

Karma Ben-Johanán
Jacob's Younger Brother:
Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II

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Introduction to the Book and the Round Table Review

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The Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Russell Berrie Foundation convened a two-day conference in Rome in March 2023 to discuss Karma Ben-Johanán's important new book *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II*. This was the second annual conference on Catholic-Jewish relations supported by the University. Ben-Johanán's book had already won three important prizes, clearly indicating its intellectual calibre and significance. This essay provides a brief overview of the book and is followed by reviews by Jewish and Christian scholars. Some focus on individual chapters and others focus on the whole book. Finally, Ben-Johanán responds to the respondents.

Karma Ben-Johanán is ambitious in her scope, erudite in her reading of two religious traditions, and inquisitive and provocative in this wide ranging and daring book. Her task is to take stock of and look at key Catholic and Jewish thinkers and traditions on Jewish-Christian relations after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). She examines the dynamics when Catholics look at Jews and when Jews look at Catholics. She is eager to explore areas that often go unexamined in the literature on this subject. There is also an argument running through her text for which she marshals considerable evidence, and she offers three claims developed over the entire book.

The first claim is that members of each tradition engage the "Other" through filters that are shaped without the intervention or voice from the actual Other. This happened at the outset of the relationship with bitter acrimony as, according to the early Christian narrative, the Jewish people rejected their messiah, killed him and thus killed God (deicide). As punishment they were dispersed throughout the world to testify—in their abject state—to the truth of the scripture they hold, showing that such a fate awaits those who fail to recognize Jesus as the Messiah. Augustine inaugurated this complex narrative. This Christian portrayal prompted Jews to

develop their own, inverted view of the Christian Other. Jews, whose writings were often censored by Christians, basically saw the incarnation as unacceptable *avoda zara* (idolatry), although some saw the prohibition on idolatry as applying only to Jews, not Gentiles. The gulf widened as did the negative typologies and there was little free and frank exchange between the two communities. The socio-political context of “dialogue” is defined by power relations (and, almost always, Christians were the politically empowered). We hardly ever encounter Habermas’ ideal speech situation between Jews and Catholics.

These Christian and Jewish narratives start each of the two sections of the book, part one on Christians’ looking at Jews, and part two on Jews’ looking at Christians. These early pre-Vatican background sections also provide a useful introduction for those who have little knowledge of these centuries and set the stage for the dramatic shift in Catholic attitudes after the Holocaust and at the Second Vatican Council.

Ben-Johanán’s second argument is that at the Second Vatican Council Catholics reversed this negative tradition in the document *Nostra Aetate* (1965). In *Nostra Aetate* the deicide charge was dropped. Further, through a modern interpretation of Romans 11:29, Catholics began to be taught to see the Jewish people as beloved by God who irrevocably keeps His promises to His people. As a result of these teachings Jews began to be viewed by Catholics as engaged in a valid covenant with the true and living God. The Holocaust was decisive in uncovering the depths of anti-Judaism present in the Christian tradition. This reversal of Catholic attitudes generates the question: how did the Church’s changed views get developed in the wake of the council? This is answered later in part one, with chapters on the post-conciliar popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

Ben-Johanán’s argument in the two chapters on the popes are the focus of the respondents’ comments. Her argument is that both popes fail to coherently grasp the challenge of engaging with the Jewish Other on his or her own terms. John Paul II seemed more radical in his powerful and media-sensitive gestures, but this radical novelty was divorced from his conservative underlying doctrine that remained unchanged. His success, according to Ben-Johanán, was in his moving the focus towards gestures rather than doctrine, as the Catholic public were less and less interested in doctrine. His successor, Benedict XVI, retained this same doctrinal structure but was far less media savvy. He missed several opportunities to make a good impact in this field and sadly but tellingly made a number of clumsy steps. Sometimes he even made a mess and seemed to move backward. For example, because of his interest in reconciling with a separated Catholic community, the Society of Pope Pius X, he overlooked (or ignored) statements denying the Holocaust by society Bishop Richard Williamson. His revision of the Good Friday prayers of the Tridentine rite, which included a hope for Jewish conversion, seemed to conflict with the rites of post-Conciliar Catholicism. Ben-Johanán’s argument is that conservative doctrine cannot accommodate the new views of Jews whose covenant is authentic and God-given. In her view, this deep tension within Catholicism has not been resolved. Furthermore, the shift from a hostile view of Judaism to the affirmation that Jews are in an authentic covenant took little notice of real-life Judaism,

which still does not really play a major role in theology. The Other is still constructed from a discourse internal to Catholic categories.

