

The Council of Nicaea and Judaism

How to commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in the context of current Jewish-Christian relations?

By Martin Hoegger, www.hoegger.org - martin.hoegger@gmail.com

Version 6 - 8.9.2024

(Introduction by Bishop Beacham: The IPHC is a signatory to the Seven Affirmations of Towards Jerusalem Council II. You can view them at <https://www.tjcii.org/>. As part of the significant remembrance of the Council of Nicaea, this article by Swiss Reformed Pastor Martin Hoegger addresses unfortunate consequences of some of the canons of Nicaea. A creed, such as the Apostles' Creed or Nicæan Creed, address doctrine, while canons refer to practical issues addressed by a particular church council. In the current widespread anti-Semitism from both the political left and right, this paper by Pastor Hoegger reminds us of our Jewish roots as Christians and the implications for Gentile and Jewish followers of Jesus.)

The year 2025 will mark the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, whose creed unequivocally confessed faith in Jesus Christ as "true God" against Arianism, which rejected his divinity. Nicaea was a decisive moment in the Church's journey and remains relevant today. As a recent seminar put it, this Council is a source for *"the start of a new beginning"* in walking together towards unity.¹

The Council of Nicaea reminds us of our common Christian roots. Its Creed, based on the Scriptures, describes the Christological convictions that define our faith. It thus provides a solid basis for moving towards unity, which requires agreement on the essential content of the faith.

However, research is needed into critical aspects of this Council, such as the decisive role it played in relations between Jews and Christians. Christianity and Judaism were then defined against each other, and their history became more one of tragedy than of mutual enrichment.

At Nicaea, the Church not only opposed the Jews, but also excluded and denigrated them. It would soon persecute them, paving the way for the even more virulent secular anti-Semitism that would culminate in the Shoah. Antisemitism that persists today and is amplified by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Moreover, Nicaea also led to the estrangement of the Judeo-Christian communities made up of Jewish disciples of Jesus, which still existed at the time. The anti-Jewish polemic, particularly in the context of the separation of the Jewish Easter date, was in fact also directed

¹ *"Since Nicaea, walking together towards unity. The start of a new beginning"*. Seminar organized on 8.2.2024 by the "Pasqua together 2025" initiative, of which I am a member.
<https://www.hoegger.org/article/commemorer-le-concile-de-nicee-le-debut-dun-nouveau-depart>

at this "*Church born of circumcision*", as well as at non-Jewish disciples of Jesus who had integrated elements of Judaism into their faith and practice.

After an introduction on the perception of the Jews in the Roman Empire and Constantine's vision of unity, from which the Jews were excluded, this article will look at the various areas of fracture between Jews and Christians in the aftermath of Nicaea. It will end by giving the floor to two Jewish theologians on Nicaea and by inviting to "repair relations".

The perception of Jews in the Roman Empire

The Church's perception of the Jews should also be seen in the context of the influence of the perception in the Roman Empire. From the time of Pompey's capture of Jerusalem (63 BC), the Jews appeared to be a group characterized by bizarre and exclusive religious customs and by their political opposition to Rome.²

Admittedly, Judaism also exerted an attraction, as shown by the presence of proselytes and "God-fearers" in the New Testament. But many Roman authors passed harsh judgement on the Jews. Seneca, for example, spoke of *sceleratissima gens* (very wicked people) to criticize the harmful influence of Jewish customs among the Romans.³ The tendency towards depreciation increased after the first revolt against Rome. Quintilian used the expression *perniciosa gens* (pernicious people).⁴ Tacitus called the Jews *taeterrima gens* ("repulsive people") and *proiectissima ad libidinem gens* ("people very prone to debauchery").⁵

The religion of the Jews is marked by superstition. According to Florus (2nd century), they were an "*impious people*", *inpia gens*.⁶ Their "*superstitio*" was often linked to the observance of the Sabbath. Seneca denounced this practice in his treatise *On Superstition* and was surprised that they gave up fighting on that day, thus becoming easy prey.⁷ Rutilius Namatianus sees the observance of the Sabbath as a "*root of madness (radix stultitiae)*".⁸

Dion Cassius (3rd century) notes, about Pompey's capture of Jerusalem, that the Romans, "*informed of this trait of fanaticism, acted without vigour the rest of the time and waited for the periodic return of this holiday to attack the rampart with all their forces. This is how the temple was taken on Saturn's day (i.e. the Sabbath), without any resistance, and all the treasures were plundered*".⁹

² Cf. Katell Berthelot. "Les Juifs au miroir des perceptions romaines : entre gens et religio". In: Yann Lignereux; Alain Messaoudi; Annick Peters-Custot; Jérôme Wilgaux. *Ethno-politique des empires. De l'Antiquité au monde contemporain*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, p. 63-79, 2021, <https://hal.science/hal-03405102v1/document>.

