

Reflections on the Goals and Nature of Jewish-Christian Relations

Melanie J. Wright

Introduction

Like the other contributions to this volume, this piece began life as a presentation at the Cross-Generational Conference in Cambridge, 2001.¹ During the conference, as I reflected on the title I'd been given — 'The Way Ahead: The Next Generation Speaks' — I found the task before me puzzling. As I write this, some unease persists, largely in relation to the terminology used and the assumptions it evokes.

Firstly, many dialogue practitioners (I think) aspire to speak primarily or only for themselves, and are less willing to claim to represent a movement, nor yet an entire generation. Moreover, although there can be dialogue between groups (2001 is the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations) it often seems that many participants in bi- or multi-lateral religious dialogue are not very representative of their traditions as a whole. For example, they may be adherents of traditions normatively suspicious of activities that challenge participants to re-assess their own self-understanding in the light of Others' experience and perception. There are also people who are interested in dialogue but have severed links with institutionalised religion, perhaps because they are affected by interfaith marriage or because their religiosity is highly individualised and integrative of resources drawn from a number of faith traditions. Awareness of these kinds of disjunctures is implicit in some contributions to this volume.

Secondly, the world of education, of which I have most experience (and which is the *locus* of much of the work necessary for future Jewish-Christian amity) has moved away from the view that one's chronological

age should be determinative of opportunity or status. Contemporary discourse emphasises ‘lifelong learning,’ the idea that interests and capabilities, rather than one’s birth-date, decide one’s place in the system at a given time. Yet the title, ‘the next generation speaks,’ implies that in Jewish-Christian conversation, generalisations based on chronological age are in some sense valid. Is this assumption accurate?

All this is a tortuous but necessary way of saying that the following should be read only as personal reflections arising from involvement in Jewish-Christian Relations in the past dozen years or so, and more immediately from the experience of the conference.

Different Voices: Turning the road less travelled into a well-worn path

So, which way/s now for Jews and Christians in conversation? Recent years have witnessed the appearance of volumes with assertive sounding titles — *The Future of Jewish-Christian Dialogue; Christian-Jewish Dialogue: The Next Steps* — but whose contents attest to a lack of consensus as to future direction.² Marcus Braybrooke speaks of a general sense that despite the achievements of the last fifty years, “Christian-Jewish dialogue has got stuck”; participants are oftentimes “treading water”³ Alan Unterman goes further, disputing the presupposition behind much Jewish-Christian encounter, that is, the idea “that all religions exist on the same level, and that we inhabit a kind of mega-store of faiths”. He argues that “the existence of unique, different, and incommensurate faiths is more in line with the existential reality of faith communities.”⁴ At our conference Judith Frischmann posed similarly pertinent questions, challenging whether Jews need conversation with Christians (other than as a pragmatic strategy) and if they do, whether it is meaningful to talk around the concept of shared textual tradition. There is a need to rethink both goals and rubric. Next century’s dialogues cannot simply re-hearse the older agendas. They will need to re-theorise and re-conceptualise relations between communities (their nature and conduct). Holding diverse demands in creative tension will be a significant challenge for conversationalists in the future.

In this volume, a number of interfaith professionals offer their insights on the past conduct of Jewish-Christian relations and prophesy as to the

RE-ASSESSING THE GOALS

likely future course. Later, I will outline some suggestions about way/s ahead. But any ideas mooted here are made with humility; one thing Jewish-Christian conversation must do to ensure a viable, credible future is to attend to different voices.

It is common in dialogue circles to hear about the difficulties involved in translating the work done in committees and colloquia into actual bridge-building between ordinary Jews and Christians. One session in the Cross-Generational conference was titled, 'Presenting the Dialogue to the Public.' In another (on institutional documents) much discussion concerned the need for changes initiated at 'top-level' by the 'elite' to filter down to regional and local levels. Such discourse is predicated on hierarchical models of religious and community life, where (expressed simply) authority rests with a relatively small number of specialists, whose role is to disseminate authoritative teaching to the ordinary member. But these models may appear strangely out of date - even offensive - to religious adherents in the twenty-first century. Many denominations are changing their understandings of authority and leadership. For example, believing that religions must speak to the needs and in the idiom of contemporary members, Reconstructionist Judaism has tried to reconceptualise the rabbinical role. Rather than understanding the rabbi as an halakhic authority, preacher, or 'vicarious Jew' who models correct behaviour for the congregation, Reconstructionism trains rabbis to be teachers and facilitators. Alpert and Staub write, "The Reconstructionist rabbi wants to help Jews assume as many of the rabbis' functions as possible — by teaching as many people as are willing to learn to do the things that he or she has learned to do."⁵ Of course, this is a somewhat idealised account, and Reconstructionism is a minority position within Judaism, but the goal of a community of empowered, engaged individuals is one that many Jewish and Christian groups would share. For this reason, efforts to broaden Jewish-Christian conversation need to take the experience of 'everyday' or 'typical' Jews and Christians more seriously than has sometimes happened in the past. Future discussions will need to be less about how to accelerate the 'trickle-down' of new theology and more about exploring the implications of a real commitment to inclusivity for our understandings of what dialogue is.

