



ICCJ Bonn Conference 2017

Reforming, Rereading, Renewing:

Martin Luther and 500 Years of Tradition and Reform in Judaism and Christianity

Reformieren, interpretieren, revidieren:

Martin Luther und 500 Jahre Tradition und Reform in Judentum und Christentum

## PLENARY SESSION

WEDNESDAY, JULY 5, 2017 - "GUSTAV STRESEMANN INSTITUT", BONN

### **“Here I Stand, I Can Do No Other’ or ‘Yes, We Can’? – The Future of Jewish-Christian Relations”**

**By Prof. Dr Philip A. Cunningham**

It is a real privilege to participate in this panel with Jean-François Bensahel and Nikolaus Schneider to mark the quincentenary of the Reformation and the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of “The Ten Points of Seelisberg.” We have been asked to discuss our hopes and expectations for Jewish-Christian relations in the future. This is obviously a vast topic that cannot be fully explored in 90 minutes, so let me preface my observations with a few focusing background remarks.

*First*, there has been more progress in promoting mutual understanding between Christians and Jews in the last seventy years than in the previous two millennia. I realize this sounds grandiose, but it is a simple fact. We still have a long way to go in unlearning the inherited reflexes of avoidance and opposition of our hostile past, but, nonetheless, we have begun to develop a significant measure of trust and confidence toward each other.

*Second*, in many parts of the world substantive dialogue has now unfolded for some time. By “substantive dialogue” I mean sustained conversation that has moved beyond surface-level exchanges of basic information—as important as that is in developing friendships and removing caricatures—to deeper explorations of each other’s traditions. These explorations have the potential to transform our own *self*-understandings as Christians and Jews in relation to God and one another.

*Third*, the very possibility of such dialogue has literally never previously existed in any sustained or widespread way. Our relationship today would have been unimaginable to our ancestors. Therefore, we have a responsibility to pursue vigorously this blessed, though challenging, opportunity we have been given. We Jews and Christians should not let ourselves be distracted by other worthy purposes or allow ourselves to become complacent in the wake of the truly monumental progress made thus far in repudiating antisemitism, conversionary campaigns, or the teaching of contempt.

*Fourth and finally*, I come to our panel today as a Catholic biblical theologian who lives in a country that is home to the world’s largest Diaspora Jewish community. I have therefore been blessed with many Jewish colleagues and interlocutors, some of whom have team-taught with me, some of whom have

become *chavruta* partners and cherished friends. I am indebted to these enriching experiences in offering the following thoughts.

With this framing, let me turn to one of our topics and ask whether there are immutable, irreconcilable “stands” (in the sense of Luther’s “Here I stand”) that will inevitably cause disputation between Christians and Jews.

My initial reaction is to caution against immediately leaping to the obvious “yes” to this question. I suspect that perhaps we may be tempted to too quickly affirm rigid boundaries between our traditions. Maintaining our distinctive identities and the respective integrities of our two communities is, of course, an important priority. However, some of our received theological traditions were based upon mutual ignorance and presupposed that Jews and Christians were—by our very natures—opposed to one another. Now that we are learning how we each understand ourselves, and now that we seek a relationship of mutuality, it well may be that at least some of our beliefs are not so unconditionally contradictory as we previously supposed.

In other words, Jews and Christians in dialogue today need to carefully analyze the nature of our theological differences. I would like to suggest five questions that we should ask whenever we encounter apparently conflicting truth claims:

*First*, is the perceived difference premised on an oppositional understanding of the self or the other? For instance, sometimes both Jews and Christians erroneously assume since Christians believe that Jesus was resurrected that Jews do not believe in the resurrection of the dead or in an afterlife. Similarly, the role that “law” plays in both traditions is frequently distorted by Christians and Jews alike.

*Second*, do important terms mean something different to Jews and Christians? An often-repeated formula is that Christians believe “the Messiah” has come, while Jews insist “the Messiah” has not come. It is not always realized that “the Messiah” may mean something very different to each tradition today, let alone that its meanings may have changed over time. Christians today mean something quite different when they speak of Jesus as “Christ” (even though linguistically the ancient Greek *christos* is equivalent to the Hebrew *mashiach*) than Jews today do when they speak of “the Messiah.”

*Third*, is the perceived difference a question of emphasis? For instance, it is sometimes said that Christians hold that the world has already been redeemed, while Jews claim that the world is unredeemed. Careful study shows that Jews and Christians both believe (in different ways) that God acts in history for human redemption but also that God’s designs for the world have yet to be fully achieved. Each tradition chooses to stress one conviction or the other, and their preferences have changed at different points in history.

*Fourth*, are there unstated presuppositions at work? Jews and Christians have traditionally interpreted certain scriptural passages, such as Isaiah 7:14, quite differently. “Look, the young woman [or “virgin” in Greek] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” Prescinding from the translational debate over the Hebrew *’almah* and the Greek *parthenos* in reference to the woman, Christians (following Matthew 1:22-23) have typically seen this text as referring to the coming of Jesus in the future. Jews tend to see the son as referring to King Hezekiah or some contemporary of the prophet. But this difference becomes a genuine contradiction between Judaism and Christianity only if it is presupposed that a biblical text can have only one correct interpretation. In fact, Jewish tradition has always seen the value of multiple understandings of a text (as in rabbinic discussions of Psalm 62:11: “One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard”), while the Catholic Church (as seen in the 2001 Pontifical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*) teaches that

multiple legitimate “retrospective” readings of biblical texts exist. That is why Pope Benedict encouraged dialogue between Jewish and Christian traditions of interpretation. The task of examining our presuppositions is especially necessary because of the oppositional history between Jews and Christians.

*Fifth*, would an apparent difference be seen in a new light if viewed from another philosophical perspective? There is not enough time to unpack this question thoroughly, so let me briefly mention the ancient Christian formula that there is “one God in three persons.” This statement is predicated on a certain Greek philosophy that understands “person” quite differently than we post-Freudian moderns do. In fact, for people today for whom a “person” is a subject with an individual consciousness, to hear God described as being “three persons” conveys the very tri-theism that the patristic church councils were rejecting! Their philosophical system was concerned especially with “ontology,” what something *is* in the essence of its being. But what if the philosophical perspective was one that stresses that identity is grounded in relationship? Viewed in this light, both the Jewish and Christian experiences of God can then be seen as grappling with how the transcendent Holy One becomes involved in ordinary human history delimited by time and space. Christians describe the essentially relational God as three interactive ways of being, while mystical Judaism described ten emanations by which God relates to the material world. Both are dealing with the same theological question of immanence vs. transcendence and have variant, not necessarily antithetical, approaches.

To conclude, I would like to propose that we Christians and Jews define the highest purpose of our relations in the future as seeking the Holy One together. This is not to exclude other worthy goals, such as healing the world’s ills, but this intentional purpose would encourage an invaluable humility between and among us as co-covenanting communities before God that would deepen our relationship. And, after all, for religious people it is God who is the ultimate source of existence and meaning. Therefore, it is God who gives the mystery of the unique Jewish and Christian relationship its fullest significance.

And, to paraphrase the prophet Micah (6:8), let us walk humbly together with our God into our shared future.