³ From a quote by Augustine in *The City of God* VI.11

⁴ *Institution of oratory* III.7.21

⁵ *Stories* V.8.2; V.5.2

⁶ *Epitome* I.40.30

⁷ See Katell Berthelot, *art. cit*, p. 7.

⁸ *On his return* I.389

⁹ *Roman History* XXXVII.16.3-4

It should also be noted that the founding of *Aelia Capitolina* in place of Jerusalem, and the construction of the Temple of Jupiter on the Temple Mount after the catastrophe of 135, signified the replacement of Israel by Rome.¹⁰ As far back as 56 BC, Cicero contemptuously referred to "*the Judeans and Syrians, nations born to servitude (Iudaeis et Syris, nationibus natis servituti)*".¹¹ With the triumph of Rome after 135, Jewish submission was total.

Constantine, a Christian statesman concerned with unity, but without the Jews

After Diocletian's harsh persecution of Christians in the early 4th century, the reign of Emperor Constantine (306-337) led in a new era for Christians. His reign ushered in an incredible turnaround. Having become a disciple of Jesus Christ, Constantine had a lofty vision of his mission and was convinced of the importance of Church unity for social peace.

In his letters, he "*considers himself to be the servant of the Almighty*" (Letter 16:17), confessing to him in prayer: "*Under your guidance I have undertaken salutary actions and have brought them to a successful conclusion*" (15:11). He presents himself as the "*companion in service*" of the bishops (16,10; 18,3), whom he calls his "*brothers*" (7; 12,9; 14,2; 17; 27,8). He does not hesitate to reproach them for their quarrels (e.g. letters 36 and 37). He seems very upset by their divisions (4,1; 16,4.10.16; etc.) and hastens to take every possible initiative to restore unity (4,3) and peace to the people of God (15,13), setting himself up as an arbitrator (16,7), resorting to the tried and tested methods of civil procedure (4,2) and convening a local council in Arles in 314, and a universal council in Nicaea in 325 (17)".¹²

Constantine believed that divisions within the Church were as dangerous, if not more so, than political confrontations. In his speech at Nicaea, reported by Eusebius of Caesarea, he said: "*I consider internal division in the Church of God to be a more disastrous disturbance than any war or furious battle, and these things seem to me to be more distressing than those outside*".¹³

Constantine committed himself to the unity of the Church to unify his empire. Thus began the long history of the entanglement of State and Church. But this link had disastrous consequences for the Jewish people. This can be seen immediately after the Council, in the letter Constantine wrote to announce its results, particularly the question of fixing the date of Easter. The anti-Jewish polemic is very explicitly expressed:

"It appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are,

¹⁰ Cf Katell Berthelot, "L'Empire romain, un défi politico-religieux pour le judaïsme antique" *Études théologiques et religieuses*, (Tome 91) (3), 2016, p. 339-349. <https://doi.org/10.3917/etr.0913.0339>

¹¹ *De Provinciis Consularibus* V.10

¹² In this §, I'm quoting Marcel Metzger, "Trois lettres et un discours de l'empereur Constantin le Grand aux évêques". *Droit et religion en Europe*, Strasbourg University Press, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pus.9531> §30.

¹³ P. Maraval, *Constantin le Grand. Lettres et discours*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2010, p. 156-157

therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul ... Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd; for we have received from our Saviour a different way".¹⁴

Along with his "brothers" the bishops, Constantine impressively rejected any reference to dependence on the Jewish people for the faith and practice of the Church. This position of the Nicene Church was supported by the highest imperial authority: the emperor himself, who considered himself "*a bishop from outside*" and who is venerated as a saint equal to the apostles in the Orthodox Church. I will come back to the question of the date of Easter *below*.

