

Landmarks and Landmines in Jewish-Christian Relations

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In the past fifty years—about the span of time I’ve worked in the field of Jewish-Christian relations—there have been significant landmarks, virtual turning points, to advance mutual understanding and respect between Jews and Christians, and there have also been landmines: explosive issues just under the surface that, when triggered, threatened to derail years of progress, or even the dialogue itself. Both the landmarks and the landmines must be viewed against the state of Jewish-Christian relations some fifty years ago, and I must tell that story by sharing my own experience.

I came to the American Jewish Committee (AJC) in late 1959, before the Second Vatican Council and many of the landmark developments that preceded and followed it. At the time, I was assigned an intriguing task: to assess, summarize, and circulate the findings of self-studies of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish religious textbooks stimulated by the AJC. That Jews should be concerned about how Christians depicted them should not surprise anyone. Jews were convinced that a certain tradition of Christian teaching and preaching represented one of the primary sources of anti-Semitism across the centuries.

The devastating reality of the Holocaust—the destruction of half the Jews of Europe and one-third of the Jews in the world—made the task of confronting the roots of this pathology of hatred inescapable, particularly its religious and theological roots. For obvious reasons, namely, the history of persecution, expulsion, and

massacre of Jews at the hands of Christians, we were particularly concerned about the content of the Christian teaching materials. Still, it should be stressed that these were *self* studies, in which the religious education materials of a particular religious community were examined by a scholar from within that community and faithful to its values and vision.

When I first began reading the raw data from the Protestant and Catholic textbooks, I was astonished both at the degree of hostility to Jews and Judaism, and at the extent of group libel I found in many of the excerpts. In the light of progress made in recent years, it is somewhat embarrassing to recall some of these statements. But they remind us of the dimensions of the problems we uncovered. Thus, from a Protestant lesson:

When Jesus was in the Temple for the last time a few days before his Passion, he asked the Jews, "What think ye of Christ?" Their answer was a great disappointment to Him, but on Good Friday they showed what they thought of Him. Their hearts were so filled with hatred toward Him that they shouted themselves hoarse, crying, "Crucify Him." That was the thanks he received for coming into this world to save and bless them.

And from another Protestant lesson:

The fruit of Israel as a fig tree was bitter and corrupt instead of sweet and good. Israel rejected their Messiah when he came and because of their failure they withered away. This has been Israel's condition as a nation for centuries; she has been dried up with no national symbols, such as a land, a king, a flag.

It should be noted that this latter comment was published in 1962, fourteen years after the emergence of the modern state of Israel. It is a striking instance of reality trumped by theology.

From several Roman Catholic textbooks:

His prophecy was partially fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem and more fully in the rejection by God of the chosen people.

Christ, by his miracles and preaching, tried to conquer the obstinacy of the Jews and to bring them to repentance. The Jews, on the contrary, by the bad influence of their hypocrisy and pride, hindered the spread of the knowledge of God among other nations.

The Jews as a nation refused to accept Christ, and since his time they have been wanderers on the earth without a temple, or a sacrifice, and without a Messiah.

These were not the only kinds of references to Jews and Judaism in the textbooks. There were fair or neutral statements as well. But what struck me about the examples I have cited was the vehemence, the intensity with which any sense of continuing mission for Judaism, any meaningful witness for the Jewish people (except witnessing to the superior truth of Christianity), any validity in Jewish terms for the re-creation of a Jewish commonwealth in Israel, were dismissed *a priori*. A few years later, Claire Huchet Bishop, the brilliant French Catholic disciple of Jules Isaac, introduced us to his writings and the brilliantly coined phrase that has since served to characterize this tradition of hostility: *the teaching of contempt*.

It is important to recall the cluster of themes that defined this negative tradition, because some of them are very much with us, and they take both religious and secular forms.

