

Colloquium “Milestones and stumbling stones in the current dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims”, Wednesday 28 October 2020, organised by the Christian weekly *Tertio*, UCSIA and the Institute for Jewish Studies (IJS)

Etienne Vetö

Milestones and stumbling stones in the current dialogue between Jews and Christians



BIO

Etienne Vetö (1964) was born in Milwaukee in the United States, but his roots are in Hungary and France. He himself has dual citizenship: American and French. In 1987 he joined the new religious movement *Chemin Neuf*. Vetö studied philosophy in Paris and then taught philosophy in Congo and from 2001 to 2014 at the *Centre Sèvres* in Paris. He studied theology in Rome and Berlin, and also obtained a doctorate in Paris in 2009. He was ordained a priest in 1997. From 2001 to 2014, he was responsible for the formation and lecturer in philosophy for seminarians at *Chemin Neuf*. Since 2014 he has been affiliated with the Gregoriana in Rome where his teaching, publications and research focus on Trinity, theological anthropology, ecumenism and Judeo-Christian relations. He is also director of the Cardinal Bea Center for Jewish Studies.

History deals in surprises and paradoxes, some bad and some good. The recent history of Jewish-Christian relations has been one of these surprises and has been an astonishingly good one. Someone from the first half of the XXth c. who would have been able to travel through time into 2020 would not believe his or her eyes at the present state of affairs. The breakthroughs of the past 50-60 years could simply not have been anticipated. My task in this lecture is to assess the present state of Jewish-Christian Dialogue and the first part will thus be devoted to the milestones represented by the documents of the Church and some rabbinical texts, concentrating on the most recent ones. However, the breakthroughs are impressive because they come after centuries of mutual opposition, despise, hatred, accusations – and on the Christian side, persecution of the Jews. This cannot be eradicated in a few decades. In a second step I will thus explore some of the difficulties and stumbling blocks of the current and future dialogue – and in some cases, try to offer some ideas for progress. As can already be perceived, the first part is centred on documents, because these are the most impressive breakthroughs in Jewish-Christian dialogue. One of the stumbling stones is the reception and appropriation of these texts by all, Jews and Christians, and that will be a major aspect of the second part. Let me note that, when studying Christian documents, because of limits of space and time, I will speak exclusively of texts produced by the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church has often been at the forefront of a renewed perception of the Jewish people by Christians, but a complete study would need to take into consideration the many rich and incisive documents from other Christian denominations.¹

I – Milestones in the current dialogue: the latest documents

1.1 The Documents of the Catholic Church

We will start with the Catholic documents, because the breakthrough in Jewish-Christian dialogue originated in the Church. The Vatican II document on the relationship between the Catholic Church and other religions, *Nostra Aetate*, in its 4th section, is symbolically and truly the watershed moment in the recent improvement. Why on the Christian side first? Different causes can be brought in as explanations, such as the Biblical movement during the first half the XXth c.: a more direct reading of the Scriptures cannot avoid seeing the importance of the people of Israel and how Jewish Jesus and the Apostles were. However, a major reason was the terrible “wake-up” call offered by the *Shoah*. The Church started realizing that centuries of “teaching of despise”, according to the expression coined by the Jewish historian Jules Isaac, had laid the fertile ground for the poisonous plant of anti-Semitism, the result of which was the murder of 6 million people in horrific conditions. Something was seriously wrong with the teaching that had led to this horror.

Nostra Aetate (= NA) is now 65 years old, and cannot be considered a recent document, but it is so fundamental that I will very briefly recall its essential contributions. Firstly, it reminds the Church that she is rooted in the Jewish people and in their religious tradition: the Church receives the Revelation made by God to Israel as the basis of its faith and the First Testament covers over 75% of Christian Scriptures. Christians are spiritually of the “stock of Abraham”. This is obvious, but it needed to be defined explicitly and underlined as an essential dogmatic dimension of the identity of the Church.

Three other statements are extremely significant, not so much for the Church’s self-perception, but rather for the perception Catholics have of the Jewish people, especially so as they contradict views that were held almost universally among Christians. 1) Jews are not to be considered collectively responsible of the death of Jesus. Of course, some Jews of the time of Jesus were accountable

for his death, but so were Romans and so was Judas, one of the Apostles. Most Jews were not involved and, what responsibility there is cannot borne collectively by the future generations. 2) For this reason, Jews are not to be considered an accursed people: “God holds the Jewish people most dear”, says NA4. 3) Finally, the Council officially and firmly “decree[s] anti-Semitism”.

