CONFERENCE PROCEEDING

A Public Dialogue: Contemporary Questions about Covenant(s) and Conversion

Edward Kessler, The Woolf Institute of Abrahamic Faiths, Cambridge University
Philip A. Cunningham, Jewish-Catholic Institute, St. Joseph's University

Presented at St. Joseph's University, January 11, 2009

In recent years, several controversies have beset official relations between Jews and Catholics. These include whether Catholics should pray for the conversion of Jews, whether the purpose of interreligious dialogue is to lead others to Christian faith, and whether Catholics should undertake non-coercive "missions" to Jews. An underlying theological topic in all these disputes is how the biblical concept of "covenant" is understood in the Jewish and Catholic traditions and in terms of their interrelationship. The resolution of these questions could set the pattern of official Catholic-Jewish relations for many years. In a public dialogue of these matters, Dr. Edward Kessler from Cambridge University in Great Britain and Dr. Philip A. Cunningham, Director of the Jewish-Catholic Institute at St. Joseph's University presented and discussed their own analyses of the present situation.

Link to video at:
http://model.inventivetec.com/inventivex/mediaresources/checkout_clean.cfm?ContentID=28893&TransactionID=218605&Checksum=%20%20509780&RepServerID=&JumpSeconds=0&CFID=3895491&CFTOKEN=14161271

Covenant, Mission and Dialogue

Edward Kessler

Covenant, mission and dialogue illustrate both the extent of the common ground between Jews and Christians and also many of the difficulties that still need to be addressed. The challenge they bring is demonstrated by *Nostra Aetate*, perhaps the most influential of the recent church documents on Jewish–Christian relations. On the one hand, the document states that "the church is the new people of God" while, on the other, "the Jews remain most dear to God because of their fathers, for He does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues (cf. Romans 11:28-29)". The tension between the two statements is caused by continuing divergence of opinion over the identity of the people of God—both Jews and Christians claim to be *Verus Israel*, the true Israel—regarded by Jews as the very core of their self-understanding, yet for nearly two millennia the Church also saw itself as the True Israel and the heir of all the biblical promises towards Israel.

Covenant

Covenant (Hebrew, *berith*), a central concept in both Judaism and Christianity is a subject that has received serious attention in recent years. It refers to God initiating a covenant with a

community of people, and that community accepting certain obligations and responsibilities as covenant partners. A covenant is not, as is sometimes mistakenly assumed, a contract or a transaction but is an agreement dependent upon a relationship. Some exegetes hold to the view that *berith* is better translated by "obligation" because it expresses the sovereign power of God, who imposes his will on his people Israel: God promises in a solemn oath to fulfill his word to his people Israel, who are expected to respond by faithfulness and obedience. Jonathan Sacks explained this in his address to 600 Anglican bishops at the 2008 Lambeth Anglican Communion when he said, "In a covenant, two or more individuals, each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other, come together in a bond of love and trust, to share their interests, sometimes even to share their lives, by pledging our faithfulness to one another, to do together what neither of us can do alone…a contract is about interests but a covenant is about identity. And that is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform."

In the New Testament the concept of the covenant is reinterpreted through the experiences of the early Christian community and the story of Jesus is seen as a new phase in the covenant-story of Israel. The change in emphasis marked by the translation of *berith* into the Greek *diathèkè* ("decree") in the Septuagint, developed still further in the New Testament, where the concept acquired the meaning of a definitive "last will and testament"on the part of God. The Vulgate translation used the word *testamentum*, which became the official designation of both parts of the Christian Bible—the Old Testament and the New Testament—with its inescapable implication of supersessionism.

From the Jewish perspective, no change took place in Israel's covenantal relationship with God. The traditional rabbinic attitude is that Judaism remained a community of faith—nothing had been taken away although there was a change in emphasis. The Sinai covenant became more important and there was an increased emphasis on the mutuality of the covenantal relationship between God and His People. This is summarized in a well-known *Midrash*, in which God was depicted as travelling around the world asking various peoples to accept His Torah. None was willing to accept its yoke until God came to Israel and the Israelites answered in one voice: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient"(Exodus 24.7, after *Mechilta BaChodesh* 5.74a).

As far as Christianity was concerned, however, a radical break had occurred. Christianity had introduced a new covenant, or at the very least, a radical transformation of the old covenant. According to the New Testament, the relationship between God and His people was mediated decisively through His Son, Jesus Christ. The early Church soon regarded the old covenant of Israel as definitely abrogated; the text on the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 was explained as pointing to fulfillment in Christ:

> Behold, the days come, says the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah. Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they broke, although I was a husband unto them, says the Lord. But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel. After those days, says the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

The question that has absorbed many Christian theologians, such as Prof. Cunningham in recent years, concerns the role of the Jewish people after the appearance of Christianity. The traditional Christian teaching is that with the coming of Jesus Christ the Church has taken the place of the Jewish people as God's elect community—this is known as replacement theology (sometimes called supersessionism) which implies the abrogation (or obsolescence) of God's covenant with the Jewish people.

