Thinking faith
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Desiring the impossible

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This coming weekend marks the end of the Jewish celebration of Hannukah. Thomas Casey SJ, Director of the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies in Rome, looks at current issues in Christian-Jewish relations and asks how dialogue between Christians and Jews can be developed and deepened.

I come from a country where the most famous Jewish person of all never actually existed: the Dubliner Leopold Bloom, the protagonist of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. I was born and raised in Dublin, the city of James Joyce and Leopold Bloom. For three years I taught in the school Joyce attended: Belvedere College. A close Jewish friend invited me to dream big dreams when I began to teach there: 'You are forming future James Joyces,' he said.


Photo by Cayusa at flickr.com

Joyce was always struck by the similarities between the Irish and Jewish experiences: both suffered oppression, and were cast into exile; the Irish and Jewish people are scattered around the world. Joyce felt forced to leave his homeland in order to find himself. He identified with Jews, especially because of the many Jewish friends he acquired when he settled in Trieste, Italy in 1904, where he was to stay for sixteen years.

On 1 September 2009, I became Director of the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies in Rome. Founded in 1979, the Cardinal Bea Centre received in 2002 the mandate from the Holy See to be 'the Catholic Church's premier programme in Jewish Studies'. Our centre is named after Cardinal Augustin Bea, a German Jesuit, noted biblical scholar, and pioneer in the sphere of ecumenical relations and of relations with Judaism. In 1956, on the occasion of his 75th birthday, Augustin Bea remarked: 'Truly, looking back on my life, I must say that the Lord has led me on paths completely different from the ones I expected and has made of me something that I never even dreamed of.' Bea may have imagined he was reaching the end in 1956, but luckily he was wrong: his best years were yet to come. When Pope John XXIII gave him the red hat in 1959, Bea told the Pope that he would use the authority and responsibility conferred on him by the office of Cardinal above all to work for the great goal of re-establishing unity between Christians. On meeting Cardinal Bea in 1960, W.A. Visser 't Hooft, General Secretary of the World Council of Churches remarked: 'this man has not only read and studied the Old Testament; he has also absorbed the wisdom of the men and women of the Old Testament'. Cardinal Bea was the principal architect of the Vatican II declaration *Nostra Aetate*, on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions. *Nostra Aetate* created a new and positive paradigm for relations between the Catholic Church and the Jewish faith. Overnight, Catholic teaching about the Jewish people shifted from being a teaching of disapproval and even censure to being a teaching of respect and love.

Living in Rome, and in my new role at the Cardinal Bea Centre, I am getting to know many Jewish figures, not only in Italy, but around the world. I am an insider-outsider in Italy, because although I have some familiarity with Italian culture, I am also conscious that it is not my natural milieu. In my study of contemporary Jewish thinkers – for instance, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and George Steiner – I have repeatedly been struck at how they see

themselves as outsiders as well as insiders, above all through the way they witness to something beyond the here and now, to some kind of transcendence, however vague and undefined.

When I began this new adventure in the world of Jewish-Christian relations, I was touched and humbled by the many expressions of good will and support I received from Jewish and Christian figures. Along with sending me hearty congratulations, some people, such as Rabbi Irving Greenberg of New York, a pioneer in interfaith dialogue, also voiced concerns for the future of Catholic-Jewish relations.

But, despite the current fear of possible setbacks, Catholic-Jewish relations have happily come a long way, thanks to declarations like *Nostra Aetate* from 1965 and the commitment of many fine individuals and groups to the task of dialogue. When we look back, it seems all the more extraordinary that for so many centuries we did not accentuate the huge amount we have in common. Ironically because Christianity is so rooted in Judaism, it has tended to highlight its independence by focusing on the differences.

Yet God has kept true to both Christians and Jews over the centuries, and is steadily throwing light on our similarities. We both have a remarkably similar way of understanding the most fundamental and important questions. We each believe the world is created by God, who is one, and infinitely beyond anything we can think and imagine. We each believe that God guides the events of history in a compassionate manner. Moreover we share the belief that God's footprints and traces are manifest in history and in the human beings of our planet. We recognise that every human being is made in God's image and likeness, and so is worthy of extraordinary respect. We both strive for a better world, where God's values will be at home. This desire is even evident in secular thinkers of Jewish or Christian heritage. Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), for instance, in *The Principle of Hope*, speaks about the struggle for a better future:

> Men have always been expected to cut their coat according to their cloth, they learnt to do so, but their wishes and dreams did not comply. Here almost all men are future, rise above the life that has been granted them. Insofar as they are discontented, they consider themselves worthy of a better life.[1]

Together we believe we have a duty to exercise stewardship and care over the world. The Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas (1903-1993) emphasises this stewardship in terms of our responsibility for future generations. He comes up with the following principle to guide human actions:

> 'Act so that the effects of your action are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life'; ...or simply: 'Do not compromise the conditions for an indefinite continuation of humanity on earth.'[2].

We agree that human life is sacred, that the family is a fundamental unit of society, that the weak and defenceless should not be trampled upon or neglected, but cherished and protected.

Without minimising our theological and cultural differences, it is evident that what unites us is much bigger than anything that divides us. The great Hebrew prophets provide a blueprint we can all share, by encouraging us to practise what we preach, to wrestle with the deepest questions of life, and to answer these questions with minds and hearts full of humility, love and truth. But the deepest source of unity between us is that we share the same divine Father.

