

# Jews and Christians: Is there any point in continuing the dialogue?

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My church's youth group was called "the Coffee Club". We met after the Sunday evening service once a month. On reflection it was an inspired idea of our minister as it ensured that some of the teenagers attended the evening service at least once a month! Sometimes "the Coffee Club" would miss the evening service and pay a visit to another church or a place of local interest. On one occasion we visited the Blackpool Synagogue and it was that visit which began my interest in inter faith dialogue. I remember quite vividly that sense of being in a place that felt very familiar and yet at the same time was something "other". For me that has characterised my own encounter with Judaism in a way that I never quite feel with other religions. As an adult I discovered that I have part Jewish heritage on my father's side and this only intensified this sense of familiarity yet otherness too.

My answer to this evening's question – is there any point in continuing the dialogue – required no hesitation: Of course there is a point! For Christians, Judaism is a faith that is both very familiar and yet also "other" in a way that not even Islam comes close. For Christians the reasons are many, too many to outline in a short presentation. Needless to say it remains my conviction that Christianity without a deep engagement with the faith alongside which it grew is likely to lose its heart.

However I understand why the question needs to be asked. The recent policy decisions of a number of churches have led to questions being asked about the relevance of the dialogue or whether anyone is really serious about it anymore. This point was reinforced when, following the recent policy positions adopted by the Methodist Church amongst others, Churches Together in Britain and Ireland held a consultation between the British and Irish Churches which took stock on where they have reached with Jewish-Christian relations; the outcome of this was that whilst the churches recognised the difficulties currently facing us, relations between the two faiths was of paramount importance. However I want to suggest that whilst Jewish-Christian dialogue is important – even vital – it will need a radical rethink because we are living in very different times to that when Jewish-Christian dialogue emerged with an urgency of purpose.

The older model of Jewish-Christian relations emerges pre Holocaust by those deeply concerned at the rise of European Anti-Semitism and comes to maturity in the post-Holocaust era. This is against the backdrop of the establishment of the United Nations, the European Union, the World Council of Churches and a strong push towards reconciliation as

a way of averting war and genocide. European history has largely determined the framing and priorities of Jewish-Christian relations. Christian Churches in Europe, conscious of their own involvement in anti-Semitism saw Jewish-Christian dialogue as essential in putting right the wrongs that had been committed. It wasn't just about saying sorry or promising not to do it again, but about changing the political, theological, liturgical and hermeneutical language of the past that had maligned Jewish faith and experience and either rendered its traditions as invalid or cannibalised its parts for the ends of Christendom. Understanding the importance of the State of Israel was important to this. The older model of JC relations was ambitious in that it was attempting to radically change the Christian narrative to one which was more faithful to Christian self-understanding in its earlier centuries. The successes of this can be seen in many respects: liturgies which have attempted to remove anti-Semitic overtones particular during Holy Week; Biblical commentaries which draw on Jewish, as well as existing Christian scholarship, not only with respect of the Hebrew Scriptures but the New Testament too.

It is often said that Jewish-Christian relations is a victim of its own success; the achievements mentioned a moment ago can easily be overstated but they are none the less remarkable achievements of a relatively small number of committed people. However I want to suggest to you that much of the reason for the present difficulty is due to the limitations of this older model of dialogue that worked well in the post-war era but will not serve our needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And so I want to suggest that an important task for us all is to start to re-imagine Jewish-Christians relations for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and an important starting point is to recognise how both faiths are in a different place to where they were 50 years ago.

In broad brush terms, one of the most significant changes over the last 50 years has been that Christianity has changed from being a Euro-centric faith to one that is a globalised religion. This is characterised by a rapid growth of Christianity in Africa and Asia. This is particular true in China where it is estimated that there are several million new Christians every month. This growing Christianity in what is sometimes called the global south, is energetic, largely Pentecostal and often tends towards religious conservatism. Meanwhile the historic churches in Europe have witnessed dramatic decline both in terms of their numerical strength and their influence in an increasingly secularised society. Christianity in Africa and Asia has also been strongly influenced by liberation theology and a desire to develop different models of Christianity that distinguish it from the colonial religion brought by Europeans. Thus many of the concerns of liberal Western Churches are either not shared by the world church or are viewed with suspicion. The conflict within the Anglican Communion over homosexuality is an illustration of that development.

Philip Jenkins' book "The Next Christendom: the Coming of Global Christianity" explores this development. In the introduction to the book Jenkins predicts "within a few decades

Kinshasa, Buenos Aires, Addis Ababa and Manila with replace Rome, Athens, Paris, London and New York as the new focal points in the Church's universality".

The desire for greater Christian unity across the world church has meant that for many European Churches, taking on board the experiences of Christian brothers and sisters who live under great adversity has become a growing priority.

The impact of this on Jewish-Christian relations can be seen in two respects. Firstly, many churches in the global south see Jewish-Christian relations as a Western pre-occupation that is distant from their own concerns and their own emerging self-identity. In particular many Christian leaders and theologians from the Global South see it as an outworking of the post-Holocaust guilt of European colonial churches who inflicted similar torments upon non-Europeans and therefore see no reason why they should embrace this particular agenda. Secondly – and leading on from this – many in the global south have an instinctive sympathy with the plight of the Palestinians. The language of the Kairos-Palestine document is in part an attempt to gain the sympathy of a globalised Christian audience. The frequent comments by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, comparing the Israeli occupation of the West Bank to South African Apartheid, is a reflection of this point of view.

