

Renew our Days as of Old

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Nostra Aetate, the Declaration on the Relation of the church to Non-Christian religions issued by Vatican II, notes that the Church regards God's election of Israel and the dispensation brought by Christ as intimately connected with one another. It is indeed important for Christians to realise that the dispensation of Israel and the disposition represented by the Church are continuous, that each forms part of a continuous and integral history of salvation. The Church acknowledges the salvific character God's covenant with Israel, and of divine revelation to Israel in the Torah of Judaism. Indeed, the Church cherishes the Hebrew scriptures, uses them extensively in its liturgy, and views them as fundamental to its Christian faith.

Some Christians argue that the new covenant in Christ supersedes and abrogates the older covenant with Israel, and that the coming of Christ marks the end of the covenantal and salvific value of the Torah. Such Christians also argue that post-Christic Jews are rejected by God, and that the Israel of the old covenant is eliminatively replaced in the economy of salvation by a new Israel comprising gentiles who have accepted Christ. On this account, part of Christ's mission was the destruction of the Torah and the rejection of Israel in favour of the gentiles, and the good news of Christ's coming is not good news for the Jewish people at all but rather a curse. This flies in the face of some of our Lord's own sayings. Does our Lord not state that he has not come to abolish the Torah, but rather to bring it to perfection, and that not a jot and a tittle¹ of the Torah will pass away until all things are brought to their eschatological perfection, presumably in the general resurrection and judgement?² For that matter, our Lord acknowledges the magisterial authority of the Pharisaic forbears of the Rabbis, saying that they speak with the authority of Moses, and that their rulings in matters of observance must be obeyed³. The burden of our Lord's criticism of the Pharisees is not that their tradition and authority is false or invalid, but rather that they fail to live up to it. As for the claim that our Lord comes to disown and reject the Jewish people, it should be noted that he tells us that he has come to the lost sheep of Israel⁴, that he commissioned the twelve apostles to go not to the gentiles 'but . . . rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel'⁵, and states emphatically that salvation itself is of the Jews⁶. There is nothing in his teaching which suggests that the

dispensation which Christ brings involves the rejection of the Jewish people and their claim to election by God, or that the election of the Jewish people ceases with the ministry of our Lord.

Our Christian faith is essentially Jewish: we share the scriptures of Judaism, our concept of God is rooted in Jewish conceptions, our hope that we will be raised from the dead is a Jewish, and indeed a Pharisaic hope, and the notion of messiahship which we use each time we affirm that Jesus is the Christ is a Jewish notion. It is fundamental to Christian faith that it be intimately connected with the hope of Israel and with the people of Israel, and that the Christian Church should see its own history as part of a broader history of salvation in which the election of Israel and divine revelation to Israel in the Torah feature large. Rejection of the Jewishness of our Lord and of our faith is tantamount to rejection of the integrality of salvation history, and this is tantamount to rejection of the gospel itself. It is fundamental to Christian faith that it accept and honour the basic importance of the Jewish people and of Jewish election to the economy of salvation and the life of the Church itself, for without these the very notion of Christhood and of salvation in Christ become meaningless. It is not mere chance that readings from the Hebrew scriptures, God's gift to Israel and the mark of his election of the Jewish people, feature prominently in our liturgy and in the symbols and declarations of our Church. They testify to the Jewish hope at the very heart of our faith, and to the centrality of the claim that the covenant with Israel and salvation in Christ are continuous and remain inextricably connected with one another. This surely tells against anti-Judaism and the rejection of Jewish identity within the Church itself, and suggests that the Church has erred grievously against itself in the past by tolerating anti-Judaism and by its failure to tolerate and indeed to welcome manifestations of Jewish-Christian identity.

In a passage in his epistle to the Romans which is quoted by *Nostra Aetate*, St Paul says of the Jewish people that, though many Jews reject the gospel for the moment, the entire Jewish people remains beloved of God by dint of his gracious choice of the Jewish people as a People bound to Him by covenantal promises which are irrevocable⁷ and that all Israel are destined for salvation.⁸ The covenant with Israel holds now as it did before the ministry of our Lord. All of this implies respect for Jewish identity as such, which is viewed as graced and as part of God's economy of salvation. Paul is at pains to argue that Jewish identity should be viewed with respect by the Church, and that it is connected intimately with the salvation, in Christ, of all peoples. He was perplexed by the failure of Jews to accept Christ *en masse*, in contrast to the success of his mission to the gentiles, and the remarks to which I have

just alluded refer to Jews who had not accepted Christ. He viewed this very failure to accept Christ as something providential which made for the salvation of all people. He speaks of this failure to accept Christ almost as if it was graced, a most happy fault. His attitude towards Jewish-Christians is all the more positive: he hints that the acceptance of Christ by the Jewish people, the renaissance of Jewish-Christianity, will bring about the consummation of salvation-history⁹. On his account, which informs the deliverances of *Nostra Aetate* this matter, manifest Jewish-Christian identity is not to be deplored but rather to be encouraged, welcomed and viewed as something of inestimable value to the Christian Church.

