Kessler, Edward, and Neil Wenborn, eds.

A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations


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In the past few decades there has been a dramatic and positive shift in Christian perspectives of the Jews nurtured authoritatively by ecclesiastical declarations seeking common religious ground between the church and the synagogue. Inspired by the Vatican II declaration Nostra Aetate (1965) and subsequent official Roman Catholic pronouncements on the Jewish people (e.g., The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible, 2002), the Vatican’s avowed purpose is to stress the importance of Jewish sources (Scriptures, rabbinics, philosophy, mysticism, Zionism) for Christianity today as in the past. Likewise, mainstream Protestant denominations have taken a strong position against the “teaching of contempt” that Christians have projected on the Jews for the past two millennia as errant scriptural reading (e.g., their prominent role in passion narrative) and bad theology and stemming from ignorance of the value of postbiblical Judaism on the nascent church and on the later history of Christianity. In the declaration of World Lutheran Federation, “Christians (also) need to learn of the rich and varied history of Judaism since New Testament times, and of the Jewish people as a diverse, living community of faith today. Such an encounter with living and faithful Judaism can be profoundly enriching to Christian self-understanding” (Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations, 1998).
To correct ethical and moral “injustices directed against the Jews at any time from any source” (Pope John Paul II at his historic visit to the Tempio Maggiore synagogue, Rome, 1986), Christians are challenged to rediscover the deep Jewish roots of their faith and to live the life of *imitatio Christi* without anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism. When relevant in Christian preaching and catechesis, the Jewish understanding of God, Torah, and Israel are to be presented without polemics, politics, or paternalism. And, I might add, informing correctly about post-Auschwitz Judaism (Sinai and Zion over cyanide and powerlessness) adjudicates the ambivalent teaching about the Jews in *Nostra Aetate* 4: “the Jews remain most dear to God because of their fathers” (past memory) and “He does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues” (eternally present).

In comparison, Jewish reciprocal correctives about Christianity are less forthcoming, due to the residual effects of *contra Judaeos* in word and deed, a perceived no-gain situation in theological matters (e.g., Can believers in the new covenant and the Second Person, “this perfect gift from above,” accept Israel as equal, God’s special people, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” [Exod 19:6], who do not see Trinitarianism in the plain meaning of Hebrew Scriptures?), and the differences of opinion within the Jewish religious polity that impede a responsible collective response to the varied Catholic and Protestant statements about the Jews. This may explain the dearth of a communal reply to the *Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church* (1985), which suggests that the establishment of the State of Israel is not “in itself religious” and reports the “sad fact” that most Jews did/do not accept for themselves the salvific role of Jesus in history (but proclaim so for Christians, respecting the teaching of classical Christianity, which joins belief and salvation). However, this was to change in 2000, when a cross-denominational Jewish statement, although not supported in the main by the Orthodox, *Dabru Emet* (“Speak Truth”) and its accompanying book, *Christianity in Jewish Terms*, categorically delineated how contemporary Jews are to view Christianity and, by extension, what is proper and not proper in the Christian view of Judaism. In “our time” the clarion call to “speak truth(fully)” about two thousand years of the relationship of Judaism and Christianity is now heeded. To explain how and why is the purport of *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations*, sponsored by the Cambridge-based Centre for the Study of Jewish-Christian Relations.

This well-balanced, highly informative handbook provides a roadmap to the extensive terminology associated with interfaith scholarship. Over seven hundred entries of various length represent a wide span of words, events, labels, phrases, bibliographies, and movements across numerous areas of study such as theology, religious studies, history, literature, sociology, and political studies. A number of items are sprinkled with scriptural and rabbinic references, and all entries contain cross-references. The front pages contain
seven pages of maps (from biblical Israel to the current State of Israel), and an extensive bibliography of books, articles, collections, and so forth and an index of names are found at the end of the work. By focusing on analytical approaches to the Jewish-Christian encounter over the centuries, editors Kessler and Weinborn and their international team of contributors from thirteen countries provide an analytical, objective approach to understanding the dynamics of interfaith relations (disputation and dialogue) that differs considerably from a parochial, faith-based view. For example, the veracity of a biblical narrative that proclaims Jews are a deicidal nation (Matt 27:25; Acts 2:36; 1 Thess 2:15–16) is reviewed as an evolutionary polemical hermeneutic, to establish the church as the new Israel, contra the traditional ecclesiastical acceptance that the passion is as spiritual belief proclaims.

The title of this book does not mislead, since the contents are almost all about the shared religious heritage that defines-separates-unites Jews and Christians. However, as is the case with any reference work, there are omissions and limited or questionable interpretations. To illustrate: (1) page 79: the Auschwitz Carmelite controversy is less an issue of mission and conversion and more of a conflict circumscribed by religious and cultural differences expressed in language predisposed by certain types of interpretation; (2) page 150: evangelist Billy Graham did express sincere remorse for his secretly taped anti-Semitic remarks to President Richard Nixon in the White House (1972); (3) page 376: the apocalyptic resurrection of the dead and “at the end of time” reference in Dan 12:1–3, 5 relate to God’s retributive justice enacted in the restored land of Israel to end the reign of persecution under Antiochus Epiphanes (175–164 B.C.E.), not at the end of historical time as noted; (4) page 411: St. Edith Stein was sent to her death not because of her Jewish birth but because the Dutch bishops interceded on behalf of Jews, and Stein’s choice of living imitatio Christi equated her as an apostate Jew, and her reported death-march words “going for our people” are seen by me not as an expression of Jewish identity but as Christian theology, emulating the central sacrifice of Christ; and so forth.

Misgivings aside, it is good to welcome, sixty years after the Judeocide in the bosom of Christian Europe, this Dictionary that underscores convincingly the interdependence of Judaism and Christianity through dialogue, hope, and respect.