By way of illustration, the *modi operandi* of dialogue groups are socially conditioned, that is, they are patterned by culture, class and time. In Britain, a typical CCJ branch might regard the organisation of an annual series of

JEWES AND CHRISTIANS IN CONVERSATION

speaker-meetings, punctuated by social events such as a cheese and wine party or a choral evening, as appropriate to the furtherance of its goals. The committee might, in the interests of inclusivity, attend to the provision of *kosher* refreshment at these events. But if the conversation between Jews and Christians is to broaden beyond the predominantly white, predominantly male, predominantly middle class circles with which it is associated today, there is also a need to discuss whether these types of events assume a particular set of cultural variables, thereby establishing barriers to dialogue — excluding those for whom attending a lecture, sampling cheese and wine, listening to European choral music, or leaving dependents at home in the evening would be uncomfortable, alien experiences.

Taking these questions seriously, perhaps drawing insights from the social sciences, could benefit Jewish-Christian relations in several ways. Broadening the ethnic, religious or socio-economic profile of participants can enliven the dialogue and promote wider ownership of concerns and developments. Equally, conversations about expanding participation can develop sensitivity to some of the factors that are crucial to actual reconciliation and community building between groups and individuals. They can highlight the barriers to change within exclusive cultures, or foster understandings of equal opportunities that move beyond ‘treating everyone in the same way’ towards cultural sensitivity, recognition of the effects of past discrimination, and treating people in ways that bring out the best in them.⁶

New Routes through the ‘Old Agenda’: Shoah and Israel

As suggested earlier, broadening participation will impact on the mode and focus of Jewish-Christian conversation. At present (from my European, Anglophone, perspective) it seems likely that the future agenda will combine both older and newer items.

In the post-war era Jewish-Christian encounter has been dominated by two historical events — the *Shoah* and the creation of the state of Israel. Most readers will be aware of their significance for the dialogue, which is also touched upon by other essayists. So I will only note here that the *Shoah* was a major impetus for Jewish-Christian dialogue, accelerating the creation of organisational frameworks for contact (the Council of

RE-ASSESSING THE GOALS

Christians and Jews was founded in Britain in 1942) and revision of Christian teaching on Jews and Judaism, already prefigured in the work of figures like R. Travers Herford and James Parkes in the 1920s and 30s. In less generalizable ways, Israel has also been a significant topic of conversation. For some Christians, as for some Jews, the creation and survival of the state indicates the continuing validity of God's covenant with Jews, and practical support for the state is an expression of Christian solidarity with the chosen people. Yet Israel can equally be a source of painful encounter, particularly if Christians seem to champion uncritically the Palestinian cause, or do not comprehend the notion of a religious tradition that regards one land as more holy than others.

The issues of the *Shoah* and Israel will continue to figure in Jewish-Christian conversation. For Christians, responsible ownership of their tradition must entail engagement with that tradition's history, including in many cases an awareness of its role in Jewish suffering in history and the fraught question of the interplay between Christian anti-Judaism and the conception and implementation of Nazi policy. Thinking through the issues will probably require repeated intra- and inter-religious dialogue. However, Jewish-Christian conversation conducted on the basis of any assumption (implicit or explicit) that Christian responsibility for the *Shoah* is inherited by generations increasingly distant from the events is likely to have more limited use-value as we move further into the twenty-first century. Perhaps on this issue it is meaningful to speak of inter-generational difference: participants who cannot access communicative memory of the *Shoah* will approach things differently. However, it is one of the more experienced figures in the dialogue, Norman Solomon, who has recently emphasised that no healthy relationship may be built on guilt.⁷ New forms of discourse about and around the *Shoah* are needed, perhaps focusing on the problems of pain and suffering raised for both traditions by the events, or (as Michael Signer suggests elsewhere in this volume) exploring its implications for all our understandings of tradition and modernity.

