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Christian-Jewish Relations after a Century of Great Change

Graham Keith

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The twentieth century has seen such significant changes in the relationship of Christians to the Jewish community that we can ask if anything is likely to be the same again. The dark shadows of the Holocaust, perpetrated in the heart of Christian Europe, have left the churches with much heart searching. How far are Christian beliefs and attitudes to be blamed for the extent to which the Nazis were able to carry through

their murderous policies?

The Holocaust has also had an impact among Jews. It has profoundly affected their psychology and outlook on life among the other nations of the world. But Jewish writers suggest the Holocaust simply intensified changes among the Jews which had already been set in motion by emancipation.¹ As a result, Jews today are faced with sharp identity problems to an extent unthinkable in the days of the ghetto.

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The Emergence of the State of Israel

This identity question comes into sharp focus with the formation of the state of Israel. A century ago the emergence of a sovereign Jewish state could not have been foreseen.

¹ Geoffrey Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations since the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), pp. 48-9.

At that time Zionism was a minority element among the Jewish communities.² Many orthodox Jews believed that return to the land was possible only after, or along with, the appearance of the Messiah.³ Moreover, there was a widespread belief that the Jewish people had been deliberately scattered by God among the nations in order to bring blessing to them.⁴ These attitudes now largely belong to the pages of past history. Zionism has shaped Jewish identity even among those sections of the Jewish community who were originally most opposed to it. The reason is straightforward – the Holocaust seemed to mark out anti-Semitism as an inevitable part of the Jewish experience in the Diaspora.

The Zionist movement is inseparable from the vision of Theodor Herzl of securing a political safe haven for all sorts of Jews. He had diagnosed anti-Semitism as the key problem – a problem which was localized in Europe. His answer was to create a Jewish state outside of Europe which would secure diplomatic recognition and give Jews in the Diaspora greater respect in the eyes of their neighbours. Legal recognition was so important to Herzl that he was prepared to give it priority over the precise location of the new Jewish state.⁵ It imparted to Zionism a key element of its ideology – the security

of the Jewish people was to be gained by political means. Diplomatic recognition has remained important to the state of Israel. Now that it is largely secured and Israel has even been given status, however reluctantly, by the PLO, we can ask – has Israel's safety been guaranteed?

Evidently, diplomatic recognition has not eliminated anti-Semitism. On the contrary, it has given anti-Semites new territory to exploit (Zionist imperialism and oppression) either apart from, or alongside, more traditional anti-Semitic motifs. Besides, since the state of Israel was established in the heart of the Islamic world, it has given fuel for those who wish to ignite long dormant anti-Jewish elements in Islam. This is not to suggest that the Arab world which surrounds Israel is full of anti-Semitism.⁶ Arab attitudes are more varied and more nuanced. But there is more than enough evidence of anti-Semitism to affirm that Herzl's remedy was insufficient. Indeed, some would point out that the existence of a Jewish state has given anti-Semites the unique opportunity of a military target.

Understandably, the state of Israel has become heavily dependent both on the diplomatic skills of the USA and on its own military strength, which includes the development of nuclear weapons. This, at least in part, accords with the aspirations of the Zionists who insisted that if the Jews were to walk tall among the nations, they must forge their own

² Jacob Neusner, *Judaism in Modern Times* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), p. 172.

³ David S. Ariel, *What do Jews Believe?* (London: Ebury Press, 1995), pp. 223-4.

⁴ Gösta Lindeskog in Göte Hedenquist (ed.), *The Church and the Jewish People* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1954), pp. 57-8.

⁵ Neusner, *Judaism*, p. 161.

⁶ Bernard Lewis, *Semites and Anti-Semites* (London: Phoenix, 1997), pp. 257-9.

destiny. That means being militarily self-sufficient, though ironically the Israelis are dependent on the diplomatic skills and financial support of other nations to help maintain security. Moreover, the reality of nuclear weapons must, if we view things in purely human terms, throw a question mark over the survival of Israel.

This is a far cry from the Jewish people taking refuge under the wings of the Lord, the God of Israel. Indeed, it is no accident of history that the state of Israel has looked to military strength to secure its future. This has been by deliberate choice.⁷ In effect, the early Zionists gave up the faith that God could be relied upon to protect the Jewish people in their Diaspora. It would not be going too far to say that the Jewish state has become a sort of substitute God,⁸ claiming to give relief to all Jews who are oppressed and persecuted. This is not because of reliance on the God of Israel or even on such religious emblems as the holy sites in Jerusalem or elsewhere. If a rationale is given for this, it would be in terms of an almost romantic idea of a true Jewish spirit which would begin to flower once the Jews found the right environment. Herzl put it this way – 'I believe that a wondrous breed of Jews will spring up from the earth. The Maccabees will rise again. Let me repeat once more my opening words: The Jews who will it shall achieve their state. We shall live at

last as free men on our own soil, and in our own homes peacefully die. The world will be liberated by our freedom, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness. And whatever we attempt there for our own benefit will rebound mightily and beneficially to the good of all mankind.'⁹ Clearly, this is the outline of a distinctly secular religion. We do not have the Jews enriching the world by grasping and entering into the fullness of their own God-given religious tradition. Instead, we have the Jews enriching the world simply by being a nation among the other nations of the world.

I need hardly say that Herzl's vision of a peaceful Israel enriching the other nations of the world has not materialised. But Herzl was right in one assumption – that the emergent Jewish state would be of great interest to other nations of the world and would affect the way in which Jews in the Diaspora were perceived. The state of Israel is subject to intense international media scrutiny. Its leaders have become household names in a way that few other national leaders have done. It is difficult to gauge the long-term effects of this. Certainly the predominant media image of Israel has changed over time. In the aftermath of the 1967 Six Day War Israel was represented as the courageous David who took on and defeated mighty Goliath. In more recent years, especially after

⁷ Hans Kosmala in Hedenquist, *The Church and the Jewish People*, p. 93.

⁸ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Modern Judaism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), p. 209.

⁹ From 'The Jewish State' as found in Arthur Hertzberg (ed.), *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Athenaeum, 1959), pp. 225-6.

the Intifada, Israel has appeared more as a repressor of a poor minority. In effect, the media seizes on the headlines of the day and creates a broader picture to fit the headline, with the result that more longstanding issues are ignored. The overriding impression is that Israel is a chronic trouble-spot – and that is not good news for Jews either in Israel or elsewhere.

Though Herzl's political concept of Zionism predominated among Zionists, it was not the only significant approach to these issues. We can also assess the impact of the alternative vision of Ahad Ha-am, who thought that Herzl was putting the cart before the horse in prioritising a political state.¹⁰ He believed the real problem was not anti-Semitism, but rather Judaism which was being fragmented and dissipated by the processes of assimilation which seemed to be inexorably taking their course with the disappearance of ghetto life. He felt the correct priority should be a renaissance in Jewish culture which could be promoted by a significant Jewish presence and corporate society in Palestine.

Ha-am was much more sensitive than many other Zionists about the Arabs in Palestine and correspondingly much more cautious about a Jewish political state.¹¹ He put his concept this way: Judaism 'needs not an independent state, but only the creation in its native land of con-

ditions favourable to its development: a good-sized settlement of Jews working without hindrance in every branch of culture, from agriculture and handicrafts to science and literature. This Jewish settlement, which will be a gradual growth, will become in course of time the centre of the nation, where in its spirit will find pure expression and develop in all its aspects up to the highest degree of perfection of which it is capable. Then from the centre the spirit of Judaism will go forth to the great circumference, to all the communities of the Diaspora, and will breathe new life into them and preserve their unity.'¹² You will note that Ha-am was no traditionalist looking for a return of rabbinic Judaism. On the contrary he believed Jews needed to grapple with the challenges of modern thought. They needed a corporate sanctuary from which they could revitalize Judaism, not only for themselves, but for Jews living in the Diaspora.¹³

However, despite admirable insight in certain areas, not least in foreseeing the Arab problem, Ha-am's aspirations have proved to be illusory. Creating a united Jewish culture has proved impossible in Israel.

¹² A. Ha-Am, *Nationalism and the Jewish Ethic* (Schocken Books, 1962), pp. 78-79.

¹³ Ha-Am's ideas of the land of Israel as a centre for Jewish revival were taken up by the Reconstructionist Judaism associated with Mordecai Kaplan. This added a religious dimension to the cultural renaissance of Judaism, but the religion advocated by Kaplan was a humanitarian variety, where God represented the highest possible fulfilment of human beings – Cohn-Sherbok, *Modern Judaism*, pp. 130-154.