After the Holocaust many Christians became aware of the inadequacy of replacement theology, which was perceived to have formed the linchpin of the "teaching of contempt."Accordingly, the identification, analysis and repudiation of replacement theology have occupied a prominent place among Christian theologians seeking to put the church's relationship to the Jewish people on a new theological footing. However, there is less agreement among Christians about what replaces replacement theology.

Clearly, the rejection of replacement theology entails some affirmation of the continuing validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people and that Christians must regard Jews as continuing in a covenantal relationship with God, however the church eventually might interpret the meaning of the Christ event. But Christian theologians continue to differ about the implications of the rejection of replacement theology for central Christian doctrines, notably christology and the church's mission. It is for this reason that Philip Cunningham helped initiate an ecumenical Christian group whose purpose was to explore the new relationship between the Church and the Jewish People on the assumption that christologies which revolve around the notion that through the Christ event Christianity totally fulfilled (and replaced) Judaism can no longer be sustained. Constructing a new theology of the church and the Jewish people in light of the Christ event remains an unresolved and formidable undertaking, perhaps because, as Johann-Baptist Metz argued, the restatement of the church's relationship with the Jewish people is a fundamental revision of Christian theology.

German scholar Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt viewed covenant as the most constructive biblical concept to describe both Christian identity and contemporary Jewish–Christian relations. His conviction is that churches as representatives of the peoples of the earth can only hope to become partners in a covenantal relationship with the People of Israel if they are willing to accept the burden of Israel in sanctifying the Name of God in the world, if they join in the calling of Israel to restore the world, and if they are ready to embark with the people of Israel on its journey to the "new covenant" with God which lies ahead.

There are at least three possible ways in which Christians may understand the relation between the 'old' and 'new' peoples:

- Only one (the newer) is truly the 'people of God';
- There are two peoples of God, the Jewish and the Christian;
- The two peoples are really one people of God - identical in some respects and different on others.

The first position states that there is simply only one "people of God"—Christians. In this case, either Jews convert to Christianity or remain as Jews, a remnant destined to suffer whose lowly position gives witness to the truth of Christ. This Augustinian position, called the witness doctrine, dominated Christian thought until it began to be questioned during and after the Enlightenment.

The second position argues that there are two peoples of God, the Jewish and the Christian. This view is espoused by theologians such as the Jewish writer Franz Rosenzweig, who suggests that both Jews and Christians participate in God's revelation and both are (in different ways) intended by God. Only for God is the truth one and earthly truth remains divided. Rosenzweig was influenced by Jacob Emden (1697–1776) who viewed Christianity as a legitimate religion for gentiles. In *Seder Olam Rabbah Vezuta* he wrote positively about Jesus and Paul, utilizing the New Testament in his argument that they had not sought to denigrate Judaism and that their teachings were primarily concerned to communicate the Noachide laws to gentiles. "The Nazarene and his apostles…observed the Torah fully," he wrote.

James Parkes also took the two-covenant position and suggested that the Sinai and Calvary experiences provided humanity with two complementary revelations. In his view the Sinai revelation emphasized the aspect of "community "while Calvary focused on the "individual." Parkes remained convinced that the revelation in Christ did not replace the covenant at Sinai and as a result Judaism and Christianity were inextricably linked together. Although there are variations in the views of theologians who follow the two peoples of God (or two-covenant) approach they tend to share the view that the revelation in Christ was a unique event and resulted in a new sense of intimacy between God and humanity. John Pawlikowski has suggested that the two-covenant approach is particularly close to the New Testament teachings because it emphasizes that as a result of the Christ event, humanity has achieved a deeper understanding of the God-humankind relationship. The difficulty of this approach from the perspective of Jewish-Christian relations is how—after having proclaimed this uniqueness—a special role can be maintained for Judaism in the salvation process.

As for contemporary Jewish supporters of the two-covenant theory, it is an approach shared by myself as well as Israeli scholar David Hartman (b. 1931). A covenant between people and God is predicated on a belief in human dignity. Other religions, especially Christianity and Islam, have their own covenants with God and are called to celebrate their dignity and particularity.

The third position posits that Jews and Christians represent one people of God who are identical in some respects and different in others. Although both differ substantially they nevertheless share sufficient common ground to make it possible for the same covenant to be applied to both. Christians favoring the one-people (or one covenant) approach sometimes refer to Ephesians 2:12 which states that to be separate from Christ is to be strangers to the community of Israel. The Roman Catholic Church favors a single covenant model as does the German Rhineland Synod, which in *Towards a Renewal of the Relationship between Christians and Jews* (1980), declared: "We believe in the permanent election of the Jewish People as the People of God and realize that through Jesus Christ the Church is taken into the covenant of God with His People."

Similarly, Catholic scholar Monika Hellwig argues that Judaism and Christianity both point towards a common goal—the same eschatological event. As a result, Christian claims that Jesus had totally fulfilled Jewish messianic expectations must be set aside. In her view, there still remains an unfulfilled dimension awaiting completion. Her words, which were published in an article in 1970 foreshadowed The Pontifical Biblical Commission's 2001 declaration *The Jewish People and their Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, which stated the "Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain." In a striking passage which deals with eschatological expectations the document also stated that Jews, alongside Christians, keep alive the messianic expectation. The difference is that for Christians "the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come and is already present and active among us." What Christians believe to have been accomplished in Christ "has yet to be accomplished in us and in the world."

