

A Look at the current Jewish-Catholic Dialogue
Joseph Cardinal Bernardin 25th Jerusalem Lecture
Chicago, 13-05-2021 (zoom)

By:

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Introduction

This contribution assumes that the participants in the meeting are already aware of the great progress made in the last fifty years in the field of Catholic-Jewish dialogue and because of this it will not focus much on this point, not because it is unimportant, but because it is considered already known.

However, it is worth recalling, by way of introduction, the last two official contributions in the field of Jewish-Catholic dialogue, one from the Jewish side, the other from the Catholic side. Unlike previous documents, they are not yet sufficiently known and for this reason I intend to refer to them here, inviting them to be carefully read and reflected, since they mark a fundamental stage in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue, fifty years after the promulgation of the historic conciliar declaration *Nostra Aetate* (1965).

The first document, entitled *Between Jerusalem and Rome*, was delivered to Pope Francis on 31 August 2017 by a delegation of three of the most important Jewish organizations, which are the *Conference of European Rabbis*, the *Rabbinical Council of America* and the *Commission of dialogue of the Grand Rabbinate of Israel*. This document contains the positions of Orthodox Judaism on the Jewish-Catholic dialogue. Its relevance lies in the fact that it is the first time in history that Orthodox Jewish organizations have issued an official document in which they express their position on the process of dialogue with the Catholic Church, indicating the future prospects for its advancement. This document, published on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* celebrated in 2015, was intended, among other things, to be a response to the document of the Commission for Religious Relations with Judaism entitled *God's gifts and call are irrevocable* (Rm 11:29) of 10 December 2015.

It is not superfluous to note that the document *Between Jerusalem and Rome* had been preceded, a few days earlier, by a declaration - so to speak "revolutionary" - entitled *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians* and signed by twenty-five famous Orthodox rabbis¹ (including fourteen operating in Israel), to which were added numerous other and illustrious signatories. Here is one of its most open statements to dialogue with Christianity:

As did Maimonides and Yehudah Halevi,[1] we acknowledge that the emergence of Christianity in human history is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations. In separating Judaism and Christianity, G-d willed a separation between partners with significant theological differences, not a separation between enemies. Rabbi Jacob Emden wrote that "Jesus brought a double goodness to the world. On the one hand he strengthened the Torah of Moses majestically... and not one of our Sages spoke out more emphatically concerning the immutability of the

¹ Text in <https://www.fcei.it/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Orthodox-Rabbinic-Statement-on-Christianity.pdf>.

Torah. On the other hand he removed idols from the nations and obligated them in the seven commandments of Noah so that they would not behave like animals of the field, and instilled them firmly with moral traits..... Christians are congregations that work for the sake of heaven who are destined to endure, whose intent is for the sake of heaven and whose reward will not be denied.”[...] Now that the Catholic Church has acknowledged the eternal Covenant between G-d and Israel, we Jews can acknowledge the ongoing constructive validity of Christianity as our partner in world redemption, without any fear that this will be exploited for missionary purposes. As stated by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel’s Bilateral Commission with the Holy See under the leadership of Rabbi Shear Yashuv Cohen, “We are no longer enemies, but unequivocal partners in articulating the essential moral values for the survival and welfare of humanity”.[4] Neither of us can achieve G-d’s mission in this world alone².

The passage cited above immediately suggests the great advancement of Jewish-Christian dialogue in the last fifty years. To become even more aware of this progress, we report two passages that we believe to be the most open to the respective partner, taken from the two official documents just mentioned. Thus, it is asserted in the rabbinical declaration Between Jerusalem and Rome:

“Despite irreconcilable theological differences, we Jews see Catholics as our partners, close allies, friends and brothers in the common search for a better world that can enjoy peace, social justice and security. We understand our mission to be a light to the nations as a contribution to humanity’s appreciation for holiness, morality and piety. The Western world, on the other hand, is growing more and more secular, abandoning many of the moral values shared by Jews and Christians. Religious freedom is therefore increasingly threatened by the forces of both secularism and religious extremism. For this reason we seek the collaboration of the Catholic community in particular, and of other communities of faith, in general, to guarantee the future of religious freedom, to promote the moral principles of our faith, in particular the sanctity of life and the meaning of the traditional family, and to “cultivate the moral and religious conscience of society”³.

