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Covenant as a Continuing Conversation in the Future

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Imagine a critic, or even a child of yours or mine, asking: “How do you solve the problem that has led people to kill one another in the name of God since the birth of human civilization? At the end of the day, Judaism, Christianity and Islam all claim to be true. They conflict. Therefore they cannot all be true. At most, one is. If Christianity is true, Judaism is false. If Islam is true, both Christianity and Judaism are false. It follows that these religions are bound to conflict whenever their devotees take their truth claims seriously.”

“I, for my part,” my critic continues, “take this as sufficient evidence that all three are false. For how could the God of all humanity command his followers to deny the full and equal humanity of those who conceive Him differently? I would rather live with the uncertainty of doubt than the certainty of faith, for it is that very certainty that leads people, convinced of their righteousness, to commit unspeakable crimes.”

You will not be surprised to learn that I have reflected deeply on this for many years. Whilst I may be convinced of the truth of Judaism, Christians (and Muslims) believe with equal fervour that their faith, not mine, is true. How can we live peaceably together while at the same time honouring the commitments of our respective faiths?

This, from my Jewish perspective, is where the covenant God made with Moses and with the Children of Israel, comes in. When the Bible describes God as saying to Moses: *Anochi koret berit*, “I make a covenant”, (Exodus 34:10), morality becomes relational.

Whilst the Bible records God as *seeing* (for example, after each day of Creation, “God saw that it was good”, (Genesis 1); at the episode of the Golden Calf, God told Moses that “I have seen this people and they are a stiff-necked people”, (Exodus 32:9)) the covenant, however, is *not* seen. It is spoken, affirmed, declared, heard, heeded, assented to. It belongs to a culture of the ear, not the eye.

Words can be used, not just to *describe* the world, but also to create relationships, make promises, undertake obligations. When I say, seriously and sincerely, “I promise to do better. . .” I am not merely describing something but doing something, namely *making* a promise. When a Jewish groom under the wedding canopy, called a *chupa*, gives his bride a ring and says, “Behold you are betrothed to me by this ring according to the laws of Moses and Israel,” he is not speaking about a marriage but creating one.

Likewise, covenants are institutional facts created by what John Searle calls ‘performative utterances’– facts that do not reside in the physical properties of objects but in the rules and conventions by which they are governed. In the case of the Torah, those utterances are divine command and human consent.

The covenant informs us what are *called on to do* and what we are to refrain from doing. The language of covenant shifts from description to prescription, from what “is” to what “ought” to be; from what human beings *are*, to an ethical statement about what we *may or may not do*,. This is the meaning of God’s comment to Moses, *Anochi koret berit* (“I make a covenant”). It is a move from things seen to things heard; from the visual to the practical construction of what we might call a proto-Big Society. The Jewish world is defined by things heard. Our key practices are study and prayer, the word addressed by human beings to God, and the word addressed by God to humanity.

This stands in contrast to a language saturated with visual metaphors for knowledge. We speak of *insight, hindsight, foresight*; of a *view, a perspective, a vision*. We call people *perceptive*. When we understand something, we say, “I see.” In Judaism, however, the key metaphors are all auditory. In the Talmud, phrases referring to knowledge, understanding, or tradition, are often variants of the verb *shema*, meaning “to hear.” The key biblical command is “Hear, O Israel...” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Nor is this accidental. The God of the Hebrew Bible is invisible. All visual representations are forbidden, some idolatrous. Even the texture of biblical narrative is non-visual. We have no idea of what Abraham or Moses looked like. There is little or no description of landscapes. Biblical prose does not capture the play of light on surfaces. Instead it focuses our attention on the sound and resonance, inflections and innuendos, of the heard word. God showed himself to Moses and to the Israelites not in the image but in the call. When Elijah perceived God, he heard only a still small voice (1 Kings 19:11-13).

When I gaze at a painting or sculpture, watch a drama on the stage, I am in a different dimension of reality from that which I observe. I am a subjective self, observing an objective world. I am not part of the landscape, or the play. I am like Zeus looking down on the human drama from the top of Mount Olympus, interested, but detached.

In contrast, in the covenantal conversation, I am involved, part of the action, seeing events as they unfold, first from this perspective, then from that, hearing a multiplicity of voices and struggling to discern meaning, plot, sense, purpose, trying to separate the music from the noise. Our Bible is not *history* – what happened sometime else to someone else – but *memory*, the story of Judaism but also of Christianity, what happened to our ancestors and therefore, insofar as we carry on their story, to us. The Bible speaks not of moral truths in the abstract but of commands, which is to say, truths *addressed to us*, calling for our response.