Vis-à-vis Israel, too, new conversations are likely to recall but also modify older ones. If currently faltering bi- and multi-lateral negotiations succeed in resolving old conflicts and shaping a peaceful Middle East, this will clearly impact on Jewish-Christian conversation about the land. Rather in the way that the Peace Process has improved Israel's diplomatic standing in the international community, lingering reservations on the part of some Christians about Israel's right to exist could be expected to diminish.

Moreover, peaceable relations with the Muslim world would advance Jewish-Muslim dialogue in ways which are as yet unforeseen but which would affect Jewish self-understanding in relation to Christian tradition.

Praxis or Doxa?

In addition to new exchange on the *Shoah* and Israel, other significant topics of (or trends within) Jewish-Christian conversation are emerging. The first set of concerns I will touch on relate to a growing awareness of the limitations of the answers theology can offer to the questions raised by the realities of Jewish-Christian encounter. One session at the Conference was titled, 'What the Institutional Documents Have and Have not been telling us.' Read pedantically, what institutional documents do not tell us is about the attitudes and activities of people who do not produce institutional documents. These might be (for example) marginalized or disenfranchised members of document-producing groups, or people who belong to traditions that do not engage in these sorts of activities. Perhaps, as was suggested in one of the conference working groups, Jewish-Christian conversation needs to be reconceived not simply as verbal exchange, or as a primarily cerebral exercise, but as 'communication' or 'relation' in much broader terms. Students from the Cambridge Centre for Jewish-Christian relations this year reported that living together gave them experience of a more profound 'dialogue' with the Other than took place in some classroom sessions — it offered a genuine existential encounter. The quest for resolution of past problems in the form of a set of words in an institutional declaration or theological treatise will ultimately be fruitless. Although vitally important within some organisational structures, such things are always 'in process.' A new emphasis on encounter through event and lived experience is needed. (James Aitken develops related issues on communication in this volume.)

Further evidence that the answer to problems in Jewish-Christian relations is not exclusively (or primarily) a theological one may be found in studies of action during the *Shoah*. One family of churches not given to producing explicit theology, the Historic Peace Churches, exhibited significant diversity of behaviour under Nazism. Particularly interesting for the understanding of the dynamics of Jewish-Christian relations is the record of the German Mennonite community. Although core elements

RE-ASSESSING THE GOALS

of Anabaptist theology — radical church-state separation; pacifism — should (*if* one assumes that having the ‘right theology’ leads to ‘right action’) have prevented them from participating in the Nazi project, German Mennonites abandoned their heritage in order to support Hitler. To understand this striking behaviour, one needs to turn not to theology, but to the socio-political realm. Many of the church’s members were returnees from the Soviet Union (their ancestors had been invited there by Catherine the Great, to escape Prussian persecution) and consequently, in the context of the new ethnic politics, were keen to prove their identity as ‘true Germans.’ Failure to do this would have negative consequences for the Church.⁸ In sociological terms, German Mennonites abandoned their goals in order to safeguard their institutional structures. Similarly, in a recent study drawing on survivor memoirs, Szczepinska has suggested that religious identification was relatively insignificant in determining the likelihood for inter- or intra-faith cooperation during the *Shtetl*. What mattered was the ability of individuals to engage with the humanity of the Other.⁹

In short, there seems to be a growing recognition that fostering positive Jewish-Christian relations is as much about developing *praxis* or practice as it is about formulating right doctrine. Textual studies and philosophical underpinnings are important, but of equal (greater?) value are attempts to theorise and reconstruct the dynamics of inter-group and interpersonal behaviour.

Is the Medium the Message?

Another strand emerging in today’s conversations relates to the significance of the media (especially print media and television journalism) in shaping popular perceptions of religion, and the ability of popular cultural forms such as literature and film to serve as *stimuli* for and vehicles of religious experience and theological reflection. Discussing recent debate surrounding the Jedwabne massacre, Konstanty Gebert’s essay clearly illustrates how Jewish-Christian dialogue can be conducted through – and therefore constructed by – the media. There are also many examples of how literary and artistic forms are instrumental in Jewish-Christian exploration. In Britain, William Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* is still a staple of both GCSE and A-level (secondary school) English Literature syllabi. Many

schoolchildren (who are generally neither members of religious communities nor theologically literate) shape their perceptions of Jewish-Christian relations whilst studying Shylock and his treatment at the hands of the Venetian state. To cite another example, the making of Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ* in 1988 provided an occasion for antisemitic activity against MCA chair Lew Wasserman.¹⁰ Equally troubling from a Jewish-Christian relations perspective, the film itself (characterised by the anti-Wasserman lobby as a Jewish attack on Christian fundamentals) is — like most biblical films — visually indebted to the traditions of classical painting, including some deeply problematic pieces like Hieronymus Bosch's *Christ Carrying the Cross*, which depicts a crowd of grotesque faces about to submerge the irenic face of the suffering saviour.¹¹

