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# KING'S

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# JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE: A NEW PROPOSAL

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In a recent issue of the English journal *Theology* I discussed whether it is now possible for Christians and Jews to engage in real dialogue given that a significant number of Christians have come to see the Incarnation as a myth. It seemed to me that this new, liberal interpretation of the doctrine of the Incarnation removes the traditional impediment to authentic Jewish-Christian dialogue since the liberal Church can no longer condemn the Jew for refusing to accept that Jesus was literally 'God of God'.

In subsequent issues of *Theology* the position I put forward was criticized for several reasons. In a letter to the editor, E. L. Mascall stated that he could see no grounds for hope in my suggestion. What is needed instead, he believes, is for Christians who accept the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation and Jews committed to their heritage to "set out on a sympathetic project of mutual exploration and understanding; they would no doubt be in for some very hard work, but it might be very fruitful".

In another letter to the editor in the same issue, David Cockerell pointed out that his experience of Jewish-Christian encounter was a positive one: "Our warm and generous Jewish neighbours showed a willingness to share and discuss religious ideas". Possibly, he suggests, real exchange should take place on such a spontaneous, neighbourly level for it is only when the theological 'experts' get to work that "the air turns blue and the knives are drawn". Further, like Mascall, Cockerell believes that in dialogue Jews and Christians should confront the differences between the two faiths. Christians should not have to be saddled with what seem to many to be reductionist interpretations of their faith as a precondition for entering into conversation with men of other faiths. "We begin to learn from each other, and so grow closer together, when we come together genuinely to listen to and to learn from the insights of others – but their integrity and ours, is not respected where they – or we – are expected to whittle away the areas of substantial difference which exist between us." In this light the aim of interfaith dialogue is to create an environment in which differences can become a point of growth.

This same point was taken up by Valerie Hamer in 'A Hair's Breadth' in the next issue of *Theology*. Like Mascall and Cockerell, Hamer contends that dialogue does not commit us to drawing closer in belief but rather in mutual understanding. Thus she states that dialogue may well illustrate how far apart Jews and Christians are, and this should not be an obstacle to friendship and tolerance between Jews and Christians. "The fact that Christians are re-examining the traditional doctrine of the Incarnation," she writes, "should have no bearing upon the progress of dialogue. The question of the Incarnation is an internal Christian issue . . . however, it is not part of dialogue for one party to make any comment upon or show partisanship in the internal affairs of the other."

The view of dialogue that Mascall, Cockerell and Hamer adopt is one shared by a number of modern theologians. Leslie Newbigin, for example, in 'The Basis, Pur-

pose, and Manner of Inter-Faith Dialogue' argues that the Christian who participates in dialogue with other faiths must subscribe to the tenets of the Gospel tradition. "He cannot agree that the position of final authority can be taken by anything other than the Gospel . . . Confessing Christ-Incarnate, crucified, and risen – as the light and the true life, he cannot accept any other alleged authority as having the right of way over this . . ."

This understanding of dialogue however is not far removed from the old attitude of Christian superiority and a rejection of non-Christian traditions. If Jesus is regarded as "true light and true life" it is hard to see how interfaith discussion can take place on a sympathetic level. Here the Church speaks out of the belief that God has entered human history in the person of Jesus Christ. For those who adopt this position, the Christian revelation is uniquely true. And if, as Newbigin and others suggest, the partner in dialogue adopts an equally confessional stance, all that can be gained is an insight into one another's convictions. Furthermore, insofar as they hold to the absolute truth of their respective faiths, they may well try to convert one another.

At best such a confrontation between believers would be an educational exercise in which those engaged in conversation could learn about one another's theology. In the 'Goals of Inter-Religious Dialogue', Eric Sharpe defines this type of encounter as "discursive dialogue" in which there is "meeting, listening and discussion on the level of mutual competent intellectual inquiry". This kind of interchange is important, but it is far removed from dialogue at the deepest level in which Christians and non-Christians are engaged in a mutual quest for religious insight and understanding. Interfaith discussion must move beyond the stage of confessional or discursive encounter to a position of openness and receptivity. Such an approach is well formulated in the 'Guidelines for Inter-Religious Dialogue' proposed in 1972 by Stanley Samartha of the World Council of Churches in which he recommends that dialogue should be truth-seeking: "Inter-religious dialogue should also stress the need to study fundamental questions in the religious dimensions of life . . . World religious organizations should support the long-range study of the deeper questions which today ought to be taken up not just separately by individuals of each religion, but also together in the larger interests of mankind."

