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Jewish-Christian Dialogue and the Theology of Religions

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Christian M. Rutishauser

Abstract

From a historical point of view, the new understanding of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people was the catalyst for the Second Vatican Council to elaborate a declaration on the non-Christian religions. This is not a mere accident. The Jewish-Christian relationship does, even from a systematic point of view, play a paradigmatic, critical and corrective function for a Christian theology of religions. It has a character *sui generis*, for Judaism constitutes the Other within Christian self-identity. The Jewish-Christian relationship helps to formulate the meaning of the particular in the discussion of the universal Christian claim of truth and salvation when facing other religions. Furthermore, it prevents a theology of religion from sliding into abstract, non-historical and purely speculative definitions. Normally, Christology and especially the theology of Incarnation guarantees it, but they have to be linked themselves back to the messianic idea of Judaism and the history of salvation where the Church itself recognizes the unrevoked covenant between God and Israel. Only a theology of religions that recognizes the lasting challenge of the Jewish faith for Christian identity will have overcome anti-Judaism at its roots.

KEYWORDS: Jewish-Christian Dialogue, Theology of Religions

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1. *Nostra Aetate's* Inherent Theological Stating of the Problem

A. From the Decree on Judaism to the Declaration on the World Religions

It is common knowledge that at the start of the Second Vatican Council no separate document on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions was envisioned. However, a *Decretum de Judaeis* was supposed to give a new foundation for the relationship between the Catholic Church and Judaism. After the horror of the Shoah and the unacceptable "teaching of contempt" (Jules Isaac) that had dominated the Christian-Jewish relationship for centuries, Pope John XXIII made it his personal quest to abolish the existing negative image of the Jewish people and to emphasize their theological importance for the Church. It was Cardinal Bea, head of the newly formed Secretariat for Christian Unity, who was entrusted with this task.¹

¹ Prior history includes the cancellation ordered by John XXIII in 1959 of the word "perfidious," the designation of Jews in the Good Friday intercession. His legendary welcome to American Jews in 1960, "I am Joseph, your brother!" also indicated a newer spirit. For more detailed information on the prior history see: *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil: Dokumente und Kommentare*, Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche, vol. II (Freiburg Basel Wien: Herder, 1967): 406-478; Stjepan Schmidt, *Augustin Bea: Der Kardinal der Einheit* (Graz: Styria, 1989), 640-689, 738-808; Otto H. Pesch, *Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil (1962-1965): Vorgeschichte.- Verlauf – Ergebnisse – Nachgeschichte*, 2nd ed. (Würzburg: Echter 1994); Giuseppe Alberigo and Klaus Wittstadt, eds., *Geschichte des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils 1959-1965*, vol. 1-3 (Mainz Leuven: Grünewald, 1997-2002): I, 437-456; II, 513-520; III, 66-68, 299-343, 393-400, 437-441, 500-507; Bohlen Reinhold, "Wende und Neubeginn: Die Erklärung des Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzils zu den Juden *Nostra Aetate*, §4" in *Katholizismus und Judentum: Gemeinsamkeiten und Verwerfungen vom 16. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Schuller Florian, Veltri Giuseppe, Wolf Huber (Regensburg: Pustet, 2005), 297-308.

From the beginning this text stood in a crossfire of forces trying to overcome traditional anti-Jewish attitudes and the conflict in the Near East, as well as the attempt to find a new vision of the Church within a pluralistic world. The first draft mainly dealt with the relationship between the Church and Judaism from the perspective of the history of salvation, both systematically and with special attention to the alleged responsibility of the Jewish people for the death of Christ.

In the first session of the Council the "Wardi Affair" prevented the presentation of the text.² When in November 1963 the draft was eventually presented as the fourth chapter of the Conciliar decree on ecumenism, it received a highly antagonistic reaction. The representatives of the Arab States considered the project to be a Zionist conspiracy and demanded that the relationship to Islam should also be addressed. The Bishops of Asia, however, considered the "Jewish decree" to be a strictly European problem in order to deal with that continent's disastrous history. In fact, they demanded that the Council define the Church's relationship to the Asian religions. In view of the opposition to this text, as well as to the one on religious freedom, it was placed at the end of the ecumenism decree.

In addition to discussions about the draft of the text itself, the encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* of the new Pope Paul VI, his visit to the Holy Land and subsequently to the Eucharistic World Congress in India in 1964, as well as the development of further Conciliar documents, especially the *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, led to the presentation of a separate text dealing with the attitude of the Church towards non-Christian

² The World Jewish Congress had announced that Dr. Chaim Wardi, an official in the State of Israel's Ministry of Religious Affairs, was to be sent to the Council as its representative. This immediately led the Arab governments to protest against a seemingly special treatment of the Jews. The controversy took the Vatican by surprise. Wardi never attended the Council.

religions. However, since the September 1964 version had lost so much of its original essence, a stronger revised version was presented in November of the same year when it received basic approval. Then, as a decree in its own right, expanded to consider the fundamental position of the Church towards all other important World Religions, it was presented for approval under the name *Nostra Aetate*, bearing the title *Declaratio de Ecclesiae Habitudine ad Religiones Non-christianas*.³ It was accepted by the Council Fathers on October 28, 1965 by a vote of 2221 to 88.

