

CHRISTIAN/JEWISH DIALOG TOWARD SOLIDARITY

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An open letter in response to a letter of a rabbi
with whom I've never had a conversation on Jewish/Christian relations
& who addressed his letter to "the Rev.Mr. Willis Elliot" (name misspelled)

Dear _____,

I thank you for your contribution to Jewish/Christian dialog, which in your last sentence you say "is possible in an atmosphere of mutual respect for our differences without being in denial of past failings." Your psychiatric phrase "in denial" is appropriate to (1) silence between our religions & (2) inauthentic polite exchanges falsely passing themselves off as dialog. This letter continues the dialog "in an atmosphere of mutual respect."

1 Dialog between our two religions is **urgent** for internal & external reasons. Internal: Our two religions, rabbinism & Christianity, are siblings: siblings should work at getting along with, even supporting, one another. External: We have common enemies against whom we need to stand in solidarity with each other. In our increasingly antibiblical neopagan cultural surround, heaven has become mere sky & the soul has collapsed into mere self & the academy thinks our religions nonsense & the media extends to us at most a demeaning patronism. We need to **act** together on the basis of our common code (moral sense, ethic--though fed by our differing creed & cult), but also we need--again, for external as well as internal reasons--to **think** honestly & courageously & confidently together.

2 Daily, in reading the Hebrew & English in your prayerbook GATES OF PRAYER, I try to think-feel-pray as you do. I can't expect you to do the same with comparable Christian materials, for as a nonChristian Jew you'd be editing out so much of creed (especially christology: God's incarnation in Jesus, & Jesus' resurrection). When I use GATES OF PRAYER, I need edit out only cult, as our creed & code are yours +. I am more free to use your materials than you are mine. Many Christians (not I) believe the reverse should be true when Jews & Christians come together for worship: Jews are of course free to use their creed, but Christians should not feel free to use their christocentric creed. For this unfreedom, all the blame is on Christians whose "be-kind-to-Jews" patronism Jews should be highly suspicious of both as inauthentic & as a root of antisemitism. As for the annual Shoa-Holocaust observance, I hate to see Christians prancing around in yarmulkas & suppressing the name of Jesus. I'll start attending again if Christians stay out of the leadership or behave like Christians. Phony solidarity revolts me, especially because authentic solidarity is so needed.

3 Heaven to mere sky, soul to mere self, & **virtues** to mere values. I saw Sidney Simon do "values clarification" on a group of junior highs who showed no sense of virtue. We know how to engender virtue, but we cancel each other out in public education. The greatest stories ever told to engender transcendence of resentment are the Joseph saga & the Prodigal Son: cannot we Jews & Christians stand together in solidarity to promote their use in public-school virtues-formation? What I'm saying broadly here is that virtues-formation in America should be an issue in Christian/Jewish dialog. Not on creed or cult but on code, we two biblical peoples need to dope out how to stand **for** what we believe about how to live & **against** both the militantly antibiblical & the morally indifferent elements in our society. Against such risk-taking stand Jewish survival-fears. But I can tell you that we Christians, too, have survival fears in today's America, where most of what passes for Christianity has little depth.

4 In saying that I "over-reach when you take upon yourself the prerogative of defining Judaism," you puzzle me. Every group self-defines, no group can deny to any other group the defining of it. When you teach your confirmands, you define my religion either as part of the curriculum or when your kids ask "What do Christians believe?" Yes, only blacks can speak from within "the black experience," only women from within "women's experience," etc. But in our increasingly ideologically fragmented-tribalized society, should we not try to avoid social solipsism?

5 You violate your criterion of "mutual respect for our differences" when you call "myth" the earliest Christian memories, scattered widely across early Christian literature (including the New Testament), that Jews (some, not all: all Jews never do anything!) "tried to wipe out the earliest Christians" (my words). The birth of Christianity was extremely painful for Jews (whose records speak out against the "minim") & Christians. When you say that on this matter I "confuse history and myth," what am I to say of any "historian" who mocks up some other explanation for this pile of evidence other than that Jews were extremely rough on Christians, rough unto death? Luke is as careful a historian as the ancient world produced, & he says (4.29) that the Nazareth synagogue's response to Jesus sermon was to try to kill him ("hurl him off the cliff"). (Given that datum, how could it honestly be said that Jesus' death was exclusively the doing of gentiles, viz Romans?) And are we to give no credence to Acts' thrice-repeated (9.1, 22.5, 26.10) statement that Saul Paul with official Jewish support persecuted the Christians, "breathing threats and murder" against them, casting his "vote against them when they were being condemned to death" (New Revised Standard Version)? When Saul Paul became a Christian, some Jews were at him with murderous intent (eg 2Cor.11.25, "stoned"; cf Ac.14.19: after the Jews stoned him, they "dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead"). Need I pile up more references to back up my statement that "Jews tried to wipe out the earliest Christians"? By a hermeneutical tour de force you can call it all "myth"; perhaps I should expect that of folk who foist on the public the tribe-exonerating myth that Jews had nothing to do with the death of Jesus....On this whole matter, my brother, I fear that you are "in denial."

6 In the history of interpretation, one of the dodgings & weavings is the *argumentum e silentio*, which you use when you argue from silence that you know of no "independent validating source for that statement [that "Jews tried to wipe out the earliest Christians"] or any description of first generation interaction between Jews and Christians outside of Christian scripture." Your implication is that all the back-up references I might supply you with would be only evidence of early-Christian antisemitism. Further, why should we expect independent sources, Jewish or nonJewish? The persecuted yelled "Ouch!"--the persecutors said nothing. Further, what advantage would there have been to nonChristian Jews or pagans in remembering Jewish holocaust intentions against Christians? But there were obvious advantages to the Christians in preserving that, along with the crucifixion in accessible memory. (The so-called antisemitic passages in the NT are not something expurgatable, as though a so bowdlerized NT would be acceptable: they are part of Christian identity, self-definition. Of course they need to be read in historical-cultural context, like everything else in the Bible.)

NOTE on "independent source": On one occasion in his home, Rabbi Chaim Stern said with a smile, "Willis, you are as hard up for external sources for Jesus as I am for Moses." The ancients were not presciently kind to the modern historian. Moses' Exodus is as central to your faith as Jesus' Resurrection is to mine, but we're both vulnerable, out of luck, when asked for independent sources.

7 You claim that antisemitism is primarily "a religion phenomena [meaning "phenomenon"]." That claim is a two-edged sword. It reinforces your religion (as embattled), & it resists, even attacks, any religion (especially mine) whose devotees for any reason participate in persecuting Jews. Religion is the root, culture ("life-style") is the fruit: almost all persecution of any group is of the fruit, not the root. I am no economic determinist, but it's undeniable that economics is a major nontheological factor in antisemitism, the Jewish drive making for disproportionate economic success (though of course there've always been also poor Jews). You are "in denial" if you think you can explain antisemitism exclusively in the religious dimension: there are other life-style factors.

8 You ask a great question: "Who created the climate which occasioned the Holocaust?" Your question is rhetorical, implying that my religion did. Again, your simplistic overrating of the religion factor. I could counter, "Who created the climate for the death of Jesus?" But such bickering impedes our moving forward to productive dialog toward solidarity.