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The Religious Other as Neighbor

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The Religious Other as Neighbor

Jewish and Christian Experience

Lawrence Frizzell

Growth in understanding and the possibility of collaboration are lessons that can be learned from the painful history of antagonism between Christians and Jews.

We can continue to build on new beginnings of more recent times and work to strengthen professional and personal collaboration.

A common pattern of thinking regarding identity has been to divide the human community into the categories of “us” and “them.” Often the group will describe itself in contrast to the rest of the world: Catholics and non-Catholics; Jews and non-Jews or Gentiles (the nations). It is traditional for the older generation of each community to pass on what makes the given group distinctive and to emphasize the importance of the vision and practices that bring coherence and meaning to its members. Unfortunately, this can lead easily to defensive attitudes of isolation with the corollary of suspicion and antagonism to others, whether individuals or groups. Among the roles of religion in any community is the development of self-identity in cohesion with the principles that hold the group together. A deep sense of security in a community’s sense of identity should be the basis for an openness to the world outside. But how should people engage in the process?

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In August 1970 I was one of four Catholic observers at a meeting of the World Council of Churches' Committee reaching out to the Jews. In a study of Romans chapters 9–11, the English-speaking group reflected on the pattern of St. Paul's description of divine election: Isaac rather than Ishmael, Jacob rather than Esau (Rom 9:6-14). "How wonderful that always the younger was chosen over the elder brother!" exclaimed a participant, "And it continues down through the ages: the Christian rather than the Jew, the Protestant rather than the Catholic!" I objected that this alone cannot be the criterion for election, because new groups will claim to replace the older Protestant communities! Often the danger to an older minority has been a vigorous, enthusiastic mission that refuses to accept the reticence of the other to convert. This has been the situation for the Jewish people in Diaspora, especially in Europe, but also in cultures that have built on this heritage.

Jewish and Christian Law of Love

For Christians, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is instructive. The immediate context must be recalled. A man learned in the Torah (Law) of Moses asked: "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" The answer was to recall the Scriptures, and the man pointed to two familiar principles (Deut 6:5 and Lev 19:18, linked by the verb "love"). Jesus challenged him to follow these age-old commandments, the first of which constituted part of the daily prayer for Jews. The Hebrew word *re'akha* (translated "your neighbor") consists of three unvocalized consonants that Jesus read to mean "the one who does evil to you" as the basis for his command to love one's enemies (Luke 6:27-31). In answer to the scholar's question about the identity of the neighbor, Jesus told the story of a Jewish victim of a brutal robbery.

As my colleague Rabbi Asher Finkel has explained, the people listening to this discussion would have anticipated that where a priest and a Levite fail a *layman* would make the proper response. But Jesus surprised them and introduced a member of the commonly despised Samaritan community as the hero.

Finkel notes that the priest and the Levite were returning from pilgrimage; touching a dead body would have rendered them unclean for a week (see Num 19:11-13), unable to fulfill their spiritual responsibilities (see Finkel 1992). Thinking that the man was dead, they kept the required distance from the body. They thought that a layman would perform the commandment of burying the dead. What should a person do when there is a conflict between an obligation toward God and a duty toward neighbor? They chose the former, whereas Jesus taught that *imitation* of God's love leads to the service of those most in need.

There has been a tendency even among scholars to interpret this illustration of Jesus simply as a sharp critique of Jewish spiritual leaders. Rather, as Rabbi Finkel's work has shown, the Gospel should be interpreted with a benign understanding

of contemporary Jewish practices. The lessons of the Gospel can be presented best when the background is understood properly.

The Other as Neighbor

Many stories are told about antagonism between Christians and Jews, especially in countries with a large Jewish minority. The history of persecution should be told and lessons learned for our time. A brief review of examples whose participants were neighbors, either in reality or in principle, may be instructive. We will move through the centuries in a rapid survey, recalling friendly contacts or benign exchanges between Christians and Jews.

Justin Martyr (ca. 100–ca. 165), a philosopher converted to Christianity, composed a long *Dialogue with Trypho* as an extended debate on the Bible and its interpretation in Judaism and Christianity. To what extent does the text represent a real-life encounter? For our purpose, it is sufficient to note the tone of reported exchanges. On several occasions Justin addressed Trypho and his companions as “friends” and twice as “brothers.” At the end, Trypho is recorded as saying that the exchange was pleasant and the Jews wished Justin a safe voyage and deliverance from every disaster. “I in turn prayed for them saying: ‘I can wish you no greater blessing than this, gentlemen, that, realizing that wisdom is given to everyman through this Way, you also may one day come to believe entirely as we do that Jesus is the Christ of God’” (142:3 in Slusser, 212).

