

Coming to Terms with Christianity

Pope Benedict XVI's visit to Israel this past May is not likely to be remembered as a landmark event. Nor is it likely to be viewed as a turning point in the history of Jewish-Catholic relations. Sadly, however, it *will* be remembered as a decidedly less-than-pleasant affair. To be sure, feelings were tense from the outset, with Israeli politicians on both the right and the left openly expressing their dissatisfaction at the pope's impending visit; Knesset Speaker Reuven Rivlin went so far as to boycott the official welcoming ceremony at Ben-Gurion Airport. The pope's much-anticipated speech at Yad Vashem, Israel's national Holocaust memorial, hardly improved matters, at least for those who sought an express apology for the Holocaust (and didn't get one). Indeed, the atmosphere surrounding the pope's presence became so bitter that Vatican spokesman Federico Lombardi was forced to convene a press conference in Jerusalem to cool tempers on both sides. "There is not always a willingness to understand well," he noted with obvious frustration. "Sometimes there are prejudices, and not everyone is open to an attitude of readiness to listen."

Of course, the discomfort felt by many Israeli Jews during the pope's visit was not unjustified. In recent months, already strained relations between the Vatican and the Jewish world were exacerbated by several developments: Pope Benedict's lifting of the excommunication of Bishop Richard Williamson, an antisemitic Holocaust denier; his public endorsement of the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, which was boycotted by both Israel and the United States on account of its virulent anti-Zionist slant; his decision to allow for the wider use of the Tridentine Mass, which expresses the hope that

the Jews will convert to Christianity; and his personal history as a member of Hitler Youth and the Wehrmacht, albeit as an unwilling conscript. In Israel, a country already beset by bitter collective memories of Christian persecution, all of this could not help but incur suspicion and resentment toward the man who wished to bring a message of peace to the Holy Land.

What was overlooked amidst all this animosity and mistrust, however, is the fact that Benedict XVI—the former Joseph Ratzinger—is actually one of the best friends the Jewish people has ever had in Vatican City. On the eve of the pope’s visit, Aviad Kleinberg, a scholar of Christian history and a columnist for the Israeli daily *Yediot Aharonot*, attempted to remind his readers of this. Ratzinger, he explained,

was the confidant of Pope John Paul II, and his immense theological authority was a critical aspect of the previous pope’s moves.... John Paul and Ratzinger buried once and for all not only the accusation of the Jews’ murdering the messiah, but the entire theological theory that the Christians replaced the Jews and are now the Chosen People and that the New Testament annuls the Old Testament. The Old Testament is still valid, declared the two, and the Jewish people is still God’s chosen and beloved people.

A few days later, in reaction to what he called an “embarrassing demonstration of tactless and boorish behavior” toward the pope, Kleinberg wrote, “It is particularly obtuse of us to demand of others what we would never demand of ourselves. Try suggesting to any of our rabbis that they should declare what John Paul II and Benedict XVI have declared. For example, that Christians are our young and beloved brethren and that their covenant with the Lord is also intact—‘Excuse me?’ you say. ‘Did we understand you correctly? Give us a break!’”

Indeed, while Catholic leaders of recent times have repeatedly expressed sorrow and even remorse for hundreds of years of antisemitism, the Jewish world has not yet shown a comparable willingness to reconsider its own perception of Christianity. No one, of course, has demanded this of Judaism, for understandable reasons. Ever since Christianity became the

official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century C.E., it was the Jews, the so-called Christ-killers, who were persecuted by the Church, and not the other way around. Today, however, circumstances demand that all established religions reexamine their traditional attitudes toward each other. Christianity, in all of its various denominations, has generally risen to the occasion. Judaism, for its part, has not.

The intensity of Judaism's traditional antagonism toward Christianity cannot be overstated. Throughout their history, Jews have preferred torture, death, and even mass suicide to forced conversion to the Christian faith. This enmity toward Christianity even found its way into Jewish liturgy: Recited by observant Jews three times a day, *Birkat Haminim*, "the Blessing Against the Heretics," was originally written as a prayer for the downfall of Christians and all apostates. Though the blessing has been revised over time—primarily out of fear of non-Jewish reprisal—its spirit of rage has outlived any textual modification.