It is important to note that Paul's views, which have been reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council, suggest that the Jewish people ought to be viewed as part of the Church rather than as practitioners of another religion. This is because the Church is the assembly of the people¹⁰ with whom God has entered into a covenant and if, as Paul teaches, God does not revoke his promises and the election of the Jewish people stands, the children of Israel according to the flesh remain part of God's people. They, together with people of all other nations whom God has gathered together in Christ, are each constituents of God's people, and each therefore forms part of the Church. It is a Church which is tragically rent by schism, to be sure, but it is a Church nonetheless, and the Christian endeavour, over the past three decades in particular, to achieve understanding between Christians and Jews must be seen as part of the Church's attempt to restore its own unity¹¹. If the Jewish people as a whole are to be viewed by Christians as an integral and identifiable part of the Church, how much more so should Jews who have accepted Christ be so identified.

It might be argued that it is absurd to continue to call Jews who have accepted Christ "Jews", since the religious world of Judaism would surely hold that such people cease to be Jews. Jews who come to Christ are ex-Jews at best. The Israeli Law of Return, which allows observant and secularised Jews alike to obtain Israeli citizenship at any time after their arrival in Israel, appears to give credence to this argument, for the Israeli High Court of Justice has ruled that Jews who willingly convert to Christianity or to any non-Jewish religion cannot avail themselves of this right. The Law of the Return makes no claim to force in Rabbinical law, however, for the right of return to Israel is a grace offered by a secular state. It does not deny that Jews who become Christians (or, for that matter, Muslims or Buddhists) remain Jewish in an important and irreversible sense¹², but considers that they have *ipso facto* displayed that they no longer identify themselves with the Jewish community at large,

and that the Jewish community at large deems them formally to have ceased to identify themselves as Jews. In Rabbinical terms, any person born of a Jewish mother is a Jew¹³ and Jews who accept Christ, though regarded as misguided at best and wicked at worst, do not thereby cease to be Jewish: once a Jew, always a Jew. St Paul's teaching about the importance of Jewish identity, whether in manifest communion with Christ or not, and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council about Jewish identity suggest that this should be taken to heart by Christians as well, and that efforts should be made to enable Jews who come to accept Christ to give expression to their distinctive Jewish identity in our Lord, and for this sense and expression of identity to be perpetuated by their descendants.

The Catholic Church does not call on people who join themselves to her to lose their national or cultural identities thereby. There are Spanish Catholics, Irish Catholics and Japanese Catholics, who remain distinctively Spanish, Irish and Japanese in distinctively Spanish, Irish and Japanese churches. There is a plurality of distinct rites in full communion with Rome for that matter, whose distinctive ritual, canonical and even theological traditions are fostered and flourish within Catholicism at large. This is as should be, for while Catholicity does demand agreement about fundamentals, it is also displayed in the heterogeneity in other significant respects, of the Church at large. It is a glorious mark of the Church that the national culture and identity of Christians be preserved and made part of the rich and seamless fabric Catholicity, and the diversity which the Church displays in this respect bears powerful testimony to its Catholicity. If this applies to English, Irish, Spanish and Japanese people, among others, whose cultures and identities are only accidentally part of the economy of salvation, it applies *a fortiori* to the Jewish people, whose culture and identity are inextricably linked with the economy of salvation; and if a variety of rites give expression to the Catholicity of the Church, surely there is place for a distinctively Jewish-Christian ritual identity. Attempts to destroy national cultures in the name of Christianity in the heyday of colonialism are now deprecated by the Church. How much more is the regime of assimilation forced upon Jewish converts to be regretted and renounced.

Dilemmas of Jewish-Christian identity:

Exile is a symbol which has deep roots in Jewish thought and experience. The destruction of the Judaean state in 587 BC and the Babylonian exile were followed by other, more traumatic exiles. The destruction of Herod's Temple in 70 AD and the brutal suppression in 490

about 135 AD of the short-lived Jewish Commonwealth headed by Bar Kochba were moments in the making of a period of exile which has spanned almost two millennia. A history of escalating oppression of Jews has been part and parcel of this exile, which has involved countless assaults on Jewish identity: prejudice, hatred, expulsions, attempts to force Jews to convert, inquisitions, massacres, Pogroms, and the sophisticated gas-chambers and crematoria of such places as Treblinka, Majdanek, Sobibor and Auschwitz. This history has made *galut*, exile, into a potent Jewish symbol of profound disorder, of pain, of tears, and of horror. In traditional Jewish thought, exile has come to symbolise all that is wrong with this vale of tears, all that Jews pray that God, in His mercy, will abolish when He redeems his people.