B. History and Structure of *Nostra Aetate* as a Theological Concept?

The history of the origin of *Nostra Aetate* conveys the degree to which the changing attitude of the Church towards Judaism served as a catalyst for a foundational exploration of the Church in relation to other religions. Obviously the new initiatives in Jewish-Christian dialogue must not be considered as the sole originating force of *Nostra Aetate*, for this process was part of the more comprehensive self-reflection of the Church and her relationship towards the world as it came to be expressed in such Conciliar constitutions as *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. Similarly, the documents concerning Christian ecumenism and religious liberty issued from the same turbulent history

³ Roman A. Siebenrock correctly points out that the common German translation: 'declaration about the relationship of the Church and non-Christian religions' is imprecise because the word *habitus* does not describe the *relationship* between the Church and non-Christian religions but far more the *attitude* of the Church towards the non-Christian religions, which the decree wants to highlight paradigmatically. See his "Das Senfkorn des Konzils: Vorläufige Überlegungen auf dem Weg zu einem erneuerten Verständnis der Konzilserklärung 'Nostra Aetate'," in *Zweites Vatikanum - vergessene Anstöße, gegenwärtige Fortschreibungen*, *Questiones Disputatae* 207, ed. Günther Wassilowsky, (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2004), 168-170.

that led to a newly modified identity of the Church in a world where humanity is constantly drawn together in pluralistic and global unity. Nevertheless, the historic fact remains that – when the conciliar writing and editing process was finished – the declaration on the relationship of the Church to the Jewish people was no longer part of the decree on Christian ecumenism but rather was placed in the same context as the relationship to other religions. Thus, the reforming Christian-Jewish relationship led to a document on a theology of religions. *Nostra Aetate*, §4 on Judaism is still the central part of the document. It differs in form and content from statements in §2 on Hinduism and Buddhism, and in §3 on Islam. Furthermore, the statement on Judaism is seen as the "heart"⁴ of the declaration, which assesses the human searching for religious truth and values the rays of Truth which enlightens all people, including in Hinduism and Buddhism. As regards Islam, *Nostra Aetate* respects the faith in one God, so dear to Muslims in their adherence to Abraham. But concerning the Jewish people, after recalling the common spiritual heritage and rejecting unjustified Christian accusations, the Church recommends a fraternal dialogue. The reconciliation with the Jews and the recognition of Christianity's own roots in the people of the ancient and everlasting Covenant re-establishes the constitutive bond between the Church and Judaism.⁵ From a salvation history perspective, the text affirms that both await the day when all people on earth will worship the one God, as promised by the Hebrew prophets.

⁴ Otto H. Pesch, fn.1, 305.

⁵ The "unrevoked covenant" has been discussed further since the Council. See: Hubert Frankemölle, ed., *Der ungekündigte Bund? Antworten des Neuen Testaments*, *Questiones Disputatae* 172 (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1998); John T. Pawlikowski and Hayim Goren Perelmuter, eds., *Reinterpreting Revelation and Tradition: Jews and Christians in Conversation* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 2000).

This biblical perspective of the history of salvation in §4 marks *Nostra Aetate* as a whole. The growing union of all people into a world culture in our time is seen in the framework of the history of salvation, which itself demands that the Church promote unity, love and justice among all the people of the human race and spread the truth of the Gospel (§1). God's providence as uniting all people, as witnessed by the Prophets, is seen in the process of globalization. The religions play a positive factor in God's actions: "From ancient times down to the present there is found among various people a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history... ." (§2) The great religions are in this sense signposts leading to the final and explicit veneration of God. This perspective of the biblical history of salvation is the result of an amended and revised theology in the first half of the 20th century that left its imprint on all the documents of the Council.⁶ Thus, the Trinitarian perspective is often expressed even more explicitly when it is stated that God works through the Son and the Holy Spirit constituting his people and forming history. Since this history of salvation does not begin with the arrival of the Son only, but is already testified to in the Old Testament, it contains a theologically defensible understanding of Judaism. In order to substantiate this, *Nostra Aetate* does not refer to the general statement of Heb 1:1, which affirms that God already spoke several times in the history of salvation. Instead, the Ancient Covenant is acknowledged, which implies the gift of the Torah to the Jewish people and their existence as a priestly nation. The Church binds herself back to it through the well-known metaphor of the wild shoots, which have been grafted on the olive tree (Rom 9-11).

⁶ This refers to texts that belong directly to the context of *Nostra Aetate*: *Lumen Gentium*, §1, 16, 17; *Gaudium et Spes*, §22; *Ad Gentes*, §3-4, 9-11.

