



ICCJ Philadelphia Conference 2016



**“The Dynamics of Religious Pluralism in a Changing World:
The Philadelphia, United States and International Contexts”**

PLENARY SESSIONS

AN AFTERNOON OF DIALOGUE: NEW DOCUMENTS ON CHRISTIAN-JEWISH RELATIONS

MONDAY, JULY 11, 2016 - SAINT JOSEPH’S UNIVERSITY – DOYLE BANQUET HALL NORTH

Authors’ Roundtable:

2. French Jewish Community,

“Declaration for the Upcoming Jubilee of Brotherhood: A New Jewish View of Jewish-Christian Relations”

Jean-François Bensahel

(President of Paris Copernic Synagogue)

Dear Friends,

As everyone here knows, most Christian and Jewish relationships only stem from personal meetings and links. In my case, mine started from some good fortune when I met Professor Olivier Clement, a professor of history and geography when I was 16. As I was to find out by getting to know him, he was, in his time, probably the greatest Christian Orthodox theologian in France. Through attending his courses in theology, I was introduced to a deeper understanding of Christianity and at the same time he showed great interest in Judaism and was very respectful of Jewish roots and practices. Also, later on, I had the opportunity to follow courses of biblical history led by Father Kowalski at the Paris Catholic cathedral school, which is, in fact, one of the best places in France to discover the Bible.

With both teachers, from the outset, neither of them ever showed any intentions – even hidden – to try to convert me to Christianity. On the contrary, the bar was raised extremely high as they had high expectations from me as a representative of the Jewish people. Obviously too high!

From that time on, I always had a strong interest in Christianity, and gained a reasonable knowledge from debates and arguments on the subject, with of course a special interest in Christian and Jewish issues.

I unfortunately discovered that in France, Jews, even Reform Jews, had little or no understanding of the theological revolution that the Catholic Church, after Protestants and others, had undertaken since Vatican II, since Pope John Paul II's visits to the synagogue of Mainz and to Jerusalem and after Pope Benedict XVI's, and now Pope Francis' strong declarations and visits to synagogues and to Jerusalem.



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For Jews in France these events are generally unknown, and trapped in a sort of mist. At best, Jewish people, with the exception of a few, are convinced that if the Catholic Church has indeed ventured to make these visits, it is not seen as being totally sincere, and viewed only as if by some weakness the Church launched this new era!

I felt that this is a crying injustice. And it truly is. I’ve lost count on how many times people have come up to me and said: “How can a guy clever like you (obviously another mistake), believe in such nonsense”!

So, this prompted me to take advantage of the jubilee of *Nostra Aetate* and to publicly hold out a hand to the Christian community to express a new vision for the future of Christian and Jewish relations, but from a Jewish perspective. In the recent past, in France, it has mainly been a one-way relationship but the time had come to turn this into a two way conversation. So, I gathered a group of Jewish colleagues (that were already involved in the subject matter) consisting of myself and four others. They included two members from the Jewish Orthodox movement, Raphy Marciano and Franklin Rausky; a rabbi from the Conservative community, the winner of the Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France prize, Rivon Krygier; and an orthodox rabbi who became rabbi of the reform Copernic synagogue, Philippe Haddad.

I suggested we produce a Declaration for the Upcoming Jubilee of Brotherhood that could encompass a strong Jewish Statement for our shared future of brotherhood. We wanted, as Jewish leaders, to acknowledge the theological revolution accomplished by the Catholic Church, and to warmly welcome it. But more so, we wanted this event to be the start of an era of brotherhood between Christians and Jews that would benefit us both, that would also be good for the world, and that would serve as a model for the future relationships between all other religions and spiritual convictions. Indeed, we are convinced that this specific brotherhood could pave the way towards the universal brotherhood and worship of the One and Unique God our scriptures embody.

We wanted this document to be accepted as broadly as possible by French Jewish stakeholders, and, especially, the French chief rabbi, and his orthodox colleagues. Moreover, it was to be a Declaration we would expect the French chief rabbi, Haïm Korsia, to hand over to the Archbishop and Cardinal of Paris, André Vingt-Trois, to the President of the French Protestant Federation, François Clavairoly, and to the Orthodox Archbishop, Adamakis Emmanuel, President of the Assembly of the orthodox bishops in France.

Sadly, one of the difficulties that we could not overcome when preparing the document, was that, to be accepted by a large orthodox public in France, we could not write down the word Christ, without being criticized.

But there was one word that I proposed to be included and which I viewed essential in our Declaration: it’s the word “synergy”, and it was used in the following sentence: We, Jews, have “to welcome Christianity as the religion of our brothers and sisters in synergy with Judaism”. Synergy means an active and dynamic cooperation. It means that we do not walk along separately, but our ways, though clearly different and distinctive, are actively complementary and convergent towards the same horizon for mankind, that of universal brotherhood gathered around the One and Only God.



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This for me was a “deal breaker”. The use of the word “synergy” in the text was essential and I devoted all my energy for its inclusion as I am totally convinced that if we are able to accept it, then the “World to Come” is closer than ever before. It indeed amounts to the recognition that none of us can claim a monopoly of Truth, and that we need to walk together hand-in-hand to create and deliver this hope of universal non-violence and love. Are Jews and Christians ready to accept it? Are we ready to accept that we can love each other, and love each other for what we are? We believe the time has come to accept it, for each of us, and for the salvation of the world we daily pray for.