

Christians Called to be Faithful to Abraham's Heritage¹

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The unique but complex history between Christians and Jews

In most countries in Europe today we live in increasingly multi-religious societies in which other religions no longer appear to us Christians as alien phenomena, but instead as realities that we encounter in our daily life, especially since they have taken on a tangible and personal face in everyday contact with believers of other religions. These multi-religious societies represent both an opportunity and a danger for Jewish-Christian encounters. They are an opportunity to the extent that today's society has to have an open ear for the world of the religions and must accordingly display a great readiness for interreligious dialogue. The danger however consists in the fact that even the relationship between Judaism and Christianity may today be located within interreligious dialogue, and thereby be reduced to just another variant of interreligious dialogue, so that its distinctive uniqueness is no longer taken into account.

That for us Christians Judaism is not just one religion among many, but that the relationship between Christianity and Judaism involves an individual and unique connection, finds its expression already in our history, though in a most painful form. For this history proves to be very complex, oscillating between proximity and distance, between familiarity and alienation, between love and hate – and it has been so from the very beginning. On the one hand Jesus cannot be understood without Judaism, the early Christian congregation quite naturally participated in the Jewish liturgy in the temple, and Paul too on his various

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mission journeys always went to the synagogues first before turning to the Gentiles with his proclamation of the gospel. On the other hand, the schism between synagogue and church formed the first split in the history of the church, which the Catholic theologian Erich Przywara defined as the “primal rift”, from which he derived the subsequent progressive loss of wholeness of the *Catholica*.² Even though contemporary research tends to accept that the process of estrangement and dissociation between Judaism and Christianity extended over a longer period than previously assumed and surely only gradually took shape during the second century after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, there is nevertheless no question that this process was set in place at the very beginning of Jewish–Christian relations, and the relationship between Jews and Christians was marked by conflict already at an early stage. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger outlined that conflict in these words: “The church was regarded by her mother as an unnatural daughter, while the Christians regarded the mother as blind and obstinate.”³ While this image reminds us that the conflicts between Jews and Christians were still like family quarrels, the relationship between Jews and Christians deteriorated progressively as the awareness of belonging to the same family was gradually lost. It has therefore in the course of history been exposed to great strain and hostility, which has in many cases unfortunately led to anti–Jewish attitudes involving outbreaks of violence and pogroms against the Jews.

Pagan anti–Semitism and Christian anti–Judaism

The distinctive uniqueness of Jewish–Christian relations in its negative aspect is permanently connected with its history in the past century. The mass murder of

² “The rift between the Eastern and the Western church, the rift between the Roman church and the pluriversum of the Reformation (the countless churches and sects) form part of the primal rift between Judaism (the non–Christian Jews) and Christianity (the ‘Gentiles’ in the language of the Pauline letters).” Cf. E. Przywara, *Römische Katholizität – All–christliche Ökumenizität*, in: J. B. Metz u.a. (Hrsg.), *Gott in Welt. Festgabe für K. Rahner* (Freiburg i. Br. 1964) 524–528, zit. 526.

³ J. Cardinal Ratzinger, *Das Erbe Abrahams*, in: Ders., *Weggemeinschaft des Glaubens. Kirche als Communio* (Augsburg 2002) 235–238, zit. 237.

European Jews, planned and executed with industrial perfection by the National Socialists, has more than ever before made the Jewish–Christian relationship historically unique. The Shoah must be judged as the lowest possible nadir of that primitive racist anti–Semitist of Nazi ideology which had developed already in the 19th century. This thoroughly racist anti–Semitism is of course fundamentally alien to Christianity, and was repeatedly sharply condemned by Popes Pius XI and Pius XII above all. The Shoah can and should not however be attributed to Christianity as such: it was in fact led by a godless, anti–Christian and neo–pagan ideology. The Goebbels diaries at the latest have brought to light the fact that Hitler hated Christianity just as much as Judaism, and that he saw in Catholicism above all the virtual Trojan Horse of Judaism within Christianity. Thus we read in these diaries for example Goebbels’ statement about Hitler: “The Führer is deeply religious but deeply anti–Christian. He sees in Christianity a symptom of decay, a branch of the Jewish race, an absurdity which he intends to gradually undermine on all fronts. He hates Christianity, which transformed the light and airy temple of antiquity into a gloomy cathedral with a pain–wracked crucified Christ”⁴.

