

The Alternative

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Dear Reader,

This issue of the Newsletter is on the relation between Christian and Jewish religions. That may sound like a boring topic or a technical question of interest only to scholars who specialize in ecumenical relations. It is, however, not only an unavoidably central issue for Jews but also a primary index for how Christians understand their own religion. Most Christians probably give little thought to their attitude to Judaism but that is a bad sign. A Christian either understands Jewish religion and the way that Christianity's meaning depends on the teaching of a Jewish prophet, Jesus of Nazareth, or else the Christian is likely to hold an absolutist version of Christianity that cannot tolerate other religious views. Politicians who are ostentatious in their profession of Christianity and loud in their support of Israel may think this problem does not apply to them but that conclusion does not follow.

This issue of the Newsletter begins with an essay by a Christian on the significance of Christianity in world history; the essay is followed by a sharp disagreement from a prominent Jewish writer. The essay was published as a *New York Times* editorial on Christmas day. It would be difficult to find a more positive statement of Christianity that has ever been published in the *Times*. The essay drew hundreds of responses that neatly fit into one of three categories: 1) Christians who effusively praised its sentiments 2) opponents of religion who ridiculed and attacked the essay's claims 3) Jews who complained that the author neglected the Jewish origin of the ideas attributed to Christianity. The essay was written by a man who served in several Republican administrations; the Jewish response that the *Times* published was by a woman who has been writing on Jewish religion for the last four decades.

Following that essay and comment, the essay by Gabriel Moran attempts to provide a context for this typical exchange between Christians and Jews. It proposes what might seem to be a surrender to Jewish critics but it is simply an attempt to find a basis for Jewish-Christian dialogue and cooperation. The final piece is an excerpt from a Jewish writer who provides Christians with an understanding of the New Testament when the gospel is examined with the help of Jewish tools.

THE CHRISTMAS REVOLUTION

By Peter Wehner

Because the Christmas story has been told so often for so long, it's easy even for Christians to forget how revolutionary Jesus' birth was. The idea that God would become human and dwell among us, in circumstances both humble and humiliating, shattered previous assumptions. It was through this story of divine enfleshment that much of our humanistic tradition was born.

For most Christians, the incarnation — the belief that God, in the person of Jesus, walked in our midst — is history's hinge point. The incarnation's most common theological take-away relates to the doctrine of redemption: the belief that salvation is made possible by the sinless life and atoning death of Jesus. But there are other, less familiar aspects of Jesus' earthly pilgrimage that are profoundly important. One of them was rejecting the Platonic belief that the material world was evil. In Plato's dualism, there was a dramatic disjuncture between ideal forms and actual bodies, between the physical and the spiritual worlds. According to Plato, what we perceive with our senses is illusory, a distorted shadow of reality. Hence philosophy's most famous imagery — Plato's shadow on the cave wall— where those in the cave mistook the shadows for real people and named them.

This Platonic view had considerable influence in the early church, but that influence faded because it was in tension with Christianity's deepest teachings. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, God declares creation to be good — and Jesus, having entered the world, ratified that judgment. The incarnation attests to the existence of the physical, material world. Our life experiences are real, not shadows. The incarnation affirms the delight we take in earthly beauty and our obligation to care for God's creation. This was a dramatic overturning of ancient thought.

The incarnation also reveals that the divine principle governing the universe is a radical commitment to the dignity and worth of every person, since we are created in the divine image. Human beings have worth because we are valued by God, who took on flesh, entered our world, and shared our experiences — love, joy, compassion and intimate friendships; anger, sorrow, suffering and tears. For Christians, God is not distant or detached; he is a God of wounds. All of this elevated the human experience and laid the groundwork for the ideas of individual dignity and inalienable rights.

The secular humanist, Luc Ferry, writes that in contrast with the Greek understanding of humanity, "Christianity was to introduce the notion that humanity was fundamentally identical, that men were equal in dignity — an unprecedented idea at the time, and one to which our world owes its entire democratic inheritance." Indeed, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (blessed are the poor in spirit, the pure in heart, the meek and the merciful), his touching of lepers, and his association with outcasts and sinners were fundamentally at odds with the way the Greek and Roman worlds viewed life, where social status was everything.