I have found that exile, albeit in milder form, is part and parcel of Jewish-Christian experience in a Church still dominated by the regime of assimilation, and that Jewish-Christian commitment brings with it a double measure of exile. The avowal of Jewish-Christian identity involves exile from mainstream Jews, for many Jews see conversion to Christianity as apostasy, shun converts to Christianity in particular, and view Jewish-Christian claims to remain Jewish as ludicrous at best, if not sacrilegious. Many Jews believe that identification with the Jewish people and Christian commitment are completely incompatible; and even those who would tolerate Jewish flirtations with Buddhism, for example, tend to see acceptance of Christianity by a Jew as a symptom of Jewish self-hatred and as a betrayal of the Jewish community. Soon after my baptism, a well-meaning and eminently charitable Rabbi attempted to wean me away from my Christian commitment by attempting to make me see that I had joined the ranks of those who had put our people into the gas-chambers and crematoria. My protestations that there was no connection between Christian faith and the genocidal endeavours of the Nazis did not persuade him that his judgement was wrong, and that the Church had repented of the evils it had perpetrated against the Jewish people. Catholic inquisition, *auto-de-fe*, medieval massacre and pogrom had made such deep inroads into traditional sensibilities that they were seen as fundamental to Christian commitment, and Jews who accepted baptism came to be perceived as accomplices to these rotten fruits of "Christian" faith. The claim that the Church does not demand that one relinquish Jewish identity by accepting baptism compounds the offence. An ultra-Orthodox friend reacted to this assertion by exclaiming bitterly that the Christians had found a new weapon with which to seek to destroy us. Attempts physically to exterminate us had failed, so the children of Esau had come up with a *chidush*, a new ruse. They could not eliminate us

physically, and therefore sought to destroy us spiritually by telling us mendaciously that we could abandon Judaism and join them without relinquishing Jewish identity. Acceptance of Jewish-Christian identity involves acceptance of the all-too-heavy cross of rejection by one's own people. It is the harder because one lives with the knowledge that one can easily be rid of this burden by renouncing Christ or even, given that Judaism involves orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy, by putting one's Christian commitments formally "on ice", and one knows that a solid working knowledge of Christianity without Christian commitment is likely to be valued within certain parts of the Jewish community. In theory, support for the Jewish-Christian within the Christian community should make this burden easier to bear. In practice, however, Jewish-Christian identity involves yet another exile in the form of marginalisation within the Church, for many Christians, with the best will in the world, still treat converts to Christianity who cleave to their Jewish identity as not properly Christian. It is true that there are many Christians who are not guilty of this attitude; but the structures of the Christian Church, as they are at the moment, allow little scope for the flourishing of Jewish-Christian identity. There is space for individual emotional attachment to the Jewish heritage, but there seems to be little space at present for the development of a corporate Jewish-Christian identity, and this reinforces the sense of exile and of alienation. The most comfortable option for Jewish converts within the Christian Church is consciously to abandon any claim to Jewish identity and to seek acceptance as an ex-Jew. I believe that such abandonment of Jewish identity, which involves the rejection of God's covenant with one as a Jew, is apostasy and is on a par with the self-conscious rejection of Christ by a believer.

There are Christians whose apostolate involves the fostering of non-conversionist dialogue with the Jewish people, and who campaign for recognition of the massive dependence of the Church to Jewish teaching. It might be thought that work with such people, who are deeply appreciative of Jewish identity, could mitigate the twofold exile of the Jewish-Christian. Unfortunately, the Jewish repugnance for converts is a stumbling-block. Many Jews are understandably suspicious of Christian attempts to proselytise them, and suspect that much "dialogue" covertly seeks to draw some Jews away from Judaism. Christianity is a proselytising faith, on the whole, and it requires considerable effort on the part of those who seek to engage in non-proselytising dialogue on its behalf to show that there is no hidden conversionist agenda. In this context, the mere existence of Jewish-Christians, let alone their claims to Jewish identity, is bound to occasion

embarrassment and to constitute an obstacle to dialogue. Little institutional succour for Jewish-Christians can therefore be expected from those who might otherwise have been expected to have the greatest insight into, and sympathy for, their predicament.

