

# A WILD SHOOT GRAFTED

## How the Encounter with Judaism can Transform Christianity

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**M**Y OWN SPIRITUAL JOURNEY began quite straightforwardly. I was not particularly interested in other religions; I wanted my own life to become more and more permeated by the good news of Christianity. Though some things in the Church's devotional tradition were more a hindrance than a help, ecclesial Catholicism served nevertheless to lead me quite consistently towards Jesus Christ. His life and teaching fascinated me, and drew me more and more under his spell. I went through different stages, until eventually I found myself confronted with something other than the baby Jesus of the manger, the pale Galilean, the man of sorrows on the cross, or the triumphant cosmic Christ. I came to encounter the Jew from Nazareth, emerging from a particular Hebrew faith-world. I found myself wanting to know who Jesus was as a historical person.

As I began this journey of discovery, new realities began to open up to me. At the time, I had no idea of how they might lead me beyond a merely Christian world. I began by relating Jesus to the God of the Hebrew Scriptures, a God who had not simply freed Israel from slavery, as liberation theology loved to recount, but who had also, after the Exodus, given the people the Torah at Sinai, and had bound them to observe it. We are now in a position to retrieve something of this Second Temple Jewish faith-world. I came to realize how Jesus has to be understood as an itinerant preacher, prophetically proclaiming the Torah; his very life is as a transparent glass, revealing Judaism for what it is, and letting it express itself. But that was not all. I also began to let these Jewish categories shape my understanding of Jesus' being wakened from the dead, and also—more importantly—my reading of the Christian proclamation given by Paul, branded as a renegade Jew. Eventually I had to recognise and reverence Judaism as the abiding origin of Christianity, as a principle which must continue to shape Christianity, even as it also represents a contradiction. The Church is

only one half of the people of God; the Jewish people remain heirs to their inheritance.

I could no longer live out my Christianity without reckoning with the fact that God had become not just human but Jewish. This recognition both fascinated and irritated me. With time, however, my Christian faith has come to incorporate a stable conviction about this truth's relevance, and has changed as it has grown into this conviction. Respected theologians wonder about whether God might also have become incarnate in a Hindu, a Buddhist monk or a Muslim. My convictions about Jesus the Jew are now so strong that this kind of question seems to me quite misguided from the outset, and to be not worth even discussing. This kind of vague universalism about the order of salvation totally ignores Judaism's self-understanding. It also completely neglects the Jewish idea of the Messiah, the origin of the Christian dogma of the incarnation, an origin to which Christianity must remain connected if it is not to become some kind of myth detached from history. Such ways of thinking have become for me intolerable. The Incarnation of God in Jesus the Jew takes its place within a tradition developed within Judaism itself: that of a transcendent creator God who comes, a God committed freely to the people from Abraham onwards, a God present also in the people's experience of prophets confronting the way they were living. The covenant of Sinai had not been revoked.<sup>1</sup> I came to recognise the covenant of Jesus as a transformation of this covenant, an extension given so it could now reach all humanity.

### *In the School of Jewish Prayer*

These insights—and I have named here only a small selection—were not just a matter of information about the far-off time in which Jesus lived, nor were they just a theological game. On the contrary, I was making a journey to the sources, a journey that would challenge and reconfigure my faith. For this newly acquired sensitivity, these new ideas, had grown out of an encounter with the contemporary lived reality of Judaism, both from stays of several months in Israel and from contacts with orthodox Jews in my native Switzerland. These

<sup>1</sup> See the collection of essays strikingly entitled *Der ungekündigte Bund?* (The Unrevoked Covenant?): *Antworten des Neuen Testaments*, edited by Hubert Frankennölle (Freiburg: Herder, 1998).

<b><i>See what wretched bread our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt. Whoever is hungry, come and eat; whoever is in need, come here and hold Pesach. This year here; next year in the land of Israel. This year in captivity; next year in freedom.</i></b>	הא לחמא כניא די אכלו אבהתנא בארעא דמצרים. כל דכפין ייתי ויפסם. השתא הכא. לשנה הבאה בארעא דישראל. השתא עבדי לשנה הבאה בני חורין.
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*From a Pesach Haggadah*

experiences had given me more than new ways of thinking about faith; they had also pointed me towards different ways of praying, different styles of religious observance permeating the whole of my life.

