



ICCI Bonn Conference 2017

Reforming, Rereading, Renewing:

Martin Luther and 500 Years of Tradition and Reform in Judaism and Christianity

Reformieren, interpretieren, revidieren:

Martin Luther und 500 Jahre Tradition und Reform in Judentum und Christentum

## **PLENARY SESSION**

WEDNESDAY, JULY 5, 2017 - "GUSTAV STRESEMANN INSTITUT", BONN

### **“Here I Stand, I Can Do No Other’ or ‘Yes, We Can’? – The Future of Jewish-Christian Relations”**

**By Jean-François Bensahel**

Is there something beyond the dialogue?

70 years ago, at Seelisberg, the dialogue between some Jews and some Christians started, officially and publicly. 50 years ago, the Second Vatican Council, with its *Nostra Aetate* Declaration, drew heavy and important conclusions regarding the spiritual relationship between the church and the synagogue, and the necessity of a common and fraternal discussion. Since then, John Paul II has recognized the State of Israel, gone to worship at the Kotel, considered Jews as elderly brothers in faith, whereas Benedict XVI has gone a step further, depicting Jews as beloved brothers in faith, and Pope Francis declared that in every Christian there is a Jew. It is all the more challenging that Christianity was built while forgetting its Jewish roots. The Popes, together with Protestant churches, and major Protestant statements, have thus opened the door for a revolution in Christian theology, faith, and behavior, indeed reconciling Christian worshippers with their Jewish sources.

Revisiting Paul's letters, they have chosen to come back to Paul's conviction that Christianity consists in turning people, turning nations, to God, the Father, the God revealed to Israel, through His Son. Hence understanding the Father as Jews did and do today has become central for Christians.

For the highest authorities in the Catholic church-- and it is the same for many Protestant authorities-- there is no doubt that Christians can no longer live their faith, understand the Gospels and Paul's letters, without meeting the Jewish people historically, but also the Jewish people today in its synagogues, and in Israel, as was the lesson of Pope John Paul II. This is true, and you here, and everywhere else, are vivid proof that this message has been heard.

But, globally, do bishops, priests, people in church know or accept that? Do they have the strength to live with this tremendous, fascinating but obviously terrifying, *aggiornamento*, and to reconnect not only with what Jesus wanted two thousand years ago, but with what He wants today, as Christians live with the conviction that Jesus is alive? Obviously and unfortunately not!

In fact, thanks to the direction given by the Popes and Protestant leaders, and also some Orthodox ones, Christians engaged in the dialogue should have grown more and more numerous, spread, and gotten

new followers. Did they? We all know this is not the case. Was then dialogue an intellectual pursuit to be shared only by intellectuals? What have Christian leaders missed?

And what about your Jewish counterparts? The situation is perhaps even sadder. For 50 years Jewish institutions have not listened, have not been aware of what was going on in the Christian world. Yet, in 2000, there has been a North American Jewish declaration, Dabru Emet, and in 2015, a French one for a new Jubilee of brotherhood, and then an international declaration from some Orthodox rabbis. But do Jews participate in Judeo-Christian friendship groups? Do to they have an interest for what is going on in the Church? Overwhelmingly, not. Of course, there are some major players. But the vast majority of Jews prefer to close their eyes and ears, while some do still consider Christians as idolaters.

We have indeed to reckon that the dialogue as it was envisioned decades ago has not really managed to reach its goals, or even to broadly convince the faithful. We have all done what we could honestly, but unsuccessfully.

Thus, time has come for a new phase in our relationship. We should consider that the dialogue phase acted as a seed; now we have to be bold enough to till the land. In my opinion, the new phase, which some may be entering reluctantly, encompasses the following necessary statements that target the heart of our beliefs, and shape what we have to tell each other, eye-to-eye.

- 1) Now that Christians at the highest levels have sincerely reconnected with their Jewish roots, now that they don't forget anymore that Jesus is for them the pathway to God, to the God of Israel, revealed to Israel, Jews can definitely tear into pieces their accusation of idolatry. But more than that, time has come for Jews to tell Christians the following: "Yes, we acknowledge you as brothers and sisters, and we're ready to acknowledge that you are part of the House of Israel. "

Indeed, Israel doesn't have a monopoly on the God of Israel, and we rabbinic Jews of modern times are not the sole owners of Israel's house.

This is how I read the parable of the Prodigal Son: he has wandered everywhere, experienced lots of new ideas, met lots of people, countries, cultures, given birth to great figures so close to God (Francis, Bernard, and so many others... who are all Saints), but also coped with politicians, committed slaughters and engaged in war and destruction, directly or indirectly, and then today became in our countries a minority or a tiny majority with a possible threat of ghettoization. Where does he stand today, the Prodigal Son? He is now returning to the house, and the house is the House of Israel. There is no doubt that being faithful to a living messiah, participating in the Eucharist, at least for Catholics and Orthodox Christians, does not at all make him a rabbinic Jew, as is his elder brother. Of course not. But Israel's house has lots of rooms, is wide enough to welcome and adopt all those who interpret the Torah with their own vision and understanding of the Revelation. Moreover, isn't it sheer honesty for us Jews to also acknowledge that in these great Christians (and we all here know lots of them today), messianic times are living intensely in their souls, in their bodies? Meeting with them has given Jews an insight, a perception of what messianic times will mean, when established on the whole earth, when violence will have left the heart of humans.