In subsequent centuries, as the church emerged from the time of persecution, Christian teachers often presented the perceived inadequacies of Judaism to their own congregants with far less courtesy than that shown by Justin. Debates with Jews continued to be based on the Septuagint or the Latin translation thereof; this text was criticized by Jews, so Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus, known as Jerome, made a Latin translation of the Jewish Scriptures directly from the Hebrew original. During a stage of his life as a monk in eastern Syria, Jerome had learned Hebrew from a monk who was a convert from Judaism. In 385 Jerome settled in Bethlehem, where he had contact with Jews. He hired teachers for both Hebrew and Aramaic; they gave him access to works that he transcribed (Epistle 36). Was he grateful? Unfortunately, because of the controversies among contemporary Christians concerning his translation directly from Hebrew to Latin (which became the Vulgate, the common translation of the Roman Church), Jerome became defensive. In an *apologia* written around the year 400, we find the following harsh statement:

Moreover if it is right to hate any men and despise any race, I am certainly a bitter enemy of the circumcised. For even to this day they persecute our Lord Jesus Christ in their synagogues of Satan. Why then should anyone bring it up against me, that I had Jews as my teachers? (Epistle 84:3, my translation)

What would it take for one to rise above the hostile climate of the time in which one lives? The competitive situation in the Holy Land and in Mediterranean cities with a considerable Jewish population, as well as tensions among scholarly Christians on theological issues, combined with Jerome's own irascible nature to foster such a negative attitude toward the "religious other."

Peter Abelard (1079–1142) was a noted theologian and provocative debater in France. Among his lighter works is *A Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew and a Christian*. He dreamed that he was asked to evaluate the positions of the three protagonists. The philosopher reflects Abelard's position but does not engage in a typical anti-Jewish polemic. The Jew is presented with a certain sensitivity, which may indicate some contact of Abelard with Jews; observations about the daily situation of Jews is expressed with poignancy. Written about 1136 or later, the dialogue tries to ring true for the Jewish experience in France.

In the context of the Jew's comment on keeping the Law one reads:

Whoever thinks that our persevering zeal, which puts up with so much, is without reward, affirms that God is most cruel. Surely, no people is known or is even believed to have endured so much for God as we constantly put up with for him; and no one ought to claim that there can be any dross of sin which the furnace of this affliction has not burned away. Dispersed among all the nations, alone, without an earthly king or prince, are we not burdened with such great demands that almost every day of our miserable lives we pay the debt of an intolerable ransom? In fact, we are judged deserving of such great contempt and hatred by all that anyone who inflicts some injury on us believes it to be the greatest justice and the highest sacrifice offered to God. For they believe that the misfortune of such a great capacity has only befallen us because of God's supreme wrath, and they count as just vengeance whatever cruelty they visit on us, whether they be Christians or pagans. The pagans, indeed, remembering the oppression of long ago by which we first occupied their territory and afterwards weakened and destroyed them through continual persecutions, reckon as just vengeance whatever they inflict on us. The Christians, however, seem to have a greater cause for persecuting us because, as they say, we killed their Lord. (Payer, 32–33)

Abelard's contemporary and theological adversary Bernard of Clairvaux was a counselor to Pope Eugene III, and in 1147 he preached the Second Crusade. Knowing the terrible attacks by Crusaders on the Jewish communities along the River Rhine in 1096, Bernard exhorted his listeners to spare the Jews, for they are "the pupil of God's eye" (Zech 2:8). This fact was noted with gratitude in the Jewish Chronicles of that time.

The great commentator on both Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi) lived in Troyes, northern France, from 1030–1105 (see Hailperin, 107). He founded a "dynasty" of scholars who, it seems, shared Rashi's contributions

with monks in the School of St. Victor. Did Hugh of St. Victor (1097–1141) learn enough Hebrew to consult written work of Jewish scholars or did he learn details of biblical interpretation from personal contact with contemporary Jews in Paris? Recent studies confirm the conclusions of investigations fifty years earlier, that it was most likely the latter. The absence of autobiographical details from the Victorine writings does not allow confirmation concerning details of contacts with Jewish scholars (on Hugh, see Moore, *passim*).

