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## Towards a new Christian perception of Jesus as a Jew

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WALDEMAR CHROSTOWSKI, WARSAW

## TOWARDS A NEW CHRISTIAN PERCEPTION OF JESUS AS A JEW

Views on the identity of Jesus and the nature and character of His mission have deeply divided Christians and Jews. The mutual distrust and suspicion are so great that the idea of a common dialogue on the subject of Jesus arouses strong emotions and disputes on both sides. When in the more immediate and remote past it sometimes did come to discussions, they most often turned into stormy debates with sharp exchanges of charges and countercharges. Both Jews and Christians, who otherwise differ greatly between themselves, do not want to admit publicly or even consider the Jewishness of Jesus. The consequence and prolongation of this attitude is a scrupulous avoidance of joint discussions about Jesus even in Jewish and Christian circles disposed to dialogue. This is the result of a tacit agreement of both sides that one can take up various matters, but it is better to leave questions about Jesus alone or to postpone them to an indefinite future.

Despite outmoded antipathies and apprehensions, one cannot avoid the subject of the Jewishness of Jesus. It keeps recurring in a scholarly papers and academic discussions, but it also troubles ordinary Christians and Jews and even appears in the daily press. It flares up with great intensity especially when Jews and Christians enter into dialogue. If this is to be a genuine and honest dialogue, both sides must cast aside old biases and one-sidedness and look at each other in a new way so as to boldly address festering problems that have been avoided or taken up only for the sake of confrontation or forcing through one's own point of view. The future of Christian-Jewish relations depends on addressing these problems squarely.

### **Jews and Christians: kindred opponents**

On both sides the rebellion of Jews and Christians against the Jewishness of Jesus has deep doctrinal and historical roots. The doctrinal opposition of Jews stems from the basic opposition to the faith of Christians in the Divinity of Jesus. Jews, explaining this by the requirement of faithfulness to monotheism, reject the conception of the Holy Trinity. They state that one cannot be a Jew and at the same time accept the

Divinity of Jesus. Hence also the claims of Jesus, if He did indeed regard Himself as the Son of God, put him beyond the pale of Jewish orthodoxy. No less strong are the historical determinants, namely, mindfulness of the persecution by Christians and their pressure on Jews to „become converts” and accept the Christian faith. For Jews associations with the name of Jesus are entirely different than for Christians: Jews have suffered much, also at the hands of Christians, and a large part of these sufferings had religious underpinnings. For them it does not seem either necessary or advisable to emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus, the foundation and symbol of the identity of Christians, who are perceived and depicted as the persecutors of Jews. Bearing in mind the past, Jews also fear hidden intentions of proselytism and the desire to win them over for the Christian faith. Whether this is openly admitted or not, Christianity is an attractive religion for the Jews. Many Jews fear that a discussion about Jesus or even contacts with Christians may be detrimental to them in the sense that it may weaken their ties with Judaism, whose foundation is the belief in its exceptionalness and the uniqueness of its mission.

There are also many reasons for the reluctance of Christians to emphasize the Jewishness of Jesus. The most important of them result from the established tendency to disdain Judaism. The Jewish religion and Jewishness were regarded as something worse, „lower”, as a less developed form of religion that had its reason for existence before Christianity existed, but simply became outdated after the appearance of Christianity. The duration of the Jewish way of life was thus judged as a stubbornly vital and incomprehensible error, which for Christians has no value apart from the fact that it can serve as a warning against the disastrous consequences of being unfaithful to God. These convictions are attended by the postulate to break away from the Jewish roots of the Bible and Christianity in order to emphasize one’s own autonomy. If it is shown that there were many Jewish antecedents and elements in the life and teaching of Jesus and in the origin and beginnings of the Church, one must ask, what is this *specificum christianorum* that determines the exceptionalness and value of Christianity? Christians feel quite helpless in attempts to come to grips with the Jewish roots of the New Testament and the Church. This feeling is accompanied by fears of the dislocation of Christian and Jewish elements, which would result in the „Jewification” of Christianity and to a weakening of the novelty of the message of Jesus Christ and the Christian faith.