Places of separation between Christians and Jews following the Council of Nicaea

The apostle Paul had a vision of a Church in which Jews and Gentiles are reconciled through the work of Jesus Christ, but the distinction remains within the one ecclesial communion of faith (Ephesians 1:13-14). Both are called "*welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you, to the glory of God*" (Romans 15:7). Together, they form the "*mystery of the new man*" (Ephesians 2:11-18).¹⁵

But very early on, at the end of the first century, this vision was undermined in the name of a "*theology of replacement*", according to which the promises given to Israel were considered null and void and henceforth concerned the Church. On the other hand, the Church of the Gentiles gradually tried to assimilate Jewish believers in Jesus Christ,

"From the second half of the second century onwards, Christians of Greek origin no longer seemed to be aware of all that they owed to Judaism, from the liturgical, exegetical and institutional points of view. The very idea of a common origin seems to have faded completely, with a few exceptions", sums up Simon Claude Mimouni.¹⁶

However, although some scholars question it and the issue must be approached with caution, Judeo-Christian communities survived until the 6th century. *"In the current state of research...the sources show that the Judeo-Christian communities survived for a long time - in various forms, as rich as they were varied - the two great military and human catastrophes suffered by the Judean nation"*, writes Mimouni.¹⁷

Jerome, for example, polemicized against them at the beginning of the 5th century, saying that, despite their confession of Christ, son of God, dead and risen, *"while they want to be Jews and Christians at the same time, they are neither Jews nor Christians"*.¹⁸

In Rome, the memory of a Church made up of Jews and Gentiles will live on because of its founding apostles: Peter, apostle to the circumcised, and Paul, apostle of the uncircumcised

¹⁴ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine* III, 18

¹⁵ See Robert F. Wolff, ed, *Awakening the One New Man*, Destiny Image, Shippenburg, 2011.

¹⁶ Simon Claude Mimouni, *Le christianisme des origines à Constantin*. Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 2015, p. 273.

¹⁷ Simon Claude Mimouni, *Ibid*, p. 276

¹⁸ *Letters*, 112, 4



(Gal. 2:8). Two magnificent mosaics, among the oldest, show this: those of the Churches of Saint Pudencian (late 4th century) and Saint Sabina (mid 5th century), in Rome, representing the “*Ecclesia ex circumcisione*” (the Church born of circumcision) opposite the “*Ecclesia ex gentibus*” (the Church born of the nations, see image above).¹⁹

The anti-Jewish polemic expressed at Nicaea is also found in the canons of the synods and councils that followed this Council.²⁰ This polemic was preceded by the writings of several Christian writers who influenced the decisions of the synods and councils. Many treatises “*Adversus*

Iudaeos” - “against the Jews” - were published. Jean-Miguel Garrigue's recent book “*L'impossible Substitution*” provides an in-depth study of the history of replacement theology from the end of the 1st to the 3rd centuries.²¹

Let's look at some of the places where, following Nicaea, councils and synods sought to mark the separation between Jews and Christians.²²

1. Rejection of coexistence between Jews and Christians

What these councils indicate by their desire to mark a clear distance between Jews and Christians is that there was a real conviviality between Jews and Christians at the beginning of the fourth century. For example, the Council of Elvira (in Spain) decreed in 306: “*If any of the clergy of the Faithful eats with Jews, he shall be kept from communion in order that he be corrected as he should*”.²³ Canon 49 of the same council also condemned the practice of Christian farmers asking Jews to bless their crops.

In the centuries that followed, numerous laws regulated these relations until the Council of Nicaea II in 787, which published what was probably the harshest text against the Jews, since it decreed that it was impossible for a Jew to receive baptism unless he “*publicly repudiates Jewish customs and rites*” (Article 8).²⁴

¹⁹ Cf. Jean-Miguel Garrigue, *L'impossible substitution. Juifs et Chrétiens (1^e-3^e siècles)*. Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 2024, p. 145

²⁰ For a study of ecclesiastical legislation expressing the clergy's hostility towards Jews in North Africa, see the article by Thomas Villey: “L'antijudaïsme dans la littérature canonique africaine tardo-antique”, *Tsafon* [On line], 78 | 2019. <http://journals.openedition.org/tsafon/2354> 4

²¹ Cf. Jean-Miguel Garrigues, *op. cit.* p. 145

²² See also Michael Igrave, Nicaea and Christian-Jewish Relations, *The Ecumenical Review* Volume 75, Number 2, April 2023, p. 238ss, DOI: 10.1111/erev.12784

²³ Canon 50 of the Council of Elvira. Cf. Jane Gerber, *The Jews of Spain: A History of the Sephardic Experience*, Free Press, New York, 1992, p. 5ff.

²⁴ For the canons of the various councils and synods, see *Library of the Church Fathers*, of the University of Fribourg (Switzerland). <https://bkv.unifr.ch/en> (Texts in German, French and English).

