

Dialogue between Jews and Christians in the Holy Land

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“There will be no peace among the nations without peace between the religions, there will be no peace between the religions without dialogue between the religions”.

Hans Küng

Jerusalem is a symbolic city. She is not, as some repeat improperly, the capital of three monotheistic religions. Only Christianity was born there as the church was founded at the cenacle. Abraham and Mohamed have had only occasional links with the city. In the Holy Land dialogue with Jews must become trialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims, since in the world there are 14 million Jews and 1.2 billion Muslims. But nevertheless the dialogue with Judaism is more important, for it affects the very soul of the Catholic faith.

A. *Some historical facts*

In 1948 the Jewish State was founded. As a result of the creation of this state the population of Palestine experienced 5 wars and till now there is no peace in the land. Many Christians left the country, for they thought dialogue was impossible with the Jews. It is true that most of the Christians are Arabs. Only a few are of Jewish origin. For a small minority, dialogue with Jews is not easy. The local Church became convinced that the Bible is the book of Israel and they are making a political reading of the Bible instead of a spiritual reading of the sacred Book.

But in the Holy Land there is also an international Christian presence, made up in great part by the Franciscan of the Custody of the Holy Land. There are about 200 Franciscans of the Custody present in Israel and Palestine. For them, not being Arabs, dialogue is easier. In fact; during the second world war Franciscans from Europe had saved a lot of Jews. Father Rufino Niccacci saved more than 300 Jews in Assisi and in the Franciscan Convents of Rome more then 600 Jews were hidden and saved.

In the Holy Land there are also the Eastern Churches, the Greek Orthodox who have always excellent relations with the authorities of the State where they are

living, and the Armenian, the Copts, the Ethiopians, the Syrian and the Protestant and Anglican Churches. Most of the eastern Churches do not dialogue with Judaism, while the Anglican and Protestant churches are more open. I shall speak only on behalf of the Catholic Church.

In the past the relations between the Christians and Israel have always been influenced by three factors:

1. The first is theological and is related to the Church's relationship to Judaism. Who is the elect people? What is the meaning of the gift of the land?
2. The second factor is the need to consider the sensibilities of Arab countries out of concern for the fate of Catholics residing in them. The desire to improve relations with Muslims is considered as a political need.
3. And the third is the fact that Israel is the Holy Land. A political reality has in fact a religious dimension.

Very often while speaking about Israel there is a confusion of levels, in which on pretext of defending the Palestinian cause, theological reflection on Israel is denied, while a potpourri of politics and theology, is elaborated. The main difficulty of Christians to understand certain elements of the Jewish conscience come from the fact that the Jewish identity combines a national and a religious dimension. Israel is a people with a religious vocation, or, if you prefer, a religion with a national basis. For Europeans, used to separate State and Religion, this combination is too complicated. Speaking about dialogue between Jews and Christians in the Holy Land we must distinguish different periods. Since it is not possible to study them all, I shall limit myself to the period following the creation of the state of Israel. For those interested in the whole history I recommend the book of Giovanelli: *La santa sede e la Palestina*, Pome 2000.

- The first period, after the creation of the State of Israel, was made up of fear. Many Christian left the country. This attitude of fear was even expressed at the second Vatican Council during the discussions of *Nostra Aetate*. The Latin Patriarch Monsignor Gori with other bishops of the Middle East were convinced that they could not sign this declaration. In fact the Christians made a political reading of the Bible. Israel meant for them the new political situation which created the immigration of the Christians. But a few years before the Custos of the Holy Land, Father Faccio, who was a biblical scholar had a different approach in *La Terra Santa* 1950, 78-80. The return of the Jews to Israel was predicted by the prophets according to him.

Among the Jews who came from Europe to Israel many had married christian wives. The problem of these Christian preoccupied the Franciscan of Jaffa and Ramle. Dialogue even in these families was not easy, since the Israeli government did everything to promote proselytism among their children.