Christianity is a missionary religion, and evangelization is an unalterable duty of the followers of Jesus Christ. In the past and today Christians have conducted and are conducting missions on a large scale, resulting in conversions and an increase in the number of believers. As though to spite these intensive efforts and undertakings, the Jews continue to endure as Jews and refuse to change their views on the New Testament or on Christianity. In such circumstances to speak about the Jewishness of Jesus seems unnecessary and inadvisable. To ignore this

Jewishness is also clearly derived from the bad image of the Jew. In Christian societies, even in modern languages, the word „Jew” evokes negative connotations, in which is expressed the more general attitude toward Jews and Judaism. The unfavorable image and emotional charge of the word „Jew” make it inappropriate to speak of Jesus as a Jew. The reluctance of Christians also has another implied meaning. In the assessment of the majority, who have been fed on a reading of the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and other writings of the New Testament and early Christian works, the birth of Christianity from the womb of Judaism was painful and bloody. „The Jews killed Jesus, Stephen, Jacob, they persecuted Paul and the other Apostles” – this is the view widespread among Christians of all centuries, sustained and inculcated by means of a rich iconography placed in chapels and churches, repeated in catechism textbooks and homilies and in editions, commentaries and illustrations of the Bible. The image of the Jew as a persecutor of the Church and the Christian faith took on new colors in contemporary times, when it was expanded with the image of the Jew as an atheist, communist, „enemy of the Church and the Cross”. Such sentiments are especially strong in the postcommunist countries of Central-Eastern Europe and they must not be ignored. The vitality of stereotypes has a long history and does not depend on arguments, which in fact rather quickly may change into a new variety of indoctrination.

The paradoxical fraternization of Jews and Christians in ignoring the Jewishness of Jesus has yet another background, namely, the great differentiation of Christians. Only a tiny part of the followers of Christ are of Jewish origin, and they are strongly contested by the other Jews. All of the other Christians are non-Jews. For various motives and reasons they would prefer to see Jesus as Israelite and not as a Jew. Since many Christians do not regard Rabbinical Judaism as a continuation of Biblical Judaism, they are inclined to draw a clear dividing line between the Biblical Israelites, with whom they are able to sympathize and identify themselves, and contemporary Jews, who not only oppose Christians and Christianity but go to extremes in their Jewry. Here we have to do with the question of the Christian theology of Judaism. All thinking and discussions about the Jewishness of Jesus must bear in mind the Christian sentiments on Jewishness and Judaism as such. Up to our times the person of Jesus and His message were perceived through the prism of a theology hostile to Judaism. The thesis was constantly repeated that while Jesus finds Himself at the beginnings of Christianity, He at the same time constitutes a break in the continuity of Judaism.

The separation of paths and the hiatus between Judaism and Christianity, including the paradoxical repudiation of the Jewishness of Jesus, had to have an influence on the historical development of the two religions. On the Jewish side the separation from Jesus gave rise to numerous biases and concealments, which found their expression in classical Jewish religious literature and tradition. Since the end of the 1st