On 1 and 2 November 2009, I attended the eighth annual meeting of the Council of Centres on Jewish-Christian Relations (CCJR) in Florida. During the meeting we discussed issues in Christian-Jewish relations that may need to be addressed over the next couple of years. This discussion, which I summarise here, gave me helpful insights into some of the questions we need to look at today in Christian-Jewish relations.

A fundamental question is the sheer ignorance that many Christians and Jews have about each other. A crucial task is to increase our mutual knowledge, and so enhance mutual respect. The task is not helped by the fact that Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate* is little known to the new generation. When a priest gave a questionnaire to his class, asking students to explain what Vatican II was, one student wrote, 'it is the Pope's summer home'!

During our discussion, we recognised that dialogue is not easy, even among those of us who supposedly have a lot of experience in it. For instance, one participant noted that after one of our sessions,

although individuals were invited to ask questions, most in fact made statements instead. This shows that even asking questions does not come naturally. And dialogue, like questioning, is a skill. It does not come automatically, and is not easy to acquire. One model that helps teach dialogue in an effective way is to present a Jewish and Christian speaker in dialogue, so that people are not just learning what particular traditions have to say about a specific issue, but are also seeing and hearing how it is possible to engage in dialogue. To be able to watch a committed Jew and committed Christian engage respectfully in dialogue is a wonderful way of learning.

Even those who have been engaged in dialogue for many years are reluctant to address certain sensitive issues. Two examples are interreligious marriage and Messianic Jews, both of which touch on the boundary lines between our respective traditions. Because much of our work in interreligious dialogue involves redefining borders to some degree, people who come from an interreligious marriage or family are interested in hearing what we have to say, as are individuals who belong to Messianic Jewish groups. However, we who are engaged in dialogue have not yet reflected enough on these areas.

An important issue to address is how to read the Bible generally and also how to approach specific texts within the New Testament. One question that is now coming up repeatedly is: how do you read and study the Letter to the Hebrews? Little has been done in this area, yet it is one of the areas that most challenges the advances in Christian-Jewish dialogue since Vatican II, because the Letter to the Hebrews appears to support the idea that Christianity has superseded Judaism. However, when we study the Letter to the Hebrews in greater depth, it does not necessarily deliver an anti-Jewish message. For instance, since the Letter to the Hebrews talks about Judaism as it was before the destruction of the Temple, it describes a kind of Judaism that not only Christians, but also Jews themselves have largely left behind in the meantime.

The relationship of Paul to Judaism is an important issue, especially in the Protestant tradition. On the one hand Paul takes a critical stance toward Judaism as he helps shape Christian self-identity. For instance, Paul allows Gentiles to adopt the covenant without adopting the Torah and without becoming circumcised or subjecting themselves to dietary restrictions or the requirements of the Sabbath. Furthermore, in the First Letter to the Corinthians, the Church is described as the new Temple. Yet despite his various criticisms of Judaism, Paul also obviously feels at home in the synagogue. For example, when Paul arrives in a new city he first goes to the local synagogue and preaches there.

The issue of ecology is bringing together many people today. It raises important Biblical issues and also invites Christians to develop a deeper understanding of the 'land' tradition in Judaism.

It is necessary to find creative ways to get students interested in the other tradition. For instance, one Christian professor has given a course entitled 'Jesus never read the New Testament: why we as Christians should be addressing our Jewish Scriptures and roots'.

Two issues of major concern in the USA are the relationships between the Jewish community and Latinos, and the relationship with evangelicals. The Latino community is fast becoming the largest demographic minority in the USA, and among Latinos there is a great deal of misunderstanding about the Jewish faith. In order to move things forward, last year in Baltimore a programme between rabbis and Evangelical clergy was launched. The rabbis were pleased to discover that the issue of proselytism never came up: the evangelical ministers never expressed a desire to convert members of the Jewish faith. The programme focused especially on hermeneutics, on how we study texts. There has been so little dialogue in the past between the Jewish and Evangelical communities that many of the exchanges on hermeneutics were quite basic, a matter of one group showing the other how they read their scriptures: for instance, the rabbis demonstrated how they study texts and what the Midrash looks like. Even though it was only a beginning, it nevertheless offers great hope for the future. Our discussion at the Florida meeting showed that, although there is a lot of work to be done in Christian-Jewish relations, there are also promising developments.

Having just taken over the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies, I am aware of the modest role that our centre plays in the overall scheme of things. Over the

centuries, many exemplary Jews and Christians have invited us to expand our horizons to the measure of the universe itself by hoping great hopes and dreaming big dreams. In our centre I would like to expand and deepen our involvement in dialogue, and continually raise standards in order to foster greater mutual respect between Christians and Jews. We may not be the biggest enterprise in interreligious dialogue, yet as the Jewish religious thinker Martin Buber (1878-1965) declared, we must nevertheless 'desire the impossible'. Instead of being content with gradual change, we must seek true transformation. 'And whoever can no longer desire the impossible will be able to achieve nothing more than the all too possible.'[3]

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[1] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Volume 3, translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, Cambridge, Ma.: MIT, 1986, p. 1365.

[2] Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, p. 11

[3] Martin Buber, 'The Renewal of Judaism' from 1911, reprinted in *The Martin Buber Reader: Essential Writings*, edited by Asher Biemann, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p. 145.