Amongst Jews during this same period Ben-Johanan sees a similar failure to engage with real Catholics, even if there are some minor important exceptions. This book is one of the first studies examining multiple views of Christianities in the Orthodox Jewish world after *Nostra Aetate*. This ground-breaking feature is boosted with the additional benefit of Ben-Johanan's tracing how Orthodox Jews and Catholics engage in comparative theology. Modern Orthodox Judaism has three defining moments in Ben-Johanan's narrative, all of which have impacted their narratives of Christians but in different ways: the Holocaust (which uncovered the depths of Christian hatred and violence to the Jews); the founding of the State of Israel (which provided a [sometimes precarious] "safe" place for Jews to flourish and most importantly to challenge Christian stereotypes of the eternally wandering people); and—before both of these—modernity. The latter elevated the values of liberal tolerance and religious freedom, which were eventually internalized by the elites in both religions, while at the same time those elites were critical of many currents within modernity.

The parallel to the Catholic changes found in her wide-ranging study of Jewish sources is the attempt by some Jews to move towards a positive narrative of Christianity after centuries of negative depictions. In her three chapters of the Jewish post-conciliar views, Ben-Johanan includes a chapter on halakhic discussions about whether Christianity is *avoda zara*; a chapter on religious Zionism and the radical and influential Rabbi Avraham Kook and his son Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook, as well as the French rabbis who followed them (and whose deeply negative views of Christianity were influenced by their views of Israel); and finally a chapter on Modern Orthodox Jews mainly in or from the United States. These latter two chapters are the focus of special attention in the review essays published here. Since much of the materials in these chapters is in Hebrew, providing English speakers access to these sources is of immeasurable benefit to Jewish-Catholic dialogue; certainly Catholics too will benefit. It is also a brave step by Ben-Johanan, as it "washes the dirty linen" of extreme forms of religious Zionism in public and risks this disclosure being misused.

It is here that we find novelty and a radical difference in the patterns. Ben-Johanan shows that the halakhic discussion is basically embedded in a negative assessment of Christianity stemming from Maimonides, along with the majority of rabbinic judgements that follow. The dominant halakhic tradition views Christians as deficient. Rabbi Menachem ha-Meiri, in the thirteenth century, is one of the lone voices that delivered a positive halakhic judgment. He has virtually no followers in modern halakhic literature. Thus, for many Orthodox Jews, positive Jewish attitudes toward Christianity can only result from a pragmatic compromise because of questions about Christian monotheism.

The other contrasting note comes with the new context of some Orthodox Jews, living within a Jewish society in the state of Israel, free of Christian persecution, and having the confidence to speak without fear of violent reprisal. Some of the extreme voices can take on a shrill tone, turning old tropes used by Christians

against Jews to now attack Christianity. Some go further than viewing Christianity as idolatry, insisting that Christians should not reside in the Holy Land because their presence defiles the land and is blasphemous. The younger Kook recounts scurrilous traditions of Jesus being immersed in boiling excrement as punishment for his false claims. The more sophisticated and well-read French rabbis who were his disciples argue that it was not Jesus (who was a good Jew) but his Gentile followers who infected Christianity with its errors and idols. This is a narrative possibly drawn from liberal Protestantism. One might note that knowledge of sophisticated Christian voices by these French rabbis, who were actively involved in dialogue with Catholics in France, does not thereby erase negative images of Christians. Instead it allows the anti-Christian tropes to be developed and embellished with greater nuance. It is clear that listening to the voice of the Other can have unexpected and diverse outcomes.

The final chapter in this section looks at American Orthodox Jewry and the most interesting and resourceful developments that have occurred. In these groups Ben-Johanan finds some aspects of a mirror reflection to positive Christian attitudes. However, these Jews are minorities questioning the general tenor of an Orthodox isolationism. Those who are more engaged with the Other find strong elements of the Jewish tradition inhibiting serious dialogue, such as the avoidance of idolatry and interference with the doctrines of other religions (following a principle ostensibly linked to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik). This chapter shows the complexity and development of American Orthodox Judaism and the various interpreters of and developments from the ideas of Soloveitchik. Some influential minority voices affirm a kind of dual covenant understanding of Christianity and Judaism, with each understood as a legitimate path to Israel's God. Ben-Johanan constantly notes how these innovations and novelties either ignore or erase the mainstream tradition. In this tension between tradition and modernity, we see another mirror to what Ben-Johanan finds in modern Catholicism.

The epilogue contains her third thesis, which was implied throughout the book but appears explicitly here. It is that these traditions have been shaped by influences outside of themselves and which conservatives in both want to reject. Modernity and secular liberalism are the key forces that have pushed dialogue and tolerance to the fore, and for some modernity is often viewed with hostility. Ben-Johanan seems to welcome this third unacknowledged dialogue partner into the conversation. She sees in modern Jewish orthodoxy, and in elements of less doctrinally "obsessed" Christianity (citing Pope Francis [277]), attempts to retrieve elements of tradition to facilitate better co-existence and serious dialogue with the Other. Yet both traditions construct the Other in terms of their own self-understanding, making it a profound challenge as to whether the kind of conversation Ben-Johanan anticipates will ever be possible. And even if possible, it will require challenging or rejecting major elements of those traditions. It is her fervent hope that it is possible.