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11-3-1999

Why Should Christians Care About Jews

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Recommended Citation

Haas, William P., "Why Should Christians Care About Jews" (1999). *Blumen Collection: Articles*. 3.
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WHY SHOULD CHRISTIANS CARE ABOUT JEWS?

I am afraid I have posed a question for which I do not have a complete answer. If I were a better human being, a better Christian or a better scholar, I might have chosen a clearer or more profound question, but I am trying to find a common sense starting point. The challenging relationship between Jews and Christians is too big to ignore, so we must begin somewhere.

There are of course many reasons for examining the historical and theological connections between the two believing communities. Personally, I undertake this investigation with the same motivation as that which sustained Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who worked for years assisting the Vatican Council in preparing its Declaration Concerning Relation Between Christians and Jews. His reasons for caring were these: 1) “As a Jew it is my profound concern that those who worship should be free of contempt for any individual,” and 2) to help Catholics become better Catholics.

Thus, my real reason for this presentation tonight: to help us all to become better Catholics, better Christians and better human beings by examining our roots in the faith of Israel and to grow closer to God by sharing in the living faith experience of Jews. There is an apparent paradox here- if we were better Christians we would appreciate the Jewish faith more profoundly, yet, if we better understood the living faith of the Jews, we would become more Christian.

It seems to me that one place to begin is with Catholics talking to each other about their need to look more deeply into those roots. Where that investigation may lead, is in the hands of God.

It is certainly beyond the scope of this presentation to find the balm that would heal all of the wounds that Jews and Christians have inflicted upon each other. Sometimes, just listening and talking is a form of healing. The history is long and agonizing, but to take one step forward it is not necessary to retrace every step in the past. This is not to say that there are painful lessons to be learned from the past, yet the imperative is to find the truth of the living present.

I pause here to note the important work of Father Edward Flannery who directed that Office of Catholic-Jewish Relations in the Diocese of Providence for many years. Among his

many lucid writings on the subject, he pointed out quite courageously that the contempt for Jews that marred Christian history came, not from Jesus, but from failed Christians.

This evening we might consider briefly several issues currently under discussion in Jewish-Christian dialogues around the world. If there is sufficient interest and if I can be of any help in advancing discussion of these matters, we might want to consider a more expanded discussion this spring. I suggest we look at these topics:

1. Where does the Catholic Church stand on the relationship of Christians and Jews? This is always a fundamental challenge for Catholics because we are so reluctant to take initiatives without authority. Incidentally, I have no authority at all to speak for anyone.
2. What is the inner vitality of the faith of Israel as it throws light upon our own believing? This evening I will mention only three such faith experiences, Sabbath, Torah and Passover.
3. How Jewish was Jesus, his life, and his message?
4. Are those roots of animosity against all Jews found in the Christian Scriptures? How do we interpret the Word of God purified of its apparent anti-Judaism?
5. What do we need to know about the bitter history of the Jews living in Christian Western Civilization for centuries? For what must we repent?
6. What can we do to understand the spiritual significance of the founding of the State of Israel and of the Holocaust?

Please do not be overwhelmed. No one is capable of penetrating every aspect of this deep, complex and mysterious relationship. But we are all capable of reaching out, of some insight which makes us more aware of the proximity of God in the lives of Jews who might otherwise seem hopelessly foreign to what we believe.

I.

To begin, then, let us at least acknowledge the urgent plea of the Second Vatican Council in its declaration on the relationship of the church to non-Christian religions (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965). Before addressing the very special connection between Christians and Jews, the council reflected on all non-Christian religions, particularly Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all men... let Christians, while witnessing to their own faith and way of life, acknowledge, preserve, and encourage the spiritual and moral truths found among non-Christians, also their social life and culture.

After applying this openness to Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, the Council addresses that unique relationship between Christians and Jews. The church cannot forget that she has received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy established the ancient covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws nourishment from that good olive tree into which the wild olive branches of the gentiles have been grafted. (Rom. 11:17)

Drawing further upon St. Paul, himself educated from youth to be a Pharisee, who said of his kinsmen: they are Israelites and to them belong the sonship, the glory, and the covenant, the giving of the law, the worship and the promises: to them belong the patriarchs, and their race according to the flesh, is the Christ. The council notes also with Paul the Jews remain very dear to God for the sake of the patriarchs, since God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made.