¹⁰ Geoffrey Wheatcroft, *The Controversy of Zion* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1996), pp. 131-2.

¹¹ Wheatcroft, *The Controversy*, pp. 132-3.

If anything, to have Jews of differing backgrounds and beliefs in such a small area, has accentuated the divisions between them, not least because it has added the possibility of political differences to existing cultural and religious differences. Recently, it has become clear that Diaspora Jews, especially those in the USA, have increasingly distanced themselves from Jews in Israel. Not only has the Zionist ideal lost something of its appeal, but American Jews have developed their own cultural patterns distinct from those in the state of Israel.¹⁴ Where a cultural rather than a religious basis for Judaism was selected, such a development was inevitable.¹⁵ Finding a basis for union among Jews today is no easy thing. Perhaps Herzl showed more realism than Ha-am in selecting a minimal criterion for Jewish identity – the suffering of anti-Semitism or at least the fear of such suffering. Sadly but ironically, a century or so after Herzl it is this, rather than a positive criterion, which most promotes a Jewish identity.

After half a century we might have expected the emergence of the state of Israel to have had an impact on the religious development of Judaism. So far, however, such impact has been negligible. Perhaps that may change in the new century, as Israel will have to reassess its purpose as a nation at some point. At

the same time the state of Israel has not yet proved the soil on which distinctively Messianic Judaism can flourish. Ironically, the most important work of that movement at the present time, as we shall see, may be outside of Israel.

I have emphasized Zionism because, as Jacob Neusner has pointed out, it has been the most successful of all the competing Judaisms within the twentieth century¹⁶; from a vague dream, a Jewish state has become a reality. But there is a deeper reason. The state of Israel now plays a vital part in Jewish identity, whether we are talking of religious or non-religious Jews, whether or not the Jews have any wish to reside in Israel. This is both remarkable and difficult to explain. In a very perceptive treatment of this phenomenon, Harold Kushner, a Reconstructionist Rabbi from the USA, describes the Jewish attachment to Israel as 'emotional, not nostalgic or theological'. Since it is emotional, he claims it is not entirely explicable in rational terms. But among the reasons he does present is this – 'Israel symbolizes for us that we are a people, not only a belief system.'¹⁷ If Israel was simply a theological system called Judaism, it would not need a home. But a people, he argues, have to belong somewhere in this world. I think Kushner has made a vital observation. If the term 'Jews' is to mean anything, there must be a

¹⁴ Wheatcroft, *The Controversy*, pp. 330-45.

¹⁵ Cf. the perceptive remarks of Abraham J. Heschel on the impossibility of a Jewish identity without religion in his *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), pp. 44-5.

¹⁶ Neusner, *Judaism*, p. 5.

¹⁷ As cited in Helen Fry (ed.), *Christian-Jewish Dialogue: A Reader* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996), pp. 106-7.

Jewish community. At present that community derives its identity in large measure through an emotional attachment to Israel. At the same time, it seems to me proper to point out that this has not always been a leading mark of Jewish identity. It is also in place to ask whether this is the best mark of Jewish communal identity.

The Jewish attachment to Israel places various responsibilities on Christians. Jews want to know what Christians think of the state of Israel. Criticism of particular governments or Israeli policies are acceptable. After all, Jews do this all the time themselves! But let any church question the right of Israel to exist and they have lost credibility in Jewish eyes.¹⁸ They are dismissed as anti-Semites. An interesting illustration of this concerns recognition of the state of Israel by the Vatican. For a long time after the Second Vatican Council, despite the noticeably warmer climate among Catholics, Jews remained suspicious because the Vatican would not recognize the Jewish state. That, however, has changed since December 1993 when official recognition was eventually given. Relations between Catholics and Jews have since then reached an unprecedentedly good level.¹⁹

Ironically, as the state of Israel secures diplomatic recognition (and this process has come a long way in the last 10 years), the Jewish people will have to change their emphasis.

No longer will their attachment to Israel reflect their desire to have security among the nations of the earth and to express their Jewishness. They will have to address more seriously the question – what sort of a nation are they to be?

It is here that the churches have a duty to address the Jewish people. If the Jews are the elect of God as a people and that election has not been rescinded, they cannot therefore become like any other nation on earth. This is a point for the churches to make now. Indeed, up to this point Christian interest in Israel has been too narrowly focused. Some church statements, notably those associated with the World Council of Churches, have had a lot to say about balancing the rights of Jews and Palestinians. Others have concentrated on the land as part of God's covenant gift to the Jewish people. Still others have wondered what place a restored Israel has in God's plans for the church and the world in general. No doubt, these all have their place, but this vital question is often overlooked – what sort of Jewish state do we have in mind?

Messianic Jews

A very precise answer has recently been given to the question of Jewishness by Messianic Jews, who hold that it is possible to believe in Yeshua (Jesus) as the Messiah and at the same time maintain a Jewish identity. They see themselves as fulfilled Jews who have no need to identify with a Gentile church. In a recent study the Jewish Rabbi, Dan Cohn-

¹⁸ Fry, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, pp. 108-9.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Wigoder in Fry, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, pp. 126-8.

Sherbok, has estimated that world-wide there are as many as 250,000 Messianic Jews.²⁰

Messianic Judaism emerged as a distinct movement, mainly in the USA, in the aftermath of the counter-culture movements of the 1960s and the Six Day War of 1967.²¹ This war had a dramatic impact in aligning Jews of the Diaspora with the state of Israel, because it convinced many of them that the anti-Semitic forces which had unleashed the Nazi Holocaust were not confined to Europe. If Jewish life and culture were regularly under threat, then a determined effort had to be made to preserve them.

This American movement may not have been aware of antecedents toward the end of the nineteenth century, when political circumstances had also exposed the precarious situation of the Jewish people in the Diaspora. Joseph Rabinowitz, a rabbi from Kishinev, was the most influential of a number of Jewish Christians who pioneered a form of distinctly Jewish Christianity with few, if any, links to Gentile denominations.²² Rabinowitz called his group the Israelites of the New Covenant. They never became a formal church because legal restrictions prevented Rabinowitz from establishing such an association. Within these limits Rabinowitz worked so

effectively in eastern Europe that it could be said he had brought Jesus from the periphery into the centre of Jewish life.²³ Surely that was no mean achievement! More recently he has been termed the Herzl of Jewish Christianity.

Rabinowitz was convinced that the churches of his time did not give sufficient weight to distinctive Jewish identity or, more importantly, to the hope of Israel's salvation as set out in Romans 11. It was true that in his time Jews who converted to Christianity were expected to be baptized into a denomination and take up membership in that denomination. In the process they lost their Jewish identity – in both religious and political terms. Such a situation had been more or less in place from the end of the fourth century when the last Jewish churches died out. Thereafter, the retention by any part of the church of Jewish elements was considered as a lapse into the error of judaizing. It was, therefore, a bold move by Rabinowitz to try to re-establish a style of Jewish worship which honoured Jesus as Messiah. The move was made at a time when high nationalistic aspirations did encourage emphasis on the cultural setting in which religious belief and practice were observed. That is not to overlook inherent pitfalls. Nationalistic trends might take more prominence than was justified by a gospel which shows no partiality

²⁰ Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 1. This figure represents only Messianic Jews; it is not a total for the number of Christians of Jewish origin.

²¹ Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, pp. 57-

65.
²² Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, pp. 15-26.

²³ By J.F.A. de le Roi as cited by Kai Kjaer-Hansen, *Joseph Rabinowitz and the Messianic Movement* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1995), p. 231. There is an excellent contemporary study of Rabinowitz in this book.

among nations. Significantly, Rabinowitz developed his ideas at the time when the seeds of Zionism were being sown. The future of the Jewish people – tossed between the Scylla of anti-Semitism and the Charybdis of assimilation – was a matter of urgent concern. Rabinowitz gave his own solution to this problem which was very different from that proposed by Zionism, but it is not surprising that he faced criticism on the grounds of inappropriate nationalism as well as the more traditional one of re-asserting obsolete Jewish ceremonies.²⁴

Both the movement associated with Rabinowitz and more recent Messianic Judaism were creatures of their time and a response to deep-rooted problems of both individual and group identity which were answered in different ways by other sections of the Jewish community. We cannot, then, confine ourselves to theological categories in our assessment of them.

