

Colloquium “Milestones and stumbling stones in the current dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims”, Wednesday 28 October 2020, organised by the Christian weekly *Tertio*, the University of Antwerp (UCSIA) and the Institute for Jewish Studies (IJS)

A Response to Etienne Vetö

A “Challenging Breakthrough” in Dialogue

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BIO

David Meyer was born in Paris in 1967. He is an ordained Rabbi. After a first degree in Applied Mathematics from the university of Paris IX, he obtained a Master’s degree from the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* and later a Master’s in Hebrew and Jewish Studies with Distinction from Leo Baeck College (London). He holds a Phd in Religious Studies from the KU Leuven. Meyer is currently a lecturer at the Cardinal Bea Centre for Jewish Studies at the Gregorian Pontifical University in Rome and has taught in various universities and countries from Belgium to Peru and China.

Let me first of all thank Prof. Vivian Liska and the Institute of Jewish Studies, as well as *Tertio* and UCSIA for not only making this webinar even possible despite the various pandemic challenges, but for inviting me (remotely) to participate in today's lecture and to respond to Father Etienne Vetö.

Thank you Prof. Vetö for the inspiring presentation you just gave. You have highlighted for us various important aspects of the recent breakthroughs **com-forting** those, like us, involved in dialogue between Judaism and Christianity, and you have pointed to challenges **confronting** us as well, as we continue to look ahead. Practical challenges and theological ones.

You have given us a great deal to think about and opened many horizons, some of them more encouraging than others. I am in particular very sensitive to the dichotomy you have presented whereby the greatest achievements of the dialogue are to be found in its textual legacy, as the "trickling down" of the letter and spirit of these remains an unceasing challenge. Is dialogue, like Revelation itself, producing a great written Book and a more difficult and hesitant infusing of the hearts ?

In the short time allocated for my response, attempting to formulate a Rabbinic/Jewish perspective to these questions, I will not have time to develop a point-by-point argument, reflecting on each and every idea evoked by Father Vetö. I would rather try to find a way to encapsulate, under one single heading and one single topic, what I - as a rabbi and as a professor of Rabbinic Literature and Contemporary Jewish Thought teaching at the heart of the Catholic world at the Pontifical Gregorian University - and listening to the words of Prof. Vetö, perceive as an overarching breakthrough that is, simultaneously, an overarching challenge in dialogue.

In other words, the perspective I would like to take is to suggest that, from a rabbinic point of view, there is possibly **one overarching breakthrough** amongst the many topics touched upon by Prof. Vetö that should really be considered as a "challenging breakthrough in dialogue" for Judaism. That is, not a breakthrough alone, and not a challenge alone, but a "challenging breakthrough", deconstructing the suggested dichotomy assumed by title of this conference.

Beyond Friendship ?

Father Vetö has pointed out, towards the end of his presentation, one important theological challenge. A challenge and a question he addressed directly to us, Jews. He argued, rightly, that the Church needs a living relation with the Jewish people in order to be truly herself, and while this is not - in theory - reciprocal, the following issue must be addressed by Judaism: **Do we have a responsibility in respect to the Gentiles ?** The question is audacious, deep and I will try to answer it, not so much as an intellectual question demanding an articulated and theologically structured answer - this is not how rabbinic Judaism normally functions -, but by giving it a more emotional and practical twist, touching on the "nerve centre" of the relationship between our two traditions.

The real "nerve" of dialogue, can be reduced to one single word: friendship. The friendship between our two traditions. Nothing could have been achieved without that friendship. It is therefore through the angle of a inquiry about friendship that I would like to try and answer Father Vetö's question about our responsibility towards the Gentiles.

Prof. Vetö gave us an excellent panoramic vision of the history of the friendship between Judaism and Christianity in the last 70 years. Suffice to add, that the **personal friendship** of the pioneers of dialogue, turned into a **friendship between two religious traditions** where "faith meets faith, not heresy or false belief".¹ Not just Jews and Christians speaking and working together, but Judaism and Christianity, as religious entities, recognising their shared theological roots and valuing their many respective diverging paths.

