



Sandrine Caneri lectures on Jewish–Christian dialogue at the Rue Copernic synagogue, Paris, 2015.

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STATE OF AFFAIRS

The Orthodox Church in Dialogue with Judaism: Toward an Official Document?

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An official document of understanding between two communities necessarily begins with an encounter, and so it must be for the Orthodox Christians and the Jews. Spurred by the tragedies of the Second World War, many in the Christian community have recognized the importance of such an encounter, not only for the healing of God’s people, but also for the mutual spiritual enrichment that is the desired fruit of such an exchange. It was on these grounds that official Jewish–Christian dialogue began in the mid-twentieth century. Roman Catholics and Protestants in the West have been at the helm of this initiative, with the Catholic Church under Pope Paul VI releasing an official Church document of reconciliation, *Nostra Aetate*, in 1965. The Orthodox Church, however, has been markedly absent from this exchange. What explains the near total silence of our church in these matters? This article examines

the historical, sociological, and theological reasons for this absence, and suggests a path forward.

The Political and Historical Situation of the Orthodox Church

Formal interreligious dialogue is a recent phenomenon. Global migrations throughout the twentieth century brought diverse communities into new proximity, exacerbating longstanding tensions and provoking the leaders of these communities to begin discussions. As it pertains to Jews and Christians, this dialogue began in the United States. To be clear, we are speaking here of an official dialogue, and not simply the kinds of exchange between notable individuals that have existed since the foundation of Christianity.

The American association at the center of this new dialogue, the Interna-

tional Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), was founded in 1928. Today the ICCJ includes thirty-eight organizations and meets each year to continue the work of personal encounter and communal study. At the time the ICCJ was formed, dialogue was beginning in Europe but was limited to private encounters.¹ According to the experience of Father Lev Gillet, who in 1938 founded a home in England for young Jews and Christians of Jewish origin, it was a dialogue inspired by the ordinary exchanges of daily life.² It did not become an official matter until after the Second World War, through the work of organizations such as the British Council of Christians and Jews, founded in 1942, and the French organization Amitié judéo-chrétienne de France (AJCF), founded in 1948.³

Initiated by Protestants and then joined by Catholics, this exchange did not include the Orthodox Church in its communal ecclesiology. Aside from the work of individuals such as Gillet, the Orthodox at this time were simply not in any condition to participate. The churches of Eastern Europe did not yet have any real presence in the West. For the most part, they either were under communist rule or had arrived only very recently in the West. They could not simultaneously establish their own communities and structures and also undertake serious interfaith dialogue. Today, by contrast, the Orthodox in the East are free from communism and have established decades-old communities all over the world. But have they entered into Jewish-Christian dialogue?

The Socio-Political and Spiritual-Theological Models

Several factors have rendered Jewish-Christian dialogue difficult. First, there are no Orthodox members in

the organizational committee of the ICCJ. This can be explained historically. The catastrophic events of World War II spurred American and English organizations to hold an emergency 1946 conference in Oxford to combat antisemitism. This led to a series of conferences, from which the AJCF (the French organization) emerged. Formed by a small number of Jews and Christians, it was headed by the Jewish historian Jules Isaac and pursued his particular historico-political model for dialogue. No members of the Orthodox Church were present at these conferences, and as they were absent at the beginning, it has been difficult for them to join subsequently.⁴

Isaac's approach was based on a systematic review of Christian history that emphasized the slanders, affronts, and humiliations suffered by the Jewish people during the two thousand-year history of Christianity, leading to the worst tragedy of our times, the Shoah. In several of his works, Isaac denounced the "teachings of contempt" for Jews transmitted through Christian catechesis, Sunday homilies, and theology.⁵ "I came to the conviction that this received tradition, taught for hundreds of years by thousands and thousands of voices," he stated, "was the first and permanent source, the ancient and powerful strain from which all other varieties of antisemitism—even the most contrary—had been grafted."⁶ The dialogue Isaac established aimed to correct this attitude.

From his perspective, the "teaching of contempt" began with the church fathers and was spread through their teachings down to the present day. The fathers were thus despised and discussion of them excluded, so violent were their words against the

¹ Rémy Guérinel, "Traces d'un dialogue bienveillant dans l'entre deux guerres," *Sens* 394 (Dec. 2014): 793–802.

² Élisabeth Behr-Sigel, *Un moine de l'Eglise d'Orient* (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 327–8, and Lev Gillet, *Communion in the Messiah* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1942).

³ Paule Berger-Marx, *Les relations entre les juifs et les catholiques dans la France de l'après-guerre, 1945–1965* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2009), 39.

⁴ See Olivier Rota, "La conférence de Seelisberg (1947): Préparatifs, déroulé et premières retombées," *Sens* 420 (Sept.–Oct. 2018): 462.