After *Nostra Aetate*, there have been significant documents by the Holy See’s “Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews” of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. In 1974, *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* (n. 4). In 1985 *Notes on the correct way to present Jews and Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*. In 1998, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*. Some papal teachings and declarations have been ground-breaking as well, especially so as their magisterial authority is much more significant than the other documents - for example the “Address to the Jewish Community – West Germany”, Mainz, November 17, 1980 by John Paul II. One can also note a major document by the Pontifical Biblical Commission, in 2001, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*. Finally, the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, 2015, was marked by the publication of the latest important document of the “Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews”: “*The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable*” (Rom 11:29), *A Reflection on the Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate* (n° 4) (= GC). I will single out three of strong points of these teachings.

1) The first major aspect is that in these different documents the Catholic Church states that its relationship to Judaism is unique and cannot be compared to its relation to any other religion whatsoever. Already *Nostra Aetate* echoes the Pauline image of the wild olive branch grafted onto the “holy root”, that is the nations grafted onto the Patriarchs and/or the Jewish people (see Romans 11). It must be underlined that the Council uses a present term to state that this root *still now* gives “sustenance” to the whole tree (NA 4). “*The Gifts and the calling...*” asserts this in another way by stating that, from a Christian point of view, Judaism and Christianity are “irrevocably interdependent” (GC 13). Let me

offer a strong interpretation of this: Christianity cannot exist, not only at its birth but still now, without the Jewish people and without a living relationship to it.

This also qualifies Jewish-Christian dialogue, because: “Judaism is not to be considered simply as another religion” (GC 14). Thus, dialogue between Jews and Christians cannot be called in the strict sense of the word “interreligious dialogue” (GC 15); rather it should be called “intra-religious” or “interfamilial” (GC 20).

2) Another main aspect is that the Church does not consider the New Covenant to annul and replace the Covenant with the people of Israel. Many Fathers of the Church and theologians have for centuries taught the opposite. However, in his 1980 address to the Jewish Community in Mainz, John Paul II spoke of “the Old Covenant [...] never revoked by God”. This teaching has been taken up by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n° 121) and by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, n° 247. The 2015 document concludes that the Church “does not replace the people of Israel” (GC 23). It states that, though the Church is the “new people of God”, it is “not possible to say that Israel is no longer the people of God” (GC 23). This implies that the people of Israel have not lost their special role in the history of salvation: God is still guiding and inspiring them², they are playing a role in the salvation of the world and will be until the end of times. The Church cannot accomplish its mission without the Jewish people.

3) The third point comes from the 2015 document. As regards to the mission of the Church to proclaim the Gospel to the whole world, the situation of the Jews is unique: “The Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews” (GC 40). Individual Christians can and should give personal witness to their faith, since it is the treasure of their life, but mission to the Jews is not part of the Church’s calling as an institution. This is based on three aspects. Firstly, the Jews already are “bearers of God’s word” (GC 40). As I understand the text, this means that they do not need to be brought into the Revelation; indeed, the first step any Christian should take is to recognize that the Church has received her knowledge of God from the Jewish tradition. The document also evokes the memory of the Shoah (see GC 40). This certainly means that the Church needs to admit that, through her behaviour, she has lost much moral authority to teach Jews. The third aspect underlined by “*The Gifts and the calling...*” is that in eschewing mission to the Jews the Church is not keeping them out of salvation. The document repeats the central tenant of Christian faith, that salvation is always and, in every case, mediated by Christ: there cannot be two or more paths of salvation (see GC 35). However, it insists that Jews do not need to become Christians to be saved. Let me quote: “That the Jews are participants in God’s salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery” (GC 36). Even though this last aspect calls for some explanation, the clarification on the question of mission to the Jews has been very significant to alleviate fears on the Jewish side of the dialogue, especially in the light of a history of forced conversions.

