

Evangelical-Jewish Dialogue: An Emerging Conversation

J. Shawn Landres and Ryan K. Bolger

Jews and Evangelicals have a great deal in common. Many Evangelicals (as opposed to fundamentalists) and Jews are equally anxious about the fusion of church and state (a traditional Jewish worry) and, more importantly, the identification of religion with the sociopolitical establishment rather than cultural-economic outsiders. Many Evangelicals share Jewish concerns about America's current political and economic orientations; progressive Evangelicals and progressive Jews hold remarkably similar positions on crucial questions of social and economic justice. Building new partnerships based on shared interests and shared principles requires a fresh look at Christian-Jewish dialogue.

Traditionally, Christian-Jewish interreligious dialogue, and especially Catholic-Jewish engagement, has focused on memory (Holocaust) and reconciliation (antisemitism); more recent approaches — and much conservative Protestant-Jewish coalition-building — incorporate politics (Israel). Much of it is result-focused and zero-sum: either the Jews killed Jesus or they didn't; either *The Passion of the Christ* was antisemitic or it wasn't; either Christians support the State of Israel or they don't. In the case of the latter, far too little attention is paid to underlying attitudes: the Christian focus on "God's plan for the Jews" rather than on Judaism as a living religion; Jewish ignorance and dismissal of Christian theological commitments; intra-Christian concerns about the implications of dual-covenant theology; intra-Jewish concerns about the moral consequences of combining fundamentalist Christian politics with "Greater Israel"-style nationalism.

By contrast, the postmodern and postfoundationalist interreligious conversation we describe here seeks neither resolution nor reconciliation. It suggests that religious worldviews are ultimately incommensurable but not mutually incomprehensible. The focus of conversation around faith practices (Torah/Jesus), worship, and social justice, shifts the ground of dialogue from a cognitive/legal frame to one that is experiential/narrative.

Three commonalities underlie this new approach to interreligious conversation: hos-

pitality, humility, and hope. By hospitality, we mean not merely the willingness, but rather the desire to share one's spiritual home, to welcome the outsider, to reconsider the table not as one's own but a shared resource for all. By humility, we mean not only openness to learning the traditional and contemporary texts of the other religion, but perhaps more importantly, the recognition that notwithstanding our covenantal commitment to a particular faith tradition, we may not always be right. By hope, we mean what Vaclav Havel (neither Evangelical nor Jew) imagines as "the ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed...the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."*

The emerging interreligious conversations we have witnessed are not so much explicitly theological as practical, responding to congregational change in the light of culture. Paradoxically, because these conversations focus on practices embedded with theology rather than on abstract doctrine, theological discussion emerges organically, with little positioning or defensiveness. We agree on the value of spiritual community and religious commitment in the face of a secularizing world, and we have a common concern about the disconnect between tradition and contemporary culture. We all are trying to create a vocabulary of spirituality that is meaningful across the sacred-secular continuum — and we question the epistemological and practical value of distinguishing between sacred and secular all together.

We are clear about the integrity of our own religious traditions and are unafraid to celebrate our differences. We have witnessed Jewish witness alongside Christian witness. We reject the liberal notion that there is a common set of experiences at the base of all religious traditions. However, we would rather serve the poor with other traditions than discuss rival interpretations of truth. Taking a line from *Aleinu*, "I'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai," "to repair/perfect the world under the sovereignty of God," we would rather learn together how to repair the world than debate the impossible ques-

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* Vaclav Havel, *Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvizdala*, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Knopf, 1990), 181.

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tion of whose definition of the “kingdom of God” is preferred.

Internal theological shifts within Jewish and Evangelical circles create a space for religious encounter across traditions. As Evangelicals and other Christians pay increasing attention to Jesus’s life and teaching, they necessarily focus on his Jewish identity. Jewish progress beyond demands for recognition and reconciliation toward discussion and action on common ethical obligations creates room for non-Jewish participants within specifically Jewish elements of the conversation.

We are open to finding resources in each

other’s traditions that can inform our own. Jews need not feel embarrassed that they are inspired by Christian worship. Christians can appreciate the deep connection the Jews have with their tradition, how they raise Jewish families, and how they create and maintain Jewish culture and peoplehood. As we share practices between traditions, even if we understand those practices in different ways, we acknowledge that we are walking a shared path. We are moving in the direction of the upside-down, justice-oriented, kingdom of God, and we will partner with anyone who shares a similar passion. 

Is Christian Missionizing a Real Problem?

Ron Kronish

Contrary to popular opinion, Christian missionizing is not a significant problem in Israel. In comparison to the pervasiveness of Western pop-culture in Israel, Christian missionizing is a nonexistent threat to Jewish identity in Israel.

First of all, the Catholic Church, which established diplomatic relations with the state of Israel more than ten years ago, is officially against proselytizing of Jews in Israel or anywhere else in the world since Vatican II in the 1960s. Mormons — who missionize all over the world — signed a special agreement with the state of Israel when they opened the campus of Brigham Young University on Mount Scopus in Jerusalem in 1987.


Although Christian Zionists are often accused of missionizing Jews, in 1998 they signed an historic “understanding” in which they clarified their position with regard to Jews in Israel:

“We believe that the covenant which God concluded with the people of Israel was never revoked. We deeply respect the Jewish people in their identity and integrity and will therefore not engage in activities, which have as their intention to alienate them from their tradition and community... We also recognize the potential for healing between our faith communities as we live in the midst of a Jewish majority, sharing its challenges while living together in a land sacred in both our traditions.”

One of the leading Christian Zionists in Israel for many decades, Clarence H. Wagner, former director of Bridges for Peace, explained that “Classical Evangelism is no longer on the agenda.”

Moreover, local indigenous Christians in

Israel do not engage in missionizing whatsoever. According to Daniel Rossing, Director of the Jerusalem Center for Jewish-Christian Relations, which began within the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel three years ago, there is a clear consensus among all the historic Christian communities in the country that members of all three faiths should respect the integrity of each other’s historical and religious inheritance and thus should refrain from any and all attempts to persuade individuals to change their faith or religious tradition. None of the indigenous Christian churches engage in proselytizing. “The small minority of individuals and groups whose outlook and actions are outside this broad consensus often come from outside the country,” says Rossing.

So as it is a minor problem, why do Jews in Israel and abroad still worry about it so much? Mostly, this is a function of Jewish history, in which Jews were the target of Christian missionaries in Europe for centuries. In addition, it is a function of ignorance; most Jews in Israel are unaware of the revolutionary changes in Christian thinking toward Jews and Judaism that were brought about by Vatican II in the 1960s, and they unfortunately continue to live with a view of Christianity that prevents them from dissociating Christianity from antisemitism. It would be more beneficial to engage in healthy and productive Jewish-Christian dialogue — both with visiting and local Christians — than to engage in witch-hunting for Christian missionaries in Israel who hardly exist any more. 

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