

The New Testament Epoch

In its origins Christianity is deeply rooted in Judaism. Without a sincere feeling for the Jewish world, therefore, and a direct experience of it, one cannot understand Christianity. Jesus is fully Jewish, the apostles are Jewish, and one cannot doubt their attachment to the traditions of their forefathers. In announcing and inaugurating the messianic Passover, Jesus, the universal redeemer and the suffering servant, did not do so in opposition to the covenant of Sinai; rather, he fulfills the sense of Sinai. True, one does find anti-Jewish polemics in the New Testament. These have to be understood at different levels.

1. On the historical level, they can be seen within the atmosphere of sectarian assaults aimed at different groups (Pharisees, Sadducees, Qumranites, Essenes).
2. On the theological level, the term “the Jews,” particularly as found in the Gospel of John, is a category used to describe anyone who refuses salvation.
3. On the eschatological level, the goal of the structures that flow from the covenant came to be seen as necessitating the Kingdom, when God reigns “over all and in all.”
4. On the ecclesiastical level, these polemics are a reaction to the demands advanced by Judaizers in circles of Christians with pagan backgrounds.

But all this does not mean that from the start Christianity and the New Testament had an anti-Semitic character.

The Medieval Period

Poliakov has shown in an exhaustive study that up until the Crusades the situation of Jews in Europe generally remained one of serene coexistence with the Christian population.

A brutal and bloody turn was provoked by the fanatical masses who mobbed together in the armies directed at the Holy Land. They were responsible for ferocious massacres of entire Jewish communities in Germany, notwithstanding the opposition of bishops and of counts. The Jews were left with a choice only between baptism and martyrdom, and by the thousands they chose the latter, proclaiming their own fidelity to God. After 1144 the accusation of ritual homicide circulated. Still later came the charge of a hateful plot being carried out against the human race by the Jews, who were cursed because they were “God-killers.” The consequences were very grave, especially at the popular level. The Jews came to be regarded virtually as a symbol of satanic evil to be implacably extirpated by every available means.

Common Roots

The entire recent universal magisterium of the church, together with documents from episcopal conferences and individual local churches, all unanimously drive home the point that the church and the Jewish people are bound by a deep bond “at the level of their own religious identity.”

Here are the common elements as they are found in Scripture and tradition:

1. The faith of Abraham and of the patriarchs in the God who has chosen Israel with irrevocable love;
2. The vocation to holiness (“Be holy, because I am holy”; Lev 11:45) and the necessity for “conversion” (teshubhah) of the heart;
3. The veneration of Sacred Scripture;
4. The tradition of prayer, both private and public;
5. Obedience to the moral law expressed in the commandments of Sinai;
6. The witness rendered to God by the “Sanctification of the Name” in the midst of the peoples of the world, even to the point of martyrdom if necessary;
7. Respect and responsibility in relationship to all creation, committed zeal for peace and for the good of all humanity, without discrimination.

And yet, these common elements are understood and lived out in the two traditions in profoundly different ways.

One Hope and a Common Goal

It is not only the sources and manifested elements of our journey that we hold in common; even the final goal can be expressed in convergent terms. Hope in a messianic future, when God alone will reign, King of justice and of peace; faith in the resurrection of the dead, in the judgment of God rich in mercy, in the universal redemption — these are all common themes for Jews and Christians.

It is on the basis of these principles — which certainly deserve further, more attentive, and deeper study — that there is already apparent a broad area for a responsible common commitment. This is especially so at the spiritual and ethical level, in the field of human rights, and in an assistance to people and persons in need of solidarity, both for peace and for the integral development of humanity. And I believe this will become even more apparent.

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini

Cardinal Martini is Archbishop of Milan, and a scholar in his own right.