

The Churches and the Battle against Anti-Semitism

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Many Jews are unfamiliar with the recent changes in Christianity and still perceive it as hostile. Nevertheless, for over half a century, both Catholicism and Protestantism have been repudiating anti-Semitism and, for the most part, proselytism, while cultivating good relations with Jews and respecting the integrity of Judaism. Because Israelis live in a Jewish state and tend to have little interaction with Christians, they are often particularly unaware of these positive changes. This has been manifested in a lack of sensitivity toward the Christian world, as in such cases as opposing appointments of Christian clergy in Israel on questionable grounds, allowing the building of the Shehab-a-Din mosque near the Basilica in Nazareth for a time, and so on. As a result, Israel is not only failing to capitalize on the Churches goodwill in the struggle against anti-Semitism, it often actually alienates them. Israel needs at least an interministerial body that would make a coordinated effort to improve relations with Christian communities both at home and abroad.

This article focuses on relations with the Christian communities in the context of the resurgent anti-Semitism. Two preliminary comments are in order.

The first is that while fighting anti-Semitism is unquestionably an important aspect of Jewish-Christian relations, it is not the ultimate reason why I devote so much time and energy to this area. There are in fact several good rationales for it, but above all the work of promoting respectful dialogue with the Christian world is nothing less than the obligation of *Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying the Divine Name in the world.¹

Second, if I may state the obvious, all too often we hear and see not only that which we choose to, but also that which we have preconceived.

The extensive history of Jewish suffering inflicted in the name of Christianity needs no elaboration.² However, most Jews are unfamiliar with modern Christianity and the changes that have taken place in it over the past fifty years in particular, ³ and therefore perceive it as still overwhelmingly hostile. The trauma of our historical experience is, of course, compounded by the specter of resurgent anti-Semitism, and our historical perceptions and even prejudices (albeit born out of an unquestionable reality) are reinforced by it.

In addition, there is the all too well-known fact that what makes a news story and sells papers is bad news, not good news. Few people seriously research issues and the reactions they evoke. It is apparently for these reasons that most Jews - including most Jewish leaders - have a distorted picture of Christian attitudes in general and of Christian reactions - or lack of them - to recent anti-Semitic manifestations in particular.

It is worth looking briefly at the changes in religious teaching itself. Already in 1949, the World Council of Churches called anti-Semitism a "sin against God and humanity." ⁴ Arguably, though, the watershed in the transformation of Christian teaching about Jews and Judaism, dismantling the theological bases for anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, came with the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council convened by Pope John XXIII. That Council issued the historic declaration known by its first words "Nostra Aetate," which asserted that any attempt to present the Jews as collectively guilty for the death of Jesus of Nazareth at the time, let alone subsequently, is wrong and against what was upheld to be true Christian teaching. Moreover, the declaration affirmed that the Divine Covenant with the Jewish people is eternal and unbroken and that it is therefore wrong to present the Jewish people as rejected, let alone cursed by the Almighty, or to suggest that it has been replaced by the Church. The statement further condemned anti-Semitism as sinful. ⁵ After *Nostra Aetate* there were many other notable documents, such as the 1975 "Guidelines"; the 1985 "Notes"; the 1998 document on "The Church and

Racism," which not only gave a detailed condemnation of anti-Semitism but also denounced "the anti-Zionism that often serves as a vehicle for anti-Semitism"; the declaration on the Shoah, "We Remember"; and the most recent document on "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures."

The bottom line of the "new theology" toward Jews and Judaism is a respect for the integrity of Judaism and an end to proselytizing efforts.

