

Interreligious Dialogue in Jerusalem

Francesco Rossi de Gasperis, sj
Pontifical Biblical Institute – Jerusalem

I — But Jesus Christ has not abolished Israel: The Palestinian Churches and Judaism

In Spring 2000, Pope John Paul II completed a personal voyage to the Holy Land that was of great religious significance. The Pope himself described it as “the spiritual path of the Bishop of Rome towards the origins of our faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob”. The actions of the Pope were more eloquent than all his words and official declarations, and this was especially true of his pilgrimage to the hill of the Holocaust Memorial. An Israeli newspaper recorded it like this: “After the celebration at Yad Vashem we came to realize how the presence of the Pope helped to unite us with our most profound feelings. Abstract ideas were sprinkled with tears”. It was, then, a model occasion for the whole Church.

In the post-war period, there is no doubt that, in the West, the Holocaust and its remembrance initiated a penitential movement of Christians in their attitude towards Israel, culminating in the request for forgiveness that Pope John Paul II brought from Rome and deposited in the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

In the western Churches, this re-engagement with the Jewish people has stimulated a secondary, and much more fundamental, movement, leading to a rediscovery of the essentially Jewish roots of the Christian Faith. Among other things, this movement produced the high-level congress to study the theological roots of Christian anti-Judaism, held at the Vatican in Autumn 1997.

Today, we are far from understanding how it was ever possible to ask the Jews who turned to Jesus, to abjure their “perfidy” and “superstition”, as prescribed in the Roman Rite until only a few decades ago! Quite the opposite has happened. We have rediscovered the Christian Faith, not as a “new religion”, but as a transcendent messianic blossoming of first century Judaism.

This second wave of repentance, however, has not been understood, or shared, by the Churches of the Middle East. In these Churches it is usually regarded as the expression of a guilt complex formed in the western Churches as a result of the Holocaust, but by no means affecting eastern Christians. Even though the “theology of substitution”, which identifies the Church as the theological replacement of Israel (the “new Israel”), has started to be seriously, though timidly questioned in the West, it continues to prevail in the eastern Churches, where up to this day it denies any theological significance to the survival of the original Israel, and is equivalent, in effect, to a kind of cultural and spiritual Holocaust.

The consequences of this are not trivial. In the East, and not only in Palestine, one frequently encounters theological, liturgical and pastoral activity based on the “Constantine” conviction that Christianity is a new religion having no links with Judaism, which has completely replaced it in the divine plan of revelation and salvation. The Church is the “new Israel”, truly regarded as an “alternative Israel” that no longer has any real connection with the previous one. For these

Christians, then, “Israel” has become just a name - a name that is purely symbolical, theological and “spiritual” –, a name that no longer has any relevance in the historical, social, political or cultural fields. The “heavenly” Jerusalem no longer has any relation with the mundane and historical Jerusalem.

Given that, even in the West, our language is ambiguous on this point, it is no wonder that a distressing misunderstanding has arisen between us and our middle-eastern brothers in the Faith, concerning the attitude to Judaism adopted by western Churches in the post-war period, especially since the Second Vatican Council. This misunderstanding has generated mistrust and criticism of the Pope’s attitude, his request for forgiveness in relation to the Jewish people, and the gestures he made during his visit to the Holy Land.

But there is still more. The Holocaust has made way for the creation of the State of Israel – not an “ideal-symbolic Israel” readily transferable to some other reality, but the original, material, historical and cultural Israel –, and the Palestinians, feeling untouched by the guilt of nazi-fascism, claim to be the only ones paying for the burdensome consequences. The “misunderstanding” between the eastern and western Christians is therefore tinged with the shades of politics. The sympathy and affection for the Jewish people, which have been re-ignited among the western Churches for purely biblical, theological and spiritual reasons, are truly resented by the Palestinians as a form of biased and uncharitable insensitivity to the tragedy that, for more than fifty years, has fallen on their land and on their people, as a result of the birth of the State of Israel and the policies of its leaders. And they feel somewhat abandoned by us in the face of their destiny.