First, there is the theme of a degenerate Judaism, already spiritually exhausted by the time Jesus appeared. I must confess I was baffled by Isaac's defining this position as a teaching of contempt, until I realized that if the Judaism of Jesus' time is seen only as a formalistic creed, empty of values and vitality, then he could not possibly "owe" it anything, or have been nurtured in it, or by it. (As late as 1972, Gerald Strober, who conducted a follow up study of Protestant teaching materials noted that the Protestant materials he

studied tended to “isolate Jesus and his closest followers from their Jewish contemporaries” and convey the impression that they are somehow not Jews: “They are made to look like a new kind of group thrust into the midst of first-century Jewish life, without roots in, or sympathy for, Jewish history, tradition, or religious values.”) Textbook commentaries on the miracle at Cana, he noted, provided a frequent opportunity for caricature of Judaism, and I would add, for displacement theologizing as well.

Then there is the theme of Jews as a carnal people, incapable of understanding their own scriptures—or anything else—except in a grossly sensual way, a theme that still carries weight in secularized forms of anti-Semitism. Nazi cartoons always characterized Jews as fat, fleshy, ugly, and greedy—caricatures, I note with regret, now found throughout the Arab world. Further, the theme of a people who willfully and deliberately blinded themselves to the significance of Jesus’ mission; the theme, most murderous of all, of a deicide—God-killing people—and the corollary themes that accompany that horrendous teaching that Jews have been rejected and accursed by God and their dispersion, their loss of nation, their suffering and persecution over the centuries are evidence of providential punishment for this terrible crime.

The findings of the Catholic textbook studies which illustrated these themes, supplemented by examples from French, Spanish, and Italian language materials, were integrated into an initiative on behalf of an authoritative statement from the Second Vatican Council repudiating these teachings of contempt and condemning anti-Semitism. What finally emerged from the Council as *Nostra Aetate*, after many delays and a bitter struggle, was indeed a milestone. Looking back at *Nostra Aetate* forty years later, it is easy to take that achievement for granted. But at the time, it was a cliffhanger! The outright anti-Semitism expressed by some of its opponents, the attempts to scuttle the document—some of them truly subversive—played out as a daily drama. It was passed on the final day of the Council, in the final minutes: a flawed, compromised document, but still a landmark.

Since the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, statements by national bishops’ conferences (United States, Dutch, Belgian, French, Swiss,

German, and Brazilian), guidelines issued by the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, and various papal statements have gone far beyond the Declaration itself. Such authoritative documents have:

called for "a frank and honest treatment of Christian anti-Semitism in our history books, courses, and curricula and an acknowledgement of the living and complex reality of Judaism after Christ and the permanent election of Israel" (*Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations*, [U.S.] National Conference of Catholic Bishops' Subcommittee for Catholic-Jewish Relations, 1967);

stressed that "the points on which Jesus took issue with the Judaism of his time are fewer than those in which He found himself in agreement with it" (Vatican study paper, 1969); stated that "the Jewish people is the true relative of the Church, not her rival or a minority to be assimilated" (study paper, National Catholic Commission for Relations with the Jews, Belgium, 1973);

called it "most urgent that Christians cease to represent the Jews according to clichés forged by the hostility of centuries" (French Bishops' Committee for Relations with Jews, 1973);

regretted "that an often faulty and hard-hearted presentation of Judaism led to a wrong attitude of Christians toward Jews; hence great care must be taken in religious instruction, liturgical services, adult education and theological training, to offer a correct interpretation of Jewish self-understanding" (Swiss Bishops' statement, 1974);

urged Christians "to strive to learn by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience" and emphasized that information

regarding the Jewishness of Jesus, the similarity of his teaching methods to those employed by the rabbis of his time, the repudiation of Jewish collective guilt for the trial and death of Jesus and the continuing development of Judaism after the emergence of Christianity “is important at all levels of Christian instruction and education,” including “the thorough formation of instructors and educators in training schools, seminaries and universities” (Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1975);

asserted that Jews are “a still living reality,” whose permanence in history, “accompanied by a continuous, spiritual fecundity,” is “a sign to be interpreted within God’s design.” (*Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Catholic Church*, 1985)¹

I emphasize that not all of these recommendations have been formally adopted. Some study documents remained just that. Still, they stand as landmarks, pointing the Church in a new direction.

The question is: How thoroughly have these exemplary guidelines and suggestions been implemented at the parish level, and to what extent has the Church’s new policy of respect and friendship for Jews and Judaism been reflected in textbooks, classroom teaching, religious information and public worship?

