

CHALLENGES FOR THEOLOGICAL TRAINING



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Having taught courses on religious responses to the Holocaust and on Christian-Jewish relations for a number of years now, it is my view that such courses must, above all, be self-critical. Considerable claims are made concerning the progress that has been made. However, are such claims justified? There is much talk about 'Jews' and 'Christians', but who is actually talking to whom about what in this context?

Often there is a preference for speaking of 'Jewish-Christian' rather than 'Christian-Jewish relations'. There are two reasons for this. First, to signal the sensitivity of Christian participants (in the past Christians have presumed to define Jews and Judaism from a Christian perspective, but today claim that this is no longer the case). Second, to indicate the primacy ascribed to Judaism and the Hebrew Bible (Christianity is, in some sense, seen as derivative and dependent on its Jewish roots for its own self-understanding). Yet, such linguistic humility is misleading. We are still often dealing with a Christian-driven agenda. As the Vatican Guidelines note, 'The problem of Jewish-Christian relations concerns the Church as such, since it is when she is "pondering her own mystery" that she encounters the mystery of Israel.' For Christians, the agenda is a theological one, motivated by the need to understand what it is to be Christian in the light of both the Holocaust and encounter with Jews and Judaism.

By contrast, many Jews insist that they have no such theological incentive: "Since Jews can understand their faith without reference to Christianity, there is no internal need to engage in theological discussion with Christians at all." (David Berger in *Essential Papers on Jewish-Christian Relations in the United States*, p. 330). Eliezer Berkovits goes further in simply stating "all we want of Christians is that they keep their hands off us and our children." Furthermore, he insists that "What is usually referred to as the 'Judeo-Christian tradition' exists only in Christian or secularist fantasy. As far as Jews are concerned, Judaism is fully sufficient. There is nothing in Christianity for them. Whatever in Christian teaching is acceptable to them is borrowed from Judaism." (*Faith after the Holocaust*, pp. 47, 44-5).

Given such statements, any course on Christian-Jewish relations needs to address the basic question of whether there is, in fact, anything theological for Christians and Jews to talk about. Or are

we dealing with something that is of concern only to Christians struggling with questions concerning the role their religious traditions played in paving the way for the Holocaust, and/or the lack of response to the Holocaust on the part of many Christians?

In this context, it is important to remember that we are not dealing with relations between Judaism and Christianity, but with a whole range of (often contradictory) Judaisms and Christianities. Any course should reflect an awareness of the multiple Jewish and Christian perspectives to be found both in the world today, and in the past. Yet, such diversity is rarely reflected in the way that Christian-Jewish relations is taught. Often the focus is limited to those individuals or institutions that believe dialogue and encounter is a valid, even necessary approach. Yet, we must also acknowledge that many Jews and Christians are either reluctant to engage in dialogue, or are consciously excluded from this process. It is all too easy to discuss Christian-Jewish relations as if dialogue is clearly a 'good thing' when, for many Jews and Christians, it is not at all self-evident that it is either possible or desirable. To illustrate this point one might ask how many evangelical Christians, committed to the centrality of mission and/or to the belief that "no one comes to the Father except by me" engage in dialogue? Likewise, ultra-Orthodox Jews are rarely, if ever, involved. Numerous Jews see no need for - or are reluctant to engage in - theological discussion. Many Orthodox Jews are reluctant to go beyond discussing social or practical issues common to both Jews and Christians. The former and now late Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Immanuel Jakobovits, gave voice to such reluctance when he insisted that "What we do not seek, at least within the Orthodox Jewish community, are theological dialogues in the narrow sense of subjecting each faith to the critical scrutiny of the other. Nor do we aspire to joint religious services, or to interfaith activities of a specifically religious nature, as a desired expression of mutual trust and respect." ('Jewish Understandings of Interfaith Encounter', *Christian-Jewish Relations*, pp. 15-6). Ironically, one area where there is consensus between many Jews and Christians lies in the exclusion of Messianic Jews. The existence of Jews who are self-professed Christians is clearly an embarrassment to many who advocate dialogue. Indeed, often the necessary precondition of dialogue or encounter is the implicit or explicit renunciation of mission on the part of the Christian partner; a precondition that can cause difficulties for many evangelical Christians