Few people would dispute the power of these images. The name 'Shylock' entered the English language as a synonym for a money-lender or loan-shark; there is a verb, 'to shylock,' meaning to lend money at exorbitant rates. Many readers will recall at least something of the *furor* surrounding *Temptation*. Yet despite this, Jewish-Christian relations (of the activist or academic kind) has barely engaged with the worlds of literature and the arts. In part, this is attributable to the history of Jewish-Christian discourse. The conversation has often been conducted between men (less frequently between women and men) whose training is in the fields of theology, religious studies, history or Jewish studies. These disciplines historically privileged the study of texts, or more particularly, certain kinds of texts.¹² Jewish-Christian relations, with its comparative neglect of artistic media and forms of popular cultural expression, has perpetuated these biases.

There is a need for Jewish-Christian conversation to embrace more warmly the worlds of literature, cinema, and fine art. This is partly because many practitioners in these fields lack knowledge of Judaism and Christianity, and their inter-action: According to one popular guide to *The Merchant of Venice* for A-level and undergraduate students, *Pesach* observance still entails animal sacrifice.¹³ If Jews and Christians are concerned to advance understanding and combat ignorance, they need to care about how people in the literary world are constructing religious identity and meanings. But at the same time, attempts to comprehend the dynamics of Jewish-Christian relationship in the twenty-first century must recognise that literary texts and other cultural products — and their reception — do not simply reflect or document history, but actively constitute it. In

order to make effective interventions, or to comprehend the encounter in a fuller sense than simply concentrating on the theological dimension can allow, it is necessary to understand the ‘language’ of these media — the rules, codes and strategies that come into play when they envision ‘reality’ for their audiences.

Jews, Christians, and Power

The final cluster of questions I want to raise relate to Jews, Christians and what I will loosely term, ‘power.’ Any introduction to Jewish-Christian relations will include an account of how Christian power has been exercised to the detriment of Jews. This is most clearly illustrated with reference to the medieval period in Western Europe, when convergence of church-state interests enabled the Fourth Lateran Synod to isolate Jews from ‘normative’ society by, for example, forcing them to wear special dress, and avoid travel during Holy Week. But there are contemporary examples, too. In Russia, Jews are amongst those affected by *Duma* legislation of the 1990s, whereby religious groups are relegated to a secondary status behind that of the Russian Orthodox Church (which is not legally established, but recognised by the state as having a special role in the formation of national spirituality and culture). Jewish activity is liable to suppression by the courts, if it is interpreted as a source of dissent from the religious or political hegemony, or viewed as a moral threat. Until 2000, Jews in Greece (like the rest of the country’s non-Orthodox adherents) had their identification cards stamped with a special symbol indicating their non-normative affiliation. Much Jewish-Christian conversation has, therefore, rightly been about Christian acknowledgement of, and repentance for, the abuses inflicted by Christendom upon Jews. But in the years ahead, will it be profitable to conduct dialogue on the assumption of Christian power and Jewish powerlessness?

Tony Bayfield (the Chief Executive of the Reform Synagogues of Great Britain) has argued that Jewish-Christian relations today is characterised by asymmetries, one of these being an asymmetrical balance of power in favour of Jewish dialogue participants.¹⁴ He notes that the Catholic Church has changed significantly since 1945, revising doctrines and opening itself to dialogue partners. Moreover, the Vatican has recognised Israel, and John Paul II has visited the Great Synagogue in

JEWES AND CHRISTIANS IN CONVERSATION

Rome. But in response, Catholics have been exposed to strong criticism, concerning the Church's decisions over canonization, its attitude towards past holders of papal office, and so on. At the same time, conversation with Christians has not generally required (or been held to require) of Jews equivalent soul-searching and self-criticism. Just as Solomon has argued against basing conversation on *Shoah*-guilt, so arguably the asymmetries inherent in current dialogue may not provide firm foundations for future cooperation. For Bayfield, "real dialogue pushes Jews into addressing some of the issues that we have hitherto only been insisting that Christians address."¹⁵ Only when Jews explore such questions as the status of the New Testament text, or the implications for them of Jesus's Jewishness, will the relationship be one characterised not by inequalities, but by shared vulnerability and willingness to trust one another.