1.2 Documents on the Jewish side

From the start there have been very positive reactions on the Jewish side to *Nostra Aetate*, as testified by the person and life of Abraham Heschel, for example. However, understandably, there have been significant voices calling for caution and even a certain dose of defiance, of which Joseph Soloveitchik is a symbol. Before engaging into dialogue with Christians, says Soloveitchik, Jews should wait for a few generations to see if the Church truly changes, and one should in any case avoid “theological” dialogue, which may lead to confusion and, as past history shows, often expresses the Christian temptation to absorb Judaism.³

This vocal resistance notwithstanding, at least three major documents have come out in the past two decades. The first one I will quote from is *Dabru Emet* (Speak [the] Truth) (= DE), published in 2000 in the *New York Times* by a group of rabbis and scholars mainly from the Reform and Conservative currents. Then, in 2015, on the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* a small group of Orthodox Rabbis wrote *Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity, To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians* (5775/2015) (= WF). This was followed two years later by *Between Jerusalem and Rome, Reflections on 50 Years of Nostra Aetate* (5777/2017) (= JR) signed by three among the most important orthodox rabbinic organizations, represented by preeminent rabbis: The Conference of European Rabbis, the Rabbinical Council of America, and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. While the Catholic documents are official and authoritative, the Jewish ones are not, since there is no similar official teaching authority in Judaism. However, one can note that these texts are endorsed by an always larger spectrum of signatories. As with the Catholic documents, I will single out three strong points that can be found to a certain extent in all of texts – and add two further reflections that are specific to the 2015 document.

1) The first aspect to stress is these documents underline that it is possible for the Jewish people to put some trust in the Church. The introduction to *Dabru Emet* notes that “Christianity has changed dramatically”. Fifty years after *Nostra Aetate*, asserts the 2017 document, “It has become clear that the transformations in the Church’s attitudes and teachings are not only sincere but also increasingly profound” (JR p.4-5). These statements are courageous steps. May the Church show herself worthy of this trust!

2) Another major dimension is that these texts underline that there is a unique relation between Judaism and Christianity. Of course, *From Jerusalem to Rome* also stresses more than once that there are irreconcilable theological differences (see JR p. 5-6). None of these documents go as far as to say that Christianity is not another religion, as the Vatican’s 2015 document says about Judaism. However, *From Jerusalem to Rome* clearly

states that, for some of Judaism's "highest authorities", Christians are not just any other religion: "Christians maintain a special status because they worship the Creator of Heaven and Earth who liberated the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage and who exercises providence over all creation" (JR p.5). This note on the story of the people of Israel reminds us that Jews and Christians do not only have in common the belief in the same "conception" of God, but also in the same "personal" God who has revealed Godself to Israel. As *Dabru Emet* expresses it, they both worship the "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (DE §1); for this reason, one can even say that "through Christianity, hundreds of millions of people have entered into relationship with the God of Israel" (DE §1).

3) A common point in all three documents is that the Judaism and Christianity have a shared responsibility to further ethical improvement of the world, peace, religious freedom, and to fight anti-Semitism and new barbarisms – different aspects of what Jews call *tikkun olam*, "repairing the world" (see JR p. 6-7; see also DE §8; WE §7). This is based on the fact that both traditions recognize in the same way the inalienable sanctity of the human being, image of God, as expressed in the Torah (see DE §4).

4) The 2015, *To do the Will of Our Father in Heaven*, holds two more radical assertions. This document is less widely received than *From Jerusalem to Rome*, but it offers plenty of food for thought. Regarding our common calling to work for a more ethical world it adds the significative nuance that the ethical partnership of Christians and Jews is a "common covenantal mission" (WF 4; 7) – which I understand to mean that Christians also have been entrusted it by God himself through a covenant. Consistently with the latter, the asserts that that the existence of Christianity is neither an error nor an accident, but that it is part of God's design. Indeed, Jews are called to acknowledge the validity of Christianity as "partners in world redemption" (WF 3; see also 7). The word "redemption" is very strong: our partnership aims at bringing about what in the end is God's saving act.

Regarding beliefs, the document asserts that, although differences should not be minimized (WF 6), "We have more in common than what divides us" (WF 5). This is a very powerful statement indeed when one lists all that we have in common: belief in the one God who created heaven and earth, who made a covenant with Abraham and with the people of Israel, who revealed himself and whose revelation and instructions are found in the Bible, who loves and cares for each human being; belief that God created the human being in God's image, that the human nature is corporal and spiritual and that both of these aspects are good, that human beings are plagued by sin but that God calls them to an ethical lifestyle and to be "holy as God is holy"; belief, finally, that God brings salvation and will one day bring full redemption.

