

A Jewish View of Jesus

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Susannah Heschel, the noted Jewish thinker, has remarked that, for some Jews, when we look at a cross, we see a swastika. In other words, Heschel fears that too many of us equate Christianity with Anti-Semitism. That's another way of saying that Jews are often prejudiced against Christians.

This statement undoubtedly causes us discomfort. It should. We Jews, so often the target of discrimination and persecution, think of ourselves as open-minded and accepting of others. We are commanded to remember the stranger, for we were strangers in the land of Egypt. How could we be prejudiced?

The tragic truth, though, is that Jews have good reason to associate Christianity with Anti-Semitism. Shall we forget the Crusades? Are we not aware of the Spanish Inquisition? Even though the Holocaust itself was not an act of Christian Anti-Semitism, can we ignore the Church's apparent indifference to Hitler's final solution?

When I teach Jewish history, I ask my students to think about the Middle Ages, from the seventh century to the seventeenth. Throughout that time, Jews lived either under either Christian or Muslim rule. I invite my students, usually adults, to speculate about whether life for Jews was better in Christian countries or Islamic ones. Most imagine that Muslims would have oppressed the Jews more. That's reasonable, given the difficulties in the Middle East today, and especially because Jews enjoy magnificent relations with our Christian neighbors in the United States.

The truth, though, is more difficult to swallow. Despite the terrors of Islamic Fundamentalism today, Jews lived comfortably and prosperously in most Muslim countries, throughout much of the Middle Ages. The Golden Age of Jews in Spain flowered under Muslim rule.

In Medieval Christian Europe, though, Jews suffered pogroms, expulsions, and blood libels. We were accused of having killed Jesus, and we were forced to live behind ghetto walls. We could neither own nor work the land, and our means of survival were sharply limited. Our very presence was considered an insult to Christianity. After all, Jews were monotheists, Jesus' own people, no less, who did not believe in Jesus. That affront often cost Jews their lives, or at least their homes. When Catholic rulers conquered the Muslims, and gained dominion over Spain, not only did our Golden Age end, the Inquisition began.

These painful facts of history shape Jewish-Christian relations today. However, past persecution does not tell the entire story. In recent years and decades, countless Christian churches have undertaken wrenching, heart-felt self-examinations, confessing their past Anti-Semitism as a sin, and charting a more tolerant future. While many of us wish that the Roman Catholic Church would go farther in acknowledging its complicity in the Holocaust, that Church has been among the leaders in

seeking reconciliation in other ways. Specifically, Rome long ago repudiated the charge that the Jews are Christ-killers.

The result is a great deal of ambivalence in Jewish-Christian interactions today. We cherish our Christian friends. We delight in our Temple's good relations with Christian churches. We enthusiastically participate in interfaith endeavors. And yet, if we hear a Pastor mention Jesus in a prayer, many of us are enraged. If we look at a cross, most of us don't see a swastika, but too many of us do regard the cross negatively. When we see a cross, we may imagine a desire to convert us.

Given our history, our fears are understandable. Indeed, some do want to convert us, and we need to deal with that. However, our fears are also prejudiced. The time has come for us to get over our fears of the cross, our suspicion of Christianity. "Jesus" is not a dirty word.

We Jews are used to preaching tolerance. We're not used to having it preached to us. Some may especially not like to be hear this message on a Friday night, when we always have Christian guests not to mention our own family, friends, and congregants. And yet, I am confident that these words can be spoken without fear. Jews and Christians and people of countless other faiths and no faith share life in this community in peace and harmony. We cherish one another, and we respect one another. We care enough about each other even to hear the painful facts of history together, and to confront the other's internal challenges together. We are boundlessly blessed, to live in America in the 21st Century, in a time of greater understanding than history has ever known.

Today, we Jews should show our deep respect for Jesus, as the object of worship of another great religion. I have heard some Jews refer to Jesus as a rabbi, or a great teacher, or even a prophet. Personally, I don't use those designations, because Christians consider Jesus to be God in human form. If we assert that he was merely a rabbi, teacher, or prophet, we trivialize both Jesus and Christianity. Jews also do not use the term "Christ," because that Greek word means "messiah," which we do not believe Jesus to have been. We Jews should not characterize Jesus, but regard him with the awe due to our neighbors' God concept.

With that new view of Jesus may come a new tolerance among us. We may be able to hear the name of Jesus, even in prayer, and not be put off by it.

Perhaps you think I'm defending the ministers who have offered invocations and benedictions at Presidential Inaugurations in Jesus' name. No, I will not defend them, because what they did was wrong. Praying exclusively in Jesus' name, at a historic moment meant to include all Americans, they excluded Jewish Americans; they wrote off Moslem Americans; they excluded Buddhist and Hindu Americans; they dismissed Americans who practice Native American religions.

The sad thing is that those Protestant clergy did not have to be so exclusionary. Their prayers could have been inclusive. They could have invited all Americans to pray in the name of the Higher Power worshiped by each. They could even have mentioned the name of Jesus.

Years ago, my friend, the late Rev. Thurman Walker, an African-American Baptist minister in San Antonio, was invited to offer the Benediction at the Brotherhood/Sisterhood Awards Dinner of the south Texas organization analogous to JCA. When I walked into the room, and saw Rev. Walker on the dais, I was suddenly struck with panic. Rev. Walker and I had discussed this matter on several occasions, and I knew that he believed that he could only pray authentically if he used the name of Jesus. I wondered: How exactly would he pray at this interfaith gathering?

Rev. Walker offered a beautiful prayer, as he always did. Though I can't quote him exactly, he ended his prayer like this: "We pray in the name of God, we pray in the name of Elohim, we pray in the name of Adonai, we pray in the name of Jesus, Amen." Now, I must admit, I would have preferred that Rev. Walker say that "some of us" or "many of us" pray in the name of Jesus. And yet, his intent was clear: Rev. Walker protected his own integrity, by mentioning the name of Jesus. By not praying only in the name of Jesus, he respected our principles and included us.

Let us be as inclusive and accepting of others' beliefs as that faithful Evangelical Christian friend of mine.

When we look at a cross, may we see it for what it is: a Christian symbol of salvation.

When somebody says "Merry Christmas," let us cheerfully respond, "Thank you. As it happens, I'm Jewish and celebrated Chanukah, but I hope you have a merry Christmas if that's your holiday."

When we gaze at the face of Jesus, may we see it for what it is: a Christian representation of the love of God.

When we hear the name of Jesus in a prayer that also includes us, may we hear that name for what it is: the source of faith for so many of our friends and neighbors, and for the members of many of our families.

When our Christian friends, relatives, and neighbors value our faith, as almost all do, we may return their love with ours. Let us hold them in esteem, even as they honor us. Let us cherish their faith, just as they revere Judaism. Let us appreciate their Churches, even as they admire our sacred Temple.

Let us respect Jesus, as the object of their worship, and may we all bless God together

Amen.