So, in solidarity with their Islamic brethren, the eastern Christians absolutely refuse to acknowledge the most minimal theological or biblical connection between modern Israel and their country, the Holy Land, understood singularly, and in its entirety, as “Palestine”. For the Palestinians the Lord’s promise and gift of the Land to the Hebrews, according to the Scriptures of the Old Testament, are not only unacceptable, but also completely outmoded grounds for a claim to their land. So they see the creation of the State of Israel purely as an act of aggression, a foreign invasion, or at the very most as a purely secular event arising out of the political circumstances of the 19th and 20th centuries. There is a Palestinian song that goes more or less like this: “We, Christians and Muslims, were living happily and peacefully in this land, until foreigners arrived from overseas and took it away from us”.

One can begin to understand, then, the difficulties experienced by Christian Palestinians in reading the Old Testament, since they evidently do not find in the Bible an acceptable explanation for what is happening to them nowadays. On the contrary, they continually fear that the integral reading of the Hebrew Scriptures favoured by the western Churches will justify and support the nationalist and fundamentalist interpretation that is held by the settlers and the extreme Right in Israel. In fact, many of them are astonished and scandalized by the love and

enthusiasm with which, in the West, we have rediscovered not only the beauty of the Hebrew Scriptures, but also their decisive importance for living the Christian Faith.

A recent document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, entitled “The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible”, and published on the Feast of Ascension 2001, concludes that «the Jewish Sacred Scriptures constitute an essential part of the Christian Bible and are present, in a variety of ways, in the other part of the Christian Bible as well. Without the Old Testament, the New Testament would be an incomprehensible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither» (n. 84). Furthermore, this quotation is highlighted by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in the preface that he wrote for the same document.

We have actually heard a Palestinian bishop (non-Catholic) explain and justify the reading of the Old Testament by Christians as a record of events and teachings that have already been fulfilled by Jesus and assimilated in him, in such a way that – for us – they have no longer a meaning or a theological validity of their own. A “Christological fulfillment of the Old Testament”, understood in such a radical way that all the historical and theological reality of events and personalities is assumed and dissolved directly and exclusively in Jesus Christ, is derived from a typological ideology that is totally platonizing and dualistic. In all the history and descriptions of Israel, it does not detect anything else but the shadowy prefigurations of truths and realities belonging to a superior order – one which renders those “figures” already outmoded, worn out and empty of any intrinsic significance, and therefore completely irrelevant for the discernment of Christian truth. So how are we to understand Jesus’ words in Mt 5:17-19: “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law and the Prophets...”?

This is the “cultural Holocaust” that I mentioned above. We must sorely confess that, for many centuries, it nourished the main current of biblical interpretation also among us Christians in the West, and so became one of the causes (certainly not the only one) of European anti-judaism – the very same kind of anti-semitism that was exploited by nazi paganism in the creation of its insane Arian mythology. Perhaps the finest aspect of Pope John Paul’s campaign for the defence of the Faith against every form of Gnosticism, is the one that he has waged against precisely this kind of anti-judaism, founded – as it is – on a theology and exegesis that is ideologically influenced by Platonism.

The Jubilee pilgrimage of the Pope was an important stage in this campaign. To the keen observer of the event, it was clear that his visit was organized on two different, but well integrated, levels.

Firstly, there was the visit to Israel, the “elder brother”, as a sign of dedication to God’s special covenant with Israel and with the Church. At Yad Vashem and at the Western Wall, John Paul II said a benediction to the God of the Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Secondly, there was the visit to the Palestinians, which finished in a solemn Eucharistic celebration for Christians in Bethlehem's Manger Square. This was, above all, a clear sign of dedication to the Justice of Creation, which involves the sanctification of the Name of the Only God and the acceptance of one's fellow human beings, with respect for the differences as well as the indisputable similarities – as in the following pairs, for example, man/woman, Cain/Abel, Isaac/Ishmael, Israel/the gentile nations, etc.