II – Stumbling stones – or: What are the next steps?

This evolution of the past decades is impressive and offers true milestones in Jewish-Christian relations. What now are the stumbling stones? Or more positively said, what are the next questions to address and the next difficulties to solve? I will start with questions that are not "theological" in the sense of the documents we have just analysed, but rather by the problem of the reception of these documents by all – precisely because the difficulty in Jewish-Christian dialogue is now the reception. Only after that will I briefly sketch out some possible questions that Catholics and Jews could work on next for future documents.

2.1 How will the contents of these documents reach all Catholics and all Jews?

This is truly a burning question and the most difficult to solve. It is most burning because so many steps forward have been taken at the highest levels of official Church teaching and rabbinic authorities. In the Catholic Church it is one of the rarer cases in which the driving force has been the institution rather than the people or the scholars. Much must now "trickle down". I must admit I don't have any magical answer... Let me just offer suggestions at three levels: formators/educators, children and how we "build our identity". When one wants to facilitate a global change of attitude, these are the most effective levels to work on.

1) For the Catholic Church, "formators" are in many cases the clergy and those who have undergone a theological training. Of course, Judaism and Jewish-Christian dialogue are starting to be part of the theological curriculum. This needs to be the case everywhere, not only in the top-level faculties but also in all seminaries and in catechism. More radically, all contents of faith-teaching can and should be revisited at the light of the recent developments, in the same way as the biblical and the ecumenical movements of the XXth c. have led the Church to think anew all its theological treaties. For example, if we take seriously what the Magisterium is now teaching about the permanent election and role of the Jewish people, we cannot do ecclesiology as we have been doing so far: are the people of Israel still the people of God? In what way is the Church the "new people of God"? What does it mean that the sacraments make us members of the people of God?

Biblical scholarship has already integrated many aspects of the recent advances but this needs to be part of all kinds of teaching and preaching on the Scriptures. How can one speak about the Old Testament without speaking of the Jewish people – , today's Jewish people as well – and not only a vague "people of God", whom many can still implicitly understand as only the Church? How can one speak about Jesus and the controversies with the Pharisees and Sadducees without knowing and showing how Jewish Jesus was and how he is entering into "rabbinic" discussion and taking positions taken by other rabbis rather "refusing Judaism"?

Let us note that this does not mean working among Catholics or Christians only. Pope Francis recently underlined that: “dialogue calls for hearing two voices, and the witness of Jewish and Catholic instructors who teach together is worth more than many speeches”.⁴ Teaching about Judaism or Jewish-Catholic dialogue in Catholic institutes does not really make sense without the participation of Jewish voices. I hope that these different points can find echo in the Jewish world as well in regards to the way both Jewish traditions are taught and in the way Christianity is understood.

2) The second level concerns children. We know that deep moral and spiritual convictions take root during childhood. Ability to communicate and sometimes long-lasting friendships also form in these years – and we will never stress enough how friendship is a key element in all types of dialogue. Of course, one must be extremely careful to avoid any form of indoctrination, as children are as vulnerable as they are receptive. However, there is no indoctrination in efforts to encourage textbooks that adopt the results of the past 50 years of dialogue. Or to promote children’s books, movies and games that can teach about each tradition and about relating to each other. There could be a prize for the best children’s book/movie/game from the Jewish-Catholic point of view, for example.

3) A third level is to seize the opportunity given by these documents, which invite us to rethink our relationship and to perceive what is common and not only what differentiates us to work on how we build our identities as Jews and Christians. As is the case in the history of many antagonistic groups, we have constructed our “Jewishness” and our “Christianness” partly in opposition to one another. Historical research is making ever clearer to what degree our traditions have influenced each other, very often through a dynamic of rejecting what seemed too “Jewish” for Christians and what seemed too “Christian” for Jews. In that process major elements that were truly part of our traditions have lost their active role, and we have thus been greatly impoverished by our antagonism. I believe that Catholic-Jewish dialogue can help both traditions retrieve fundamental dimensions that may have, to a certain extent, been lost – and that this is one of the next steps to take in this dialogue.

