

Reflections on «The Ways of God»

HANS UCKO

Dr. Hans Ucko är executive secretary vid Kyrkornas världsråd i Genève med ansvar för inter-religiösa relationer och dialog. Han har bl.a. skrivit boken The people of God: Minjung and Dalit Theology in Interaction with Jewish-Christian Dialogue (2002).

+The French saying, «L'impossible a été fait. Le plus dur reste à faire», comes to mind regarding the endorsement by the Church of Sweden of the document on the Jewish-Christian relationship, «The Ways of God». Relations between Christians and Jews have been the concern of few. Old Testament scholars found an outlet in contacts with Jewish scholars. People who had seen the aftermath of the Shoah felt that a new attitude was called for and sought contacts with Jews to learn more about the faith that carried them. There are Christians that are maybe less at home in the Church of Sweden than in more evangelical and Pentecostal circles, in which relations with Jews are seen as a way of getting a better grip of apocalyptic time. Whatever the categories of Christians, the people engaged in Jewish-Christian relations are not many.

There are those who would say that the visibility given to Jewish-Christian dialogue could be construed as promoting the positions of Israel to the detriment of the Palestinian cause. Endorsing a document on such a topic today is seen as inopportune. Today one needs to qualify that by advocating Jewish-Christian dialogue, one does not subscribe to the settlement policy in Israel or building a new temple on the Temple Mount.¹ To launch a document on Jewish-Christian relations in such a climate is not easy, but

the impossible has been done. The document has been long in waiting and it is a good thing that the Church of Sweden also now formally can be counted among churches, which through an official document embraces the Jewish-Christian relationship. The Church of Sweden is thus now on record advocating Jewish-Christian dialogue. Such work could not have been undertaken had there not been people in the vanguard, exposed early and deeply to the Jewish-Christian dialogue and receptive to how Jews heard and experienced Christian language as theological triumphalism. The Church of Sweden has an interesting pedigree in terms of engagement in Jewish-Christian relations and dialogue, although maybe only in hindsight recognised as an expression of the church as such.² Mostly, the engagement in Jewish-Christian relations and dialogue was exercised in the margins of the church. The former Swedish Israel Mission converted itself during the ministry of Director Göte Hedenquist from a society targeting Jews for conversion to an organisation, the National Organisation Church and Judaism (Riksorganisationen Kyrkan och Judendomen, RKJ), providing knowledge about Judaism. The establishment of the Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem may at its very beginning and as the real *raison d'être* have had a hidden agenda of

¹ Protagonists of the Swedish Christian Study Centre in Jerusalem affirmed its establishment as necessary to ward off what they perceived to be a «pro-Zionist» perspective at the Swedish Theological Institute in the same city.

² The Ways of God, p.11: «Represented by several distinguished theologians, the Church of Sweden has been, and still is, involved in the ecumenical work to establish theologically-rooted principles concerning Christianity's relationship to Judaism.»

mission but developed itself through its leadership to an institution that offered to Swedish pastors and teachers as well as to students from churches in the South a solid knowledge of biblical and modern Judaism. The handing over of RKJ to the Church of Sweden Mission contributed to a significant thrust for interreligious dialogue in general. When writing the history of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, the names of Krister Stendahl, Biörn Fjärstedt, Åke Skoog and Göran Larsson must be mentioned. There is thus a history to the document «Guds Vägar».

So far, «The Ways of God» does not seem to have made much of a change in the life of the Church of Sweden. Theological discussions on the document seem few in numbers and voices of praise or protest, for or against the document, in Swedish church publications have mostly been silent. This seems rather to reflect the fate of other church or ecumenical documents; they float in a world of their own and only seldom surface in the everyday reality of ordinary Christian church life, falling short of truly affecting and changing the direction in the life of the Church.

Its implementation is now before us. The most difficult thus remains to be done, first to make use of the document in the life of the Church of Sweden and secondly to make sure that the document enables new steps to be taken in Jewish-Christian dialogue.

The document should become a tool in Christian education from Sunday school to catechism, from liturgy to homiletics. Used in these and other areas, «The Ways of God» could address enduring expressions of a theology of replacement and supersession still present in sermons and theological writing, which is today often dangerously interwoven with the justified protest against the politics of the State of Israel in relation to occupation of and settlement building in Palestine.³ The document, if used

³ It is tempting for many preachers to make facile and dangerous comparisons between the vicious Herod killing babes in Palestine and Ariel Sharon, as it were, allowing the killing of Palestinian children. Another turn is when the situation in Israel and Palestine is interpreted by reference to what is called the Jewish predilection of «an eye for an eye».

throughout the Church of Sweden, would continue the work of review, which has already taken place: the removal of or rewriting of some of the obvious anti-Jewish hymns in the previous hymnal and the attempts to rework «The Reproaches» from the Good Friday Liturgy.⁴ So far, the document has not intentionally or programmatically been put to such use.