The difficulty is that when inter-faith dialogues are organized they frequently lose sight of this goal, and instead of engaging in a mutual quest, participants adopt a confessional attitude or decide to teach members of other faiths about their practices and beliefs. This was particularly evident in the recent consultation between Anglicans and Jews held at Amport House at Andover, England in November 1980. Despite the primary objective to discuss an issue of mutual concern – law and religion in contemporary society – it became clear that religious convictions about the nature of Jesus and the Christian revelation stood in the way of a constructive exploration of shared problems. This confrontation is thus a concrete illustration that the kind of dialogue envisaged by Mascall, Cockerell, Hamer and Newbigin inevitably is constrained by conflicting theological presuppositions.

The subject of this encounter between Anglican and Jewish leaders focused on three basic questions: (1) What is

the legitimacy or need of an objective law of God beyond situational ethics? (2) Is the religious objection to 'permissiveness' more than a mere return to religious triumphalism? (3) Have Jews and Christians any insights to the line to be drawn between individual personal freedom and the authority of the State? The Conference lasted three days, and according to the Archbishop of York and the Chief Rabbi, the participants "did begin to see the value and relevance of exploring our different religious heritage to come up with clues that have at least a sporting chance to be taken seriously".

Despite this claim, it is clear from the papers published in the *Christian Jewish Relations* (Vol. 14 No. 1) that prior religious commitments made such a joint quest extremely difficult. From the Christian side, the centrality of Jesus continually came to the fore. Thus in 'Law and Religion in Contemporary Society', G. R. Dunstan draws attention to the fact that St. Paul argued that ritual ordinances – what he called "the works of the law" had been fulfilled by the self-offering of Jesus and need not be demanded of those who partook of the benefit of his sacrifice. Yet he affirmed the demands of the moral law in its full rigor – fulfilled to a new depth what he perceived it to be in the life and teaching of Jesus. "Obedience was due in grateful and loving response to God's love, or grace, as seen in Jesus." For Paul, baptism "into Christ implied baptism into his obedience, a partaking of his sacrifice" (Rom. 12). St. Paul is thus the authoritative teacher of New Testament ethics: "he had to give his Gentile Churches, made up of men and women with no common religious culture or bond, a common morality, a 'way' to walk in, a Christian *halakah*".

This understanding of morality as obedience to God's love in Jesus has no connection with Jewish ethics. Dunstan thus offers no suggestions how Jews and Christians could reach some sort of agreement in the area of ethics. Rather he points to the fact that in the area of medical ethics (which he had discussed with the Chief Rabbi for several years), there were deep divisions between the two traditions. Clearly then, in Dunstan's discussion of law in society, the obstacle to fruitful dialogue is the Christian conviction that the moral law is ultimately grounded in Jesus Christ. Similarly, in 'The Place of Law in Contemporary Society', A. Phillips emphasizes that "Christianity rests entirely on the authority of Jesus alone, what he was and did. The Christian is called to identify with Christ by taking up his cross and following (Matt. 16:42). It is in this self-denying cross that his ethics are located." Membership of the Israel of the New Covenant was not determined by obedience to any Christian law, but it was subjected to the new situation created by the Christ event. Further, Phillips contends that for Christians, "the spirit, under whose direction all ethical rulings must be made, continues to guide into all truth" (Jn. 16:13).