On the other hand, it was affirmed on the Catholic side, in the document *The Gifts and the Call of God are irrevocable* (Rm 11:29), n. 40:

The Church is therefore obliged to view evangelisation to Jews, who believe in the one God, in a different manner from that to people of other religions and world views. In concrete terms this means that the Catholic Church neither conducts nor supports any specific institutional mission work directed towards Jews. While there is a principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission, Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so

² Cf. THE CENTER FOR JEWISH-CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING & COOPERATION, *To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven. Toward a Partnership Between Jews and Christians* (3 December 2015) in <https://www.cjcuc.org/2015/12/03/orthodox-rabbinic-statement-on-christianity/>

³ <http://www.glisicritti.it/blog/entry/4243>

in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God's Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah⁴.

These assertions constitute fixed points in the current situation of the Jewish-Christian dialogue from which to start its future advancement.

Having said this, the focus of this contribution will mainly be on the current situation of the Jewish-Catholic relationship and it will do so by keeping in mind two contexts: The Western World and the Middle East, in particular Israel. We will insist on the need for dialogue between us to not being limited only to deepening more and more common religious themes, more or less shared. Dialogue must also be dedicated to a common commitment on issues that involve the life of our respective communities.

1. Western world

In the Western world there are ancient and ever-present challenges, and others that are new. Unfortunately, anti-Semitism remains a common commitment towards which everyone must express themselves clearly and without hesitation: condemn, monitor, educate. The firm and decisive condemnation of the Holocaust, of all manifestations of anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism, as well as all forms of persecution and discrimination against Jews, Christians and any other religious group must remain unchanged in Jews and Christians relations. In this sense, it must be noted - not without satisfaction - that today, after years of dialogue, Catholics are in general more willing to acknowledge the serious failings of some members of the Church towards the Jewish people in the history, while the Jews are much more sensitive to denouncing the persecutions and injustices perpetrated against Christian minorities (and not only) by radical groups and movements. One example of this commitment on the Jewish side, is the recognition of the terrible Armenian genocide, something still ignored in some official forums; but also the many statements published during the terrible years of the rise of ISIS, and many other related initiatives.

Catholics show an increasingly marked sensitivity in presenting the Jewish religion not as a religion of the past, but as a living religion, with its own identity that should not be obscured or exploited; which implies the rejection of replacement theology, the recognition of the Jewish people as chosen and dear to God.

We note, especially at the academic level, a progressive overcoming of the reciprocal rejection of the respective interpretations of Scripture, recognizing the richness of the hermeneutic tradition proper on each side. Suffice to think, in this regard, of the great advancement of Christian studies on rabbinic interpretative richness, the interest of Jews for a Hebrew reading of the New Testament, the joint research projects between Jewish and Christian scholars, in the USA as in many other parts of the world. In Italy, for example, the last volume of the *Bible of friendship* (*Bibbia dell'amicizia*) is being published, a truly unique project in history, since it is a complete commentary on the Bible written in "four hands" by Jews and Christians. Until a few decades ago, commenting on the Bible together seemed like a truly impossible project. *The Jewish Annotated NT* is well known and has now become a classic⁵.

Another commendable initiative, on the Catholic side, is the launch, from the next academic year 2021-2022, of the first Licentiate course - never offered in a Pontifical University - in

⁴ http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/it/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crre/documenti-della-commissione/_perche-i-doni-e-la-chiamata-di-dio-sono-irrevocabili--rm-11-29-/en.html

⁵ The Jewish Annotated New Testament (2nd ed.), New York 2017.

Jewish Studies and Jewish-Christian relations, which is offered in the Cardinal Bea Center of the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.

On the other hand, in some parts of the world there is a certain "fatigue" in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue, partly due to the fact that at times fundamental persons have been missing who have played a role of primary importance in the thrust of reciprocal relations, while those who replaced them, for various reasons, did not continue in the same line or in any case not with the same effort. Elsewhere, the dialogue has lost interest because it has resulted in a mere discussion based on political correctness, which is limited to various and generic declarations of friendship, and which often however, do not affect the real life of their respective communities. Furthermore, it cannot be denied that sometimes, even in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue, politics has interfered, erroneously linking the Israeli-Palestinian question to the Catholic Jewish relationship. The policy of the State of Israel is perceived by some, not as the policy of the "Israelis", but as the policy of the "Jews". This attitude is becoming quite common in some secular circles, but also among some Catholic movements.