From the vantage point of the WCC and the possibility of networking with Christians and Jews in various parts of the world and on various issues of concern, I would like to offer some comments how the Church of Sweden through its document could participate in and enable new ways for Jewish-Christian dialogue.

The value of the document is maybe less in what it says but more in the very fact that the Church of Sweden through this document claims ownership to the Jewish-Christian relationship, involving the whole body of the church. The document is in itself something of an abbreviated version of the Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christian Dialogue (1982).⁵ The document makes no assertions but describes situations and conditions referring to WCC and LWF statements on the issue. It stands a bit by the side and reports on issues at stake. The common heritage, the covenant and covenants, the history of antisemitism, the Land, Christian witness, all is faithfully rendered from the many Jewish-Christian dialogues having dealt with this variety of concerns. There is no unequivocal stand taken on any theological issue. «... the Church of Sweden has not yet taken an official stand on the issues of principle that have been discussed in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, nor on the recommendations made by the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation. It is therefore important for the Church of Sweden to define its approach.»⁶

⁴ Hymn no. 43, 7 was removed in the revision of the 1937 Hymnal. Hymn no. 88 suffered a similar destiny. A short and succinct reflection on the Reproaches is J. Frank Henderson's Critical Reflection on the Reproaches and the Good Friday Liturgy, <http://www.compusmart.ab.ca/fhenders/goodfriday2.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/interreligious/j-crel-e.html>

⁶ The Ways of God, p. 123.

Which direction will the Church of Sweden take once it is ready to articulate its stand? To my mind, the weakness of the document lies exactly in its absence of any declaration in relation to the theological challenges coming out of the Jewish-Christian dialogue. I would have liked to see something of the same theological thrust that we find in some of the confessional documents of the German Landeskirchen in relation to the Jewish people.⁷

Another weakness is the lack of local context. The text is general. What does the Church of Sweden have to say about Jews and Christians in Sweden? Are there no examples in history of how Jews fared in Sweden? What about the Jew's sow in the Uppsala Cathedral? Could no reference be made to local context both in terms of history and for the dialogue between Jews and Christians in Sweden today? Should Christians seek out possibilities to engage in dialogue with Jews? Which advice does the Church want to give to Christians in Sweden? Should theological institutions work on curricula and research that could enhance the Jewish-Christian dialogue in Sweden and contribute to a deepened understanding of Judaism? With the exception of the statement of the House of the Bishops, there is almost no «we» in the document, something that weakens the commitment to the Jewish-Christian dialogue in Sweden.

I feel a certain unease when reading the following words in the statement: To «look down on» or «condemn Jewish faith ... would imply contempt for the faith, in which Jesus lived and died. ... A deeper knowledge of Jewish faith is also likely to bring us closer to Jesus himself, and thereby to the God that enters into eternal covenants and whose ways are ultimately beyond the grasp of humans».⁸ The relationship to Jews, not condemning their faith, getting to know Judaism more in depth seems to be justified because of Christ or is being encouraged because at the end of the day, we may then get closer to Christ. These sentences seem to say that were it not for Christ, one would almost be

entitled to be contemptuous of Jewish faith. Were it not for the possibility of getting to know Christ more deeply, a genuine knowledge of Judaism in itself does not seem to be a sufficient stimulus. Irrespective of the gains in relation to Christ, should not common decency prevent us from harbouring contempt? If we were not brought to greater closeness to Jesus, should we then consider as merit ignorance about the Jewish faith as it defines itself?