If the Shoah must therefore be judged as the horrific nadir of a neo–pagan world view which intended to annihilate not only Judaism but also the Jewish heritage in Christianity, one can also understand that Pope Benedict XVI during his visit to the extermination camp Auschwitz–Birkenau wished to give expression to this fatal connection: “By destroying Israel they ultimately wanted to tear up the taproot of the Christian faith and to replace it with a faith of their own invention: faith in the rule of man, the rule of the powerful.”⁵ In these words by the Pope one should not see, as has so often been done, an evasion of the guilty

⁴ Cf. H. G. Hockerts, *Die Goebbels–Tagebücher 1932–1941*. Cf. also V. Conzemius, *Zwischen Anpassung und Widerstand. Die Christen und der Nationalsozialismus*, in: *Communio. Internationale katholische Zeitschrift* 23 (1994) 483–502.

⁵ Benedict XVI, “Dovevo venire”. *Auschwitz–Birkenau: La visita al campo di concentramento il 28 maggio 2006*, in: *Insegnamenti di Benedetto XVI II, 1 2006 (Città del Vaticano 2007) 724–729*.

complicity of Christians, but rather recognise his conviction that Christianity is most profoundly rooted in Judaism, and that Christianity could not exist without these vital Jewish roots.⁶ With deep shame we Christians must also acknowledge that Hitler, with his joint rejection of both Judaism and Christianity, had grasped the true essence of Christianity and its intrinsic relationship with Judaism better than not a few Christians themselves. This shared National Socialist hostility should have aroused among us Christians much more empathetic compassion than in fact did come into effect.

We Christians therefore have every cause to remember our complicity in the horrific developments, and above all to confess that Christian resistance to the boundless inhuman brutality of the ideologically and racially based National Socialism did not display that vigour and clarity which one should by rights have expected. Resistance by Christians may well have also been so inadequate because a theological Christian anti-Judaism had been in effect for centuries, fostering a widespread anti-Semitic apathy against the Jews. Thus an ancient anti-Jewish legacy was embedded in the furrows of the souls of not a few Christians. We Christians must therefore sincerely regret that only the unparalleled crime of the Shoah was able to bring about a genuine re-thinking.

The new beginning at the Second Vatican Council, and remaining dangers

In this regard the 4th chapter of the Second Vatican Council declaration “Nostra aetate”, which the German Cardinal Augustin Bea was commissioned to prepare and which was promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1965 after controversial discussions during the last session of the Council, enabled a fundamental new beginning in the relationship between Jews and Christians.⁷ With this

⁶ Cf. C. Sedmak, Europa und eine Ethik des Gedächtnisses: Papst Benedikt und der Holocaust, in: Ders. / St. O. Horn (Hrsg.), Die Seele Europas. Papst Benedikt XVI. und die europäische Identität (Regensburg 2011) 155–183.

⁷ Cf. A. Cardinal Bea, Die Kirche und das jüdische Volk (Freiburg i. Br. 1966), esp. 21–25: Hinweise zur Geschichte und Entwicklung des Konzilsdokuments.

declaration the Second Vatican Council not only repudiated and condemned all outbreaks of hatred, persecutions, slanders and manifestations of force directed against the Jews on the part of so-called Christians. In a positive sense the Council also affirmed the shared patrimony of Jews and Christians, and pointed to the Jewish roots of Christianity. Finally the Council expressed the ardent desire that the reciprocal understanding and the resulting mutual respect of Jews and Christians be fostered. This demands above all that the unique and distinctive individual relationship between Christianity and Judaism must be recalled into Christian consciousness and remain present there, as it was expressed by Pope John Paul II in the vivid and impressive words: “The Jewish religion is not something ‘extrinsic’ to us but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion. With Judaism we therefore have a relationship we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and in a certain way it could be said, our elder brothers.”⁸