In today's Middle East, however, the Israel that is visibly represented by the State of Israel appears to the entire world to be closing in on herself and becoming hardened by the fear of a new Holocaust. She senses the threat of a new Holocaust in the terrorist methods used against her by the Palestinian resistance, which is supported by various external Islamic forces. Reacting in this way, however, Israel runs a much more serious risk: that of committing suicide spiritually, as well as politically, in what is her true vocation – that of being, even today, a special channel through which Abraham's blessing can reach all the nations of the earth. If today, in the Middle East, it has become impossible not only for the Palestinians, but for all the nations of the world – and even for the Christian Churches! – to acknowledge that, in the divine plan, Israel (with the messianic Church of Jesus) is the “sacramental people” of God's blessing for the entire human race, then the Israel of the modern Middle East certainly risks losing her soul, and for her that is much more serious than withdrawing voluntarily from those settlements that have been built on the territory of the Palestinian Autonomy.

After 11th September 2001, the fear has grown and the hardening has deepened, and the situation of the Palestinian population has become even more serious.

In this context, what has the ecumenical dialogue between the Christians and the Jews achieved? Without doubt, some progress has been made (the existence of Jewish Christian and Messianic Jewish congregations are of note), but there have also been some reverses. Nevertheless, the establishment of the fraternal dialogue between the Church and Israel has clearly become an irreversible sign from God for the people of our time.

II – The Palestinian Intifada – a Stone against the Jewish-Christian Dialogue?

Islam has evaded the unique communion of faith and culture that exists between Christianity and Judaism, between the Church and Israel, and between the Old and the New Testament.

This has to be kept in mind when trying to understand the kind of “Islamic terrorism” that was born from a “theology of substitution” even more radical than the past, but not yet fully defeated, “Christian anti-judaic theology” that Pope John Paul II has wished to confront. The “third monotheism” has conquered, subjugated and replaced the two previous ones. A striking architectural example of this “replacement theology” can be seen in the two mosques erected on the Mount of the Jewish Temple, in Jerusalem. What is evident is the failure of Islam to comprehend the Judaeo-Christian parentage, and in this incomprehension one can recognize a certain kind of “jealousy”, that of Ishmael for Isaac and his descendents.[*]

An analogous attitude and a similar form of jealousy can be detected in the relation between some Palestinian Christians and their western co-religionists. As I emphasized above, Palestinian Christians also participate in that Islamic incomprehension, albeit from their own point of view and in their own way. Proclaiming the messianic fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy by Jesus in the “dialectical and substitutionary” terms described above, they are careful not to attribute to the present Israel any theological significance that could be considered relevant for their Faith, in a way that totally contrasts with what has happened to us – or at least to many of us – in the West. Neither the Jewish roots of the Christian Faith, nor the fact that Jesus himself was, and is forever, a Jew, seem to have the slightest spiritual resonance in them, occupied and preoccupied as they are with the tragedy of their people and their land. On the contrary, a certain Arabist ideology, even theology, has taken root amongst them, deriving from their sincere and profound inculturation in the Arab world. To a certain extent, it can be said that Christian Arab “exegesis of substitution” of the Old Testament is almost necessary, or at least very useful, to the Islamic theology of replacement of Judaism.

I have outlined the theological background to the socio-political events of the Israel-Palestinian conflict, because it has influenced the local Jewish-Christian dialogue in a new, and in my view detrimental, way for all the Churches in the middle-eastern region.

To avoid falling into a banal and forbidden kind of “marcionism”, which denies the entire Old Testament any value as the “Word of God”, some Palestinian theologians have generously committed themselves to revising their exegesis of the Holy Scripture. This arises out of a suggestion made some years ago, by both Protestant and Catholic cultural centres, for a more comprehensive kind of “Palestinian Theology of Liberation”.

This activity is analysed in a journal dedicated to the theme of “The Gospel in Context”, in an article written by Lance D. Laird and entitled «Meeting Jesus Again in the First Place: Palestinian Christians and the Bible» (Interpretation. A Journal of Bible and Theology, 55 [2001], 400-412). The author describes how some Christian theologians of the Intifada (B. Sabella, M. Raheb, N.S. Ateek, etc) are trying to liberate their people from a reading of the Bible that still involves historical and “exclusive” interpretations of the divine election and promises to Israel – particularly the promise of the Land but also the Exodus from Egypt, the conquest of Canaan, the return from Babylonian exile, etc. Rightly claiming “inclusivity” in the election of Israel, these exegetes seem to abolish its outstanding messianic significance by interpreting it historically – together with the promise of the Land – as a gesture of God’s general predilection for the weak and the oppressed.