The effect of this double exile, this twofold marginalisation, is to make each day a into a Gethsemane. Every day one has to ask whether or not one has done the right thing in accepting baptism into Christ. One lives in the belief that one accepts the validity of Torah, but might one's Christian life deny this in practice? Has one in fact abandoned the Torah, one's very soul as a Jew, as other religious Jews claim? Do one's actions betray the covenant whose mark is cut into the flesh of Jewish men? Each day is a make-or-break situation for one's Christian commitment, each day one prays to the Father that He might remove this cup from one if it be His will, but that His will be done rather than one's own will. Each day brings almost overwhelming doubts which have to be confronted if one is to continue to do justice to one's faith and to one's election. These doubts are fuelled, in large measure, by the fact that there are no institutional channels for the expression of Jewish identity within the Church. Neither Jewish orthopraxis nor Jewish communality, which are of the essence to the observance of the Torah, play an official part in one's religious life.

An additional factor and source of alienation which I, as a Jewish-Christian, have encountered within the Church to my considerable surprise and dismay is what can best be described as tacit Marcionism. The views of the early heretic Marcion, who rejected the Hebrew scriptures and the God of those scriptures, were rightly disowned by the Church. More than a touch of Marcionism nevertheless survives, though it is not tolerated officially within the Church. I remember going to a Carol service with another Jewish-Christian shortly before my baptism. As the congregation sang the carol "O come Emmanuel", with its reference to Jesus as the king of Israel, she nudged me forcefully in the ribs to catch my attention (almost knocking me off the pew in the process) and whispered that as far as the congregation was concerned, Jesus might as well have been the king of Timbuktu. I did not really take this to heart at the time, perhaps because my battered ribs monopolised my attention at the time; I have come to feel, however, that while my benign assailant overgeneralised, there is a great deal of truth in her remark.

Many Christians do not see Jesus in terms of his Jewish context at all. He is often seen in Roman or Byzantine imperial terms, and the Jewish context of the gospel is seen as stage-setting at best. This tendency to deny or belittle the Jewishness of Christ sometimes goes

hand in hand with a fondness for traditional Christian chants—the psalms, antiphons and responsories based on verses of the psalms—in their original and proper language, which is, as everyone should know, the Latin of the vulgate¹⁴. An up-and-coming young priest and budding theologian once informed me that Jesus’s Jewishness is purely accidental, simply an expression of God’s quirky freedom, and that it has nothing whatsoever to do with the economy of salvation. I fear that this tendency to “Aryanise” Christ is not uncommon. It seems that I have been labouring under the illusion, for my entire Christian life, that Christianity teaches that God the Son became incarnate as a Jew in order to fulfil the hopes expressed in the Hebrew scriptures, and that the history expressed in the Hebrew scriptures and the dispensation at the time of and following the incarnation comprised one seamless history of salvation. Denial of the salvific significance of the Jewishness of Jesus implicitly denies the integrity of salvation-history, denudes the claim that Jesus is the Messiah, of any real religious meaning, making “Christ” into no more than a hallowed surname for Jesus, and seems to me to leave no space for traditional Christian veneration of Hebrew scripture. I cannot help wondering what sense such people can possibly make of the idea that Jesus is the Messiah—“Christ” is, after all, a Jewish title—or how such tacit Marcionites can make any sense of the use of Old Testament lections, including the psalms, in the mass and in the Divine Office. There is a traditional “Catholic” antipathy towards the Old Testament which is probably of a piece with this tacit Marcionism. I hope that my remarks suggest that, quite apart from the fact that it marginalises Jewish-Christians within the Church, it is corrosive of the very foundations of Christian faith and must be combated.

Exile from one’s own people, marginalisation within the Church, the pervasiveness of tacit Marcionism: none of these make Jewish-Christian identity easy. I believe, hope and pray, however, that this “crucifixion” is fruitful and indeed redemptive.

Conclusions:

I have attempted to sketch an argument against the regime of assimilation which dominated the attitude of the Church towards Jews who came to faith in Christ. I have sought to describe from a first-person perspective some of the vicissitudes of Jewish-Christian identity in a Church which remains dominated in practice, albeit no longer in theory, by this regime. I hope that I have made a plausible case for the proposition that it is of vital importance to the Church itself that it rediscover its Jewish-Christian roots, that it reinforce its abandonment of the theory of the regime of assimilation not only in theory by purging

itself of the practice associated with this regime, and that it afford the institutional space for the development of flourishing communal Jewish-Christian identity.

