

Toward Linguistically Hospitable Dialogue

by Chava S. Bahle

I recently watched a series of humorous videos produced by a Cincinnati synagogue that take on some of the great “bugaboos” of religious organizational life. One was a faux horror film, complete with a musical score, about the demon “We’ve Always Done It That Way,” named as “the most resistant force to progress in synagogues, churches, and organizations everywhere.”¹ In the film the demon takes over the bodies of otherwise pleasant leaders who become intractable about change. The demon is defeated when the brave woman rabbi, dressed as a Viking, and congregants in red capes banish the demon by giving it advice: “Change is painful but necessary” and “Don’t let the past keep you from moving forward.”

For at least a generation, a core purpose of interreligious dialogue has been to build understanding and cooperation while staying carefully within the lines of our own historically defined traditions. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue defined the project of dialogue as “a manner of acting, an attitude; a spirit which guides one’s conduct. It implies concern, respect, and hospitality toward the other. It leaves room for the other person’s identity, modes of expression, and values.”² This statement was a wonderful step forward. For some of us, though, the space of “leaving room,” while respectful, can also feel coolly distant.

As a dialogue partner, I am less interested in learning from you what I can read in a book than about who you are and how your religious identity, challenges, and practices inform your soul and might also, if I am willing to take the risk, inform mine. Dialogue is more than conversation. As the physicist David Bohm suggests,

Dialogue...is a way of taking the energy of our differences and channeling it toward something that has never been created before...In essence, a dialogue is a *flow of meaning*...In the most ancient meaning of the word, *logos* meant “to gather together,” and suggested an intimate awareness of the relationships among things in the natural world. In that sense, *logos* may be best rendered in English as “relationship.” The Book of John in the New Testament begins: “In the beginning was the Word (*logos*).” We could now hear this as “In the beginning was the Relationship.”³

1 “The Way We’ve Always Done it Demon,” YouTube video, 6:25, posted by “TEMPLESHOLOMCINCL” October 26, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U57Nb2N5OX0>.

2 Secretariat for Non-Christians, “The Attitude of the Church Toward Followers of Other Religions: Reflections and Orientations on Dialogue and Mission,” Section 29 (May 10, 1984). http://www.pcinterreligious.org/dialogue-and-mission_75.html.

3 As cited in William Isaacs, *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together: A Pioneering Approach to Communicating in Business and in Life* (New York: Currency, 1999), 19.

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Relationship is inherently transformative: this is the risky task of interreligious dialogue. Especially in the field of Comparative Theology, those devoted to interreligious dialogue have gone further, questioning the solidity of the lines that carefully define us, and suggesting a more permeable relationship across religious traditions. The theologian Hans Küng asks, “Can one combine openness and truth, plurality and identity, dialogability and steadfastness in the interreligious dialogue?”⁴ In other words, how do we balance “we’ve always done it that way” with the emerging realities created by our intentional togetherness?

This is noticeable in the language we use to describe one another, which is part of the “linguistic hospitality” about which Marianne Moyaert writes. Here I would like to suggest reconsideration of four terms long in use, in the “we’ve always done it that way” sense, within the Christian tradition that might create a field of greater openness with Jewish dialogue partners.

“Old Testament”

The term “old” does not carry, to my Jewish ears, the implications of respect for our elders, but rather a sense of something that is outdated and, most especially, something that has been superseded. One of my rabbis uses the term “Elder Testament” and “Younger Testament” to push the auditory boundary. Too often when Christians speak of Jesus’s relationship to the Old Testament, they do not mean the actual Hebrew Bible and its hermeneutics as known to Jesus. They mean later, multiply-translated, multiply-edited texts birthed out of western Christianity, not Judaism.

Christians would profit greatly from understanding how Jews (such as Jesus) read the *Hebrew Bible* (a preferred term), especially the midrashic process, that is, understanding that Torah in its broadest sense is “black fire written on white fire.”⁵ The words of “the bible” are not to be read in isolation or literally. They were meant to live organically with interpretation, conversation, argumentation for the sake of heaven, and the contemporary situation as dialogue partners: the “white fire,” the space between the words.