Jewish acrimony toward Christianity was not solely a reaction to the persecution suffered by the Jewish people under Christian rule, however. It also has a lot to do with the fact that, almost from its inception, the Church claimed to be Judaism's replacement, the new (and universal) "Israel of the spirit" that superseded the old "Israel of the flesh." The Israeli philosopher and Orthodox Jew Yeshayahu Leibowitz, known for his sharp tongue and blunt style, repeatedly stressed this point in his writings. "Christianity... is nothing but the denial of the right of Judaism to exist," he maintained. "The relationship of Christianity to Judaism is unlike that of other religions or faiths, whether pagan or Islamic, which deny the Torah of Israel and would nullify it. Christianity does neither, but claims that *it* is Judaism and there is no Judaism apart from it." Therefore, asserted Leibowitz, Judaism feels nothing but "repugnance" toward Christianity: "This feeling is an integral aspect of the living Jewish awareness and is very different from the Jewish attitude to other forms of worship of strange gods,

and, needless to say, to Islam.” Alas, lamented Leibowitz sarcastically, the deep-seated Jewish hatred of Christianity “has ceased to exist among those Jews who rejoice at the absolution of Judaism by the Vatican Church Council and attribute importance to its statement concerning the ‘guilt of the Jews.’ [This hatred] is hardly characteristic of modern Reform Judaism in the United States and is completely absent from the secular State of Israel.”

Harsh words, and, for the most part, quite wrong. In contrast to the impression one might get from Leibowitz’s polemics, the truth is that even among Orthodox Jews, notable figures have disapproved of Jewish contempt for Christianity. Rabbi Yehiel Yaakov Weinberg, for instance, a leading *posek* (“decisor” of Jewish law) of the twentieth century, held an opinion diametrically opposed to that of Leibowitz. Indeed, in a 1965 letter, Weinberg went so far as to condemn halachic rulings that, in his view, conveyed an inappropriate, condescending, or disparaging attitude toward Christians:

In my opinion, it is fitting to put an end to the mutual hatred between the religions. More than Christianity hates Judaism, Judaism hates Christianity. There is a dispute if the Torah forbids stealing from Gentiles, and everyone holds that deceiving a Gentile and breaking a pledge made to him is permitted.... According to Maimonides, if a Jew has sexual relations with a Gentile [woman], the Gentile should be killed, because she has driven the Jew to sin. This law treats the Gentiles the same way it treats animals. [But] Maimonides arrived at this ruling on his own. It has no basis in the Babylonian or Jerusalem Talmud. *We must solemnly and formally declare that in our day this does not apply.* (Emphasis in original.)

As a Holocaust survivor, Weinberg had experienced firsthand the atrocities of antisemitism. Nevertheless, he courageously rejected expressions of extreme animosity toward Gentiles. Crucially, he did so without forsaking the tradition of his forefathers and without appearing to grovel before the Church. Instead, he understood that Judaism has to purge itself of its accumulated resentment of Christianity—and that it must do so in an earnest and public manner.

Weinberg, a progressive figure by all accounts, may have been prone to modern sensitivities. The fact of the matter, however, is that conciliatory statements about the Christian faith had been voiced by important Jewish leaders in earlier times, when the concepts of tolerance and pluralism were far from common. One of the most prominent of these leaders was Rabbenu Tam. This distinguished twelfth-century rabbi almost lost his life in the anti-Jewish riots that accompanied the Second Crusade, and he witnessed firsthand the destruction of the French Jewish community of Blois at the hands of a bloodthirsty mob. Despite these grim experiences, Rabbenu Tam rejected the claim—whose most renowned exponent was the great theologian Maimonides—that Christianity is a form of idolatry. In accordance with this stance, he did not forbid Jews to form business relationships with Christians. Other Jewish decisors were concerned lest a Gentile invoke the name of his god when entering into a contract, and the Jewish partner would thus be guilty of participating in an idolatrous act. Rabbenu Tam, by contrast, ruled that a Christian oath is not problematic, because “in the present times, they all take oaths in the name of their saints, but do not view them as deities. Although they mention God’s name along with the others, they have a different intention in mind, so that, in any case, *their oaths do not involve idolatry, as they too have the Creator in mind.*” (Emphasis mine.)