For this reason, various parties expressed the hope that the Jewish-Catholic dialogue (and, more generally, interreligious dialogue), after a recovered and stable mutual trust, will advance starting from the most problematic texts for a partner, in order to seek an explanation and an interpretation from the other. I also consider it important to talk about what could be considered as a difficulty between us, in friendship and sincerity, precisely in order to deepen our relationship and break down everything that can contribute to the spread of prejudices, which are the antechamber of anti-Semitism. In other words, according to some, instead of dwelling only on the "common heritage", it would be useful to discuss what divides us most, to understand the position of the other, to help him re-interpret his texts and his gestures or at least to give him the opportunity to explain them adequately.

Then there are challenges of modernity that believers of all religions will have to face together and on which a discussion between the two communities of believers is desirable: gender theories, artificial intelligence, international economic dynamics, the work market, commitment to justice and peace, the relationship between culture, identity and religion, and so on.

These are issues on the daily agenda in public life and which closely affect our respective communities and societies. The increasingly secular and secularized thought of our societies poses many challenges to religious thought not only with regard to the vision of man and the family, but also in the economic and social spheres. The idea of the person, of individual rights, of personal choice increasingly widespread in the Western world, are progressively distant from religious thought, both Christian and Jewish. I think it is necessary to engage in critical, but at the same time, serene and positive dialogue in these instances. If on the one hand it is not possible to uncritically accept all the demands of modernity in this area, on the other it is not even possible to limit oneself to expressing rejection and condemnation, creating cultural barriers that are then insuperable between secular and religious thought. In this context, interreligious dialogue could help us all to find positive and at the same time non-renouncing forms, language and attitudes.

Another interesting and increasingly discussed topic is the relation between religion and identity. In our secularized society, where religion has always played a less important public role, there are movements that want to declare the traditional religions in the West - Jewish and Christian - as constitutive of the identity of the West. But this phenomenon also has clear and evident anti-Islamic tones and well-defined political aims. We have to reject any manipulation of the religion, as in this case, but at the same times we cannot avoid asking ourselves what our role is as religious in building and/or preserving our collective identity.

In the social sphere, Pope Francis, with his last two encyclicals (*Laudato Sii, Fratelli Tutti*), has initiated an important dialogue in order to rethink the economic, social, political and even religious models that have guided us up to now, but which at present manifest their weakness. We cannot anymore dialogue among ourselves, without a clear common commitment towards justice, peace and reconciliation.

A constant discussion on these issues is increasingly urgent, especially if we consider the widespread crisis of philosophical ethics, for which the very foundations of a human ethics have been lacking. In the light of reason and therefore also regardless of faith religious, this is shared by as wide a circle of people as possible. In this field, the contribution of the Judeo-Christian tradition appears to be of primary importance in the face of the new ethical challenges that we have only mentioned above. Furthermore, these challenges engage us on a global level, as the recent Covid-19 pandemic has shown. No one can be considered an island any longer. We are so interconnected that we are increasingly aware of living in a "global village".

As a consequence of what has just been said about globalization, a final challenge, both at a world and Middle Eastern levels, concerns the need for more interlocutors to come into play in interreligious dialogue and this has its relevance also in the Jewish-Catholic dialogue. Two recent examples, which already introduce us to the next paragraph on the Middle East, are sufficient. The dialogue between Catholics and Muslims, to which the pontificate of Pope Francis has given great impetus and with unprecedented steps to date, cannot ignore the Jewish interlocutor. But here politics comes into play, especially the Middle East, which makes this dialogue rather difficult.

This theme introduces us to the second part of my presentation.

2. Middle East and Israel

In the Middle East, particularly in Israel, the situation is very different from that in the Western world. While in the West, Judaism and Catholicism are more or less autonomous with respect to political life, in Israel it is the opposite. Official Jewish religious institutions are part of the political life of the country, where Christianity is a minority and Judaism is a majority. Politics plays a dominant role in relationships.

Although, as mentioned above, the Jewish-Catholic dialogue has made great strides from *Nostra Aetate* up to today, it must be recognized that in the Middle East we are still at the beginning of the journey. This is due, in all honesty, to the reluctance of both parties involved. On the part of Christian churches (largely Arab) there is an objective difficulty in understanding how much knowledge of Judaism and dialogue with religious Israel are fundamental for Christian life. Obviously this is mainly due to political reasons. For the Churches of the Middle East, in fact, it is difficult to distinguish between the religious and political Israel and there is a certain reluctance (or fear?) to publicly dialogue with Judaism, for fear of being accused of collaborationism by the Arab population. The gestures of rapprochement between Jews and Catholics are thus seen as political gestures and as a submission to political Israel. On the other hand, there is not much interest in dialogue with local Catholicism at Jewish religious institutions in Israel. There is a council for religious dialogue with Judaism, but it does not have much influence on the general public.

