

## ***What Would Roy and Alice Do? A Reflection on How I Came to Be a Failure through Dialogue, Thank God,*** **By Irving (Yitz) Greenberg**

I first learned about dialogue from reading Martin Buber. From him, I understood that religious dialogue was all about meeting the other in an I-Thou encounter. Certainly, there should be no intention to change the other or make him/her over in my image. But I confess that I did not enter the Jewish-Christian conversation in a very dialogic frame of mind. I was driven by a shocking, life-changing encounter with the Holocaust in 1961 that tore apart my devout, believing relationship with the God of Israel and shattered my religious equilibrium as a fulfilled modern Orthodox Jew. I could not understand how the Nazis could single out the Jews for total extermination, preceded by emotional torture and endless suffering, yet the neighboring peoples—nay, the whole modern civilized world—stood by. Nor could I accept that God had not intervened to save God’s people from this fate.

As I read and studied, I came to believe that the Jews were set up to be victims of genocide by almost two thousand years of Christian theology that had penetrated deep into Western civilization. As “the new Israel,” Christians had to defend Christianity’s validity as the upgraded, ongoing covenant of Abraham/Sinai, even as the original Israel lived on and rejected Christianity’s claims. The answer was the teaching of contempt—a horrifying typology of Jews and their religion: having been besotted by pride in being chosen, the Jews grew self-satisfied and spiritually blind. Their faith turned into a religion with no soul or compassion. They arrogantly rejected God who in the person of Jesus Christ walked among them, and they became cruel murderers who mocked and, bringing the mild, loving Lamb of God forward, condemned him to death, forfeiting their election, and brought down an eternal curse from God on themselves.

These teachings darkened over the centuries into images of Jews selling their soul to the Devil, afflicted with pestilent diseases—not to mention horns—that betrayed their pact with the Arch Fiend. They poisoned wells and spread plagues to decimate their neighbors. They kidnapped innocent children, cut their throats, drew their blood, and baked it into the *matzah*, their ritual bread. Thus, Christianity injected deep into Western culture the image of Jews as uncanny and demonic, beyond the pale of humanity. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, this profile had mutated into racial anti-Semitism. One consequence was that in religious anti-Semitism, the evil characteristics could be shucked off by becoming Christian; now Jews were incorrigibly sub-human. Hitler and many Nazi leaders were not faithful Christians—indeed they were enemies of Christianity—but they seized upon the group already designated by Christianity as unworthy life to be their scapegoat; by the elimination and death of the Jews, the world would be made whole.

I saw that to rid Christianity of supersessionist demonization and “justified” hatred would require an active program of positive affirmation of Judaism by Christianity’s practitioners. It would take a head-on acknowledgement of past guilt and a determined repentance, including confronting the New Testament itself when it portrayed Jews as cursed. It would take unblinking self-criticism and heroic efforts to neutralize the Church Fathers’ and various saints’ teachings about “the Jews.” Protestants would have to repudiate the violent, eliminationist anti-Semitism of Martin Luther—the very man who gave them so much spiritual nurture and understanding of faith. Could a religion with such a bad record generate such a noble and selfless reformation in order to stop inflicting pain on others? It did not look very promising.

Desperate and looking for allies, my wife and I entered Jewish-Christian dialogue in order to persuade Christians to cut off this tradition of anti-Semitism so its terrible impact would never be felt again. I also felt that Christians would need to recognize the good truth about Jews and Judaism in order to reject the vicious stereotyping embedded in their tradition, so I tried to show a Judaism worthy of respect: *Halachah* as more than a legal system (=Law) as

opposed to living Christian faith and encounter with God (=Gospel), the Torah as a redemptive vision of *tikkun olam* (repairing the world) and a way to walk with God through every moment of life; Judaism as a covenant to work for the spiritual and political liberation of humanity, and not about the Jewish people alone; the core proclamation of Judaism as this: that every human being was created in the image of God, endowed with the dignities of infinite value, equality, and uniqueness; and flowing from these principles, all the commandments between one person and another – from “love your neighbor as yourself” to *tzedakah*, the obligation to help the poor; from feeding the hungry to treating others with justice.

Did I think about Christianity itself as a religion? Not much. Although I was Orthodox, my view of the founding of Christianity was close to the standard liberal religious American Jewish view: it was the religion started in the name of Jesus, a “liberal” Jew who brought many good Jewish values to the new faith, even though Paul, the conduit of much Hellenistic influence, had turned this new faith toward (excessive) spiritualization of the Messiah and away from Jewish religious practice. I had no clue about Christians’ extraordinary closeness to Christ or their experience of the presence of God in him, or the ethical resources and the extraordinary self-sacrifices that Jesus and the Crucifixion evoked in the faithful. My goal in “dialogue” was not to learn about Christianity, but to teach Christians about its deeply embedded anti-Semitism.