Here there is much good news and some bad news. Recent materials do note the Jewishness of Jesus, and the better ones show the continuity of Jesus’ teachings with the teachings of his Pharisaic contemporaries. Still, the image of Jesus as a faithful Jew is a very hard pill for some Christians to swallow, and I suspect it is hardest in those cultures which have had very little experience of religious pluralism, and where national identity is linked to one particular religious identity. A Polish woman I met at a conference in Eastern Europe told me: “Polish Catholics have terrible difficulty accepting Jesus Christ as Jewish. Some are beginning to believe that Jesus really was a Jew. But Mary, never!”

Christian educators have made a conscious effort to remove the most poisonous teachings of contempt from textbooks and classrooms. To the best of my knowledge, the deicide charge—specifically, that the Jews are a people of Christ-killers—is gone from Christian education materials, although other vestiges of the anti-Jewish polemic still abound. Yet that image is so pervasive in Western culture—what was called, in another time, Christendom—so close to the surface and so accessible in moments of tension or conflict, that it remains a potent vehicle for knee-jerk anti-Semites. Two examples: In May 1987, during the conflict over the revelation that Austrian Chancellor Kurt Waldheim had been a high-ranking Nazi officer during World War II—there were protests against him by some Jewish organizations—the deputy mayor of the Austrian city of Linz wrote to the head of a well-known Jewish organization: “You Jews got Christ, but you’re not going to get Waldheim the same way” (*New York Times*, October 9, 1987). Here in the United States on the *Today Show*, a discussion on the Jewish community’s objections to the papal audience granted Kurt Waldheim featured the Roman Catholic participant preaching to his rabbinical counterpart as follows: “Well, the problem is that ours is a religion of forgiveness and yours is a religion of vengeance.” Similar comments were heard at the time of President Reagan’s unfortunate visit to the cemetery at Bitburg, and such false contrasts were rampant at the time of the Eichmann trial, perhaps because of who was conducting the trial and where it was conducted. Neither the Nuremberg trials of war criminals in the 1940s nor the trial of Klaus Barbie in Paris in the 1980s evoked any reference to the *lex talionis*, but the Eichmann trial did engender Christian press references to “an eye for an eye.” And the fact that “the Jews” were conducting a trial in Jerusalem seemed too rich a coincidence for some commentators to pass up.

The tendency to see Jews in terms of Christian theological categories takes on a special form when it comes to Israel. On the one hand there are some who see Israel as a prime player in an end-of-days scenario with apocalyptic overtones. They are pro-Israel politically, but they support the ingathering of Jews in Israel largely

as prelude to their mass conversion and the Second Coming—that is, for the sake of Christian eschatology, not Jewish survival.

On the other hand, there are Christians who are hostile to Israel for theological reasons—recognized or unrecognized—of vastly different kinds. One perspective dismisses in advance any possible religious or moral significance in the rebirth of Israel on grounds that the Church is the new Israel and all the promises have been fulfilled in Jesus. Israel is thus seen as illegitimate on religious grounds, but the attitude carries over into political judgments: if Israel's very existence is theologically illegitimate, that state can do nothing right. This is what I might call an anti-Israel position as an extension of traditional Christian supersessionism.

Similarly, hostility to Israel is often expressed by invoking traditional teachings of contempt for political purposes. For example: the Palestinian Christian liberation theologian Naim Ateek accuses Israel of “crucifying” the Palestinians. What is he trying to achieve with this usage? What images is he invoking with this quite deliberate resort to a 2,000-year-old Roman form of execution that has served to vilify Jews for centuries?

The other side of that coin is hostility to Israel based on what we might call philosemitism run amok: *viz.*, Judaism does have a mission, but it is universal and prophetic, not tied to a piece of real estate. The inevitable fall out of national sovereignty: concern with security, military preparedness, budgets, social problems, imperfect solutions to real problems—in short, all the nitty-gritty of normality—is seen as somehow demeaning to the universal calling of Judaism. What follows is that Israel is judged against a standard of perfection while her adversaries are judged more realistically. Failure to achieve this perfection is seen as proof of inherent corruption.

What these positions have in common is that they view Israel—and to a certain extent, Judaism and the Jewish people—abstractly and through theological lenses. Christians rarely comment on Israel with an awareness of history, particularly Jewish history.