These instructions contained in “Nostra aetate” have been reaffirmed and reinforced on a number of occasions by the popes in the period since the Council, not least through the visits to the Great Synagogue in Rome by Pope John Paul II on 13 April 1986 and by Pope Benedict XVI on 17 January 2010. The epoch-making new course set by the Council regarding the relationship between Jews and Christians is of course repeatedly put to the test. On the one hand the scourge of anti-Semitism seems to be ineradicable in today’s world; and even in Christian theology the age-old Marcionism and anti-Judaism re-emerge with a vengeance again and again, and in fact not only on the part of the traditionalists but also on the liberal side, for example when Jesus’ conflict with the Judaism of his day is seen as grounded in the Torah, which is misinterpreted as slavish adherence to external observances from which Jesus brought

⁸ John Paul II, Ringraziamo il Signore per la ritrovata fratellanza e per la profonda intesa tra la Chiesa e l’Ebraismo. Allocuzione nella Sinagoga durante l’incontro con la Comunità Ebraica della Città di Roma il 13 aprile 1986, in: Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II IX, 1 1986 (Città del Vaticano 1986) 1024–1031, cit. 1027.

liberation. I also observe again and again with regret how the roots in the Jewish liturgy are often cut off⁹ if in the Sunday worship the prescribed Old Testament reading is omitted, or if the Eucharist is not performed according to the ecclesial norms.

In view of such phenomena and developments the church must be reminded that by excluding Marcion from the Christian congregation in 144, the church rejected his concept of a purely “Christian” bible purged of all Old Testament elements; today too the church is obliged to denounce anti-Judaism and Marcionism as a betrayal of its own Christian faith, and to call to mind that the spiritual kinship between Jews and Christians has its firm and eternal foundation in Holy Scripture. On the other hand, the demand by the Second Vatican Council to foster mutual understanding and respect between Jews and Christians must continue to be accorded due attention. That is the indispensable prerequisite for guaranteeing not only that there will be no recurrence of the dangerous estrangement between Christians and Jews, but also that the regained understanding of the Jewish roots of Christianity does not lapse once more into oblivion.

Jewish roots and Christian graft

The discourse of Jewish roots is indeed to be understood in a strictly theological sense, as already demonstrated by the expressive image of Saint Paul, who spoke of the root of Israel into which the wild branches of the Gentiles have been grafted (cf. Rom 11:16–20). This image represents for Paul the key to thinking of the relationship between Israel and the church in the light of faith: “Nothing but a single olive tree. God’s whole history with humanity is like an olive tree with sacred roots and branches cut out and grafted in and artificially ennobled in this way. All God’s dealings are like his way of dealing with this

⁹ Cf. B. Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist. Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper* (New York 2011).

tree.”¹⁰ With this image Paul gives expression to a duality with regard to the unity and divergence of Israel and the church: on the one hand the image is to be taken seriously in the sense that the grafted wild branches have not grown out of the root itself and or sprung from it but represent a new reality and a new work of salvation by God, so that the Christian church cannot merely be understood as a branch or a fruit of Israel. On the other hand, the image is also to be taken seriously in the sense that the church is only able to survive when it draws nourishment and strength from the root of Israel, and that the grafted branches would wither or even die if they were cut off from the root of Israel. Speaking literally rather than metaphorically, this means that Israel and the church are related to and interdependent on one another, precisely because they exist in a state not only of unity but also of difference. Israel and the church thus remain to that extent bound up with one another, and indeed both unmixed yet undivided.

