

**3<sup>rd</sup> INTERNATIONAL MULTIDISCIPLINARY  
SCIENTIFIC CONFERENCE ON SOCIAL SCIENCES AND ARTS  
S G E M 2 0 1 6**

**ANTHROPOLOGY, ARCHAEOLOGY, HISTORY & PHILOSOPHY  
CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS  
VOLUME II**

**ANTHROPOLOGY, ARCHAEOLOGY  
HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY**

**24-30 August, 2016  
Albena, Bulgaria**

**ISBN 978-619-7105-77-3**

**ISSN 2367-5659**

**DOI: 10.5593/sgemsocial2016B32**

## ORTHODOX-CHRISTIANITY AND JUDAISM IN DIALOGUE – MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY PERIOD –

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### ABSTRACT

With a history of 2000 years, the dialogue between Orthodoxy and Judaism experienced difficult times that have left deep scars in the hearts of the followers of the two religions. In the modern and contemporary period, without forgetting the past, it is trying to find bridges between the two religions with the purpose to help the faithful to respond responsibly to the challenges of the present and future. The themes that have been analyzed in the past are of a great interest to our times: the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, the place and the role of the Bible in the two monotheistic traditions, Jerusalem as a Holy City, the religious freedom, the quality and the responsibility of elected people, the problem of religious freedom. Finally, only through sincere cooperation one can find relevant answers to the faithful of the both religions.

**Keywords:** Interreligious Dialogue, Orthodoxy, Judaism, mutual understanding

### INTRODUCTION

In the larger borders of history of interreligious dialogue, the dialogue with the Jews is the oldest that the Christians have had with the followers of other religions. Over the time, this dialogue has experienced difficult periods that ended with a real conflict. In the early modernity, the dialogue between Christians and Jews had several guidelines that take into account the realities of living of the representatives of the two religions: the Old Testament approach as a common basis for discussion; the moral attitude which consists in the awakening of the Christian responsibility to the Hebrew people; the desire to get out of the isolation expressed by the followers of Judaism in the sense that, after the dark period of the last century, the Judaism was legitimized before the world as the religion of a people which has kept the intact identity over the centuries.

### THE CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE WITH JEWS DURING THE MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

Before the Second World War were founded several organizations that have worked to improve the dialogue between Christians and Jews. In 1930 was founded the *Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews* as an agency supported by the *International Missionary Council*. It was dealing with the development of training programs and preparation of meetings between Christians and Jews, since its formation, denouncing the anti-Semitism in any form. At the General Assembly of the *World Council of Churches (WCC)* in New Delhi (1961) this *Committee* was reorganized as a body in the *WCC*. Another forum that fought against anti-Semitism was *The Council of Christians and Jews (CCJ)* created in 1942. Over time there have been as well other bodies which have militated for the development of levers to help promoting the dialogue between Christians and Jews. One of these organizations was the *International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCI)* in which were involved Protestant Christians and Roman Catholics, as well representatives of Jews. They met in Seelisberg (1947) proposing a

list of ten points for a better collaboration between the followers of the two religions. Other important meetings were held in Bossey in the period 1964-1966. An important moment in the relations between Christians and Jews was the document *Nostra Aetate* at Second Vatican Council (1965) followed by others promulgated by Vatican or by the conferences of the cardinals in order to implement the decisions of 1965 in the best possible conditions. The same thing was happened in the Protestant Churches, where a meeting of several Christian organizations from Rhineland (1980) criticized any proselytizing attempt to convert the Jews. If centrally one can say that Protestant Churches and the Catholic Church have issued various documents that reestablishes the path of good relations between the followers of the two religions, problems arise when one trying to assess local and parochial decisions. The attempt to resolve meantime moral and social issues often slams the problem of the missionary conversion [1].

Along the meeting in *Edinburgh 1910* and those in the *WCC*, in which they discussed the dialogue between Christians and Jews (from the first General Assembly in Amsterdam in 1948, when one raised the issue of anti-Semitism of any kind), it must be also mention the bilateral meetings held during the time in the different places. "The relationship between the World Council of Churches and the Jewish community is as old as the Council itself. In fact during the years when the Council was in process of formation, it was actively involved in work among refugees in Europe, many of them Jews. The Council has always looked upon Christian-Jewish relations as a special ecumenical commitment, and it is resolute in the struggle against anti-semitism" [2]. In most cases, beyond the specific topics addressed, the basis of the bilateral meetings was the biblically study, given the importance of the history of Bible in the two traditions and the fact that the Old Testament is respected both Jews and Christians.

