

SEARCHING IN THE WILDERNESS

Jewish Christian Relations Today: The Legacy of Abraham Joshua Heschel

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This is the agony of history: bigotry, the failure to respect each other's commitment, each other's faith. We must insist upon loyalty to the unique and holy treasures of our own tradition and at the same time acknowledge that in this aeon religious diversity may be the providence of God.

Respect for each other's commitment, respect for each other's faith, is more than a political and social imperative. It is born of the insight that God is greater than religion, that faith is deeper than dogma, that theology has its roots in depth theology.

The ecumenical perspective is the realization that religious truth does not shine in a vacuum, that the primary issue of theology is pre-theological, and that religion involves the total situation of man, his attitudes and deeds, and must therefore never be kept in isolation. (Heschel, 1972: 181)

Precis

The 2007 centenary of Abraham Joshua Heschel's birth is an opportunity, 35 years after his death, to re-examine the adequacy of his interfaith perspective. Heschel would not recognise today's political world, with the replacement of Communism by Islam as 'the enemy' of the West. Nor would he recognise the Roman Catholic Church, after thirty years of restorationism, as the one he knew, struggled with, and came to respect. This paper asks whether Heschel's interfaith vision has anything yet to offer our time and place.

Setting the Scene

2007 is the centenary of the birth of Abraham Joshua Heschel, a scion of Eastern European Hasidism whose life and work was shaped by three cities: Warsaw, the city of his birth in Congress Poland; Berlin, under the rise of Nazism, the city of his intellectual flowering; and New York, where he became one of the most influential Jewish theologians of his generation, and where he died 35 years ago. It is astounding that all of Heschel's books in English remain in publication, and that some have been made available in very recent years for the first time to a wider English-speaking audience: his massive rabbinic theology, *Torah min Hashamayim*, for non-Hebraists (2005), and his early poems, *Der Shem Hameforash: Mentsh*, for non-Yiddishists (2005).

One of Heschel's enduring contributions to *Christian* (and specifically Roman Catholic) thinking was his very personal commitment to the debates of the Second Vatican Council that resulted in the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 (Chester, 2001). Twenty years after Heschel's death, David Blumenthal (who once described himself to me as 'Heschel's disciple though never his student') questioned the validity of Heschel's ecumenical perspective in the light of changes in interfaith relations in the intervening period (Blumenthal, 1992). Forty two years after *Nostra Aetate*, in a new world symptomised by America's 9/11, London's 7/7, the ongoing disastrous war

in Iraq, last year's Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and after almost thirty years of Catholic restorationism that makes Vatican II seem like mere wishful thinking, does Heschel's approach to interfaith relations stand up under further scrutiny?

Although Heschel did have contacts with individual Muslims, his relationship with Islam was insignificant compared with his association with Roman Catholics and Roman Catholicism as a body. In a similar way, he had meaningful friendships with a number of Protestant theologians and ministers, but not with any particular Protestant church body. For these reasons this paper focuses on Jewish-Christian relationships, and on Jewish-Catholic relationships in particular. For a Methodist perspective, members of the Oxford Institute are directed to the 'Statement on Inter-religious Dialogue: Jews and Christians' (1972) and 'Building New Bridges in Hope', (1996) both adopted by the General Conference of the United Methodist Church (USA). The British Methodist Church has not issued its own statement, but has aligned itself with those of the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland and its predecessors, and of the World Council of Churches.

A New World Order

It is now twenty-five years since Hans Küng first concluded that there could be 'no world peace without religious peace' (Küng, 2007: xxiii). His three publications so far in the 'Religious Situation of Our Time' series (*Judaism* [1991, ET 1992], *Christianity* [1994, ET 1995] and very recently *Islam* [2004, ET 2007]) all open with his programme for global survival as a frontispiece:

No peace among the nations without peace among the religions.
No peace among the religions without dialogue between the religions.
No dialogue between the religions without investigation of the foundations of the religions.