Thus, the 7th so-called "Ecumenical" Council - which still has authority in the Orthodox and Catholic Churches today - affirms that any Jew who comes to faith in the Messiah Jesus and wishes to retain elements of his faith and practice is rejected from the society of the baptized.

2. Rejection of the Sabbath

The Council of Nicaea did not introduce Sunday instead of the Sabbath, as this practice had gradually become established in the Church before the Council. An important milestone was the decision by Emperor Constantine in 321 to make Sunday the day of rest in his empire. A social revolution at a time when there was no such thing as a weekly rest day! ²⁵

Constantine probably also took this decision to facilitate the celebration of Christian worship on that day. Canon 20 of the Council of Nicaea, which forbids kneeling on Sundays and during the Easter season, indicates that the celebration of Christ's resurrection has become central to worship, but also presumes that it should be celebrated on the first day.

This imperial decision led the Church to forbid Christians to rest on the Sabbath, as Jews and Judeo-Christian communities did, on pain of anathema.

Four decades later, a canon of the Synod of Laodicea - a regional council, around 364 in Asia Minor - forbade Christians to keep the Sabbath or "*observe any other Judaic rite*": "*Christians must not judaize by resting on the Sabbath, but must work on that day, rather honoring the Lord's Day; and, if they can, resting then as Christians. But if any shall be found to be judaizers, let them be anathema from Christ.*" (§29)

This Council therefore expressly forbade Christians from observing the Sabbath, on the grounds that this practice was "judaizing"; the emphasis on Sunday marked a desire to separate Christians from their Jewish neighbors.

3. Rejection of Jewish festivals and pious practices

The canons also sought to regulate pious practices and participation in festivals. The Synod of Laodicea, for example, prescribes: "*It is not lawful to receive portions sent from the feasts of Jews or heretics, nor to feast together with them...It is not lawful to receive unleavened bread from the Jews, nor to be partakers of their impiety.*" (§37-38).

Similarly, the "Canons of the Holy Apostles", which probably date from the beginning of the 5th century, forbid participation in Jewish feasts: "*If any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, or any one of the list of clergy keeps fast or festival with the Jews, or receives from them any of the gifts of their feasts, as unleavened bread or any such things, let him be deposed. If he be a layman, let him be excommunicated.*" (§70).

These same Canons forbid the practice of lighting a lamp in a synagogue: "*If any Christian carries oil into a heathen temple, or into a synagogue of the Jews, or lights up lamps in their festivals, let him be suspended.*" (§71).

²⁵ See my sermon on this theme: <https://www.hoegger.org/article/91-800-dimanches>

4. Rejection of the Jewish dating of Easter

This concern for separation from Judaism was also a very important factor in the disputes over the date of Easter and the resolution of this controversial issue at Nicaea. The debates on this subject are complex. To simplify, there are two positions: one that sets the annual celebration of Christ's resurrection on the Jewish Passover: 14th day of Nisan. This is the "*quartodeciman*" position in force in the Churches of the East.

The other majority position is that the feast of the Resurrection should always be celebrated on a Sunday. The fathers of the Council of Nicaea clearly opted for this point of view. The obligatory rule decided at Nicaea was to fix the feast on the first Sunday following the full moon, after the vernal equinox.²⁶

The central argument for this decision is that the minority opinion is to be rejected because it is based on Jewish dating practice. Virulent anti-Judaism is explicitly expressed in the Letter of the Council of Nicaea to the Egyptians, found among the writings of Athanasius, and above all in Constantine's Letter to the Churches cited above.

The language of Constantine's letter is very negative: following the practice of the Jews is "*unworthy*" and all trade with them must be broken off. Not content with calling for a break with them, the letter passes abusive judgement on them: "*their hands have been stained by the most appalling of crimes*", "*their minds have been blinded*", they are "*guilty of patricide in killing the Lord*" (*patroktonia, kyrioktonia*).

The aim of such a diatribe, which many Church Fathers took up again, was not to denigrate the Jews for the sake of it, but to "*separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews*". There must be a clear separation between Jews and Christians. Any sign that the Church was dependent on the Jewish people for its faith and practice must be rejected.

The Synod of Antioch went further, excommunicating those who celebrated on the Jewish date of Easter, and deposing clerics who dared to do so (Canon §1).