Between 1968-1972 took place in Switzerland four meetings attended by religious leaders both Jews and Christians: Geneva (1968, 1969, 1972) and Lugano (1970). Of the Jews participated ten representatives of various religious organizations, while Christians were represented by 17 participants from different Christian formations, members of the *WCC*. As main subjects were chosen the importance of Jerusalem in the two religious traditions and the importance of the religious education [3]. In 1975 it held in Sigtuna a meeting, *Jewish and Christian Worship*, with the theme focusing on the relevance of the religious worship in the two traditions. Also it was discussed the importance of Jewish worship for the Christian world, including the cult of the family, the synagogue and the temple. Another meeting was held in Arnoldshain (1981), *Jews and Christians on the way to Vancouver*, being a preparation for the General Assembly of the *WCC* in Canada (1983). At this meeting they discussed what brought the new dialogue between Christians and Jews about the gained experience of life, and the role of Jesus. In 1982 has been sent the document *Ecumenical Considerations on Jewish-Christians Dialogue* by the Central Committee of the *WCC* to the member of all Churches, a result of meetings between *CCJ* and *IJCIC*, putting into practice the recommendations of the *Guidelines on Dialogue* adopted in Chiang Mai (1977).

In 1988 it was published the text of the *Theology of the Church and the Jewish People: Statements by the World Council of Churches and Its Members Churches* in the discussions that took place between the representatives of *WCC* and *IJCIC*. The text starts from the historical reality of the dialogue between Christians and Jews and from the obvious relationship that exists between them. It emphasizes the historical

importance of the Jews for the Christians, and the importance of the Old Testament for the New Testament. It is recommended that in the future to work on shaping a single vision in every tradition for a better development of dialogue or to the presentation of all the opinions on the subject. In these circumstances, it is advised to Christians to know and to understand the Jewish history, especially in recent years, when they were persecuted [4]. In the same year, the *WCC* held a meeting in Sigtuna in that were fixed key points that have emerged from the meetings that took place so far between the Christian and Jews: God's love is manifested for all humanity; Christians and Jews share a similar spirituality; Jesus Christ unites Christians and Jews; Christians reject the claim after that the Jews suffering is due the Lord Crucifixion; Jews and Christians have the same roots, but have different goals; the recognition of the tragedy of the Holocaust; Jews people is not removed from God; Jews have a special vocation; nowadays Jews continue the old tradition of biblical ancestors.

At the meetings with the representatives of Christian Churches, Jews raised the issue of their defining not according Christianity and its terms, but as a people with a long tradition without being labeled as religion of wholly Hebrew Scriptures. The problem of state Israel continues to trouble around the world, its official recognition not solving the conflicts in those territories. In these circumstances, the dialogue with the Jews did not just stop at treating some general themes, but tried to serve the practical needs of the Christians and the Jews living together in different regions of the world and they are trying to find answers to the needs and the daily problems, according to the geographically area they are living and to the mentalities, traditions and history that seeks to valorizing them for collaboration and mutual understanding.

The meetings between Christians and Jews continued especially in widely dialogue with the representatives of several religions. Without to be neglected, the dialogue between Christians and Jews gave attention to the meetings between Christians and Muslims, especially in the new social, political and economic context and especially on the recent events that have awakened the interest in these discussions at the highest level. However, the desire to establish a better understanding between people belonging to different religions and ideologies, dialogue with the Jews is occupied and continues to occupy an essential place. Mistakes of the past have influenced these discussions, but the desire for mutual understanding has always been that the difficulties to be overcome.

In 2010 it held in Istanbul, *Intra-Christian Consultation on Christian Self-Understanding in Relation to Judaism*. This consultation was part of a series of meetings in which the representatives of various Christian denominations have analyzed and assessed their Christian understanding in a pluralistic world, in the contexts in which the majorities are representatives of other religions. The meeting took place at the same time and in the same place with the annual one organized by *ICCJ*, the participants having the opportunity to attend the both consultations. At the Christian meeting attended the representatives of Christian denominations around the world. Those present discussed their understanding in different Jewish contexts.