Huntington's (1993) counter-paradigm, 'A Clash of Civilizations', provided ideological support for the replacement of communism as 'the enemy of the West' with Islam, and provided a new foreign affairs vocabulary to Western politicians. Since the first Gulf War this has made the current war in Afghanistan, the second Gulf War, and a potential invasion of Iran, not only thinkable, but politically achievable, if not winnable. The so-called 'War against Terror' shows no sign of being won by the West, but has, rather, resulted in the globalisation of terror, with attacks in Africa, Asia, Arabia, and Europe linked (at least in the minds of politicians and media) with the Al Qaeda organisation. Together with the unwillingness or inability of the West to rein in Israel's oppression of the Palestinians further angering the Islamic world, 'the clash of civilisations seems to have become a self-fulfilling prophecy' (Küng, 2007: xxiv). Thus international relations between the West and Islam, and therefore amongst the three Abrahamic faiths, have altered dramatically since Heschel's time. The options, Küng asserts (2007: xxiv) are clear:

[R]ivalry among the religions, a clash of civilisations, war between nations or a dialogue of civilizations and peace between the religions as a harbinger of peace among nations. Faced with a deadly threat to all humankind, shouldn't we demolish the walls of prejudice stone by stone and build bridges of dialogue . . . rather than erect new barriers of

hatred, vengeance and hostility? I am pleading neither for opposition to be swept under the carpet nor for a syncretistic mixing of religions. I am pleading for an honest approach and an attempt at understanding, based on mutual awareness, on objectivity and fairness, and on the knowledge of what separates and what unites.

***Nostra Aetate* and Restorationist Catholicism**

The political face-off between the West and Islam is not the only major development to change the environment for inter-faith relations since Heschel's death 35 years ago. Heschel's role in Vatican II had enabled radical changes to take place in Roman Catholicism's attitude to Jews and Judaism (Chester, 201: 256ff). He described Pope John XXIII as 'a great miracle' (Heschel, 1996: 254), whose programme of spiritual renewal 'opened many hearts and unlocked many precious insights' (Heschel, 1972: 181). His friendship with Thomas Merton was deepened through their joint objection to the inclusion of hope for the conversion of the Jews in the third proposed draft of the 'declaration on the Jews' (Chester, 2001: 259). Merton said that he felt more 'a true Jew under my Catholic skin' by 'being spiritually slapped in the face by these blind and complacent people of whom I am nevertheless a "collaborator"' (Shannon, 1985: 434). Heschel himself flew to Rome for a half-hour audience with Pope Paul VI, to strongly restate his position, and the declaration on the Jews was delayed for a further year. It was finally presented on October 28 1965, not as part of the Schema on Ecumenism, as originally proposed, nor as an appendix to *Lumen Gentium*, the Schema on the Church, but at the heart of *Nostra Aetate* ('The Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions') (Chester, 2001:260-2). The fourth section of the document specifically absolves the Jewish people of guilt over the crucifixion of Jesus, makes no reference to proselytisation, and condemns anti-Semitism. There were things Heschel looked for in *Nostra Aetate* and did not find, so that he regarded it as a 'milestone, but . . . not the climax' (Miller, 1966: 373). However, nine years later (and three years after Heschel's death) the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued some guidelines for implementing *Nostra Aetate*, clarifying wording deliberately left vague to avoid criticisms, and seeking to overcome many omissions, in ways that would have gladdened Heschel's heart. There are references to false stereotyping of Pharisees in the New Testament, and of Jews in the liturgy; to Jews of today (whereas *Nostra Aetate* makes no mention of the post-biblical religious tradition of Judaism); to the Holocaust as the historical setting of *Nostra Aetate* and of Jewish-Christian dialogue; to the avoidance of supercessionist implications (Fisher & Klenicki, 1990: 29-37).

Heschel's influence on Roman Catholic thinking was far from limited to the Council, and his influence on Pope Paul VI went far beyond the brief audience of 1964. A month after Heschel's death the Pope reminded pilgrims at a General Audience at the Vatican that 'even before we have move in search of God, God has come in search of us', Heschel being cited in the text of the audience as the source, an unprecedented public reference by a Pope to the works of a non-Christian writer (*America*, 1973: 202).

However, Pope Paul VI, having seen John XXIII's vision for the Council through to its conclusion, and having at the end symbolically laid the papal tiara on the altar of St Peter's, to be sold and the proceeds donated to charity as a sign of humility and

conciliation, died in 1978. After the brief 33-day tenure of office of John-Paul I, John-Paul II was elected, quickly revealing himself as a charismatic but essentially conservative pope, whose reign was to send very mixed messages about Jewish-Christian relations.