Sometimes, my philosophical and scientific minded colleagues at Cambridge tease me, saying *they* seek to answer the *big* questions: what is knowledge? What is truth? What is really there? They tell me that a statement and its opposite cannot both be true. Either there is or is not a table in this room. Either Napoleon was or was not defeated by Wellington 200 years ago. Either the universe did or did not have a beginning in time.

This works well for facts and descriptions. It does not work at all well for what Viktor Frankl called “humanity’s search for meaning.” Meaning is not to be found in scientific facts, pure reason or physical description. Even Richard Dawkins notes at the end of *The Selfish Gene* (first

published in 1976), scientific facts entail nothing about how we should or should not act “We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.”

Meaning is found not in systems but in stories; not in nature but in narrative – the stories we tell ourselves about who we are, where we came from, what is our place in the universe, and what, therefore, we are called on to do. That is why the Bible, the supreme example of our search for meaning, is written in the form of narrative. Unlike philosophy, narrative celebrates the concrete, not the abstract; the particular, not the universal; the open future made by human choice, not the closed, predictable future of scientific law and historical inevitability.

Narrative does not exist in the opposition between objective and subjective, but rather in the *intersubjective*. It belongs, in other words, to the same domain as performative utterances, institutional facts, and covenants. Narrative truth is not like scientific or logical truth. It does not obey the law of the excluded middle. It does not operate on the either/or of truth and falsity. Narratives, as Jonathan Sacks regularly points out, contain multiple points of view. They are open – essentially, not accidentally – to more than one interpretation, more than one *level* of interpretation. Nor does the validity of one story exclude another. Stories, including historical narratives, do more than reflect facts about the world. They offer interpretations of the world. They attempt to *make sense* out of the raw data of events. They create worlds; they do not merely describe them.

What is true of texts is true of relationships. Relationships are multi-faceted in a way physical facts are not. I either am or am not (mainly) black-haired, short-sighted, and bespectacled. But I am, simultaneously, a child of my parents, the father of my children, the husband of my wife. I have colleagues, friends, neighbours and co-religionists. I am a citizen of England, the United Kingdom and Europe as well as belonging to humanity as a whole. Each of these relationships is covenantal in the sense that it involves reciprocal obligations. These obligations can conflict. Should I accept a speaking invitation in Rome or spend the time with my wife and children? I am torn between my responsibilities as a leader in interfaith dialogue and my duties as a father and husband. But there is no principled incompatibility between these loyalties. The truth of one does not entail the falsity of others.

Objective facts about a person are one thing; the relationships that make each of us who we are, are another. Here there is no either/or. Instead there is a series of narratives – those we tell about ourselves or others tell about us. Multiple narratives do not exclude one another. To the contrary, they help build a composite picture. They are part of what makes us human, hence different, unique, unsubstitutable. This is what led Jews and later, Muslims, to say that “a single life is like a universe.”

Hence the profound difference between thinking if my faith is true and conflicts with yours, then yours is false. *Faith as covenant* means if I and my fellow believers have a relationship with God, that does not entail that you do not. I have my stories, rituals, memories, prayers, celebrations, laws and customs; you have yours. That is what makes me, me and you, you. It is what differentiates cultures, heritages, civilizations. The truth of one does not entail the falsity of the other. Indeed the very words “true” and “false” seem out of place here, as if we were using words from one domain to describe phenomena belonging to another. Covenantal language speaks not of brute facts but institutional ones; not of physical descriptions but of systems of meaning, modes of belonging, ways in which groups relate themselves to the universe, its Author, and to one another.

Faith in the Bible is a moral quality, a condition that generates trust, the essential precondition of inter-personal relationship and co-operative behaviour. The scientific question is: What can I know about the world? The biblical question is: How shall I act and expect others to act if we are to achieve together what none of us can do alone? The former generates narratives of displacement. Truth cannot coexist with falsehood. If I am convinced that I possess the truth while you are sunk in error, I may try to persuade you, but if you refuse to be persuaded, I may conquer or convert you, imposing my view by force in the name of truth. This thinking leads to the mindset of, "I'm right; you're wrong; go to hell."