The most comprehensive theological study among Protestant theologians is found in the three-volume work by Paul van Buren (1924–98) entitled *A Theology of Jewish-Christian Reality* (1980-88), who argues that the people "Israel" should be recognized as two connected but distinct branches. The Christian Church represents the Gentile believers drawn together by the God of the Jewish people in order to make God's love known throughout the world. Through Jesus, Gentiles were summoned by God for the first time as full participants in God's ongoing salvation of humanity. However, the Gentiles went beyond God's eternal covenant with the Jewish people and attempted, unsuccessfully, to annul the original covenant. Van Buren argues that both branches must grow together rather than in isolation and that in time they will draw closer whilst retaining their distinctiveness.

Evangelical scholar, David Holwerda however, argues that Christians are in danger of minimizing the differences between Judaism and Christianity and in so doing produce a theology that is not true to the New Testament message. Although he recognizes the importance of the Christians' re-acquaintance with the Jewish Jesus, Christianity still has an implicit argument with Judaism on several key issues but "the category of election still applies to the Jewish people, even those who do not now believe in Jesus." The Church is the new Israel but the old Israel remains elect and in God's faithfulness still has a future.

In taking this view, Holwerda is clearly dependent upon Romans 9 – 11. Although there are significant differences between proponents of the single covenant thesis, they all share a number of key features:

- Gentiles can ultimately be saved only through a linkage with the Jewish covenant, something made possible in and through Christ;
- The uniqueness of Christianity consists far more in modes of expression than in content;
- Jews and Christians share equally and integrally in the ongoing process of humanity's salvation.

It is much debated whether the concept of covenant, in its one- or two-covenant version, could function as a bridge between Judaism and Christianity. It has certainly become a common subject for discussion in activist and scholarly circles. Numerous official ecclesiastical statements have in the last few decades declared that the covenant of God with His People was never abrogated, illustrated by the 1985 Vatican *Notes* and the 1992 catechism which stated that the biblical covenant had not been revoked and that "Israel is the priestly people of God…the older brothers and sisters of all who share the faith of Abraham" (Para 63). It is particularly noteworthy that the present tense is used with reference to the Jewish people.

In recent years a number of scholars have become somewhat dissatisfied with the single and double covenant options. These scholars, both Jewish and Christian, have begun to suggest new images of the relationship such as "siblings" (Hayim Perelmuter), "fraternal twins" (Mary C. Boys) and "co-emergence" (Daniel Boyarin). All of these images stress both linkage and distinctiveness between Christianity and Judaism. They tend to emphasize a more "parallel" rather than the traditional "linear" dimensions of the relationship, with Christianity and Judaism, as we know them today, having emerged out of a religious revolution in Second Temple Judaism.

Re-Reading Paul

Paul's comments on the identity of people of Israel and their relationship with God are complex and sometimes hard to follow and it is unfortunate that they are commonly and misleadingly simplified. He is the New Testament writer *par excellence* who struggles deeply with the meaning of the covenant of Israel and the election of the Church. He is generally viewed as arguing that membership of the true Israel is not determined simply on physical descent from Abraham, but rather on the spiritual affinity to Abraham's trusting relationship with God. In other words Israel is composed of a combination of Jews and Gentiles. The former, due to their spiritual past, include those who have extended their trust in God to a dependence upon Jesus as Lord; the latter includes those Gentiles who have entered into the covenantal relationship with God by their acceptance of Jesus. This, however, is a facile interpretation of Paul's assessment for it simply imputes to him the view that the old becomes new.

A significant re-reading of Paul's writings in modern times began in 1974 when Lutheran scholar Krister Stendahl, published *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles*. Stendahl showed that Paul could not accept the idea that Jews as a people and religion are totally and forever outside the people of God. According to Stendahl, Paul suggests that both Israel and the Church are elect and both participate in the covenant of God. Paul affirmed that the Jewish people, despite their disobedience toward Christ, are still the elect people of God and that Christian Gentiles are honorary citizens grafted onto the rich tree of Jewish heritage. While Paul argued that unbelieving Jews are in a state of disobedience regarding Christ, nevertheless, he unreservedly affirmed their continued election.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul asked a controversial question: what of the ongoing validity of God's covenant with his Jewish people? Did the Church, as the New Israel, simply replace the Old as inheritors of God's promises? If so, does this mean that God reneges on his word? If God has done so with regard to Jews, what guarantee is there for the churches that he won't do so again, to Christians this time?