Naturally it takes time before an institution, especially a venerable religious institution, truly internalizes change. It takes even longer for such change to find its way fully into educational materials. Furthermore, the pace of these processes also depends on the sociocultural context in which the respective communities live. However, the effect on the Church has been profound, and in the United States, most recent studies on Catholic educational materials have revealed an unqualified positive view of Jews, Judaism, and Israel.⁶

Protestant denominations cannot be compared in structure and authority to the Catholic Church, for better and worse. Accordingly, the transformation may not appear quite as striking. Nevertheless, similar processes have taken place among mainline Protestant denominations; particularly notable has been the courageous and categorical repudiation of Luther's anti-Semitism by the Lutheran Church.⁷ The extent of this transformation within the Protestant churches is powerfully evident in a declaration of the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, a network encompassing the majority of Protestant churches in Europe. In 2001 it issued an extensive document entitled "Church and Israel." Among other things, this document "confesses the guilt [of the churches] towards Israel for their share in the Shoah in different ways" and declares their commitment to change and rectify the causes and sources of that guilt. It affirms the unique bond with the Jewish people as "an indispensable part of the Foundation of [Christian] Faith," but arguably most notable of all, it proposes that "the Churches [should] refrain from any activity directed specifically to converting Jews to Christianity." Indeed, the whole endeavor of this historic declaration and articulation of theological positions was carried out in concert with a Jewish scholarly advisory board, for which Professor Chanah Safrai of [Jerusalem](#) was very much the leading resource person.⁸

Accordingly, both Catholic and mainline Protestant churches have overwhelmingly abandoned any formal missionary activities to convert Jews to Christianity (small, marginal groups with such orientation have no official backing).

The only proselytizing efforts of any systematic character come precisely from Evangelical quarters, whose very theology insists on one exclusive path to salvation without which a person is condemned to perdition. Since this theology goes hand in hand with a biblical fundamentalism that links final redemption with the Jewish people's return to its ancestral homeland in keeping with biblical prophecy, such Evangelical fundamentalism is generally highly supportive of the State of Israel. Hence it has been warmly welcomed in many Israeli and Jewish quarters, especially in the wake of the traumatic violence of the last few years. Paradoxically however, this often means embracing precisely those who still maintain a classical exclusivist theology with a vision of a society in which there is no room for Jews or anyone else who does not share their beliefs.

Returning to the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches, an array of religious leaders, church synods, and bishops' conferences have issued forthright condemnations and warnings about the recent resurgence of anti-Semitism. Examples include the Dutch bishops (3 May 2002), the French bishops (3 April 2002), the Bulgarian churches (21 February 2002), the World Lutheran Federation (17 September 2001), and the Alliance of Baptists (25 April 2003), to name but a few.

The Pope has frequently condemned anti-Semitism, describing it as "a sin against God and humanity,"⁹ and he reiterated these views in the course of the last year.¹⁰ His condemnations were reinforced by a powerful text published by Cardinal Kasper¹¹ and impressive statements by other cardinals, perhaps most notably that of Cardinal Tucci.¹² These and other statements by Catholic leaders were gratefully acknowledged by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel in its concluding declaration at the meeting of the interreligious bilateral commission of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and the Holy See.¹³

In the wake of the bombing of the synagogues in Istanbul, a wide range of Christian leaders issued eloquent statements of solidarity with the Jewish community and condemnations of anti-Semitic violence.

These included the joint statement of the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch and the Archbishop of Canterbury¹⁴ as well as declarations by an array of religious leaders and churches representing the spectrum of American Christianity.¹⁵

Numerous statements in a similar vein have been issued by American church leaders in recent years on the occasion of Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Remembrance Day). Beyond the United States, particularly notable declarations were made by the Primate of Ireland, Sean Brady,¹⁶ and by the heads of the Anglican and Catholic churches in the United Kingdom, Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor and Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, who has reinforced the remarkable solidarity with the Jewish community demonstrated by his predecessor, Lord Carey.¹⁷ We have recently seen many further impressive exonerations of anti-Semitism, including those of Canadian Primates Cardinal Ouellet and Archbishop Andrew Hutchinson.¹⁸

Indeed, as the late Geoffrey Wigoder put it, official Church teaching today is not only no longer part of the problem, but actually part of the solution.¹⁹

The question that remains, however, is how to capitalize on this transformation and truly promote Jewish interests in relation to and through the Christian world. In this regard there has been an enormous contrast between American Jewry and Israeli Jewry. The difference is a natural and obvious one. Western Jewry lives in a society that is predominantly secular but whose dominant religious ethos is Christian. Israeli Jewry lives in a very different context - a Jewish state in which most Israelis never encounter a Christian. Indeed, even when Israelis travel abroad, they tend to meet non-Jews as non-Jews and rarely as modern Christians. As a result, the image of Christianity is still overwhelmingly culled from the tragic past.