“Christianity placed charity at the center of its spiritual life as no pagan cult ever had,” according to the theologian David Bentley Hart, “and raised the care of widows, orphans, the sick, the imprisoned, and the poor to the level of the highest of religious obligations.” Christianity played a key role in ending slavery and segregation. Today Christians are taking the lead against human trafficking and on behalf of unborn life. They maintain countless hospitals, hospices and orphanages around the world. We moderns assume that compassion for the poor and marginalized is natural and universal. But actually we think in this humanistic manner in large measure because of Christianity.

One other effect of the incarnation: It helps those of us of the Christian faith to avoid turning God into an abstract set of principles. Accounts of how Jesus interacted in this messy, complicated, broken world, through actions that stunned the people of his time, allow us to learn compassion in ways that being handed a moral rule book never could. For one thing, rule books can’t shed tears or express love; human beings do. Seeing how Jesus dealt with the religious authorities of his day (often harshly) and the sinners and outcasts of his day (often tenderly and respectfully) adds texture and subtlety to human relationships that we could never gain otherwise.

Christians have often fallen short of what followers of Jesus are called to be. We have seen this in the Crusades, religious wars and bigotry; in opposition to science, in the way critical thought is discouraged and in harsh judgmentalism. To this day, many professing Christians embody the antithesis of grace. We Christians would do well to remind ourselves of the true meaning of the incarnation. We are part of a great drama that God has chosen to be a participant in, not in the role of a conquering king but as a suffering servant, not with the intention to condemn the world but to redeem it. He saw the inestimable worth of human life, regardless of social status, wealth and worldly achievements, intelligence or national origin. So should we.

RESPONSE

By Letty Cottin Pogrebin

I was troubled by Peter Wehner’s Op-Ed column, “The Christmas Revolution.” He utterly disregards the Jewish roots of Christianity and ignores the foundational principles of Judaism that he appropriates as if Jesus and Christianity invented them: for example, b’tzelem Elohim (the idea that each human being is created in the image of God), or the obligation to care for the widow and orphan; or the requirement to set aside the corners of one’s field for the poor, all of which are fundamental Torah precepts.

His erasure of the Jewish ethos and prophetic teachings — which are as prescriptive for leading a moral and ethical life as the lessons of Jesus and which predate Jesus by many centuries — and the way Mr. Wehner leapfrogs from paganism to Christianity without so much as a nod to its Judaic heritage seems both ahistorical and insensitive.

Finally, to call the “Crusades, religious wars and bigotry” examples of Christians having “fallen short” strikes me as an understatement only slightly more mind-boggling than his list’s glaring omission of the horrors of the Holocaust, which were facilitated or tolerated by millions of people who considered themselves Christians.

TOWARD THE FUTURE FOR CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

By Gabriel Moran

Late in the first century of the Common Era the Jesus movement took on a distinctly negative attitude to Jewish tradition. From first being understood as one of several reform movements within the Jewish community, the group who became known as Christians began their own tradition. That separation was neither inevitable nor bad although religious reforms often create a hostile attitude. Did Christians march out of the synagogue or were they thrown out? What is clear is that Saul of Tarsus who became Paul preached a radical reform of Jewish thought as seen through the one whom Paul calls Christ Jesus. In his mission around the Mediterranean, Paul was amazingly successful in making new converts to such an extent that the Jewish membership was quickly overwhelmed by these newcomers.

Without an anchor in its Jewish origin, the Christian Church absorbed ideas from the Greek philosophers who dominated the scene. Paul was himself a strange mixture, proud of his being a Pharisee and contemptuous of Greek philosophers; and yet his letters lent themselves to anti-Jewish interpretations. His letters did not show much interest in the details of the life of Jesus nor Jesus' particular teachings. He instead elaborated a philosophical theory about the universe and the human struggle to overcome its shortcomings and find health (salvation). It was a brilliant philosophy of history that reverberates around the world to this day. As a Jew, Paul assumed that Christians were being taken into the way laid out by the Jews minus some of the rituals required of Jews. He concentrated on contrasting the limits of Judaism and the fact that something new had emerged out of Jewish history. In the past God had spoken to one group of people; now God was embodied in a single member of that community who could speak with definitive authority.