As already observed elsewhere in our days with other “theologians of liberation”, Covenantal theology is reduced to the promotion of the Justice of Creation, whilst the theology of the Exodus and of the Passion/Resurrection is made to refer specifically to the humiliated and crucified Palestinian population, resisting the Israeli occupation and waiting for the recognition and confirmation of their rights. Biblical exegesis performed by western Christians appears to

them to be developed in a vacuum, so far removed from the circumstances of the current Palestinian intifada that it runs the risk of ending up “alienated and alienating”, playing the game of “Zionist” fundamentalism with profoundly negative consequences for both Jews and Arabs alike.

With the utmost respect that I have for the suffering of Palestinian Christians and for their painful search for an authentic Christian identity, it seems to me that every Christian reads the Scripture as the “Word of God”, believing that it retains its complete validity for all time. For Westerners and for Orientals – but especially for the Orientals! – this “Word” is not by any means assimilated in a vacuum, ready to serve any suitable interpretation; on the contrary, it is embodied in the history and in the conscience of the people of Israel and of Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, and also of the gentile nations (Rom 15:7-13).

It seems to me that the Bible, which is all “Word of God” to the Judaeo-Christian Faith, may already include the conditions and contextualizations that prevent an ideologized, or ideologizing, interpretation, whether by “fundamentalist Israeli exegetes” or by “contextual Palestinian exegetes”. She resists the attempts of those who insist on manipulating her for their own purposes, to “liberate her” from all those historical associations that seem to contradict current socio-political interests, even legitimate ones. In a similar way she resists those who, equally tendentiously, insist on interpreting her in a fundamentalist way, like those Israeli exegetes, who nowadays presume to deduce a divine right authorizing them to implement a total and unconditional colonization of the country, taking no consideration of the presence of the Arab Palestinian population, composed of Christians and Muslims. It is not for the socio-political context to determine what is to be retained and what is to be rejected in the interpretation of the Word of God (“The Gospel in Context”); on the contrary, what is important is the context itself, which is re-read and re-interpreted down the centuries, each time anew, by those believing in the totality of the Scriptures (“The context in the whole Bible”), to which nothing should be added and from which nothing should be taken away (Deut 4:2; 5:32; 13:1 Josh 1:7; Mt 5:17-19). By re-reading the Bible along these lines, the faithful derive discernment on their conduct without renouncing the election, the promises and the Covenants of the Lord with Israel, the conquest of Canaan and the return from exile, etc., at the same time taking into account socio-political contexts, even contemporary ones, without being manipulated by the fashionable ideology of the time.[†]

The “gift” of the Land to a particular people by the Only God of All does not give them any “exclusive right” to property, especially when their divine vocation assigns them a priestly role intended for the benefit of all. Neither Palestinians nor Jews – least of all Italians or immigrants – have an exclusive right to possess a certain country. The earth is the Lord’s and to him we are like foreigners and tenants (Lev 25:23). The gift of the Land to Israel has always, down the centuries, been linked to the socio-political circumstances and conditions of the time. Today these conditions are expressed in the declarations of the United Nations, which require the two peoples to share the one land of Israel-Palestine. We are talking about a gift that does not exclude

“the other”, whoever they may be. Having said that, however, nobody who reads the Judaeo-Christian Bible as the Word of God can deny that Israel has her own essential connection with this Land and with Jerusalem. When the Italian radio and TV talk about the “soldiers of Tel Aviv” or the “Government of Tel Aviv”, it offends the Israeli people, since their capital city has never been Tel Aviv and cannot be any other place but Jerusalem.