Let us just take a few examples. Christianity, in reaction to Judaism, has lost a full comprehension of the Law – what a Christian means when he or she says “Law” is so much poorer and superficial than what is meant by a Jew who says *Torah*. Likewise, the Church considers herself as a people, especially with the Second Vatican Council, but this “peoplehood” is often understood in terms more similar to a community brought together by common ideas and ideals than to anything close to what “people” (*am* or even *goy*) means in the Bible, that is, with ties that touch every aspect of daily life.

Judaism, in reaction to Christianity, has had for many centuries a less clear perception of its messianic thrust than it had during the Second Temple period and the first centuries of C.E. The question is not so much who/what/how the Messiah is, but whether Messianic expectation – a powerful Jewish idea –, still has a significant role in the life of most Jews. There was a time in which wedding invitations stated

that the celebration would take place in Jerusalem, except if the Messiah had not yet come, in which case it would be at Lincoln Square Synagogue, New York... Of course, this should be nuanced because of the Messianic dimension of Zionism: Messianism is secondary only for some currents of Judaism. The next point will be more-clear cut: in reaction to Christianity, Judaism has sometimes set aside the central hope, related to messianic times, of the resurrection of the dead. We often hear that Christians believe they can know things about eternal life or the end of times, while Jews take care of this world and the present life and let God take care of the future and of eternity. But resurrection, as part of definitive and full redemption, was in no way invented by Jesus and his disciples. A last example: because of the Christian insistence on love over and against “law”, it may well be that many Jews have more difficulty in perceiving that theirs is the first, original, “religion of love”, grounded on the loving election by God of their people, structured by the *Shema*, the injunction to love God with all one’s heart, soul and force, and developed by the rabbis as love of the neighbor: “Love your neighbor as yourself— this is the major principle of the Torah” (Rabbi Akiva, Jerusalem Talmud *Nedarim* 9:4, 30b).

I am not arguing that we should in some syncretistic way mingle our traditions. The form each of these dimensions takes is specific to Judaism and to Christianity. However, the moment may have come in which a less antagonistic relation can allow us to become better Jews and better Christians because we reconnect from inside with the fullness of our own tradition. This is part of what true dialogue is all about ...

2.2 Some possible next “theological” steps

Now, after having addressed some questions about reception, it is possible to go back to the “theological” level. What questions that concern our beliefs and our conception of ourselves and of the other could be addressed in future documents? Since we are in the field of dialogue, and the first (and constant) step to take is to listen to the other: it is necessary to hear what questions the other has in store for us. These may not be the questions each partner wishes to tackle first, but this is precisely why it is useful to listen to what is dear to the heart of those we are dialoguing with. I will start with three questions which many Jews have for Christians, and then, prudently and briefly offer two questions Christians have in store for Jews.

1) The first question Christians can receive from Jews is whether Christianity has entirely taken into account the full extent of the Shoah. For the Jewish people the Shoah has caused an epochal change, with radical questions about God and about the humanity and its capacity for evil. Many Christians simply do not understand to what extent the Shoah is central in the self-understanding most Jews have of themselves and the world, and that it is one of the main reasons for dialogue with Christians: dialogue can be a question of life and death. The question posed with acute distress more than thirty years ago by Emil Fackenheim still rings true: “Why has the Christian theological response, in this nearly half a century, been so feeble, and so superficial? Why has it been even ambiguous?”⁵

Why has our theology and faith not been traumatised, truly moved, by that horrific evil? For Christianity, hearing this fully means accepting to think anew many central questions, analogously to the way the Church has accepted, with difficulty but often quite successfully, the change in paradigm brought by modernity. Let me take just one example of what may need to be revised: theodicy, the theological attempt to “justify God”, that is to explain how God can be good and all-powerful at the same time. A concrete example of what is at stake is the crisis created by the establishment of a Carmel in Auschwitz in the 1980s. The nuns and many members of the Catholic hierarchy could not see the problems, because of their difficulty in recognising how uniquely symbolic Auschwitz is for the Jewish people, but also because setting a cross in Auschwitz expressed the need to set under the saving power of Christ the evil that was committed. However, this can also be a way to try to cover up the suffering and the horror. It is true, from a Christian point of view, that all evil has been vanquished by the Passion and Resurrection of Jesus. But that does not mean that it does not remain an unresolved mystery, the “mystery of iniquity” (2 Thess 2:7). It does not mean that evil and suffering and horror can be simply explained away as part of the greater order of things and brushed away because of God’s goodness. Moreover, even if we do believe that Jesus is the Messiah, we should remember that the full realisation of messianic salvation is yet to come. Judaism is acutely aware that all the messianic promises of the prophets have not been concretely brought into being.⁶ Dialogue with Judaism may in fact help us to expect more explicitly this full realisation of the promises, which is also part of Christian faith and hope, and to confess more honestly that evil is inexplicable and unacceptable. It is a wound that one cannot close.