Predictably, their main effect at first was to relativize my traditional Catholic forms of piety, and to change my sense of what was really important. They also allowed older elements in the spiritual life, standard in Catholicism, to appear in a new light. For example, visiting synagogues and celebrating Sabbath meals with the Jewish families who had become my friends reawakened in me a feeling for communal times of rest, for our own Sunday observance. Above all I learnt how healthy and wise it is to regard the day as beginning with the evening. The evening then becomes not the day's dregs, but an extended new beginning. The sense of the morning incorporates the darkness and mysteriousness of the night within a sense of new life and hope. The fact that Saturday evening is part both of the Sabbath and of the Sunday can make it a time in which we can reflect on the concerns and convictions common to both Christianity and Judaism.

In general, it has been the Jewish liturgical year that has been the strongest influence initiating me into Jewish sensibility. The heavy stress on the Jewish people that one finds in the prayers has occasionally been difficult for me, as a Christian, to hear. I managed to make the personal adjustment required by recalling Paul's theology: precisely the apostle to the Gentiles speaks of how the Gentile Christians are shoots grafted on to the olive tree that is Israel (Romans 9-11). I had New Testament warrant for seeing myself as belonging to Judaism at least through an intermediary, at least by adoption.

To my daily activities inspired by the Gospel I soon came to add the kind of blessing prayers that Jews use when they observe a *Mitzvah*, a specific command. So, before beginning my work, I would pray, 'Blessed are you, Lord our God, Creator of the World—you who have commanded us to shape your creation through our labour'. My daily morning prayer began to centre on a recitation of the central passage in the Jewish confession of faith, the 'Hear, O Israel':

Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

This text contains the first commandment, along with a reminder of how it must extend into all spheres of life.

**T**AKE THIS, ALL OF YOU, AND EAT IT.

**T**HIS IS MY BODY,

**W**HICH WILL BE GIVEN UP FOR YOU.

*from the Eucharistic Prayer*

Then in a book comparing Jewish and Christian liturgy, I came across the idea that there is a text in the New Testament which simultaneously evokes all the commandments, including the first, as well as naming what is specifically Christian:

I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11: 25-30)

This text from Matthew speaks not only of how Jesus' interpretation of the Torah, which can sometimes appear as a heavy burden, is binding on Christians, but also of how this interpretation becomes easy and salvific through the relationship between Jesus and his Father. The two texts together have become central to my prayer. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament here give an orientation for the whole of life from God as *Torah*, with two central foci: the revelation on Sinai, and Jesus' death and resurrection.

It is not difficult to see how this relationship changed the stress in my spirituality. Letting my prayer life be influenced by rabbinical Judaism led me to be more concerned with practical activity than with religious feelings, more preoccupied with the sanctification of this creation than with matters of death or eternal life. What came to matter was Jesus as a teacher for this life, as the God-given Jewish foundation stone for the Church. Ideas about the beyond receded very much into the background. Obviously Ignatian spirituality played a part here too; and one can surmise—although the point needs to be researched—that the *Spiritual Exercises* were influenced by Jewish and Muslim practices, even though the thought of the soul's salvation after death also looms large in the text.

***The Acid Test: Life in Israel***

The above examples are enough to give some idea of how the discovery of Jewish religious practice affected my Christian

spirituality, whether through my simply adopting particular elements of Jewish tradition or through my developing something analogous within a Christian framework. I was captivated by the process of reforming radically my own spiritual life. The encounter with Judaism released in me an enormous creativity. At times, however, my enthusiasm was naive, and I misinterpreted my new discoveries.

This sort of imbalance is inevitable in any process of interreligious learning. Inter-faith encounter happens, after all, in human beings who are searching for the fullness of life. Sometimes they have turned away in disappointment from institutions, ideas, and ways of life; sometimes their hopes and desires have led them to become overenthusiastic. There is no point in meeting with people from other communities of faith unless you want to grow in your relationship to God, and unless you are open to changing your behaviour as a result.<sup>2</sup> In particular, it is quite natural for people to become one-sided and excessive in their appropriation of the other faith when they set the shadow-laden history of their own spiritual tradition alongside the fascinating ideal provided by the other. These phases give way to times of anxiety, of stress on boundaries, of preservation of one's own identity—all legitimated by an over-idealistic reading of one's own tradition in contrast with the all too human failings of what lies outside it.

One sees these mechanisms for what they are only when one has worked through them oneself and learnt how they operate. Then one also realizes how the process of learning together will never come to an end, and one also receives the strength to stay with this process joyfully. Obviously people can take a break from the process as their spiritual life develops. Perhaps, indeed, such breaks are a necessity: unless people have some time to develop their sense of self without being challenged, the strain will be too great. The psychological and sociological laws regarding identity-formation apply in interreligious spirituality too. The process of maturation is complex and takes time, and a balance needs to be struck between openness to the stranger and the integration of one's own experience.