Messianic Jews have not found it easy to establish a Jewish identity. They are not recognized by leading Jewish authorities.²⁵ Currently they are the only Jews who do not have automatic right of citizenship in Israel because they are deemed to have espoused 'another religion' by their profession of Jesus as Messiah.²⁶ At the same time they are not always welcomed by the main-

stream of the Christian church. This is not primarily from traditional suspicions of judaising, but because, in a pluralistic climate, they are an embarrassment to those churches which wish friendly relations with Jewish religious leaders.²⁷

Many Messianic groups at least began life with a distinctly evangelistic agenda. They wanted to reach fellow-Jews with the same gospel as had changed their own lives. They thought they could do this by following the principles set out by the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:20 – 'To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law, I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.' This would seem eminently appropriate. Looking back at Joseph Rabinowitz, we can say that even his critics within the Christian church recognized that he fulfilled an invaluable evangelistic role among fellow-Jews by preaching to them in their familiar Yiddish tongue and in a context very much akin to the worship of the synagogue.²⁸

But today 'becoming a Jew' is much less clear than it was in Paul's day. Such is the variation in Jewish belief and practice that it is not straightforward for Messianic Jews to identify with the mainstream of Jewish culture, especially in a religious sense. After all, it was the religious implications of being a Jew –

²⁴ de le Roi as cited by Kjaer-Hansen, *Rabinowitz*, p. 114.

²⁵ Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, pp. 79-81, 182-90.

²⁶ Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, pp. 191-202.

²⁷ Walter Riggans in Kai Kjaer-Hansen (ed.), *Jewish Identity and Faith in Jesus* (Jerusalem: Caspari Center, 1996), pp. 153-4.

²⁸ Kjaer-Hansen, *Rabinowitz*, p. 142.

being under the law – that Paul intended. Yet, the more Messianic Jews in the state of Israel identify with Jewish tradition and religion, the more they are held in suspicion.²⁹ Besides, Israel contains many secular Jews of a tolerant disposition with whom Messianic Jews would wish cordial dealings. It is no surprise that distinctively Messianic Jews are not the predominant strain among Christian Jews within Israel today. Perhaps their ministry can be more fruitful in the Diaspora where they may help to counteract assimilationist pressures.

It is clear, however, that the theologians of Messianic Judaism have moved beyond a purely evangelistic orientation. This is due in part to the pragmatic recognition that their credibility will suffer if other Jews see their only interest in Jewish practices is to win others to their allegiance to Jesus. But a more important factor has been the recognition that the New Testament speaks of a future for Israel – ‘the gifts and call of God are irrevocable’.³⁰ Moreover, Messianic Jews have been strongly influenced by Dispensationalist readings of biblical prophecy which give a special place to the state of Israel, or to the Jewish people more generally, in God’s unfolding plan for the future.³¹ The clear implication from this is that aspects of Jewish life are worth preserving for their own sake or rather for the sake of this future

plan of God which needs a recognisably Jewish nation for its fulfilment. It may not be easy to identify which aspects of Jewish life are crucial, especially when the characteristics of Judaism are so confused today. It is certainly not a simple matter of recreating the situation of Acts 21:20, where we read in the days when the Temple still stood that genuine Jewish believers were zealous for the law. Judaism has since then become much more complex. Today no agreement has emerged among Messianic Jews as to what is meant by ‘living Jewishly’.³² On a wider canvas, this concern among Messianic Jews surely mirrors fears among Jews in Europe and the USA about the erosion of distinctive Jewish life under the insidious influence of a relativistic culture where corporate values have little importance and the individual is encouraged to pick and choose whatever he wants of traditional or not so traditional values.

In accordance with their Dispensationalist views, or simply as a consequence of believing that every aspect of God’s covenant with Abraham is still in force, Messianic Jews are inclined to see the state of Israel as a sign of God’s faithfulness to the Jewish people, even though the return to the promised land has occurred in unbelief and authorities in Israel remain hostile to the distinctive claims of Messianic Judaism.³³ In

²⁹ Menahem Benhayim in Kjaer-Hansen, *Rabinowitz*, p. 54.

³⁰ Rom. 11:29.

³¹ Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, pp. 171-2.

³² Ruth Rosen in Kjaer-Hansen, *Jewish Identity*, p. 69.

³³ Bodil F. Skjott in Kjaer-Hansen, *Jewish Identity*, pp. 98-104.

this respect they come near to the position of many Christian Zionists, though they are less likely to adopt uncritical attitudes to Israel's policies.³⁴ Both groups would do well to show more agnosticism on the state of Israel as an outworking of biblical prophecy because of the secularist, Zionist ideology of modern Israel. Messianic Jews are certainly aware of the nature of the Jewish state, but tend to underplay it in their desire to identify as much as possible with Jewish aspirations. While God does have the power to overrule the intents of unbelievers – Jew or Gentile – for his own purposes, we cannot say whether that will happen with this assertion of Jewish national identity. The project of an Israeli state may still end in disaster. In short, at this point Messianic Judaism is in danger of identification with a political nationalism.³⁵ Simple acceptance of the state of Israel may frustrate a prophetic voice warning of the implications of building a state, even a Jewish state, without the blessing of God.

Nationalism is not confined to the realm of politics. It may appear in the very structures of religious life. In this connection, Messianic Jews must seriously consider a warning issued by Jakob Jocz some time before their movement emerged. Jocz observed that 'racial pride is a failing common to man' and where a national cause and a religious cause are so deeply

intertwined as in Judaism, the danger is exacerbated. He claimed that in the main, the Jewish people had not avoided that danger because the Rabbis, consciously or otherwise, framed the Jewish religion as a means of preserving Jewish identity. It is not that Jocz had a jaundiced view of the Rabbis. On the contrary, he pointed out that they laboured under abnormal political conditions. In a normal situation where the Jews enjoyed political sovereignty, then Jews would have lived for their religion; but in straightened political circumstances the Jewish religion had to subserve the Jewish national existence.³⁶

Messianic Jews must be realistic about the danger of compromising the gospel with nationalistic associations, not least as they seek to establish their own Jewish credentials. It is unfortunate, for example, that in their desire to be recognized as Jews under the state of Israel's Law of Return, they have revised the rabbinic criteria for Jewish identity and offered a model of their own which still emphasizes a racial connection.³⁷ At the same time this will not make it easy for them to maintain the testimony of the New Testament – that being a Jew in God's eyes is not a matter of race but of spiritual rebirth. At the very least, Messianic Jews might be found fighting the wrong battles.

Even at the very outset of the

³⁴ Kjaer-Hansen, *Jewish Identity*, pp. 100-1.

³⁵ For some interesting and nuanced comments on the competing claims of Christian and Zionist loyalties see Baruch Maoz, 'The Christian Embassy in Jerusalem', *Mishkan* 12 (1990), p. 4.

³⁶ Jakob Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ* (London: SPCK, 1949), pp. 305-6.

³⁷ Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, pp. 200-2 gives details. cf. Rom. 2:26-9 for a different approach to being a Jew.

Messianic movement, as it consciously took a different path from the Hebrew Christians, it affirmed Jewish separateness as part of its Jewish identity.³⁸ The Messianic pioneers pointed out that where Hebrew Christians played a full part in Gentile churches and retained only an informal association with other Jewish believers, inevitably their children and grandchildren were divorced from their Jewish roots. As they felt entirely at home in Gentile churches, they thus lost interest in any impact they might make on the Jewish community. Moreover, they were failing to redress the forces of assimilation.

The choice of a distinctively Jewish path may have been made by Messianic Jews for the best of reasons. But there are dangers if the criterion of Jewish separateness becomes too prominent. It may overshadow, for example, the unity that Jewish and Gentile believers have in Christ. There may even be a straight choice between being distinctly Jewish and following Christ, especially if being Jewish takes on nationalistic overtones. Some of these concerns even arise in the liturgies used by Messianic Jews. I worry, for example, when I read that some Messianic believers are happy to use the Havdalah prayer – ‘Blessed are you O Lord our God, king of the universe, who makes a distinction between the holy and the secular, light and darkness, Israel and the nations, the seventh day and the six days of labour. Blessed are you O

Lord, who makes a distinction between the holy and the secular.’³⁹ Can Christians now accept that the distinction between Israel and the nations is analogous to that between the holy and the secular?⁴⁰ Again, I worry that Messianic believers retain a separatist rationale for distinctive Jewish festivals like Sukkot, where part of the liturgy declares ‘Blessed are you O Lord our God, king of the universe, who has set us apart by thy commandments and commanded us to dwell in the sukkah’.⁴¹ We can ask – do Messianic Jews celebrate this festival to maintain Jewish distinctiveness or to honour Christ? Perhaps they may reply that this is a false dichotomy. Perhaps too these problems may be simply remedied through a more radical change to the traditional Jewish liturgies. After all, Messianic Judaism is comparatively young as a movement and is still seeking the best forms in which to fulfil its goals.⁴² But the further away any changes take them from Orthodox Judaism, the more difficult it will be to press their claims to be recognized as part of the Jewish community.