-the second period goes from Vatican Council II till the nomination of the first Arab Patriarch Monsignor Sabbah. The visit of Pope Paul VI in the Holy land in 1964 was a pilgrimage to the Holy places. He never pronounced the name of Israel, even if he visited parts of Galilee which were under Israeli government.. In fact there were no diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Israel. The second Vatican Council gave an impetus to the Jewish-Catholic dialogue. The Church denied the collective responsibility of Jews of all ages for the crucifixion of Jesus. It also attacked anti-semitism. Nevertheless the Latin Church in Israel kept silent. In her liturgy she took off the name of Israel from the Magnificat and put instead of it Jacob. The Institute of the Fathers of Sion founded by the brothers Ratisbonne for the conversion of the Jews in 1843 replaced their aim with a willingness to enter into dialogue with the Jews as equals. It was acknowledged that the Jews continue to be God's chosen people, thus revising traditional theology. The Sisters of Sion were very active, guiding pilgrims and being Zionist activists. The Palestinian Christians continued to say that the problem of the Shoah was an European problem. Why should the Arab Christians, who are innocent in this problem, pay the bill?

- In the year 1967 the parliament of Israel passed a law called 'the protection of the Holy places law'. A month after the six day war the Holy see dispatched Monsignor Felici to consult with the government of Israel on the new situation created after the six days war. An official statement was made public and spoke of mutual understanding. Even Moshe Dayan paid a visit to the Custos to confirm the position of Israel who decided to protect the Christian Holy Places.

- A major modification of the Vatican's support for the internationalisation of Jerusalem was included in the Pope's message of Christmas 1968 when Pope Paul VI spoke of a desire to obtain international guarantees for the Holy Shrines, a special status guaranteed by international law.

- At the end of the 80's; with the failure of of communism, many Jews emigrated to Israel. Recently the Israeli government recognised that more than 40% of them were Christians. Dialogue will have to start between these Christians and the Arab Christians.

-In the year 1987 Michel Sabbah was nominated Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. Not being himself a theologian, he formed a theological commission and asked it to study the problem of the land, the problem of covenant and election. The document was published and is known under the title: "Reading the Bible in the Land of the Bible".

-In 1993 official relations were established between the Holy See and Israel. The Apostolic Delegate has now the rank of Nunzio.

-In march 2000 the pope John Paul II visited the Holy places. One of the most important event of this pilgrimage was his visit to Yad washem with the prayer of forgiveness to God, his visit to the chiefs rabbis and to the wailing wall. A new attitude in Jewish-Christian relations started.

-In September of the year 2000, the year of the great Jubilee the al-Aqsa Intifada started. This Intifada has exacerbated the relationship between the Israeli authorities and the Church Institutions with leading catholic priests joining in the criticism of the Israeli occupation and the behaviour of Israeli soldiers in particular. In a meeting of diplomats from 175 countries the Pope warned that the situation in the Middle East could spiral out of control. He spoke of a continuous injustice and a contempt for international law that forbids holding onto territory by force.

-David Jäger, a Franciscan of Jewish origin, who is the legal advisor of the Nuncio in Jerusalem spoke recently of the arrogant attitude of Israelis during their talks with the Palestinians. He said also that the Sharon government is going to get rid of a serious thread to Israel's relations with Christianity, since Sharon promised to the Pope that he will be against the building of the Mosque of Nazareth very close to the Basilica of the Annunciation. During Sharon's visit to the United States, president Bush asked him to do everything he could to stop the building of the Mosque of Nazareth.

- In Jerusalem Jews and Christians ignored each other for centuries.

But after the Pope's visit to the Holy Land there are some signs of good will. I shall quote 2 signs of the times, even if the situation remain tense:

a) The first one is the opening of a new convent in Jerusalem: the convent of Joachim and Anna in the New city.