In 'A Christian Understanding of Law and Grace', C. F. D. Moule also locates the moral law in the personhood of Christ. The thesis of his paper is the conviction that the Christian Church is the Israel of the New Covenant and that a right relation with God depends solely on trusting him for his forgiveness which has taken shape in history and continues to take shape in the death and aliveness of Jesus. "There is no way," he writes, "of being within the Covenant except trust in God – the God whom Christians find supremely and decisively in Jesus". If Jesus is one with God and one with humanity, his death and resurrection are

at one and the same time the affirmation of law and grace. The main thrust of the Mosaic Revelation thus extends beyond itself – into the Christian revelation.

The understanding of Jesus as God Incarnate is therefore central to a Christian conception of ethics, but as Moule himself remarks, this standpoint "cannot be without offence to the Jew". And, though these papers are illuminating in various ways, they do not facilitate Jewish-Christian dialogue. Fundamentally they are confessional and educative. Jesus is seen as the climax of human history, and Christianity is understood implicitly and at times described explicitly as the fulfilment of God's Revelation.

From the Jewish side, there is likewise an appeal to revelation as the basis of morality. In 'Law as a Basis of a Moral Society', W. S. Wurzberger draws a distinction between philosophical doctrines which base law upon morality and the Jewish tradition in which "morality ultimately derives its normative significance from the transcendent authority of the law". Jewish ethics attributes the 'imperativeness' of the moral law to the property of being commanded by God on Mt. Sinai, a view in direct opposition to the Christian view that ethics must be grounded in Jesus Christ – the word made flesh.

The contrast in approach is explained in some detail by U. Tal in 'Law, the Authority of the State, and the Freedom of the Individual Person'. It is not unity, he argues, but rather plurality which Judaism should seek in dialogue: "In the realm of pure theology the fundamental principle of Christianity, that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah in whom in the dispensation of time . . . all things . . . both which are in heaven and which are on earth (Eph. 1:10) will have been re-established and reconciled (2 Cor. 5:18), is unacceptable to Judaism. As long as Judaism remains faithful to the tradition of the ontological all-inclusiveness of the Torah it cannot accept . . . that God hath made the same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ. (Acts 2:36; Heb. 5:5; Ps. 2:7)."

In the concluding paper 'Review of Christian-Jewish Relations', C. M. Reigner points to the fact that Christian-Jewish dialogue must be based on a recognition of "the fundamental differences" between the two faiths, yet it is difficult to see how dialogue understood in this sense can go beyond the confessional or the educative stage. No doubt the participants in this Conference learned a great deal from one another, but because of the Christian's commitment to the traditional understanding of the Incarnation and the Jew's refusal to look beyond the Jewish conception of revelation on the basis for the moral law, no progress was made in formulating a common approach in the problems outlined. This encounter is an example of the type of inter-faith dialogue recommended by Mascall, Cockerell, Hamer, Newbigin and others; yet by bearing witness to their respective faiths, it consisted simply in the display and comparison of irreconcilable beliefs. What is needed, however, is for participants in such discussions to adopt an open-minded and inquiring disposition in exploring fundamental questions. As can be seen from this consultation, this can happen only if the doctrine of the Incarnation is understood in such a way that Christians will recognize the separate validity of non-Christian religious traditions.

For Jewish participants in dialogue, there must also be

the same level of tolerance. In the past Jews have maintained that their religion is at the centre of the Universe of faiths; Sinaitic revelation is thus understood as a unique divine act which provided a secure foundation for the religious traditions of Israel. From the Pentateuchal revelation Jews believe they can learn God's true nature, His dealings with His chosen people, and the promise of the world to come. In this fashion the Written Torah as well as the rabbinic interpretation Scripture is perceived as the yardstick for evaluating the truth claims of Christianity, and the significant feature of this view is that Christianity is regarded as true only in so far as its precepts conform to the Jewish faith.

If Jewish-Christian dialogue is to take place on the most profound level, such a Judeo-centric picture of revelation must be replaced by a more tolerant view in which God is understood as disclosing Himself to each and every generation and to all mankind. Thus, neither in Judaism nor in Christianity nor for that matter in any other religion is revelation complete and absolute. In such a model of God's activity, it is God Himself who is at the centre of the universe of faiths with both Judaism and Christianity encircling Him and intersecting only at those points where the nature of Divine reality is truly reflected.