In fact, Messianic Jews may well find insuperable obstacles to recognition by the mainstream of the Jewish community. They may be

³⁹ Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, p. 100. Havdalah is the service which takes place at the end of the Sabbath.

⁴⁰ For the importance of this idea in Judaism see Seth Kunin's essay ‘Sacred Place’ in Seth Kunin (ed.), *Themes and Issues in Judaism* (London: Cassell, 2000), pp. 22–55.

⁴¹ Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, p. 110.

⁴² cf. the comments of the Messianic Jew, D. Juster, as quoted by Kjaer-Hansen, *Rabinowitz*, p. 234.

³⁸ Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, p. 56.

marginalized like Jewish believers in the past. It does not follow, however, that there is no advantage to be gained from a wish to cling to a Jewish identity.⁴³ With his profession of Jesus as Lord, the apostle Paul was ostracised from those Jewish circles where he had previously been respected. We know too that at times he became suspect even among Christian Jews. But in his new position he did not forget his kinsmen after the flesh. He tells us that he has 'great sorrow and unceasing anguish' in his heart as he contemplates the majority of unbelieving Jews.⁴⁴ He prays regularly for their salvation.⁴⁵ He even gives an emphasis to his own ministry among the Gentiles which is designed to stir unbelieving Jews to envy.⁴⁶ He limits his own freedom under the gospel to get alongside his fellow-countrymen and so win some of them for Christ.⁴⁷ The apostle is surely a model that identity problems can be handled constructively.

God's Election of Israel

So far I have concentrated on discontinuities in the Jewish situation for which the churches have had comparatively little responsibility. We can only look stupid if we choose to ignore either the place of Israel in modern Jewish thought or the existence of Messianic Judaism.

I want now to turn to one change

for which the initiative has been on the Christian side. In the post-World War II period, public statements from the Christian church have consistently emphasized those parts of Romans 11 which speak of the continuity of God's dealings with ethnic Israel. If there is a key text for this approach, it is Romans 11:29: 'God's gifts and his call are irrevocable.' It has become fashionable to decry 'supersessionism' or 'replacement theology' as the bogey of the church in past centuries.⁴⁸ No doubt there are differences when it comes to defining exactly what is entailed in 'supersessionism', but Bruce Marshall provides a useful and precise definition when he says it entails 'the belief that the church has taken the place of the Jews as the elect people of God'.⁴⁹ Supersessionism will entail one of two different consequences – either the Jews have become no different from any other nation in the plans of God, or they have become subject to a special and lasting judgement because of their unbelief. Both consequences are denied, the latter rather more strongly than the former.

Renewed emphasis on Romans 11, however, tends to be selective. In fact, it highlights the positive elements in the picture of the Jews, stresses the future hope Paul holds out, ascribes this to all Jews of all generations and tends to place this at

⁴³ See the fascinating essay by Ruth Rosen in Kjaer-Hansen, *Jewish Identity*, pp. 63-70.

⁴⁴ Acts 21:20-4; 2 Pet. 3:16; Rom. 9:2.

⁴⁵ Rom. 10:1.

⁴⁶ Rom. 11:13-14.

⁴⁷ 1 Cor. 9:19-20.

⁴⁸ Gabriel Fackre, *Ecumenical Faith in Evangelical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 148-53 distinguishes five types of 'supersessionism'.

⁴⁹ Bruce Marshall in Colin Gunton (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), p. 82.

the end of the age. It ignores Paul's insistence that the Jews, as well as the Gentiles, are found guilty and inexcusable before God. Also, the new emphasis fails to do justice to Paul's anguish about Jewish unbelief and the urgency of his prayers and activity for the salvation of Jews. Take Bruce Marshall's comments: 'Christians may engage in a non-proselytising conversation with Jews; since we do not have to assume that we are talking to the damned, we do not have to feel responsible for converting and thus saving them.'⁵⁰ What a contrast to Paul who wished himself to be damned for the sake of his kinsmen!

The reason for the different attitudes is a different evaluation of Jewish unbelief. As I understand Paul, Jewish unbelief in his own time (or at any other time) involved exclusion from covenant privileges. Hence the language of defeat or loss (*hthhma* – v 12) and even more strongly of casting off (*apobolh* – v15.)⁵¹ This was accompanied by a hardening of their hearts, a further judicial act from God. This exclusion, Paul contends, does not mean that God has gone back on his word. In past times and in Paul's own day there was an elect remnant who believed God's message of righteousness and were saved. No doubt there is a sense in which the whole Jewish people are elect of God, but

that is election to privilege.⁵² It does not entail that every single Jew makes proper use of these privileges. For in the elect nation not everyone was chosen for spiritual favour – 'not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children.'⁵³ Some such distinction as that between election to privilege and election to favour is imperative. Otherwise, we will end up with a situation where God shows partiality to the Jewish people. No matter what unbelief they demonstrate, they will all ultimately be saved in the end. It is not clear, however, whether Gentile unbelief will be written off quite so generously. Indeed, a major purpose in Paul's excursus in Romans 9-11 is to guard against wrong conclusions and complacency among Gentile Christians. 'In unbelief there is no respect of persons.'⁵⁴ Paul foresaw this danger might be ignored in Gentile congregations. While this remains relevant today, modern theological trends have downplayed the effects of Jewish unbelief. But the dangers of unbelief remain the same, whether it is among Jews or Gentiles who have possession of the word of the living God. That surely is a major continuity for Christian relationships with the Jewish people.

Bruce Marshall's comments mentioned above are a clear indication

⁵⁰ Gunton, *The Cambridge Companion*, p. 89.

⁵¹ For *hthhma* see Richard Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy* (Tübingen: J.C.B.Mohr, 1994), p. 114. The meaning of *apobolh* is secured by contrast with *proslhqv*.

⁵² The privileges are spelt out in Rom. 9:4-5. To this should be added the fact that they were entrusted with the Scriptures, the oracles of God – Rom. 3:2.

⁵³ Rom. 9:6-7.

⁵⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1967), vol 2 p. 87.

that the new emphasis on the special position of the Jews from Romans 11 is a disincentive to evangelism or mission among the Jews. Even if it is agreed that the Jews need to be saved as Romans 11:26 suggests, the fact that this salvation will be applied to all Jews of every age at the end of time removes the urgency of any evangelistic approach at the present time.⁵⁵ Mission may be replaced by a new agenda – that of encouraging the preservation of the Jewish race, as this is God's will and this should bring blessing to the whole world in the future. In practical terms this means not only combating anti-Semitism but encouraging Jews to carry out both the written and the oral Law, since these are assumed to be the vital badge of Jewish identity. This agenda will suit the fears of those religious Jews who worry about the process of assimilation or of relativism; but it will not commend itself to the large number of secular Jews in Israel, the USA or wherever. I doubt if this is the best contribution Christians can make to the debates on Jewish identity. Does it, for example, square with the biblical definition of a Jew as set out in Romans 2:28-29?

Recent trends in many churches, therefore, have found ideological ways to dismiss the concept of a Jewish mission. For most on the Jewish side this will come as good news. For a long time Jews have

objected to Christian missions among them, and this remains the main reason for Jewish suspicion of evangelicals.⁵⁶ However, the ground of objection may have shifted. Traditionally, Jews criticized Christian missions for being aggressive and coercive, as well as tainted with bribery especially when philanthropy toward poorer Jews was involved. In an interesting twist, Rabbi Leo Baeck, who clearly recognized in principle the duty of all religions, including Christianity, to engage in mission, affirmed that often in the past Christian mission had become the tool of secular power.⁵⁷ For Jews like Baeck, who are more tolerant than the norm, a situation where Christianity has lost political power in the West should make Christian mission more acceptable. Today, however, objections to Christian mission have a different focus. They centre on the attempt to obliterate Judaism itself, often combined with reproaches about the Christian contribution to the Holocaust. Susannah Heschel, for example, complains that Christian mission 'is especially disturbing after the Holocaust, because it represents its continuation, a spiritual genocide. Can anyone believe it is to the greater glory of God that there should be no more Jews left in this world? After the Holocaust, to pursue a Jew to convert to Christianity is to murder a soul. What

⁵⁵ Most Jews are dissatisfied with any Christian scheme which suggests they will accept Jesus at the end of the age, because this implies the inadequacy of their Judaism and the superiority of Christianity, cf. Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, p. 67.