In the United States, however, the Jewish community's level of fraternal cooperation - particularly its self-defense and human relations agencies - with Christian leadership is unparalleled. It is true that positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have led to a cooling of relations with much of the mainline Protestant denominations, amid a growing polarization between their views and those of the Jewish community, particularly lately. Although some of these attitudes within mainline Protestant denominations indeed derive from more insidious sources, they are largely simply a response to the cries of their local Christian Palestinian communities. Hence, some of my comments about tactics below are not only relevant to combating distorted images of Israel but also to diaspora Jewry's own relations with mainline Protestantism. There is still, however, extremely close collaboration on a wide spectrum of social and civic issues between American Jewry and the mainline Protestants.

However, the most remarkable transformation in the United States is one that has not only reflected but even influenced the transformation in Rome - namely, relations between American Catholics and Jews. A whole spectrum of interactions and dialogues is reflected in the numerous Catholic institutes for Jewish studies and Catholic-Jewish relations. Arguably the most striking example - especially considering that the Catholic communities in Israel are overwhelmingly Palestinian and led by an outspoken, nationalist Palestinian patriarch - is that when the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) discusses statements or proposals on the Middle East, they hold *prior* consultations with Jewish religious leaders. Accordingly, the USCCB's declarations on the Israeli-Palestinian issue have been among the most fair and balanced to come from a Christian hierarchical body.²⁰

However, even if Palestinian, and particularly Christian Palestinian, propaganda has put strains on that relationship, the behavior (and sometimes lack of behavior) of the State of Israel has played a significant part as well. This mainly involves the state's attitude both toward its own Christian communities and toward Christians who seek to spend periods of time in the country. However, it also involves Israel's flagrant disregard of international commitments it has made regarding Christians. A separate problem is the disgraceful poverty of budgetary allocations, which in the Ministry of Religious Affairs came to just 2.9 percent for the approximately 20 percent non-Jewish citizenry of the state in the year 2000.²¹ Certainly neglect has done its harm, but even when the State of Israel has involved itself in Christian affairs, it has generally done so in a manner guaranteed to alienate the local communities (influencing international perceptions) and do much harm to Israel's image.

This was evident a few years ago in the attempt by then-Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon and then-Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to block the appointment of Melchite Archbishop Boutros Mouallem.²² Aside from the deplorably bad intelligence that could have led anyone to conclude that this truly peaceful, spiritual man, who is actually a friend of the Jewish people, could present any threat to the state, the attempt to deny his appointment flagrantly ignored Israel's commitment made in the Fundamental Agreement with the Vatican.²³ Moreover, even if Israel had not been morally bound by its international commitments, it should have been obvious that such interference in internal Church affairs would spark international condemnation and Israel would be forced to back down and appear ludicrous - as was indeed the case.

Nevertheless, the lesson has evidently still not been learned, as was revealed in the case of the appointment of the Greek Orthodox patriarch of Jerusalem, Ireneios I. Again the authorities fell prey to faulty intelligence and perhaps vested material interests that couched themselves in pious nationalist sentiment. However, apart from the substance, the lack of political savvy and above all the insensitivity toward Christian sensibilities was astounding. Inevitably, Israel again had to back down and confirm its recognition of the patriarch.²⁴