The suggestion that Jewish-Christian conversation should be at all theological remains controversial, despite the broad-based support given to this kind of position by signatories to *Dabru Emet*. For many Orthodox Jews in particular, doctrinal issues should not be discussed — indeed, they cannot be — Judaism and Christianity are unique faith orientations, each possessing their own languages and mental categories, "if the debate should revolve around matters of faith...then one of the participants will be impelled to avail himself of the language of his opponents. This in itself would mean surrender of individuality and distinctiveness."¹⁶

However, whether conversation focuses on matters theological, or on ethical problems such as war and peace, abortion, business ethics, or stewardship of the natural world, Jews and Christians in the future will, it seems, need to explore questions of power — not just in history, but also within their own, diverse encounters today.

In addition to considering the dynamics of power within interfaith encounter, it seems probable that Jews and Christians will be drawn into dialogue about (and with) the wider discussions on the nature of power and authority in contemporary society. Taking quite different approaches, the contributions of Jurgen Manemann and James Aitken to this volume both raise questions about religious commitment *vis-à-vis* contemporary politics. How do Judaism and Christianity — individually, and together — stand in relation to efforts to balance the demands of the modern economy (the quest for competitiveness on a regional or global basis), the need for social cohesion, and the liberty and freedom of the individual?

Questions about the role Christianity and Judaism should play in today's

RE-ASSESSING THE GOALS

societies are far-reaching. In a British context, much discussion of the religion-state interface has tended to focus on whether the Churches of England and Scotland should follow the Church in Wales and be dis-established. In the USA, church establishment has been cultural rather than legal; that is, Christianity has long been identified with general social values and with the *mores* of the dominant classes. But many Christians feel themselves and their ideals to be increasingly peripheral in a largely consumerist society. Meanwhile, in Israel a central issue of controversy is the extent to which the country should manifest a Jewish *religious* identity. Nowhere is this more sharply disputed than in relation to personal status, over which (so far as Israeli Jews are concerned) Orthodox rabbis have jurisdiction. These examples show why discussions about the nature and desirability of power and authority deserve prominent place on the agenda for Jewish-Christian conversation.

In the post-Cold War era, the term ‘civil society’ has become something of a catch-phrase or mantra, around which much debate has coalesced. Discussions about civil society centre around how one might nurture and sustain societies of people who have rights, and accept obligations; societies which try to prevent exclusion, and are based on trust, voluntarism, and co-operation. They touch on issues of economics (especially the role of private initiatives and enterprise), politics (sovereignty and constitutionalism) and culture (including the interaction of the ‘religious’ with the ‘secular’ in society). These conversations have been particularly significant in the post-communist countries of East and Central Europe, where strong civil society is associated with the development of healthy democracy. However, more recently the concept of civil society has been discussed in Britain and North America, in response to social disintegration, disillusionment with unfeeling capitalism, and public fatigue with existing political systems.

What is unclear at present is the role of Jews and Christians *together* in shaping civil society. There are several strong reasons why Jewish and Christian conversationalists might feel a need to explore this in the future, and to clarify their responses. Firstly, although in ideal terms a civil society will act in ways that represent and serve the public good, the public good/public interest is highly contested. (Studies have shown how even ostensibly consensus-oriented events, like public ceremonies and other celebrations of what is sometimes termed ‘civil religion,’ may in fact be occasions for conflict among varied interest groups.¹⁷) Jews and Christians may want to

participate in the 'contest' to define the public good. If they do not, they may see society develop in ways that do not reflect, or even actively oppose, their traditions' ethical teachings or ritual practices. At the same time, Jews and Christians concerned about dialogue may have an interest in wider conversation about the creation of societies characterised by inclusivism and trust. For example, one aspect of the discussion of civic culture focuses on how far societies are able to embrace their own historic cultural particularisms without engendering hostility towards other particularisms, or alienation from the emerging global community.¹⁸ These issues are profoundly relevant to interfaith dialogue, as are efforts within civic education programmes to raise consciousness about the nature and impact of stereotyping.