As it is clear from *Nostra Aetate*, §4 Jews stand side by side with the Church as chosen by God for service to the world. The Church finds herself linked to Judaism through the history of salvation even before she approaches the other non-Christian religions. Judaism is not looked upon as the first "foreign" religion when the Church initiates interreligious dialogue. But it is up to the Church to deal with Judaism even in her process of self-understanding as the people of God, which can be found only in reference to the tradition of Mount Sinai. Thus Pope John Paul II could declare: "The first dimension of this dialogue, that is, the meeting between the people of God of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God (cf. Rom. 11:29), and that of the New Covenant, is at the same time a dialogue within our Church, that is to say, between the first and the second part of her Bible."⁷ The dialogue between the Old and the New Testament, the dialogue within the Christian Bible and within the biblical and historical foundation of the Church, has been paradigmatic for the encounter between Christianity and Judaism up to this very day. The Church "cannot reflect upon her own being without remembering her inherent and present origin, her ongoing source."⁸ The otherness of a foreign religion reaches into the self-understanding of the Church. This is why she cannot exist without a theology of Israel. Judaism is the other within the very being of Christianity.

⁷ John Paul II, "Address to Representatives of the Jewish community in Mainz, West Germany," (Nov. 17, 1980); see <http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/documents/catholic/johnpaulii/Mainz.htm>.

⁸ Reinhold Bohlen, "Wende und Neubeginn," 303. Interesting in this context is the debate on the historic or present interpretation of Jn 4:22: "For salvation comes through the Jews." Cf. Rudolf Kutschera, *Das Heil kommt von den Juden (Joh 4,22): Untersuchungen zur Heilsbedeutung Israels*, Österreichische Biblische Studien vol. 25 (Bern, Frankfurt, New York: Lang, 2003).

Considering that Christianity is constitutionally interwoven with Judaism and has, in fact, a relationship *sui generis* with it (which has been a topic of a considerable amount of research recently),⁹ we have to question to what extent a theology of Judaism relates to a theology of religions in general. Does the relationship of the Church to Judaism create a paradigm for that with other religions? Could it form a pattern for other interreligious dialogues? And furthermore, how could a theology of religions benefit from the Christian understanding of Judaism? To what extent does the Jewish-Christian relationship influence or promote a better understanding of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism? Does reflection on the Jewish-Christian relationship provide basic elements for a theology of religions? Should that be the case, how can these elements be found and what do they mean? These are considerations and questions also broached by Roman A. Siebenrock when he examines the theological issues and consequences of *Nostra Aetate*:

Originally, the task was to develop a theology of Israel on the background of the past theological repudiation of the Jewish people and their extermination by the National-Socialists. The original project was extended in order to deal with all the other non-Christian religions. But what is the relationship between *Nostra Aetate*, §4 and the complete text, or: What is the relationship of the theology of Israel to a theology of other religions? I realize today a schism between both tasks stated in *Nostra Aetate*, for at certain places there is a danger of the Old Testament being supplanted by texts of other religious traditions.¹⁰

This is the reason for trying to define these relationships in this essay.

⁹ A good compendium is: Hans Hermann Henrix, *Judentum und Christentum: Gemeinschaft wider Willen* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2004).

¹⁰ Roman A. Siebenrock, "Das Senfkorn des Konzils," 180.

2. A Courageous Stand in the Theology of Religions

A. The Historical Grounding of Systematic Theology as a Central Quest of the Theology of Judaism

In the first half of the 20th century, Catholic theology elaborated a new foundation, supported by historical research in biblical science, by reconsidering patristic sources and through the integration of a post-Kantian theory of cognition. This enabled it to abandon the neo-Scholastic system. Systematic theology was particularly influenced in all its fields by references to exegetical considerations and to insights from the history of theology. This change in methodology became especially evident in the study of divinity in which the immanent Trinity became clearly linked to the economic Trinity where God's presence through his Son and the force of his Spirit in history is dealt with.¹¹ Since then the development of Trinitarian faith can no longer be considered as an alien, Hellenistic interpretation of the Gospel, but rather as a consequence of the early Church's Christological task of defining the relationship between Jesus the Messiah and the God of Israel. In the same process, the Church became more and more convinced of her calling as a people chosen by God with a similar or analogous status to the people of Israel.¹² Accordingly, the question of God, Christology, and Ecclesiology are inseparably linked together and developed out of the history of revelation as asserted in the Scripture.

¹¹ See Karl Rahner, "Bemerkungen zum dogmatischen Traktat 'De Trinitate'," *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. IV, 4th ed. (Einsiedeln Zürich Köln: Benziger, 1964), 103-133; and Karl Rahner, "Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte," in *Mysterium Salutis II* (Einsiedeln, Zürich, Köln: Benziger, 1967), 317-397.

¹² See the essays in the anthology: Striet Magnus, ed., *Monotheismus Israels und christlicher Trinitätsglaube*, Quaestiones disputatae 210 (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2004).

Based on this perspective, Josef Wohlmuth, in particular, has linked classical Christology with its core definition of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ to biblical and Jewish history.¹³ For him, it was not only the rabbinic world of late antiquity that had to be considered in studying early Christology, but also that of the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, the contemporary Jewish scholar and philosopher. As is well known, the Jewish way of thinking has a certain reserve towards systematic and philosophical thinking, especially when referring to God. Moreover, important Jewish representatives in the Christian-Jewish dialogue consider the idea of incarnation as particularly un-Jewish.¹⁴ But as regards Levinas' philosophy of the other, his ethical approach to the question of transcendence as well as his distinctively rabbinic outlook on reality enabled Wohlmuth to build bridges between different traditions. Thus he made the valuable overall contribution of bringing the revelation of Sinai and that of Jesus Christ into a constructive discourse.