Some of you probably read an article in the Italian newspaper *l'Avvenire*: The convent where the friars speak Hebrew. The article was written by Dr Graziano Motta on January when the Custody of the Holy Land inaugurated the convent of Simon and Anna in the Jewish part of Jerusalem. The convent will be the meeting point of the Jewish Christian. To be honest I must start with a few words about the pioneers of the Dialogue between Jews and Christians

The pioneers of the dialogue

The Dominicans who founded years ago the *Domus Isaia* decided not to continue the work of Father Marcel Dubois, a French Dominican who used to teach philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Father Bruno Hussar another Dominican who founded *Neweh Shalom*, a kibboutz for Jews, Muslims and Christians, died, and nobody continues his initiative. The era of the pioneers of the dialogue between Jews and Christians cannot ignore the figure of Father Daniel Rufeisen, a polish Carmelite well known in Israel, who did a lot to present Christianity to Jews and Judaism to Christians. Also Father Rufeisen left for the heavenly Jerusalem. To this short list of pioneers I should add immediately the names of some institutes present in the Holy Land which have the charisma of dialoguing with Judaism. Among them I must mention the Fathers of Ratisbonne and the Sisters of Zion, founded by a two converted Jew: Father Alphonse Marie and Théodore Ratisbonne. But after Vatican II Council, the Sisters of Zion decided that they should insist more in Christian milieu to show the Jewish roots of Christianity. In Ayn Karem they have a convent of contemplatives who continue to live the charisma of Father Ratisbonne in another way. Another congregation of contemplative sisters present in the Holy Land: The Sisters of Bethlehem in Beth Gemal are very open to dialogue with Judaism. Even the Sisters of the Beatitudes present in the Holy Land insist on knowing Judaism to better understand Christianity.

The Franciscans, present in the Holy land more than seven centuries, continue the dialogue with Muslims, since they came after the crusaders to substitute violence with a peaceful dialogue. They are convinced that the dialogue with Judaism cannot ignore the dialogue with Muslims. In other words the dialogue must become a triologue. Recently they started a new ear of dialogue with the Jews.

b) The opening of the Convent of Joachim and Anna was made possible because the Hebrew University of Jerusalem opened a centre for the Study of Christianity during the year 2000. This is a second sign. Before Christianity was taught in the

context of the History of religions. Now the new centre gives more independence to Christianity and a new status. A few days ago there was the second annual lecture given by a Jesuit on the subject: How do Christians deal with pluralism: Some Jesuit responses.

In the pamphlet of presentation you could read : “Members of the faculty at the Hebrew University also enjoy personal and scholarly relationships with their Colleagues in a number of ecclesiastic institutions within Jerusalem such as the Ecole Biblique, the Franciscan Studium Biblicum, the Tantur Institute for Theological Research and the Ratisbonne Pontifical institute of Jewish studies”.

B. Some Implications of the Dialogue between Jews and Christians in the Holy Land

In order to clarify the ideas about the dialogue one has to draw some distinctions. Modern Judaism is divided into three main branches:

Orthodox Jews who put emphasis upon the Torah study and on practice of the 613 commandments.

Conservative movements, especially in the US, who stress the unity of the Jewish people amid its diversity.

Reformed Judaism strong in the US, or Liberal Judaism, a term used in the UK, stress the idea of God and contemporary orthodoxy and want to constitute the bridge between Orthodox and Conservative Jews.

In Israel there a very few Reformed or conservative congregations. Orthodoxy is the official religious position. Dialogue is possible only with liberal and conservative movements. Last year orthodox Jews burned the flat of a Christian lady born in Switzerland who lived in the neighbourhood of Meah Shearim.

To make the problem even more complex there are many groups of messianic Jews, some of them interested in dialogue, specially those living in Tiberias where they present a video cassette to Christian pilgrims. Their centre is called “Galilee experience”.

The Christian communities in the Holy Land are also divided in many groups:

we have the Eastern Churches and the western Churches. For political reasons the Eastern Christian communities forgot their biblical roots to affirm only the differences with the Jews. They suffer from a lack of missionary dynamism and seem to be given in to Muslim fatalism. Western Churches, especially the Protestant Churches, are very open to dialogue with Judaism. Christians from the Netherlands even have their own Kibbutz called *Nes 'Amim* in Israel. Every year Christian friends of Israel from all over the world take part in the celebration of the Jewish Feast of tabernacles. The Center for the Study of Christianity of the Hebrew university is sponsored by Christians of the Netherlands.