2) Related to this question of the epochal importance of the Shoah is the ongoing problem of confronting anti-Semitism. Many Christians believe that this is an error of the past. However, the organisers of this lecture have asked me to speak about it and they are right. We know that anti-Semitic speech and acts are on the rise in many countries where they were believed to have been overcome. There is a “new anti-Semitism” fuelled by the political tensions in the Middle East – we will come back to this later – but most anti-Semitic acts are committed by people belonging to far-right movements⁷ and are often still inspired by a rhetoric based on themes of Christian origin, such as the accusation of deicide or of the Jewish people being accursed. An important step for Christianity would be to make the study and rejection of anti-Semitism a part of all Christian teaching: for instance it would be useful if a section on anti-Semitism was part of every teaching on ethics or moral theology so that it is not addressed only in the context of Jewish-Christian relations but as a general ethical question. Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger used to underline that anti-Semitism was not only one of the forms of racism but a refusal of God’s election of the Jewish people and thus “blasphemous”, a “deep infidelity to the grace of Christ”.⁸ In a way, it is a synthesis or a concentrated expression of sin. However, to fight anti-Semitism, it is not enough to oppose it so to say “negatively”. One also needs to develop a positive teaching on the Jewish people. In biblical terms, the Church needs to “bless”

the Jewish people, as Genesis 12:3 calls all the nations to bless Abraham. The Church needs to bless the Jewish people for the gift of Revelation and of Scriptures. She needs to bless the Jewish people for the idea of the dignity of the human being. She needs to bless the Jewish people for all the treasures of religious thought and mysticism, as well as science and medicine, that they have offered and continue to offer mankind.⁹ Only then may we hope to see anti-Semitism struck at its roots.

3) A third question that can be heard by the Church is whether she should develop a theological approach to promises of the land made by the Scriptures to the Jewish people. The relation to the land of Israel is so dear to the heart of so many of our Jewish partners that is impossible to take lightly. From a diplomatic standpoint the Vatican has recognised the State of Israel in 1993. However, this is not a theological statement. Indeed, “*The Gifts and the calling...*” repeats previous Church documents in refusing a Catholic theological position on the land: “Christians are invited to understand th[e] religious attachment [of the Jewish people to the land of Israel] which finds its roots in Biblical tradition, without however making their own any particular religious interpretation of this relationship” (GC §5). The document insists that the question pertains to international law, not to a religious perspective. This is a highly sensitive question of course. Because Jesus said “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s” (Mk 13:17), because of its teaching about separation between Church and State, the Catholic Church is rightly very suspicious about “theologizing” a State or a political position. Moreover, the establishment of the modern State of Israel has implied, for many reasons, a great amount of suffering for another people, the Palestinian people. However, how can we speak of “irrevocable promises” of God and not include the promise of the Land? Or if we do not include it, then we need to offer a solid justification. This does not mean the Church will necessarily agree with Jewish positions; or rather, since there are many Jewish positions, the Church will probably agree with some. The most important, however, is to take seriously into consideration that the Scriptures do hold a promise of the land, and to address all the questions that this brings up: are these promises valid in all times? How can such a promise be reconciled with the situation on the ground? Do historical conditions and the presence of other peoples on the land have an ethical/theological significance? What ethical conditions are given to inherit the land? What does “inheritance” mean (in terms of sovereignty, for instance)?