Unity and difference between Judaism and Christianity come to the fore in the first instance with the testimonies of divine revelation. Because Israel is the beloved people of God’s covenant which has never been revoked or repudiated, Israel’s book of the covenant, the Old Testament, is part of the lasting heritage of the Christian church. With the existence of the Old Testament as an integral part of the one Christian bible, there is a deeply rooted sense of the intrinsic inseparability and kinship between Judaism and Christianity. The roots of Christianity lie in the Old Testament, and Christianity constantly draws nourishment from this Old Testament root. On the other hand the existence of the New Testament also brings with it a fundamental tension into the relationship of the two faith communities insofar as Christians read the Old Testament in the light of the New, in the conviction expressed by Augustine in

¹⁰ Cf. K. Berger, *Gottes einziger Ölbaum. Betrachtungen zum Römerbrief* (Stuttgart 1990) 229.

the indelible formula: “In the Old Testament the New is concealed and in the New the Old is revealed”.¹¹

The New Testament sees itself as the fulfilment of what is promised in the Old, but fulfilment cannot mean substitution. This crucial distinction is evident already from the historical fact that Judaism too found itself compelled to adopt a new reading of the Old Testament after the catastrophe of the destruction of the Second Temple in the year 70. Since only the Pharisees survived the catastrophe of the destruction of the temple, they developed their particular mode of reading and interpreting the Old Testament in a period during which there was no temple, taking the Torah as its centre. On the basis of this historical situation, Pope Benedict XVI rightly concluded from this in the second part of his book on Jesus of Nazareth, that there were as a consequence “two responses to this situation”, or more precisely, “two ways of reading the Old Testament anew after the year 70”,¹² namely the Christian exegesis of the Christians and the rabbinical exegesis of that form of Judaism which arose from the destruction of the temple. Since the Christian church and post-biblical rabbinical and Talmudic Judaism developed in parallel and since both modes each involved a new interpretation of the Old Testament, the crucial new question must be precisely how these two modes are related to one another. Pope Benedict XVI gave a helpful answer to this question with his instruction: “After centuries of antagonism, we now see it as our task to bring these two ways of rereading the biblical texts – the Christian way and the Jewish way – into dialogue with one another, if we are to understand God’s will and his word aright.”¹³ Here Pope Benedict takes up once more a finding that the Pontifical Biblical Commission formulated in its 2001 document “The Jewish People and Their Sacred

¹¹ Augustinus, *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* 2, 73.

¹² J. Ratzinger / Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco 2011) 33.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

Scriptures in the Christian Bible”, that Christians can and must admit “that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish scriptures of the Second Temple period, analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion”; it then draws the conclusion: “Both readings are bound up with the vision of their respective faiths, of which the readings are the result and expression. Consequently, both are irreducible.”¹⁴

Neither two different paths to salvation nor Jewish Mission

Since in the view of Pope Benedict the two readings each serve the purpose of “rightly understanding God’s will and word”, it is clear how much importance he attaches to the issue of the Christian faith being rooted in Judaism before and in the turn of the eras, without of course obscuring the irreducible newness of the Christian faith.¹⁵ At that point the question must arise of the precise relationship between Christianity and Judaism, above all in regard to the question of salvation. In this regard the assumption has gained increasing plausibility in recent years that there may be two different paths to salvation, the Jewish path without Christ and the path for all other people which leads through Jesus Christ. Such a view however threatens to call into question the groundbreaking discovery of the Second Vatican Council, that Jews and Christians do not belong to two different peoples of God but in their difference form one people of God, which however lives in two parts in a state of division. The Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews gave expression to this interpretation already in 1985 in its “Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church” when it maintained that the church and Judaism cannot be represented as “two parallel ways to salvation”, but that the church must “witness to Christ as the Redeemer for all”. The Christian faith stands or falls by the confession

¹⁴ II. A. 7.22.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Wohlmuth, Die Sicht auf das Judentum im zweiten Band des Jesusbuches; in: H. Häring (Hrsg.), Der Jesus des Papstes. Passion, Tod und Auferstehung im Disput (Münster 2011) 179–193.

that God wants to lead all people to salvation, that he follows this path in Jesus Christ as the universal mediator of salvation, and that there is no “other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved” (Acts 4:12).