To speak about the dialogue between Jews and Christians in the Holy Land means to speak about liberal or conservative Jews and western Christian. One should remember also that most of the Eastern Christian are from Arab origin, while there is a small community of Christian from Jewish origin, about 300. It means that dialogue will have a political connotation.

The first step of Dialogue is **reciprocal knowledge and tolerance**. Dialogue with Judaism didn't start in the year 2000. So we have to call to mind the complicated history of this dialogue.

Christians know that Jesus was a Jew, that Mary his mother was born under the Law, and that the apostles were Jews. Our dialogue with our elder brethren is the result of a long path of reconciliation between the Church and Israel. Vatican II marked an important stage of this new era due to Pope John XXIII and to Cardinal Bea. By this seizing of conscience was born an ever-increasing interest on part of Christians concerning their relationship with the Jewish people characterised by a rediscovery of the Jewish roots of Christianity.

While speaking of Judaism one should keep to mind the historical development of Judaism. The Biblical period insists upon ethical monotheism. The One God is holy and demands holiness. He has chosen Israel to serve as a nation of priests (Ex 19,6) to be a light unto the nations (Is 42,6). Prominent among the laws are the observance of the sabbath and the celebration of Passover, Pentecost and the Feast of Tabernacles. Once a year, at the feast of Expiation, Israel asks pardon to God for his sins. The feast of the dedication of the temple, Hanoukah, remembers the victory of the Maccabees and the purification of the Temple, while the feast on the 9th of Ab calls to mind the destruction of the Temple.

Males are to be circumcised as a sign of the covenant made with Abraham. The spiritual leaders of the people were the priest who served in the Temple who was the custodian of the Law and the prophet who brought a message from God. The belief in the coming of the Messiah became stronger after the destruction of the Temple and the exile to Babylon. This hope was associated with that of the national restoration under the Davidic ruler.

The pre-rabbinic age is the period after the return from Babylon. It is characterised by the reading of the Torah and by commentaries to actualise it. The rise of oral tradition was implied in these commentaries. It was accepted only by the Pharisees, while the Sadducees accepted only literal reading of the Torah. Under Persian influence there came into Jewish life the belief in angels. Many groups developed in Judaism in this period. The most well know group is that of the Essenes living in the desert of Judah.

After the destruction of the Temple in the year 70 by the Romans Judaism reorganised itself and insisted on national consolation and on the assurance that God still cared. The universalistic tendencies of Judaism were obscured by the particular in this period. Oral traditions were collected and put into writing. The dominant value of the Torah study was more and more underlined.

During he Middle Ages, Judaism was confronted with the challenge of Greek philosophy in its Arabic garb. The Jews mainly affected were those of Spain and Islamic countries.

In the 18th century great ferment marked Jewish life. The movement of the Hasidim was founded in 1760 with the message of simple faith and joy to be invoked in God's service. Hasidism is emotional and mystical. Ritual immersion plays an important part in Hasidic life.

The period of Enlightenment brought the Jewish people face to face with the modern world and the exercise of reason. Emancipation caused a direct confrontation with modern thought.

The experience of the *Shoah* lived by occidental Judaism during the second world war left traumatised communities. It takes time to heal wounds. If dialogue is not always possible, silence and listening music together can help to overcome sufferings.

The essence of Jewish faith is contained in the *Shema Israel*: "Listen Israel: the Lord our God is one. You shall love God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength". God in the Bible is presented as the One who enters in covenant with his people, who looks for dialogue with his people. The whole Bible is nothing else than the dialogue of God with his people through the prophets and the sages.

Maimonides drew up 13 principles of the Jewish faith: Belief in the existence of God, in his unity, in his incorporeality, in his eternity. He alone is to be worshipped. Moses is the greatest of the prophets. Torah is divine and unchanging. Prophecy is inspired by the Spirit of God. God knows the thoughts and deeds of men. He rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. The Messiah shall come and the resurrection of the dead will take place at the end.

Before Vatican II the Church considered the Jews as witnesses of the truth of the Gospels and was concerned mainly with their conversion. In 1993 a guide to Interreligious dialogue in Israel gave the list of 40 Institutions interested in Dialogue with the Jews. A long itinerary has been done.