I remember some classic responses:

- Christianity might be anti-Judaism—critical of the religion—but not anti-Semitic; anti-Semitism is hate, and Christianity is a religion of love.
- Later Christians injected anti-Semitism into Christianity, but the New Testament is sacred, and a divine text by definition cannot be besmirched with hatred.<sup>1</sup>
- Hitler was a pagan who hated Christianity; “we were persecuted also so the Holocaust cannot be connected to Christianity”. Pius XII ordered the monasteries to hide the Jews of Rome.

Such encounters did not increase my appreciation for Christianity. Had all the Christians I met been conventional and defensive, this dialogue would have been futile, if not disastrous.

However, by the grace of God, I met a most remarkable group of Christians including Franklin Littell, Gerald Sloyan, Paul Van Buren, John Palikowski, J. Coert Rylersdaam, Clark Williamson – and especially Sister Rose Thering and Roy and Alice Eckardt, who became soul mates. There were many others, too numerous to name. These people got it. They understood the Christian problem, because they had studied it themselves. They did not need me to teach them; they were ahead of me, which is why they joined the dialogue. They were able to offer a critique from within that was not fudged or airbrushed in any way. As faithful Christians, they were determined to erase the blot of anti-Semitism from the religion they loved. And most had started to study Judaism already so they could do justice to it as an independent faith with dignity and depth of its own.

During the weeks before the outbreak of the Six-Day War, when it appeared to every caring Jew that the Holocaust was about to be repeated in the destruction of Israel, there was a deafening silence from the churches. But the above colleagues did speak out, and they condemned the Church’s bystanding. Roy (and Alice) Eckardt wrote a searing article, “Again, Silence in the Churches.”<sup>2</sup> Sister Rose had already begun working on an analysis of Catholic textbooks’ treatment of Jews and Judaism. She went on to campaign with astonishing force for liberating Soviet Jewry and for Israel’s right to exist in peace in the Middle East. One would have to have a heart of stone not to be moved by the integrity and passion of these good Christians. I began to reflect on the apparent paradox that these were people shaped by and suffused with Christian faith, which surely deserved some credit for raising such people. Clearly, I had not paid sufficient attention to the total substance of the religion and its effects on its adherents.

I was further shaken out of my complacency by the depth of criticism and the unyielding search for purification and moral rebirth that my dialogue partners exhibited over time. I remember how the Eckardts grasped that certain classic Christian beliefs were deeply implicated in the worst Christian behaviors. They made the point that the basic conviction that Christianity was the sole religion in which God had joined in person misshaped Christian theology into putting down all other religions (in addition to the way it distorted Judaism to show the specific inferiority of Jewish faith). They witheringly portrayed Wolfgang Pannenberg, then considered one of the leading contemporary *avant garde* Christian theologians, who claimed that, “Through the cross of Jesus, the Jewish legal tradition as a whole has been set aside in its claim to contain the eternal will of God in its final formulation—as false witness about Judaism’s claims and unselfconscious, self-flattering triumphalism.” They realized that the Church’s claims had to be reshaped and reduced, in order to stop the falsification and mistreatment of others.

They also perceived how the Christian good faith focus on Jesus’s infinite suffering in the Crucifixion had led to dismissal of the suffering of others and even of the enormity of the Holocaust itself. This led them to the theological reduction of the Crucifixion and the “relativizing” of the Resurrection in their later classic, *A Long Night’s Journey into Day*.<sup>3</sup> In it, they quoted the account of the Nazis in Auschwitz burning Jewish children and described it “as an evil that is more terrible than other evils [including the crucifixion of Jesus who was a mature person on a mission who knew for what he was dying]. This is the evil of little children witnessing the murder of other little children...being aware absolutely that they face the identical fate.” By this standard, “[t]he God forsakenness of Jesus has proved to be non-absolute – for there is now a God forsakenness that is worse by an infinity of infinity that God forsakenness of Jewish children which is a final horror.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1975, I broke my boycott of Germany to participate in a conference on the Holocaust in Hamburg. The German participants were noble Christians, headed by Gertrud Luckner who had been sent to the concentration camps for her resistance to the Nazis. At one session, Roy Eckardt presented. As he went on, the murmurings grew. The listeners were embarrassed by the uncensored dissection of Christianity’s sins against the Jews (a feeling no doubt intensified by the presence of Jews). They were offended by the reduction of Christian claims – even though Eckardt explained that this was the only way to break the vicious cycle of Christian triumphalism. The group literally silenced him. I felt that we were inches away from some kind of excommunication.