century Judaism has had the expression *birkat haminim*, an euphemism for a swear-word primarily addressed to the followers of Jesus Christ. Talmudic literature, which was elaborated and accepted by rabbis as authoritative for the Jewish faith, is replete with allusions to „Ben Stad” or „Ben Panter”, as Jesus was called, and with condemnations of the *nochim* or Christians. In this literature Jesus is not only a false messiah but also a dangerous and criminal heretic, a deceiver and soothsayer. In such and similar Jewish writings anti-Christian elements are a reflection of a more general sentiment, whose genesis goes back to the divorce between the Synagogue and the Church. Another way of expressing animosity and hostility to Jesus and Christianity was remaining silent about Him. This historically intensifying aloofness expressed itself in the often repeated thesis on asymmetry: to express their identity Christians unquestionably need Judaism, but Judaism has no need whatsoever of Christianity. This was responsible for one-sidedness and simplifications in the Jewish theology of Christianity and for the remarkably stereotypical views on the history and nature of Judaism, resulting in overemphasis on rabbinical Judaism, thereby ignoring the multifarious faces of Judaism in the intertestamental period. The most extreme consequence of this attitude is the self-declaration of Jews in the sharp confrontation with what is specifically Christian. Many elements of the rabbinical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible have their origins in the polemics with Christians and in taking revenge on Christianity. This had to result in a situation in which anti-Jesusness and anti-Christianity colored rabbinical Judaism and the entire life of Jews, as a consequence of which they were subjected to negative schematization and to a certain impoverishment.

On the side of the Christians as well the consequences of denying or ignoring the Jewishness of Jesus were lamentable. One of them was the temptation to dehumanize, dematerialize Jesus, namely, the mythologization of the Incarnation, which had fatal consequences for the Christian faith. From the fact that „the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1, 14) we may conclude that the Jewishness of Jesus is an inseparable part of the History of Salvation. Already in the Hebrew Bible one can clearly see stages of the gradual incarnation of the Word. Jesus Christ is the „fulness of time” also in the sense that He fulfilled the covenant of God with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and what is more – He is the realization, the reality of this covenant. To deny His Jewishness or to ignore the Jewish context of His life and mission inexorably leads to a weakening or even disappearance of interest in the Old Testament, hence to resigning from knowledge of and dependence on the long History of Salvation that preceded His life in the flesh. Such suggestions and tendencies manifested themselves among Christians already in the earliest period, e.g., in the Martionism. Though the Church separated itself from the views of Martion and his followers, similar orientations and trends manifested themselves, weakening the vitality of Christianity, distorting the nature

of the Gospel and the concreteness of the Incarnation. Jesus was perceived as a „Super-Man”, as a completely undefined „Man-In-General”, or as an almost mythological figure lacking the corporality so important for the Incarnation. Another theological consequence of this state of affairs was opposing Jesus the Jew (if it was fitting or necessary to speak about this aspect of His identity) to Christ the Lord. Jesus the Jew became a synonym for the Jesus of history and was placed in opposition to Christ the Lord as the object of the Christian faith. This distinction deepened toward the end of the past century and in our century, which did not fail to have an influence on the nature and historical and theological directions of studies of the New Testament and the beginnings of the Church.

The Jewishness of Jesus not only divided Jews and Christians, but it also deepened the existing divisions, for both sides clearly were loath to accept His Jewishness. Animosities and concealments on both sides resulted from the drastic parting of the ways of the sisterly religions and made this parting even more dramatic and unbridgeable.

### **Basic elements of the Christian understanding of Jesus Christ**

The question who Jesus is for the Christians helps us to understand and show who He is not for the Jews. In this place the sisterly religions are the farthest apart, and the differences decide what is specific for each of them. Consideration of how Christians understand Jesus tells us something about Judaism, which always vociferously negated these views. Without exaggeration one can say that Rabbinical Judaism was a negative reflection of the most important part of the Christian understanding of Jesus.

The basic elements of the Christian image of Jesus consist of several truths. One can sum them up most briefly as follows: Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah (= Greek *Christos*) promised by God to the chosen people, the Messiah who fulfilled all of the hopes and expectations expressed in the Hebrew Bible that the Christians treat as the Old Testament. Jesus was responsible for the fact that the religion founded by Him, Christianity, is a fully autonomous religion of world wide scope and not some more or less open Jewish group or sect. The emphasis on the absolute uniqueness of the birth of the Church and Christianity is made at the cost of reducing the true role of Paul the Apostle, which the critics of Christianity exaggerate by seeing Paul as a more effective and more important creator of Christianity than the Rabbi of Nazareth. Jesus Christ is perceived by Christians as the preexisting Word of God (*Logos*) and the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, Fulfilling the promises from Mi 5,2 and Is 7,14. He was born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary (Mt 2,1 – 12; Lk 2,1 – 20). At His baptism He received the Holy Spirit as a confirmation of Divine origin and filiation (Mk 1,1 – 11), and then He began His teaching in Galilee. The God incarnate ardently won over listeners for the Father, expressing the