Given that Christians and Jews are prepared to begin from this starting point, there are a number of central issues, of which the following are a few representative examples, which Jews and Christians could fruitfully explore together:

(1) *Symbols* – The two faiths could profitably discuss the nature of religious symbols as long as neither Jew nor Christian adopts the standpoint that the symbols in his respective faith are intrinsically superior. Not very much is known about the logic of symbols. We do not understand why, for example, people chose to use certain symbols, why they give up some symbols, why they remain unmoved by symbols that others find meaningful, and why they are moved by a symbol that others find offensive. If discussion took place across religious lines, it might be possible to gain greater insight into what is involved in religious symbolism.

(2) *Worship* – In Judaism and Christianity worship is a response to God, an acknowledgement of a reality independent of the worshipper. Assuming that neither the Jewish nor the Christian participants maintain that their conception of God is uniquely true, it would be useful to discuss the ways in which various forms of worship give some glimpse into the nature of the Godhead. Furthermore, it might be possible to explore ways in which the liturgical features of one tradition could be incorporated into the other. The Passover Seder, for example, is regarded by most scholars as the ceremony celebrated at the Last Supper. In this respect it is as much a part of the Christian as the Jewish tradition and could become an element of the Christian liturgy. Similarly, the Psalms are shared by both Christians and Jews, and their recitation in the Christian musical tradition could enter into the Jewish liturgy. These are simply two examples of the ways in which Jews and Christians could enrich the liturgical dimensions of one another's faith.

(3) *Ritual* – Like worship, ritual plays a fundamental role in Judaism and Christianity and there are areas worthy of joint investigation as long as neither party adopts an attitude of religious superiority. First an examination of formal and elaborate practices as well as simple actions could reveal the

various ways in which the believer interprets his action as making contact or participating in God's presence. Second, a comparative study of ritualistic practices could illustrate the ways in which an outer activity mirrors an inner process – a relationship fundamental to the concept of ritualistic behaviour. Third, it might be beneficial to look at various contemplative and mystical activities in these faiths which allegedly disclose various aspects of God and enable the practitioner to reach a high state of consciousness.

(4) *Ethics* – Orthodox Jews believe that God chose them to be His special people and gave them His law through the revelation on Mt. Sinai. The moral law is thus embodied in immutable, God-given commandments. For the traditional Christian, Christ is the end of the law, thereby superseding the Torah as the mediator between God and man. Allowing that both sides adopt a more flexible attitude to moral attitudes within their respective traditions, it would be worthwhile to embark on an exploration of Jesus's critique of Pharisaic Judaism. Such an investigation would help to illuminate the tension between specific rules and general principles as well as the relationship between action and intention.

(5) *Society* – Religions are not simply systems of belief and practice; they are also organisations which have a communal and social dimension. Given that neither the Jewish nor the Christian partner in dialogue assumes at the outset that his faith possesses a better organisational structure and a more positive attitude toward modern society, it would be helpful to examine the way in which each religion understands itself in relation to the world. In addition, since Judaism and Christianity have religious hierarchies, an analysis of the nature of institutional structures, the training of leaders, and the exercise of authority could clarify the ways in which religious traditions reflect the non-religious characteristics of the societies in which they exist. In the face of modern secularism, such an examination is of particular consequence since more than ever before religions find themselves forced to adapt to a rapidly changing world.

These subject areas by no means exhaust the possibilities for dialogue, but they do indicate the type of discussions that could take place. Of course such issues could be discussed by traditionally-minded Christians and Jews, but as was illustrated in the case of the encounter at Amport House, such debate is inevitably constrained by conflicting religious presuppositions: as in the past the Christian belief that Jesus was literally God Incarnate and the Jewish conviction that Judaism is the supremely true faith are central stumbling-blocks to a mutual quest for religious insight and understanding. However today there is the possibility, as never before, for authentic inter-faith dialogue of the deepest kind. If Jews and Christians can free themselves from an absolutist stand-point in which claims are made to possess ultimate and exclusive truth, the way is open for a radically new vision of Jewish-Christian relations.