⁵⁶ Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, pp. 34-6.

⁵⁷ Leo Baeck in Hedenquist, *The Church and the Jewish People*, pp. 108-9.

an easy solution: let all the Jews become Christian – after all, there would be no more anti-Semitism if there would be no more Jews.’ But in case the rhetoric about the Holocaust should obscure the main point, Heschel also comments, ‘What a remarkable blindness is displayed by those churches that do not see the holiness of Judaism, the preciousness of being a Jew.’⁵⁸

Several observations may be made about these new criticisms. They assume that being a Jew is to take a religious stance. Yet, for many Jews today, not least in Heschel’s own USA, being Jewish is more of a cultural than a religious identity.⁵⁹ Moreover, the potential destruction of a distinctive Jewish way of life has also been ascribed in the west to a totally different cause – the processes of assimilation. It seems that Christian missions are being scapegoated to explain trends in the Jewish world which have very different causes. Ironically, these Jews would not be sympathetic to Messianic Jews despite the latter’s desire to retain a distinct Jewish identity and culture.

Most importantly, the new criticisms imply the intrusion of some religious relativism into thinking on the place of Judaism alongside the other large monotheistic religions, Christianity and Islam. Traditionally, Judaism regarded both these systems as errors, whatever links they

may have had with the Hebrew prophetic tradition. But a change occurred with the work of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, who accepted that Christianity had brought great benefits to the Gentile world, but, at the same time, had little relevance for the Jewish world.⁶⁰ In effect, this foreshadowed the dual covenant, whereby God deals with the Jews in a different way from the rest of humanity. It is fine for the church to engage in missionary activity toward the other Gentiles, but as regards the Jews, their task is to recognize the unique status of the Jewish people and to encourage them in that calling. This idea has made a great impact among Christians.⁶¹ Even Billy Graham has made it a touchstone of his policy, and as a result he has been honoured by Jewish groups.⁶²

But there are problems both at a logical and at a biblical level. At a logical level it is difficult to argue both that no religious system can have a monopoly of the truth and at the same time that God has special dealings with the Jews. Yet, this is the position of Abraham Heschel who, for all his insistence on the distinctive Jewish tradition says, ‘Human faith is never final, never an arrival, but rather an endless pilgrimage, a being

⁵⁸ Susannah Heschel in Fry, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, p. 87. She is the daughter of Abraham Heschel and here reflects one of her father’s emphases.

⁵⁹ Cohn-Sherbok, *Messianic Judaism*, pp. 1-5.

⁶⁰ Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, pp. 52-3. For some earlier positions within the Jewish tradition along these lines see Heschel in Fry, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, pp. 248-9.

⁶¹ Some would, however, demur at the fact that this makes Jesus irrelevant – Marshall in Gunton, *The Cambridge Companion*, pp. 89-90. Marshall’s position is to suggest that Jesus applies his salvation to all Jews at the end of the age.

⁶² David Rausch in Fry, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, pp. 83-4.

on the way. We have no answers to all problems. Even some of our sacred answers are both emphatic and qualified, final and tentative; final within our position in history, tentative because we can speak only in the tentative language of man.⁶³ On what authority, then, can Heschel claim value in the Hebrew Scriptures he cherishes or in the wider aspects of the Jewish tradition? It would be better to argue that God has for some reason treated the Jews differently from the rest of mankind. If Judaism is an acceptable way to God for Jews, while Jesus Christ is acceptable only for Gentiles, we have a God who shows partiality. The conditions on which a Jew obtains God's blessing are different from those of a Gentile. I labour this point because Christian writers who wish to discredit mission to the Jews are not always clear as to whether they accept a full-blown relativist position or would want to travel the more difficult road of advocating that somehow the Jews are different from the rest of mankind in God's dealings with them.

Jewish/Christian Dialogue

If Jewish mission has become taboo in some Christian circles, dialogue is definitely the order of the day. Serious Jewish-Christian dialogue is a relatively recent and exciting development. Here I can only present some edited highlights, concentrating on a few key players. First, I will mention the Roman Catholic

Church, where dialogue takes on particular significance for the Jews because relationships between Jews and Roman Catholics have in the past been particularly fraught and because the Roman Catholic Church with its hierarchical structures can make the sort of authoritative public declarations denied to other denominations.⁶⁴

Roman Catholic reappraisal of its relationship with the Jews proceeded slowly and tentatively at first, but has gathered increasing momentum in recent years. These developments have been all the more significant because they did not occur overnight. They have been the fruit of an ongoing dialogue which has every likelihood of continuing.

It was Vatican II which gave the first public signs of Catholic reappraisal. The changes were modest but significant. They occurred amid a Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*). The statement about the Jewish people formed the major part, but even then amounted to only 15 Latin sentences. The main emphasis was a frank recognition of the church's debt to God's covenant people of the Old Testament. There was no suggestion, however, that Judaism is on a par with Christianity. Indeed, there was no attempt to hide either the reality of early Jewish opposition to the gospel or the centrality of Christ's cross as the place from

⁶³ Heschel in Fry, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, p. 245.

⁶⁴ Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, pp. 75-101.

which 'every grace flows.'⁶⁵ In many respects, therefore, *Nostra Aetate* was a traditional document with an unusually positive glance at the church's Jewish legacy. At the same time this document looked forward both to dialogue and to joint biblical study with Jews – enterprises which had scarcely begun at that time. (Significantly, *Nostra Aetate* omitted any mention of a mission to Jews.)⁶⁶

Today, Vatican II would seem to protagonists of Jewish-Catholic dialogue as unduly representative of an older era and at best a starting point for better things. The most recent official statement from the Vatican indicates how the situation has changed over the last 35 years.⁶⁷ 'We wish,' it says, 'to turn awareness of past sins into a firm resolve to build a new future in which there will be no more anti-Judaism among Christians or anti-Christian sentiment among Jews, but rather a shared mutual respect, as befits those who adore the one Creator and Lord, and have a common father in faith, Abraham.' This statement surely gives value to Judaism. Ethnic Jews are automatically being included with the faithful Abraham – despite what Scripture teaches of the need of personal faith. This impression is corroborated in the final section of this document which declares that Christians are to see Jews as 'dearly beloved broth-

ers'. In a sense they are 'elder brothers' as far as Christians are concerned – though this expression is hardly unambiguous. Thus Vatican circles are increasingly favourable towards the idea that God has a different way of dealing with the Jews. This means there can be no question of the church seeking to win them to the allegiance of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is impossible, however, to overlook the Jewish 'No' to the claims of Jesus, but now Roman Catholics are keen to exculpate as many Jews as possible from this. The original denial may well have been based either on a Jewish misunderstanding or on a distortion by some of Jesus' early followers. This in turn presupposes a readiness by the Catholic Church, or at least those parties within it who have engaged in dialogue with the Jews, to accept the idea that the gospels have been coloured by internal Jewish squabbles over the legacy of Jesus. Such an approach first appeared in an official Vatican document in 1985.⁶⁸ This would enable the Roman Catholic Church to reject from the gospels those parts which threatened the progress of the present Jewish dialogue. Of course, this sort of procedure is familiar in liberal Protestant circles, but it is relatively new to the Catholic Church. It remains to be seen what effect this foray into critical scholarship will have on other areas of Catholic

⁶⁵ Wigoder usefully includes the relevant section – *Jewish-Christian Relations*, pp. 143-4.

⁶⁶ Abraham Heschel claimed credit for this – in Fry, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, p. 405.

⁶⁷ Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews – 'We Remember – a Reflection on the Shoah' (dated 16 April 1998).

⁶⁸ 'Notes on the Correct Way to present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church', June 1985 reproduced in Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, pp. 149-59. See especially section 21A.

piety. I cannot find any reference to such critical biblical scholarship in *The Catholic Catechism*. Yet, the Roman Catholic Church will surely find it impossible to allow critical scholarship in some areas and not in others. Perhaps it is significant that the recent 1998 document is more cautious and identifies Christian misinterpretations of gospel teaching about the Jews as the evil to be corrected.