In 1510, almost a decade before Martin Luther promulgated his ninety-five theses, Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1533) responded to the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian in defense of the Jews in Germany against the threatening decree that their volumes of the Talmud be burned. This philosopher and legal scholar composed a long and erudite defense of Jewish literature. He argued: “We may not take their books away from them against their will, for books are as dear to some as their children. . . . If our purpose in confiscating a Jew’s books is precisely to bring him over to the Christian faith, then such an action would be tantamount to force.” This effort was appreciated highly by the leader of the German Jewish community, Josel of Rosheim, who wrote: “Our enemies, and the oppressors from among our own people [Pfefferkorn], arose to abolish the written Torah; then God demonstrated a double miracle to us, for the Torah was returned to its former glory [the books were returned] by a sage among the nations [Reuchlin]” (Wortzman, 85–86).

In the turbulent times of the French Revolution, a French priest, Henri Baptiste Grégoire (1750–1831), argued that Jews should be given full rights as citizens. He wrote eloquently of the burden borne by Jews in the European Diaspora and of their potential for participation in the political, social setting that would accept them:

You nations, for eighteen hundred years you have trampled on the remnants of Israel. The severity of divine vengeance has fallen on them—but has God appointed you his instruments? The fury of your fathers chose its victims from among this tormented flock. What kind of treatment have you saved for those frightened lambs that escaped the slaughter and fled into your arms? Is it enough to let them stay alive, all the while robbing them of the things that make life bearable? Will you bequeath your hatred to your children? Do not judge this people except in the light of their future. . . . A new age is about to begin. . . . The Jews are members of that universal family that is bound to establish brotherhood among all peoples. Over them, as over you, revelation spreads its majestic veil. Children of the same Father, rid yourselves of every pretext for antipathy towards your brethren. Some day, they will be united with you in the same fold. Give them homes where they may rest their heads in peace and dry their tears. Then the Jew will return tenderness to the Christian and embrace in me his fellow citizen and his friend. (Oesterreicher, 43–44)

An example of Jewish outreach from June 1935 in Prague is noteworthy, especially when one recalls Nazi oppression in nearby Germany. As Catholics gathered in the city for a national conference, the chief rabbi and his associates offered a message of welcome. The bishops of Moravia and Bohemia responded with a similar salutation of peace from Psalm 122:7. Then they offered the following comment:

Mankind is divided today into only two camps, the camp of those who proclaim faith in God and the camp of his foes. We also trust that the common values of faith and morality be, without exception, a rampart to those who build their lives on the sacred truths of divine revelation. The sublime commandment of the love of God and of neighbor, already contained in the Old Testament, is the common base of all that is sacred to Jews and Catholics.

The message of peace that goes out from this National Assembly of Catholics is addressed to the entire world and to all men without distinction. For every human soul is of infinite value before God. You have greeted this Congress with the words of the singer of the Lord. Permit us to respond with the high priestly blessing, with these lofty words:

May the Lord bless you and keep you
May He let His face shine upon you,
And give you peace (Num 6:24-26). (Oesterreicher, 44-45)

Perhaps no recent story of a neighborly attitude between a Christian and a Jew has a wider impact than that of Irene Harand (1905-1975) and Moritz Zalman of Vienna. She was a Catholic housewife without an academic degree but with a passion for justice. A Jewish attorney offered to help her defend a destitute old man; his generous waiver of fees led her to overcome a prejudice that Jews were greedy. From 1930 they worked together to counteract the ominous rise of anti-Semitism. She published a critique of Hitler in March 1933, and they founded a weekly paper *Gerechtigkeit* ("Justice"), which appeared in four European languages and had a wide circulation. In October 1933 Harand and Zalman founded the "World Organization against Racial Hatred and Human Need," which grew to almost forty thousand members and was established in twenty-seven countries. Harand recognized that bad economic times and poverty foster anti-Semitism, so her work always included efforts to offer social assistance. Fortunately for her safety, Harand was in London on a lecture tour when the Nazi *Anschluss* (annexation) of Austria took place on March 12, 1938 (on Harand's work, see Greenberg, 92-115).

These examples, presented but briefly, show that some people recorded attitudes that provided hints of understanding and the possibility of collaboration. The terrible crimes of Nazi persecution cast a dismal shadow over Europe and beyond; the heroism of all who rescued Jews during that time should be remembered as well.