Although the analysis outlined above is simplistic in many respects (many Christians in the Global South will also instinctively identify with Israel as this arises out of their reading of the Bible) the approach previously described represents the priorities of the world church, especially through the World Council of Churches and this is increasingly setting the agenda for European churches. For the churches in Europe, and in particular the UK, who are attempting to move away from Eurocentricism, the temptation to embrace a different narrative around the Middle East is immensely strong. Edward Said's criticism of Western Orientalist approaches towards Middle Eastern cultures has also played an important part and lies behind a number of background papers that have informed recent policy changes in Western churches. In some extreme cases Western and Middle Eastern Christians have expressed unease about the use of Hebrew Scriptures that refer to Israel or interpret the sufferings of Jesus at the hands of his tormentors as analogous to the sufferings of the Palestinians today. At the polar opposite is the movement known as Christian Zionism; often originating in the United States and views the return of the Jews to Israel as a portent for the end of the world and the final judgement. Christian Zionism often is uncritical in its support for Israel and even for the eradication of existing Christian communities in the region. Traditional approaches to Jewish-Christian dialogue have been caught between these two opposite views within the churches.

Another important factor is the rapidly changing political scene in Israel and the rise of Islamism in the Palestinian territories that have diminished the possibilities of a peaceful settlement.

If I am to make a generalisation at this point it would be this: the present situation is one where the major Churches of the United Kingdom are increasingly drawn to a world church perspective where there is strong support for Christians in difficult contexts; meanwhile the Jewish community is instinctively supportive of Israel, despite any misgivings they might have with regard to current government policy. Thus the focus for both Christianity and Judaism has shifted away from its traditional European focus towards events that have global significance.

It is this changed context where traditional approaches to Jewish-Christian relations have been found to be inadequate. Indeed, it is often viewed as merely a platform for those who are uncritical supporters of Israel. One of the most unfair charges against Christians involved in dialogue with Jewish people is that they are little better than American backed fundamentalist Christian Zionists. This radically different context calls for a very different approach to Jewish-Christian relations.

Having outlined a very broad brush, and somewhat over simplistic change in context it is worth asking ourselves if this leads us conclude that our task is done and that there are other priorities that demand our energies? However despite the globalised nature of our present context, the paradox is that people increasingly live their lives in localised fashion, albeit with a much more of a global awareness. There are many aspects of the traditional approach to Jewish-Christian relations that still holds true. The inseparable commonalities do not need to be rehearsed here. What probably does need to be stressed is the shared ethical values of the two faiths that not only have underpinned European civilization but continue to frame to nature of ethical judgement globally. Arguably the ethical content of the Judeo-Christian tradition is just as important today as it ever once was and there continues to be a task to apply this to contemporary events.

The ethics around financial markets serves as an important example where the Judeo-Christian tradition has much to say, in its own right and in dialogue with other religious traditions and belief systems. Similar claims can be made in respect of racial justice, environmental protection, asylum seekers, people trafficking and issues of poverty and social justice.

However to be effective in dialogue and action there needs to be a deepening of the relationships. The recent difficulties arising from church policy decisions on the Middle East and has suggested that we are some way from that deepening. Yet at the same time we have learned that there is no such thing as a unilateral action – that a policy decision by one church affects us all, both Jews and Christians; that they have the potential to hurt, betray and force us further apart. Likewise the actions of the Israeli Government have a profound impact on our ability to remain in mutual trust of one another.

So in conclusion I would want to offer the following starting points as to how Jewish-Christian relations might be shaped more appropriately for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

1. A stronger sense of the shared ethical values of both religious traditions, along with a shared history, means that there is still a strong case for a bi-lateral relationship. This will need to have a strong focus in contemporary events and be willing to engage not only with each other but wider society.
2. A greater focus on areas of social justice and how our traditions encourage wider society to be more just towards the vulnerable.
3. A more global and political focus to our dialogues, recognising that events in the Middle East will continue to have profound implications for our own relationships as Jews and Christians together
4. Moving beyond the model of European Jews talking to European Christians, towards an awareness of Christianity and Judaism as world faiths that lie at the heart of one of the most challenging conflicts on the present age
5. A continuing commitment to a bi-lateral dialogue with each other and yet one that is open to the perspectives of other traditions – particular Islam. Thus a great literacy about developments in other religions that will have implications for our own religious identity (for example, the impact of the role of Islamism in Middle East politics and its impact on Christian minorities in the region and how this affects the way Jews and Christians dialogue together).
6. A greater sense of our inter dependency yet at the same time having the maturity to recognise that it is unreasonable to expect Jewish people not to support the State of Israel or for Christians not to instinctively support the hard pressed Christians of the region

My own sense is that few people seriously question whether Jews and Christians should be in dialogue together. At the same time many have rightly asked whether it has value when both communities have resorted to unilateral action. An opportunity therefore presents itself to develop new models of engagement that recognise the new circumstances in which we find ourselves.

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