In the case of the Fundamental Agreement with the Vatican, Israel succeeded in enlisting the personal intervention of the Pope to ensure that the agreement was signed at the end of 1993²⁵ and ambassadors exchanged some six months later. This occurred despite the Vatican Secretariat of State's desire for a prior resolution of two outstanding issues, namely, the legal status of Church authorities in Israel and matters of tax exemption for Church assets and personnel.²⁶ The compromise reached between the parties appeared in the text of the Fundamental Agreement, indicating that Israel was to do its best to resolve the two issues within two years.²⁷ However, while Israel and the Vatican did reach an agreed formula on the legal agreement after no less than four years,²⁸ the agreement was never given force in Israeli law despite the commitment of the then-director-general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs to do so.²⁹ As for the fiscal matters, these have dragged on for ten years with no indication that Israel has any intention of resolving them.³⁰ Even more serious, Israel promised the Vatican that until the issue was resolved, no steps would be taken that might prejudice the position of the Church's institutions in this regard. Nevertheless, this was precisely what happened when Israel recently began demanding payment of taxes that had previously been part of the de facto exemption. The deplorable policy of the Interior Ministry concerning visas is also in contravention of the Fundamental Agreement,³¹ and despite promises by the current minister, the situation has continued to be troubling. This Ministry's failure during recent governments to deal intelligently and compassionately with the needs of the various Christian institutions in Israel - including even the Evangelical organizations that are politically active on Israel's behalf³² - has done much damage to Israel's image and credibility.

There seemingly has not been evil intent in any of these cases (though there may have been some); instead, it is primarily a matter of sloppiness, stupidity, and an amazing lack of strategic consideration toward the Christian world. There has been little or no appreciation of the fact that not only is the wellbeing of the local Christian communities a matter of basic human rights, it is something that influences the attitudes of billions of Christians around the world. Stalin may have derisively asked: "How many divisions does the Pope have?" but Gorbachev's first destination outside the Warsaw Pact countries after his declaration of *perestroika* and *glasnost* was St. Peter's,³³ showing that one need not have divisions and munitions to have influence.

Other episodes involving Christians in Israel have revealed this failure in strategic thought, such as the controversy over the Shehab-a-Din mosque near the Basilica in Nazareth. Instead of standing firm, both Labor and Likud governments allowed themselves to capitulate or at best compromise with the squatting tactics of the Islamic movement in the city.³⁴ In the final analysis, the considerations were a matter of simple mathematics. There are about 750,000 Muslim voters in Israel and less than 150,000 openly-professing Christians. Nevertheless, the latter were able to enlist enormous international pressure that forced Prime Minister Sharon to rethink his predecessors' decisions, and eventually matters were restored to the status quo ante.³⁵ Amazingly, some politicians actually expected local Christians to show gratitude to the government despite the substantial distress that both Likud and Labor governments had previously caused the Christian communities. Although it would only compound matters for them to publicly admit it, Christians in the Galilee (as elsewhere in the Arab world) already felt under siege by the

dominant Muslim community and sought solace in Israeli democracy's rule of law. Hence, they felt especially abandoned by the Jewish state in this case.

Not unrelated to this is the major challenge, mentioned above, that Israel faces regarding the local Christian communities - namely that they are overwhelmingly Arab and have a profound interest in good relations with their immediate neighbors, the much larger Muslim communities. This is especially so in Jerusalem and the West Bank, where they are subject to enormous nationalist pressure to show their loyalty to the Palestinian cause.³⁶ All too often, this leads them to enlist their coreligionists internationally for the Palestinian nationalist cause with anti-Israeli propaganda, influencing Christian perceptions worldwide and souring attitudes toward Israel and even toward diaspora Jewish communities that support it. If it wants to counteract this, Israel must do more than wag its finger. Only if the local Christian communities feel that their interests are seriously considered by the Israeli government, and that positive relations with it are genuinely worthwhile, will more constructive attitudes that have a positive international impact develop within these communities. Israel's past behavior, however, has made many if not most of them skeptical about whether the Jewish state cares about them at all.³⁷

This is in no way to excuse any Christian who does not take a stand against anti-Semitism, both on theological and historical grounds. In the battle against anti-Semitism, however, Israel has an enormous potential strategic ally in the churches that is not adequately exploited. If Israel is truly to capitalize on this potential, it has to start relating very differently toward Christians living in and coming to the Jewish state. This requires a coordinated effort, if not through a centralized authority under the prime minister then at least through an interministerial body in coordination with the security authorities, which has clear and definite governmental patronage. Such an authority must address issues concerning the local communities, the treatment of Christians entering and exiting the country, and relations with Christian communities abroad and their relations with respective governments. Until that happens, I fear we will continue to squander much of what is not only no longer the source of the problem, but in fact a potential strategic asset both for the general interests of Israel and for the worldwide struggle against anti-Semitism.