Contemporary Christians are not guilty of the dismal record of Christian hostility to Jews and Judaism, nor are contemporary

churches guilty for the fact that non-Christian—even anti-Christian—anti-Semites have appropriated labels and libels that originated with Christian anti-Judaism for their own purposes. But two caveats. One, Christians must learn something about the history of Christian anti-Semitism as part of their religious education. Fr. Edward Flannery noted that Christians have torn from their history books the pages the Jews have memorized. Church history materials must put some of these pages back: not to make Christian students feel guilty, but to help them behave responsibly. Christians who don't know that it was the church that confined Jews to ghettos, made them wear special clothing and denied them access to universities and professions, are like Americans who move into race relations without having learned about slavery.

Second, the situation of the contemporary church community *vis-à-vis* the paranoid fantasies spawned by earlier Christians recalls the dilemma of Dr. Frankenstein when the monster he created broke out and ran wild. It was another Christianity that created the monster: the myth of the “synagogue of Satan,” of the Jewish world conspiracy, of blood libels and well-poisonings. Contemporary Christianity rejects and repudiates these myths. But as with Dr. Frankenstein, it is not enough to disown the destructive creation: the churches must help to overcome it. That means not only standing with Jews against secular anti-Semitism in all its manifestations, but looking inward to its Christian roots. That means not only issuing documents, but engaging in a systematic effort to remove the vestiges of the teachings of contempt from Christian teaching and preaching.

The landmarks in Jewish-Christian relations consist of both words and actions. The documents cited above signify an affirmation of Jews and Judaism as fellow-believers whose covenant with God has never been revoked. Actions which have punctuated this relationship have been particularly welcomed within the Jewish community: Pope John Paul II's visit to the synagogue of Rome—the first Pope to visit a synagogue—his visit to Auschwitz, perhaps above all, his visit to Israel and the Western Wall in Jerusalem, in

which he inserted a prayer asking for forgiveness for the suffering of Jews at the hands of Christians: these were concrete demonstrations of kinship and sensitivity. The signing of diplomatic accords between the state of Israel and the Holy See was a major landmark, because it put to rest a suspicion in the Jewish community that an anti-Jewish theology had prevented the Church from full diplomatic recognition of Israel.

Awareness of history and a concern for Israel also proved to be landmines. The Carmelite convent at Auschwitz became a source of serious tension between significant numbers of the Catholic and Jewish communities. Many Christians could not see what the fuss was all about: what is more natural than to dedicate a place to worship God in a site of such horror and inhumanity? Most Jews felt the convent, established within the confines of the camp that served as the primary center of the murder of European Jewry was not only insensitive, but worse, an attempt to appropriate and “Christianize” the Holocaust. It was a powerful landmine, and anti-Semitism surfaced as the conflict played out. (It took the intervention of Pope John Paul II for the convent to be moved outside the walls of the death camp.) Not as serious, but landmines nonetheless, were the Pope’s meeting with Kurt Waldheim after the latter’s Nazi past had been revealed, and his granting of an audience to Yassir Arafat.

I would cite the latter as a missed opportunity as much as a landmine. Apparently, Arafat greeted the Pope by announcing: “I am a Palestinian. Like Jesus.” It would have betrayed no Catholic doctrine for the Pope to reply that Jesus was a Jew. He did not do so. An opportunity missed.

Another was during the Pope’s visit to Syria, when both Syria’s president and foreign minister assailed Jews, the foreign minister calling Jews “the enemies of God.” The Pope could have responded that, according to current Catholic teaching, Jews are not the “enemies of God” but beloved of God and respected elder brothers. Another opportunity missed.

One does not expect an adversarial tradition of almost two millennia, marred by persecution of Jewry and mutual hostility, to

be overturned in a few decades. The progress that has been made since Vatican II is remarkable against the background of estrangement that preceded it. We still have much work to do together.

Notes

This article, while original, is drawn from presentations and papers by the author delivered on several occasions, including the International Liaison Committee Meeting of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations, May 1992, Baltimore, Maryland.

1. Despite many constructive aspects, *Notes* drew sharp criticism from leading Jewish organizations. For a discussion of positive and regressive aspects of the document, see Judith Banki and Alan Mittleman, "Jews and Catholics: Taking Stock," *Commonweal*, September 6, 1985.