generale xpectations of His contemporary fellow countrymen of a definite intervention in history bringing about God's rule over the world (*The Kingdom of God*). After the Judgement Day appointed by God, a new order will arise led by the Messiah elevated to the right hand of God, King of the Universe. The messianic era already started with Jesus. Miracles, healings, and exorcisms are unquestionably signs of the work of God's Spirit (Lk 11,14–23). The forecasts of sufferings contained in the Old Testament and taken up by Jesus during His public activity in Galilee and in Jerusalem became completely fulfilled in His passion and death on the cross. Jesus, identical with the Son of Man (Dn 7,13), reveals to man and to humanity the meaning and direction of life (Mk 10,45), Everyone who believes in Him shall have eternal life. Christian ethics, whose main requirement is the obligation to imitate Jesus, rests on these premises.

A Christian familiar with the principles of his own faith accepts these assertions reflecting the traditional and dogmatically sanctioned understanding of Jesus Christ. Is there any place in such a vision for additions and light from Judaism? Do Christians need anything from Jews, or can they learn something from them in matters that are specifically Christian? Can Jews and Judaism be helpful to Christians for a deeper understanding of themselves? Is there any justification for and purpose in emphasizing the Jewishness of Jesus in the image of Jesus preserved for nearly two thousand years and professed by tens of generations of believers?

Though the Christian image of Jesus is coherent and logical, the answer to all of these questions is in the affirmative. Christians need contacts with Jews and a dialogue between the religions on the subject of Jesus first and foremost in order to understand themselves better. Our faith would be catastrophically impoverished and incomplete if it ignored the human antecedents and aspects of the reality of the Incarnation, among which is the truth about the Jewishness of Jesus. Inquiries in this subject are not easy, however, for His Jewishness, like Jewishness in general, is realized on two planes. One of them is ethnic, national affiliation, the other has a religious dimension. The first is of lesser importance for Christians. Christianity encompasses various peoples and nations, and thus ethnic affiliation presents no problem and gives no special privileges. Migrations, processes of integration and disintegration of various political communities and societies are going on all the time, which has no influence on possible entry into the Church or staying in the Church. But for Jews ethnic affiliation is extremely important. Tensions resulting from this fact have manifested themselves time and again and stiffened Jews and Christians in how they view each other and in views on the person of Jesus. And precisely for this reason the question of His Jewishness is so important. Since the answer is not easy, it is all the more important to try to clarify the picture and to gain the best possible understanding in matters that for centuries have kindled emotions and given rise to bitter disputes.

## The self-awareness of Jesus and His place in the Judaism of 1-st Century

Before Jesus became recognized as the Son of God, the Second person of the Holy Trinity, and by His opponents as an apostate and swindler who should be forgotten – He was an itinerant Galilean. Thus in reflections on the Jewishness of Jesus one must re-create His historical image and the milieu in which He lived, using the image preserved in the Gospel. Despite various doubts and conjectures that fortunately are passing to the arsenal of the history of exegesis of the New Testament, it is possible both to get through to the person of Jesus and to gain knowledge of the Palestinian Judaism to which He belonged.