This theological symbolism of contemporary Israel (not necessarily of a State or of the actual State of Israel) is accepted today neither by Muslims, who categorically deny that the Jews are a special people chosen by God (this was bluntly and clearly expressed by Bashar al-Assad when he received the Pope at Damascus Airport), nor by numerous Palestinian Christians. On the contrary, this is what we believe: that the universal salvation of mankind has been predestined and planned by God in his only Son, Jesus the Messiah, prophesied by his people Israel and proclaimed by his Church (cf. Rom 8:29-30; 1Pet 1:10-12).

Despite appearances, the universal demand for Justice and human rights cannot and ought not be at odds with the particularism of the Covenant, which brings together the Christian Churches and Israel. Indeed, according to the Bible, a certain tension exists between the economy of the Justice of Creation and that of the Covenant (cf. the jealousy of the gentiles for Israel), a tension that is not always evident to the conscience of many western Christians.

Those who stress the universal Justice of Creation seem to forget and neglect the historical dimension of Election and Covenant (and side with the Palestinians against the Israelis), while those who adhere more to the Biblical faith tend to favour the particularism of Israel’s Election and Covenant (and side with the Israelis to the detriment of the Palestinians).

A very interesting phenomenon in Israel is that of the messianic Jews who believe in Jesus: it is a prophetic event, which shows very clearly that Jesus belongs to the Jewish people, and not to the Church. It is we who belong to Jesus. Believing in Jesus, these Jews relate themselves to the Jesus of the Early Church, the Church of the Jews, and this is extremely liberating for us. It is not I who possess Jesus, but it is he who possesses me, adding me to that section of his people who have believed in him from the beginning (Acts 2:41.47; 5:14; 11:24; Eph 1:8-12). Mary, Peter and the Eleven, Mark, Martha and Mary of Bethany... were not Christians. They were “Jewish disciples of Yeshua”, just like those of today. They no longer want to call themselves “messianic Jews”, since this term is linked to several groups of the far Right and has therefore taken on a political connotation.

In his book *Yom Kippur. Guerre et Prière* (Jerusalem, 1975), A. Chazan, a rabbi in the Israeli Defence Forces, complains to Abraham: Why did you first cause Ishmael to be born to Hagar, instead of waiting faithfully until Isaac was born to Sarah? By then, even Ishmael had been circumcised and so he also, in some way, is a partner in the Covenant.

Is this another way of asking what is Islam's place in the divine plan of God? There is no doubt that there is such a thing as a "mystery of Islam", a mystery that Paul was not able to take into consideration.

From the theological and spiritual point of view, it is vital to harmonize faith in the Lord of the Covenant (the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Israel and of the Church, YHWH) with faith in God the Creator (Elohim), and understand our religions as the partly human elaborations of faith in the Only God. Frequently, in fact, many of those who claim to be the more intensely religious among us, appear in reality – like the suicide terrorists or "blind martyrs", killing in the name of God – to be less faithful than those, who, without displaying excessive religiosity, demonstrate more faith and even come to know the "true martyrdom of peace and reconciliation"; examples of these include Anwar as-Sadat and Yitzhak Rabin, killed by "religious" followers of Islam and Judaism respectively. In fact, religiosity lacking in faith inevitably becomes a kind of fanatical integralism. He who does not accept and welcome as equal the presence of the "other" – as in the relation of man and woman (Gen 2:23-25) – does not sanctify the Name of the Only God. We think of the Taleban and the shameful abolition of women from their society!

From the political point of view, nothing could be said more clear than what John Paul II said while addressing the Diplomatic Corps to the Holy See on 10th January, 2002:

«No one can remain insensitive to the injustice to which the Palestinian people have been subjected for the last 50 years. No one can refute the right of the Israeli people to live in security. But neither can anyone forget the innocent victims who every day, on both sides, are falling as a result of the bombing and shooting. Cruel attacks and weapons will never be an appropriate means of conveying messages to political representatives. Neither, however, is the 'Lex Talionis' ('Eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth') a suitable formula for preparing the road to peace... Only respect for each other's legitimate aspirations, the application of international law, the evacuation of occupied territories and an internationally guaranteed statute for the most holy places of Jerusalem, only these will enable a process of peace to begin in this part of the world, breaking the vicious circle of hate and revenge... The Israelis and Palestinians, one against the other, will not win the war. Only the one together with the other can achieve peace».