- 2) Grafting to Jewish roots has just started. We should not forget it. We should not underestimate that for centuries Christianity established itself while forgetting its Jewish roots. It is thus a beginning and a learning process for the churches, and it is necessary for them to trace and to track down this oblivion, and then to share it. It requires Christians to ask

what is the Church Jesus wanted, but also, if I understand Christianity correctly, what is the Church Jesus wants today. An application of that, is, in my opinion, the recent move of Pope Francis towards transforming Catholic opposition to divorce, going back to the letter of Jesus' opinion, which was really close to some of the rabbis of his time. Then, rooted in the Son of God, but also the son of Israel and master of the Torah, this will enable Christianity to design a new theology. I do really see no other possibilities for such a graft, for such a rooting, than to meet with living Jews, in their synagogues and in Israel.

This may seem odd for some. But wasn't this the case for centuries? When Chrysostom scolded his flock, it was because in 387 in Antioch, his Christians still went to the synagogue, celebrated Pessah and Sukkot and went to Shabbat services. And it lasted for centuries. We had to wait for the Lateran Council in 1215 that forbade Christians to eat with Jews, which proved, on the contrary, that they had been eating together.

Meeting with Jews should help Christians go a step beyond in their relationship with Jews and accept the following: Jews do not have to be converted to the faith in Jesus. If Jesus is the pathway to the Father, it is then not necessary for Jews, who already, and despite, sometimes, their weaknesses, faults, narrow mindedness, have direct access to the Father. Isn't the Bible, which Christians adhere to, the story of the relationship between God and the Jewish people? Thus the Vatican document from December 10<sup>th</sup> should have a new version that would make this position explicit. I of course understand that it will not be easy. But I really see no other solution for the Christian graft to Jewish roots.

On the other hand, if Christians are ready to visit us in our synagogues, then, are we, Jews, ready to welcome them warmly? For that, rabbinic Judaism will have to perform for itself a major *hiddush*, a major renewal.

- 3) We do have to remind ourselves that Judaism (rabbinic Judaism) and Christianity constituted themselves in the same movement. They fell into conversation for centuries, more often for the worst, trying to differentiate, to despise, to hate each other, to demonstrate that the other was wrong and made mistakes in its own understanding or left aside some of its major ideas and convictions. For instance, the Talmud has been written with the hypothesis that Jesus did not abide by the Torah. But we know now that this was not the case. Judaism laid a heavy emphasis on the belief that there was no intercessor between God and human beings. So, what about Exodus, Chapter 14, verse 31: "They believed in God and in Moses his servant"? Do we then have to blame Christianity for living its relationship with God through an intercessor? And, last, rabbinic Judaism, which has been obsessed with the preservation of the Jewish people, thus entailed no contacts with the pagan world. For rabbinic Judaism, the translation of the Bible into Greek, the cooperation with the Roman Empire and with Greco-Roman culture was a mistake. Hence the rejection, for instance, of philosophy! And, according to the Jewish tradition, Christianity is the heir of Rome. But the Jewish people have been preserved and have come back and settled in the land of the Promise, in Israel. And the millennial hope to see the Jewish people back in Jerusalem has been accomplished for 50 years.

The change in Christian theology, the clear understanding that Jesus is not the goal, but the pathway to God, the Father, the God of Israel, the God of mankind, that Jews don't need to follow this path, the wish of Christians to encounter Jews and give up all sign of anti-Judaism--all this will have a strong seismic effect on Judaism: it will indeed require a *hiddush*, as

rabbinic Judaism has been formed in many situations as a mirror image, as an opposing image to Christianity, built on derision and distrust, and vice-versa. But isn't this period over?

We are actually living in an extraordinary moment: we have the chance to give up all our quarrels and thus to have intimate access to the core of our respective beliefs. By chance, Judaism is constituted by many sources: e.g., the Talmud, and in Talmud, minority opinions were still recorded; the Midrash records sources besides rabbinic Judaism; decision-makers in the literature will provide us with religious resources helping us to design Judaism for future times, cleared, no longer limited by this long antagonism.

- 4) If dialogue has then to shift and lead to revisit our own theology, our own religion, then we, Jews, have also to widen the basis for mutual meetings. We Jews can no longer celebrate Sukkot without inviting Christians; they are our closest brothers and sisters; they are part of the House of Israel. We cannot celebrate Pessah without inviting Christians to the table. Jesus and the apostle celebrated it in their times. The practice of our liturgy, the content of our liturgy, will necessary evolve.
- 5) Then, lastly, sharing brotherhood as a unique moment in human history, hand in hand, Jews won't have to fear the Christian world anymore, and then will be ready to mobilize for the good on earth, as the Bible requires. And we will do it with Christians, who have been available to the world for long. This time, there will be no hidden agenda. For all the others, our mutual strength will be the strength of the example. Isn't it the best one? It will be obvious then that Christians and Jews are co-responsible for the world, that they bear a radical responsibility for the world, and that they are ready to welcome others, in this bridge of brotherhood?

"The world is a narrow bridge and the essence is not to be afraid" said Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav.

Yes, let's not be afraid.