

International Council of Christians and Jews
Istanbul, June 2010
Susannah Heschel
Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies
Dartmouth College

I am honored by the invitation to speak to you today. This gathering of the ICCJ has long been a major and highly influential occasion for Jewish-Christian dialogue, in which Muslims have begun to take part in recent years, to everyone's delight. This is a meeting at which Christians have reaffirmed their profound concern for relations with Jews and Judaism. It has also been an opportunity for Jewish theologians to express what is of primary concern to us and to our communities.

I come to you as a Jew with a deep love of Judaism. I am the daughter of a rabbi who was plucked as a brand from the fires of Europe, but who lost his mother and three of his sisters in Warsaw, Auschwitz, and Treblinka. His world was destroyed. My father was born to a religious family in Warsaw, but came as a student to Berlin in 1927. He studied at the university of Berlin and at the two rabbinical colleges. In 1933, he completed his doctoral dissertation on the biblical prophets at a time when the universities and rabbinical colleges during the Third Reich, when Protestant theologians were proclaiming that Jesus was an Aryan, Hitler was Christ, and the Old Testament was a Jewish book that had no place in a Christian Bible.

I come to you today as a student of Christian-Jewish relations in Germany. I have written about the great hopes of nineteenth-century German-Jewish

theologians to engage in a cooperative theological endeavor with Christians, with a focus on the great theologian and historian Abraham Geiger, whose 200th birthday we are celebrating this year, and who wrote extensively on the history of Second Temple Judaism, the rise of Christianity, the Jewishness of Jesus, plus the first modern historicist analysis of rabbinic influences on the Qur'an. More recently, however, I have published a book about Protestant theologians in Nazi Germany who perverted Christianity with their devotion to National Socialism, purging the Bible of the Old Testament, labeling Jesus an Aryan, and seeking the dejudaization of the church.

There is much to learn from an immersion in both the most hopeful and the most degenerate moments in our relationship as Jews and Christians. I can see the extent to which we are dependent upon one another: no religion is an island, my father used to say. I also see that religion does not function as an amulet, guarding us against the dangers of tyrannical political regimes; on the contrary, I discovered that a large number of Protestant theologians in Germany during the Third Reich sought to create a synthesis of Christianity and National Socialism. Placing a wall between religion and politics is no answer, of course, since religion at its heart is deeply concerned with politics. Attempting to restrain religion from the political realm would be to ask God to be silent.

I am a Jew who stands in the prophetic tradition of Judaism, criticizing many elements in Jewish teaching, practice, and politics, especially regarding women. Given the history I have studied, and the personal history of my family, I cannot think about religion without thinking about the political implications of its

teachings. For me, to be a Jew is to think critically, not submissively. I cannot be Jewish in the way of past generations; that would rob Judaism of its authenticity. What I receive, I must also transform. My father writes, "A vibrant society does not dwell in the shadows of old ideas and viewpoints; in the realm of the spirit, only a pioneer can be a true heir. The wages of spiritual plagiarism are the loss of integrity; self-aggrandizement is self-betrayal. Authentic faith is more than an echo of a tradition. It is a creative situation, an event." (136)

Today I want to question our concept of "pluralism." Pluralism seems to imply that we are separate, individual religions. Yet that understanding is challenged by historians and theologians who demonstrate how intertwined our religions are. We do not exist as separate entities. Each of the three religions represented at this conference is shaped by the other two. Judaism exists within Christianity and is affirmed whenever "Jesus" is called "Christ," the messiah. To define what is central to Christianity, the messiahship of Jesus, is to affirm the Judaism that brought the very concept of messiah to the world. To claim to be the New Israel is to affirm that there is a Jewish people, as God's beloved disciple. For liberal Protestants and Catholics, faith, as the German Catholic theologian Norbert Reck has written, "is eccentric. It does not have its center in itself. Its center, Jesus of Nazareth," he explains, was a Jew who declared that he did not come to abolish the Torah but to fulfill it (Matt 5:17-18). In Orthodox Christianity, the worship of Christ, the son of God, bears striking parallels to the ways Jews worship of God.

The eccentricity of Christianity, to use Reck's term, has not often been celebrated, but has instead been rejected through supersessionist theologies. There

has been discomfort over the alterity of Jesus's identity – was the founding figure of Christianity, the greatest of Christians, in fact a Jew? Was Jesus born a Jew and then became a Christian? If so, at what point and for what reason? What did it mean to be a Jew in his day, let alone a Christian? Can Judaism be transformed into Christianity?