In discussions about the Jewishness of Jesus it is impossible to omit what Jesus had to say about Himself. When during His public activity someone asked him, „Are you a Jew?“, this question was entirely incomprehensible to Him. Jesus was a Jew in the ethnic sense. He was born of a Jewish mother, Mary, and thus He came into the world from the womb of Israel. No one can seriously question His ethnic Jewishness. On the other hand both Jews and many Christians attempt to overturn the Jewishness of Jesus in the religious sense. Despite them one has to notice and emphasize that we can recognize typically Jewish features in Jesus' life and behavior:

1. Jesus sees Jews as the nation chosen by God. Like most of His countrymen and in the spirit of authentic Jewish tradition He trusts in God in the hour of death. He knows the Torah and profusely refers to it, even quoting it on the cross. In body and spirit He is a member of the Jewish community;

2. The pattern of Jesus' life is typically Jewish. He was circumcised, made regular pilgrimages to Jerusalem. He traveled to the Holy City with His parents as a child and on His own as an adult. He knew and followed the native customs, traditions, and laws. He fully respected the authority of the Torah. He studied in the synagogue and also taught there Himself. He knew the exegetic and theological traditions of his nation in explanation and interpretation of the Hebrew Bible;

3. Jesus was attached to the land of Israel, in His teaching He constantly referred to its natural resources and nature. He was characterized by a typically Jewish positive attitude toward life and its gifts. He deeply admitted and respected the Creation. He also knew the concerns and needs of the inhabitants of the Holy Land;

4. Following the typically Jewish line of thinking Jesus was far removed from facile optimism and an uncritical reliance on man's possibilities. He perceived the dangers and consequences of corruption and sin, but at the same time He professed the possibility of forgiveness and the chance of reforming everyone who wants to open himself to God. He courageously included in His teaching criticism of His own nation and condemned its excesses and offences. In doing so He was part of the best prophetic tradition. This was a criticism undertaken „from the inside“,



confirming knowledge of and attachment to the noblest principles of Judaism and concern for the spiritual and religious condition of His countrymen;

5. The message of Jesus was addressed primarily to the Jews. In those times and situation this was a condition resulting from His identity. Jesus' message was so Jewish that Paul of Tarsus faced the urgent need to adapt it to the different situation of Christians of pagan origin;

6. Jesus willingly made use of the uniquely Jewish religious institutions of His times, e.g., the synagogue. In the canonic Gospels we clearly recognize the arrangement and contents of the series of liturgical readings that were used in those days. Reading of the Hebrew Bible was accompanied by teaching in the form of a homily and adapted to the readings of a particular day (see Lk 4,16 – 21). For example, the teaching about the „bread of life” delivered in the synagogue in Capharnum (J 6,24-59) referring to the Ex 16 read in the synagogal liturgy in the early spring (April) in the second year of the three-year cycle of readings; dispute about the Sabbath (Mt 12,1 – 8) takes up themes of Nm 28,9 – 10 and 1 Sm 21,1 – 10, readings from the Torah and Prophets designated for one of the Sabbaths. At the synagogues there were so-called study houses (*bet midrash*) in which boys and grown men gathered to study the Torah. Jesus made use of this manner of transmitting the holy tradition of Israel. He was also characterized by profound respect for the Temple in Jerusalem, where he engaged in passionate disputes similar to those known from the Jewish tradition of rabbinical disputes.

Thus the self-awareness of Jesus was typically Jewish. His contemporaries also regarded Him as a great Jewish teacher. That is how His pupils and the pupils of John the Baptist, the crowds, and other Jewish teachers, who accorded Him greater authority than the other commentators of the Law (Mk 12,14), also regarded Him. They often called Him „Rabbi,” for the word *rabbi* was used for a qualified teacher. In the Gospels Jesus is also called „Master”, but this reflects the post-Easter consciousness of His followers. Thus one cannot look at Jesus in isolation from His nation.

