



The Jewish-Christian Relationship and the Middle East

Rabbi David Rosen | 30.11.2010

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Your Holiness, Eminences, Excellencies, Reverend and distinguished ladies and gentlemen, allow me to fraternally greet you with the blessing of peace -shalom aleichem, asalaamu aleikum, pax vobis.

I am profoundly honored by the invitation extended to me by his Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to address this esteemed Synod.

The relationship today between Christianity and the Jewish people is a blessed transformation in our times - arguably without historic parallel. In his words in the great synagogue here in Rome last January, H.H. Pope Benedict XVI referred to the teaching of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council as "a clear landmark to which constant reference is made in our attitude and our relations with the Jewish people, marking a new and significant stage."

Naturally this striking sea change in the way the Jewish people is viewed and presented, still had and has to contend with the influence of centuries, if not millennia of the "teaching of contempt" towards Jews and Judaism, which obviously is not eliminated overnight nor even over forty five years. Accordingly the impact of this transformation in Catholic-Jewish relations varies considerably from one context to another. Arguably the most dramatic internalization has taken place in the United States of America where Jews and Christians live in an open society side by side as vibrant self-confident and civically engaged minorities. As a result the relationship has advanced there to a unique degree involving cooperation and exchanges between the communities and their educational institutions; and today the US boasts literally dozens of academic institutions for Catholic-Jewish studies and relations, while there are perhaps three in the rest of the world. Indeed there is a widespread perception among the Jewish communities in the US of the Catholic Church as a genuine friend with profound values and interests in common.

It is my privilege to head the international interfaith representation of the American Jewish Committee, which has been and continues to be the leading Jewish organization in this remarkable and historic transformation.

However there are many countries where the abovementioned social and demographic factors are not present. In most countries where Catholicism is the dominant social force, Jewish communities are small if present at all, and the relationship between the Church and Judaism often gets little notice. I confess to having been surprised to find Catholic clergy and sometimes even hierarchy from some countries, who are not only remarkably ignorant about Judaism, but often even about *Nostra Aetate* itself and the relevant teachings of the Magisterium concerning Jews and Judaism.

While as indicated, Jewish experience in the US has done much to alleviate negative impressions of the tragic past; there is still widespread ignorance about Christianity in the Jewish world - especially where there is little or no contact at all with modern Christians.

In the only polity in the world where Jews are a majority, the State of Israel, this problem is further compounded by the political and sociological context. In the Middle East, as in most parts of the world, communities tend to live in their own linguistic, cultural and confessional settings, and Israel is no exception. Moreover Christian Arabs in Israel are a minority within a minority - approximately 120,000 among an Arab citizenry of around a million and a half which is overwhelmingly Muslim and

which constitutes some twenty per cent of the Israeli citizenry as a whole. It is true that Christian Arab Israelis are a particularly successful religious minority in many respects. Their socio-economic and educational standards are well above average; their schools receive the highest grades in annual matriculation examinations; many of them have been politically prominent; and they have been able to derive much benefit from the democratic system of which they are an integral part. However the daily life of the vast majority of Arabs and Jews takes place in their own respective contexts. As a result, most Jewish Israelis do not meet contemporary Christians; and even when they travel abroad, they tend to meet non-Jews as such - not as modern Christians. Accordingly, until recently most of Israeli society has been quite unaware of the profound changes in Catholic-Jewish relations. However this situation has begun to alter significantly in the last decade for different reasons, but two in particular are especially noteworthy.

The first is the impact of the visit of the late Pope John Paul II in the year 2000, following the establishment of full bilateral relations between Israel, and the Holy See six years earlier. While the latter had already had some effect on perceptions in Israel, it was the power of the visual images, the significance of which Pope John Paul II understood so well, that revealed clearly to the majority of Israeli society the transformation that had taken place in Christian attitudes and teaching towards the Jewish People with whom the Pope himself had maintained and further sought mutual friendship and respect. For Israelis to see the Pope at the Western Wall, the remnant of the Second Temple, standing there in respect for Jewish tradition and placing there the text that he had composed for a liturgy of forgiveness that he had held two weeks earlier here at St. Peter's, asking Divine forgiveness for sins committed against the Jews down the ages, was stunning and overwhelming in its effect. Israeli Jewry still has a long way to go in overcoming the negative past, but there is no question that attitudes have changed since that historic visit. In addition, it led to the remarkable new avenue for dialogue understanding and collaboration in the form of the bilateral commission of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with Jewry, established at John Paul II's initiative and praised extensively by Pope Benedict XVI during his pilgrimage to the Holy Land last year and also in his words at the great synagogue here in Rome earlier this year.

The other major factor is the influx of other Christians who have doubled the demographic make-up of Christianity in Israel. I refer first of all to the estimated approximately fifty thousand practicing Christians who were part and parcel of the immigration to Israel in the last two decades from the former Soviet Union.