The profound discomfort over these questions forms an essential part of the tapestry of Western thought and is expressed politically and culturally as well as theologically. Here is an example. In Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, Shylock's presence as a money-lender within Venice reenacts the danger associated with the figure of Judas, the Jew who betrayed Jesus for silver. Although his money-lending is essential for the mercantile economy of Venice to flourish, Shylock remains the Jew within the Christian realm and must be purged through conversion to Christianity. Yet can a Jew truly be transformed into a Christian? Act 5 of the play makes it clear that Jessica's conversion results in her misery and the failure of her Christian husband and his friends to accept her. The uncertainty of Jewish conversion to Christianity reflects the uncertainty of Jesus that plagues some Christians: was Jesus a Jew or was he the first Christian? Down to Ernest Renan's assertion in the nineteenth century that Jesus was transformed during his life time from Jew to Aryan, Christian discomfort regarding the nature of its origins within Judaism undermined the theological certainties that supersessionist theology sought to overcome.

If there is a "Jewish" problem for Christian theology, it is that Judaism is not an entity outside and apart from Christianity, but is both the religion out of which Christianity developed and is also a religion that lives within Christianity. Not

surprisingly, modern Jewish and Christian thinkers have often spoken of the two religions as “mother and daughter.” Given the intensity of that relationship, we might consider the efforts of Christian theologians in Germany to de Judaize Christianity a kind of “theological bulimia.”

By contrast, Christianity and Islam do not stand within Judaism, but outside it, yet shaping Judaism’s beliefs and practices nonetheless. Both Islam and Christianity are the cultural and political contexts in which Judaism has taken shape. Those relationships differ, however. We often speak negatively of the Christianization of Judaism in the modern era, whereas we speak positively of a Golden Age of Jews in Muslim Spain, in which Jews and Muslims interacted and influenced one another philosophically, linguistically, and spiritually. Still, it is clear that we each influence the other: Judaism from within Christianity, Christianity and Islam surrounding Judaism on the outside, as a shell determines the shape of the contents within.

Thus, the pluralism we speak of is not of three religions that are separate entities, but three religious traditions that are deeply intertwined. How do we understand our relationship differently, given how intertwined we are? We share more than we realize, and we are each affected by developments in the others. “No religion is an island,” my father used to say.

Judaism and Christianity are antiphonal religions: Christians speak of forgiveness, Jews speak of atonement, Christianity speaks of love, Judaism of Torah – each religion makes its contribution to one side of the balance – and so we learn from each other. We have such antiphonies within our religions as well. Michael

Welker, professor of theology at Heidelberg University, is helpful when he writes that Christians need the sanctifying presence of the divine biblical law-traditions with their care for justice, mercy and the search for truth “before God”.¹ Christianity, in other words, cannot be based on love alone; both justice and mercy, law and love, are necessary, as they are for Jews as well. Welker writes, The strict correlation of justice and mercy challenges the legal evolution to move into “humane” directions; the correlation of mercy and justice urges the morals of compassion to strive for diaconical social institutions.

By contrast, Jews have generally understood Islam not as antipodal but as an offshoot of Judaism that has grown up to be a sister religion, with parallel commitments: to strict monotheism, rejection of anthropomorphism, recognition of the centrality of religious law and morality, and worship through the body as well as the soul.

In recent years, however, what used to unite us has often divided us. We see a Jewish polemical literature in opposition to Islam as a religion of violence and as a religion that promotes anti-Semitism – and I distinguish this from political debates concerning Zionism, Israel, the Palestinians, and so forth. This has led to the absurd spectacle of right-wing Jews embracing Muslim feminists in an alliance to attack Islam. The invitations extended to Irshod Manji and Hirsi Ali to speak to Jewish organizations about Islam’s oppression of women were neither preceded nor

¹ Michael Welker, „Security of Expectations. Reformulating the Theology of Law and Gospel”, in: *Journal of Religion* 66 (1986), 237-260; cf. Michael Welker, „Moral, Recht und Ethos in evangelisch-theologischer Sicht“, in: *Marburger Jahrbuch Theologie* XIII, hg. W. Härle and R. Preul, Elwert: Marburg 2002, 67-81.

followed by invitations to Jewish feminists articulating the problems within Judaism, or, even better, what we as feminists have in common.