The assertion that the Christians have the “Creator” in mind—i.e., the same God in whom the Jews believe—and that, therefore, a common denominator unites both religions, can also be found in the writings of Rabbi Moshe Ravkash, a leading seventeenth-century *posek*. In his halachic treatise, *Be’er Hagola* (“The Well of the Exile”), Ravkash criticized the analogy, popular among Jews of his time, between the biblical Egyptians who afflicted the People of Israel and Europe’s Christians:

The Gentile nations under whom we, the Israelite nation, take refuge, and among whom we are scattered, believe in the creation of the world and in the exodus from Egypt and in the pillars of religion, and they are devoted to the Creator of the heavens and the earth. . . . Not only is there no prohibition against saving them, but we are even required to pray for their well-being.

Possibly the most favorable Jewish statements on the Christian faith were made by Rabbi Jacob Emden in the eighteenth century. One of the most esteemed Jewish thinkers of his generation, Emden was not content simply to point to those beliefs that Judaism and Christianity held in common. He also extolled Jesus as a great spiritual figure worthy of the Jewish people's deepest appreciation. Emden believed that Jesus and his disciples never intended to convert the Jews or to abolish the Torah's commandments. Instead, they took it upon themselves to spread a universal moral code among the nations of the world and to purge humanity of idolatry:

But truly even according to the writers of the Gospels, a Jew is not permitted to leave his Torah.... We see clearly here that the Nazarene and his Apostles did not wish to destroy the Torah from Israel, God forbid.... The writers of the Gospels never meant to say that the Nazarene came to abolish Judaism, but only that he came to establish a religion for the Gentiles from that time onward. Nor was it new, but actually ancient; they being the Seven Commandments of the Sons of Noah, which were forgotten. The Apostles of the Nazarene then established them anew. However, those born as Jews, or circumcised as converts to Judaism... are obligated to observe all commandments of the Torah without exception.... It is therefore a habitual saying of mine... that the Nazarene brought about a double kindness in the world. On the one hand, he strengthened the Torah of Moses majestically, as mentioned earlier, and not one of our sages spoke out more emphatically concerning the immutability of the Torah. And on the other hand, he did much good for the Gentiles... by doing away with idolatry and removing the images from their midst. He obligated them with the Seven Commandments so that they should not be as the beasts of the field. He also bestowed upon them ethical ways, and in this respect he was much more stringent with them than the Torah of Moses, as is well-known.

One might take issue with Rabbi Emden's theological interpretations, but his main argument cannot be discounted. As Emden rightly points out, Christianity instituted a system of beliefs and values that greatly advanced human morality, bringing it closer to the ideal espoused by Judaism. In its

own way—and on a much wider scale—Christianity carried on the campaign against paganism that the early Hebraic religion had begun. It fought against the same abominations that the Jewish Bible condemns: ecstatic fertility rites, human sacrifice, and other licentious practices. Moreover, wherever Christianity established itself, it advocated a tradition rooted in Judaism, praising what Nietzsche, the Church's sworn enemy, called "the grand style in morality, the fearfulness and majesty of infinite demands, of infinite significations, the whole Romanticism and sublimity of moral questionableness."

Indeed, even the harshest Jewish critics of Christianity have been hard put to discredit its enormous cultural and spiritual contribution to the world. Maimonides admitted as much when he said that the Christian faith "paves" the way for the coming of the Messiah, because it will "prepare the whole world to serve God with one accord." Ultimately, this acknowledgment that Judaism and Christianity (as well as Islam) share the same fundamental goals may permit us to hope that both religions' mission to improve the world might also hold the key to repairing the damaged relationship between them.

There is an old Yiddish joke in which a Christian priest attempts to convince a Jew to convert by saying, "I will give you a hundred gold pieces if you agree to believe in three things: that Jesus was born of a woman, but of Immaculate Conception; that Jesus gave five thousand men five loaves of bread and two fish, and they all ate to their hearts' content; and that Jesus died on the cross, but rose from his grave three days later and lived."

The Jew pauses to think and then says, "You are asking a lot of me. I don't think I can do this myself. Allow me to bring a partner."

The priest consents, and the following day the Jewish man returns with his Christian neighbor. "Your holiness," he says, "please hand over the hundred gold pieces you promised me."

“So you believe?” asks the priest.

“Together, my partner and I each believe our share,” the Jew replies. “I believe Jesus was born of a woman, and my partner believes in the Immaculate Conception; I believe Jesus gave five thousand men five loaves of bread and two fish, and my partner believes they all ate to their hearts’ content; I believe Jesus died on the cross, and my partner believes he was resurrected three days later and lived.”