And then, a few years ago, coming from the Jewish side of the partnership, a new milestone in friendship was reached, echoing the calls of the Church. As Father Vetö reminded us, in 2015, the Orthodox Israeli Rabbinate, reviving for the occasion some past teachings from the vast rabbinic literature (in particular from Maimonides, Yehudah Halevi² and the later rabbinic authority Jacob Emden³) went as far as to declare: "that the emergence of Christianity in human history is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations ?"⁴ This is how far we have reached in friendship, this is how much was achieved.

But if friendship is to be more than words on a document, and if words are to carry true meaning as both our interpretative and exegetical traditions believe, one is bound to question the practical meaning of such words. If Christianity is not an "accident", if it is the expression of a "divine will", what does that truly mean from a Jewish and rabbinic perspective ? What does it mean to affirm that the existence and presence of your friend is not an "accident" ?

It is asking this question that the breakthrough becomes a challenge.

Being Warmed by the Theology of the "Other"

To try to formulate the true nature and the scope of the challenge, I would like, very briefly, to turn to a short talmudic text, a Mishnah and its Gemara in Shabbat 41a. Let us open a brief talmudic parenthesis. A halakhic/legal parenthesis, that will appear, at first, to be seemingly unrelated to our topic.

The Mishnah, that is the first legal code of the II century, discusses the legal problem of warming up water on shabbat, without infringing on the prohibition of using fire and a source of heat on that day. Quite an improbable scenario! And yet, with some ingenuity, the Mishnah declares: "The *miliarium* that has been cleaned from its hot ashes/coals, we can drink from its hot water on shabbat. But the *antichi*, even if all the hot coals have been removed, one cannot use its hot water on shabbat".⁵

We can all agree that this halakhic ruling is indeed unrelated to the question of the challenge of Jewish/

Christian friendship in our own century ! Unrelated, unless we set our eyes and minds on the two technical *words* of *miliarium* and *antichi* that are used to describe the kind of warming process of the water. Both are kinds of boilers from antiquity. One is from the Latin, the other from the Greek. The first refers to a roman heating device, the second to a Greek equivalent, but not entirely identical. The reference to Greek and Latin words, that is from the Greco-Roman tradition - a symbol for Christianity in so many rabbinic texts⁶ - to describe the possibility of a Shabbat warming process to enjoy hot water, is potentially highly revealing and significant. While, for the sake of intellectual honesty I must clarify that the mishnaic text is indeed halakhic and not symbolic or metaphorical, nevertheless, the images it uses to express its own halakhic concerns, can reach way beyond its intended legal scope.

So let us reformulate the question of the Mishnah. Can one rely on Christian (read Greco-Roman) know-how to warm up our own Shabbat ? This is the question that the Talmud confronts us with and asks us to ponder. This is the question, the monumental question framed in halakhic terms but read through the lens of our Jewish/Christian focus, that stands ahead of us. **As Jews, do we want to be theologically warmed by Christianity ?**

I am not here merely asking if Judaism is **interested** by Christianity, at an intellectual, historical, or theological level. I am not asking either: “what does Judaism have to gain from a friendly proximity with Christianity” ? The answers to these questions have been given many times before. I am rather asking an emotional question. Do we, as Jews, somehow want to feel the warmth of Christianity in our lives ? It is not do we “need” to feel the warmth, but do we “want“ to feel it ? I am talking about the “guts“ of Judaism.

The question, let alone the answer, is in itself an immense challenge for Judaism today. I have doubts that any of the signatory of the Orthodox declaration of 2015, not for that matter the majority of Jews whatever their affiliation, would easily answer with a resounding and unequivocal “yes” to such a question. The famous words to Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits, declaring that “as far as Jews are concerned, Judaism is fully sufficient. There is nothing in Christianity for them”,⁷ still powerfully echo in the minds and hearts of many.

And yet, reading and listening to Father Vetö’s presentation today, working with him at the Gregorian, having developed such an enduring and honest personal relation with so many members of the Church, at all levels, I believe that the depth of the sincerity of **their emotional bond** with Judaism calls not just for an intellectual reciprocal answer, but for an **emotional engagement** to dialogue on our part. Hence, again, my question that I perceive as a true challenge ahead: Do we, Jews, want to benefit from the theological heat and warmth that Christianity offers ?

Where Is Theological Heat to be Found ?