To sum up, for Michael Ipgrave, "*the Paschal decision of Nicaea, like the legislation on the Lord's Day which shortly preceded it, is a key marker on the way to the differentiation between two communities that were still, to some extent, in a relation of symbiosis, or at least co-existence*".²⁷

5. Faith in the divinity of Christ: a marker of identity against the Jews.

The denial of the divinity of Christ by the Alexandrian priest Arius was an even more serious challenge to the unity of the Church than the date of Easter. It has not been established that Arius was influenced by Judaism, even though his bishop Alexander of Alexandria wrote about

²⁶ See the detailed discussion of the issues involved in Daniel P. McCarthy, "The Council of Nicaea and the Celebration of the Christian Pascha", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, ed. Young Richard Kim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021, p.177-201.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108613200.009>

²⁷ Michael Ipgrave, *Art. Cit.* p. 241

Arius and his acolytes in a letter to Alexander of Constantinople: "*They revile every godly apostolic doctrine, and in Jewish fashion have organized a gang to fight against Christ, denying his divinity, and declaring him to be on a level with other men*".²⁸

Whatever the historical kinship of Arianism with Jewish thinkers, the Nicene Creed draws a clear distinction between Christian orthodoxy and Judaism. The incarnation of our Lord, his divinity and the mystery of the Trinity became the hallmarks of the Christian faith. The affirmation, in particular, of the Son as "*homoousios*", "of the same nature" as the Father, unequivocally affirms his full divinity.

The Nicene creed became a marker that clearly differentiated Christians from Jews. In response, Jewish thinkers increasingly emphasized the divine unity to which the *Shema* testifies (Deut. 6:4). The definition of the faith at Nicaea thus provided both communities with clear markers to demarcate one from the other.

Jesus the "true Jew"

Nicaea and the Councils that followed emphasized Jesus' identity as "*true God*" and "*true man*". The confessional texts of the Protestant Reformation considered this Christology to be faithful to the Scriptures. As a "*confessing Reformed Christian*", I also accept it and take a stand against some "neo-Arian" tendencies present in Protestantism today.²⁹

However, I deplore the fact that the Nicene Creed and all subsequent creeds have erased any reference to the Jewish humanity of Jesus and his roots in the history of his people, even though it is implicit in the affirmation that Jesus was "*born of the Virgin Mary*" and that the Holy Spirit "*spoke through the prophets*", in the addition to the 3rd article on the Holy Spirit at the Council of Constantinople.

Jesus was a "*true Jew*", and today's Jewish-Christian dialogue enables us to rediscover his Jewishness, which must never be ignored. Following the Council of Constantinople, recognizing "*the equal divinity of the Father, the Son and the Spirit*"³⁰ " does not imply denigrating Judaism. On the contrary, it enables Christians to deepen their understanding of the humanity of Jesus, who, as the Book of Revelation proclaims, is "*the lion of the tribe of Judah*", who remains a Jew even in the glory of his resurrection (5:5).

Two Jewish viewpoints on Nicaea

In his book "*The Jewish Christ*", a landmark in Jewish-Christian dialogue, Daniel Boyarin notes that Nicaea succeeded in creating both what we call "Christianity" and "Judaism": "*In the end what was accomplished in Nicaea and Constantinople was the establishment of a Christianity*

²⁸ Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.4

²⁹ During the seminar "*Since Nicaea, walking together towards unity. The start of a new beginning*" (see note 1), I contributed on the Nicene Creed, showing its topicality in the face of these trends: *The Nicene Creed in Protestantism: rejected, optional or normative?* (Texts in French and English) <https://www.hoegger.org/article/nicee-protestantisme/>

³⁰ Canon 5 of the Council of Constantinople.

that was completely separated from Judaism... This had the secondary historical effect of putting the power of the Roman Empire and its church authorities behind the existence of a fully separate "orthodox" Judaism as well.

At least from a juridical standpoint, then, Judaism and Christianity became completely separate religions in the fourth century. Before that, no one (except God, of course) had the authority to tell folks that they were or were not Jewish or Christian, and many had chosen to be both. At the time of Jesus, all who followed Jesus—and even those who believed that he was God".³¹

For Mark Kinzer, co-chair of the dialogue between the Vatican and Messianic Judaism, the most serious problem is that the *ecclesia ex circumcisione* (the Church born of circumcision) was not represented at Nicaea. It is therefore difficult to regard it as a truly ecumenical council.³² It was a council of the Church of the nations. For him, the Church must have a "*bilateral constitution*", where Jews are not assimilated, but where, in the spirit of the Apostle Paul, Jews and Gentiles recognize and welcome each other as Christ has welcomed them (Romans 15:7).