The dialogue of the new millennium will have different tonalities according to the different areas. In Israel such dialogue will always be more difficult than in the diaspora. This is due to various reasons among which the aggressiveness of the orthodox Jews towards the Christians on one part, and the poverty of the Christian communities due to the voluntary exile of the Palestinian intelligentsia.

A new approach to Israel and Judaism

- A new approach to Israel and Judaism shall consider Israel from the viewpoint of its vocation and of its present destiny: What remains from the divine election? What does it mean today?
- shall consider the destiny of Israel as the exemplar of man's spiritual destiny.
- The return to Zion seems to imply the return to God. Israel has a mysterious vocation of which Christians are witnesses.
- In the Church facts precede and prepare laws. The experience and the reflection of the faithful enables theology to progress.

Such dialogue takes place at different levels:

- **As for the daily one**, Christians and Jews can collaborate to resolve the

important problems of the world, like hunger and injustice in the world. Collaboration in the social field remains open, seeing that the same values are taken up by Christianity. Many cases of collaboration on the humanitarian level already exist. The best example is the Kibbutz *Neweh Shalom* founded by Father Bruno Hussar, a dominican father who was born in Egypt. This foundation was possible because the Trappist monastery of Latroun gave the land to start the Kibbutz.

This form of collaboration can extend itself into other sectors. The archaeological research in the Holy Land, for example, remains an open field where Christians School of Shammai or a Hassid? Even in Christian milieu where the *Third Quest* is characterised by the research of the jewishness of Jesus, different opinions are defended. Nodet and Taylor from the Ecole biblique are convinced that Christianity originated from Qumran, since Baptism and Eucharist can be explained in this context according to them. Others are convinced that Christianity originated from the Baptist milieu as the Gospel itself recognises it.

The Church Fathers, when they reflected on the mystery of Israel, loved to recover the scriptural image of the explorers sent by Moses into the land of Canaan who, reaching the valley of Escol, cut a branch with a bunch of grapes. Because of its immense dimensions, it was carried with a pole by two men who rested it on their shoulders (Numbers 13;23). In the wood from which hangs the bunch, the Fathers of the Church recognised the Cross on which hangs Christ, bunch of the new vine. In the two carriers of the pole, they saw the Church in the person who is in back and Israel in the one who precedes him. Both of them are walking toward the same goal, united by the same hope, but the first, even though leading the way sees neither the bunch nor the Church, while the Church, the second, sees the older brother in the light of Christ crucified.

Both Judaism and Christianity received the mission to bring to the world the grape, the suffering servant. Both are taking part in the mystery of suffering and through their sufferings there are going to save the world.

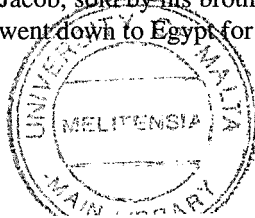
The mission of the Church and of Israel is to walk together, participating in the same fatigue of bringing to the world the suffering servant who is the Saviour: "By his wounds we are healed." Walking means not stopping, moving forward and progressing. A name of early Christianity was "the way." Judaism also insists on the *halakah*, that is on the way of walking. The faith of Israel and of the Church

must ignite in the pagans the desire to take part in the heritage to be able to eat the fruit of the vine. Walking in diversity and awareness of a duality is not easy. It must be lived in reciprocal respect, in the mutual witness of the one God and in awaiting the fulfilment of the promises. The mystery of Israel speaks like this to the Church in all her richness and the testimony of the believers in Christ offers to Judaism a positive stimulus to walk in an ever-more faithful manner in the ways of the living God.

The idea of a reconciliation in the making, rather than complete, surpasses every pretence of substitution according to which the Church would have taken the place of Israel in the plan of salvation. Israel, in the measure in which it maintains the faith of its Fathers and brings the name of God to the world, remains testimony of the election and of the promises of God. God does not regret his promises. The covenant will not be revoked even if it is not fully complete. The Church, which is not the Kingdom, remains the people of God constituted in the covenant concluded in the blood of Christ, covenant open to the pagans like the Jews. There is only one salvific design, but different covenants, from the covenant established with Noah to that of Abraham until that which has been sealed forever in the redemption of Christ. There is only one fundamental structure of the dialogue between God and his people. This last one is called to a response of love to the Lord of the covenant. Paul recalls in the letter to the Ephesians 2;14: "He is our peace, he who made of the two one people only." Christ created in himself of the two only one new man, making peace for the far and the near. The far are the pagans and the near Israel.