Please permit me to indulge in some moderate utopianism by way of conclusion. I believe that a non-conversionist framework is called for in which Jewish-Christians could bear witness to their commitment to Christ by leading Jewish lives, faithful to the Torah, in a full-blooded sense; in which they would have the space and the facilities freely to explore and appreciate any aspect of their Jewish heritage, wherever this might lead them, as well as its connection with the good news in Christ; and which would, ideally, permit fellowship and dialogue as Jews with other Jews without a conversionist agenda of any sort.

While facilitating Jewish-Christian communality and practice, such a framework should not preach the intra-Christian superiority of Jewish-Christians either manifestly or tacitly, nor should it hold that Jewish practices are necessary for salvation in Christian terms. Jewish observances should be practised as a witness to an identity which goes back to the very beginnings of the Church, but should not be observed in a divisive spirit of superiority.

The issues of political Zionism, its claim to represent all Jews, and the not uncommon claim that criticism of actions of the government of Israel are *ipso facto* attacks upon the Jewish people as a whole, are fraught and divisive in the extreme. Vigorous attempts should be made to present the embroilment of such a framework in the issue of political Zionism, and it is imperative that it avoid, *qua* framework, the ascription of any eschatological significance to the government of Israel and its policies. This makes Israel a singularly unsuitable location for a Jewish-Christian framework of this sort: the pressure of the Israeli context is so considerable that the framework could not avoid embroilment in the issue of the ideology and actions of the country. I have reason to believe that the attitudes of different Jewish-Christians towards political Zionism in general and the policies and actions of the government of Israel are far from homogenous, and this is perhaps as it should be. Whatever the feelings of individual Jewish-Christians about this issue, and however strongly some of them might feel, the framework as such must distinguish sharply between "Jewish" and "Zionist", and must take no institutional stand in relation to Zionism. It should take the view, *qua* institution, that the policies and actions of the State of Israel are to be judged by the same criteria which are applied to any other state. The framework must, of course, be able to cope with a wide variety of individual views on this subject.

Jewish commitment within such a framework would doubtless

enhance and enrich, rather than threaten, the Christian life and fellowship of its members, and the commitment to the faith of gentile Christians who come into contact with it, Its members will have a variety of other Christian commitments, lay, clerical and religious, and the other ecclesiastical institutions to which they belong should be encouraged to see the Jewish-Christian framework as a resource and a witness which is worthy of their support, and not as a competitor, and should view the vocation of Jewish-Christians to maintain and nurture their identity within the Church at large as one which at one and the same time transcends and undergirds their more particular vocations within the Church.

- 1 'Jot' presumably refers to the Hebrew letter *yod*, the smallest of all the letters, and 'tittle' presumably refers to the 'crowns' on the letters in Torah scrolls.
- 2 See Mt 5. 17–18.
- 3 See Mt 23. 2–3.
- 4 Mt 15. 24.
- 5 Mt 10. 5–6.
- 6 Jn 4. 22.
- 7 Rm 11. 27–29.
- 8 Rm 11 26.
- 9 Rm 11.15.
- 10 The New Testament Greek for 'Church', '*ekklesia*', means 'assembly' and is related to a number of Hebrew terms which are to be found in the Pentateuch and later. These Hebrew terms, which are used of the people of Israel, include *qahl*, 'community', '*edah*', 'convocation', and the Rabbinical term *knesset*, 'assembly'. All of these are 'ecclesiastical' terms, as it were, and by using them both the Old Testament and later Rabbinic tradition in effect refer to Israel as God's Church.
- 11 I am indebted to my brother in St Dominic and teacher, Herbert McCabe, OP, for this point. See the first two essays in McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Geoffrey Chapman).
- 12 I remember once reading a long article about Cardinal Lustiger, the Archbishop of Paris, in *Ha'aretz* &- the finest of Israel's daily newspapers. The writer of the article was at pains to point out that Cardinal Lustiger is Jewish.
- 13 I shall use the term 'Jew' as if it were a gender-neutral term instead of using the awkward longer phrase 'Jews and Jewesses'.
- 14 I cannot resist a story about an incident when I was at Rabbinical college. I happened to be seated on a bus piously reading a volume of psalms with a Rabbinical commentary. A respectable lady with an educated accent sat next to me, glanced at the volume, and asked me what it was, and in what language. Once I had explained what they were, she expressed amazement that the Bible had been translated into Hebrew of all languages. As far as fondness for Latin chant is concerned, I do not wish to suggest that it is invariably associated with rejection of our Lord's Jewishness, or that Latin chant is in any way suspect. As my autobiographical sketch states, I happen to enjoy it and have occasionally been known to indulge in it. I also plead guilty to the presence of a few reproductions of Byzantine icons in my room.