"Nicaea thus represents a decisive moment in the history of Christian substitution, when the Christian Church, in alliance with the Roman emperor, formally renounced its bilateral constitution. Consciously and decisively, the Church turned away from the Jewish people and turned towards the Roman Empire".³³

According to Kinzer, by omitting any reference to the people of Israel and their crucial role in the history of God's dealings with the world, the problem with the creed is substitution by omission – "*a sin of omitting rather than committing*". This omission is reflected in virtually every historic Christian confession of faith.³⁴

However, Kinzer believes that this creed should be taken seriously and treated with respect by Messianic Jews, as it encapsulates the essential and enduring teaching of their "*ecclesiological partner*". He also notes that in environments where fidelity to Nicene orthodoxy is declining, the faith and spiritual vitality of the churches are weakening. But "*when Christians honor the Council of Nicaea, they are doing one and the same thing: paying homage to Jesus, and glorifying him as the Son of God, 'the shining forth of his glory, the effigy of his substance' (Hebrews 1:3)*".³⁵

³¹ Daniel Boyarin, *The Jewish Gospels*, The New Press, New York, 2012, p.13f.

³² 'Ecumenical' is to be understood in the geographical sense: a council that is not regional but concerns all the Churches in the Roman Empire. We find this meaning when Augustus ordered a 'census of the whole oikoumènè' (Luke 2:1).

³³ Translated from French in: Mark Kinzer, *Scrutant son propre mystère*, Parole et Silence, Paris, 2016, p. 281 (English version: *Searching Her Own Mystery: Nostra Aetate, the Jewish People, and the Identity of the Church*. Cascade, Eugene, 2015)

³⁴ Mark Kinzer, *Op. cit.* p. 282f

³⁵ Mark Kinzer, *Op. cit.* p.278, 282

Conclusion: repairing relationships

At Nicaea, the Church abusively described the Jew as a representation of the "other", the "different" with whom it did not wish to have relations. The legacy of Nicaea remains essentially that of a rejection of Judaism by Christianity: "*We wish, my dear brothers, to separate ourselves from the detestable company of the Jews*", Constantine did not hesitate to write to the bishops, *urbi et orbi*. But this separation is the result of more than two centuries of replacement theology, and the decisions of Nicaea were preceded and followed by those of other councils.

A recent Church of England report expresses this wounded relationship as follows: "*Since at least the fourth century, Christianity and Judaism have been separate religions which have, to a significant degree, defined over against each other*".³⁶

In order to move away from this age-old "*teaching of contempt*",³⁷ it was necessary to wait for the Jewish-Christian dialogue that emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War, in which the "*Ten Points of Seelisberg*"³⁸ (1947) and the "*Declaration Nostra Aetate*" (1965) were milestones and introduced a completely different approach, one that could be described as an "*exchange of gifts*".³⁹

Indeed, Seelisberg's fourth thesis recalls that "*fundamental commandment of Christianity, to love God and one's neighbor, proclaimed already in the Old Testament and confirmed by Jesus, is binding upon both Christians and Jews in all human relationships, without any exception*" (Point 4), while the section on Judaism in *Nostra Aetate* begins with these striking words: "*As the sacred synod searches into the mystery of the Church, it remembers the bond that spiritually ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock*" (§4).

So how do we commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in the context of current Jewish-Christian relations?

³⁶ Faith and Order Commission of the Church of England, *God's Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian-Jewish Relations*, Church House Publishing, London, 2019, § 7.

³⁷ This expression was coined by Jules Isaac in a seminal book on Jewish-Christian relations, *L'Enseignement du mépris*, Fasquelle, Paris, 1962.

³⁸ See : <https://www.ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/ecumenical-christian/seelisberg>

³⁹ The year 2025 will see not only the Nicaea celebrations, but also the 60th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Relations of the Catholic Church with Non-Christian Religions. The chapter on Judaism represents a decisive turning point
See https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_fr.html

In 1965, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches also began a work that would culminate in the Bristol Document "*The Church and the Jewish People*", published in 1967. On the WCC's involvement in Jewish-Christian relations, of which the Bristol report is the most comprehensive, see David Marshall, "The World Council of Churches and theology of Christian-Jewish Relations", *The Ecumenical Review* 72:5 (2020), pp. 861-894.

