

**FORUM: “THE CHANGING FACE OF RELIGION IN AMERICA:  
INTERRELIGIOUS CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES”  
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*Introduction.* I would like to illustrate the changing face of religion in America by quoting from a full-page ad which appeared in the New York Times on Sunday, September 10, 2000, entitled “DABRU EMET,” Hebrew for “speak the truth.”<sup>1</sup> The subtitle is “A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity,” and it was signed by 170 prominent rabbis and Jewish scholars from all branches of Judaism. It begins: “In recent years there has been a dramatic and unprecedented shift in Jewish Christian relations. . . . [Christian bodies] have made public statements of their remorse about Christian mistreatment of Jews and Judaism. These statements have declared . . . that Christian teaching and preaching can and must be reformed so that they acknowledge God’s enduring covenant with the Jewish people and celebrate the contribution of Judaism to world civilization and to Christian faith itself.” Further on, these leaders “believe it is time for Jews to learn about the efforts of Christians to honor Judaism. We believe it is time for Jews to reflect on what Judaism may now say about Christianity.” A noteworthy paragraph in this document states in part: “Nazism was not a Christian phenomenon. Without the long history of Christian anti-Judaism and Christian violence against Jews, Nazi ideology could not have taken hold nor could it have been carried out. Too many Christians participated in, or were sympathetic to, Nazi atrocities against Jews. Other Christians did not protest sufficiently against these atrocities. But Nazism itself was not an inevitable outcome of Christianity.” The paragraph ends by saying, “We applaud those Christians

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<sup>1</sup> Zech 8:16.

who reject this teaching of contempt, and we do not blame them for the sins committed by their ancestors.”

It is clear that what Jewish and Christian leaders think and say about each other, based on their informed encounters, is worlds apart from what the majority of Jews and Christians believe and know about one another. It is my conviction, based on personal experience, that only with personal knowledge of the other, who differs from us in beliefs, history, experience, culture, options, etc., can we get along and live together, working out our differences in a constructive and mutually enriching manner.

Let me tell you about myself and my work. I am a Roman Catholic, that is Christian, Bible scholar, which I define as a person who devotes his life to studying the history and the writings of Jews! My object of study is the Bible, composed of Scriptures originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic and, for what Christians call the New Testament, in Greek. Probably all of these Scriptures were written by Jews; they are certainly utterly incomprehensible without a deep knowledge of the history of the Jews and of their culture. As a Christian, I regard Jesus as the Son of God and the Messiah. Jesus was a Jew, as was his mother and all his close companions (“the apostles”). As a scholar, I understand Christianity as emerging in a historical place and context; I cannot simply substitute human reason for a blind and ignorant “faith,” which would be a misnomer, and disregard the fact that Christianity began as a Jewish sect within Judaism. This leads me to regard the Jews as my brethren—as Pope John Paul II has said, “our elder brethren”<sup>2</sup>—and to ponder the reasons for this split between siblings and the terrible—though not inevitable—consequences which have historically ensued.

What have I learned about the Jews in my biblical studies? I have learned that they are the people chosen by God (whose gifts and calling are

irrevocable, Rom 11:29), numbering few, but destined to be a light to the nations. After experiencing liberation from Egypt and having a great kingdom under David and Solomon, they came under the successive domination of various empires. In the Babylonian Exile, in the midst of paganism in all its splendor, the Jews, under their learned and creative leadership, developed the religion which we know as Judaism. It is a religion of separation from idolatry and its temptations, a religion of conversion in the sense of turning to God, *t'shuvah*, away from impurity and injustice. Fidelity to this divine command has cost the Jews suffering which has only been excelled by their ability to survive, adapt and carry on. *luley adonay shehayah lanu*, "if not for the Lord who was for us," Ps 124:1. The contribution of Jews to world civilization is immense not only in religious terms, but in every field of human science and culture, not least of which is entertainment.