The self-definition of Judaism is hardly more sensitive as when we enter the question of the Land. The document does not enter the question more than stating: «However, for many Jews the covenantal bond with the land has a theological dimension that it does not have in a similar way for most Christians. Our respect for this position does not necessarily mean—no more here than in any other context—an uncritical acceptance of religiously motivated claims for certain land areas.»⁹ This needs to be given definition. The WCC, having been accused by some Jewish organisations of being antisemitic because of statements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, felt that it needed to come clear on this issue. We cannot sit idle and allow the reality of antisemitism to be trivialised. The discussion on this issue is sensitive. The chapter entitled Guilt gives in brief the story of anti-Judaism and antisemitism. The Church has been a contributor to antisemitism and is therefore not the best body to say what is antisemitism and what is not. While this is true, one can on the other side not abdicate from responsibility. In a recent article, Judith Butler writes:

Historically we have now reached a position in which Jews cannot legitimately be understood always and only as presumptive victims. Sometimes we surely are, but sometimes we surely are not. No political ethics can start from the assumption that Jews monopolise the position of victim. ... If the charge of anti-semitism is used to defend Israel at all costs, then its power when used against those who do discriminate against Jews—who do violence to synagogues in Europe, wave Nazi flags or support anti-semitic organisations—is radically diluted.¹⁰,

⁷ The web site Jewish-Christian Relations provides many examples of texts adopted by the different Landeskirchen, <http://www.jcrelations.net/index.htm>

⁸ The Ways of God, p. 129.

⁹ ibidem

In a document adopted by the Central Committee in 1992, the WCC said, «... we assume that criticism of the policies of the Israeli government is not in itself anti-Jewish. For the pursuit of justice invariably involves criticism of states and political movements, which does not imply denigration of peoples and much less of faith communities. Expressions of concern regarding Israel's actions are not statements regarding the Jewish people or Judaism, but are a legitimate part of the public debate. The same holds true for a critique—from within or from without—of states and political movements that claim a Christian foundation for their basic values.»¹¹

The Jewish-Christian dialogue cannot, if it wants to remain healthy, evade the question of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As much as the Land is central to the self-understanding of Judaism, it would be a deviation from the very meaning of dialogue to keep silent or make disappear the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from the agenda.

Jewish-Christian dialogue has been described as a path for Jews and Christians to go from pogrom to peace, from Shoah to *shalom*, from Holocaust to *hesed*. While this may be shorthand language and the Jewish-Christian dialogue certainly addresses more than a tragic past, it is true that the Holocaust, the Shoah, more than anything else prompted Jews and Christians to examine deeply engrained roots of mistrust, hatred and fear that culminated in one of the worst evils in human history. Ever since, theologians, historians and educators have been engaged and involved in trying to find ways to make sure that «the teaching of contempt»¹² never again becomes an explicit or implicit Christian teaching about Judaism or the Jewish people.

¹⁰ Judith Butler: «No, it's not anti-semitic», *London Review of Books*, vol.25 number 16, 21 August 2003, 19.

¹¹ «Christian-Jewish dialogue beyond Canberra '91», adopted by the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches in August 1992 as a basis for the ongoing Christian-Jewish dialogue, and sent to member churches for study and action. <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/displayItem.php?id=1491>

¹² Jules Isaac: *L'enseignement du mépris; vérité historique et mythes théologiques*. Fasquelle, Paris 1962.

The Jewish-Christian dialogue has been characterized as being in principle asymmetric, Christians would for their self-understanding need a dialogue with Jews. Jews would not for the same reason need dialogue with Christians. Jews engage in dialogue, or so it has been said, to bring about a commitment among Christians to stand up against antisemitism, to reconsider mission to Jews and to understand the linkage between Jews and the Land of Israel. But do Jews need dialogue for their self-understanding? It depends on how one understands self-understanding. It is obvious that there is a difference in how both communities look upon the other. There are reasons to look upon the Jewish-Christian dialogue as being more of a necessity for Christians than for Jews. It is a fact that Christian declarations and documents, confessional and ecumenical, are in various ways articulating that «the covenant of God with the Jewish people continues and that Christians are to thank God for the spiritual treasures which we share with the Jewish people».¹³ Some of these statements have found or are finding their way into preambles of the constitution of many churches throughout the oikoumene. One example is the North Elbian Evangelical-Lutheran Church, which «testifies to the faithfulness of God, who remains true to the covenant with his people Israel. In listening to God's instruction and in hope for the fulfilment of God's rule, the church is linked with the people of Israel».¹⁴

The Jewish-Christian dialogue has however opened up for Jews to reconsider Christians as being not only «a persecutor of the past» and to realise that «Judaism will have to face the meaning of Jesus ... invested with a mission to the world, to bring God and humanity together».¹⁵ Although Jewish reflections on Christianity are less frequent than the other way around, one could as an illustration refer to the statement and

¹³ «Christian-Jewish dialogue beyond Canberra '91»

¹⁴ Declaration of the Synod of the North Elbian Evangelical Lutheran Church, Rendsburg, 22 September 2001, <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/displayItem.php?id=1468>

¹⁵ Leon Klenicki & Geoffrey Wigoder (eds.) *A Dictionary of the Jewish-Christian Dialogue*. Stimulus Books, New York 1984, 107.

project Dabru Emet, which tries to encourage «Jews to reflect on what Judaism may now say about Christianity».¹⁶ From a Jewish perspective, it affirms the intrinsic relationship between Jews and Christians, saying that Jews and Christians worship the same God, they both seek authority from the same book, and they accept the moral principles of Torah.