In its own lighthearted way, this joke conveys the deep theological divide separating Judaism and Christianity. Insofar as Jews wish to remain Jewish, they cannot accept many of the basic tenets of the Christian faith: They must reject incarnation, because they believe there is an infinite, unbridgeable, and ontological gap between the Creator and his creation; they must reject the Trinity, because it contradicts the Jewish belief in God’s unity; they cannot recognize Jesus as the Messiah, because Jewish tradition holds that the redeemer will not be a divine and suffering victim, but an earthly champion who will lead his people to victory; they cannot believe that God superseded his covenant with the Jews through a new covenant with all of the world’s nations; and finally, they cannot consent to the Apostle Paul’s claim that Jewish law has been rendered obsolete by the Grace of Christ.

Despite these considerable differences, Christianity and Judaism also have a great deal in common. They both draw their inspiration from the Jewish Bible and the historical narrative it relates; they both believe in God’s providence and benevolence, which guides humanity toward peace and prosperity; and, perhaps most important, they both espouse *absolute values*. These values, they insist, constitute the moral order according to which all men should live. These shared beliefs—usually referred to as the Judeo-Christian tradition—have served as the foundation of Western civilization ever since the Middle Ages.

More than anything else, however, Christianity and Judaism are united by the threats facing them and the world they wish to construct. Today, both religions are on the same front of an all-out war that radical Islam has

declared on the West and its values. This confrontation has been forced upon the two faiths against their present inclination. Over hundreds of years, Judaism and Christianity have had to accept a degree of religious tolerance. For Judaism, this resulted from political weakness and the constraints of a life in exile under the auspices of non-Jewish nations. For Christianity, the turning point was the religious wars that threatened to tear Europe apart. Islam, by contrast, did not undergo a similar process, and has thus not internalized the mostly pragmatic need to tolerate the existence of other cultures and allow them to live in accordance with their own religious beliefs. Consequently, Islamists have declared a war whose ultimate goal is the subjection of all infidels and the imposition of the rule of Islam over the entire world. This terrorist campaign has placed Christians and Jews in the same camp, fighting side by side in order to defend their cultural and political heritage. One can only hope that moderate Islam, which does not cultivate such violent religious hatred, will join forces with Christianity and Judaism and take a stand against the murderous jihad waged by the likes of al-Qaida, the Taliban, Hamas, and Hezbollah.

But no less, and indeed perhaps more, dangerous than religious terrorism is the spiritual barrenness that has come to define much of contemporary Western culture. Modern life is blessed with unparalleled wealth, diversity, and creative energy, but it is also cursed with confusion, boredom, and lethargy. Moreover, the tremendous technological power humanity now commands makes today's nihilism especially threatening: The vast disparity between this power to enact dramatic changes in both our surroundings and ourselves, on the one hand, and the ethical judgment exercised by those who wield it on the other, should concern anyone who believes that humanity bears a special responsibility towards creation. It should concern anyone who recognizes that this responsibility stems from the *humility* expected of man once he comprehends that he is not, after all, the measure of all things.

Clearly, the burden of contending with these threats to our shared values and beliefs does not fall solely on the shoulders of people of faith.

Many nonbelievers actively take part in this endeavor, motivated by both a genuine ethical concern and a profound sense of moral responsibility. There can be no doubting, however, that the great religions have at their disposal immense ideological resources that modern secularism is simply unable to command. They can summon a self-conviction and determination forged over hundreds, even thousands of years of enduring spiritual tests. There is simply no substitute for the kind of experience and resolve they bring to the contemporary struggle over the fate of mankind.

The challenges we face, now and in the future, require both Jews and Christians to set aside their theological differences, even ones that are ultimately irreconcilable. Reality demands that we try to forge unity wherever possible. This, of course, will not be easy. Removing old barriers and eliminating old grudges will require an active, arduous effort. Christianity must realize that the vast majority of Jews will never abandon their religion and traditions and accept Jesus as their lord and savior. Judaism, for its sake, must let go of its historical bitterness, and stop demanding public expressions of Christian remorse at every turn. It must learn to see the great religion to which it gave birth as a partner and an ally, one deserving of our appreciation and respect.