¹³ Josef Wohlmuth, *Im Geheimnis einander nahe: Theologische Aufsätze zum Verhältnis von Judentum und Christentum* (Paderborn, München Wien, Zürich: Schöningh 1996); Josef Wohlmuth, *Die Tora spricht die Sprache der Menschen. Theologische Aufsätze und Meditationen zur Beziehung von Judentum und Christentum* (Paderborn, München, Wien, Zürich: Schöningh, 2002); Josef Wohlmuth, "Jesus der Bruder und Christus der Herr: Neue Perspektiven im jüdisch-christlichen Gespräch?" in *Redet Wahrheit – Dabru Emet: Jüdisch-christliches Gespräch über Gott, Messias und Dekalog*, eds. Erwin Dirscherl and Werner Trutwin (Münster: LIT, 2004), 91-112. On the intermediation between God and the world in the New Testament and early rabbinic period, see Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 89-147; Erich Zenger, "Gott hat keiner jemals geschaut" (Joh 1,18): Die christliche Gottesrede im Angesicht des Judentums," in *Einander zugewandt: Die Rezeption des christlich-jüdischen Dialogs in der Dogmatik*, eds. Erwin Dirscher and Susanne Sandherr (Paderborn, München, Wien, Zürich: Schöningh, 2005): 77-89.

¹⁴ E.g. Peter Ochs, "The God of Jesus and Christians," in *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, eds. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, et al. (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 2000), 59-62.

No theology of Judaism can ignore the history of revelation that itself presents and arises from reflection on the experience of faith in history.¹⁵ And according to the Bible, it is axiomatic that God – for reasons that cannot be explained other than as being of His own free will – spoke and revealed Himself to Israel in a special way. Thus a people of God was created, different from any other people in the world. Since *Nostra Aetate* the Church no longer considers herself as "verus Israel," the true Israel. Therefore, the "great difference" created by God's revelation is – in a Christian perspective – no longer restricted just to Israel compared to the rest of humanity with its different religions, but includes the duality of God's people, consisting of Israel and the Church, and the rest of the world. Within this duality of God's people exists what might be called a "small difference."

B. The Theology of Religion in the Wake of the Science of Religion

Reflection on the relatively "small difference" between the Church and Israel leads to the conclusion that a theology of Judaism must be strongly influenced by the perspective of the history of salvation and that its systematic questions must be linked to history. As I stated above this is the achievement of the theology of the Council. However, reflection on the "great difference" between the Church and the other religions leads to the conclusion that a theology of religion will not be reached by the theological interpretation of history, but only by a pure systematic comparison of religions. When we consider publications about the theology of religion or those interested in a general theory of religions, it becomes obvious indeed that there is hardly any detailed

¹⁵ See the two works on a theology of Judaism by Clemens Thoma: *Christliche Theologie des Judentums* (Augsburg: Pattloch, 1978); and *Das Messiasprojekt: Theologie jüdisch-christlicher Begegnung* (Augsburg: Pattloch, 1994).

information about a specific religion, although the vast number of works dealing with single religions and religious phenomenon would provide this information. This absence of history in the theory of religions is no coincidence. A theological interpretation and evaluation of religions which would seriously consider the variety of historically comprehensible religions would have to deal with the fact that, from a historical point of view, a number of religions have nothing to do with each other. Consequently, one would have to construct out of discrete events a comprehensible history of development towards a final goal. That was exactly what Hegel had once done in his philosophy of religion. This teleological (or “final target”) view that a theological interpretation of history had finally to refer to the end-point of Christianity as a positive historical reality was refuted as Christian prejudice and as contempt for the varieties of sense and nonsense in history.

And indeed, the science of religion long ago stopped presenting the history of religion in a manner which led to an evaluation of religions. It has abandoned the attempt to evaluate the interpretation of religions, in favour of depicting religions as different cultural systems of signs. However, where evaluation cannot be avoided, it is measured mainly by a postulated ethical basic consensus of all religions or by basic ethical values as enlightened western culture has specified in the declaration of human rights. Hans Küng’s “Project Weltethos” is the most prominent effort to judge religion through ethics.¹⁶ It has been developed to protect humanity from obviously inhuman ideologies. It can indeed detect in religions certain elements threatening the dignity of

the human being. But this is not sufficient for an evaluation of religions that express highly developed forms of culture. As is especially evident in discussions about implementing the concept of human rights in Islamic countries, these ethical values are often attached to religions, but they are not necessarily part of their inherent basic consensus.

Other approaches prompted by theology and the science of religion do not seek common ethics, but rather strong inherent religious factors that can be used to judge religions in general. John Hick explains that all religions have tried to regulate people’s environment as a whole, establish it metaphysically and structure it ethically. In a later phase in the history of religion, the soteriological element in religions was moved nearer to the center. Thus religions primarily intend to liberate people from narcissistic self-centeredness in order to lead them to an unselfish devotion to the transcendent and to the other.¹⁷ So they are to be measured by the extent to which their teaching, ethics and rites have encouraged this transformation. Reinhardt Leuze has similar reflections on the goal of religions: it is to make people ready to accept difference and otherness on all levels of reality.