The place that Jesus occupied in the Judaism of His times also requires a close scrutiny of His Jewishness. Christians usually approached this subject with a three-fold attitude:

– The Gospels depict Jesus in a constant conflict with Jewish political and religious leaders (the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Scribes, priests, the Sanhedrin) and even with „Jews” in the broad sense, which is especially evident in the Fourth Gospel. The trial of Jesus is placed against this background, but His death is explained in categories of the responsibility of Jews for it. This responsibility is laid not only on the Jews who were participants of the events of the first Holy Week in Jerusalem but on all Jews, those living then and even Jews of all generations, those who lived later and those who live know; -

– The form of Judaism that developed after the return from the Babylonian exile toward the end of the 6th century B.C. and in the period of the Second Temple, completely lost its significance and dynamism. It is characterized by extreme sterility, the tendency to isolate itself from everything that is non-Jewish, and increasing barrenness due to having separated itself from the tradition and spirit of the Bible. All of this creates a void in Judaism to which Christians can respond by scorning and ignoring it;

– the Judaism of today derives its origins and shape from rabbis, who are the heirs of the Pharisaic tradition. The rabbis have censored the rich and variegated Jewish tradition, narrowing it considerably and removing these elements that did not fit the direction of the reconstruction they undertook. Judaism has exhausted its possibilities, first and foremost its saving ones, and so it cannot be a way of salvation. As a religion of love Christianity, standing in contrast to Judaism as a result of the tension that exists between the principle of love and freedom and enslavement by the rigors of soulless legislation, took the place of the religion of „legalism” and spiritless Law.

Even a cursory review of the theological and devotional literature and specially honest discussion with Christians leave no doubt that such an approach still exists among many followers of Jesus Christ. Jews also are aware of this and see in such a tendency manifestations as well as the source of sentiments and attitudes they call Christian anti-Semitism. In the last quarter century a lot has been done to overcome this stereotypical way of looking at Jews and Judaism that had many negative consequences and could not longer be tolerated. The newer theological thinking approaches accepted habits and theses differently, and its results can be summed up as follows:

– the Gospel’s descriptions reflect not only the historical antecedents of the life of Jesus but also later tensions and conflicts that appeared between the apostolic Church and those Jews who did not believe in Jesus. During His lifetime the pluralistic nature of Judaism was nothing unusual, and conflicts with Jewish leaders could not be excessively strong. The trial and death of Jesus also served the interests of the Roman occupation authorities and the group of Jews collaborating with them:

– we need a new look at the beginning and development of Rabbinical Judaism. This form successfully secured the survival of Jews in a strange and often hostile environment. Since after nearly two thousand years the Jews and Judaism have survived with the consciousness of their own distinctness, their religion and culture have demonstrated their vitality. From the theological point of view the question arises whether Rabbinical Judaism can be the way that God wanted. This makes it necessary to elaborate a new Christian theology of Judaism perceived as a vital and dynamic religion. New studies will be required of Jewish sources and greater interest in Judaism during the intertestamental period;

– observation of the life of Jews and consideration of what happened to them in the past make it clear that many of them were genuine witnesses of God, who gave their lives to sanctify His name. Judaism, deriving its life-blood from the religion of Biblical Israel, knows and practices the commandment to love God and one's neighbour. As such it is not in opposition to the Gospel. Impartial theological reflection is required whether it can be judged by Christians as the Jews' way of salvation. This makes it necessary to put Jewish-Christian relations on a new basis and to formulate a new look at the origins of Christianity and the nature of the two sisterly religions.