The purpose of this meeting was to find bridges between the two traditions and to encourage the dialogue between Christianity and Judaism. The observers from the Jews participated also, which represented a step forward in the methods used in the dialogue. Among the issues raised in the consultation from Turkey, which have been proposed also in the agendas of the following meetings, are: how can the relationship between

Christianity and Jews to help the first one in understanding how God relates to the people of the other religions?; can Christianity to see the Christology as a general framework in which to understand the nature of the Church and the relationship with Judaism and Jews people, or this framework must be represented by God's history with the Jews people through which to understand also Jesus Christ and the Jews people?; how can be valorized the historical truths after that Jesus Christ was a Jew and the early Christian roots were Jewish?; what implications can have the Christian understanding about Judaism towards the situation from the Middle East?; how can the Palestinian Christians experience to influence their own Christian understanding?; how can Christians find solutions in conflict situations that to develop a relationship of respect and a gracious perspective? [5].

### **THE ORTHODOX CONTRIBUTION BROUGHT TO DIALOGUE BETWEEN CHRISTIANS AND JEWS**

From the historical point of view, the dialogue with Jews represented for the Orthodox Christians, the oldest form through that those who professed the faith in Jesus Christ the Savior came into contact with the people of the other religions. The Gospel was first preached to the Jewish world, and after to the pagan one.

In connection with the historically attitude towards the Jews, they have outlined two different approaches: the first one, going from St. Justin Martyr and the Philosopher who, in the *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*, represented a relationship of mutual understanding between Christians and Jews. The second one, which starting from Tertullian, gathered an entire literature against the Jews, among them a special place took St. John Chrysostom and St. Augustine. "Christians, in taking a position with respect to Jews, have two ways in which they may go. The one is that of polemic against the Jews and the other is that of irenic conversation. Most Christians have taken the former route, down to our own age" [6]. Thus, in the discussions between Orthodox and Jews, the first had as model the attitude of St. Justin Martyr of the second century, "the Christian philosopher, who boldly chose to dialogue sincerely with Trypho, a Jewish intellectual of his time. The twentieth century is known as the age of dialogue. The times are such that we are all called upon to hold conversations with religious peoples of other faiths" [7].

During the spread of Christianity throughout the world, the relationship between Christians and Jews is presented in the *Epistles* of St. Paul and also in the *Acts*, especially in relation with The Council at Jerusalem (*Acts* 15: 1-21; *Galatians* 2: 1-21). It must not forget that the proclamation of the Christian message was first among the Jews communities, where the Law of Moses and the Prophets prepared for the coming of Messiah. Also, the first Christian services took elements and moments of Jews ceremonies of the Temple and of the synagogues. This close relationship between the Jews and Christians worship is reflected today in the Orthodox Churches, especially during the Divine Liturgy. "The Christian worship has its origins in Judaism which points to the fact that a historic Jewish Christianity was a reality in the experience of the historical Church. This valid Jewish Christianity disappeared, however, and its tradition and vitality continue in the rich rituals and worship of the Christian Church" [8].

During the dialogue with the Jews have been addressed several key issues: the problem of anti-Semitism, as an action against God; the incompatibility between Christian

proselytizing (or forcing the baptism of Jews) and the true teaching of the Church; the current reality of God's covenant with the Jews; the issue of religious freedom; the Christian Church presented as the New Israel etc. Regarding the anti-Semitism, the issue is very sensitive, because there are traces of such approach on the relationship with Jews from the early Christian centuries, the tragedies of the Holocaust during the Second World War being only traces of whole string wars of mass destruction. There must however be remembered that the Orthodox Church has condemned as heresy any racial or anti-Semitic violence. On this line took part the *Encyclical* of the Ecumenical Patriarch Metrophanes III in 1567 condemning the attitude of some Christians towards the Jews from Crete, threatening them with excommunication on those who do not respect the Jews and violated the commandment of love that our Lord Jesus Christ gave us. In the nineteenth century, Metropolitan Athanasios of Corfu condemned all those who disturbed the peace of the Jews and attacking their sacred traditions. According to this sentence, the Synod of the Church of Greece has issued three *Encyclicals* accusing the practice of burning a Jews symbol on Good Friday, the *Encyclical* since 1891 showing that this custom has its roots during the Ottoman occupation. The practice must be removed from people's lives, emphasizing the fact that, according to the Gospel, the Christians must be tolerant towards Jews, the creation and God's children. The idea is repeated in two *Encyclicals* issued in 1910 and 1918. Over the time, the Orthodox of any nationality tried to implement these exhortations that were valid not only for the Greek people, but also for all the Orthodox believers. So, in many situations during the Holocaust, the representatives of the Orthodox Churches urged and helped to save the Jews. After the dark period of the Second World War, the Patriarchal *Encyclical* which concerned to the relationship between Orthodox and Jews and others were given as well of other Ecumenical Patriarchate until nowadays [9].