It is evident that any religion can be understood as an experience or perception of the other... A religion will be valued to the extent that it is ready to understand and accept the radicalism of the entirely other in its otherness. Only there, where the opposition to the world, to the whole realm of the describable reality is presented without compromise, only then it opens up the highest form of self-realization of the religious man.¹⁸

¹⁶ Hans Küng, *Projekt Weltethos*, 5th ed. (München: Piper, 1999); Hans Küng, *Wozu Weltethos? Religion und Ethik in Zeiten der Globalisierung* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder 2002); Hans Küng and Angela Rinn-Maurer, *Weltethos christlich verstanden: Positionen – Erfahrungen – Impulse* (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 2005).

¹⁷ John Hick, *Religion: Die menschliche Antwort auf die Frage nach Leben und Tod* (München: Diederichs, 1996), 46-69.

¹⁸ Reinhard Leuze, *Religion und Religionen: Auf der Suche nach dem Heiligen* (Münster: LIT, 2004), 46.

These different criteria are valuable reflections for a theology of religion as they correspond to Christian values and action plans. Sometimes they are even derived from Christian theology. In any case, they should be considered in any interreligious dialogue. However, as these criteria are either added to the religions or derived from a pure, philosophical concept of religion, they lead, as a foundation for a theology of religion, to a pluralistic and an unhistorical model. This pluralistic theology of religion considers all religions as principally similar but culturally differently formed systems leading humanity to salvation and truth.¹⁹ This moderate theological pluralism, which differs from a radical pluralism insofar as it is oriented towards ethical and objective criteria, has the great disadvantage of not taking seriously the self-perception of any great world religion that claims absolute truth. The Church's specific origin, essential for the existence and justification of Christianity as the historically comprehensible revelation of God in Judaism and in Christianity, is abandoned as a unique phenomenon and is considered instead to be only an instance of all religions' general relationship to transcendence. The revelation based on the history of salvation is subordinated to the general, systematic principle of transcendent manifestations within the immanence of reality. It is one among many other revelations. "The great difference" set up by God through revelation to his people is betrayed.²⁰

The reasons for this theological pluralism consist above all in the fear, based on historical facts, that because of this

¹⁹ John Hick and Paul Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, 5th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Maryknoll Press, 1994).

²⁰ Recommended as a critical debate on these observations: Raimund Schwager, ed. *Christus allein? Der Streit um die Pluralistische Religionstheologie*, *Questiones Disputatae* 160 (Freiburg Basel Wien: Herder, 1996); Hans-Gerd Schwandt, *Pluralistische Theologie der Religionen: Eine kritische Sichtung* (Frankfurt a. M.: Lembeck, 1998).

difference the Church and Christianity as a positive religion would again fall victim to the temptation to make imperialistic claims for possessing absolute truth. But fear by itself is not a good guide. Nor is it advisable to rely only on historical missteps, abused ideas, and degenerated forms as the bases for arguments. Although it seems at first that in recent times Christianity has acquired more tolerance and ability for dialogue, in reality it is Jews who more readily and constitutively live out of the difference between the people of God and the other people. As regards the relationship of early Judaism to other religions, Hans Kessler concludes:

The decisive issue is the irrevocable dialectic tension between a particular standpoint which is based on the perspective of the covenant – a universal one which has its origin in a theology of creation. The first guarantees the exclusive veneration of Yhwh and the [community's] own identity, the second is open to other nations and religions and integrates them [includes them]. This could lead to acknowledging the existence of other religions as a place for acts of God and for the true honoring of him in accordance with God's will.²¹

The Christian theology of pluralism, though well-meant, sacrifices the difference between Judaism and other nations and religions, the otherness of Judaism that Jews have paid for in blood over the centuries, even during the Shoah where this differentiation was at times given up by Jews themselves. Perhaps it is the most important source of hatred towards the Jews in its various forms. However, any attempt to eliminate the differentiation has never succeeded

²¹ Hans Kessler, "Was macht Religionen pluralismusfähig (und authentisch)? Fragmente einer Theologie des religiösen Pluralismus – jenseits von 'Dominus Jesus' und Pluralistischer Religionstheologie," in *Der eine Gott und die Welt der Religionen: Beiträge zu einer Theologie der Religionen und zum interreligiösen Dialog*, ed. Markus Witte (Würzburg: Religion-&-Kultur, 2003), 284.

in overcoming hatred of Jews; the hatred has only assumed different forms.

The courage to assert the “great difference” generated by God’s revelation – and so to acknowledge the particular relationship of God to Israel through the history of salvation – is the primary contribution a theology of Judaism brings to a general theology of religion. The non-Jewish character of a pluralistic theory of religions cannot only lead to an anti-Jewish attitude; it also abandons the Christian concept of revelation.