In the Holy Land, the Israeli-Palestinian political question, rightly or wrongly, is considered the reason for the aforementioned reticence. It does not allow a truly free dialogue between the two sides. The absence of Jews at the interreligious meeting in Iraq exemplifies this situation at the general level in the Middle East.

In civil and social life in Israel, the Church is almost totally absent, unlike in Autonomous Palestinian, whereby it has been accustomed for centuries to relate with the Islamic world; and also through its institutions, especially schools, which play an important role both for preserving the Christian identity and for developing dialogue with the Muslim world, given that many Muslims attend Christian schools. Israel, on the other hand, while making an exception for religious tourism, does not strictly need Catholic Church structures. Furthermore, the Church in Israel is made up largely of Arabs and therefore remains somewhat remote from the Jewish world.

Another important topic is that in the Catholic Church in general and even more so in the Holy Land, the existing link in Judaism between the Land of Israel, the State of Israel and Jewish faith is not understood in the same way. On the Catholic side, there is a tendency to distinguish between religious faith and a bond with the Land and the state, while in Judaism the bond between these realities is profound.

All this makes a constructive relationship of dialogue at an institutional level difficult, which would otherwise be of great interest and importance. Indeed, the Church has much in common to share with Israel and its society. To give just one example, Christian art is highly appreciated by Jews. In some Jewish universities, New Testament courses are held because Jews are aware that understanding Christianity is essential for understanding Western history, art and literature and provides the awareness of Europe's Christian roots.

It should be noted that Catholics do not constitute the majority of Christians in Israel. Israeli Jews are not always able to distinguish between Catholics and non-Catholics. Furthermore, most of the ecclesial initiatives in the Holy Land are now organized by all the churches jointly, although it must be recognized that the approach to Judaism between the different Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic churches is quite different. In Israel, therefore, dialogue between the Catholic Church and Judaism is not the only channel. Moreover, dialogue initiatives often start "from above", that is, from religious leaders rather than from the people who are often very distant from such initiatives. We should ask ourselves if it is not time to leave our conference rooms and do something that is more linked to the territory. Furthermore, the role of women in the Jewish-Christian dialogue is still too small and must be evaluated by the respective religious faiths. In this sense, the struggle against male chauvinism and clericalism is still only just beginning with us.

In Israel, however, despite various episodes of violence and discriminatory attitudes - due to ignorance, prejudice and suspicion towards the others - it must be recognized that the freedom of worship and expression for Catholics and other Christians is guaranteed, something not to be taken for granted in the Middle East. Furthermore, in Israel the number of Catholics is stable and, in general, they live peacefully. Catholic schools, as well as those of other Christian churches, are largely supported economically by the State of Israel. The presentation of Christianity in the textbooks of Israeli schools has been updated, in order to highlight its positive aspects and not only the errors of the past or the wounds of history. There are still many steps to be taken and it is precisely here that the greatest future challenge in the concrete relations of Jewish-Christian dialogue is at stake.

In general, Christians and churches lament the Jewish-Israeli society's profound ignorance of Christianity and Christians. Still too often, in not few Israeli Jewish circles, Christians are identified as pagans or idol worshipers. On the other hand, it must be recognized that, among the Arabs, knowledge of Judaism is very poor. It must be recognized, then, that unfortunately, on the whole, there are not many opportunities for dialogue in Israel and that often these are not relevant to social life. Religious authorities certainly meet, but in the majority of

cases on formal or institutional occasions and rarely for strictly religious reasons. Meetings almost always have no concrete effect at the grass root level.

Nevertheless, at the local level, there is no lack of exemplary and solid situations of dialogue and encounter: associations, groups, religious and communities that seek to dialogue and encounter. We must therefore insist more on those (and there are many) who want a sincere dialogue. In fact, there are numerous friendships and ties between religious communities, movements and individuals. While relations remain formal at an institutional level, numerous dialogue initiatives must be pointed out at the grass root level, often foreign, but increasingly also local. New ecclesial movements, families who meet for work occasions and then remain linked by sincere friendship; associations and groups for human rights and many other occasions, are often the origin of fraternal ties, which are to our justification no less important than the institutional ones. In this sense, an aspect of great hope is constituted by the increasingly frequent visits of Israeli groups in Christian contexts (holy places, churches, schools, Christian villages, etc...). In Israeli society there is more and more awareness of the Christian presence and its cultural contribution to the life of the country; while among Catholics the live contact with Jews, religious and otherwise, causes many prejudices to fall.