One might argue against Paul by saying that if Jews have not kept faith with God, then God has a perfect right to cast them off. It is interesting that Christians who argue this way have not often drawn the same deduction about Christian faithfulness, which has not been a notable and consistent characteristic of the last two millennia. Actually, God seems to have had a remarkable ability to keep faith with both Christians and Jews when they have not kept faith with God, a point of which Paul is profoundly aware in Romans 9-11. He goes out of his way to deny claims that God has rejected the chosen people, and asserts that their stumbling does not lead to their fall. He also offers a severe warning that gentile Christians should not be haughty or boastful toward unbelieving Jews—much less cultivate evil intent and engage in persecution against them. This critical warning remained almost totally forgotten by Christians who tended to remember Jews as "enemies" but not as "beloved" of God and have taken to heart Paul's criticisms and used them against Jews while forgetting Paul's love for Jews and Judaism.

In Paul's view it was impossible for God to elect the Jewish people as a whole and then later displace them. If that were the case, God could easily do the same with Christians. In his view, the hardening took place so that the Gentiles would receive the opportunity to join the people of God. The Church's election, therefore, derives from that of Israel but this does not imply that God's covenant with Israel is broken. Rather, it remains unbroken—irrevocably (Romans 11:29).

The Rhineland Synod (1980) explained this as follows, referring to the continuing existence of the Jewish people, its return to the land of promise and the creation of the State of Israel as

"signs of the faithfulness of God towards His people."In the same year, John Paul II referred to "the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked."As the 1985 *Notes* stated: "The permanence of Israel (while so many ancient peoples have disappeared without trace) is a historic fact and a sign to be interpreted within God's design. We must in any case rid ourselves of the traditional idea of a people *punished*, preserved as a *living argument* for Christian apologetic. It remains a chosen people, "the pure olive on which were grafted the branches of the wild olive which are the gentiles" (John Paul II, 6 March 1982, alluding to Rm 11:17–24)."

Mission

The issue of mission is in many ways far more difficult for the Church to resolve in its relationship with Judaism than, for example, Christian antisemitism since it is relatively easy to condemn antisemitism as a misunderstanding of Christian teaching whereas mission (in the sense of making converts) has been and still is central to the Christian faith—the legacy of the command found in Matthew 28:19 to "go therefore and make disciples of all nations." Initially, the Christian message was preached by Jews to Jews (cf. Acts 2:14ff) until Paul raised the issue of preaching to the Gentiles. The Gospels themselves reflect early controversies over the inclusion of Gentiles in Christianity's missionary activity. Mark 7:27 says in this context, "Let the children first be fed, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs" and similarly in Matthew 10.6 the instruction to "go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" is ascribed to Jesus. Both verses express the view that the proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah should be expressed to Jews alone. The conclusion of the New Testament authors, however, contradicts this. Not only Matthew 28:19 but also Acts 28:28, which argues that the "good news"should also be transmitted to Gentiles: "Let it be known to you then that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles." Indeed, unlike Jews, the author argues the Gentiles "will listen."

For Jews, Christian mission is contentious because it conjures up images of centuries of persecution by the Church which has failed to understand the Jewish "no" to Jesus. Some Jews view Christian missionary activity as no different from Hitler's policies because for centuries the Church had tried to do spiritually what Hitler had sought to do physically: to wipe out Jews and Judaism. Indeed, the 1948 meeting of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Amsterdam called for a redoubling of efforts to convert Jews. Whilst acknowledging the six million Jews who perished under the Nazis, the WCC report nevertheless recommended that the churches should "seek to recover the universality of our Lord's commission by including the Jewish people in their evangelistic work." The conclusion of the WCC was that, in the light of the Holocaust, an even greater effort should be made to convert Jews.

Much missionary theology rests on Christian claims that salvation is only possible through Christ. The exclusive understanding of salvation is demonstrated by the traditional teaching, *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church there is no salvation) and a discussion of mission and Jewish-Christian relations needs to address the issues of salvation and christology. The Roman Catholic theologian John Pawlikowski strongly argues that *Nostra Aetate* necessitates a rethinking of Christology, Christian identity, covenant and mission.

The 2002 document, *A Sacred Obligation*, a statement from an ecumenical American Christian Scholars Group on Christian–Jewish Relations, argues that the recent recognition within the church that with of the permanency of God's covenant with the Jewish people there

automatically comes the realization that the redemptive power of God is at work within Judaism. So, if Jews who do not share the Christian faith are indeed in such a saving relationship with God, then Christians require new ways of understanding the universal significance of Christ. This has been the subject of fierce debate and remains highly contested.

Despite the recognition of Christian theologians that the repudiation of the *adversus Judaeos* tradition has profound implications for Christology, major problems remain. The Vatican document *Dominus Iesus* (2000) reiterated that all salvation ultimately comes through Christ and that those that do not acknowledge stand in considerable peril in terms of their redemption. Cardinal Walter Kasper, since 2001 head of the Holy See's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, has advanced the notion that Jews are an exception to the rule in terms of the universality of salvation in Christ because they are the only non-Christian religious community to have authentic revelation from the Christian perspective. Hence Torah is sufficient for Jewish salvation. This thesis remains in its infancy and it seems marginal under the papacy of Benedict XVI, as the 2008 controversy over the revised Tridentine Rite Good Friday prayer demonstrates. The reason the Tridentine Rite touched a raw nerve in Jewish-Christian Relations is because the prayer deals with mission and the conversion of Jews and expressly looks towards their conversion. Since 1965 and until 2008, official Catholic teaching was clear for, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 839*, "the Jewish faith, unlike other non-Christian religions, is already a response to God's revelation." The one prayer for Jews in Catholic liturgy, which before the Second Vatican Council was a prayer for their conversion, previously called the Good Friday Prayer for the Perfidious Jews, had been transformed by the new 1970 English missal into a prayer that Jews will be deepened in the faith given to them by God. It reads: *Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God, that they may continue to grow in the love of his name and in faithfulness to his covenant.* The Tridentine rite prayer, which retains the pre-Vatican II heading, "Prayer for the Conversion of the Jews" has been reformulated as follows: *We pray for the Jews. That our God and lord enlighten their hearts so that they recognize Jesus Christ, the Saviour of all mankind.*