Both the Jews and the Christians were affected by the religious movements at that time and in that part of the world. Those religious groups were based on belief in "apocalypse" which was translated into Latin as "revelation." Etymologically, the word simply means to "unveil." It fit in with the Greek meaning of truth as "coming out of the darkness." One could say that in the Greek language all truth was apocalypse or revelation. In the religious twist on the term, especially in Persian religion, revelation referred to a final unveiling of the truth beyond the struggles of human history. The final truth could not be unveiled without terrible conflict between the good and the evil in human history. This version of history and truth conflicted with the Hebraic sense of truth and the biblical story. Revelation was a threat to both Jews and Christians but paradoxically it might be a key to how Jews and Christians could cooperate in the future.

The Jews with their long tradition mostly resisted the lure of revelation but Christianity was susceptible to the idea that the world was about to end and revelation would soon occur. The first Christians thought that the risen Christ was going to return at any moment and judge who were his true followers. That attitude continued into the second century and for many Christians today that attitude remains.

Only after a long debate was the Book of Revelation accepted into the Christian canon of scripture. The idea of revelation threatened to swallow the church because it seemed to fit the pattern that Christianity posited for the movement of human history. It was an appealing idea that solved most of life's problems. If a new earth and a new heaven are about to be unveiled, why bother taking care of this earth? If you know how the story ends, you do not have to pay much attention to the details of the story. The vast majority of today's tens of thousands of web sites on "revelation" refer to the Book of Revelation.

Most Catholics had never heard of the Book of Revelation until the Second Vatican Council. Their Bible did include a book called Apocalypse which was never given much attention. Even the biblical scholars who wrote the Council document "The Constitution on Divine Revelation" made no reference to the Book of Revelation. That strange fact is indicative of the church's embarrassment with the last book of its Bible and its confusion about the idea of revelation.

By the third century the Christian Church was trying to domesticate the idea of revelation so as to bring it under control. The main tactic was to equate the metaphors of divine speaking and divine revealing. Because the two ideas are fundamentally opposed, the domestication was never entirely successful. The assumption that one finds the truth by taking a look and then adding words is opposed to speaking and listening as the primary way to truth. The tactic of equating the two ways to truth meant that revelation could be identified with the story of God speaking and humans responding, a process that has happened in the past and found fulfillment in the Christ who is word of God, word of man.

The Catholic Church and mainline Protestant Churches have continued the tactic of equating incompatible metaphors. The Council's "Constitution on Divine Revelation" has the Latin name "*Dei Verbum*" (Word of God). By refusing to face the problem the idea of revelation or apocalypse runs wild. The main churches ridicule apocalyptic sects without acknowledging where these sects come from. And the idea of apocalypse dominates our political speech and environmental discussions.

There is no way to reverse what has happened in the past. While Jews were trying to survive in history, the Christian belief was that the Jews should have disappeared already. The Old Testament had been followed by the New Testament and according to the revelation that has already occurred, the end is coming soon. The official belief that the revelation happened in the past was always vulnerable to prophets who were ready to announce the real revelation that would usher in the endtime. Not by accident the term apocalypse took on connotations of violence. Hastening the endtime cannot be done without violence to those who resist.

The divine revelation and the divine speaking have never merged but neither of them can be done away with at this point of history. The only feasible strategy now is to decide which of them takes precedence. The Bible leaves no doubt about which comes first: "In the beginning God *said* let there be light." Seeing the light is important but it is second to speaking and listening. To the extent that the Christian gospels are rooted in a Hebraic way of thinking, the gospel has to be preached if the truth is to be known. Jesus

did not leave any written record (he wrote something in the sand). The gospel survived orally for decades before it was put into print. And then it was written in conversational Greek not literary Greek. Nietzsche, in commenting on the literary style of the fourth gospel, said that it was strange that when God wanted to write a book he learned Greek; and stranger still that he did not learn it better.