Lastly, the council sternly admonishes Catholics that: neither all the Jews indiscriminately at that time nor Jews of today can be charged with the crimes admitted during Christ's passion. It is true that the church is the new people of God, yet should not be spoken of as rejected or accorded as if this followed from scripture... indeed the church reproves every form of persecution against whomever it may be directed, remembering then, her common heritage with the Jews and moved not by any political consideration, but solely by the religious motivation of Christian charity, she deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism leveled at any time or from any source against Jews.

The implications of these powerful admonitions cannot be ignored. They clearly imply that a most serious Christian failure must be admitted and repented and deplored. I would add this additional reflection. Too many Christians think that the story of the Jewish faith is a

closed book. Perhaps it appears as a road map which has served its purpose- it got us where we wanted to go, so its value is only for nostalgia, an irrelevant curiosity. This condescending attitude sometimes passes itself off as the absence of anti-Semitism, as if indifference or ignorance were a virtue.

Furthermore, by seeing the suffering and death of Jesus as over and done with and by feeling satisfied that the Jews were the perpetrators of the crime, caught, convicted and sentenced, it is easier for Christians to overlook the fact that Jesus paid in advance for every disgraceful act of every human being. Nothing should be allowed to spare us the admission that each of us individually taps in his own nail, albeit discretely and anonymously.

II.

The next important topic before us is the inner heart of the living faith of the Jews. Worthy as it is of study, it is more urgent for us to try to penetrate the living faith rather than the formal articulation of Jewish doctrine. It is difficult for us Catholics to realize that Jewish faith takes on many forms and expressions--they are not bound by a single dogmatic formula... Thus, we must be very cautious of the notion that Jews (and other non-Catholics for that matter) who lack THE faith in its entirety as we receive it from Christ, are therefore without ANY true faith at all. Faith is not an all or nothing condition (Lord, I believe, help my unbelief, Mk9:25). The faith that Jews actually live by is the faith that God gave them and will judge them by. If we claim to have received a more precious gift, this does not devalue the gift that Jews cherish and which we must acknowledge as the cornerstone of our own believing. Remember Paul's stirring words; "God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made." (Rom. 11:29) One cannot be grateful for his own gifts and disparage the gift to others from the same giver without disparaging the generosity of that source.

Thus it is in this spirit that we try to penetrate the heart of Jewish believing. One can hear the obvious rejoinder to this emphasis: How are we to fathom Jewish faith when we hardly understand our own? Few Catholics ever hear more than the fragments of the New Testament that they are offered in the Sunday Liturgy. With Catholic Education for the young and for adults becoming more marginal as time goes by for so many, one cannot expect the weekly

homily to nourish the growing curiosity of the young and the adult mind. Yet, I dare to think that there is an alternative to despair or to cynicism. We can indeed always penetrate more deeply the mysteries of our faith as we examine its roots in the living faith of the Jews.

Clemens Thoma, the Swiss Catholic theologian, claims that the “Christ event” did not diminish or destroy a legitimate and autonomous Judaism after Christ. In other words, Jewish faith, without grasping the mystery of Christ does not die out, but continues under its own God-given vitality- incomplete, perhaps, but alive and holy still in its origin and purpose. This does not contradict but rather complements Catholic convictions.

It is possible here to only mention briefly three elements of Jewish believing which are especially important for our Catholic reflection: Sabbath, Torah and Passover.

Abraham Heschel stresses the centrality of the concept of Sabbath as “holiness in time: eternity in time”. The Sabbath asserts the universe was created in six days and is indeed good, but the seventh is the day in which God talks with man, in which man rests in God’s quiet and becomes more than good, he becomes holy. Celebrating Sabbath is rising above every civilization, every epoch of history, above every human accomplishment and, as well, above all human perversity and stupidity. The Sabbath makes a man royal, the child of God.