When it came to Islam, 19th century European Jews saw things differently. Long aware of the good treatment they received in Muslim Spain, in contrast to Christian Spain, in the Ottoman Empire in contrast to Central Europe, they developed an affinity for Islam. Indeed, Jews created the field of Islamic Studies in the 19th century and flocked to it. In the decade of the 1830s, Gustav Weil went to study with the Egyptian philologist Rifa'I al-Tahtawi in Cairo; Abraham Geiger published a highly praised book demonstrating, for the first time, the rabbinic parallels to the Qur'an; Ludwig Ullmann translated the Qur'an into German; Salomon Munk began a career as a distinguished scholar of Arabic Jewish philosophy; Arminius Vambery published highly popular travelogues about his years in Turkey and Persia and Uzbekistan. Ignaz Goldziher was warmly received at al-Azhar University and in Beirut and Damascus; Josef Horowitz became a professor of Arabic for seven years at a Muslim University before establishing the Institute for Oriental Studies at the Hebrew University.

These Jewish scholars demonstrated that the Qur'an draws from rabbinic literature, presenting biblical stories via the Midrash; that the Hadith is formulated like the Talmud, with chains of attribution of teachings to figures of earlier generations; that both Judaism and Islam are living, dynamic, constantly changing religions, adapting to the social conditions of each era, and not static, uncreative "Semitic" religions, as some scholars, such as Ernest Renan, were beginning to claim.

Jewish scholars presented a very conservative Islam: they praised what they saw as the strong family values in Islam, its strict sexual morality, its women in their proper subservient position – all this in an era when Jewish women in Europe were agitating for a change in their status. Jewish scholars of Islam ignored Sufism and Shiism, just as they ignored mystical, pietist, and apocalyptic elements within Judaism. Most of all, Islam seemed to some Jews to fulfill Judaism's promise: a religion of pure and strict monotheism, without anthropomorphisms, and with a religious law that was a bit easier than halakha, Jewish law. Islam was described as the religion of tolerance within which Judaism could flourish, and modern Jews built European and American synagogues in the 19th century in Moorish architecture as reminders of that medieval Golden Age in Spain.

Yet Jewish-Christian interactions do not occur in a vacuum. Islam has long been our silent interlocutor, even as Judaism as functioned as a silent interlocutor in Christian understandings of Islam, as Suzanne Akbari has described in her recent book, Idols in the East.² Medieval Christian theologians thought of Islam as the return of the so-called “old law” of the Jews, a religion of carnality, like Judaism, in contrast to the religion of the spirit, Christianity.

Yet Christianity has also shaped Judaism. Although most Jews through the centuries lived under Muslim, rather than Christian rule, Jews developed a fascination with Christianity and internalized many of its teachings and images. Rabbis speak of the Jew as a living embodiment of Torah, the Jew as Torah

² Suzanne Akbari, Idols in the East: European Representations of Islam and the Orient, 1100-1450 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009).

incarnate, using Christian imagery; much of the music of our synagogues has been borrowed from churches. Our Passover Seder liturgy was most likely written, as Yisrael Yuval has recently argued, as a response to Jesus and the Eucharist. Modern Jews define our religious observance with an eye to Christian polemics: when I criticize aspects of Jewish law, for example, I worry that I might sound Pauline. There is no independent theological tradition because Judaism does not exist in isolation, but is shaped by the Christian, a looming presence that officially must be kept outside the gates of Judaism, to preserve the uniqueness and difference of Judaism, but that unofficially is very much guiding and shaping us.

Our relationships, in other words, are triangulated: we understand each other through the lens of the imagined third. For example, Islam has symbolized, for many Jews, an alliance between two religions of rationality, strict monotheism, and rejection of anthropomorphism, over against Christianity, which in turn was misrepresented in much of modern Jewish thought as a religion of irrational doctrines, Trinitarian rejection of monotheism, and feminine, romantic, subjective religiosity.

Human relationships are also triangulated. Philosophers and theorists have long noted that we invent a projected “third” in our most intense interpersonal bonds; the psychoanalytic theorist Jessica Benjamin speaks of a “moral third” that comes into being between analyst and analysand. So, too, with relationships between religions: an imagined third comes into being, often to form an alliance in antagonism with the other party, and frequently misunderstood or deliberately misrepresented for polemical purposes. The medieval Christian understanding of

Islam as a return to the old law of Moses is a good example of misrepresentation, misunderstanding, and polemics, the third in the Christian-Jewish relationship.

My question is whether we can reconfigure that triangulation in positive ways, transforming the third into a moral third, a third party joining our dialogue that will keep us honest, fair, and with our eyes on positive goals.