With the publication of the prayer, the Church now holds two contradictory positions on relations with Jews. Pope John Paul II (and Cardinal Jozef Ratzinger, before he became Pope Benedict VXI), among others, regularly used the term, "elder brother" to apply to the relationship with Judaism, and Catholic teaching accepted the irrevocable nature of the covenantal relationship between the Jewish People and God. The new prayer, however, challenges this teaching and since its promulgation in 2007 a small number of conservative catholic groups have begun to voice more loudly their desire to seek Jewish converts. This raises a fundamental question: If the Church accepts that the covenant still belongs to the Jewish People, surely there appears a less pressing need to convert Jews to Christianity? The revised rite should be seen as part of the growing tension within the Church, which now has no clear consensus in this area. Many Jews expect that if they dialogue with Christians there should be no hidden missionary agenda or secret desire for their conversion.

At the Second Vatican Council, Cardinal Patrick O'Boyle expressed concern if conversion came on to the agenda of Catholic-Jewish relations. "The word "conversion" awakens in the hearts of Jews memories of persecutions, sufferings…If we express our hope for the eschatological union in words that give the impression we are guided by the definite and conscious intention of working for their conversion, we set up a new and high wall of division, which makes any fruitful dialogue impossible." His words still echo today.

Yet, it is a mistake to equate mission to proselytism; rather, mission refers to the sending out of someone to fulfill a particular task and both Judaism and Christianity have a missionary vocation in the sense that their adherents carry out a specific witness in the world. Christian missionary activity has traditionally been understood as converting non-Christians to belief in Christ, and that has included Jews. Generally, Jews have not understood their mission as converting others to Judaism but as faithfulness to Torah and the covenantal obligations, sometimes described in terms of "being a light to the nations"(Isaiah 42:6); therefore non-Jews are not targets for conversion because the righteous of all nations will have a share in the world to come if they keep the Noachide Laws.

Of course, there has always been ambiguity in the Church's understanding of mission and Jews: on the one hand it sought to bring as many Jews as possible into the fold, at times by force; on the other, it had respect for the tradition that was at the root of Christian faith. The Church sought to preserve the identity of the Jewish people because Jews were the recipients of God's providential care as the chosen people and eschatologically they had a role in the final act of redemption. This raised a tension between belief that the conversion of the Jews was an essential part of Christian mission and not wanting to thwart God's final salvific plan.

This tension remains, as demonstrated by those who seek the conversion of all Jews because there is no exemption from the need for salvation in Christ; others who witness to faith in Christ, without targeting Jews specifically, but believe in sharing the Christian faith with all people (including Jews); and finally, those who have no conversionary outlook towards Jews, where mission is understood as mutual influence and a joint ethical witness in an unredeemed world (sometimes called "critical solidarity "or "mutual witness").

On the one hand, it has been argued that the Church alone is the theological continuation of Israel as the People of God and mission to the Jewish people is necessary, as illustrated by missionary organizations such as the *Christian Mission to the Jewish People*; on the other, Jews were still the elect of God, demonstrated by the Leuenberg document (2001) which rejected the need to actively seek the conversion of Jews.

Put slightly differently, if the main emphasis is put on the concept of the Church as the Body of Christ, the Jewish people are seen as being outside. The Christian attitude to them would be in principle the same as to adherents of other faiths and the mission of the Church is to bring them either individually or corporately to the acceptance of Christ so that they become members of this body. However, if the Church is primarily seen as the People of God, it is possible to regard the Church and the Jewish people together as forming the one People of God separated from one another for the time being, yet with the promise that they will ultimately become one. Consequently, the Church's attitude towards Jews is different from the attitude she has to all others who do not believe in Christ. Mission is therefore understood more in terms of ecumenical engagement in order to heal the breach, than of seeking conversion.