A covenantal conversation, however, with its acknowledgement of the multiplicity of narratives, relationships, interpretations, institutional facts, cultures and covenants, is fundamentally opposed to displacement narratives. It subverts them by offering counter-narratives in their place. The message of these counter-narratives is that despite our differences, we each have integrity and dignity in the mind of God. One of God's messages to us is that we must learn to live together by making space for one another.

We are reminded – and this is a point of immense significance – that beyond the truths that define the human situation as such, all further relationships between God and humanity are covenantal. None excludes others. God may be with us but also with those who are not like us; with friends but also with strangers. That is why the Torah tells us on 36 separate occasions to love the stranger. A covenantal conversation provides meaning and gives purpose, and the concepts of human freedom, responsibility and dignity follow. Whilst Greece (and Cambridge) may have produced philosophers, Israel produced prophets. Greece gave us tragedy, Israel its opposite: hope.

If all this is difficult, which it is, it can be said another way. My wife, Trisha, and I have three children. We love them equally and unconditionally. They are very different from one another. They have different strengths, skills, interests, temperaments and emotional needs. If we favoured one at the cost of the others, we would have failed as parents. Still more would we have failed if, having loved our firstborn, we then withdrew that affection on the birth of our subsequent children, transferring it each time to the youngest. Such behaviour would have damaged them all deeply, creating rivalries, insecurities and a sense of rejection.

If that is true of human parents, how much more is it true of God. Can I really believe that God, having set his love on, and made a covenant with, the children of Israel, then rejected them when they continued to honour that covenant, choosing not to follow the new faith, Christianity? Can I believe that the God of love, in loving Christians, thereby abandoned Jews? Can I make sense of the idea that, six centuries after the birth of Christianity and twenty-six after the journey of Abraham, God revealed that Jews and Christians had been mistaken all along and that their religious destiny was other than they had believed it to be? I can perfectly well understand that first Ptolemy, then Copernicus, then Newton – perhaps even Einstein - were shown to be wrong in their scientific beliefs and that if religion is like science, it is open to such refutations.

But to think of religion on the model of science is to think that God is a concept yet the Bible reminds us that God is a parent. The story of Moses invites us to reflect not on a concept but on a relationship; to engage not in a theoretical exercise but in a two-way encounter; most of all, the Bible commends us to contribute to the story of humanity by participating in a covenantal conversation.

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Having given you some personal reflections on covenant as conversation, I would like to explore, theologically, how they apply to the Jewish-Christian encounter.

Well, Christians might start by reflecting on (and seeking to understand the reasons for) the Jewish 'no' to Jesus. It is true that has been a massive shift in the Christian reading of the NT, that (for at least the last generation) acknowledged and embraced that Jesus was born, lived, and died a Jew; that the first Christians were Jews. But few reflect on the fact that his mother was Jewish or that the harsh criticism of the Pharisees in the Gospels has as much to do with the closeness and rivalry between the communities in which the texts were written as with anything that happened during the lifetime of Jesus. NT students may learn that Jesus was closer to the Pharisees than to any other Jewish group in the first century CE, but how many apply this to arguments between them? I often ask my students "with whom do you argue most?". Their answers coalesce: "We are arguing with those to whom we are closest."

The NT bears witness to debates and arguments, which were serious, vigorous and often bitter. Yet, what is forgotten is that the arguments were primarily between Jews, about a Jew or about Jewish issues (even when they concerned Gentile converts). The problem is magnified when passages are read as if they were "Christian" arguments against Jews. To read them this way is to misread them and to ignore the context of the ministry of the earthly Jesus: first century Palestinian Judaism.

There are signs of a shift in Christian thinking, illustrated by the Pontifical Biblical Commission's (PBC) "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible" (2002), which states that "Jewish messianic expectation is not in vain." It explicitly teaches that Jews, alongside Christians, are commended for keeping alive the messianic expectation. The difference is that for Christians "the One who is to come will have the traits of the Jesus who has already come and is already present and active among us" (no. 21).

It builds on the work of a small number of Christian scholars such as Jürgen Moltmann who see value in the Jewish 'no'. For Christians, the significance of the Jewish 'no' is that they should postpone the question of who will be revealed as Messiah to the end of time, and learn from Jews what it means to live in the present in an unredeemed world. Phil Cunningham suggests Christians should reflect on the possibility that the Jewish 'no' is in accord with God's will. By associating Jewish expectations of the coming of the Messiah with the second coming of Jesus. Both Jews and Christians share this anticipation and may—in theory at least—be viewed as right all along.