A spirituality open to what comes from other religions must be able to live with uncertainty regarding what is to come, and to cope with the fluctuations of the present. This applies above all when disappointment

<sup>2</sup> This follows the first of Leonard Swidler's ten rules for interreligious learning, a rule that sets out the purpose of the exercise. See his *Toward a Universal Theology of Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), pp. 13-16.

comes—something I have also had to experience. In the 1990s I made regular visits to Israel-Palestine; in 1998, I had the chance to move to Jerusalem for a period of a little more than a year in order to study at the Hebrew University. I made a conscious decision for a style of daily life that would bring me as close as possible to the setting of Jewish religion. The state holidays of Israel—which include not only the traditional festivals, but also a *Shoah* memorial day and Independence Day—brought me up against the Zionist civil religion of Israel. These bolster the identity of the Jewish state with a kind of religious and nationalist feeling. The Sabbath was the day of rest; the basic rhythm of the week resembled that of societies shaped by Christianity, but with one day's difference. Sunday thus became the first day of the working week. There was a period when I often got my days mixed up; I would fail to turn up for appointments, or find myself going shopping on days when everything was closed. This showed me that interreligious and inter-cultural encounter in daily life was leading me into an impossible situation between several different worlds. There were still the major Christian feasts of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost: then I deliberately refrained from work so as to give social expression to my Christian faith. Israel was where I learnt how strongly the way society is organized can affect religious identity and the formation of a spirituality.

But what chastened my enthusiasm for interreligious dialogue was not so much these irritations arising from the Jewish world, which was in any case fragmenting before me. What took my breath away was how uninterested in dialogue contemporary Israelis were. Perhaps it is only the genocide of the twentieth century that has brought home to the Christian majority in Europe the need for dialogue with the Jewish minority. But the Jewish majority in Israel is so preoccupied with how it is to survive that it seems a waste of time for them to bother dialoguing with the Christian minority there. Or perhaps they are saying, 'you Christians, just leave us in peace now that you've recognised that we have a right to exist'. Relatively few seem impressed by the idea that the only way to discover even Jewish identity in the Near East today lies through encounter with the Other—with Christians, or even with the Palestinian Muslims on their doorstep. Moreover, the only way to break through projections about other religions lies through face-to-face exchange, and through a shared struggle about basic human issues. These concerns are what generate and nourish an interreligious spirituality. I found this kind of

nourishment far less in Jewish Israel than in the European Jewish diaspora. This I experienced as a painful obstacle in my efforts to become a Christian respectful of my Jewish sisters and brothers.

Another sobering experience was the realization of how, in Israel itself, religious and Jewish identity was so fragmented. I was well aware that Judaism in Europe following the Enlightenment had effectively had no alternative but to accommodate to the capitalist or socialist societies in which it found itself. Then Zionism had become strong when anti-Semitism, despite these efforts, had continued. But it seemed to me a tragedy that classical modernity also had such a devastating effect in Israel today. The humane tradition of piety has been largely destroyed, partly because modernity has suppressed any connection with tradition, partly because of various factors hindering its being brought to the Near East. The new and fragile society that is Israel today could have drawn on precisely these spiritual and humane traditions as it struggled for political power; the reality is that it now finds itself needing to reappropriate its religious roots, a process that will be difficult. My efforts towards an interreligious spirituality were certainly challenged by the discovery that these partners had been infected by secularization: they had lost their sense of security and were divided among themselves.

Not surprisingly, then, I began to be plagued by doubt as to whether it made sense to keep on searching across the boundaries. Would it not be better simply to aim at more or less peaceful co-existence, as people have done in the East for centuries? Perhaps the agenda we have opened up through encounter, through inter-faith learning, is just too challenging for both sides? These questions arise from the sheer difficulty of interreligious encounter; they vanish only when the fruits of deep mutual understanding, of struggle, prayer and action together, become apparent. The truth revealed on the boundary is deeper than what can come from any spirituality keeping carefully to its own confessional space, simply living alongside the other while remaining centred on itself.