As integrally connected at the same time to Jewish society through familial and cultural ties, they arguably represent the first Christian minority that sees itself at the same time as part and parcel of a Jewish majority since the very first Christian community.

These Christians, as the Arab Christian communities, are Israeli citizens who enjoy full franchise and equality before the law.

However there is a third significant Christian population in Israel, namely the scores of thousands of practicing Christians among almost a quarter of a million of migrant workers - from the Phillipines, Eastern Europe, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa. Most of them are in the country legally and temporarily, although close to half of them have entered or remained illegally. Nevertheless the substantial Christian presence among this population maintains a vibrant religious life and constitutes a significant third dimension to the Christian reality in Israel today.

These factors have contributed, among others, to an increasing familiarity in Israel with contemporary Christianity.

In addition, while there are an estimated two hundred or so Israeli organizations promoting Arab-Jewish understanding and cooperation generally, there are also literally dozens of bodies promoting interreligious encounter, dialogue and studies, and the Christian presence in these is most prominent

and significant. This of course is substantially due to the presence of Christian institutions and their clergy, scholars, international representatives of churches and so on, who contribute totally out of proportion to their numbers to these efforts especially in the field of scholarship.

Moreover the fact that in the State of Israel, Christians, as Muslims, are minorities with a need to be accepted and understood by the Jewish majority, also serves as impetus for interfaith engagement (as opposed to elsewhere, where the contrary may often be the case.)

Christians in Israel are obviously in a very different situation from their sister communities in the Holy Land who are part and parcel of a Palestinian society struggling for its independence and who are inevitably caught up in the Israeli- Palestinian conflict on a daily basis. Indeed the location of some of these communities on the intersection between Israeli and Palestinian jurisdiction means that they often bear the brunt of security measures which the Jewish State has been obliged to take in order to protect its own citizenry against continuous violence from within the Palestinian territories especially after the carnage in Israeli cities during the second intifada. It is only natural that Palestinian Christians should express their distress and their hopes regarding the situation. However, regrettably such expressions have not always been in consonance with the letter and spirit of the Magisterium concerning the relationship to Jews and Judaism. This would seem to be reflected in a wider geographical context, where the impact of the Arab-Israeli conflict has all too often meant a discomfort for many Arab Christians with the Church's rediscovery of its Jewish roots and sometimes even a preference for historical prejudice.

Nevertheless the plight of Palestinians generally and Palestinian Christians in particular should be of profound concern to Jews both in Israel and the Diaspora.

To begin with, especially as Judaism brought to the world the recognition that every human person is created in the Divine Image; and that accordingly, as the sages of the Talmud teach, any action of disrespect for another person, is an act of disrespect for the Creator himself; we have a special responsibility for our immediate neighbors.

This responsibility is even greater when suffering is born out of a conflict of which we are a part and paradoxically precisely where we have the moral and religious duty to protect and defend ourselves. For me personally as an Israeli Jerusalemite, the suffering of so many on both sides of the political divide in our land, is a source of much pain; even as I fully realize that it is used and abused to heighten various tensions that go well beyond the geographical context of the conflict itself. Yet I give thanks to God for the remarkable amount of organizations in our society working to alleviate as much suffering as possible in this very difficult context. I am proud to be a founder of one of these organizations, Rabbis for Human Rights, whose director and members, precisely as loyal Israeli citizens, continue to struggle to preserve and advance the human dignity of all and especially of the vulnerable.

While ongoing threats from those openly committed to the destruction and extermination of Israel demand the necessary steps to protect our society; we must still strive to do all we can to alleviate the hardships of the situation and especially as they pertain to the Christian communities in Jerusalem and environs.

In fact in recent months there has been a notable improvement in conditions, for example regarding the free movement of clergy, and there have also been recent indications that there is a growing understanding of the needs of the local Christian communities by the authorities, notwithstanding the security challenges. We continue to advocate for such, believing it to be ultimately in the interests of all.

Indeed Jewish responsibility to ensure that Christian communities flourish in our midst, respecting the very fact that the Holy Land is the land of Christianity's birth and holy places, is strengthened by our increasingly rediscovered fraternity. Yet even beyond our particular relationship, Christians as a minority in both Jewish and Muslim contexts, play a very special role for our societies at large. The situation of minorities is always a profound reflection of the social and moral condition of a society as

a whole. The wellbeing of Christian communities in the Middle East is nothing less than a kind of barometer of the moral condition of our countries. The degree to which Christians enjoy civil and religious rights and liberties, testifies to the health or infirmity of the respective societies in the Middle East.