Similarly, Pope Francis (restating the view of St Paul) has written not only 'the covenant has never been revoked' but also that 'God continues to work among the people of the Old Covenant' (24th Nov 2014). And, "God has never neglected his faithfulness to the covenant with Israel and that through the awful trials of these last centuries the Jews have preserved their faith in God. And for this, we, the Church, and the whole human family can never be sufficiently grateful to them." (11th Sept 2013 p 238)

From the Jewish perspective, a covenantal conversation may resolve the apparent contradiction that both Jews and Christians claim *exclusively* to be the true Israel.

This is because a covenant is not, as is sometimes mistakenly assumed, a contract or a transaction but is an agreement dependent upon a relationship. Some exegetes hold to the view

that *berit* is better translated by “obligation,” because it expresses the sovereign power of God, who imposes his will on his people Israel: God promises in a solemn oath to fulfill his word to his people Israel, who are expected to respond by faithfulness and obedience. Jonathan Sacks explains:

‘In a covenant, two or more individuals, each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other, come together in a bond of love and trust, to share their interests, sometimes even to share their lives, by pledging our faithfulness to one another, to do together what neither of us can do alone. . . . A contract is about interests but a covenant is about identity. And that is why contracts benefit, but covenants transform.’

From a Jewish perspective, *all* relationships between God and humanity are covenantal. None excludes others. God may be with us but also with those who are not like us; with friends but also with strangers. That is why the Torah commands (on 36 separate occasions) to love the stranger.

Jewish philosopher, Franz Rosenzweig, argues that both Jews and Christians participate in God’s revelation, and both are, in different ways, intended by God. Only for God is the truth one; earthly truth remains divided. In other words, other religions, especially Christianity (and Islam), have their own covenants with God and are called to celebrate their dignity and particularity.

I call this “Jewish covenantal pluralism.” It begins with the Covenant with Noah: “The children of Noah [that is, people other than Israel] were given seven commandments: Laws [i.e., to establish courts of justice and the prohibitions of] idolatry, blasphemy, sexual immorality, bloodshed, theft, and [eating] the limb from a living animal.” These laws are an attempt to formulate moral standards for the world without a concomitant demand for conversion to Judaism. As such, they acknowledge the right of peoples to their own formulation of faith, provided only that a minimum standard is met. As Rabbi Johanan of Tiberias said: “Whoever denies idolatry is called a Jew.” Therefore, the rejection of idolatry, rather than any doctrinal definition of God, is key.

A Jewish covenantal pluralist may also turn to the concept of “righteous Gentiles,” referring to Rabbi Joshua ben Hananya who propounded the view, later generally accepted, that “the righteous of all nations have a share in the world to come,” though they were not converted to Judaism. Judaism does not have an equivalent to Augustine’s *extra ecclesiam non est salus* (“there is no salvation outside the church”).

Finally, briefly, one may refer to the principles of *tikkun ‘olam* (“establishing the world aright”), *darchei shalom* (“the ways of peace”), and *kiddush Hashem* (“sanctifying God’s name,” i.e., behaving in a manner that brings credit to God), all of which can be brought to govern the Jewish relationship to Christianity.

What these approaches share is an *affirmation* of God’s covenant not only with the Jewish people but also with Christians (and other faith communities) who are faithful, particularly in their covenantal relationship.

In conclusion, I suggest that for Christians, a covenantal conversation will aid the construction of a new and positive theology of the church and the Jewish people, a formidable undertaking, because as Johann-Baptist Metz has argued, the restatement of the church’s relationship with the Jewish people is a fundamental revision of Christian theology. The issue at stake is whether Christianity can differentiate itself from Judaism without asserting itself as either opposed to



Judaism or simply as the replacement of Judaism. The term “unrevoked covenant,” is the starting point, not the end point, of a renewed Christian theology of Judaism.

As for Jews, “covenantal pluralism” creates the theological space in which to affirm Christianity and establish a relationship based not on a lack of hostility but on common values; not on a lack of suspicion but on creating trust; a relationship based not on exclusiveness and superiority but on a shared mission, critical solidarity and mutual affirmation. A Jewish acceptance of an ‘irrevocable covenant’ for Christianity will create the theological space for Christians to retain their own special relationship with God and to see their reflection in a Jewish mirror, serving to deepen Christian faith in Christ and Christian respect for their elder siblings.