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Notes

1. Leviticus 22:31,32; Seder Eliyahu Rabba, 26,2; Yalkut, Devarim 6:5 (cf: Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 86a; Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 10b; Jerusalem Talmud, Bava Metzia 2:5; Tosefta Bava Kama 10,16).
2. See Edward H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).
3. David Rosen, address to the International Lutheran Council (ILC), Jerusalem, March 1994.
4. Statement from the First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, Amsterdam, 1948, on "The Christian Approach to the Jews."
5. See www.jcrelations.net.
6. See the study by P. Cunningham, www.bc.edu/research/cjl/.
7. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) statement, 18 April 1994; see www.j-institute.org.
8. "Church and Israel," *Leuenberg Documents*, 6 (Frankfurt am Main: Lembeck Press, 2001).
9. Papal address to Jewish leaders in Budapest, 18 August 1991.
10. The latest instance being in May; see Catholic News Agency (CNA), 24 May 2004.
11. *Osservatore Romano*, 9 September 2003.

12. CWNews.com, 6 January 2003.
13. Zenit News Service, 4 December 2003.
14. BBC World News Edition and *Turkish Daily News*, 19 November 2003.
15. *New York Times*, Anti-Defamation League advertisement, 3 December 2003; Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) News Service, 25 November 2003; National Council of Churches (NCC) News Service, 20 October 2003.
16. Zenit News Service, 27 January 2004.
17. Religion News Service, 28 January 2004, report by Robert Nowell.
18. *Canadian Jewish News*, 1 April 2004.
19. Address to the International Jewish-Catholic Liaison Committee meeting, Jerusalem, March 1994.
20. <http://www.usccb.org>.
21. Foundation for Middle East Peace, address by Ori Nir, Washington, 30 April 2003.
22. Michael S. Arnold, "Test of Faiths," *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, 28 August 1998; Akiva Eldar, *Ha'aretz*, 6 August 1998.
23. Fundamental Agreement, Article 3,2.
24. Religious News Service (RNS), 28 January 2004.
25. "Israel Dossier - A Secret Meeting," *Inside the Vatican*, January 1994; cf. Shaikha Ben Porat, *Conversation with Yossi Beilin* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1996) [Hebrew].
26. *Jerusalem Post*, 8 January 1993.
27. Fundamental Agreement, Article 10, 2a, 2c.
28. *Jerusalem Post*, 10 November 1997.
29. Letter to Archbishop De Montezemolo from Eitan Ben Zur, November 1997.
30. See "Israel-Holy See: No Apparent Fruit after 10 Years of Diplomatic Relations," *Asia News*, 9 March 2004.
31. "Church Officials Say Israel Delaying Visas," "Apostolic Delegate in Jerusalem Protests," *Jerusalem Post*, 8 April 2004.
32. Daphna Berman, "Red Tape Baffles Christian Volunteers in Search of Visas," *Ha'aretz*, 28 May 2004.
33. On 29 November 1989, twenty days after the fall of the Berlin Wall.
34. See an overview of the episode in Drew Christianson, "Palestinian Christians: Recent Developments," in Marshall Breyer, ed., *The Vatican-Israel Accords: Political, Legal and Theological Concerns* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).
35. See *The Christian Century*, vol. 199, no. 6 (13 March 2002); cf. "Religious Freedom in

Nazareth," *Jerusalem Post*, 5 March 2002.

36. Daniel Rossing, "Microcosms and Multiple Minorities: The Christian Communities in Israel," *Israel Year Book and Almanac* (1999).

37. See the document of the Coordinator of Israel Government Activities in the Territories, translated and cited by the Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity in Israel (ETRFI), 13 May 2004.

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