A black page of history of relations between Christians and Jews is represented by the pogroms from Russia. But, in that period of darkness of mind, when many Christians have resorted to fight against those next to them, there were not rare the cases where the Orthodox Church has stand up against injustice products to Jews. At Tomsk, in 1905, a young monk defended "his Jew brother" against those who were persecuting him, and in Kiev, Bishop Plato held a procession that advocate for removing the injustices made towards Jews, leaving himself to be beat by the crowd.

In 1960 it reiterated the condemnation of those who do not tolerate the Jews, as highlighted the Archbishop Theokletos of Athens, which stated that the proximity to Jews should be based on historical truth after that the Apostles, our parents, had Jews nationality. Moreover, our Lord Jesus Christ was born as a man among the Jews, and "His redeeming blood which He shed on the Cross for our sake was Jewish blood" [10]. Based on these ideas, the Christians must show a greater love towards the Jews people.

Regarding the forced baptism, the Orthodox tradition has always condemned those who practiced the proselytism. The Orthodox Faith does not oblige anyone to be baptized unless the act is consensual. The Orthodox claim that the covenant of Mount Sinai is crucial for the Christian tradition and should be an important point in the talks between the Christians and the Jews, especially since St. Paul insists on the fact that the Law and the Prophets have prepared the people for the Incarnation of the Son of God.

A common point of discussion between the two monotheistic religions is linked to the Torah, as the Old Law that our Lord Jesus Christ came to fulfill. In addition, the Jews

talk about one unwritten Torah, as a possible topic for discussion when it take into account the importance of the Sacred Tradition for the Orthodox faith. Finally, “we are like the Jews. Throughout the many centuries they suffer hardships because they slip away from the hands of God; however, God again forgives them and again they ascend and descend, and still continue to be children of God, as are all human beings” [11].

One of the most sensitive topics in the dialogue between Christians and Jews is related to the religious freedom. In the bilateral meetings were highlighted the common principles of the Orthodox Christianity and the Judaism: the religious freedom is a fundamental right based on the revealed truth, according to which all the believers are created in God’s image, the religious freedom being a divine gift and a fundamental value that it is affirmed, respected and defended; the relation between freedom and religion is characterized by complementarity and it cannot speak about the antagonistic relationship between the two; the gift of freedom involves responsibility, and the way in which the believer realizes and expresses its responsibility affects his own dignity and determine its relationship with his sacred living environment, the human shall be moral responsible to pursue good and justice in society and to combat evil in all its different manifestations; the responsible freedom is the essential prerequisite for the exercise of freedom of religion, and the society must recognize this as an inviolable freedom of the human person; the creation of the conditions for preserving the religious identity of communities is as well a responsibility of the pluralist and of the multicultural society; the governments having the duty to recognize the important role of religion in society and to respect the principle of the religious freedom in the legislation; the militant secularism, the religious fundamentalism and the relativized pluralism are real obstacles to preserving the religious identity and the recognition of the value of the human person requires respect for all forms of religious or secular expressing, if they do not threaten the religious freedom of the believer or of the society.

