

## 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.

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