Moreover as I have already indicated, Christians play a disproportionate role in promoting interreligious understanding and cooperation in the country. Indeed I would presume to suggest that this is precisely the Christian *métier*, to contribute to overcoming the prejudice and misunderstanding that bedevil the Holy Land and which of course are greatly reinforced in the region at large. While it is not fair to expect the small local Christian communities to be capable of bearing such responsibility alone; perhaps we may hope that supported in such an effort by their universal Church and its central authority, they may indeed be blessed peacemakers in the city whose name means peace and which has such significance for our respective communities.

Already an initial sign of this has been evident in the local Catholic leadership role in the establishment in recent years of the Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, which brings together the Chief Rabbinate of Israel; the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Courts of the Palestinian Authority; and the Patriarchates and Bishopsrics of the Holy Land. This Council not only facilitates communication between the various religious authorities; but it is also committed and working to combat misunderstanding, bigotry and incitement; and also seeks to be a force for reconciliation and peace, so that two nations and three religions may live in the land in full dignity, freedom and tranquility.

The Instrumentum Laboris of this Special Assembly for the Middle East quotes Pope Benedict XVI in his interview with *Osservatore Romano* on his way to the Holy Land that "it is important on the one hand to have bilateral dialogues- with the Jews and with Islam- and then also trilateral dialogue" (sect.96). Indeed this last year, for the first time, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Relations and the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews co-hosted together with the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC) and the foundation for the Three Cultures in Seville Spain, our first trilateral dialogue.

This was a particular joy for me as the proposal for this was put forward during my chairmanship of IJCIC and I earnestly hope that this is just the beginning of more extensive trilateral dialogue, to overcome suspicion, prejudice and misunderstanding, so that we may be able to highlight the shared values in the family of Abraham for the wellbeing of all humanity.

It appears to me that the aforementioned bilateral commission with the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Council of the Religious Institutions of the Holy Land, together offer even greater opportunity and challenge in this regard.

The Instrumentum Laboris also provides important insights into the nature of relations for Christians with both Muslims and Jews. It quotes Pope Benedict XVI's words in Cologne in August 2005 when he described relations with Islam as "a vital necessity....on which in large measure our future depends" (sect.95). Indeed in the Middle East this is a truism. Whether the concept of *dar el Islam* is understood in just a geographical/cultural context or in a theological one, the critical question for the future of our respective communities is whether or not our Muslim brethren can see the Christian and Jewish presence as fully legitimate and integral parts of the region as a whole. Truly the need to address this issue is nothing less than "a vital necessity...on which...our future depends". Indeed this relates to the issue that is at the "root" of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Those that claim that "occupation" is the "root cause" of the conflict are at best disingenuous. This conflict had been going on for decades long before the Six Day War in 1967 as a result of which the West Bank and Gaza came under Israeli control. "Occupation" in fact is precisely a consequence of the conflict, the real "root cause" of which is precisely the issue of whether or not the Arab world and more specifically the Muslim world can tolerate a non-Arab/Muslim sovereign polity within its midst.

However the Instrumentum Laboris commenting on *Dei Verbum* describes the dialogue of the Church

"with her elder brothers" as not just necessary, but as "essential" (sect.87). Indeed in his visit to the great synagogue in this city this year, Pope Benedict XVI quoted the Catechism of the Catholic Church (sect.839): "It is in pondering her own mystery that the Church, the People of God of the New Covenant, discovers her own profound bond with the Jews, who were chosen by the Lord before all others to receive His word" ; and added that "the Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God's revelation". These words echo those of the late Pope John Paul II who in his historic visit to the same central Jewish place of worship in this city in 1986 declared that "the Jewish religion is not extrinsic to us but in a certain way is intrinsic to our own religion.

With Judaism therefore we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion."

Furthermore in his Apostolic Exhortation of June 28th 2003 he described "dialogue and cooperation with believers of the Jewish religion" as being "fundamentally important for the self-knowledge of Christians" in keeping with the Synod's call "for acknowledgment of the common roots linking Christianity and the Jewish people, who are called by God to a covenant which remains irrevocable"

As I have indicated, I am fully cognisant of the fact that the political realities in the Middle East do not always make it easy for Christians to acknowledge let alone embrace these exhortations.

However I pray that the miracle of what John Paul II referred to as "the flowering of a new springtime in mutual relations" will increasingly become evident in the Middle East, as throughout the world. To this end let us dedicate ourselves ever more devotedly both through prayer and in work for peace and dignity for all. Let us pray in the words of Pope John Paul II at the Western Wall in Jerusalem with which Pope Benedict XVI concluded his presentation at the Rome great synagogue:-

"Send Your peace upon th(e) Holy Land, upon the Middle East, upon the entire human family; stir the hearts of those who call upon Your Name, to walk humbly in the path of justice and compassion" .

And allow me, as one who comes to you from the city that is holy and beloved to us all, to conclude with the words of the Psalmist "May the Lord bless you from Zion and may you see the good of Jerusalem all the days of your life"(Psalm 128:5)

Editorial remarks

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