This wilderness into which we Catholics have been brought by our leaders is removed from the conciliar reform and renewal in the Church and from the vision of Pope John XXIII. We have been led away from an ecclesiology that speaks of the people of God and back to autocracy; away from an inclusive vision of revelation inspired by the yearnings of our own times (what the Second Vatican Council called the ‘signs of the times’) and towards a kind of fundamentalism, in a Church that has no place for certain others . . . (O’Hare, 2004)

In relation, specifically, to Jewish-Christian relations, what Padraic O’Hare observes is ‘the regular recurrence of recidivist attitudes, the expression of relatively primitive understandings of one another, after much progress and from sources we would least expect’ (O’Hare, 2006: 18). An example he gives is of Cardinal Avery Dulles’ criticism of the position, stated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, that ‘targeting Jews for conversion . . . [is] no longer theologically acceptable in the Catholic Church.’. Dulles had been created a cardinal by John-Paul II to honour his theological work, yet in objecting to the Committee’s proposition ignores ‘Vatican leaders, papal statements, and the work of the Pontifical Biblical Commission’ (O’Hare, 2006, 19).

Pope John-Paul’s place in Jewish-Christian relations was ambiguous, to say the least. His visit of reconciliation to Israel in 2000 was but one act of many in his pontificate to nurture a positive relationship between Jews and Catholics: the first papal visit to Auschwitz, in 1979; the guidelines published in 1985 regarding the proper teaching about Jews and Judaism; his visit to the Rome synagogue and embrace of the chief rabbi in 1986; the commemoration of the Shoah in the Vatican; and the diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel. Yet, at the same time, the conservative pope seems to have set out most deliberately to dismantle the reforms put in place by Vatican II, and retreated to a pre-Vatican II view of Jews and Judaism in official documents. Thus the 1993 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is essentially a restorationist document, silent about the Shoah, recidivist when it speaks of the Jewish and Christian covenants, and archaic in Christology and soteriology. The 1998 document on the church’s role in the Shoah is a defence of Pius XII’s role, and distances a sinless church from erring individual Catholics. In 2000 the Congregation for the Doctrine on the Faith (headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI) issued *Dominus Iesus* which associates interreligious dialogue with evangelisation, and reaffirms the missionary principle, effectively repudiated by Vatican II, of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. This reaffirmation was strengthened with the issuing, in July of 2007, of yet another document from the Congregation for the Doctrine on the Faith, *Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine on the Church*, this time reversing Vatican II’s change of attitude, not to the Jews, but to other Christian churches. To cap it all, amongst the rash of canonizations enacted by John Paul II (more than all his predecessors put together) were some that might be understood as deliberately damaging to Jewish sensibilities, those of Edith Stern and Maximilian Kolbe, together with moves towards the canonization of Pius XII, and the

beatification of reactionary Pius IX, remembered by Jews not for the First Vatican Council and papal infallibility but as the kidnapper of Edgardo Montoro. In the latter case, the promoter of the cause for the canonization of Pius IX commented, 'The Church has tried everything to improve relations with the Jews. But they don't forgive us the slightest thing' (New York Times, 2000, June 28). By the first decade of the twenty-first century the Roman Catholic Church has retreated half-a-century in its sensitivity to Jewish sensibilities.

Abraham Joshua Heschel's Interfaith Vision

How would Heschel, committed to the cause of social justice in his own place and time, respond to this new world? What would a man who put his reputation on the line to work with Roman Catholic officials for a new relationship between Jews and Christians respond to this reactionary Catholicism? If twenty years after Heschel's death, Blumenthal questioned the validity of Heschel's ecumenical vision in the light of changes up until that point, how does Heschel's vision stand up fifteen years later still?

Blumenthal's critique was explicitly of Heschel's position as laid out in his inaugural lecture as the Harry Emerson Fosdick Visiting Professor at Union Theological Seminary in 1965 (Blumenthal, 1992; Kasimow and Sherwin, 1991:3-22). It must be remembered that the audience at this singular event was the faculty, students, and invited guests of a Protestant seminary, which had gone out of its way to change its constitution so that a non-Christian could be invited to teach. Blumenthal abstracted the following points from the lecture, identifying them as 'Heschel's post-Holocaust commandments for interfaith dialogue':

Do not be cynical. Strive in cooperation against social evils. Work on the basis of shared faith. And, specifically for Christian-Jewish dialogue: Be rooted in God's faithful presence as depicted in the Bible. Recognize one another's different yet necessary roles in God's ultimate plan for the salvation of humankind. Do not be anti-Semitic. Do not proselytize. (Blumenthal, 1992: 250).

