

Jews and Christians: Rejecting Stereotypes, Forging New Relationships
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**Unedited text of Response to Lecture by Rabbi Norman Cohen Presented at a Jay
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This is a very timely program. We gather here at a time when we are seeing great evil being committed in the name of God. It is incumbent on those of us who call ourselves people of faith – whatever our faith – to think about how to resolve our conflicts, particularly those based on religion, without resort to violence.

Let me start by suggesting why I think this subject is of particular importance. While I believe interfaith dialogue is important among all major faith traditions, from my Christian standpoint, I think dialogue and greater understanding between Jews and Christians is particularly important, for at least two reasons.

First, Jesus was, after all, a Jew. This surprises some Catholics, who think Jesus was Catholic. It has never actually occurred to them that Jesus was Jewish. As Rabbi Cohen has suggested, Jesus teachings were Pharisaic in style and content. If we ignore that Jewishness, we risk misunderstanding Jesus and what he said.

As an aside, one of the books I enjoyed this summer was Amy-Jill Levine's *Short Stories by Jesus*, subtitled *The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi*. In it she explores a number of Jesus' parables, explaining how we tend to misinterpret them and showing how their original Jewish audience would have understood them. (She also demonstrates that several well-known parables Jesus used find their source in Jewish commentary.) It is well worth reading. And it is not only the parables that reflect Jesus' Jewishness; as Rabbi Cohen observed, the great commandment – Love God and love one another are taken directly from the Torah. As is what we call the Lord's Prayer.

Second is the history of Christian anti-semitism. As Rabbi Cohen observed, Christian rejection of Judaism gave rise to serious persecution of Jews – including an effort to exterminate them. I believe that is an important part of Christian history we must remember. (Especially now, when we are seeing a rise of anti-Semitism in both Europe and the United States. “We must not forget” says a memorial stone at Dachau. I sometimes wonder if we have.)

There is no question that the Catholic Church has come a long way in its desire for meaningful interfaith dialogue with our Jewish brothers and sisters. To give you a sense of where we once were, in the third century, Origen preached “Let no one fool himself; ...outside of the Church, no one is saved; for if someone goes outside, he becomes responsible for his own death.” And in the fourth century, Augustine claimed the Jewish people were cursed and relegated to eternal damnation. In 1442, Pope Eugene IV's papal bull *Cantate Domino* expressed in no uncertain terms that

[The sacrosanct Roman Church] believes, professes, and proclaims that those not living within the Catholic Church, not only pagans, but also Jews and heretics and

schismatics cannot become participants in eternal life, but will depart “into everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels.”

Given that attitude, historically I think it is correct as Rabbi Cohen suggests that the goal of Christians in interacting with people of other faith traditions was to convert them to the one true faith. But by the time of Vatican II, that was starting to change.

Nostra Aetate, the 1965 declaration on the relation of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions, acknowledged that there is much that is “true and holy” in the precepts and teachings of other religions and that the Church “regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men.” Consistent with that sentiment, Pope John Paul II spoke of the need to rid ourselves of “stereotypes and old habits.”

Projects like Rabbi Cohen are thus incredibly valuable in moving us toward that goal.

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So let me share some brief observations about some of the points he raised in his talk, starting with observations about Christian perceptions of Judaism.

First, I think Rabbi Cohen is absolutely correct that we all have a tendency to look at the beliefs and practices of someone of another faith tradition through the lens of our own tradition.

So we think – bar mitzvah – that’s like our sacrament of Confirmation. Or to use Rabbi Cohen’s example, viewing a synagogue as Jewish church.

As a means of trying to understand, I’m not sure that is a bad starting point – so long as (a) it is an initial point of reference and not our ending point, that is, that the recognizable feature becomes the starting point from which we move to deeper understanding and not a reason to think one need not go any further and

(b) so long as the comparison does not become a basis for judgment. So long as it is not: “Here’s why our “version” of “church” is better than theirs.” (Although I confess my own thoughts on this sometimes run in opposition directions – as I compare the rigor and time put into preparation for Bar Mitzvah with the Catholic minimal-by-comparison preparation for Confirmation.)

A subset of that is our need to recognize that we have different understandings of certain terms. Rabbi Cohen’s “Messiah” is a great example. Christians have a particular understanding of that and most Christians have very little idea what Jews understand by that term.

Second, I also think Rabbi Cohen is correct in his (at least implied) criticism of the Christian tendency to interpret what we used to call the Old Testament and now more commonly refer to as the Hebrew Scriptures through a Christian lens. We look back on those scriptures post-resurrection and see them as prefiguring Jesus as the Christ in ways

I suspect the writers of those scriptures never intended. Do we think about what that says to our Jewish brothers and sisters?

Third, to a greater or lesser degree, I think many Christians – historically and even some today – have accepted a narrative that reads the Gospels as “Jews were bad.” Judaism is equated with a harsh views of the Pharisees – as concerned with law vs. love and so forth. We need to (a) realize how much of the presentation of Jews in the New Testament is distorted and (b) understand that modern Judaism is not adequately represented by the Jews of Jesus’ time (however they are presented in the New Testament).