Why did Jews and Christians become separate religions? To put it simply, in the first century of the Common Era, when Christianity began, Judaism was very pluralistic. After the fall of the Temple in the year 70, Judaism regrouped under the rabbis, and there was less pluralism, since there was a need for a form of Judaism which could wait for the messianic age without jumping the gun, so to speak, in violently revolutionary and ultimately disastrous ways. Christianity also took its particular path, and these siblings parted ways less than amicably. Later, when Christianity became the legal religion, in the fourth century, it began a long history of persecuting Jews, which lasted until very recently.

Today, without dwelling on the past, we try to come to terms with it by first of all acknowledging our sins and failures. Without recognition of guilt and asking for forgiveness, as the Church has recently done in one way or another, there can be no hope of starting a new path of friendship and

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<sup>2</sup> Address at the synagogue of Rome April 13, 1986, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 78 (1986) 1120.

understanding. And for this, knowledge of history is essential; as Jesus states in the Gospel of John (8:32), “the truth shall liberate you.”

One final point regarding the co-existence of Jews and Christians, these separated siblings. The apostle Paul in his short treatise on this subject in Rom 9-11, states among other things that God has not rejected his people Israel; that if their refusal to accept Jesus as the Christ has resulted in the Gentiles coming to know the one true God, one can only imagine what might happen if they did accept Christ; in any case, they are the holy first fruits and the holy root into which the Gentiles have been engrafted as wild olives: it is the Jewish root which supports the Gentile branch, and not the other way around. Finally, the Israelites are chosen and beloved of God because of the Fathers, whose gifts and call are irrevocable.

How does someone such as myself view the different religious perspectives of Jews and Christians? We both wait for the Messiah. The Jews wait for him to come for the first time, Christians await his second coming. The Christian tells the Jew that the Messiah has already come, that the messianic age of salvation has begun. The Jew points out that according to the Scriptures, when the Messiah comes swords will be turned into plowshares and the wolf shall dwell with the lamb. In other words, whatever our belief, the world is a long way off from concrete, credible signs of the messianic age. The history and existence of the Jews is a wake up call to realize the immense challenge we all have in making this world a place which can in some way be called messianic, full of bliss and *shalom*.

*Concrete problems and proposals.* I have left out Islam and Muslims until this point because I wanted to devote my first words to what I know most about. But I think that what I have said applies to relations between all groups. Ignorance of the other breeds distrust. If the ignorance is part of a syndrome of lack of education and of intellectual curiosity and interest in

what lies beyond one's own group and culture, then this usually goes hand in hand with insecurity and lack of self-esteem, which breed frustration and hatred, which leads to discrimination and even violence. Therefore I believe that the cultivation of genuine spiritual and intellectual traits is necessary in order to better relations between different faith groups. These do not grow in a vacuum or by magic; they grow in the fertile, healthy medium of authentic human development and self-realization.

The most salient problems take place in marginalized communities. It is there that frustration and desperation are worst. But we must make a start by beginning to address certain issues.

*The burden of the past.* To loosely paraphrase the father of psychoanalysis, knowledge of our past and coming to terms with its conflicts is the only way of liberation from atavism. Atavism, which comes from the Latin word for ancestor, is the repetition of the mistakes of the past. We must be aware of these past sins, crimes, failures . . . however you want to call them. We move beyond them only by knowing what they were, by being sorry for them, by asking for forgiveness as necessary, and by genuinely seeking reconciliation. In this way, we also become aware of how different we are, or want to be, from our ancestors, or perhaps how much alike we still are. Again, this calls for education, thoughtfulness, and other qualities which can be cultivated only in an atmosphere of tolerance, of discipline and self-control, of openness and interest in the other. The person who learns only to escape from reality in self-enclosure, in the demonizing of the other and in fanatical and fantastic solutions to his and the world's problems, is doomed to failure, and to contribute only suffering and hatred to this world. Concretely, we must provide opportunities for people, and especially children, to learn about others who are different from ourselves, but, I repeat, this can only take place in a general atmosphere of love of learning and genuine spiritual

development. To quote from Pirke Avot: *lo 'am ha-arets hasid*: “no ignoramus (can be truly) pious.”

