the Temple and its cult; the Letter to the Hebrews witnesses to this. The second division happened over the «boundary markers» (e.g., circumcision and food laws) that became an issue when Gentiles joined the «Reign of God Movement»; the controversy at Antioch (see Galatians 2:11-14) witnesses to this. The third parting, which revolved around claims of Jesus' oneness with God and became more decisive in mid-second century, was not merely about Christology, but about understanding God in light of monotheism.⁷ I find it curious that «The Ways of God» has little to say about the doctrine of the Trinity, which also separates Jews and Christians. So, too, do modes of commentary from the rabbis that have developed quite distinctively from Christian commentaries.⁸

Even as we acknowledge the very real differences that separate us, we must be attentive to the deep commonalities. This was evident in Rabbi Sheridan's paper on salvation, mentioned above. Another, more readily accessible example comes from Rabbi Ismar Schorsch, the chancellor of

Jewish Theological Seminary of America (which sits just across the street from my own institution, Union Theological Seminary). In his commentary *Parashat HaShavua* (Torah portion for January 25, 2003, Exodus 18:1—20:23), Chancellor Schorsch writes:

Christianity turns on the doctrine of incarnation as formulated famously by the Gospel of John: «So the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth» (1:14). It is a doctrine that Jews tend to identify as uniquely Christian. Whereas both Judaism and Christianity equally acknowledged that at creation «the Word dwelt with God» (1:1) as both wisdom and instrument, Judaism refrained from ever endowing it with human form. Though valid, the distinction does not preclude the appearance in Judaism of the doctrine. For Judaism, the Word became incarnate as book. ... That formulation is a Jewish version of incarnation. The words of the Torah are more than the medium of God's will; they are the very form which God's presence takes in our world of time and space. Concentration on the text leads to union with the Almighty.

He concludes as follows:

Yet like the Christian doctrine of incarnation which since the fifth century posited a Christ of two natures, divine and human, the Jewish version also allows for a twofold nature. In this conception, the Torah is a roiling composite of divine presence and human reaction, a gripping record of the lived experience of the eternal in the midst of the ephemeral. The Torah reports that after Adam and Eve had eaten of the forbidden tree «they heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden» (Genesis 3:8). Despite its idyllic state, the garden was not all divine. But God was surely to be found in it. So too in the fertile and effervescent expanse of the Torah, the voice of God becomes audible if we can only muster the patience to listen intently. Should we succeed, we join a biblical dialectic that spanned nearly two millennia and then spawned a dynamic that is still going strong two millennia later.⁹

⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways*. SCM and Trinity Press International, London and Philadelphia 1991.

⁸ See James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible As It Was at the Start of the Common Era*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge and London 1998.

⁹ <http://learn.jtsa.edu/topics/parashah/5763/yitro.shtml>

It is important for both Jews and Christians to know that we do not inhabit difference universes. As Rabbi Sherwin argued in his paper for the London conference, although Judaism cannot consider Christian doctrines as true for Jews, it can acknowledge their validity for Christians: «In this view, Christian doctrines such as Christology, Trinity and Incarnation no longer need be considered impediments for Jews recognizing Christianity as a valid and legitimate monotheistic faith». Similarly, «neither should the doctrines of the election of the people Israel or the Jewish refusal to accept Jesus as the Christ be an impediment to the Christian recognition of the theological validity of Judaism for Jews».

Mystery

I found myself deeply moved by the section «God's Secret», particularly the imperative that the «Church must be particularly on the watch against patterns of thought that we know by experience are fraught with risks of humiliating people of other faiths». So much supersessionism that lies at the heart of replacement theology seems to be based on a thoughtless disregard for the integrity of another religious tradition. Chris-

tians tend to pronounce dogmatically about other religions while knowing virtually nothing about them. Perhaps our tendencies to dogmatism might be undone by reflection on our finitude before God. Thus, the citation from Rabbi Marcus Ehrenpreis deserves a central role in discussions of «The Ways of God». This eloquent citation suggests that silence has a role in genuine dialogue: the silence of awe before that which is beyond our ken, the silence of contemplation before the other's «closed door».

It is appropriate that the document calls for repentance, «*Teshuvah*». Reconciliation with the Jewish people, which is an obligation of Christianity in our time, indeed requires a transformation of understanding, attitude, and actions. Perhaps, however, «The Ways of God» might have ended with a summons to interreligious friendships, since it is the building and fostering of relationships across boundaries of difference that enable us to develop a solidarity capable of countering the forces of hatred and violence in our world.

Roman Catholics and Lutherans have a heavy heritage in regard to the Jewish people. May God's grace sustain us as we seek reconciliation with Jews—and with one another.