1) The first question that I would address to our Jewish partners is if they consider they have a responsibility in respect to the Gentiles. Christianity is rediscovering that the Jewish people are still the chosen people and that they have an ongoing role in salvation history. As said above, the Church perceives that she needs living relation with the Jewish people to be herself. Now, this is not reciprocal – the vast majority of Jews do not think they “need” the Gentiles. However, the question is: why or what for are the Jewish people “chosen”? Is it for themselves or is it to have a special mission regarding the Nations? Are they just “chosen” or “chosen for...”? To put it in biblical terms: are they chosen to be a blessing for “all the families of the

earth” (Gn 12:3) and a “light to the nations” (Is 42:6; 49:6; see also 60:3)?¹⁰ And if so, what does the Jewish people do today to fulfil this calling? One should note that some contemporary Jewish thinkers reject the notion of chosen people, because of its elitist connotations and because of the thirst of Jews in the modernity for a more individual relation to God.¹¹ The paradox today is that a Judaism that does not consider the Jewish people as chosen puts Christian theology in a difficult situation. However, it may be helpful precisely for those who relate negatively to the notion of election to understand it not as a type of superiority but as a responsibility and in a certain way a form of dependence: if one is chosen *for* another, one’s existence (as chosen) makes sense only with this other...

2) The second question I would like to approach is dear to the heart of Christians but is highly sensitive – as was the land issue above. Is it possible for the Jewish rabbinical tradition to give some place to the person and teaching of Jesus? Not as divine Messiah nor as foundation of another religious tradition and faith, but as one of the first rabbis, whose teaching may be illuminating, however much one may want to agree or disagree with it. I know that the sombre history of what the Jewish people has suffered in the name of Jesus makes it difficult for many Jews to hear this name without bitter associations. However, Christians are growing in the realisation and acceptance that Jesus was Jewish, that he lived and died as a Jew, and that his intention was not to overthrow the Law or cause the disappearance of the Jewish people. Much of this new understanding comes from Jewish scholars, in what is called the “Jewish Jesus Research”. The Israeli scholar David Flusser, one of the initiators of this research, did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah but he did say that he was a “religious genius” and that he was looking forward to meeting him and discussing with him in the afterlife.¹² One can hear the provocative observation addressed by Amy Jill Levine to fellow Jews: rabbis in Reform and Conservative synagogues cite atheist or non-observant Jews such as Freud and Einstein, as well as non-Jews such as Homer, Plato or Buddha, but never does one hear of the “quite observant Jesus”, who was “Jewish with regard to family, practice and belief”.¹³

* * *

What will the future be made of? No one asked this question sixty years ago would have been optimistic enough to imagine the milestones reached in the past half-century of dialogue. Of course, the stumbling stones are daunting as well – but they are also full of opportunity if we dare rise to the challenge. Let us hope our expectations will once again be surpassed.

1. See for instance the Leuenberg Church Fellowship document *Church and Israel* (2001).
2. See Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 2001, §22.
3. See for example Joseph Soloveitchik, “Confrontation”, *Tradition* 6/2 (1964), 5ff.
4. Audience for the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies (Pontifical Gregorian University) on the occasion of the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the death of Augustin Cardinal Bea, 28 February 2019.
5. Emil L. Fackenheim, *To Mend the World, Foundations of a Post-Holocaust Jewish Thought*, 1983, 281. See also Alice. L. Eckardt, “The Holocaust, Jewish and Christian Responses”, 453.
6. “Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain. It can become for us Christians a powerful stimulant to keep alive the eschatological dimension of our faith. Like them, we too live in expectation” (Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, §21).
7. See the 2020 reports by the Anti-Defamation League: www.adl.org/audit2019#executive-summary and www.adl.org/blog/one-year-after-the-tree-of-life-attack-american-jews-face-significant-threats.
8. Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, *The Promise*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2007.
9. For more on this idea see E. Vetö, in Jon M. Sweeny (ed), *Gesù non fu ucciso dagli ebrei*, Edizioni Terra Santa, Milano, 2020, 22-24.
10. *From Jerusalem to Rome* stresses the fact that the Jewish people are under the obligation to be a “light unto the nations” (JR, preamble)
11. See for example Eugene B. Borowitz, *Renewing the Covenant, A Theology for the Postmodern Jew*, The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia-New York-Jerusalem, 5752/1991.
12. See David Flusser, *Jesus in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten*, Rowohlt, Hamburg, 1965, 27.
13. A. J. Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew, The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus*, Harper, San Francisco, 2006, 8.