On the Protestant side, perhaps the work of the World Council of Churches has roused the greatest interest in the Jewish community, though there is recognition of the limits of its authority among those churches represented by it.⁶⁹ Over the years its statements on the Jews have undergone a significant transformation parallel to those emanating from the Vatican. This is not surprising given that both the Vatican and the WCC seem to have embraced as a priority mutual respect and co-operation between the world's major religious traditions. Listen to these words from the Preamble of an official document from 1988: 'The search for community in a pluralistic world involves a positive acceptance of the existence and value of distinct historical communities of faith relating to one another on the basis of mutual trust and respect for the integrity of each other's identities. Given the diversity of living faiths, their adherents should be free to "define themselves", as well as to witness to their

own gifts, in respectful dialogue with others.'⁷⁰ You will notice the priority given to a political, humanitarian agenda. You will notice that the distinctly biblical word 'faith' is readily used of non-Christian religious traditions. Exactly the same can be paralleled in current statements from the Vatican.⁷¹

It may come as a surprise that at its first meeting in 1948 the World Council of Churches issued a 'Report on the Christian Approach to the Jews' which stressed the responsibility of Jewish mission. In its first section, this report cited the words of the Great Commission and stated 'the fulfilment of this commission requires that we include the Jewish people in our evangelistic task'.⁷² Later the Report blamed the churches for neglecting Jewish mission and leaving this to independent agencies. By contrast, it advocated ministry to the Jews as part of normal parish work; it seems to have seen this as the best way of fully integrating Jewish converts into Christian fellowship. At the same time the WCC was not insensitive to the legacy of anti-Semitism. It recognized failures to love Jewish neighbours, even to seek basic social justice for those neighbours. The churches were to denounce all forms of anti-Semitism 'as absolutely irreconcilable with the

⁷⁰ 'The Churches and the Jewish People: Towards a New Understanding' reproduced in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 13 (1989), pp. 152-4.

⁷¹ cf. *The Catholic Catechism*, sections 839 and 841.

⁷² 'Report on the Christian Approach to the Jews' conveniently included in Hedenquist, *The Church and the Jewish People*, pp. 201-5.

⁶⁹ Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, pp. 31-33.

profession and practice of the Christian faith.' Realistically the Report declared that only as the churches gave sincere evidence of their desire for human rights to be accorded to the Jews, would it be possible to share the gospel with them. This is a far cry from saying that the experience of the Shoah makes preaching to the Jews an impossibility. Nor is there so much as a thought of recognising the vitality and place of Judaism as an acceptable religion before God. In short, the immediate legacy of the Nazi holocaust, as far as the WCC was concerned, was redoubled zeal for Jewish mission, though they were careful not to advocate this as a special priority. Their repentance consisted in acknowledging that this aspect of Christian mission had been ignored in the churches.⁷³

What a change there has been since then! The WCC no longer speaks with a clear voice on the subject of Christian mission to the Jewish people, though (unlike the Vatican or certain of its own member churches) it has not entirely jettisoned the idea. Take this statement from the 1988 consultation – 'the churches still struggle with the issue of the continuing role of Jesus and the mission of the church in relation to the Jewish people'. An earlier statement from 1982 outlined the diversity of approaches among its members to mission in general and

to Jewish mission in particular.⁷⁴ The statements from 1982 and 1988 even recognized the existence of Messianic Jews, though they did reflect some uncertainty as to how they fitted into the wider picture. But amid these uncertainties some fixed points do emerge. Most notably, 'coercive proselytism' is condemned, though this expression is not clearly defined.⁷⁵ The emphasis has turned to dialogue. The 1982 statement sets out reasons for Jewish-Christian dialogue (which are valuable in their own right), while the 1988 statement places this dialogue within the wider context of the goal of 'breaking down of barriers between people and the promotion of one human family in justice and peace'. Anything, then, which will bring confrontation between two faith communities or even anything that will cause discomfort to either of them in their relationships is to be avoided. On the contrary, such relationships are to be marked by mutual trust and respect for each other's identities. 'Given the diversity of living faiths, their adherents should be free to "define themselves" as well as to witness to their own gifts, in dialogue with others.' It is no surprise that in these WCC documents a very positive appraisal is made of Judaism. 'We affirm,' says the 1988 Statement, 'that the Jewish people

⁷⁴ Reproduced in Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, pp. 159-67.

⁷⁵ The nearest to a definition occurs in section 4.2 of the 1982 document – 'Proselytism embraces whatever violates the right of the human person, Christian or non-Christian, to be free from external coercion in religious matters.'

⁷³ Because of the insistence on mission, this document did not prove satisfactory to many Jewish people – Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, p. 5.

today are in continuity with biblical Israel and are thankful for the vitality of Jewish faith and thought. We see Jews and Christians, together with all people of living faiths, as God's partners, working in mutual respect and cooperation for justice, peace, and reconciliation.⁷⁶ At the same time, it comes as a surprise that this document wants to insist on the uniqueness of Christ and the truth of the Christian faith.⁷⁷

How can it do so? By a two-covenant theology? This is not quite the language it uses, but it comes near to such an idea when it says 'we see not one covenant displacing another, but two communities of faith, each called into existence by God, and holding to its respective gifts from God, and each accountable to God.'⁷⁸ No doubt, it is unwise to look for complete consistency in public statements from such a diverse body as the WCC. All we can do is to point to tendencies. The prevailing theme seems to be the promotion of peace and harmony between different religious groups in a world that is unalterably pluralistic. (It is virtually assumed that God approves of pluralism or more precisely that he wants different religious groups to maintain their own religious integrity.) Given the past history of bad relationships between Christians and Jews, WCC documents inevitably highlight these on the path to a better and more harmonious world. I doubt, therefore, if there is in the WCC any significant

trace of the view that Christian attitudes to the Jews fall into a special category to be differentiated from Christian attitudes to other religions. The WCC philosophy of establishing the one human family in justice and peace goes well beyond the bounds of the Christian and Jewish communities.

In some quarters the WCC is regarded as excessively cautious in its approach to the Jews. Elsewhere, notably in the USA in recent years, Jewish-Christian dialogue has been espoused with ever more grandiose ambitions. The idea of 'joint witness' has been canvassed. Dialogue has revealed significant areas of agreement and protagonists of dialogue, especially from the Christian side, have been keen to capitalize on these. 'Continued dialogue, grounded in prayer and shared scripture study, can serve to point out that for both faiths the moral imperatives of peace, justice and love are the heart of God's plan for creation. It is time to move beyond dialogue about our differences into discovery of our shared vision.'⁷⁹ And what is that shared vision? The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of the USA in 1987 expressed this succinctly when they wrote 'We affirm that Jews and Christians are partners in waiting. Christians see in Christ the redemption not yet fully visible in the world, and Jews await the messianic redemption. Christians and Jews together await the final manifesta-

⁷⁶ Section C (Affirmations) No. 9.

⁷⁷ Section C No. 8.

⁷⁸ Section C No. 8.

⁷⁹ Philip A. Cunningham and Arthur F. Starr (eds.), *Sharing Shalom* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), p. 76.

tion of God's promise of the peaceable kingdom.'⁸⁰ In practical terms this is to involve 'a striving to realize the word of the prophets, an attempt to remain sensitive to the dimension of the holy, an effort to encourage the life of the mind, and a ceaseless activity in the cause of justice and peace.'⁸¹ Christians and Jews can engage in these together as well as in the context of their separate religious communities.

To put it mildly, it is a bold move when a Christian denomination can appeal to Jewish messianic hopes as the basis of a common programme, if not a common witness. A traditional and major point of division between the two religious communities has been transformed into a platform of union. How are we to understand this astonishing development? By appreciating some of the dynamics of religious dialogue.⁸² Undoubtedly, the emergence of a dialogue (or rather, a series of dialogues) between several of the churches and representatives of religious Jews is a most encouraging development. It is unprecedented since the first centuries of the Christian church. It is a world removed from the public disputations to which the Jews were subjected from time to time in the medi-

aeval period.

These new dialogues are to be welcomed as an opportunity for Christians and Jews to meet on equal terms as far as political and civil rights are concerned. It is encouraging that some of these dialogues have embraced study of the Scriptures. We should, however, be realistic and note that among all sections of the Jewish religious world there are those who have no time for religious dialogue.⁸³ And even among those who do, we might well ask how far they are motivated by a perfectly understandable concern for their political and social well-being rather than by a desire to understand Christianity better.⁸⁴

Moreover, dialogue does not have unlimited scope.⁸⁵ It is well to recognize difficulties, including the point where dialogue will cease to serve a useful purpose. Dialogue, after all, should not ignore genuine differences.⁸⁶ Indeed, a major purpose of dialogue is to distinguish the genuine differences from the spurious or the superficial. (Of course, considerable common ground may also emerge.) No group of Christians can hope to achieve anything worthwhile if they set aside key Christian beliefs like the messiahship of Jesus solely to gain further co-operation with members

⁸⁰ Affirmation 7 – the whole statement is recorded in Frank E. Eakin Jr, *What Price Prejudice?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1998), pp. 134-50. Eakin does acknowledge on p. 119 the unusual boldness of this statement.

