



Walking God's Paths



6. Mending Relationships, Mending the World

INFORMATION SHEET

Stereotypes: Origins and Contents

The first segment of this video takes note of a number of stereotypes or caricatures of the other community that have been commonplace in the Christian and Jewish communities. This information sheet provides some background about these misperceptions.

Christian caricatures of Judaism

1. Judaism as legalistic

In New Testament times, the followers of the resurrected Christ were still predominantly Jewish and thought of themselves as part of Israel's covenant. Among the topics they debated with other Jewish groups was how to observe the Torah (or Teaching) of Moses, known to Greek-speaking Jews as the Law (*nomos*) of Moses. There were also debates within the churches about whether the growing number of Gentile members needed to take on Torah observance. Although a number of different positions were argued, the general consensus that emerged was that baptized Gentiles did not have to become circumcised. The Mosaic Law was not for them.

In the next few centuries, the intelligentsia of the Roman Empire scorned Christianity as a novel superstition out of the East, a bizarre mutation of venerable Judaism. They attacked the apparent contradiction that Christians considered the "Old Testament" scriptures of ancient Israel to be divinely ordained and canonical and yet felt that they did not have to observe the Mosaic Law those scriptures imparted. Roman elites also mocked the claim that Christian leaders understood Israel's scriptures better than Jewish rabbis, who, after all, still read those texts in their original languages.

At the same time, the rabbis were writing the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*, making the study and observance of God's commands (*mitzvot*) the center of post-Temple Judaism.

Christians defended themselves against Roman intellectual assaults by delegitimizing the Judaism against which the church was being unfavorably contrasted. Drawing on the prophetic writings, Christian leaders declared that God gave the Law of Moses to Israel because of the people's constant waywardness. The Law was a harsh taskmaster that was always intended by God to be a temporary measure until the coming of Christ. Argumentative verses from the New Testament debates, that sometimes concerned other subjects, were cited to construct an image of Jesus as the opponent of the Jewish Law. The ongoing creative activities of the rabbis were dismissed as futile exercises in legislation that had no meaning in the Christian world.

Thus, a pattern of reading both Testaments of the Christian Bible developed in which the Jewish Law was seen negatively and Christianity, the religion of Christ's love, was seen positively. The caricature was partly based on the dichotomization of "law" and "love" as polar categories and partly on a selective reading that omitted those Jewish texts stressing that love must be the primary motive for observing God's commands and those Christian texts promulgating laws and commands.

One corrective to this caricature, as Prof. Kimelman observes in the video, is to appreciate that Jewish Torah-centered spirituality incorporates love and grace. For example, one of the most frequent ways the Talmud refers to God is a *Rachamana*, the Merciful One. Another is to consider some key Hebrew words, whose full connotations cannot be easily rendered into English.

Ahavah (love) embraces three terms:

- *chesed* = God's undeserved and ceaseless love for all creatures
- *rachamim* = mercy (but related to *rechem* =womb, and so motherly, nurturing compassion). In terms of making moral judgments, this divine virtue tips the balance, since God's justice is always merciful.
- *tsedek* = righteousness, love that is owed; related to *tsedakah* = "charity," being just by being loving.

Rabbi Norman Solomon aptly has summarized all this by observing that the *halakhah* (the Jewish walking of God's path) teaches Jews how to respond to God's *ahavah* by observing the mitzvot (commands) and thereby to be counted as *tsedek*. Through fulfilling the mitzvot, one has *simchah* (joy) *shel mitzvah* in which one is linked through Torah to the joyful Source of all being.

2. Jews as Christ-killers

As mentioned in video 2, the New Testament narratives about the crucifixion of Jesus were influenced by the following: (A) memories of public events from eyewitnesses; (B) reflections on the significance of Jesus' death in the light of his followers' resurrection experience and with reference to especially meaningful texts from Israel's scriptures, e.g., Ps. 22, Is.53; (C) prophetic denunciations by baptized Jews of their Jewish kinfolk who did not accept the Church's proclamation; and (D) a tendency to minimize the role of the Roman prefect in ordering a Roman execution because of the Church's vulnerable

position in the Empire. Each of the four gospel passion narratives is unique with varying emphases and concerns, but all were shaped in one way or another by these factors.

In the second through fourth centuries, Gentile Christianity had to defend itself from unfavorable Roman comparisons with Judaism. Christian apologists interpreted the accounts of the crucifixion to argue that God's blessings on the Jewish people had been transferred to the Church. The third-century Christian writer Origen put it this way:

One of the facts that show that Jesus was some divine and holy person is just that on his account such great and fearful disasters have now for a long time befallen the Jews For they committed the most impious crime of all, when they plotted against the Savior of mankind, in the city where they performed to God the customary rites that were symbols of profound mysteries. Therefore that city where Jesus suffered these humiliations had to be utterly destroyed. The Jewish nation had to be overthrown, and God's invitation to blessedness yielded to others, I mean the Christians, to whom came the teaching about the simple and pure worship of God. And they received new laws that fit in with the order established everywhere [*Contra Celsum*, IV, 22].