Thomas Stransky, former director of the Tantur Institute near Jerusalem, explained the problem of mission slightly differently and his words raise new questions. He argues that Christians should always avoid proselytism (in the pejorative sense). They should shun all conversionary attitudes and practices, which do *not* conform to the ways a free God draws free people to Himself in response to His calls to serve Him in spirit and in truth:

> *In the case of the Jewish people, what is Christian proselytism in practice? And what is 'evangelization' - the Church's everlasting proclamation of Jesus Christ, 'the Way, the Truth*

> *and the Life'? Is open dialogue a betrayal of Christian mission? Or is mission a betrayal of dialogue?*

The 1988 Anglican Communion at Lambeth was the first Anglican conference to reflect on the issue of Christian mission and Judaism. It explained mission, not in terms of the conversion of Jews, but rather of a *common mission*. In light of Christian-Jewish and Christian-Muslim relations, proselytism was to be rejected and the Conference called for "mutual witness to God between equal partners." It stated that:

> *…there are a variety of attitudes towards Judaism within Christianity today...All these approaches, however, share a common concern to be sensitive to Judaism, to reject all proselytizing, that is, aggressive and manipulative attempts to convert, and of course, any hint of antisemitism. Further, Jews, Muslims and Christians have a common mission. They share a mission to the world that God's name may be honored.*

In contrast, some, evangelical Christian leaders, such as de Ridder, firmly believe that it is the divinely mandated mission of the church to preach the Gospel to Jews, as well as to everyone else. Alongside the missionary activity, it is also suggested that Christians should re-examine their relationship with Judaism by increasing their understanding of the Jewish roots of Christianity. This has led to some intriguing social and political alliances between Evangelical organizations and Orthodox Jewish groups, particularly in the United States, such as a joint opposition to abortion.

According to this view, embraced by many Southern Baptist churches in the United States, Christians would be false to their faith if they failed to try to bring Jews into Christian fellowship. The 1996 Southern Baptist Convention reaffirmed the need to direct "energies and resources towards the proclamation of the gospel to the Jewish people" and the Jews for Jesus movement also exemplifies active mission towards Jews. Its charter states that "we believe in the lost condition of every human being, whether Jew or Gentile, who does not accept salvation by faith in Jesus Christ, and therefore in the necessity of presenting the gospel to the Jews."

For evangelicals in particular, the question of Christian mission to Jews is not a practical problem as to whether Christians should witness their faith to Jews; rather, it is how Christians should witness their faith to Jews. At the heart of the tension between evangelism and dialogue lies conversion and conversation. An Evangelical Anglican, Roger Hooker, argued that *evangelism*—in other words, conversion—and *dialogue*—in other words, conversation:

> *have to walk together but always as uneasy partners. If they are not walking together, there can be no tension between them. If there is no tension, then the proponents of each caricature the others in order to enjoy the phony security of always being right. When that happens we stop asking questions and so no longer grow.*

Response to Dr. Edward Kessler

Philip A. Cunningham

I'd like to begin by noting the death yesterday of a friend of both of ours, Rabbi Dr. Michael Signer of the University of Notre Dame and one of the authors of the important document, *Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity*. Since he was such a strong proponent

of dialogues such as this one today, I know I speak for both of us in dedicating this afternoon's program to his memory.

I thank Dr. Kessler most sincerely for his wonderfully prepared remarks. It is amazing how much intricate and complex material he has expressed in a fairly brief presentation. I am especially struck by his acute sensitivity as a Jew to Christian, and especially Catholic, frames of references and concerns in his remarks. This is a sign of the very significant depths that Jewish-Catholic dialogue is occasionally able to explore, and a testimony to the unprecedented time in which we live. I am also happy to point out that our conversation this afternoon illustrates the important transatlantic collaboration that is taking place between Christians and Jews. These international efforts bode well for the future.

Because Ed Kessler and I both are eager to engage in spontaneous dialogue with each other and with all of you, I am going to respond to his comments somewhat briefly. In good Trinitarian fashion, I'll organize my prepared remarks in three sections:

1. Some thoughts about Ed's discussion of covenant and how Christian and Jewish covenantal lives may or may not relate;
2. An overview of the current theological debate in Roman Catholicism about how Jewish covenantal life should be understood, especially in regard to interreligious dialogue and whether Catholics ought to hope, pray or act to encourage Jews to seek baptism;
3. Some questions that Jewish thinkers are facing concerning a Jewish "theology" of Judaism's relationship to Christianity.

The Meaning of Covenant and Implications for Jewish-Catholic Relations

I appreciated very much Ed's descriptions of the term "covenant." Biblically speaking, a covenant is not a contract, even if the scriptural term had its origins in the ancient legal agreements between people. I found especially helpful Ed's citation of Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: "contracts benefit, but covenants transform."

A covenant is a living, dynamic reality. It is not something possessed or quantifiable, but a relationship experienced. In my view, we really ought not to talk about whether Christians or Jews "have" a covenant (or two), but whether Jews or Christians are living in covenant, or have covenantal lives, or are covenanting with God.

I am among those Ed mentioned who have grown weary of the one-covenant, two-covenant, multi-covenant debate. For me such perspectives are predicated on a mistaken static or objectified understanding of covenant as a thing that can be possessed or counted, rather than as a relationship that is lived. Which brings me to Ed's suggestion that there are at least three possible ways in which Christians may understand the relation between the 'old' and 'new' peoples:

1. Only one (the newer) is truly the 'people of God';
2. There are two peoples of God, the Jewish and the Christian;
3. The two peoples are really one people of God - identical in some respects and different in others.