One of the major future challenges of the Jewish-Catholic dialogue is linked to the question of identity. There can be no true dialogue without a certainty about one's own identity, otherwise one will necessarily fear the other. If religious identity in Israel is sufficiently defined, at the civil level is not the case. Even today there is a wide debate about the identity of the Israeli. Who is, in fact - one wonders - an Israeli? He cannot be defined either by his mother tongue, nor by race, nor by place of birth, but only by religion: according to the 1948 declaration of Independence, only those who are Jewish according to the *halakhah* can obtain Israeli nationality. Within Israeli society, Christians are experiencing an even greater identity crisis: Christians are Israeli citizens, but they are not Jews; they are Arabs, but not Muslims; they often boast of belonging to the Palestinian people, from which they are now effectively separated, others are proud to be Israelis; in many cases they accept to live in Israel, but they do not associate themselves with the flag and symbols of the State (which are also religious symbols). In some cases, young people live in social contexts far from the Christian world, attend Israeli public schools and therefore know more about Judaism than their own faith and identity. It is an important and decisive aspect of the life of the Arab Christians in Israel.

A new challenge is represented by immigrants and foreign workers present in Israel. Among the immigrants from the former Soviet Union, tens of thousands are of Christian origin. They fit completely into Israeli society and often discriminate against the Arab component, even when they share the Christian faith with it. On the other hand, there is an objective difficulty on the part of Israeli society in accepting a reality like this, considered foreign. There are also tens of thousands of foreign workers in Israel. Their children necessarily acquire rights, first of all the right to education, which is done in Hebrew, so they fit into Jewish society. It is a new reality, which involves the Church in dealing with Israel and the Jewish-Israeli society. As a result, Hebrew is increasingly becoming one of the languages of the local church. There are so Hebrew-speaking Israeli Catholics.

In Israel, the vast majority of Christian Arabs know and fluently use Hebrew. And here we find, in our opinion, a unique challenge in the whole Middle East: only in Israel do Arab-speaking Christians who know the Hebrew language and who can therefore read the sacred texts in Hebrew and dialogue with the Jews in their own language. In this direction, however, there are still many steps to be taken. Often Christian Arabs, even though they can read the Old Testament in Hebrew, ignore it. Love for the Old Testament in the local Christian community must therefore grow. They often prefer to leave it aside or not to study it, as if it does

not matter because it is Jewish. Yet many things are changing. Movements, parish groups, associations, etc. are progressing in this respect. An important point emerges from these considerations: on the one hand, the Jewish-Catholic dialogue in Israel is closely linked to the Christian formation of the faithful, along the lines of the Second Vatican Council, which not by chance rediscovered its roots with Judaism precisely from its reflection on its own identity. On the other hand, a change of vision and perspective is also needed on the Jewish side, which is called to see in the Christian presence and in Christianity a dialogue partner to be known, a constitutive reality of the identity of their country and not a stranger to be ignored in the best case scenario. This means that serious formation, far from being an obstacle to dialogue, is instead a necessary condition in order to improve our relations.

In the light of what has been said above, we now indicate the themes of the Jewish-Catholic dialogue which in Israel, require particular attention for the near future:

- 1) The discussion on Jewish identity today, in the light of reconsideration, that is open to the future, of tradition, of the covenant with God, of ethical precepts, of the interpretation of Sacred Scripture;
- 2) Reflection on the relationship between religion and state, between religious and civil authorities, with specific reference to the State of Israel;
- 3) Relationship of the Jewish people with the Promised Land, an essential theme in the Jewish-Christian dialogue, for which it is necessary to examine the question with reference to Sacred Scripture and its interpretations, to ecclesial and pastoral documents, to the historical and messianic significance of the three elements Torah, people and land. But also, the political repercussions that these considerations have on the life of the Palestinian people.
- 4) Reflection on the civil rights of minorities in the State of Israel, for Catholics also in the light of diplomatic agreements with the Vatican since 1993, and the commitment to religious freedom and the protection of the Holy Places.
- 5) The common discussion, conducted at multiple levels (theological, philosophical, pedagogical, socio-political, etc.), on the themes of peace, reconciliation, nonviolence in the three monotheistic religions. On the one hand, this commitment aims to demystify the relationship between religion, violence and political power and to condemn the violent abuse of religion, fundamentalism and intolerance; on the other hand, it aims to strengthen the philosophy and pedagogy of nonviolence and their prophetic and educational role in conflict management, and in supporting positive political processes, bearing witness to the constructive use of religion and its importance as a force of reconciliation.
- 6) Jerusalem. She has come back to the fore in recent days, with the incidents we have all witnessed. Jerusalem is the heart of the life of all believers of the monotheistic religions. Already from the biblical period in Judaism, it played a central role, not only just in prayer. It is the heart and the central identity of the people of Israel. But Jerusalem also plays a central role for Christians. The historicity of the Christian faith is made visible precisely by the Holy Land and in particular by Jerusalem, which guards the heart of Christian revelation. Without a place, there is no event. Without the Geography of Salvation, we couldn't even have a Salvation Story. Jerusalem is also important for Islam. It is a dear, delicate, sensitive issue, where our respective jealousies emerge.