Teaching within a Department of Theology in a secular British university, it cannot be assumed that staff and students share a particular faith perspective, or indeed adhere to any faith at all. The course under discussion here, "Christian-Jewish Relations since 1945", is a single module - that is, ten two-hour sessions - for approximately twenty five second and third year undergraduates. Those taking the course are mainly students within the Department of Theology, with a small number from other departments, such as Drama or Philosophy taking the course as an ancillary subject. While most students taking the course have completed first year courses in "Christian Theology" and "Introduction

For Reflection

Do Jews and Christians have different reasons for wishing to engage in dialogue or encounter with each other? If so, is this likely to generate problems for Christian-Jewish dialogue?

Why is 1945 held to mark a turning point in Christian-Jewish relations? Is the Holocaust the sole reason for the changes that have occurred in Christian-Jewish relations in the past 50 years, or have other factors also had a bearing on attitudes?

Is there any need for Jews to develop a Jewish theology of Christianity?

What is meant when people refer to 'the Judeo-Christian tradition', Do you agree with Eliezer Berkovits that there is in fact no such thing?

to Judaism", this is not always the case. The majority of students on the course are practising Christians, or from Christian backgrounds, although a small number may be Jewish. The format of the class is a 60-minute presentation followed by a combination of discussion, small-group work, and the viewing of a video or slides. Assessment is twofold in order to give students the opportunity to engage with both specific texts and broader theoretical discussions, and consists of an essay and an analysis of one of a number of specific key Church statements.

The aim of the course is to enable students to identify and analyse the dominant issues and approaches in Christian-Jewish relations since 1945. There are three primary emphases:

(a) The evolution of Christian-Jewish relations since 1945, with particular emphasis on the changing attitudes of the Churches as embodied in official statements.

(b) Identification and analysis of recurrent questions and controversies, such as the relationship between Christian anti-Judaism and Nazi antisemitism, and attitudes to the State of Israel.

(c) Analysis of theological models employed to represent the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, e.g. supercessionism (which regards Christianity as the fulfilment or successor of Judaism), or the interpretation of Christianity as 'Judaism for Gentiles', or as a second covenant. As a model, is it more helpful to represent the relationship between Judaism and Christianity as that of a mother and daughter (Abraham Joshua Heschel), or elder and younger brothers (Rosemary Radford Ruether)? Alternatively, should rabbinic Judaism and Christianity be seen as distinctive strands simultaneously emerging from a variety of Second Temple Judaism(s)?

The course concludes with three lectures by guest speakers who have practical involvement in the field on 'The Future of Christian-Jewish Relations'. These sessions illustrate the variety of possible perspectives, encourage students to think about possible future developments, and provide an opportunity to engage directly with those actively involved in this area. Throughout the course, consideration is given to the question of whether 'official' dialogue and encounter have had any real impact upon the situation as it is 'on the ground'. As one possible example of such a contrast, the course explores current debates over the Christianization of the Holocaust, such as the Carmelite convent controversy, the canonization of Edith Stein, and the presence of Christian symbols at Auschwitz. Students are encouraged to consider the ways in which such controversies are represented on the internet and reported in the media. Does the frequency of such controversies illustrate the progress or the lack of progress made in Christian-Jewish relations since 1945?

Teachers in this area have a responsibility to their students to be clear. However, such clarity should not be achieved by misrepresenting what is actually happening. A course on Christian-Jewish relations since 1945 should reflect developments and, by all means, offer a critique of that situation, but never present this situation as more straightforward than it actually is.

For Further Reading

Secretariat for Ecumenical and Inter-religious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Catholics Remember the Holocaust*, United States Catholic Conference 1998.

Allan Brockway et al, *The Theology of the Churches and the Jewish People*, WCC Publications 1988.

Dan Cohn-Sherbok (ed.), *The Future of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue*, Edwin Mellen Press 1999.

Carol Rittner and John Roth (eds.), *Memory Offended: The Auschwitz Convent Controversy*, Praeger 1991.

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