### ***Interreligious Learning***

A spirituality open to being shaped by another religion, a spirituality which understands itself more deeply through its reflection in the Other, must always, therefore, be understood as a process of learning. There is much to be enjoyed; there is also effort and pain. But to look at life in general, and the spiritual life in particular, as a matter of

mutual learning is in fact a central and ancient concern of Judaism, and also of Christianity. The central message of Deuteronomy is that the people of Israel should organize itself as a community of learning; even its King—when it has one—should be a King of the Word, a person who learns from the Torah and lives by it. In Talmudic and later Rabbinic Judaism, study became the prime religious activity; it even reduced prayer to second place.<sup>3</sup>

I have picked up something of this religious feeling for the significance of study as service to the Torah, the source of life. It goes well beyond the kind of spiritual reading of Scripture common in Christian spirituality. It has made me understand how Jesus of Nazareth is a 'King of the Word'. Most importantly, however, it has provided me with a support for interreligious learning that comes from what is most central to both traditions. Jesus' great commission to teach all nations (Matthew 28:20) has broadened: it is no longer a matter of missionary evangelization, communicating by means of teaching, but rather a learning process. Proclamation is one of the central expressions of faith, one of the ways through which the world is sanctified. But so is a Christian spirituality that gives itself, along with Judaism, to a process of learning—a process aimed not at conversions from one religion to another, but at a deepening in one's own truth. Though—or perhaps even because—Christianity and Judaism have a special relationship to one other, this shared learning might serve at least to stimulate, if not to model, the way in which Christians might relate to other religions.

### *Inter-Faith Learning and 'Transreligious Spirituality'*

The conviction that inter-faith learning is a priority is one of the most important enrichments that the encounter with Judaism has brought to my Christianity. For learning does more than reach after the Holy Spirit's presence in all religions and in all humanity. It builds bridges between cultures and peoples, enabling us to live together in peace. I have become convinced that the kind of encounter and dialogue that I have been describing is also the best model for dealing with the religious pluralism to be found in our multi-cultural society today. The kind of closed, monolithic religious subculture common in industrial

<sup>3</sup> Israel M. Goldman, *Lifelong Learning Among Jews: Adult Education in Judaism from Biblical Times to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Ktav, 1975).

societies two generations ago has lost credibility and collapsed. These cultures arose in the nineteenth century, in reaction against a modernity that was often secularist, antagonistic to religion. Instead of a monolithically identical religious culture set against a socialist or liberal society, we now have our celebrated multi-cultural society, a phenomenon which has quite visible effects on how Christians practise their faith and develop a spirituality. Civil society passes itself off as neutral: it gives each individual the right to practise their own faith, on the understanding that individuals allow others the same right. People move in and out of the different groups, and the media make known a vast range of different spiritual approaches to life. The Church therefore cannot but be drawn into a process of intensive exchange with other religions, involving profound transformations of its own reality. Liberal capitalism has created an economy in which people can buy what they want, and has also encouraged Christians to think of the treasures of other religions as a source of personal enrichment to be drawn on as one feels like it. What we call 'globalization'—the linkage of particular societies and economies through the media and through transportation—has opened up a way of being human in society that is quite unprecedented. This 'meta-society' has a tendency to crowd out or even absorb local societies.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Christians are now developing forms of spirituality that draw eclectically on a very great variety of religious traditions. Spirituality today is often taken up with trying to integrate these, to harmonize them into some kind of universal religion. People who frequent the Eucharist may also be practising Zen intensively, be reciting Sutras regularly, and be seeking enlightenment of the kind opened up by the Buddhist way.

It does not seem to me very helpful to condemn all this as 'syncretism'. No religion exists in chemical purity, unadulterated by others, nor indeed should we necessarily be negative about how Western Christianity has drawn on Hellenistic culture, or even say that it is the original Christian element that is somehow normative. Spirituality is part of religion; and religions are like languages—the boundaries between them are not clear.

My term for how Christians today draw eclectically on various forms of spirituality from other religions is 'transreligious spirituality'. 'Transreligious spirituality' seeks to improve on religion as it has culturally evolved by trying to bring religions and cultures together in forms of shared practice. In some ways it is reminiscent of the 'rational

religion' espoused by the great figures of the Enlightenment, who dreamt of a religion that somehow transcended the particular denominations of Christianity. But the suspicion under which Enlightenment reason has come has led 'transreligious spirituality' to express itself in more romantic terms: as expression of a human feeling of absolute dependence that was universal, and as such, beyond the limitations of institutionalized religion. At its heart lay a version of 'spiritual experience', originating in the mystical. Individual mystical experience was seen as the inner reality of religion, and its origin timeless.<sup>4</sup> The different religions would then be seen as different cultural and historical expressions of a mystical reality that is ultimately one, worked out through rituals, schools of spirituality, scriptures and the like. Then people postulate that the spiritual experience of transcendence, formulated in a way drawing on the various religions, holds everything together and somehow transcends all religious traditions.