My short response to the far reaching perspectives offered by Prof. Vetö is not the place to engage at length into a detailed reading of the mishnaic text just

quoted. We would need much more time to do so, in particular if we were to try and understand, through the technical differences between the *miliarium* and the *antichi*, the conditions under which the sages of the Talmud perceived one could be warmed by the knowledge of the other, or not, benefiting from the other but without running the risk of losing one’s own identity. What such a distinction, based on the Talmudic discussion recorded in the Gemara, could mean for us today in the way we, as Jews, could benefit from the theological heat of Christianity, would be a fascinating enterprise. It is a needed enterprise as one would interpret a desire for theological warmth as a call to syncretism or dilution of one’s true identity. Nothing is further from my intention.

Maybe, suffice to ask - as a conclusion to my response to Fr Vetö - where would one need to look for a Christian theological heat that Judaism could be interested in receiving from its sister religion, without transgressing Judaism’s borders ?

I will answer at a personal level, with a personal experience that I will recast in more theoretical terms.

When faced with personal crisis, with grief or anxieties, with loss but also a times with joy, it is not solely to rabbinic colleagues that I turn for guidance, assistance or help. A few Catholic priests and theologians, that I have known for years, are also my port of call. I have shared many burdens of life’s journey with them. And I wonder: what do I look for and hope for when, as a Rabbi, I turn to them ?

The answer is simple: It is not their theological doctrine and it is not the official creed of their faith that I seek. What I seek, and what I get from them, is the human knowledge and the deep human understanding, that emerges from the experience and practice of their faith and tradition. That human knowledge is different from the one that emerges out of my own religious tradition. It enriches my own understanding of the human experiences, without threatening the integrity of my religious faith and practices. This is where the theological heat of the other can safely be found. In what Heschel, in his time, called “depth theology”: “The primary issue of theology is pre-theological; it is the total situation of man and his attitude towards life and the world. [...] Theology declares; depth-theology evokes; theology demands believing and obedience; depth-theology hopes for responding and appreciation. [...] Theology is in the books; depth-theology is in the hearts. The former is doctrine, the latter an event. Theologies divide; depth-theology unites”.⁸

After the breakthrough of true friendship, it is maybe the challenge of the desire to be exposed to the depth-theology of the other, that must be met, certainly on the Jewish side, if dialogue between our two traditions is to continue and move forward.

And so I end by responding to Prof. Vetö’s question, with another question, addressed to him: If we, as Jews, were capable of formulating a religious desire to be warmed by the depth-theology of the Church, would that not contribute, even partially, to demonstrate and activate our sense of responsibility towards the Gentiles ?

1. Rutishauser, C. "The Old Unrevoked Covenant' and 'Salvation for All Nations in Christ' - Catholic Doctrines in Contradictions ? », in (eds.) Philip Cunningham, Joseph Sievers, Mary Boys, Hans Herman Henrix & Jesper Svartvik, *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today; New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2011, p. 230.
2. While medieval Jewish thinkers such as Maimonides (Mishneh Torah, Hikhot Melakhim 11:6-7), Yehudah Halevi (Kuzari 4:22) or the Meiri (Beth Ha-Bechirah to Avodah Zarah 2b, 22a; Baba Kama 113b; Baba Metzia 27a) on occasions expressed rather positive statements about Christianity, such affirmation did not amount to full recognition of a valued Covenant between God and the people of the Church.
3. Emden, J., *Sefer Hashimush*, Amsterdam, 1758, pp. 16-17. Emden, J., *Seder Olam Raba Ve-Zuta Umegillat Taanit*, Hamburg, 1757, pp. 33-35.
4. "Orthodox Rabbinic Statement on Christianity," 3rd Dec 2015. *The Centre for Jewish-Christian Understanding & Cooperation*, www.cjcc.org/2015/12/03/orthodox-rabbinic-statement-on-christianity - Consulted 7th Oct 2020.
5. Bavli, Shabbat 41a.
6. Naiweld, R., "The Use of Rabbinic Traditions about Rome in the Babylonian Talmud," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 2, 2016, pp. 277-279. See also Yuval, I., *Two Nations in Your Womb: Perceptions of Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2006, p. 10. See also: Neusner, J., *Judaism in the Matrix of Christianity*, Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1991, pp. 73-87.
7. Berkovits, E., *Faith After the Holocaust*, New York, Ktav Publishing, 1973, pp. 44-45.
8. Heschel, A. J., "Depth-Theology", *CrossCurrents*, 10, n° 4, 1960, pp. 317 and 319.