Throughout most of history Christianity has viewed itself as obviously superior to Judaism. The Christians took over all the best ideas of the Jews while bringing those ideas to fulfillment. Jewish religion became irrelevant or false. In the last half century there has been a beginning dialogue between the two religions. Christians have tried to find a way to soften their triumphalist claims to be the final religious truth. That has not worked as far as Jews are concerned. It is difficult to see how Christianity can avoid having a condescending attitude to the people who were waiting for a messiah and, according to Christianity, did not recognize him when he appeared.

The one possibility of having a mutual and cooperative relation is found in the writing of a medieval Jew named Judah ah-Levi and revived by one of the great writers of the twentieth century, Franz Rosenzweig. Both writers viewed Christianity as a tree that grew from the seed of Judaism and has cast its shadow across the whole world. Christianity, in Rosenzweig's words, is the "readying and preparation of the Messiah for whom we wait." Instead of history as Jewish promise and Christian fulfillment, history is the preparation for the revelation of a last age. Christianity is the missionary of God's speaking to all people as interpreted through Jewish and Christian traditions.

Could Christianity see itself that way? It requires that Christians stop referring to Jesus of Nazareth as the messiah. That is not as drastic as it may seem. Christians could continue to affirm Jesus as the Christ with the philosophical and theological connotations they have given to that term. "Messiah" is a Jewish term and the Jews have a right to say what the term means. Christians have claimed that the Jews did not recognize their own messiah and at the same time Christians say that he was an unexpected messiah. Christians could join Jews in expecting the messiah and working for the peace and justice of a messianic age. Other changes of language should and would follow. In the past century enlightened Christian scholars have tried to avoid the claim of Christianity's superseding Judaism by referring to the "Hebrew" scriptures instead of the Old Testament. But Hebrew scriptures/New Testament makes no logical sense and hides the problem. A proper contrast would be Jewish scriptures/Christian scriptures. Christians need the Jewish scriptures to understand the Christian scriptures.

Christians could distinguish between the process of speaking and listening as the primary way to past and present truth in contrast to a more transparent truth that is hoped for in the future ("Now we see through a glass darkly but then we will see face to face"). Jews could also accept revelation as a future possibility. The idea of revelation could finally be brought under control and separated from all the catastrophic violence associated with the end of history. Christians and Jews should be able to work for realistic progress based in faith and sustained by hope. There is no guarantee that the human race will not destroy itself but that surely is not the plan of a divine creator who pronounces all things as good and places them in the hands of the humans.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: A JEWISH READING

By Pinchas Lapide

Jesus preached: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.”

Hating one’s enemies, rejoicing in their misfortune, and repaying evil with evil are expressly forbidden in Judaism. Magnanimity and kindness toward an enemy are commanded. But love of enemy as a moral principle does seem to be tailored only for saints. Can we love those who hate us and do evil to us? Is that not a moral utopia? The answer, which can only be reached via a translation of Jesus’ words into Hebrew, is a clear no. Neither sympathy nor maudlin sentimentality are commanded here but simply and solely “doing” – one of the most common words in Jesus’ vocabulary. The commandment of love of neighbor that Jesus cites (Lev. 19:18) does not say “Love your neighbor” in the accusative but in the dative, a usage that in English can only be paraphrased: “show your neighbor loving acts,” or “take care of your neighbor.” In a word, “do good not harm to your neighbor.”

Because Jesus was neither a visionary nor a utopian but a worldly-wise observer of human nature, he did not demand superhuman selflessness or sentiments that would be over-demanding for any human heart, but practical demonstrations of love such as visiting the sick, giving alms in secret, supporting the needy, and all the thousand and one effective good deeds that create trust, demolish enmity, and promote love.