The Church must recognise that Israel is the root that carries and grounds her. Without the faith in the one God taught by Jesus to the Christians, the Church would not have anything original to propose to the world. To recognise the importance of the roots means opening herself up to the life that rises through the roots until giving the fruits on the tree.

The way of reconciliation to become an authentic dialogue cannot bear on the part of Christians a loss of identity. These must present to the Jews their brother Jesus that they did not recognise in his first coming, but who they will recognise when he comes in glory. The Fathers, to explain the rejection of Israel, always referred themselves to Joseph, son of Jacob, sold by his brothers. Joseph was not recognised by his brothers when they went down to Egypt for the first time. They recognised him the second time.



A last level of such dialogue could be the level of spirituality.

Shared adoration and silence are fundamental. Judaism and Christianity are called to contribute the best of their wisdom and to help illuminate and make serene the hearts of many. Believers are called to be transfigured, inhabitants of silence and at the same time brothers full of passion for all their human brothers.

The mutual prayer between members of the various religions inaugurated by Pope John Paul II in Assisi opened the way to a spirituality of dialogue that can be translated concretely.

The spiritual dimension of Jewish-Christian dialogue is much richer. A mutual reflection helps to understand how man becomes the maker of his own destiny. Divine silence is the condition of the possibilities of human existence. And from nothing, from "the night", that is from the silence of God, from his leaving space to the created life can emerge the freedom of man. In this empty space man is called by God. Promise, vocation and hope are constitutive to the dimension of the silence of man. Even today Job continues with his questions about the enigma of time and suffering. Notwithstanding the silence of God and the delayed response of man, the hope against every hope is permitted. In the search and continuous effort of man are the possibility of ransoming his own existential sense, his own exile. Heschel used to affirm: "The supreme question is not to be or not to be, but the mystery of being, therefore the surprise, the awe of man." Such awe corresponds to the capacity of listening and relating. The sensitive experience is not only the beginning of a rational process, it becomes a road which opens up towards transcendence. Jewish-Christian dialogue, being an experience of reciprocal listening, can also open this spiritual dimension.

Full reconciliation between Jews and Christians belongs to the end of times according to Paul in Rom 11,15. In the mean time we have to find a path leading to reconciliation. Every form of impatience has to be overcome. Israel and the Church will have to walk independently till the final integration in the eschatological Shalom. Reconciliation eliminates every idea of substitution. The Church has not taken the place of Israel in salvation plan. Paul reminds us of the danger to render the mystery vain (Rom 11,25). Israel remains the witness of the election and of the promises made to the fathers. It remembers the church that the holy root sustains her (Rom 11,16). God's salvific plan is unique even if the covenants are many. The Church is the people made up of two peoples - Jews and Pagans - who was established in the covenant through the blood of Jesus.

Giorgio La Pira was a prophet of our times. He had a profound awareness of living in a nuclear age and in a world open to space discovery. Humanity has to choose between peace and suicide. In the year 1951 he wrote to some nuns asking them to pray that the walls of Jericho should collapse. For him this expression meant the end of atheism in Russia. He wrote also very often about the reconciliation of the sons of Abraham. Unless there is reconciliation there won't be peace.

For those who live in Jerusalem and are witnesses to rising of fundamentalisms, the intuitions of La Pira can seem to be utopian. But nevertheless there are signs of a new era. Those signs are called *Nostra Aetate* and the Bilateral Commission between Israel and the Holy See. Many other symposia are organized to bring together Jews, Muslims and Christians. It will take time to change mentalities. Education remains a very important task. But Rome was not built in a day.

A rabbinic tradition to conclude:

“In Hebrew the stork is called “the pious one” (*hasida*) and nevertheless it is an impure animal (Lev 11,19). Why? Because the stork shows his affection only to his own”.

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