More modestly, but no less explicitly, a large group of Italian Jews signed a very lucid open letter, published in La Repubblica Newspaper on 23rd December, 2001:

«We express our solidarity with the people of Israel, so severely hit by Palestinian terrorists aiming to eliminate their State. We express our solidarity with the Palestinian people, who for decades have suffered the Israeli occupation and aspire for the recognition of their own rights, for their independence, for their land and dignity. We believe that by breaking off negotiations in Winter 2000–2001 and resorting to armed conflict, the Palestinian leadership have destroyed all hope in the peace process for the majority of the Israeli people, and have therefore promoted the election of Sharon, whose desire is to destroy the Palestinian Autonomy. We believe that the

Israeli policy of uninterrupted settlement expansion in the occupied territories has undermined the Palestinians' hope in the peace process as a way to achieve their own territorial independence and statehood. The military retaliation and blockades in the territories have, with their high cost in human lives, prevented Arafat from finally intervening against terrorism. But these methods risk ending in failure for both sides. On the Palestinian side the commitment to defeat terrorism and on the Israeli side the freezing of the settlements with a view to their evacuation seem to be the conditions necessary to regenerate faith in the negotiations. The forces for peace among the Israelis and the Palestinians are now in great difficulty. More than ever, we believe it is necessary to support them: there is no other alternative than for the two peoples and their two States to live side by side in security and dignity. We recognize that the courageous actions of Yossi Beilin, Yossi Sarid and Yael Dayan on the Israeli side, Yasser Rabbo, Ziad Abu Ziad, and Hannan Ashrawi on the Palestinian side, have reconfirmed the desire to work together for peace. After September 11th, the global repercussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have multiplied. We are united with all those who call on the European Union, the United States, and Russia to intervene more decisively against the violence and to push both sides to restart negotiations».

This seems to me to be a fine example of how Judaism in the Diaspora can influence Judaism in the homeland, with a view to resolving the conflict peacefully. Could not the more enlightened Palestinians in the Diaspora do something similar to influence their people at home?

Anyway, in the long term the true solution will be the provision of a new form of education in both Palestinian and Israeli schools – an education that is able, as in Neve Shalom, to recognize and explain to one side, not only the rights, but also the intentions of the other side. The teaching must be aimed at dispelling ideas about possessing or reconquering the Land by excluding or eliminating the other. On the contrary, it should help to impart appreciation for friendship and communion with the other, like a treasure more precious than any piece of land.

(translated from Italian by John and Gloria ben Daniel: *Mondo e missione* [P.I.M.E - Milano], a. 131, febbraio 2002, 11-13; marzo 2002, 11-14)

[*] We must remember, however, that even the Koran supposes that the holy land was a unique gift from God to the people of Israel, and there is no indication that this gift has been withdrawn. Even if God punishes the transgressions of the people of Israel by exiling them from their land, this punishment does not cancel their divine claims to this land, since it is followed by the return of their descendants, whenever the Lord chooses to show them mercy. A future return of the people of Israel to their land is prophesied in the Koran, and is a sign of the consummation of history and the imminent fulfilment of God's plan for mankind. Cf. «The Table»: 5:20-21.26; «Jonah» 10:93; «The Night Journey» 17:4-8.104. Cf. 2Macc 2:7-8 (I owe this information to John and Gloria ben Daniel).

[†] As a personal contribution, I have tried to suggest some interpretative criteria that may help to avoid such influences, from both the Right and from the Left, and these can be found in the Excursus «Creazione, alleanza, escatologia» in F. Rossi de Gasperis – A. Carfagna, *Prendi il Libro e mangialo*, Vol I: Dalla Creazione alla Terra promessa, (Bibbia e Spiritualità, 3), EDB,

Bologna, second edition 1999, 287-381, esp. 372-379. One could refer also to our second volume: *Prendi il Libro e mangia!*, Vol II: *Dai Giudici alla fine del Regno* (Bibbia e Spiritualit?, 7), EDB, Bologna 1999, 9-20.