C. A Positional and Dialogic Inclusivism

In *Nostra Aetate* itself, as in nearly all post-Vatican II Roman-Catholic theology, the Christian claim for revelation has been retained. The “great difference” is taken seriously from a theological point of view, especially when developing a theology of religion. The Christian claim for truth is expressed in a theocentric or christocentric manner and the ecclesiocentrism derived from the dogmatic statement *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the Church there is no salvation) has been overcome in every reasonable theology. Even the question of salvation of the individual, whether a member of the Church or of a non-Christian religion, is not the focus in this discussion. So what remains is to consider religions as systems of signs that have to be measured by the truth of Christ and by his God, just as the Church and Christianity in their historic form must also be. For all positive religions have to be challenged by the charity, humanity, justice, and mercy historically revealed in Christ, which express a truth that neither excludes nor oppresses any other truth. This would lead, as alternatives to the pluralistic conception, to two different approaches to a theological

definition of the relationship of Christianity to other religions: exclusivism and inclusivism.²²

Whereas exclusivism maintains the unique truth of Christianity and denies completely every other religion’s value as being a road to salvation, inclusiveness sees in Christ the highest value of revelation and evaluates other religions’ engagements with the Transcendent as lesser forms. Occasionally a distinction has to be made between a strict and condescending inclusivism on the one hand and a self-critical and open one on the other hand. Of course, this differentiation always depends on the extent to which the Church identifies herself with the truth revealed in Christ or lets herself be challenged by it. The revolutionary act of the Second Vatican Council consists of overcoming the traditional exclusivism and starting with *Nostra Aetate* to espouse a self-critical open inclusivism regarding a theory of religion. This change was highly promoted by Pope John Paul II and seems to be now further supported by Pope Benedict XVI.

But this self-critical inclusivism can be further developed and deepened through a positional pluralism so that inter-religious dialogue occurs among truly equal partners.

For this reason one has to proceed from one’s own internal perspective while, at the same time, the internal perspective of those of other faiths has to be taken seriously... My answer and thesis in an all summarizing headline: a mutually granted open inclusivism (not a presumptuous but a frank inclusivism based on mutuality) that, at the same time, is a positional pluralism (not a

²² For synopsis of the three alternatives see: Lee Kyou Sung, *Konziliare und päpstliche Beiträge zum interreligiösen Dialog im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt: Books on Demand GmbH, 2003), 20-33; Hans Kessler, “Was macht Religionen pluralismusfähig (und authentisch)?“ 303-305.

pluralism pretending to be free from a personal standpoint, but a consensual plurality of different standpoints and different religious perspectives).²³

I would like to call Hans Kessler's thesis simply a positional and dialogic inclusivism, as he establishes the theologically defined relationship of Christianity towards non-Christian religions considering the biblical revelation (inclusivism) in a communicative structure where freedom of opinion, freedom of action and right are guaranteed (pluralism).

This theology of religion seriously considers the claim for revelation and for the "great difference" to be fundamental. With its predications based on Jesus Christ, it takes a definite position and speaks out of a historical situation. This aspect, especially in dialogue with Jewish thought, will always be present. However, the perspective of the history of salvation is not fully achieved yet. Certainly, Jesus Christ is not an abstract manifestation of God but a person full of life, filled with ethical values, acts of faith and a conduct inspired by the Judaism of his days. However this social and religio-historical context is hidden in a Christology that only reflects on Jesus as an individual human being in relationship to God. Neither the fact that Christ was of Jewish origin, nor his link to the history of the Covenant of the Old Testament, which is such an essential part of the Christian theology of Judaism, finds expression. Furthermore, from the point of view of a positional and dialogic inclusivism, it is not evident that Judaism has attained a special position in a Christian theology of religion. It appears just as any other dialogue partner. A theology of Israel demands, therefore, that a theology of religion considers the context of the history of salvation and the

²³ Hans Kessler, "Was macht Religionen pluralismusfähig (und authentisch)?" 307.

unique position of Israel. The "small difference" within God's twofold people of Church and Judaism must be reflected in any theology of religion.

3. Dialogues on the Horizon of the History of Salvation

A. The Twofold Bible as a Paradigm?

In the history of the Church, a dialogue with religions in the modern sense was not possible. However, the constantly constitutive relationship of the Church to Judaism proves that from the very beginning Christianity has held the "character of a dialogue."²⁴ From post-apostolic times onwards, Christianity rejected paganism but was in dialogue with Judaism and above all with Greek philosophy. This character of dialogue in Christianity is unique and can be useful today: Although other religions have also developed from religions preceding them and have taken over a large number of discrete elements from them, they have nevertheless become a closed system of signs with normative religious foundation. At the same time they have become completely separated units. This is the case even of Islam, which has taken over a considerable number of elements from the Jewish and Christian traditions. It has linked itself systematically to Judaism and Christianity by declaring that it offers the final and pure revelation, the Quran descending directly from God. While it is true that the Church had built an independent foundation in the first century, in the second century she deliberately connected with Judaism by defining her canon of revelation out of the Old and the writings of the New Testament.²⁵ She adopted

²⁴ Bertram Stubenrauch, *Dialogisches Dogma: Der christliche Auftrag zur interreligiösen Begegnung*, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 158 (Freiburg, Basel, Wien: Herder, 1995).