This widespread and popular view of how Christianity can be lived out through a 'transreligious spirituality' is supported by certain sorts of spiritual theology that define mysticism as proceeding from an unchanging, ahistorical, universal experience of the transcendent, valid in all its forms and different only in its cultural manifestations. Further legitimation has come from a pluralistic theology of religions, though this latter may be less dependent on religious experience and more on a set of strict philosophical convictions about God being unknowable. Religious pluralism is legitimate: the religions manifest the inevitably partial forms to be found in contingent cultures, reflecting different aspects of a religious truth that in principle is never directly accessible.<sup>5</sup>

Since I myself live in the multicultural society which is Europe, and since I also work in a centre for spirituality and interreligious dialogue, I meet people everyday who describe themselves as Christians, and

<sup>4</sup> A classic expression of this kind of view came in the Gifford Lectures given in 1901-1902 by William James, published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, the definition of religious pluralism given by one of its most prominent proponents, John Hick: '... the view that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real or the Ultimate, and that within each of them independently the transformation of human existence from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness is taking place'. ('Religious Pluralism', in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (London: Collier Macmillan, 1993), vol. 12, p. 331.) Hick's position is most fully articulated in his *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

who understand and practise their religion through the kind of transreligious spirituality that I have been describing. Fascination and engagement with Eastern religion—or at least with what people think is Eastern religion—are permanent features of life. Many years ago it became simply part of my life to value the richness and truth of all religions, to let a sensitivity to this become part of Christianity, and to incorporate their practical teaching into my own religious practice. The Yoga and Zen traditions influence not just my feeling for how bodily and spiritual processes interrelate, but also the daily contemplation through which I cultivate my relationship to God in Christ. I also share—with an absolute, heartfelt commitment—the commitments underlying ‘transreligious spirituality’ to tolerance and to work for justice and peace. If spirituality is to remain authentic and not degenerate into individual gratification, then one of Christianity’s most central commitments must, I am convinced, be the engagement for justice and peace amid the variety of religions and cultures.

Nevertheless, I also have abiding questions of a critical kind about a ‘transreligious spirituality’. These are no doubt to some extent personal, but they emerge above all from philosophical and theological conviction, and from what I have learnt in the process of living with people of the Jewish faith. ‘Transreligious spirituality’ is too subjective. Religion is not, after all, simply an expression of the soul: it is, rather, a cultural system that profoundly influences the individual identities of its adherents, and provides a framework logically prior to religious experience as such.<sup>6</sup> ‘Transreligious spirituality’ remains too distanced from any of the specific religious paths, and fails to take seriously the terms in which they present themselves. It is often unable to resource specific decisions, or the taking of responsibility—something which becomes vital once you recognise that you are a particular person at a specific point in space and time. It presents itself as somehow emancipated from particular circumstances, and fails to recognise how, as a way of thinking, it too emerges from a specific set of historical circumstances. In the end, despite its paraded tolerance, it is closed-minded. It is only superficially open to religious learning. It is concerned only with what the religions have in common; it does not

<sup>6</sup> See Clifford Geertz, ‘Religion as a Cultural System’, in *The Interpretations of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London: Fontana, 1993 [1973]); George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

take seriously the fact that there is, or might be, something genuinely Other in the other religion.

There are better models for constructive relationships between the religions. A multicultural society that is truly respectful of different religious traditions requires that its religious communities accept the fact that they have particular origins and histories. They should be at peace with the fact that their self-understanding has already arisen from a process of dialogue and learning, and be prepared to allow this process to continue. Inter-faith dialogue needs to begin not from 'transreligious spirituality', but from rootedness in specific traditions. Such rootedness involves a sense of the limitations of one's own tradition, and a feeling for the guilt in its history. From this kind of standpoint, there can arise a spirituality that passes beyond boundaries and forms a genuinely religious bond with the Other. The goal is not some kind of universal spirituality or some world-religion purporting to be appropriate for a global society, but rather a particular kind of growth and change. Through the learning process that is inter-faith encounter, one's own spiritual world comes to be related permanently to the other religion, and thus is deepened and transformed: a dialogical identity emerges. It is this kind of experience that my encounters with Judaism have given me.

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