Another topic that must to be considered very carefully in terms of Christians, with strong echoes in dialogue with Jews, is linked to the Christian vision of the Church as the New Israel. The theme was analyzed from the early Christian centuries, and these are found at St. Justin the Martyr and Philosopher, St. Gregory of Nyssa, Sf. Ambrose of Milano, St. John Chrysostom, etc. In treating this problem it should be considered the language in that the Church Fathers were using during their time, and so we must not overlook the context in which they lived and wrote. The two traditions have a common heritage that must be highlighted and valued in the interreligious discussions, especially because the Holy Fathers of the early centuries often found image of the Church as the New Israel, with a significant role in the theological and liturgical life of first Christian communities. This inheritance can be harnessed starting from the specific scriptural figures from the two traditions. Always it must bear in the mind the context in which those who have written towards these themes, and as well the language and the spirituality to which they belonged. The image of the New Israel is rooted in the Church’s consciousness so deeply that it is impossible to give it up, as it is required in some theological circles. This was due to the closeness between the two traditions in the early centuries, so when discussing the representatives of the two religions must take into account the context of the first Christian centuries to not fall into the error of unfounded accusations. It should not be overlooked that the Fathers saw everything in sacramental terms in general, and in the eucharistical terms in particular. In this context, Jerusalem appears frequently in the writings of the first centuries, while the liturgical



texts of those times, which were preserved and nowadays are linked to Jewish tradition, among the early Christians being many who came from among the Jews. So, in the Sacraments often appear the references to the Old Testament and to the important moments from the Jews people's lives, and the main persons mentioned in the Old Testament appear as models for Christians in the sacramental life. These holy figures, among which a special place took Abraham and Moses, represent possible points of discussion between the representatives of the two traditions. Other common themes that can be treated in the interreligious dialogue are about holiness and virtue. From these start the arguments of Trypho and St. Justin, showing that they are not privileges of the one of the two traditions, but responsibilities to achieve their overflow. The common inheritances are tasks and blessings for those engaged in the dialogue [12].

On the way to a sincere dialogue an important role play the bilateral meetings between Jews and Orthodox Christians which was discussed on equal position, about the report and relations between the believers of the two religions. One of the first modern meetings, attended by representatives of the *Greek Archdiocese of North America* and of the *American Jews Committee*, took place in 1972 in New York. At this meeting it was strained that the two religions have many points in common to be valorized for a better understanding between people. Thus, among the recommendations adopted by the representatives of the two religions were revealed: to be assembled a coordinator committee to handle the scheduling and the organization of the future symposia between Christians and Jews; to be undertaken studies from both the Orthodox and the Jews, on common themes (relations between Christians and Jews in the Byzantine Empire, the conception of the Holy Book in the two religious traditions, etc.). The bilateral meetings with the representatives of Jews continued to this day by participating, from Orthodoxy, the representatives of Churches from Greece, Romania, Bulgaria and Russia (starting with the meetings since 1972, 1979 and 1993). The organizers of these dialogues were *The International Jewish Committee for Inter-religious Consultations*, *The Orthodox Centre of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Chambésy* (until 2001), *The Office for Inter-religious and Intercultural Relations of the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Brussels* (starting with year 2001) [13]. Over the time, along the Ecumenical Patriarchate, in the academic dialogue between the Orthodox and Jews were involved *International Jewish Committee*, *Jewish Community of Romania*, *World Jewish Council of Jerusalem* and *International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations in New York*. These meetings continue and strengthen the relations between the representatives of the two religions that address issues concerning both the past and the current interest. In this context, in 2013 was held in Thessaloniki the eight Conference between the representatives of Jews and Orthodox Christianity, with the title *The Spiritual and Physical Environment: Respecting Our World, Respecting One Another*.

## CONCLUSIONS

Although it has been made important steps on the road of sincere dialogue between Christians-Orthodox and Jews, there are still voices condemning this as a betrayal of the message of Jesus Christ. To answer to all of those that are contesting the importance and the necessity of this dialogue should be pointed out that, "in our search for understanding the relations and interactions of Christians and Jews, we must at the outset declare our honesty and openness to the study of experiences of both Judaism and Christianity", because "when people do not know each other, they misunderstand each

other and often the results are disastrous. An honest dialogue between Christians and Jews is of utmost importance for all of us. The hope is that these conversations will result in mutual respect and recognition of each other as human beings” [14]. In this regard, only a correct analysis of the past and a meaningful look to the present and to the future can help to strengthen the bounds between Orthodoxy and Judaism on the desire to collaborate in strengthening the relations between the followers of the two religions. Without forgetting and denying the past, only a correct perception of this can find solutions for the future of the relations between the Christians-Orthodox and Jews to be based on mutual understanding and cooperation to overcome together the obstacles that appear against the realization of God’s Kingdom.

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