Heschel goes further and notes: ‘We have learned from Jewish history that man is not a man if he is not more than a man. To be a people we have to be more than a people... Our existence is either superfluous or indispensable to the world. It is either tragic or holy to be a Jew.’ Thus the Sabbath is the heart of Jewish Identity. Furthermore, Heschel observes: “Israel’s experience of God has not involved a search. Israel did not discover God. Israel was discovered by God. Judaism is God’s quest for man. And that included us Christians, too, for we are less attuned to our own humanity under God if we fail to see Heschel’s point. To me, one of the most compelling truths in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is the raw humanity facing the relentless pursuit of God.

The Torah or the Law of God is essentially contained in the dual precept that we love God with our whole heart, whole soul, whole mind and whole strength, and that we love our neighbor as ourselves. When Jesus asserted this he was not proclaiming a new Christian imperative: he was reaffirming his solidarity with Judaism’s reverence for the Torah. He was

inviting his followers, at that point mostly Jews, to persevere in the journey of a thousand beginnings, a journey of a thousand failures. Of course we cannot possibly love God, neighbor or even ourselves with our whole souls. So, I understand “whole soul, mind and strength” to mean “Never give up”. This is believing like a Jew.

Then we must reflect on the meaning of the Passover, which is better thought of as a continuing passing over. The Passover is not only an event of the past, as if a one skip and jump over the Red Sea from Egypt to the Promised Land. It is an unending passing over from slavery of selfishness and stupidity to the freedom of faith and wisdom, but through a tortuous trek across the desert. When Jesus celebrated the Passover before his death he prepared his followers for a continuation of that agonizing trek by offering them a new manna, like the old manna in that it was a mysterious food (“manna” meaning an unnamed thing) for a long and tough journey. His gift of his body and blood is incomprehensible without its roots in the Jewish experience of passing over continuously from slavery to freedom.

You see how much we miss in the excitement of our Catholic faith when we separate it from the vitality of Jewish believing. And we squabble over whether it is OK to genuflect before receiving the Eucharist!

One last comment on the relevance of Jewish faith to our own experience. There may be some divine irony at work now that Christians are beginning to fear the collapse of their triumphant civilization- the matching of faith, economics and politics as if guaranteed by the Gospel. We may well look to the hidden vitality, the inextinguishable flame that has kept Jewish faith intact through terrible suffering as we witness a world gone crazy and mean, convulsed in greed and vulgarity. Believing is not only an assent to the truth, it is taking the truth seriously enough to die for it, to suffer alienation and rejection for it. The history of Jewish faith is one of tenacity and indomitable resistance to oppression. God forbid that we should be so tested before we are ready. May the children of Abraham guide us by their example and pray for our endurance.

III.

One of the most rewarding topics under discussion in Jewish-Christian dialogues around the world is the question of the Jewishness of Jesus. It has been suggested that Jesus was first, last, and always a Jew. To the extent that we oversimplify or overlook that possibility we miss part of the true Jesus Christ as he wanted us to know him. By way of the introduction to the topic, we can consider three instances where Jesus revealed his Jewish character and convictions in a provocative way.

In the beginning of his Gospel, John relates how Jesus went about selecting his first disciples. Phillip found his friend Nathaniel and told him about Jesus, whom he described as the one who fulfilled the expectations of Moses and the prophets. When Jesus saw Nathaniel coming toward him he said: "There is an Israelite who deserves the name 'Without deceit'." Nathaniel asked: "How do you know me?" "Before Phillip came to call you" Jesus said, "I saw you under the fig tree." Without hesitating Nathaniel exclaimed "Rabbi, you are the Son of God, you are King of Israel." Jesus replied: "You believe that just because I said I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than that."

This is all quite curious: Nathaniel jumps to this profound conclusion on the basis of such apparently flimsy evidence - just because he was seen under the fig tree. This is one of the first times in the Gospels that anyone comes close to identifying who Jesus really is. One interpretation of the event is that Nathaniel was meditating on the Torah quietly and alone with God in intimate union as was the practice of devout Jews. He thought that only he and God were aware of this communion. For Jesus to know what was going on in Nathaniel's inner soul, Jesus would have to be intimately close to God... in some mysterious way sharing God's presence. Hence the huge leap of faith that Jesus was Son of the God of all knowing, of all loving, of all truth. Jesus and Nathaniel met in the living heart of Jewish intimacy with God. Oddly, we hear nothing more of Nathaniel till the very end of John's Gospel.