The pattern of thinking of "the Jews" collectively was intensified when Christianity became the preferred religion of the Roman Empire in 380 c.e. Christian's former rivals were the "others" to be marginalized in Christian society. Their subordinated state was seen by the majority culture as God's collective punishment for killing Christ. The image of "the Jews" as Christ-killers, or even deicides (= God-killers), became firmly entrenched in European culture, and was reinforced regularly by Christian preaching on the passion narratives and by the performance of "passion plays."

Although recent declarations from many Christian churches have insisted that "neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion," and that, "the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from Holy Scripture" (*Nostra Aetate*, 4), the habit of thinking of Jews collectively when considering the crucifixion of Jesus lingers still.

3. Jews as avaricious

In parts of medieval Europe, Christian leaders gradually restricted the occupations that Jews were permitted to hold. Eventually, Jews could not own or farm land, could not enter certain professions (such as the legal profession), and had limited educational opportunities. Both Christian and Jewish law understood that usury, the practice of charging interest on loans, ought not be practiced with one's co-religionists. But the European economy would never prosper if the giving of loans was not profitable. For instance, start-up loans could not be obtained in order to initiate new business ventures if there was no expectation of profit for the lender who was taking a risk in making the loan.

Since Jews could charge Christians interest on loans, and given the few opportunities open to them, Jews gradually became disproportionately involved in money-lending, pawn-brokerage, and trading. By the late Middle Ages, Jews were identified in the popular European imagination with these occupations. Although this helped Europe emerge from bleak economic times, the price Jews paid was to be accused of thievery, greediness, and the love of money. Periodically, mobs would burn the records and sometimes the Jewish residents of a town in order to remove their indebtedness to Jewish money-lenders. Princes and popes would occasionally dismiss the debts Christians owed to Jews in return for their participation in military campaigns or some other service. In more recent centuries, the image of the avaricious Jew was translated into the international realm, with Jews accused of controlling worldwide finances in a vast conspiracy to conquer the world.

Ironically, therefore, Jews became branded by Christians as naturally inclined toward those very economic occupations to which Christian society had limited them.

Jewish caricatures of Christianity

1. Christians as idolaters

Two defining Christian doctrines have always been problematic for Jews. The ideas that the One God is triune and that God's Word was incarnated in Jesus have typically raised questions in Jewish minds as to whether Christians were violating monotheism and/or were idol-worshipping. It is difficult for Christians (whose relationship with God is mediated through Jesus Christ) to grasp these concerns, just as it is difficult for Jews (who relate to God in a non-Christic way) to understand why Jesus or the associated doctrines are necessary.

A [1974 Vatican document](#) took note of this difference in perspective when it urged Catholics to "strive to understand the difficulties which arise for the Jewish soul -- rightly imbued with an extremely high, pure notion of the divine transcendence -- when faced with the mystery of the Incarnate Word." The same document also insisted that Christians must "learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience."

The different conceptual horizons create difficulties for interreligious dialogue. One goal of dialogue is to appreciate the other in terms of the other's own frames of reference, or at least to respect how the others define their own views. This goal is challenged when Christian theological topics are the subject of conversation between Jews and Christians.

Some Jews find it difficult to accept Christian declarations of their monotheism while they affirm a Trinitarian belief. Similarly, if idolatry is worshiping something other than God, then Christian veneration of Jesus as God's Son -- a faith conviction not shared by Jews -- can be seen as unjustified "strange worship" or idolatry, despite Christian protestations to the contrary. How far can one take a desire to respect the other's self-understanding when it conflicts with the logic of one's own faith perspectives?

These matters touch on the heart of the essential differences between Judaism and Christianity; differences that will not be resolved until the Age to Come. A practical objective for dialogue is to agree to disagree while still trying to enter as much as possible into the other's thought world, even if ultimately one cannot share it.

2. Christianity as antisemitic

When one group dominates and marginalizes a minority group for centuries, it is hardly surprising if some members of the subordinated group conclude that the majority is intrinsically hostile to them. Given the history of relations between Christianity and Judaism, it is reasonable for some Jews to wonder if Christianity is by its very nature antisemitic.

The occurrence of the Shoah in the heart of "Christian" civilization, and growing knowledge of the complex history of the two religious communities, inevitably challenges Christians to reassess their teachings about and behavior toward Jews over the past centuries. Pope John Paul II committed the Catholic Church to such an ongoing reckoning of the soul during the prayers for God's forgiveness at St. Peter's Basilica and when he later prayed at the Western Wall.

Most Christian theologians believe that hostility toward Jews is not an inevitable aspect of Christian faith, even though historically it became uncritically woven into the fabric of Christian attitudes. Christian theology can be both Christian and affirming of the Jewish tradition, but it will take time for Christians to understand and unlearn the habits of centuries. That is one reason why dialogue between Jews and Christians is so important.