²⁵ As described by Gerd Theissen both processes are crises that have led to the consolidation of Christian identity. See Theissen's *Die Religion*

and integrated the Holy Scripture of Judaism. Paul of Tarsus can be taken as an example of the first movement, and the decision of the Great Church against Marcion – to recognize and accept the Old Testament as Holy Scripture – of the second. The twofold Christian Bible consisting of the Old and the New Testament became normative, thus reflecting the continuity and discontinuity of Christianity with biblical Israel. The dynamic of the relationship is a demarcation through relating.

If continuity alone had been emphasized, it would have been possible to attach the documents of the New Testament as single texts to the Tanakh. If discontinuity alone was to have been expressed, it would have been imperative to rewrite the history of revelation in the light of the history of Jesus. This practice would have hardly been surprising in Antiquity. However, early Christianity intentionally wanted simultaneously to distinguish itself from and relate itself to Judaism, which was expressed in the form of the two-part Bible. In recent years Biblical theology and canonical theology have brought into consciousness the theological relevance of this structure of the canon.²⁶

The significance of the structure of the biblical canon still has to be integrated into a theology of religions, particularly since such first attempts as that of Gerhard Gäde remain very unsatisfactory.²⁷ Gäde criticizes the approaches of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, claiming that they represent a logic borrowed from philosophy and the science

der ersten Christen. Eine Theorie des Urchristentums (Gütersloh: Kaiser, Gütersloher, 2000), 283-337.

²⁶ Christoph Dohmen and Thomas Söding, eds., *Eine Bibel – zwei Testamente. Positionen biblischer Theologie* (Paderborn, München, Wien, Zürich: Schöningh 1995).

²⁷ Gerhard Gäde, *Christus in den Religionen: Der christliche Glaube und die Wahrheit der Religionen* (Paderborn, München, Wien, Zürich: Schöningh, 2003), 131-190.

of religion, and so are not following a Christian perspective. He thinks that they place Christ *against* religions (exclusivism), *above* religions (inclusivism) and *next* to religions (pluralism). He proposes as an alternative the so-called “interiorism” that sees Christ *in* the religions. It is built on the following thesis: “The Christian Bible’s canonical relationship of the New Testament to the Old established a paradigm through which other religions can also be viewed from a Christian faith perspective, their undeniable truth recognized and able to be universally proclaimed.”²⁸ As the New Testament renders the Old relative in its sole claim for recognition, its revelation completely fulfils it while at the same time making it universal. Now everybody has the possibility to join the people of God by becoming members of the Church. So, too, according to Gäde, Christ is the profound fulfilment of all religions for he is from the beginning present in them in a hidden way, just as he was in the Old Covenant. Although Christ would relativize all religions because he measures them, he nevertheless brings to light their own undeniable claims of truth. However, Gäde fails to explain how these undeniable claims of truth relate to each other. The revelation in Christ, in spite of its relationship to the Old Testament, is overly personalized and decontextualized.

His use of the paradigm of the Old and New Testaments becomes equally unclear since neither Buddhist nor Islamic texts are placed on an equal footing with the Old Testament. The relationship between the two parts of the Bible through the theological concept of *fulfilment* seems too simple. His simple equation of the Old Testament with Judaism on the one hand and the New Testament with Christianity on the other is not very helpful. But above all, even this definition of relationship creates a simple, universal scheme that is supposed to make comprehensible Christianity’s theological

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

relationship to all religions without differentiation. The basic differentiation between the “great difference” and the “small difference” is not respected. The presumed Jewish-Christian relationship does not maintain its *sui generis* character. By being reduced to a formal paradigm it becomes blurred into all relationships with all other religions. Here the Jewish-Christian relationship supersedes everything as in inclusivism this relationship is superseded by the general relationship of Christianity to other religions. However, the crucial point is that the Christian faith in Jesus has different consequences for the other religions than it does for Judaism. The awareness of these two different relationships can already be seen in the texts of the New Testament as in Simeon’s declaration concerning Jesus the Messiah: “For my eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to thy people Israel” (Lk 2:30ff).

C. Interreligious Dialogue in the Context of the History of Salvation

The definition of the relationship between the Old and New Testament does not offer a simple paradigm for Christian relationships with other religions, but rather is crucial for the relationship of the Church to Judaism, which Christians have always understood to be of central importance for all humanity. The decisive hermeneutical question of how the two parts of the Bible are to be understood is perhaps best seen in the reception of the Torah into New Testament texts. Thomas Söding describes the great theological relevance of the term “the scriptures” for the New Testament as follows:

It appears neither simply as a dialectical opponent nor simply as *praeparatio evangelica* (preparation for the Gospel), nor simply as a constant warning against relapsing into legalism, nor as a collection of impressive

exempla for the Paraclesis, but above all as a document proving the existence of One Unique God, as a valid expression of hope for eschatological perfection, as a charter to certify that Israel is chosen, as God’s trust in his people, as elemental ethical order...as witness of the messianic promise, [only] with Paul is there also a witness to the coexistence of the Church and Israel in the time of the deliverance of “all Israel” (Rom 11:26), but first of all as the Word in which the unique God – who did not appear first in the Gospel but appeared already in the history of Israel in which he himself acted – is expressed, so that he can be acknowledged by Jews and Gentiles alike as creator and keeper of the world, as Lord of Israel and the people, as Judge, as Saviour, and as fulfiller.²⁹