I could not help speaking up. I had not heard such penetrating words of unsparing self-criticism since the prophets of Israel had chastised the people. Although the prophetic words had been misused by Christians to degrade the Jews, in actual fact the prophets’ critique was testimony to the ethical stature of Jewry and the high standards by which Judaism was being judged. I testified that as I heard Roy, I experienced Christianity’s moral grandeur in that it could raise up such prophetic voices in this time. Now I understood that Jews would have to make a herculean effort to try to match such a standard of self-purification from sins against others.

Other experiences continued to shape my evolving stance towards Christianity and Christians. Sister Rose (who loved Shabbat and often came to spend the day with our family) invited us to visit Catholic worship. We came to see the living liturgy and the spiritual force of sacraments and community. I also met Christians who had taken up the cross and devoted their lives to serve the needy and helpless.<sup>5</sup> Through dialogue and experience, I discovered the moral force of Christianity, the spiritual power of its worship, as well as the will to serve God, the devotion unto death of true Christians, sending me on an extended journey to reconceive the Jewish relationship to Christianity. I tried to understand what vision for the world and message to the Jews God had wanted to convey in extending the covenant to a vast segment of humanity through Jesus and Christianity.

The impact of these experiences, as I have noted, went beyond rethinking Christianity from a Jewish perspective. The Eckardts and Sister Rose had no axe to grind against Christianity. They were seeking truth unto its innermost parts and they would speak it even to God. They would show no favoritism to man or God; they refused to soften the failures, responsibilities, and obligations that they uncovered. Therefore, their critique implicitly challenged all religious people—inevitably, for me, extending to Judaism as well.

In a conference in 1976, Roy presented a paper, “The Recantation of the Covenant,”<sup>6</sup> which argued that God must repent for giving the covenant to the people Israel—the Divine was guilty of exposing Jewry to murderous fury without giving the people protection against the ultimate genocidal cruelty. I have written elsewhere of the theological crisis that this paper set off in me.<sup>7</sup> The initial terms of the covenant were (to quote Elie Wiesel) that the Jews “are to protect His Torah and He in turn, assumes responsibility for Israel’s presence in the world.”<sup>8</sup> This was not just a theoretical point. If Roy was right, then traditionalists could no longer claim that unless modern Israelis observe the Torah, that God would exile them again, or that if Jews obey the Torah—or study it—they need no army, for God will protect them. Nor could moralists—or Christians—argue that unless Israelis live by the highest standard, then Israel has no right to exist, and the land will spit them out. This insistence is a powerful, if tacit, undercurrent in the critique of Israel on the Christian left and among liberation theologians. Roy made me see that it was immoral for God to demand that Israel meet higher standards or else – since God was not, as initially promised, going to save them when in danger. There was a need to rethink Judaism in light of the Eckardts’ spiritual witness.

I struggled to rearticulate Jewish theology: The covenant was broken in the Holocaust; God could no longer make demands. But the covenant was *voluntarily* taken on again by Jewry out of love (of God, people, and the redemptive vision). Later, I came to believe that from the beginning, the covenant had been designed by a loving God as a pedagogical process: as human capacity grew, God self-limited more. Finally, the Divine renewed the covenant on the basis of full human commitment – but humanity had not acted responsibly in Europe in the 1930s and 40s. That breakdown made the Holocaust possible, after which the Jewish people stepped up and took responsibility for their own destiny by assuming sovereign power creating the State of Israel. Its task was to exercise that power with justice and liberty for all. Naturally, many in the Jewish community were offended by these thoughts.

The Eckardts’ impact on me was not finished. I had noticed all along that they paid a steep price for their religious courage and avant-garde explorations. Roy had been a distinguished student of Reinhold Niebuhr and published important books. He had served as President of the American Academy of Religion as well as editor of its journal. He should have been at Harvard or Yale. The reason he wasn’t seemed obvious to me: he and Alice were too devoted to Judaism and Jewry, too involved with the Holocaust, and too outspoken in their critique of Christianity. In effect, they were asking the Church to have the faith and courage to “die”—to crucify its own worst tendencies even at the risk that classic concepts might also expire. This prospect frightened and angered many Christians, even some repentant ones.

The Eckardts even challenged no less than the Resurrection itself, writing: “It is the teaching of the consummated Resurrection which lies at the foundation of Christian hostility to Jews and Judaism,” and in this “Christian triumphant ideology reaches ultimate fulfillment.”<sup>9</sup> They argued that most affirmations of Resurrection failed the test of historicity (fundamentalists were, of course prepared to fail this test, but most Christians were not fundamentalists), and highlighted how many modern theologians had already spoken of Resurrection as “symbol,” “myth,” “experience,” or as “extra-bodily” and thus not necessarily literal. Roy and Alice knew they would be spiritually crucified by Christians outraged at their further relativizing of the core doctrines of Christianity. Out of Jewish self-interest and loving concern for them, I privately pleaded with them not to push their community beyond its limits. But in order to stop the mass

murder of Jewish children from recurring, they were willing to follow Jesus, to take up the cross and be destroyed themselves in order to save the innocent.