⁸¹ Eakin, *What Price Prejudice?* 149.

⁸² cf. the remarks of David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification* (New York: Oxford UP, 1989), pp. 20-3 about the religious syncretism which can take place in some types of dialogue.

⁸³ Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, pp. 3-9.

⁸⁴ Wigoder, *Jewish-Christian Relations*, pp. 62-4.

⁸⁵ Behind this lies uncertainty as to how dialogue is to be defined. See the helpful analysis of Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), pp. 283-301.

⁸⁶ For a constructive approach to theological difference see Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, *Jewish-Christian Debates* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp. 4-11.

of the Jewish religious community. There will often come a point where further agreement will be impossible without hopeless compromise on one side or another.

From my observations of Jewish-Christian dialogue, such compromises have tended to come from the Christian rather than the Jewish side. For example, one writer from the Christian side, Monika Hellwig, has argued that what she calls a 'fundamentalist' approach to Scripture will not work in Christian-Jewish dialogue, because it leads to deadlock over doctrinal differences. Instead, she argues that it is vital to adopt a critical approach to Scripture, where it is seen as a collection of interpretations of what happened. With this outlook dialogue can proceed because 'it allows for a legitimate variety in the approaches to and interpretation of the same reality'.⁸⁷ But is it open to Christians to indulge in creative re-interpretations or excisions from their own Scriptures to suit Jewish sensibilities?

Most Jews, by contrast, are clear that they will accept nothing less than Christian recognition that Judaism is a valid religion in its own right, of equal weight with Christianity. In this case, Christian mission to Jews is inappropriate. Of course, there are exceptions to this trend – those Jews who recognize the right of Christian mission. Dialogue with such people is to be especially cultivated. But from the Christian side, I wish there was as

much consistency in its appraisal of Judaism. Though the majority of Jews today are not exceptionally religious, we should surely acknowledge the apostle Paul's distinction between a religious zeal or sincerity which is informed by truth and one which is not. His complaint against the practices of the majority of Jews of his own day, of which he had once been a supreme example, was their failure to submit to God's way of righteousness.⁸⁸ The Jewish-Christian dialogue will become a sideshow if challenges such as these are not addressed. This is not to assume a Christian triumphalist stance, because Paul's observations about religious Jews can equally be applied to many of the religious traditions which have grown up within the broad spectrum of the Christian church. We can all ask – is our form of piety shutting our ears to what God is actually saying? More traditional Jews and Christians are agreed on the reality and on much of the content of divine revelation. Such common ground is helpful in dialogue. We can also appraise the adequacy of our responses to that revelation.

I have deliberately mentioned some of the extremes in Christian-Jewish dialogue partly because developments of this nature have occurred comparatively recently and partly because they do illustrate the limitations of dialogue. Most dialogue, however, has not overlooked the serious theological differences but has seen a way forward in active

⁸⁷ Monika Hellwig in Fry, *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, pp. 170-4.

⁸⁸ Rom. 10:2-3.

co-operation on ethical and social issues.⁸⁹

Dialogue is not the only arena where there has been a tendency, consciously or otherwise, for Christians to approximate to essentially Jewish positions. Writing in the 1940s, Jakob Jocz reminded the church that for all the growing fascination of Jewish writers with Jesus, they tended to treat the Synoptic text with recklessness.⁹⁰ Jewish attitudes to Jesus have undoubtedly changed in a positive way. The days when Jesus would hardly be mentioned except as a heretic or apostate are largely gone. But Jews draw the line at an acceptance of Jesus as Son of God or as their Messiah.⁹¹ Indeed, they have been happy to acknowledge him as a great Jewish teacher or leader who, for various reasons, made his profoundest impact on the Gentile world. In short, Jesus has been made into an important figure within Jewish history – a picture which accords with the Zionist tendency to recreate Jewish history in a secular mould.

We ought, therefore, to be cautious in assessing the impact on Jews of developments in the world of Christian scholarship which have accentuated the Jewishness of Jesus or have delved into the world of Second Temple Judaism. (I do not deny their value in elucidating the background to the New Testament.)

⁸⁹ There is a much more tentative approach to the question of joint witness in Helen Fry's collection – *Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, pp. 257-83.

⁹⁰ Jocz, *The Jewish People*, p. 111. Jocz acutely adds that this recklessness has not been confined to Jewish scholars.

⁹¹ Jocz, *The Jewish People*, pp. 112-145.

These developments overlap extensively with the concerns of Jews. Yet, the fundamental difference between Christianity and Judaism is not historical, as though an unnecessary and protracted dispute arose in time past out of misunderstandings which can now be unravelled by critical, historical scholarship. The dispute between the Church and the Synagogue relates to the identity of Jesus of Nazareth and those claims which he made to back up that identity. Essentially these are theological claims not to be resolved by historical research alone.⁹²

Light From the Apostle Paul?

The apostle Paul was at the cutting edge of the rift between Christianity and Judaism. I have already mentioned that he can shed some light on the identity problems faced especially by Messianic Jews at the present time. He also addresses our situation by setting out in his letter to the Romans a strategy of mission for both Jews and Gentiles. It has relevance for our day, because Paul claims to be following God's own strategy. Paul gives the first indication of this at 1:16 where he affirms, 'I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.' We might think this alluded to no more than a temporal priority in the opening up of the gospel. After all, Christ himself came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel and

⁹² Jocz, *The Jewish People*, pp. 320-2.

commissioned his disciples to preach first to Jews before opening the gospel to a Gentile audience. But it is clear that a more important principle is at stake as Paul repeats the order 'the Jew first and then the Gentile' when he comes to talk of God's final judgement at 2:9-10. Evidently with the privileges they possess and the responsibilities these entail, the Jews have a priority in the mind of God when it comes both to bliss and to damnation. In view of this we cannot dismiss Paul's remarks as applicable only to some past age of the church, since we in every age live under the prospect of the same righteous judgement of God.

Paul proceeds in chapters 9-11 to explain the place of the Jews in God's plan. Though disturbed by the belief prevalent among the majority of his fellow-countrymen, he does not allow his heart to rule his head, and is at pains to illustrate that God's word has not failed. He recognizes from a combination of Old Testament Scripture and from more recent revelation that God has been following a careful strategy. The first stage involved the hardening of the majority of Jews while preserving a remnant of true believers among them. This hardening led directly to the opening up of the gospel to the Gentiles. Moreover, the hardening was no arbitrary act on God's part, but a judicial act of retribution because the Jews had failed to acknowledge their own Messiah and had insisted in establishing a righteousness of their own. The hardening, however, was to be only temporary – 'until the fullness of the

Gentiles has come in'. Then the disobedient Jews would be roused to emulation by the evidence of God's mercy among the Gentiles.⁹³ They themselves would then become the recipients of God's mercy. He summed it up in these words, 'Just as you (i.e. Gentiles) who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you.'⁹⁴ Paul, then, regarded both the hardening of Jews and the success of the gospel among the Gentiles as vital prerequisites to the salvation of the Jewish people. The goal is for both Jew and Gentile together to praise God for his mercy.⁹⁵

What are the implications of this missionary strategy?

1. Paul was not complacent about the Jews. This is all the more surprising since Paul recognized God's wise providence in the hardening of the Jews and expected mercy to be shown to them in future. From a different perspective, Paul had argued in Romans 10 that the Jews could not claim ignorance of the gospel. In view of this we might have expected Paul to respond by saying 'They have had their chance. There is little more I can do.'

On the contrary Paul was distraught by their unbelief, partly

⁹³ This important motif was drawn by Paul from the Song of Moses in Deut. 32 – Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy*, pp. 200-85.

⁹⁴ Rom. 11:30-1.

⁹⁵ cf. Deut. 32:43 which is quoted at Rom. 15:10.

because he recognized its devastating consequences, and partly from a concern that it should not appear that God had failed in his covenant promises. Few within the church have come near to Paul's grief. Instead, Jewish unbelief rouses either contempt or apathy. I suggest the latter, the prevailing reaction today, is just as serious as the contempt which warped Christian attitudes until recently. Perhaps there would have been less need for movements such as Messianic Judaism if Gentile Christians had been more aware of their Jewish roots and of their responsibilities to the Jewish people.