⁵ Jules Isaac, *Jésus et Israël* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1948).

⁶ Jules Isaac quoted in André Kaspi, *Jules Isaac ou la passion de la vérité* (Paris: Plon, 2002), 180–1.

Jews. Their teachings were considered by Isaac to be the origin of modern antisemitism, directly engendering the Shoah.⁷ It is important to note here that there has never been a scholarly, systematic review of these assumptions and accusations, one that would fairly place the fathers' harsh words about the Jews in their historical, sociological, and theological context. The assumption that the fathers lie at the origin of modern antisemitism and the imperative of "purifying" Christianity of their teachings are simply accepted by the ICCJ as a foundational basis for dialogue.

Whereas this exchange has been modeled around the historico-political model of Isaac, the Orthodox would wish to engage in a more spiritual and theological dialogue. At the outset, the Catholic Church was not particularly at ease with the choice of subjects addressed at the Oxford conference either. The Archbishop of Canterbury set aside theological questions in order to prioritize commonalities.⁸ This characteristically Protestant approach, at the time unfamiliar to the Catholics, has now become customary for them. The Orthodox, on the other hand, believe that a relationship would be better fostered by looking at the religious, spiritual, and theological dimensions of the two traditions—where they meet and where they diverge. In the words of Leon Zander, a student and close friend of Sergei Bulgakov, "The encounter between Christians and Jews can occur on many different levels, but there is really only one level that has any depth, a spiritual perspective that can influence souls and lives; it is the religious encounter, an encounter on the religious level." Citing Bulgakov, his teacher, he continues: "We need to charge ourselves with the responsibility to encounter Jews . . . on the purely

religious and spiritual level. It is only in this way that we may find the foundations to resolve this tragedy."⁹

The Problem of the Fathers: Are the Orthodox Ready To Be Challenged?

The church fathers' central place in Orthodox theology thus presents an important obstacle to the spiritual and religious encounter between Orthodox and Jews. A stand-off has emerged in ecumenical dialogue because discussion of the fathers is utterly excluded. The Orthodox, who are deeply attached to the teachings of the fathers and hold them to be pivotal for faith and theology, clearly cannot "do away" with the fathers as the Catholics and Protestants have done in many respects. Any sincere dialogue would therefore entail the Jews' respectful acceptance of this integral aspect of Orthodox faith. But have the Orthodox been respectful of the Jews on this account?

One of the risks at the heart of Orthodox Christianity is a tendency to idolize the fathers, turning a blind eye to their negative teachings about Jews and how these teachings have infiltrated catechetical and liturgical texts—and, through those texts, culture and history at large. Perhaps before expecting the Jews to come to the table to discuss spiritual and theological matters, the Orthodox are due for a critical confrontation with aspects of their own tradition, their own certainties.

In such a confrontation, the Orthodox would have to accept historical truths that disturb them and contradict certain patristic writings, as some foundational Christian thought is challenged by history. For example, the fathers predicted the extinction of Judaism following the destruction of the Temple and the disappearance

⁷ See *L'antijudaïsme des Pères, mythe et/ou réalité? Actes du colloque de Louvain-la-Neuve (20–22 mai 2015)*, ed. Jean-Marie Auwers, Régis Burnet, and Didier Luciani (Paris: Beauchesne, 2017).

⁸ See Rota, "La conférence de Seelisberg," note 4, 462.

⁹ Leon Zander, *L'Amitié judeo-chrétienne 1* (September 1948): 4.

of Jews beyond Judea. However, the Jewish people have continued to multiply and to bear fruit throughout the world over the past two thousand years. Another point to consider is that, classically, the Orthodox have affirmed that the Church has replaced Israel, substituting itself for Israel, thus revoking God's covenant with his people and transferring his promises to his Church.

Then there is the stumbling and embarrassment caused by the language the Church uses concerning Jews and Judaism in general. How have we understood this? Does the Orthodox church continue to accuse the Jews of "deicide"? Are there verbal excesses in the patristic texts? If so, what has the Church done to assure that they are not in any way taken out of context or held up as "divine words" for our time? Is it acceptable to keep using passages in our liturgical services, particularly during Holy Week, that are disrespectful to the Jews? Can we really pray to the one who created us all in his image while incriminating those who transmitted to us the essence of the revelation?

In an article written in 1998, Father Sergei Alekseyevich Hackel wrote:

The liturgical texts of Holy Friday are widely assumed to express the doctrine of the Church accurately. However, their authority is based only on their centuries-old usage. These texts have never been sanctioned by ecumenical councils for modification or removal, so there would be no need for the approval of a new council [to alter them]. Reforms of this kind have already been proposed many times, for example in 1960 by the Greek theologian Amilkas Alivizatos. Yet to this day nothing has changed, and we

continue to give our assent to these texts by our presence at the services. We still have a long way to go. We lack the humility, perseverance, academic knowledge, and—above all—determination to go beyond what we have received.¹⁰

Advances By the Catholics While the Orthodox Fall Behind?