It is increasingly necessary that in the dialogue between us, we begin to talk about this too, in order - without denying the respective differences - to seek together a common basis regarding the Holy City; of prospects for encounter on which to build the future of the city which, as now and always, will continue to gather us all.

3. Final considerations

If, speaking of peace and dialogue in the Holy Land seems an ideal far from any concrete realization, then it is a topic awaiting an urgent solution. This paradox is due to the fact that the Holy Land is the "center" of the world, the place where secular tensions, political interests and different cultures meet and clash, and which the three great monotheistic religions consider sacred. Yet the Holy Land, far from being only a place of conflict, is the cradle of our Western culture and to a large extent also of the Eastern one: "Both were born in it" (Ps 87:5). The Holy Land remains the unique place where the three monotheistic religions, in fact, still coexist, often fragmented - not without real divisions - within themselves in multiple currents, traditions and cults. The three religions, therefore, have a long way to go also with regard to openness to the other within their communities and not only externally. This is an essential point: inter-religious dialogue must begin *ad intra* if it is to be truly effective *ad extra*.

Christians, who constitute the minority in the Holy Land in front of a vast Jewish and Muslim community, have the important task of being a "bridge", with the Islamic world, thanks to the many Christians of Arab origin who share with the Muslim majority the language and numerous cultural factors and with Judaism, thanks also to the small Hebrew Catholic community that lives in the Holy Land.

The different faiths, therefore, if lived in their authenticity, must be bearers of resources of reconciliation and pacification. In this sense, such faiths can be an "accelerator" to foment division or to lead to dialogue.

Sooner or later, common religious themes will have to be addressed which till now, have never been discussed, at least never openly, such as the relationship with *Eretz Israel*, as I have already mentioned. It is an important issue that deserves attention: leaving politics aside, what is the relationship that the two communities have with it from a religious point of view?

It is also important that Catholic Jewish dialogue goes beyond Western and Middle Eastern borders and begins to look at other geographical, cultural and religious contexts as well. We are today facing new challenges. The current historical circumstances are once again dramatic and directly question our conscience as believers and question our faith, that is, our relationship with God and, consequently, our relationship with each other. We are at the center of a global health emergency, of tensions and wars - global or not - but still serious and which cross all our societies, in the West as in the East, in the North as in the South. Tensions which have often a religious background. All this cannot fail to question each of us, who is not and cannot be an island.

Up to now, much of our reflections have focused on the past and on the need to purify the memory, to unhinge the wounds, fears and ancient prejudices that separated us. To begin the dialogue, it is first necessary to recognize the other. This process is not yet complete, but it will continue for a long time and must always be a constitutive part of our relations.

Now, however, to the need to purify the past, there must be added that of collaborating in the future, as believers of different faiths, to build models of positive relationships that have clear social repercussions. One's own faith and identity cannot be questioned, but the experience of faith can and must lead everyone to recognize themselves in some shared principles that help believers to stop fearing the other and to be a positive leaven in society. The challenge we face, in short, is to ensure that our different experiences of faith illuminate not only our institutional relationships, but our various societies, fighting all forms of violence and are a positive reference point for the construction of new models of society that here in the Middle

East, as in the rest of the world, are appearing on the horizon. In short, on a global level, the alternative to inter-faith is inter-nihilism, as Rabbi A.J. Heschel:

*We must choose between interfaith and inter-nihilism. Cynicism is not parochial. Should religions insist upon the illusion of complete isolation? Should we refuse to be on speaking terms with one another and hope for each other's failure? Or should we pray for each other's health, and help one another in preserving one's respective legacy, in preserving a common legacy?*⁶

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A.J. HESCHEL, «No Religion is an Island», 119