New Beginnings

Decades ago the Council of Christians and Jews in some countries fostered the exchange of speakers for events such as "Brotherhood Week." Very often sixty years ago the encounters among clergy were only incidental, perhaps in a death-bed setting when a person might revert to the religion of his or her youth. Fifty years ago the development of local clergy associations brought religious leaders together on a regular basis, with a focus on the discussion of practical issues created by a pluralistic, even secular, society. Various religions, in spite of sharp differences, do share common social challenges; a unified approach to these questions is more impressive to the community's decision makers than lonely voices. Usually Reform or Conservative Rabbis were the Jewish leaders who interacted with other clergy, often Protestant and a few Catholic priests. For Catholics in many lands the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) brought a change toward openness and collaboration.

The council wanted "to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit, above all, of biblical and theological studies as well as fraternal dialogues" (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4). In several cities a rabbi was appointed as an adjunct professor in undergraduate Religious Studies departments or would be asked to offer a course in a Catholic seminary. The Jewish Chatauqua Society offered books on Judaica to Catholic colleges and seminaries and sponsored speakers for programs or lecturers for courses.

The Other as Colleague

Asher Finkel, a graduate of the Rabbi Elchanan Theological Seminary of Yeshiva University with a doctorate in comparative religion from the University of Tübingen, was hired as a full-time professor in the master's program in Seton Hall University when it was founded in 1975 by Monsignor John M. Oesterreicher, the first graduate program in Jewish-Christian Studies. Along with two Jewish and two Catholic adjunct professors, Rabbi Finkel and I helped to initiate a wide-ranging program grounded in the biblical heritage and covering the major periods of Jewish-Christian relations from the first century to the present.

As the Second Vatican Council recognized, the university is a favored setting for research and teaching that can move beyond the urgent issues of a given time to reflect upon the foundations and developments in intellectual and spiritual orders for religious communities. At Seton Hall the Jewish and Catholic faith experiences have been the center of attention, without ignoring the contributions and questions brought by others, for example, Protestant churches and Muslim thinkers.

For more than thirty years I have been the beneficiary of a unique intellectual experience of working with a rabbi, team teaching courses on "The Fall of Jerusalem: Jewish and Christian Perspectives," "Eschatology: Jewish and Christian," developing programs for the meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and the International Congress on Medieval Studies, and joint publications on a topic selected by the editors in *SIDIC Review* (Rome) and the *Journal of Dharma* (Bangalore), as well as other projects.

In courses and publications Rabbi Finkel has drawn on the riches of Jewish worship and prayer to elucidate the allusions to the Passover meal in the gospel accounts of the Last Supper, Jesus' preaching, and the way that Jesus' teachings draw upon pilgrimage traditions of the Second Temple period. Thus the ingredients of a journey to Jerusalem for a pilgrimage feast become the demands for the apostles on their mission: simple garments, no money for daily sustenance (Matt 10:5-15). He made an important contribution to Christian understanding of the Gospel in his doctoral dissertation, where he showed that Matthew's record of Jesus' woes against the Pharisees is a critique of the positions espoused by the House of Shammai. If the evangelist would have specified this precision much of the Christian misunderstanding about the Pharisee movement might have been avoided! As with other groups, some Pharisees may have been legalistic and hypocritical but the movement included many sincerely faithful Jews. Some, like Saul of Tarsus (see Phil 3:4-6), were intemperate in their zeal but they strove to follow the challenge of prophets and psalmists, "to walk blamelessly, do what is right and speak the truth from the heart" (Ps 15:2; see 24:4).

For a long time scholars have debated about the Lord's Prayer: Is Matthew 6:9-15 or Luke 11:2-4 the original? Drawing on the forms of the great intercessory prayer in the synagogue, Rabbi Finkel has shown that Jesus offered two versions of the prayer. Matthew's text is for a liturgical assembly and Luke gives a "prayer on the road."

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Appreciating Our Jewish Neighbor

In the past fifty years the age-old interpretation of the Gospel as antagonistic to the Jewish way of life has become more nuanced and fair to the intricate dynamics of worship and study, of debate and confrontation between religious leaders in the

first century. Along with the advances of archeology, especially the discovery of the Qumran (Dead Sea) Scrolls, work of those knowledgeable about Judaism of the Second Temple period has contributed greatly to an appreciation that Jesus built carefully on biblical and Jewish foundations in presenting his message.

The faithful in many Christian communities have come to appreciate their Jewish neighbors as people of integrity with a strong sense of justice and service. This real-life experience should be reinforced in the education they receive through religious education and preaching. "All should see to it, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the Word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ" (*Nostra Aetate*, no. 4).

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