1. Nurturing fraternal relationships

To work towards repairing these relations, we need to nurture fraternity between Jews and Christians, by getting to know each other better through dialogue, by visiting each other, by responding to the invitations of our Jewish sisters and brothers, by taking part in their religious services, and by focusing on relationships rather than institutions.

It can also lead Christians to become involved in mutual aid projects and to show generosity towards their Jewish brothers and sisters, to help them escape poverty, resist anti-Semitism and return to the land of their ancestors.

In 2022, I made a spiritual retreat in the monastery of Abu Gosh, around twenty kilometers from Jerusalem. This Benedictine monastery is located in a town that is 95% Muslim, with a vocation for dialogue: to be a "*fraternal presence*" for the inhabitants, but also to be "*attentive to the mystery of Israel*". That is why so many Jews visit this blessed place.



The church, built by the Crusaders in the 11th century, contains numerous frescoes. The faces of Jesus, Mary and the angels had been erased by the Muslim occupiers. One of them struck me: that of an angel pushing away a woman holding a broken spear, whose face is marked by fear and confusion. With the inscription "*Synagoga*", it represents Judaism excluded by Christianity, as at the Council of Nicaea.

"As I contemplate the Synagogue, my thoughts take me back in time. Photographs of Jews from

*the 20th century with the same look of fear and dismay alongside those who hate them and drive them out without the slightest hesitation", writes the Jewish painter Peter Maltz about this fresco.*⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Peter Jacob Maltz, "Synagoga", in Jean-Baptiste Delzant, *L'église d'Abu Gosh. 850 ans de regards sur les fresques d'une église franque en Terre Sainte*, Tohu-bohu - Archimbaud, Paris, 2018, p. 218.

But in the light of P. Maltz's relationship with the monks and nuns of Abu Gosh, he drew this sketch expressing what he really felt. The angel now embraces the synagogue!

"My experience of the Christian religion has been marked by healing and compassion, not by a desire of rejection", says the painter, following his companionship with the monks and nuns of Abu Gosh, who have always shown him their love. "The rapprochement is genuine, and the 'repair of the world' (tikun olam) is at work every day".⁴¹



2. Humility and repentance

Reparation cannot be achieved without humility. To focus on relationships rather than institutions is to recognize our condition as creatures drawn from "Humus". God is attracted by humility: "However high the Lord may be, he sees the humble, and from afar he spots the proud" (Ps 138:6) and he lifts them up (Luke 1:51; James 4:6).

An attitude of humility enables repentance that must always accompany the encounter between Jews and Christians. After the jubilee of the year 2000, the jubilee of the 1700 years of Nicaea in 2025 will once again be an opportunity for the Churches to deplore and condemn the manifestations of anti-Judaism that were expressed then, just as they are today. To ignore this problematic dimension of the Council of Nicaea would be to agree with it.

Repentance is an essential part of the Jubilee tradition. In the Old Testament, the Jubilee year begins and ends on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 25:8ff). In an interview, Patriarch of Constantinople Bartholomew spoke of the need for a penitential dimension if the Jubilee of the council of Nicaea is to be authentic.⁴²

As part of the seminar *"Since Nicaea, walking together towards unity. The Start of a New Beginning"*, I proposed that on the Jubilee of Nicaea, the Reformed Churches should enter into a process of repentance for their actual theological compromises on Christology. Although most of them have adopted the Nicene Creed, they tolerate the denial of the divinity of Jesus Christ in their synods.⁴³

The relationship of the Churches with Judaism continues to be a fundamental place of repentance. In a study of the Catholic theologian Peter Hocken, a great architect of Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Mary Paul Friemel writes:

⁴¹ *Ibid* p. 221

⁴² In an interview with the Italian newspaper *Avvenire* (13.2.2021). See: <https://www.avvenire.it/chiesa/pagine/intervista-bartolomeo-patriarca-ecumenico-di-costantinopoli>

⁴³ See note 28

"This question of repentance and confession of the sins of our Churches is critical. Without a proper repositioning and purification of hearts in repentance and confession, our theological repositioning can hardly be accomplished".

Such repentance is part of a historical "repositioning" of the Church in its relationship with the Jewish people. Faced with the Church's harshness against the Jews at Nicaea and throughout history, Hocken's response was simply: *"There needs to be more repentance"*. And, adds Friemel, *"This he often did, on his knees and with true tears of repentance. Only then could reconciliation be furthered and a new vision for both sides begins"*.⁴⁴

3. A call to start of a new beginning.

In preparation for the Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II called for repentance and conversion, in order to enter the new millennium with a *"purification of memory"*, that is of *"all the forms of counter-witness and scandal"* that can be identified. His prayer at the "Kotel", the Western Wall in Jerusalem, during this jubilee was a symbolically powerful moment.⁴⁵ With this act, I think the Bishop of Rome was representing not just his own Church, but Christians of all Churches. I felt I was represented by him. And I think my Church also!