Blumenthal's conclusion was that Heschel's view of interfaith dialogue was no longer adequate because of a shift in interfaith relations in the intervening 25 years, 'from sensitive dialogue to grudging coexistence, from embracing universalism to truculent particularism' (Blumenthal, 1992: 251). Instead of the messages that had come from Vatican II, there was dispensationalism, supersessionism, Jews for Jesus, the mission to the Jews as integral to the Great Commission, literalism, anti-Zionism, and so on. The theological issues that had come to the fore were 'all absolutes, none of them rooted in the poetry of the common human awareness of the holy' as was Heschel's interfaith vision. Yet, despite his assertion that 'the ecumenical window has closed . . . in favor of a tougher understanding of the irreconcilabilities of religious co-existence', and therefore that Heschel's ecumenical perspective was no longer adequate because dialogue needed to be about 'fears and prejudices, about anger' rather than a common sense of the holy and a common social agenda, Blumenthal accepted that 'if there is to be interfaith dialogue and not interreligious war, there is no alternative proposition to Heschel's', i.e. devotion to 'the idea that religions share a sense of the holy and a mission to embody that holiness in our social lives'

(Blumenthal, 1992: 252-3). Thus, despite appearances, Blumenthal's conclusion was that Heschel's perspective *remains* valid. It is in its *practical outworking* that Heschel's perspective could be deemed inadequate then, and to remain inadequate today. But Heschel's vision works both at a deeper and at a wider level than that deduced by Blumenthal from the Union Seminary lecture. Indeed, any real dialogue that does take place, takes place in the spirit of Heschel: real dialogue involves listening as well as talking, with no hidden agenda of proselytisation, and presupposes an openness to being changed by the encounter. The neo-orthodox or neo-fundamentalist simply does not engage in such dialogue, nor even see the point of it (Chester, 2001: 268).

Heschel, though, did see the point of it. When we get behind the practical outworking of his interfaith programme to an appropriate commitment and a sufficient depth we find that:

[t]he first and most important *prerequisite of interfaith is faith*. It is only out of the depth of involvement in the unending drama that began with Abraham that we can help one another toward an understanding of our situation. Interfaith must come out of depth, not out of a void absence of faith. It is not an enterprise for those who are half-learned or spiritually immature (Heschel, in Kasimow & Sherwin, 1991: 11).

Because for Heschel the interfaith imperative is such that the only alternative is 'internihilism', the need for dialogue is urgent, and the purpose plain:

It is neither to flatter nor to refute one another, but to help one another; to share insight and learning, to cooperate in academic ventures on the highest scholarly level, and what is even more important to search in the wilderness for well-springs of devotion, for treasures of stillness, for the power of love and care for man. What are urgently needed are ways of helping one another in the terrible predicament of here and now, to work for peace . . . , to purify the minds from contempt, suspicion and hatred . . . (Heschel, 1967: 140).

Three connected factors lay behind Heschel's perspective on Jewish-Christian relations: (1) contemporary manifestations of institutional intolerance, racism and oppression, manifested not only in the Holocaust, but also in his time and place in the Vietnam War and the struggle for Civil Rights; (2) the importance of the Bible as a common heritage; and (3) the repudiation of the biblical message in secularisation. However, he did not merely offer Judaism and Christianity a strategy for survival against a common enemy. He was utterly convinced that the future of Western civilization depended on understanding the implications of this connectedness. He perceived that interfaith dialogue demands humility and a sense of reverence:

None of us pretends to be God's accountant, and His design for history and redemption remains a mystery before which we must stand in awe. It is arrogant to maintain that the Jews' refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah is due to their stubbornness or blindness as it would be presumptuous for the Jews not to acknowledge the glory and holiness

in the lives of countless Christians (Heschel, in Kasimow & Sherwin, 1991: 17).

Quite what Heschel would make of ‘the religious situation of our time’, the foreign policy of confrontation, and of the wider ecumenical perspective of Roman Catholicism today, I can only imagine. But I do believe that his position continues to offer a viable way in interfaith dialogue. And because of what he was and did, as well as what he said and wrote, he continues to encourage many in their own ‘search in the wilderness for the wellsprings of devotion’, often despite religious institutions which have, before, during, and since his lifetime, remained or become part of the problem in the quest for ‘peace among the nations’.

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