*The role of religious traditions.* No religion has become great without having genuine elements of greatness in it. And so it is with Islam. The prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him,<sup>3</sup> was an inspired genius who was able to unite disparate and fighting Arab tribes in the absolute belief in one God. I am not very knowledgeable about Islam or the Qur'an, but what I have been studying indicates that there is a similar gulf between what the true scholars know and teach and what the man or woman on the street believes their faith actually teaches. One particular point that I have been looking into with understandable interest is the notion that Jews and Christians have corrupted their own Scriptures, not just misinterpreting them (we all charge each other with that!), but altering the text of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, so that it is the Qur'an which restores the real text to us. But it seems that this is not the teaching of the Qu'ran at all, only popular belief. And we could add many examples of superstitions that Christians have held about Jews, especially in the Middle Ages, or that Jews have held about Christians. The point is that our religious traditions must be known and expounded in the genuine sense which has made them great, and not allowed to degenerate into vulgar, spurious religious folklore of poor quality. From my own experience with the study of the Scriptures, I have come to joyfully recognize my religious roots in Judaism. This makes me a more enlightened, and thus better, Christian. I cannot speak for Muslims, but I can only surmise that a similar scholarly and open-minded approach to the holy texts of Islam leads to the same deep recognition of, and even feeling of debt towards, its Judeo-Christian heritage, and thus to the very people who are the living tradents (bearers) of this heritage.

*Convergence and Divergence.* It is clear that coexistence and cooperation between religious groups can only exist in an atmosphere of deep respect. This means that efforts to convert, cajole or otherwise manipulate the other is an affront to his or her dignity and freedom. One should know one's faith and where one stands; one should be confident in one's faith and not feel the urge to subsume or swallow up the other so as to make what is different somehow disappear and not challenge or disturb us in any way. Religious pluralism must be seen as part of that variety which the good Lord put on this earth so that human beings, no one individual or group of which is self-sufficient or omniscient, can learn from one another. We have our differences and can rub each other the wrong way; the discipline lies in using this to learn and grow, not to destroy or raise walls. As the Book of Proverbs<sup>4</sup> says, "Iron sharpens iron, and a man sharpens his neighbor." In addressing the ethical and social issues which challenge us, only the pluralistic participation of all minds and views can contribute to seeing all sides of a question and all the pros and cons of proposed solutions.

*Be the Best that You Can Be.* I have used and perhaps abused the word "genuine." This word is related to the word "kin," a group of persons with common ancestry. Jews, Christians and Muslims have a common ancestry, not only in terms of religious systems but even in terms of claiming Abraham as their forefather. Ultimately, of course, we all come from Adam and even more, from God almighty. We must live together. Our faiths have much in common, and where they don't, we can recall places and times in history when all three faiths lived in harmony and prosperity together, such as in Spain and especially in Toledo, where I had the pleasure to live and see a beautiful 1000 year old mosque right outside my window. Sadly, these times

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<sup>3</sup> "Salla Allahu 'Alaihi Wa Sallam."

<sup>4</sup> 27:17.

have not endured: Jews and Muslims were expelled by the “Catholic Monarchs.” But if we strive (the meaning of *jihad*) to seek what is most authentic in our respective faiths, what is most genuine —and here, the cognate relationship to the word “kin,” “relative,” is apropos— then I think that we will all recognize the sibling in the other, and the sibling will have those traits which attracted our founding ancestors, those traits of faith and hospitality and goodness and righteousness. In the other we will recognize ourself, and since we often tend to see what is best in ourself and what is worst in the other, this recognition that the other whom we are encountering is our brother will be a process of reconciliation. As Joseph said to his brothers who had sold him into slavery but who did not recognize him, “I am Joseph, your brother.” (Gen 45:4). Amen.

Dr. Emilio G. Chávez  
St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary  
Boynton Beach, FL 33436