2. Paul believed something could be done. Though himself designated an apostle to the Gentiles, he did not ignore his fellow-Jews. Rather, he used his own Gentile ministry, especially the evidences for its success, as a way of stirring unbelieving Jews to a healthy emulation. 'Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.'⁹⁶ By his use of the word 'some' Paul suggests that his efforts will have modest success.⁹⁷ He knows that the majority of Jews have become hardened and will remain so until the fullness of the Gentiles comes into the kingdom. I doubt if Paul knew when the fullness of the Gentiles would be reached, but he did not let that stop him from stirring the Jews of his own day to aspire to

the faith of the Gentiles.⁹⁸

This raises the question – do we see the advance of the gospel in the wider context of Jewish evangelism? Is it part and parcel of the teaching given to new congregations in lands newly open to the Christian gospel to point to the Jewish roots of the church and the responsibilities this entails toward the Jewish people? Are they given the right perspectives on Jewish unbelief? Remember that if they are given such perspectives, they are themselves being warned not to fall into the same sin of unbelief.

3. Paul was also concerned about Gentile attitudes. The whole section from verses 11 to 32 of chapter 11 is directed to Gentile believers. Observing the historical fact that the majority of Jews were divested of their privileges and Gentiles installed in their place, Gentile Christians might assume an arrogant complacency. They might think they have been brought into the church because they are better than the offending Jews. 'Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in', Paul represents them as saying.⁹⁹ That was to ignore the Jewish roots of the church, especially the promises to the patriarchs. It was also to gloss over the real possibility of the sort of unbelief among Gentiles who knew the gospel which could equally result in their losing their privileges.

⁹⁶ Rom. 11:14.

⁹⁷ Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 2:80.

⁹⁸ Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy*, pp. 129-131 suggests that Paul believed that once his Spanish mission was complete, the fullness of the Gentiles would have come in; but I doubt that Paul would have been as definite as this.

⁹⁹ Rom. 11:19.

As well as warning against errors, the apostle is keen to inculcate a positive outlook on Jewish evangelism. When he mentions his own policy of magnifying his ministry to the Gentiles before his fellow-Jews, he implies that this would be an appropriate policy for Gentile believers. After all, signs of spiritual life among them are meant to incite the Jews to a healthy envy. Moreover, they are to see it as perfectly natural for Jews to resume their allegiance to the true God.

Probably Paul's main point is to affirm that Gentile believers have nothing to fear and everything to gain from the salvation of Jews.¹⁰⁰ 'If their transgression means riches for the world and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!'¹⁰¹ Indeed, Paul goes on to declare in Romans 15 that one purpose of God is to bring Jew and Gentile together in praise of him for his mercy. This had immediate relevance to the congregation at Rome, composed as it was of both Gentiles and Jews. Paul pleads for mutual acceptance between those believers from very different backgrounds so that glory may come to God. Of course, there were dangers at this time that Jewish believers might despise Gentile believers; but the danger in Rome, where probably

Gentiles predominated, may have been the reverse. If so, then this situation would recur in subsequent centuries including today. Paul's teaching is designed to promote harmony between the two groups. Since both began life under the dominion of sin but had experienced God's mercy, their spiritual experience in essentials was the same. Such equality was an adequate basis for spiritual harmony. The only difference between Jew and Gentile concerned their temporal place in God's scheme of salvation.

There are other ways in which Paul's analysis retains its relevance. In fact, with the re-emergence of a significant Jewish church for the first time since the fourth century, his letter to the Romans has even more relevance. Paul was aware of possible strains in the relationship between Jewish and Gentile Christians, and wrote at length on the place of both in God's economy in order to minimise these. Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians (Messianic or otherwise) must ponder these points in the interests of healthy relationships. The main danger for Gentile believers remains a lack of concern both for the potential enrichment brought to the church by Jewish believers and for the precarious position they have between two distinct religious communities. Jewish believers, for their part, may pursue a separatist course, neither contributing to nor benefiting from Gentile churches.

One significant difference remains from Paul's day. We no longer confront an assured Jewish religious or national identity. While Paul testified

¹⁰⁰ I am assuming Paul does teach a much fuller conversion of Israel at a later point in history. Today this is a controversial position, though it was a commonplace among Puritan writers of the 17th century. For more discussion on this point, see my book *Hated without a Cause?* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), pp. 65-70.

¹⁰¹ Rom. 11:12.

to their zeal for God, today we can point only to a small number for whom that judgement would be appropriate. Judaism today is in crisis. Not only are there many divisions, but even those Jews who form one particular grouping are united more by cultural ties than by religious beliefs. This emerges when they pick and choose which aspects of their religious tradition they accept. A Jewish identity is maintained largely by the love of Israel and the fear of anti-Semitism – hardly religious criteria. Indeed, it is amazing that Jewish identity persists at all when religious belief among Jews has become so diverse. But surely it presents an opportunity for constructive witness to the Jewish people in terms of the questions – what does it mean to be a Jew? Why maintain a distinct Jewish people? This theme has not attained the prominence it deserves in Christian-Jewish dialogue. Since the Holocaust, Christians have understandably displayed a willingness to re-examine their religious traditions with regard to the Jews. That is welcome. But at the same time there has been a reluctance among Christians to challenge Jews to think of their own identity, understandably perhaps because any hint of anti-Judaism is dismissed as anti-Semitism. We can be sure, however, that this challenge will face the Jewish people as they continue to define the character of the state of Israel and as they consider the implications of their religious diversity.

Finally, the apostle Paul (or the New Testament generally) has little to tell us directly about a sovereign

Jewish state.¹⁰² Interestingly Paul leaves the land out of his list of Jewish privileges in Romans 9:4-5.¹⁰³ Perhaps even more significantly, when Paul speaks of the restoration of the Jewish people in Romans 11, it is restoration to their covenant privileges – to all the blessings brought by Christ. It seems not to matter whether the Jews in question are in Israel or in the Diaspora.

Conclusion

For these reasons I am agnostic about the future of a Jewish state in God's plans, especially as a Jewish Diaspora is unlikely to end. A more profitable approach, I believe, is to ask whether the Jewish people as a corporate entity are to play a major part in God's future plans. Often this is seen as a dispensationalist distinctive; but it is not only dispensationalists who believe from Romans 11:12 and 15 that the future conversion of the Jews will bring great blessings in its train. It would be unwise to be too specific about these blessings since Paul offers few details, but I will make one tentative suggestion. This conversion may have a corporate dimension, and so may tie in with the strong sense of Jewish community to which I have alluded.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps the conversion of a large section of the

¹⁰² See the interesting comments of Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 266-9.

¹⁰³ cf. Rom. 4:13 where Abraham and his descendants are said to inherit the earth, not Israel.

¹⁰⁴ That is not to overlook the fact that the restoration of Israel is accompanied in certain Old Testament passages with the healing of traditional divisions in Jewish society – Ezek. 37:15-23 and Zech. 12:10-14.

Jewish community will bring to the fragmented Christian church a greater sense of community values.

This, however, is only a surmise. Even if it were correct, it would not justify making a theological priority out of preserving the distinctness of the Jewish people, as many want to do today. It is certainly a Christian responsibility to resist any manifestation of anti-Semitism; but it is quite a different thing for Christian churches directly to promote Jewish separateness, whether that be construed culturally, politically or religiously.

A careful balance must be preserved. Any approach from Christians to Jewish people must recognize and be sensitive to distinctive Jewish concerns. The Scriptures, after all, set forth a distinct role for the Jews in God's dealings with all peoples of the earth. Moreover, since the history of the churches in their dealings with the Jews is not readily paralleled from other fields, it demands separate study from other aspects of ecclesiastical history. It may also be appropriate for churches and missionary agencies today to follow the example

of Peter and Paul in affirming different priorities towards the Jews and the Gentiles (cf. Gal 2:7-10).

At the present time sensitivity to the Jewish people must include sensitivity to their feelings of insecurity – feelings which can only grow as it becomes increasingly clear that no real security is to be found within the modern state of Israel. This issue lies at the root of their problems of religious and political identity. Zionist influence has inclined Jews to look for a refuge in some ideal geographical location. The Hebrew Scriptures, however, point to God as the sole refuge of his own people. In the New Testament this idea finds poignant expression in Jesus' willingness to protect the people of Jerusalem as a mother bird would bring its chicks under the shelter of its wings, but sadly Jerusalem would not have anything of it (Mt. 23:37-9; Lk. 13:34-5). We can, therefore, understand (and lament) the lack of security Jews face in this world, but at the same time we can point to the One who alone can give them the security they desperately need.

Gardening

*Golgotha's tree once grew in Eden,
The vine that saw salvation-history has long roots.
The branch once broken did not wither, but brought forth
sacred foliage;
And we are grafted into that redemptive plant.*

From *Becoming . . .* (poetry reflecting theology) by Garry Harris,
Adelaide, South Australia. (used with permission)