In one short statement: the relationship of the New to the Old Testament serves the history of salvation under the guidance of God alone. It will not be marked only by the twofold people of God, Israel and the Church, but also by the fact that the revelation is not only expressed in the Christian Bible but also from Jewish side in the twofold Torah consisting of the Tanakh and the Talmud/Midrash. Erich Zenger’s earlier research on the differences between the Old Testament and the Tanakh,³⁰ together with historical and theological studies about the parting of the early Christian and rabbinic ways into two legitimate continuing narrations of the biblical history,³¹ provide important insights into both

²⁹ Thomas Söding, “Probleme und Chancen biblischer Theologie aus neutestamentlicher Sicht,” in *Eine Bibel – zwei Testamente. Positionen biblischer Theologie*, eds. Christoph Dohmen und Thomas Söding, (Paderborn München Wien Zürich, 1995), 171.

³⁰ Erich Zenger, *Das erste Testament. Die jüdische Bibel und die Christen* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1991).

³¹ Alan F. Segal, *Rebecca’s Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Boston, MS: Harvard University Press 1986); Daniel Boyarin, *Dying for God. Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1999); Daniel

Jewish and Christian understandings of the history of revelation and salvation.

This basic connection, disclosing a theology of Israel, signifies for a theology of religions that the religions encounter in Christianity not Jesus Christ alone, but also come into contact with the history of salvation that includes Judaism. The fact that Christianity in dialogue with the religions conveys not only the Gospel but both parts of its entire Bible should be theoretically obvious, but on the practical level this is not always the case. The inclusion of the Old Testament that is strongly impressed with history and prophecy will stimulate – particularly in dialogue with the deep mysticism and wisdom of the Asiatic religions – the social and creative dimensions of the interreligious dialogue. It is however crucial that it is not only the history of salvation up to Jesus Christ and the subsequent history of the Church that is brought into the discussion when the Church meets other religions. They will automatically be brought into further dialogue with Judaism, whether they want it or not. The big sister Church will have to introduce the little sister synagogue and bring her into conversation explicitly.³² Only when the Torah in its rabbinic Jewish development together with the whole history of the Jewish people is included is the history of salvation sufficiently transmitted. In a Christian theology of religions there has to be joint listening to

Judaism, by both Christianity and the other religions. The reference to Judaism will have the task of reconsidering its own position in different situations and of maintaining a critical point of view.

In the first part of the 20th Century, the differentiations between religion and faith and between natural religion and revelation were introduced in the theology of religion in order to express the “great difference” of the biblical tradition.³³ Faith meant a response of the people to God’s revelation and self-disclosure in Christ and religion was described as the pure human searching for transcendence. This judging concept of dialectical theology seems inadequate when one realizes that God as creator does not only give life to people of faith, he also reaches out to people beyond the history of salvation that constituted Judaism and Christianity. When looking at the Jewish-Christian relationship it becomes clear that the “great difference” between Judaism and Christianity and the rest of the world’s religions really needs to be reconceived. The revised understanding does not simply mean that single individuals out of all nations and religions have to be granted the possibility of expressing ethical and soteriological judgements, but the historical dimension of the religions will be asserted as well. This historical dimension becomes especially evident by following how the religious communities travel their roads to God, the Other. This is the decisive outlook. The history of salvation has greater pedagogical importance for the education of humanity the more that Judaism and Christianity understand each other, and as they understand that each in its own way is a religious community inevitably obligated by God to lead all

Boyarin, *Border Lines. The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 2004).

³² When I call the Church “big sister” and Judaism the “little sister,” I am not referring to the well known metaphor of the elder and younger brothers and sisters with whom Jews and Christians are compared. The “big” has its meaning simply in terms of size of membership and refers to the situation of the interreligious dialogue of our days. However, the metaphor is even used in the 2nd Century by Origen in his exegesis of Cant. 8,8. where it refers to the synagogue which is the “little sister” by age. Cf. A. Ehrhardt, “The Birth of the Synagogue and R. Akiba” in *Studia Theologica* (September 1955): 86-111.

³³ Above all, dialectic theology strongly played religion against belief. Cf. Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. I/2 (Zürich: Theol. Verl., 1932): 305-397; Karl-Josef Kuschel, ed., *Christentum und nichtchristliche Religionen. Theologische Modelle im 20. Jahrhundert* (Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchges., 1994).

people to acknowledge the One God.³⁴ However, it is a difficult task to make God's otherness, God's difference from us evident in history without falling into a deprecatory hierarchy. To experience that difference neither as a menace nor as self-serving, but as a call to serve *God's* gift of salvation and truth to all people is a challenge for both Jews and Christians, in dialogue with other religions.

³⁴ Compared to Christianity, Rabbinic Judaism has renounced an active mission. Nonetheless it wants a sole God to be approved by all people and it seeks to lead everyone to a just and social system. The concept of the Noahide commandments makes this clear. Cf. Klaus Müller, *Tora für die Völker: Die noachidischen Gebote: Ansätze zu ihrer Rezeption im Christentum* (Berlin: Institut Kirche und Judentum, 1994).