The second instance which reveals the Jewish character of Jesus is his encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. His simple yet disarming request for a cup of water leads to a big discussion about how she perceives that the Jews look down on the Samaritans because they do not worship God in the Temple of Jerusalem. She contends that Samaritans worship

God just as well on their own mountains (Gerizim). Jesus gently yet firmly corrects her by affirming his own Jewish Faith. “Believe me woman; the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know: we worship what we know. For salvation is from the Jews.” Jesus does not disparage her faith in God, but he points out that there is more to God’s presence than she realizes and also that, holy as Jerusalem is, God is not constrained by time and place and that he shall make his love known wherever he pleases. God’s revelation is ever expanding, not excluding or rejecting what he has already offered. God works in history but reaches beyond all limitation. Jesus defended the purity of his Jewish beliefs and turned them into an invitation to the woman to look further than Samaria.

Lastly, in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus asserts: “The Scribes and Pharisees occupy the chair of Moses. You must therefore do what they tell you and listen to what they say: but do not be guided by what they do, since they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men’s shoulders, but do not lift a finger to lift them.” Here, Jesus categorically affirms the authority of Moses and his successors, without distancing himself from them at all. The arrogance, the pomposity, the foolishness are the failings of individuals, not the fault of Moses and those who speak in his name. Thus, those who covet power and privilege, whether politicians, ecclesiastics or the rich and famous, are corrupted by it. Like the Prophets, Jesus is outspoken in his criticism of abuses, while remaining steadfast in defense of the word of God.

Our comments on the Jewishness of Jesus would be incomplete without some recognition of the only witness to the whole of his life from conception to crucifixion and the coming of the Holy Spirit, that is, Mary, his mother. She alone was privy to all of the details from beginning to end. At the very beginning, Mary took her stand when she addressed her cousin Elizabeth: “He has given help to Israel his servant, mindful of his mercy- Even as he spoke to our fathers- to Abraham and to his posterity forever.” Absent all sentimental excesses, Mary witnesses the tragic affair in the tradition of the heroic women of the Hebrew Scriptures. She sees it all, through Jewish eyes, hears every nuance through Jewish ears, interprets events through Jewish memory and sensitivity. There she is, critically observing the details, present

in crises, questioning, probing, standing firm when others ran and hid, affirming when others denied. The Jewishness of Jesus would be impenetrable without his mother's witness.

IV.

One of the more confusing and painful questions that must be raised in any honest appraisal of Jewish-Christian relations is whether the seeds of opposition between Christians and Jews were planted by the first generation of Christians and reflected in the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and in the Epistles. There are numerous references to the hypocrisy, the intransigence and the animosity of Jews toward Jesus and his followers. Many of these passages have been misconstrued to cast guilt upon all of the Jews in Jesus' time and even upon all Jews throughout history. It is encouraging that Jewish and Christian scholars have worked more closely in reviewing those texts in the past decade or so than they did for the 1900 years. Christians should not be surprised that Jews then and now are understandably aghast at what appears to them to be the ultimate blasphemy - that a human being could claim to be a God. We must acknowledge that the Incarnation, God becoming Man, dwelling among us and dying for us, is a most profound mystery, totally incomprehensible without the grace to believe it. No one can be faulted for being abhorred by the contradiction that God can become anything that God was not totally and absolutely in his very being. Jesus recognized how difficult it would be to approach this mystery. The first generation of Christians had trouble keeping some followers of Jesus from twisting the mystery to suit the various philosophies that held their attention. Jews, observing this confusion, understandably held firm to the uncomplicated faith in one God. Moreover, Christians did not always behave among themselves as a people who were enraptured by the intimate presence of the Son of God. Added to the forces of confusion was the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD which led to various interpretations among Jews who became Christian and those that did not, and between Gentile converts and Jewish Christians, as to why a catastrophe should occur.

The intensity of feelings in those early days can be readily seen in the words of Paul (I Thessalonians, 2:14) "And now they have been persecuting us, and acting in a way that cannot please God and makes them enemies of the whole human race, because they are

hindering us from preaching to the pagans and trying to save them. They never stop trying to finish off the sins they have begun, but retribution is overtaking them at last.”