In the course of their dialogue, Jews and Christians have begun to discover that the encounter is a challenge for both communities. While it is true that no dialogue is symmetric, there is in the last decade the beginning of a convergence among Jews and Christians. Jews and Christians are beginning to ask themselves, each in their own community, how the other informs our own self-understanding. We should take this particular process seriously and encourage a continued reflection on one of the most important outcomes of dialogue: the unexpected discovery about oneself! The other enables me to reflect upon who I am. This learning is masterly illustrated by French historian Fernand Braudel, who once wrote to a French student, who was about to leave Paris for one year's studies in London: «Living in London for one year does not automatically imply that you will know England very well. But in comparison, in the light of the many surprises that you will have, you will suddenly have understood some of the deepest and most original features of France, those you did not know before and could not learn in any other way.»¹⁷

After some decades of dialogue, when friendship has been established, there are opportunities not only for learning about the other but also for learning about oneself. There is now a space for unlearning as well as for learning anew. Such possibilities are not necessarily mutual and synchronic. The challenge to Jews and Christians takes different forms and can be expressed in varied ways. There is no doubt that this comment by Rabbi Leon Klenicki offers a challenge of both unlearning and learning to both communities, while not exhausting other learnings: «Christianity must overcome theolo-

gical triumphalism: the conviction that it is the only way of salvation and that it has to be imposed on everyone. ... Judaism needs to overcome the triumphalism of pain and memories. ... the feeling of pain should not be ... an attitude of constant accusation».¹⁸

The only point where the document gives a rationale for its very being is in the struggle against antisemitism. We are in the Jewish-Christian dialogue painfully aware of how Christianity has been misused to help structure a platform of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. Paralleled with a critical attention to the renaissance of antisemitism, there should however also be another focus. Building upon the words of the WCC statement Christian-Jewish Dialogue beyond Canberra 91,

There is a growing quest of spirituality in the world of today. Spiritual values are shared. Spiritual experiences from faith-to-faith meetings abound. We believe that also the Jewish-Christian dialogue can offer spiritual insights. As Christians, we can be greatly enriched by the heritage of Jewish spirituality. We affirm the great value of dialogue at the level of spirituality in coming to know and understand Jews as people of prayer and spiritual practice. Such a dimension in the Jewish-Christian dialogue might strengthen a common commitment to justice, peace and truth and to a partaking and creative involvement in the struggles of the world.¹⁹

Jews and Christians should explore whether it would be possible to go beyond the historical rehearsal of the relationship, aware of that this tends to wedge us into discussions of the distortions and (mostly Christian) sins of the past. A focus also on today's theological and spiritual situation and formation would lead to a deepening of the Jewish-Christian dialogue, articulating if and how the contemporary self-understandings of Jews and Christians are influenced by the living reality of the other. If the Church of Sweden wants to engage itself in a theological work

¹⁶ Leon Klenicki, «A Hopeful Reflection on the Future of the Interfaith Dialogue Relationship» in *Lesarten des jüdisch-christlichen Dialoges*, Silvia Käppeli (ed.). Peter Lang, Bern 2002, 109.

¹⁷ Fernand Braudel: *Ecrits sur l'histoire*. Ed. Flammarion, Paris 1969, 59.

¹⁸ <http://www.icjs.org/what/njsp/dabruemet.html>

¹⁹ «Christian-Jewish dialogue beyond Canberra '91»

on these issues, it seems to me that Christians and Jews in dialogue on a local level should address the following questions: How do our understandings of Jews and Judaism and our relationships with Jews and living Judaism shape the way we Christians think about ourselves? How do our understandings of Christian-

ity and Christians, and our relationships with Christians and living Christianity shape the way we Jews think about ourselves?

This is a necessary follow up that the Church of Sweden needs to engage in as a consequence of its document. «L'impossible a été fait. Le plus dur reste à faire.»