Because Jesus loved to preach in contrasting pairs and in rhetorical antitheses, the intensified “love your enemy” in the original Semitic wording must also have been formulated with the same dative – by no means a call to a Platonic love of enemy, much less to a hypocritical pretense of love, but to a reconciliation with one’s opponent aimed at a long-range rehabilitation. Love of one’s enemies, as Jesus understood it, entails an honest effort, a campaigning and struggling with them, so that they change, give up their hate, and become reconciled. The Nazarene did not see it as a question of an enthusiastic self-surrender, but rather as a mutual dismantling of hostility by a vigorous reconciliation benefitting the hater as well as the hated.

Jesus was no revolutionary in the usual sense, not even a Galilean gang leader. His statements against violence as a political method are too numerous for this to be seriously doubted. But one who can say, “I have not come to bring peace but the sword” (Matt. 10:34) and who advises his disciples to sell their cloaks “so that they can buy a sword” (Luke 22:36), is just as unlikely to be a pacifist. Of Jesus’ many reference to swords, none of which advocates folding one’s hands in resignation, one of them is outstanding for two reasons: because it is the only saying that is mentioned five times in the Gospels, and because something like it is also found in a Jewish tradition of that time: “Only the one who is prepared to carry the cross shall follow after me.”

Much later the church fathers spiritualized and defused this summons into an otherworldly appeal to personal salvation. What is signified when Jesus said it on earth

was much simpler, more challenging, and deadly in earnest. It was a well-intentioned warning to young hotheads in Galilee who wanted to join his movement in the flush of their enthusiasm. To them he said: whoever of you is not prepared to risk the possible consequences, the rebel's death on a Roman cross, stay home. It was the gruesome, brutal truth: thousands of Jews before Jesus, with Jesus, on both sides of Jesus, after Jesus, were put to death by crucifixion.

The later depoliticizing of Christianity split this world into two clearly distinct realms in order to defend the church from all defilement by worldly concerns, and in contradiction to Jesus and his scripture it succeeded in surrendering the earth, allowing it to become an arena for dictators. For the Jew Jesus, on the other hand, there was no cleft between body and spirit, between religion and politics, no bifurcation of competencies, but only *one* God and *one* dream of an all-encompassing heavenly realm.

Jesus of Nazareth, who in all the physical and spiritual characteristics of his humanity was totally a Jew, an arch-Jew, is never more Jewish than his opposition to subjugation, whether it be enslavement to the literal faith of the priestly caste or oppression by the brutal Roman authorities and their Jewish camp followers who exploited his people godlessly and shamelessly. But above all he was a threefold rebel of love, much more radical than revolutionaries of our day. He dared without weapons to protest against the cruel Roman domination; he opposed the high clergy of the Sadducees who assumed that they had a monopoly on God's love; and at the same time he raised an eloquent protest against the faintheartedness of many of his compatriots who would not credit the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with a salvation politics of liberation.

And yet Jesus was against naked armed force – neither out of unworldliness nor out of cowardice, but out of biblical farsightedness and realistic worldly experience. Between the quietism of the silent majority and fanaticism of the despairing minority, Jesus found another way which promised that “the meek will possess the land,” as both the Psalter and Instruction on the Mount foretell (Matt 5:5; Ps 38:11). Not with power nor with force, but by the Spirit of the Lord,” preached the prophet Zechariah (4:6). Jesus did not want it otherwise. Jesus' way relied neither on passiveness nor militancy but on a completely new course of human interaction that would invert all dominant relations and deprive them of power. “Whoever among you will be great should be your servant, and whoever among you would be the first should be the servant of all. (Mark 10:45).

The concluding sentence at the end of the series of antitheses: “You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48) appears to be incorrectly translated. An attempt to translate back into Aramaic produces a verbal form which unvocalized can be read either as “the perfect” or “repay.” The context as well as the structure of Jesus' argument lie closer to the second reading: “You should repay as your Father repays,” that is, evil with good, curse with blessing, enmity by forthcoming de-hostilization. This would also correspond better to the parallel Lukan passage: “Be merciful as your Father is merciful,” (Luke 6:36) as well as with various Rabbinic analogies. Thus, not only is the inexhaustible and gracious love of God held up for imitation, but at the same time there is also included the pedagogy of God, which aims at moving the sinner to insight and conversion through kindness.