How can Islam become a moral third, a voice in the triangle that will lead us away from polemics and toward an affirmation and appreciation of Christians and Jews for one another? And how can Judaism become the moral third in the Christian-Muslim relationship? Perhaps Islam can help to clarify the meaning of law, including Jewish law, as authentic religiosity for Christians who think that only gospel can be God's word. The role of religious law within Islam might help change Christian views of law as carnal, old, superseded. Perhaps Islam might reassure Jews that recognizing the prophethood of those who brought God to other peoples, to Greeks and to Arabs, namely, Jesus and Muhammad, enhances our faith. Let us keep in mind that Muhammad is said to have died as the result of food poisoned by a Jewish woman. Yet we have never seen a movement within Islam in any way comparable to Christian charges of Jewish deicide. Islam can help us as Jews and Christians to understand the crucifixion in a new way, drawing on the claim in the Qur'an that Jesus was not killed but raised to heaven – or perhaps the Qur'an intends simply to deny that the Jews had killed Jesus. (Surah 5:157-158) Islam can also serve as a model for an understanding of Jesus as a prophet, one with a message to other peoples, an affirmation of him and his message without requiring his death or the Jews as his murderers.

Let me expand this point. For too long, we have spoken of the “other” with whom we stand in dialogue, but I want to question that language. What we seek in religious encounter is not awareness of an “other,” but an intersubjectivity, that is, recognition of the subjectivity of the one we face: the other whom we face “is actually another subject, an equivalent center of being” (Benjamin, 2004). What I find so important about the work of the ICCJ, particularly the twelve points concerning dialogue that were issued at the Berlin meeting last summer, is precisely that recognition of the subjectivity of the other when entering into dialogue.

Through our dialogue, we engage on more than one level: we are called upon to experience empathy at the same time that we have to maintain our awareness that we are different and separate; we identify with one another even as we stand back and observe. The “moral third” is a projection of our hopes but also bears a quality of judgment, both of which are needed if we are to make progress. Informed by values that we share as religious people – ethical principles, humility, whole hearted engagement, commitment both to the past and the future, compassion, and more – the moral third unites us but at the same time protects our independence and, by being recognized, should come to safeguard us against misrepresentation and polemics.

One of the great tragedies of world history is that Christianity and Judaism have been such antagonists. “The children did not arise to call the mother blessed; instead they called the mother blind.... A Jew, on the other hand, ought to acknowledge the eminent role played by Christianity in God’s design for the redemption of all men,” my father wrote. Perhaps we need to be more attentive to

our many religious faiths as revealing the beauty of God's creation and the extraordinary creativity of their religious adherents. "Stand still and consider the wondrous works of the Lord," says Job. We human beings will not perish for lack of information, but we may perish for lack of appreciation, my father used to say. Intellectual truth is not sufficient, and the love taught by religion cannot stand alone. The wisdom we acquire makes us aware of the mystery inherent in nature, we are led to cultivate a sense of wonder that is the root of learning; to inspire others; to clarify our values and to acquire a clear, loud moral voice; for theology at its heart is an endeavor that is profoundly rooted in moral values and deep concern with bettering society. Remember the Hadith that says that the learned man's ink is as precious as the martyr's blood.

There are varieties of gifts that we bring, St. Paul teaches, but the Spirit is the same, and each of us is given a manifestation of that Spirit, to gain wisdom, to proclaim knowledge, to heal, to interpret. (1 Corinthians 12). There are bitter problems that we face, but we have also witnessed miracles in our lifetime: the Berlin wall has been torn down, the Soviet empire has collapsed; apartheid has ended in South Africa and an African-American is our president; women are ordained as rabbis and ministers; women are scholars, professors, theologians, president of the ICCJ, and even give plenary addresses at interfaith conferences; can the time be far off when the lion and the lamb shall lie down together, Sunni and Shi'ite, Hutu and Tutsi, Israel and Palestine? Such miracles take hard work, and they also require inspiration and hope, integrity and honesty. We still live amidst war,

poverty, cruelty. There is wickedness in the world, horror in the soul. Let us each ask ourselves, What can I offer?

When at times we feel overwhelmed by the troubles of this world, let us remember, as Deuteronomy teaches, that the word of God is not in heaven or beyond the sea, it is not too hard for us; the word of God is in our mouths and in our hearts. The challenge is great, but it is not beyond our capacity to begin to repair this world.

The prophet Isaiah tells us, Who will speak for me, asks God, who will remember the covenant of peace and compassion? Let us remember God's call and find the inner resources to respond like Isaiah, who said, Here I am, send me. (Isaiah 6:8).