I am glad he said "at least," because I do not exactly embrace any of the three options he described, partially because to me "people" and "covenant(ing)" are not interchangeable. For me, the best way for Christians to understand the relations between the "old" and "new" peoples

is that here we have two related peoples of God, the Jewish and the Christian, but both are covenanting with the One God in distinctive ways that resonate with one another.

The Jewish community lives in covenant with God. The Church community lives in covenant with God. Jews and Christians both "know/experience" (*yada*) God's saving works, in the past, present, and in hope of the ultimate future. They both grapple with God's desires for the world presently and anticipate that those desires will culminate in God's Age to Come. Both Christians and Jews sin, but God's covenantal faithfulness encourages and enables repentance and reform.

Jews and Christians can perceive each other as covenanting with God. This perception occurs by resonating with each other's distinctive experiences of covenantal life. Jews seek to do God's will by engaging with and walking in the life of Torah. Its covenantal life is Torah-shaped. The Church seeks to do God's will by engaging with and walking in the life of Christ. Its covenantal life is Christ-shaped.

Finally, because God is the ever-faithful covenant partner, the distinctive though organically-related ways of walking in covenant with God experienced by Christians and Jews are willed by God to endure until the end of time.

Time does not allow me to go into all the details, but this vision of the covenantal lives of Jews and Christians is firmly grounded in Catholic magisterial teaching beginning with the Second Vatican Council's famous declaration, *Nostra Aetate*. That authoritative document not only instructed that the Jewish people are beloved by God, but in addition the Council deliberately, overwhelmingly, and with the knowledge of the general public postponed any interest in Jewish conversion to Christianity until the end of time: the eternal destiny of Jews was a mystery to be left in the hands of God. *Nostra Aetate* expressed this teaching with these words: "the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and 'serve him shoulder to shoulder.'" This watershed statement is the principal reason why the Catholic Church, unlike some other Christian communities, has not supported any conversionary campaigns aimed particularly at Jews ever since the time of the Council.

Combined with a growing Catholic respect for Jewish covenantal life and for the rabbinic heritage, the theological trajectory launched by *Nostra Aetate* would lead Pope John Paul II to make many important contributions to a Catholic theology of its relationship with Judaism, and would enable Cardinal Walter Kasper, current president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews to make this very important pronouncement in the year 2000:

> ... God's grace, which is the grace of Jesus Christ according to our faith, is available to all. Therefore, the Church believes that Judaism, i.e. the faithful response of the Jewish people to God's irrevocable covenant, is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises.

This statement is very notable for attributing the power to save to Jewish covenantal life, but it also links that power to "the grace of Jesus Christ" in some unspecified way. That apparent tension led to a major internal debate presently unfolding within the Catholic community and whose contours I can only hastily sketch out this afternoon.

The Current Catholic Debate over Jewish Covenantal Life

In retrospect, it is hardly surprising that habits and attitudes and ways of thinking that have endured for many centuries would not be transformed in a mere handful of decades. As Ed

perceptively observed, we Christians in encountering Judaism anew are dealing with matters that touch on the central nervous system of our own self-understanding.

In recent years, some Catholic officials and leaders who, on the one hand are concerned about religious relativism and who, on the other hand, espouse a robust proclamation of Christ as universal savior, have critiqued aspects of the emerging post-*Nostra Aetate* Catholic theology of the Church's relationship to the Jewish people. To take only two examples: Cardinal Avery Dulles marked the 40th anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* by writing that, "The Second Vatican Council, while providing a solid and traditional [?] framework for discussing Jewish-Christian relations, did not attempt to answer all questions. In particular, *it left open the question whether the Old Covenant remains in force today* (italics added)." Similarly, at the recent Synod of Bishops in Rome, Cardinal Albert Vanhoye, S.J. argued that the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews denied "the permanent validity of the Sinai Covenant." He concluded that although there is a permanent validity of the "covenant-promise of God," this "is not a bilateral pact such as the Sinai Covenant, often broken by the Israelites…In this sense, according to the New Testament, Israel continues to be in a covenant relationship with God."

The approach represented by these two essays in effect denies any legitimacy to post-Christic Jewish covenantal life. Ironically, the very document that Cardinal Vanhoye was discussing undercuts his conclusion: "Israel's election is made concrete and specific in the Sinai covenant and by the institutions based on it, especially the Law and the Temple." If Sinai was terminated by the coming of Christ as Vanhoye suggests, then Israel's election would have no concrete specificity and the Jewish people's self-understanding of post-Temple rabbinic Judaism as continuous with the Sinai covenant would be denied.

Let me sum up the current debate by means of a comparative chart:

A Comparison of Currently Competing Catholic Conceptions of Covenant

APPROACH ONE	APPROACH TWO
Sees history as crucial to theology (e.g. supersessionism, Shoah)	Tends to transcendent, ahistorical ways of theologizing.
Tends to see salvation as being in relationship with God.	Tends to see salvation as believing Jesus is Lord/Savior.
Jews are in covenant with God and Christians must be guided by Jewish self-understanding of their covenantal life.	Jews are in covenant with God and Jewish covenantal life promises to lead to Christ.
The faithful response of Jews to God's irrevocable covenant is salvific for them.	The status of the bilateral Sinai covenant after Christ is doubtful, but God remains faithful to the promise(s).