The Christian confession that there can be only one path to salvation, however, does not in any way lead to a demand for organised mission to the Jews. Christians need to be aware that this represents a very delicate and sensitive matter for the Jews because in their eyes it involves the very existence of Israel itself. In this regard however Cardinal Karl Lehmann rightly discerned in his detailed examination of this question that – in contrast to evangelically oriented Protestantism – one finds “as good as no institutional Jewish mission in Catholic mission history”: “We have an abundant share in other forms of inappropriate attitudes towards the Jews and therefore have no right to elevate ourselves above others. But in respect to a specific and exclusive mission to the Jews there should be no false consternation or unjustified self–accusation in this regard.”¹⁶ The principal rejection of an institutional Jewish mission does not on the other hand exclude Christians from bearing witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, but they should do so in a humble and unassuming manner, particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah.

The most profound reason why there cannot be any organised mission to the Jews has in turn been expressed by St Paul when he proceeds from the conviction that not only salvation comes from the Jews, but also that in the “time of the Gentiles” God entrusted Israel with a specific individual mission. Paul therefore definitively negates the question he himself has posed in the Letter to the Romans, whether God has repudiated his own people, and lets his soteriological reflections on the irrevocable redemption of Israel against the background of the Christ–mystery culminate in a mysterious doxology: “Oh, the

¹⁶ K. Cardinal Lehmann, „Judenmission“. Hermeneutische und theologische Überlegungen zu einer Problemanzeige im jüdisch–christlichen Gespräch, in: H. Frankemölle / J. Wohlmuth (Hrsg.), *Das Heil der Anderen. Problemfeld „Judenmission“* (Freiburg i. Br. 2010) 142–167, zit. 165.

depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How inscrutable are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways” (Rom 11:33). In the same sense Pope Benedict XVI in the second part of his book on Jesus of Nazareth allows Bernard of Clairvaux to say in reference to this confronting problem, that for the Jews “a determined point in time has been fixed which cannot be anticipated”.¹⁷

Reconciliation in the covenant community of Abraham

This sensitive tightrope walk which does justice to both the Jewish and the Christian faith convictions,¹⁸ enables a promising future for Jewish–Christian dialogue, on the foundation of the covenant which God concluded with Abraham and which is of fundamental significance for Jewish–Christian dialogue. For Abraham is not only the father of Israel but also the father of the faith of Christians. In this covenant community it must be evident for Christians that the covenant that God concluded with Israel has never been revoked but remains valid on the basis of God’s unfailing faithfulness to his people, and consequently the New Covenant which Christians believe in can only be understood as the surpassing affirmation and fulfilment of the Old, and never as a replacement. We Christians are therefore also convinced that through the new covenant the Abrahamic covenant has obtained that universality for all peoples which was of course originally intended. This recourse to the Abrahamic covenant is so essentially constitutive of the Christian faith that the Christian church without Israel would be in danger of losing its locus in the history of salvation and degenerating into an ultimately unhistorical gnosis. By the same token, Jews could with regard to the Abrahamic covenant arrive at the insight

¹⁷ J. Ratzinger / Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth. Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection* (San Francisco 2011) 44.

¹⁸ This tightrope walk is expressed particularly in the re–formulation of the Good Friday Prayer for the Jews in the extraordinary form of the Roman rite undertaken by Pope Benedict XVI, who explained that he altered the Good Friday prayer in such a way “to express our faith that Christ is the Savior for *all*, that there are not two channels of salvation, so that Christ is *also* the redeemer of the Jews, and not just of the Gentiles. But the new formulation also shifts the focus from a direct petition for the conversion of the Jews in a missionary sense to a plea that the Lord might bring about the hour of history when we may all be united.” Cf. Benedict XVI, *Light of the World. The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times. A Conversation with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco 2010), 107.

that Israel without the church would be in danger of remaining too particularist and failing to grasp the universality of its experience of God, opened up for all peoples through Christianity.

In this fundamental sense Israel and the church remain bound up with one another according to the covenant and interdependent on one another, by accepting one another in a profound internal reconciliation drawn from the depths of their respective faiths, thus becoming a sign and instrument of reconciliation to the world. That reconciliation can be possible even after a very complex and often enough difficult and sadly all too often painful history is vouched for by the Jewish–Christian dialogue in the past decades, and this is a sign of hope for continuing the tried and true shared pilgrim path of reconciliation.