

Some Reflections on the ICCJ February 2022 Consultation on “The Jewish and Christian Other in Teaching and Preaching”

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Several important insights arose among the participants from around the world in the ICCJ’s February 2022 Consultation, “The Jewish and Christian Other in Teaching and Preaching.” Among them I particularly noted these recurring comments:

1. To build a new relationship between long estranged communities, true humility and a willingness to criticize one’s own tradition are essential virtues.
2. In terms of Jews and Christians, additional considerations are the various kinds of “asymmetries” that exist between them historically and theologically. In addition, the category of “religion” is inadequate to describe the self-understanding of the Jewish people.
3. The “intersectionality” of relations between Christians and Jews with other intergroup interactions was raised in a variety of ways during the Consultation. These included the dealings of European colonizers with indigenous peoples and in the context of the African slave trade.
4. The subject of Jewish-Christian relations may seem unimportant to large segments of both communities because of more pressing issues or of a desire just to be left alone.

Of course, each of these observations could be examined in great depth. Here, however, I would like to develop the theme of “otherness” being an unavoidable and necessary part of both individual and communal identity formation. We are who we are because we are different from others in some way(s). Problems arise when such distinctions are predicated on the presumptions that what distinguishes me or us from the other also makes me or us superior to them. However, does contrasting oneself or one’s community with others automatically have to lead to disdain and hostility? Early in the first century CE, there were apparently some believers in Christ Jesus who thought of themselves and mainstream Jews as both in covenant with God. However, this benign approach did not prevail.¹

As the ICCJ family is well aware, Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, in the early centuries of the Common Era, had to redefine themselves after the violent end of biblical Jewish practices with the destruction of the Second Temple. Simply put, Christianity would refocus many of the aspects of Temple worship onto Christ as the eternal high priest and the perfect sacrifice for all humanity, while the rabbis would emphasize the observance of the *mitzvot*, prayer, family life, and the centrality of the Torah as how to live Jewishly in a world without the Temple.

Over time, each community defined itself anew in relation to biblical Israel. But they also sought to distinguish themselves from each other. In the earliest centuries, this was a more urgent task for Christians. As an illicit religion according to Roman law until the fourth century, and having a much lower social status in the Empire than Jews, patristic-era Christian thinkers didn’t just want to distinguish themselves from emerging rabbinic Judaism: they felt it necessary to denigrate Jews and Judaism. Thus, the “othering” that took place among early Christian leaders was intentionally adversarial. Perhaps circumstances at the time made that inevitable, but there is some irony in this as well since there was evidently a high degree of positive social interaction among Jews and Christians at the time.

Be that as it may, Christian leaders developed an entire *adversus Ioudaios* theological system at the same time as the rabbis were writing the Mishnah and the Talmuds—mammoth literary productions in which Christians and Christianity are barely mentioned at all!

Since the Shoah, many Christian churches have come to perceive the repercussions of these early developments. They recognize that an “anti-Jewish tradition stamped its mark in different ways on Christian doctrine and teaching, in theology, apologetics, preaching and in the liturgy.”² This anti-Jewish “othering” claimed that God cursed Jews collectively for rejecting and crucifying Christ—and for continuing to reject him to the present. This “blood curse” ideology prompted Christian thinkers to disregard biblical verses that could have promoted amity with Jews and to weaponize the self-criticism of the Hebrew prophets against them. It sparked “erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament relative to the Jewish people and their presumed guilt [that] circulated for too long.”³

Numerous statements from a wide range of Christian communities in the wake of the Shoah retrieved neglected aspects of biblical and later Christian traditions to thoroughly repudiate the basic premise of the *adversus Ioudaios* legacy. *Nostra Aetate*, for example, citing the Epistle to the Romans, declared that “God holds the Jews most dear” and directed that “Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God.” This and similar texts by other Christians renounced the blood-curse premise of the *adversus Ioudaios* legacy and condemned antisemitism. They also called on Christians to engage in open dialogue with Jews, an appeal without precedent in previous history.

Freed from the theological straitjacket of “blood curse” thinking, Christians can now see that the *adversus Ioudaios* tradition has also insidiously infected the Christian mind with the idea that Judaism and Christianity are opposed, antithetical religions.

A zero-sum “**oppositional imagination**” holds that for Christianity to be true, Judaism must be false. Therefore, Jesus himself must have opposed the Judaism of his day. Such binary thinking relates to a Marcionite “de-Judaizing process” in the Church’s early centuries in which the “Jewishness of Jesus, of his mother, his disciples, of the primitive Church, was lost from view.”⁴ (Jesper Svartvik also noted this when talking about Albert Schweitzer in his video presentation.) Its ultimate expression is utterly antisemitic: the Nazi Aryan Jesus.

This oppositional imagination also effectively undercuts the Christian belief that Christ Jesus is fully divine *and* fully human. A de-Judaized Jesus who opposes Judaism is also dehumanized, thus doing real “damage to the very truth of the Incarnation.”⁵ It actually promotes the Christian heresy of docetism, which denies that Jesus was truly human.

(Incidentally, later as a suppressed minority in medieval European Christendom, an oppositional imagination toward Christianity also gained influence among Jews, as Ruth Langer and Ophir Yarden showed in their video presentations.)

Although many post-Shoah churches have conclusively rejected the blood-curse premise of the *adversus Ioudaios* tradition, **the pernicious and corrosive impact of the oppositional imagination still exerts a powerful influence in the Christian world and implicitly supports antisemitism.** This is true despite the explicit condemnation of antisemitism by all branches of Christianity. Like the gravity well of a black hole, the ongoing force of the oppositional imagination pulls us Christians into teaching and preaching about Jews as “other” than Jesus, as other than a companion people in covenant with God, and as the

other who is an enemy. (And contrary to the relational understanding of the other urged by Pavol Bargar in his video presentation.)

Moreover, the oppositional imagination regarding Jews is also thoroughly embedded in the secular culture because it easily accommodates itself to racist worldviews. This results in Jews being “othered” in modern Western culture, ostensibly without religious motivations. In fact, this destructive “othering” originated among Christians who now find it difficult to combat it in the wider society, as well as among themselves.

These are some thoughts that occur to me after the ICCJ 2022 Consultation. Hoping they are of some use to others, I am grateful for the opportunity to think these matters through in the context of the ICCJ family. I want to thank the ICCJ Executive Board and everyone who offered presentations during the Consultation for all the work that went into preparing this program, especially President Liliane Apotheker and General Secretary Anette Adelman.

¹ See, e.g., Epistle of Barnabas 4:6: “do not be like certain persons who pile up sin upon sin, saying that our covenant remains to them also.”

² Group of French Catholic Bishops, “Declaration of Repentance,” September 30, 1997.

³ Pope John Paul II, “Address to Participants in the Vatican Symposium on ‘The Roots of Anti-Judaism in the Christian Milieu,’” October 31, 1997, 1.

⁴ National Conference of Catholic Bishops (USA), “Statement on Catholic-Jewish Relations,” November 20, 1975.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, “Address to Participants in the Vatican Symposium on ‘The Roots of Anti-Judaism in the Christian Milieu,’” October 31, 1997, 3.