Yes, this is the same Paul who was quoted by the Council affirming that God would not take back his gifts from Israel. Suffice it to note here that none of these most perplexing concerns with that meaning of the scriptures will go away. Also, people of faith will be led honestly into the deeper sense of it all. Moreover, none of these matters is beyond the adequate appreciation of the informed layperson.

V.

As if there were not already enough to engage the curious and interested Christian, there remains the disturbing history of the Jews surviving in a Christian world - how really Christian the world has ever been is anyone's guess. However, in 330 AD the Roman Emperor, Constantine, eased off on the persecution of Christians and fostered religious tolerance, eventually giving Christianity a special access to political importance. With that came a new religious persona - a new vision of the Church as part of the power structure of the world. And of course, the destiny of the Jews would thereafter be affected by Christian ascendance. The history from then on is frightening, pathetic and confusing. But there are lessons to be learned and abuses to be condemned and warnings to be headed. In confessing our sins we become more Christ-like. In purifying our recollection of history, the Church will be more aware of dangerous entanglements in the affairs of Caesar.

VI.

Finally, no dialogue on Christian and Jewish concerns would be adequate without a deeper penetration of the meaning of the Holocaust and of the establishment of the State of Israel. A general knowledge of the historical forces leading to these two events and a general sense of regret for the suffering and death of millions of Jews, as well as a feeling of support for the State of Israel, are not enough by themselves. These events are of such profound uniqueness that they warrant a relentless search for their religious significance, because there are not two histories, one secular and the other religious. As Jews, Christians and Muslims believe, there is only one history and only one divine providence in which all events take their final purpose from the single will of God. That is why we Christians must learn from Jews their vision of the

spiritual implications of both their suffering and of their hopes for the future. We cannot scratch the surface of God's disposition without learning what Jews are experiencing and how that experience affects their relationship to their Father, our Father.

Since Abraham's incomplete sacrifice of Isaac, there has been the thought that the Jewish people throughout history have been called to continue the sacrifice on behalf of all mankind. Jesus is to us Christians that suffering servant, sharing with his people that calling.

Gershon Greenberg notes "At times of great crisis, the two religions draw only upon the redemptive value of suffering. The time has arrived when it would be valuable to dwell on the possibility of elements of an inner synthesis of Judaism and Christianity in the wake of the Holocaust." I would add that the suffering which is redemptive is that which brings us eventually into a closer intimacy with God.

It is certainly beyond my competence to assign culpability for the failure of Christian leaders, including popes, to resist Nazi atrocities. Nor am I able to interpret the complex political, cultural, and economic forces that are shaping events in Israel and Palestine. Yet, I believe that the truth must be faced, however painful. Most importantly, beneath the complex facts of history and unraveling current events, there always remains the need to pursue the deeper spiritual realities.

CONCLUSION

Understanding must precede dialogue, after which more understanding should follow. Eventually, this all leads to action, but it must be remembered that there are exterior action and interior action. Those exterior actions that address the needs of society, to correct injustices, revise education, to advance the common good nationally and internationally, to feed the hungry, shelter the homeless- all of this is God's work, better to do it together than in isolation from each other. However, it is equally God's work to foster understanding, to facilitate a coming together of minds and a spiritual sharing of the intimate presence of God. For me personally the only reason for trying to understand is that I just might get a glimpse of God passing by. To so many, this is either a sad waste of time and talent or it is a sinful aloofness from the real world. Perhaps the greatest good that might come out of a sincere respect for the spiritual vitality of Jewish and

Christian communities is that we would discover each other under the fig tree, that is, we share in the absolute tranquility of God's smile.

EPILOGUE

Audience was invited to send any reflections, concerns, or criticisms to me at home so that I can better plan a possible follow-up in spring.

Also, audience was encouraged to start collecting a scrap book of current events relevant to Jewish-Christian relations. And also to begin examining books and journals that deal with these issues. And to let me know what interests them. A short autobiography was provided.

The questions were varied: What does the Passover have to do with the Eucharist? Elaborate more on the significance of the fig tree. If divine providence governs every event, how can we be free? Who are the Jews for Jesus? How widely or narrowly do I interpret the Holocaust? Why do we feel blessed when we learn that we were spared a tragedy like the crash of the Egyptian plane?

William P. Haas

November 3, 1999