### **The Jewishness of Jesus – possibilities and challenges**

During the Persian period and for a considerable part of the Hellenistic period, that is, from the end of the 6th to the beginning of the 2nd century B.C., the Jews were a rather homogeneous religious community. Sudden changes took place in the wake of the confrontation and wars with the Hellenistic rulers of Syria that intensified in the second quarter of the 2nd century B.C. Many groupings and parties appeared characterized by a blending of religion and politics, expressing itself in religious motivations of armed uprisings, the most famous of which broke out under the leadership of the Maccabees. Among the various groups and fractions that originated in those times, the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, and Essenes endured and gained influence. After the national disaster in 66-70 A.D., the Pharisees shaped and preserved the foundations of Judaism and became the main opponents of Christian communities. But somewhat earlier, at the very beginning of the Christian era, Jesus was closest to the teaching of the Pharisees and position of the rabbi. The arguments in support of this are obvious: He knew the oral Torah and taught it (*Torah shebealpeh*), He reinterpreted and adapted the Hebrew Bible to the changing conditions and needs of believers. He was characterized by an authentic attitude and behavior of a rabbi who not only teaches but also heals. Also, the teaching of Jesus, in synagogues and outside them, followed the line of teaching of the Pharisees of His time. One can recognize important similarities in doctrine: the emphasis on showing love, reverence for the Name of God, and typically „Jewish” subjects present in the Eight Blessings. Following the example of other famous rabbis He took part in common meals, and during one of them, just before His capture and death, He instituted the Eucharist. Even the basic subject of His teaching, the intimate connection with the Father, is part of the Pharisaic way of thinking and experiencing God. Although His emphasis on unity with Father went far beyond what the Pharisees accepted, the conception of intimacy between God and man was not new or inique to Jesus. And this precluded the remembrance and preservation of the

essence of the new religion, first among Jews and then among Gentiles. All of this confirms and illustrates the profound spiritual influence of Pharisaism on Jesus' thought and actions.

The Pharisaic current, with which Jesus and His message most agrees, ought to be understood and presented not as the Christians have done thus far but as Joseph Flavius characterizes it: „This was a group of Jews who enjoyed the opinion of standing out among others for their devoutness and scrupulous explanation of the laws” (*The Jewish War*. I, V, 2). Jesus' polemics with the Pharisees have the same background as Jeremiah's polemics with his countrymen. In both cases, as in many others when the great heros of faith spoke out, the matter concerned the purification of religion. Jesus was closest to the Pharisees, a secular movement that focused on explanation of the Law and adapted its requirements to new circumstances. As a teacher and rabbi He fits an image and model of the leading teachers of the Law. He attracted many pupils, whom He taught and who stayed with Him. The loyalty and faithfulness they displayed to the Teacher became one of the basic conditions of remembrance of what they had experienced together and of preserving it in the early Christian tradition and shortly thereafter in the canonic Gospels. There were obviously differences between Jesus and the Pharisees, but they should not be overexaggerated and especially not for the purpose of tearing Jesus away from his Jewish context and depriving Him of His Jewish roots.

Without Jesus the Jew, who carried into effect and fulfilled the messianic hopes of many generations of his countrymen, there would be no Christianity. And since the Jewish context of Jesus is so important for a proper understanding of His person and mission, one must go even further: without the religion of Biblical Israel and without Judaism in the form that came into being and consolidated itself after the return from the Babylonian exile, though undergoing many transformations, there also would be no Christianity. The separation of Jesus from Jewish antecedents and background carries the danger of disastrous mythologization and distortion of the Gospel. Depriving the Christian religion of rootedness in Jesus the Jew would turn it into an „idealistic superstructure” similar to some ideology or doctrine.

The practical benefit from dialogue on the subject of Jesus consists in the fact that Jews may make a positive contribution to Christians in reaching the historical Jesus, which is an essential condition for a correct and comprehensive understanding of His message and the circumstances of the birth and dynamic expansion of the Church. Here, however, one must make a serious reservation: such a discernment does not exhaust all of the levels of reflection on the person and teaching of Jesus Christ. The question about His Jewishness is basically a theological question. In asking it we face the problem of whom we want to see in Jesus. Is He to be regarded as the Lord, the founder of the Church and a new religion, or as a historical person set in the social, religious, cultural and political realities of His