Dialogue aids Jews and Christians in their distinct covenantal lives.	The aim of dialogue is to lead all to the fullness of Truth.
The ultimate destiny of Jews is a mysterious eschatological matter left in the hands of God.	Christians should propose Jesus to Jews so that they can know God-with-us and be fulfilled.
Tends to extend respect for biblical Judaism to rabbinic Judaism and Jewish self-understanding today.	Respects biblical Judaism for receiving the promise(s); overlooks Jewish self-understanding and rabbinic Judaism.
Stresses the revolutionary nature of *Nostra Aetate* and later Vatican and papal documents.	Stresses *Nostra Aetate* as continuous with prior Church tradition and ignores subsequent documents.
Accuses the other approach of making explicit faith in Christ a requirement for salvation (~christomonism).	Accuses the other approach of denying any significance of Christ for Jews and/or of relativism.

Questions about Christianity and Covenant Confronting Jewish Thinkers

Finally, lest anyone think that it is only Christians whose self-understanding is challenged by the deepening Christian-Jewish dialogue, I'd like mention some issues that face Jewish scholars who might consider developing a Jewish "theology" of Judaism's relationship to Christianity. Regardless of whether a one- or two-covenant model, or some other metaphor, is employed, a Jewish affirmation that Christians are in a spiritual relationship with the same One with whom Jews covenant raises challenging questions—questions that historical oppression has not encouraged Jews to consider.

A. If Christians are covenanting with the Holy One, then presumably Christian covenantal life must be the result of God's will. How else could such a relationship be established unless God agreed? Since the distinctively Christian style of covenanting is shaped by him whom Christians name "Christ," then was Jesus of Nazareth an agent of God, through whom God worked in bringing a new covenanting people into being? Or was the emergence of a Christian covenantal reality the result of some sort of accident or mistake that God took advantage of to reach out to the Gentiles?

B. How would a "Jewish theology of Christianity" (or of Judaism in relation to Christianity) reckon with the Church's self-understanding, especially its convictions that Jesus is Lord, God's Word Incarnate? A theology of revelation is relevant here.

Speaking of revelation, I would like to end with a question that in different ways is challenging to Jews and Christians alike. I think most Christians and Jews uncritically hold that something went

wrong with the origins of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, the so-called "parting of the ways." The parting was not God's will.

A. Christians: Jews, who did not accept the Good News about Jesus, were either blinded (Paul: God's will), obstinate (not God's will, maybe demonic), or more benignly, innocently mistaken because of a misplaced myopic focus on the Torah.
B. Jews: Paul, if not Jesus, fundamentally distorted Judaism and founded a religion for the Gentiles, but one based on misconceptions.

Let me give two recent illustrations of these ideas.

First, a leading Jewish scholar of Christian-Jewish relations: "Let us assume…that I respect believing Christians, as I do, for qualities that emerge precisely out of their Christian faith. But I believe that the worship of Jesus as God is a serious religious error displeasing to God even if the worshipper is a non-Jew, and that at the end of days Christians will come to recognize this."

And now, as a Catholic example, the newly composed extraordinary Good Friday prayer "for the conversion of the Jews": We pray for the Jews. That our God and Lord enlighten their hearts so that they recognize Jesus Christ, the Savior of all mankind. Let us pray. Eternal God Almighty, you want all people to be saved and to arrive at the knowledge of the Truth, graciously grant that by the entry of the abundance of all people into your Church, Israel will be saved. Through Christ our Lord.

I would like to ask: "What if the origins of our two traditions have actually unfolded according to God's will?" In the Catholic tradition, God is, of course, the Ultimate Mystery, meaning that God's plans and actions are not fully comprehensible to mortal minds. In addition, both Israel and the Church are "mysteries" in the sense of possessing divine or transcendent qualities that go beyond human perceptions. It is therefore almost unavoidable to conclude that God has not necessarily revealed to either Jews or Christians everything that God might be doing in the other community. In fact, since Jews cannot experience how I as a Christian encounter God in Christ, and since Christians cannot experience how Ed as a Jew encounters God in the life of Torah, it is a foregone conclusion that God acts in the other community in ways inaccessible to outsiders, though perhaps—because covenanting resonates with covenanting—outsiders can glimpse God at work among the Jewish or Christian others.

Why is it not possible that God would desire two covenanting communities in the world, perhaps to serve as enablers and correctors of one another? This makes greater sense if God's self-disclosure, divine revelation, is understood as essentially relational in nature, so that God—with divine freedom of action— is perfectly able to reveal different (though not contradictory) things selectively and in different ways to different people.

If so, then at the End of Days one "side" or the other will not be proven wrong and come to see the light in some zero-sum calculus; rather both sides will come to understand why both were correct to walk with God down through the centuries in their related Torah-shaped and Christ-shaped ways.

These are the kinds of ruminations and thought-experiments permitted by our unprecedented atmosphere of open and respective dialogue. Although we've only begun to scratch the surface, we invite you to join the conversation.