Fourth, I think Rabbi Cohen and I would agree that there has been a vast improvement on a lot of these scores – at least at the level of theologians and those who read and think seriously about this issue. Academic Christians are reading and listening to scholars who speak from a Jewish perspective, reading the Jewish Annotated New Testament and the like.

The challenge is moving this to a “grass-roots” Christian level. This question came up at the Jay Phillips Symposium on Christianity in a Multi-Faith World last month. During the Q&A, a man who teaches in a Catholic school in an area outside of the Twin Cities said something like, “All well and good to say the Church has changed on grown in its appreciation of other faith traditions, but someone needs to tell that to some of the local bishops and priests who still fear any exposure outside of Catholicism.”

And that is a big challenge. It is true with respect to all sorts of things. (How many priests do you still hear talking about Mary Magdalene as a prostitute even though the Vatican repudiated that idea back when I was in grade school.) And it is certainly true on this issue. That is something we need to work on.

Finally on Christian perspectives on Judaism, I want to just say a couple of words about the State of Israel, because, although Rabbi Cohen did not discuss it here, I think it is an important issue. While Israel and Judaism are not synonymous (and I, for one, think one should be able to express opposition to something the Israeli government does without being labeled an anti-Semite), I think most Christians fail to understand the importance of the State of Israel to Jews. We don’t get the centrality of it – how much of Jewish law is tied to the land of Israel and how the Holocaust brought the need for a Jewish homeland into sharp focus. (Again, not saying Israel cannot be criticized; but Christians need to be educated about how much and why Israel matters.)

Pope Francis is reported to have said earlier this year that anyone who does not recognize that the Jewish people and the State of Israel and their right to exist, is guilty of anti-Semitism. But that is different from suggesting that one must support every policy of the Israeli nation.

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It is more difficult for me to speak from my own Christians experience about Jewish perceptions of Christianity, but let me offer two thoughts.

First, I think at least some Jewish people have something of a monolithic view of Christianity. They need to be sensitive to the fact that there are differences between Catholicism and various Protestant denominations on many issues. (Pope, Mary, transubstantiation) And, related, apart from what the religion teaches, it is hard to make any statements about “All Christians” – once you get beyond the basics of incarnation, death and resurrection.

Christians, likewise, need to be sensitive to differences among Jewish adherents.

Second, just as Christians need to be sensitive to the fact that words have different meanings in Christianity and Judaism, Jews need to understand what Christians mean by certain statements is more sophisticated than the literal words mean.

So, for example – to take a big issue – the New Testament does say that the only way to the Father is through the Son and “official” Catholic Church teaching is that Christ is central. But that doesn’t mean it believes everyone has to be a Christian; it does not say Christianity as a faith is the exclusive avenue for salvation.

The Catholic Church acknowledges that, through ways known only to God and not to humans, Christ may make Himself known to non-Christians in a way that allows for their salvation. This is reflected in Karl Rahner’s notion of the “anonymous Christian.” Similarly, in its 2000 declaration, *Dominus Iesus*, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith spoke of those non-Christians who possess “a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church, but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation.”

Now, that still may not be a position or way of framing it that Jews can be happy with. BUT wouldn’t it be better to discuss and object to the actual position than address one that is not a true one. It is always easier to combat the straw man and everyone needs to avoid that temptation.

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Let me end with a few quick observation regarding both Christians and Jews that affect how we view each other:

First, we need to remember that our observations about particular Jews or Christians we know do not represent the faith as a whole. I grew up in NYC, so for many years, Jewish for me was NYC Jewish. As a child that meant my father’s Jewish partner on the police force who brought his little girl to our house to decorate our Christmas tree. So Jews were people who had to go to gentile homes to have a Christmas tree. And it meant my father’s experience with Hasidic Jews in Red Hook, Brooklyn – asking him to turn on their lights or press the elevator button for them on the Sabbath, which gives the impression of Jews as trying to subvert the intention of their laws. I’m not sure my experience going to law school in NYC was much better – there, Jewish was synonymous

with East Coast liberal cultural Judaism. For many people who have no lived experience with Jews at all, Jewish is Shylock in Merchant of Venice, and he was the bad guy.

The totality is always greater than our own experience of it, so we need to be careful forming judgments based only on my own experience.

Second, and this is always case when dealing with people of different faiths, nationalities, races: we can't compare best of ourselves with worse of another. Yet that is precisely our tendency. No meaningful dialogue and growth is possible from that standpoint.

Third, for me the most important line in what Rabbi Cohen said is "Let us not be so bold as to think that our God is so limited that God chooses only the Jews or has replaced the Jews with the Christians." And that "Only a concept of a God who is so great that covenant can be created with more than one people in different ways, is the road to better interfaith understanding." My God is an unlimited God – a God in whose house there are many mansions, a God who says in John 10, "I have other sheep who do not belong to this fold." And that means, as Rabbi Cohen says, that "we need to be open to the possibility that truth can be found by different covenant people in different ways."

As he suggests, interfaith dialogue is not about syncretism; it is not about ignoring our differences. It is about understanding our differences and making room for each other.

Finally, the big question is: what are we going to do about this? How will we move the conversation forward? And how to we reach, not only the kind of people who are in this audience this evening, but the rank and file of both traditions?