Evangelical-Jewish Dialogue: An Emerging Conversation

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Jews and Evangelicals have a great deal in common. Many Evangelicals (as opposed to fundamentalists) and Jews are equally anxious about the fusion of church and state (a traditional Jewish worry) and, more importantly, the identification of religion with the sociopolitical establishment rather than cultural-economic outsiders. Many Evangelicals share Jewish concerns about America's current political and economic orientations; progressive Evangelicals and progressive Jews hold remarkably similar positions on crucial questions of social and economic justice. Building new partnerships based on shared interests and shared principles requires a fresh look at Christian-Jewish dialogue.

Traditionally, Christian-Jewish interreligious dialogue, and especially Catholic-Jewish engagement, has focused on memory (Holocaust) and reconciliation (antisemitism); more recent approaches — and much conservative Protestant-Jewish coalition-building — incorporate politics (Israel). Much of it is result-focused and zero-sum: either the Jews killed Jesus or they didn't; either The Passion of the Christ was antisemitic or it wasn't; either Christians support the State of Israel or they don't. In the case of the latter, far too little attention is paid to underlying attitudes: the Christian focus on "God's plan for the Jews" rather than on Judaism as a living religion; Jewish ignorance and dismissal of Christian theological commitments; intra-Christian concerns about the implications of dual-covenant theology; intra-Jewish concerns about the moral consequences of combining fundamentalist Christian politics with "Greater Israel"-style nationalism.

By contrast, the postmodern and postfoundationalist interreligious conversation we describe here seeks neither resolution nor reconciliation. It suggests that religious worldviews are ultimately incommensurable but not mutually incomprehensible. The focus of conversation around faith practices (Torah/Jesus), worship, and social justice, shifts the ground of dialogue from a cognitive/legal frame to one that is experiential/narrative.

Three commonalities underlie this new approach to interreligious conversation: hospitality, humility, and hope. By hospitality, we mean not merely the willingness, but rather the desire to share one's spiritual home, to welcome the outsider, to reconsider the table not as one's own but a shared resource for all. By humility, we mean not only openness to learning the traditional and contemporary texts of the other religion, but perhaps more importantly, the recognition that notwithstanding our covenantal commitment to a particular faith tradition, we may not always be right. By hope, we mean what Vaclav Havel (neither Evangelical nor Jew) imagines as "the ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed…the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out."*

The emerging interreligious conversations we have witnessed are not so much explicitly theological as practical, responding to congregational change in the light of culture. Paradoxically, because these conversations focus on practices embedded with theology rather than on abstract doctrine, theological discussion emerges organically, with little

positioning or defensiveness. We agree on the value of spiritual community and religious commitment in the face of a secularizing world, and we have a common concern about the disconnect between tradition and contemporary culture. We all are trying to create a vocabulary of spirituality that is meaningful across the sacred-secular continuum — and we question the epistemological and practical value of distinguishing between sacred and secular all together.

We are clear about the integrity of our own religious traditions and are unafraid to celebrate our differences. We have witnessed Jewish witness alongside Christian witness. We reject the liberal notion that there is a common set of experiences at the base of all religious traditions. However, we would rather serve the poor with other traditions than discuss rival interpretations of truth. Taking a line from Aleinu, "l'taken olam b'malchut Shaddai," "to repair/perfect the world under the sovereignty of God," we would rather learn together how to repair the world than debate the impossible question of whose definition of the "kingdom of God" is preferred.

Internal theological shifts within Jewish and Evangelical circles create a space for religious encounter across traditions. As Evangelicals and other Christians pay increasing attention to Jesus's life and teaching, they necessarily focus on his Jewish identity. Jewish progress beyond demands for recognition and reconciliation toward discussion and action on common ethical obligations creates room for non-Jewish participants within specifically Jewish elements of the conversation.

We are open to finding resources in each other's traditions that can inform our own. Jews need not feel embarrassed that they are inspired by Christian worship. Christians can appreciate the deep connection the Jews have with their tradition, how they raise Jewish families, and how they create and maintain Jewish culture and peoplehood. As we share practices between traditions, even if we understand those practices in different ways, we acknowledge that we are walking a shared path. We are moving in the direction of the upside-down, justice-oriented, kingdom of God, and we will partner with anyone who shares a similar passion.

* Vaclav Havel, Disturbing the Peace: A Conversation with Karel Hvížďala, trans. Paul Wilson (New York: Knopf, 1990), 181.

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