In addition to enhancing discussion about civil society, Jews and Christians can benefit from active participation in these debates. For example, ideas about fostering civil society as a means of social renewal may be useful for Jews and Christians rethinking the authority structures within their own denominations. The civil societarian's dream of an alliance of empowered, motivated people resonates with the ideals of religious adherents who seek to rejuvenate their own communities through the creation of more participative structures and practices. Finally, and perhaps more interesting, are the implications of the prominence of Central and Eastern European voices (and increasingly, African, Asian and Latin American voices) in the civil society debate. Too frequently, Jewish-Christian relations discourse still characterises these parts of Europe as places of, at best, comparative *stasis* or stagnation in comparison to the progressive 'west,' and at worst, as sites of Jewish suffering and danger (see also Konstanty Gebert's paper in this book). Incorporating the topic of civil society into Jewish-Christian relations would entail listening to and learning from Poles and Hungarians (or Argentinians and Yemenis) challenging (in particular) Anglophone assumptions, and thereby correct another of the asymmetries that blights our conversations today.

Conclusions

As I stressed earlier, the essay has been limited in scope and has been a personal statement on emerging trends and needs within the dialogue. I have tried to show that much has been achieved. But at the same time, the

RE-ASSESSING THE GOALS

fact that Jewish-Christian conversation has attained a certain level of maturity necessitates re-assessment of its goals and nature — a questioning of the fundamentals underpinning our encounters. In prosaic terms, just as roles within an organisation typically become more differentiated as that organisation develops and grows over time, so individuals and institutions associated with Jewish-Christian dialogue can no longer try to cover all the bases. In discussing possible roads ahead, I deliberately chose to talk about diverse possibilities, as an indication of the scale and scope of the task ahead.

It seems to me that much current uncertainty as to our next steps together stems from a confusion of different kinds of Jewish-Christian conversation. Too frequently the roles of the academic practitioner and the activist practitioner are conflated. This can result in, for example, our defining as ‘interfaith dialogue’ activities (like the lecture-meeting or the colloquium) more accurately described as intellectual exercises. In consequence — as already suggested — our efforts may work against genuine existential encounter and reconciliation. Conversely, much ‘scholarly research’ in Jewish-Christian relations has not kept pace with developments in the wider academic context. I am speaking here both of work in history, psychology, politics and so on, and of the engagement with critical theory in other forms of inter-religious dialogue. Of course, an individual may adopt both activist and academic roles; usually interest in one is motivated by a prior involvement in the other. But for viable future growth to be possible, it is important to differentiate these roles; to be clear about what sort of conversation we are engaged in at a particular moment, and about the nature and ‘standards’ of that discourse. In this respect, I concur with Norman Solomon’s call for increased professionalization of the dialogue. However, I do not think that the goal should be to establish Jewish-Christian relations as an ‘academic discipline in its own right.’²⁰ The concept of a discipline normally implies a degree of consensus or uniformity as to presupposition, theory and method. It seems unlikely that this type of approach could tell us all we want or need to know about the relations between two families of traditions. Instead, Jewish-Christian relations needs to be established more firmly as a *field* of study, rather in the way that ‘Holocaust studies’ is accepted today as a field within which people use tools and insights from a range of different disciplines (either discretely or in combination) to tackle broadly related questions.

JEWS AND CHRISTIANS IN CONVERSATION

In short, if we can think seriously about the processes and dynamics of our conversation, then we can find new ways ahead for Jews and Christians together. I have tried to suggest that work is needed to think about what it might mean to undertake successfully the vital task of popularising the dialogue — not just its concerns and goals but also its mechanisms and processes. But equally, conversationalists who wish to don the ‘academic’ hat must not (as has occasionally happened in the past) believe that the worthiness and rightness of our desire to advance inter-religious understanding and respect excuses us from the normal tests and standards of scholarly credibility.

All this will not be easy — philosophically, practically, or personally. Many of us have gained much from our involvements in Jewish-Christian relations. Speaking personally, the friends I have kept in touch with since undergraduate days are those I met in dialogue groups; I have been privileged to attend conferences in interesting places; in blunt economic terms, I pay my mortgage and have food to eat in part because of my involvement in Jewish-Christian relations. Salaries, status and so on may all be at stake if we take seriously the task of critically evaluating and re-thinking the nature and scope of Jewish-Christian conversation. But at the same time, if we genuinely believe in the importance of positive Jewish-Christian relations, and want to share more openly the joy of this ‘learning conversation,’ then ultimately — regardless of age or generation — we must be willing to hazard those personal gains for the sake of greater, more beautiful ends.