times? Each of these answers taken separately is an inadmissible reduction of the identity of Jesus. It ends either with mythologizing Him or with moving away from what is inalienably Christian in Christianity, in the „Judaization” of Christianity. Thus one must reconcile both perspectives, for without either of them Christianity would be crippled. Christians are concerned not only with the Jesus of history but also with Jesus Christ – the object of the Christian faith. For Jews this aspect is of no importance. The vast majority of them see absolutely no reasons for which they could or would want to assist Christians in a deeper understanding and confirmation in the Christian faith. For this reason an interreligious dialogue on the subject of Jesus is a very delicate matter. However, Jews should understand that paying attention to or even emphasizing the Jewishness of Jesus is the best way to overcome and remove still existing anti-Jewish stereotypes and prejudices from Christian theology and practices. Recognition and appreciation of the Jewishness in Jesus, who is the very heart of the Christian faith, is the most effective way of improving the Christian image of the Jew as such. Ignoring this dimension of His person turns first against the Jews and then indirectly against Jesus Himself; when Christians do not want Him to be the kind of Jew whose image they carry in themselves. Thus the Christian emphasis on the Jewishness of Jesus should be accompanied by greater openness on the part of Jews, „regaining” Him for Judaism and recognizing in Him an important figure also for the Jewish religious tradition.

On the part of Christians knowledge of Jesus requires familiarity with and even sympathy for Judaism. Until now neither the believers nor theologians and biblical scholars have been concerned about this. There is an urgent need to elaborate a new, post-Auschwitz Christology, which will see and respect in Jesus the similarity of His fate with the fate of His Jewish brethren murdered in death camps and elsewhere because of their Jewishness. John Paul II made a significant analogy between what happened in Jerusalem and in the crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau, symbolizing the Nazi extermination of the Jews, when on 7 June, 1979 he said in a homily during Holy Mass on the grounds of the former death camp: „I have come and I kneel on this Golgotha of the modern world, on these tombs, largely nameless like the great Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.” One of the pillars of the post-Auschwitz theology should be testimony from the times of the Holocaust, whose tragedy and profoundness attains the dimension and emotional charge characteristic of the New Testament descriptions of the passion and death of Jesus. In some mysterious sense the centuries-long „passio Hebraica”, which attained its zenith during the Second World War, was an extension and manifestation of the „passio Jesu Christi”. One must also take into consideration the exceptional duration of the Jews and their regaining of complete sovereignty after nearly two thousand years. The existence of the Jews and the formation of the state of Israel do not permit a purely „secular” approach to history. Christians

generally understand this, but the problems and disputes arise concerning the interpretation of these facts. A lot has been done in this respect (G. Baum, M. Dubois, J. Moltmann, F. Mussner, J. Pawlikowski, C. Thoma); but a lot still remains to be done.

Thus the problem is not only whether deliberations on the Jewishness of Jesus will contribute something new to the Christian understanding of His person and role. For there is no doubt that they will. To be sure – theoretically speaking – the picture of Jesus and faith in Him could exist without clear reference to Jews and Judaism, but both Christians and Jews would be poorer for this. „Assisting” Christians to gain a deeper and truer image of Jesus the Jew makes sense, for it will also bring benefits to Jews. Christian anti-Judaism, which has not been lacking, took its sustenance from the consequences of ignoring the Jewishness of Jesus. On the other hand views and attitudes that in fact also turned against Jesus sprouted up on this subsoil. The rebellion against the Jews always turned into a rebellion against Jesus and is a manifestation of the triumph of the pagan element in Christianity. If someone cannot bear or even hates Judaism and Jews, he is unable to reach and recognize the true identity of Jesus. In the final analysis anti-Jewishness leads to anti-Christianity. If Christians negate the Jewishness of Jesus, they tear themselves away from their roots. On the other hand recalling and emphasizing His Jewishness may be an effective antidote for anti-Semitism.

„Whoever meets Jesus Christ, meets Judaism” – said John Paul II during a meeting with leaders of the Jewish community in Munich (17 September, 1980). „Whoever is ashamed of Israel, is ashamed of Jesus Christ and thus of his own existence” – added Alfred Laepple, renowned German exegete and theologian.

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