Just because direct dialogue between Orthodox Christians and Jews will be necessary in order to mobilize the Church, this does not mean that the advances made by the Roman Catholics are of no interest. We may draw inspiration from these advances, even if our distinctive approach and sensibility prevent us from directly assimilating them.

The first official document of the Roman Church on this subject is the famous *Nostra Aetate*, part of the declaration of the Second Vatican Council on the Catholic Church's relations with non-Christian religions. This pivotal document was the first of ten documents of significant theological and ecclesiological importance on this question. *Nostra Aetate* begins with an important reflection, which the Orthodox Church would do well to consider:

As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock. Thus the Church of Christ acknowledges that, according to God's saving design, the beginnings of her faith and her election are found already among the Patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. She professes that all who believe in Christ—Abraham's sons according to faith—are included in the same Patriarch's call, and likewise that the salvation of the Church is mys-

¹⁰ Sergei Hackel, "Je suis Joseph, votre frère": L'Église orthodoxe et le judaïsme," *Service orthodoxe de Presse* 226 B (March 1998).

teriously foreshadowed by the chosen people's exodus from the land of bondage. The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles. Indeed, the Church believes that by His cross Christ, Our Peace, reconciled Jews and Gentiles, making both one in Himself. The Church keeps ever in mind the words of the Apostle about his kinsmen: "theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises; theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh," the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the apostles, the Church's mainstay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ's Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.¹¹

The Orthodox cannot but be inspired by the Biblical, Pauline foundation of this declaration. It raises questions about the foundational identity of the Church and about ecclesiology, questions to which the fathers did not give many responses because their major preoccupation was with questions of Christology and of the consubstantiation of the three divine hypostases.

Two eminent figures of French Orthodoxy who closely followed the events of Vatican II responded positively to this document. Nikolay Lossky wrote:

An Orthodox Christian worthy of this name cannot but adhere fully to the conciliar declaration on the rela-

tions of the Christian Church with non-Christian religions and in particular the Jewish religion. I would add further that a conscientious Orthodox Christian cannot but deplore that at certain historical eras, notably in Russian history, the Orthodox Church could remain passive "as an institution" in the face of various forms of antisemitism, both latent and explicit.¹²

Likewise, Olivier Clément wrote:

As a Christian of the Orthodox tradition, I rejoice profoundly for the declaration about the Jews made by the Second Vatican Council. This entire text seems to be of great historical and theological precision [*justesse*], a precision that is an act of justice [*justice*] all the more courageous for its late arrival (and this goes for *all* Christians—not just for Catholics). Perhaps I might have wished that this text be more "theological" (in the noble and existential sense of the word); that it not, as a result, place Judaism "in a series" with other non-Christian religions; that it recognize Jewish spirituality as based in Christ (which could only be possible through the perspective of an open pneumatology, such as certain Russian religious philosophers have proposed); that it bring to mind in a more "pregnant" manner that the Jewish people at the moment of the passion of Christ were simply—yet totally—a "theater of humanity," a synthesis of the human condition—of my own condition, as a Christian of conscience would say. . . . I would like to remind us that at the third assembly of the World Council of Churches, in New Delhi in 1961, nearly all the Orthodox churches ratified a declaration calling on the churches "to do all in their power to resist every

¹¹ Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, proclaimed by Pope Paul VI, October 28, 1965, §4, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

¹² Nikolay Lossky, *L'Amitié judéo-chrétienne* 1965.4 (Nov.–Dec.): 12–13.

form of antisemitism. In Christian teaching the historic events which led to the Crucifixion should not be so presented as to fasten upon the Jewish people of today responsibilities which belong to our corporate humanity.”¹³

Nostra Aetate and the documents that followed it are authoritative for Catholics and have been approved by the Roman Magisterium, and yet—with the exception of a few figures like Clément and Lossky—the Orthodox either do not know these texts or do not appreciate them, seeing in them a major weakness: lack of reference to church tradition. In order for a new text to have authority and solid grounding, it must manifest an established continuity with the tradition of the Church. This brings us back to the problem of the fathers in ecumenical dialogue generally and with the Jews in particular, where fair consideration for our patristic tradition as an essential element of Orthodoxy is necessary. The Jews are arguably well equipped to understand the Orthodox on this account. They believe that their written Torah is one with the oral Torah, that is to say with the commandments contained in the Talmud, the Midrash, and later authorities, which together influence and determine their tradition and communal values. Likewise, the Orthodox have the tradition of the holy fathers. But is the establishment of such continuity possible concerning this question? It is not clear that we can to look to the fathers for answers to the questions this dialogue raises today.

Is a Joint Document Possible for the Orthodox Church?