Here was their final impact on my life: I had been increasingly in tension with my own Orthodox Jewish community due to my theological journey under the impact of the Holocaust. Now I asked myself: in light of the Eckardts' approach, what in my tradition taught contempt for other traditions? Which traditions in Judaism denigrated the image of God in various people or groups? Prodded by their model, I spoke out. In the eyes of my community's leadership, my offenses were many: urging the centrality of restoring the image of God to its fullest as a response to the systematic degradation of the image in the camps meant affirming black liberation, women's liberation, gay liberation; recognition of the unity of fate and the revealed inadequacy of all positions in the light of the Shoah meant affirming internal Jewish pluralism; reconceptualizing the relationship with Christianity to recognize it as a covenantal partner in *tikkun olam* meant a grave departure from past consensus. I felt that all these teachings were desperately needed in a post-Holocaust world, but I was straining my own ties to their breaking point.

Indeed, I tried to soften or downplay some positions in order to narrow the distance between me and my community. But just when I was ready to sell out, the image of Roy (and Alice, and Sister Rose and others) would rise up before me. They were being crucified for their fidelity to justice for Judaism/Jewry, whatever that took. How could I betray their model by backing down?<sup>10</sup> Time and again when I hesitated, I asked myself: what would Roy (and Alice) do? I could do no other. I got into trouble; many relationships were ruptured. But I learned the final lesson of dialogue: it made me into a better—certainly a changed—member of my own faith.

After great catastrophe, one must respond with great redemptive acts—morally, theologically, politically—in our faiths and between our faiths. From the Eckardts' example, I learned that it is worth being a “failure” in order to make such redemption possible. I believe that this rapprochement and new partnership between Judaism and Christianity (which only people like them could have made possible) will be seen in history as one of the great religious revolutions of all time, a repentance/turning almost without parallel.

As I, too, brooded on the fate of the burning Jewish children at Auschwitz, I came to believe that there could be only one reparation for this infinite evil—and that was not immortality (i.e., consolation in a post-mortal existence) but resurrection (ironically, given the Eckardts' own relativizing/reducing of Christian understandings of resurrection). I came to feel its overwhelming moral necessity. Both God and humans would have to accept the responsibility to make it happen. I came to believe that in both our faiths, resurrection is the central life affirming, mortal body-upholding, humanity-liberating promise and consolation. Like the Eckardts, I affirm the future Resurrection. In their words: “The young Jewish prophet from the Galilee sleeps now. He sleeps with the other Jewish dead, with all the disconsolate and scattered ones of the murder camps, and with the unnumbered dead of the human and non-human family. But Jesus of Nazareth shall be raised. So too shall the small Hungarian children of Auschwitz.” They helped me to see that once we have reckoned with full mind and responded with full heart to the triumph of evil and the rule of despair in our time, we can with honor, dignity, and hope embrace the promise of the prophet. “They shall not do evil nor destroy in all My holy mountain [that is, the whole planet]; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:9).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I remember, thirty years later, having such an exchange with the Reverend Jerry Falwell. Since our paths had crossed at a conference in a hotel, I pulled out a Bible and asked him to read Matthew 27:25 (“The people cried: ‘His blood be on us, and on our children’”) and some of the classic passages in John. He was obviously shaken up, fell silent for a moment, and then said: you know my mother read me these passages starting from my childhood. My mother loved the Jews and there was not a drop of hatred in these verses as she read them (I am not recalling his exact words, but the gist of them). In a way, I believed him, but in the early days, such responses evoked righteous indignation in me, if not scorn.

<sup>2</sup> *The Christian Century*, Vol. LXXIV, Nos. 30 and 31, July 26, 1967, pp. 970-980, and August 2, 1967, pp. 992-995.

<sup>3</sup> Eckhardt, Alice L. and A. Roy. *Long Night's Journey into Day*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104.

<sup>5</sup> One most vivid memory: a Norwegian television news anchor who had given up a life of celebrity and fortune to build and run a village for abandoned, brain-damaged children in the backwoods of Sri Lanka.

<sup>6</sup> In Alvin Rosenfeld and Irving Greenberg, *Confronting the Holocaust: The Work of Elie Wiesel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> see Greenberg, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*, p. 26ff

<sup>8</sup> Elie Wiesel, “Jewish Values in the Post Holocaust Future” in *Judaism*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1996, p. 281.

<sup>9</sup> Eckhardt, Alice L. and A. Roy. *Long Night's Journey into Day*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1982. p. 130.

<sup>10</sup> One of the beauties of dialogue is that it spreads religious paradigms that formerly operated only inside the context of the faith that spawned them--through exposure and intimacy, leaping across faith barriers and shaping people nurtured in a totally different religion.