Christians spend a great deal of time studying Jesus and his disciples but mostly ignore Jesus’s teachers and their hermeneutical methodologies. In this way, a critical aspect of Jesus’s literary context and ministry is lost. If one means what Jesus read and preached, “Hebrew Bible,” is a preferred term, and the Hebrew *Tanakh* (an acronym for Torah, Nevi’im [prophets] and Ketubim [writings]) is even more precise. Terminology and translations matter.

“Judeo-Christian”

The term “Judeo-Christian” is problematic on three levels. First, Judaism is portrayed as but a precursor to Christianity. Second, the abbreviation of Judaism into “Judeo-” is indicative of undervaluing the rich, independent history and culture I mention above. And, third, “Judeo-Christian” denies important distinctions between two cultures. While I advocate a “moving toward” posture in dialogue, this term’s overtones are more reductive than respectful. “Jewish and Christian” names our commonality without reducing one partner to being just a necessary antecedent.

The Hebrew Name of God

4 As cited in Marianne Moyaert, *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 1. The title of this article borrows from Chapter 6 of Moyaert’s book, titled “Interreligious Dialogue and Hermeneutical Openness: Linguistic Hospitality.”

5 Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish taught: “The Torah given to Moses was written with black fire upon white fire, sealed with fire, and swathed with bands of fire” (Talmud Yerushalmi, Shelamim 6:1, 49d).

Often in dialogue, when well-intentioned folks want to be interreligious about how Jesus named God, they will speak an invented form of the Tetragrammaton, YHVH, the four-letter name of God Jews read as “Adonai” (“my Lord”) which is used in prayer and the reading of the Torah. The intimate name of God is not meant to be spoken aloud, ever; neither is its correct pronunciation actually known. Historically, it was spoken only once a year at the height of the Yom Kippur service in the Holy of Holies of the Temple and at great risk by the *Kohein Gadol* (the “high priest”). The Name is the Mystery, and this can only be known in silence. In dialogue, we go even further: *HaShem*, literally “the name” is as close as one wants to get in conversation about the name of ultimate beingness.

“Pharisee”

Throughout almost all Christian literature and conversation, including contemporary cartoons found on the Internet, “pharisee” is a synonym for everything wrong with religious leaders: judgmental, superior, picayune, rejecting. The treatment of the *perushim* in the New Testament “is the initiating, perhaps the licensing, example of what [scholar Jacob] Neusner derides as the Christian habit of offering derogatory definitions of Judaism for the express purpose of highlighting a more benign Christianity.”⁶

This is probably the term that hurts most, because not only was Rabbi Jesus a Pharisee, all rabbis—myself included—are descendants of the rich, literary, highly practical worldview of the *perushim*, the explainers, as is the very existence of Judaism in the world today. To spit out the term “pharisee” as a derogation is akin to cutting the roots of Judaism from the soil of existence.

I teach full courses in unpacking this word for the improvement of linguistic hospitality and building understanding of Jesus’s Jewish context, but here let me say this: what the New Testament portrays is *one side* of not unfriendly intra-Pharisaic discussions, taken from fuller conversational contexts which reduces them to pull-quotes to make an argument for separating from a parent culture. The only cure for this I have found is for Christian folk to learn like Jesus, and spend time on Midrash and Talmud. This is no small gesture. It means a commitment to meet Jesus and his teachers in their own context and on their own terms.

This consideration is not an invitation to step into the intent but the effect of linguistic naiveté. No harm is meant, to be sure, when these terms are used, but the experience of hearing them in formal and informal conversation is not endearing.

I have been deeply enriched by my immersion in Christian and Catholic cultures and traditions. I have “allowed in” a great deal of spiritual inspiration and been changed by it. By offering these reflections on linguistic hospitality, it is my hope that my Christian dialogue partners may likewise be invited into my Judaism, and the Jewish world of Jesus.

6 James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword: The Church and the Jews* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001), 132.