First of all, we lack a world center that could serve as an indisputable authority for all Orthodox Christians. Our

churches are a communion in which each primate is autonomous and free to address the problems of his community. In addition, the Orthodox Church is not in the habit of publishing “official” documents concerning every problem it encounters, as most often such problems are specific to their time and are treated in relation to the context in which they arise. Unless the integrity of the whole Orthodox Church is implicated, the Church generally will not produce a document like this. Neither the seven ecumenical councils nor the recent council in Crete touched on the subject of Jewish–Christian relations. The question thus remains open. But before suggesting a “direct line” that would engage members of the Church and would direct their behavior and their reflection on the mystery of Israel, the Church must engage in its own profound reflection on the subject.

Above all, it is essential to begin credible work to train priests and laypeople on this question that persists with such urgency today. The task is one of education: to offer classes in parishes and to educate our catechists, our priests, and all who preach. Such education could also extend to theological institutes and academic and diocesan publications. Those of our bishops who are convinced of the importance of such dialogue and of mutual exchange could put in place structures for it that, little by little, would touch the life of the church. For example, in 2001 Metropolitan Jérémie (Kaligiorgis) of France, as president of the Conference of European Churches, signed the document *Charta Oecumenica*, which called for “strengthening community with Judaism.”¹⁴ Despite being signed by the European churches and by one of our eminent hierarchs, this charter has had little to no influence over the

¹³ Olivier Clément, *L’Amitié judeo-chrétienne* 1965.1 (Jan.–Mar.): 10–11.

¹⁴ *Charta Oecumenica: Guidelines for the Growing Cooperation Among the Churches in Europe* (Conference of European Churches, 2001), <https://www.ceceurope.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/ChartaOecumenica.pdf>.

past eighteen years, a sign of the lack of impact such “official” documents have on the Church.

Still, it remains important to work toward a common declaration from our patriarchs, which would signify a common intention among the different canonical authorities of our Church, and furthermore would manifest awareness on the part of the Church of the need to overcome

struct us. On December 6, 2011, Yona Metzger, the Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel, and Archbishop Chrysostomos, head of the Church of Cyprus, signed a historic document affirming the illegitimacy of the doctrine of collective Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion of Jesus.¹⁵ This event marked the first time an Orthodox church has explicitly rejected this doctrine, a doctrine which was a major factor in the development of reli-

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Patriarch Irinej of Serbia lights a candle at a 2010 Hanukkah celebration in a Belgrade synagogue.

what is contentious between Jews and Christians. To arrive at such a common agreement, it is absolutely necessary to begin educating the Orthodox world, to introduce a new conception of the Jewish worldview and experience, through the experience and profound study of the the two traditions and of the commandments of Christ.

Several steps have been taken by a handful of primates to reach out to Jewish communities in their regions. These gestures can inspire and in-

ferious antisemitism in Europe. In December 2010, Serbian Patriarch Irinej went to the synagogue in Belgrade to participate in the Hanukkah celebration. He was invited to light one of the eight ceremonial candles, a sign of warm welcome to Christians in the synagogue.¹⁶ The visit of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC was the occasion for a moving allocution:

Our history together is plagued by too many sad instances of fear

¹⁵ “Mutual Respect and Advancing Relations Between Cyprus and Israel” (2011), *Jewish-Christian Relations*, http://www.jcrelations.net/Mutual_respect_and_advancing_relations_between_Cyprus_and_Israel.3682.0.html.

¹⁶ “Celebration of Hanukkah in Jewish Community Belgrade,” Serbian Orthodox Church, December 9, 2010, http://www.spc.rs/eng/celebration_hanukkah_jewish_community_belgrade.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew signs a guestbook at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem. Photo: Yad Vashem.



and loathing and yet it is, here and there, rich with numerous examples of the Almighty's love for us as individuals and as peoples. . . . In repenting of our species' most terrible crimes, we begin to find the road toward the love for one another that has eluded us for so much of our collective histories. . . . We boldly proclaim to all, to our own spiritual children and to our brothers and sisters in the entire Oikoumene, that silence in the face of injustice, silence in the shadows of helpless suffering, silence in the darkness of Auschwitz's bitter

night will never again be allowed. True Christian faith ought to be manifest toward every people of faith, any faith. For his obligation is the preservation of human life with every sacrifice, even with the sacrifice of his own life.¹⁷

It is by such measures, along with engaged study of the Jewish tradition and a deepened mutual exchange, that the misunderstanding between our two traditions may diminish and make way for the mutual comprehension and respect that we so deeply desire. ✽

¹⁷ Bartholomew I, address delivered October 20, 1997, Washington, DC, <https://religionnews.com/1997/01/01/news-sidebar-text-of-ecumenical-patriarch-bartholomews-speech-at-holocaust/>.



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