I hope that during the commemorations of the Council of Nicaea in 2025, there will also be a meeting between the highest representatives of Judaism and those of the Churches.⁴⁶ These Church leaders should acknowledge the tragic exclusion of Judaism at Nicaea and give a fraternal embrace to their Jewish brothers and sisters, like the angel embracing *"Synagoga"*, so well drawn by P. Maltz. And may this embrace be *"the start of a new beginning"*, as the recent seminar with this title invited us to do!

4. Redefining relations with the "Church born of circumcision"

The decisions taken at Nicaea have influenced the relationship between Christians and Jews - and vice versa - right up to the present day, establishing a clear separation between the two communities. For example, it has become strange for a Christian to integrate some elements of Jewish practice. Similarly, a Jew who recognizes Jésus as Israel's Messiah is no longer considered to be a Jew by certain currents of Judaism, whereas this was not the case before the Council of Nicaea. This mutual estrangement is a legacy of the process of separation that was set in motion at Nicaea.

⁴⁴ Sr Mary Paul Friemel, "The Challenge of the Messianic Jewish Movement for the Churches. Repositioning Ecclesiology in the reflections of Mons. Peter Hocken (1932-2017), in *Jesus, King of Jews? Messianic Judaism, Jewish Christians, and Theology beyond Supersessionism*, ed. James Earle Patrick, Toward Jerusalem Council II, Vienna, 2021, p. 68.

⁴⁵ See Mgr Roland Minnerath, "Mémoire et réconciliation", *Revue des sciences religieuses*, 96/1-3 | 2022, <http://journals.openedition.org/rsr/11279>

⁴⁶ As the relationship with Judaism concerns all the Churches, those which form the "pillars" of the Global Christian Forum - the most representative ecumenical body - should be represented by their highest authorities. Cf. <https://globalchristianforum.org/about-us/who-we-are/>

The Jubilee of Nicaea will also provide an opportunity to reflect on the relationship with *the "ecclesia ex circumcisione"*, which was eclipsed at Nicaea. Its current rebirth over the last 50 years is a powerful call to all the Churches.⁴⁷ How can this eclipse be transformed into inclusion? This is the question posed by the initiative *"Towards a Council of Jerusalem II"* (TJCII)⁴⁸, whose answer is clear: to convene a council in which this "Church born of circumcision" is a stakeholder, unlike the seven "ecumenical" councils, from the first in Nicaea to the seventh held in the same city!

The Reformed theologian Thomas Torrance made clear what is at stake for the Church's journey towards unity, with this simple phrase:

*"The deepest schism of the one people of God is the schism between the Christian Church and the Jewish Church, not between Eastern and Western Christianity, or Roman and Protestant Christianity. The bitter separation between the Catholic Church and the synagogue...was one of the greatest tragedies of all Western civilization... Only by healing this split in a profound reconciliation will all the other divisions we are struggling with in the ecumenical movement finally be overcome".*⁴⁹

May the year 2025 be an important stage in the pilgrimage towards 2033, the great jubilee of the 2000th anniversary of the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, the light of the nations and the glory of Israel (Luke 2:32).⁵⁰ Let us pray and work for a great outpouring of the Spirit during this year and on the road leading up to it, so that the Church may correspond more closely to what her Lord has willed for her: a communion in his love between Jews and Gentiles! In this way, we will move towards that profound unity that Paul describes in his letter to the Romans:

"Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" (15,7-9).

⁴⁷ For an introduction to Messianic Judaism, most of which is found in the USA, see Richard Harvey, *Mapping Messianic Jewish Theology: A Constructive Approach*. Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2009. On its great diversity in Israel, see David Serner & Alexander Goldberg, *Jesus-believing Israelis - Exploring Messianic Fellowships*. Caspari Center, Jerusalem, 2021

⁴⁸ <https://www.tjcii.org>

⁴⁹ Thomas Torrance, "The divine Vocation and Destiny of Israel in World History". In: *The Witness of the Jews to God*, David Torrance, ed, Hansel Press, Edinburgh, 2011, p. 92

⁵⁰ On this Jubilee, see <https://www.jc2033.world/en/>