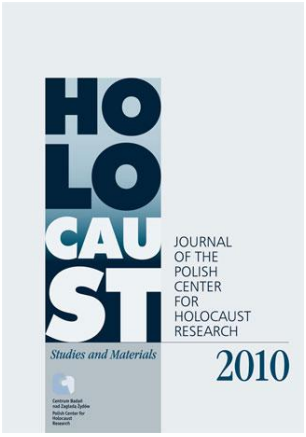



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# *Christian-Jewish Dialogue in the Land of Sick Imagination. On the Margins of Waldemar Chrostowski's Book Kościół, Żydzi, Polska*

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# Christian–Jewish Dialogue in the Land of Sick Imagination

## On the Margin of Waldemar Chrostowski's Book *Kościół, Żydzi, Polska* [*Church, Jews, Poland*]

### Monologue on Dialogue

During the last half century "dialogue" became a term most often used for describing a positive vision of relations between followers of different religions. Regardless of whether this word seems overused, imprecise or inadequate to some, no reasonable person will deny that erecting bridges between communities that traditionally have had an unfavorable attitude to each other is something more than a fantasy of wishful dreamers who practice dialogue-mania or dialoguelatry – to use the terms by means of which Father Prof. Waldemar Chrostowski expresses his disgust with the current state of the dialogue enterprise.

In an epoch marked by globalization and expansion of religious fundamentalism, which occasions chaos and tensions at every geographical latitude, giving in to weariness of dialogue due to personal grudge and entrenching oneself in positions ensuring cheap psychical comfort (because we are right and we do not need to apologize to anybody) means escaping from the responsibility for solving not so much theological problems as real problems of victims of religious persecution.

John Paul II referred to this practical goal of dialogue, when he repeated at meetings with non-Christian communities' leaders that "interreligious dialogue is God's will," for each religion has a moral obligation to "spread peace" and oppose the spread of violence. Only when we look out of our own religious or ethnic backyard and we notice that pluralism is a permanent phenomenon which concerns billions of people tangled up in negative stereotypes, "honored" by centuries-old tradition, can we appreciate the importance of, if only gradual, dialogue's progress.

Father Chrostowski and his completely congenial interlocutors cannot see this progress and rejoice in it. In my opinion, it is partly an expected effect of the shortcoming in their intention to diagnose the current state of and perspectives for Christian-Jewish dialogue by means of generalizing one person's rather solipsistic experiences, gained in two religiously monolithic countries, Poland and Israel, in which, for statistical reasons, dialogue is vestigial.

From the perspective of Poland, where the number of religious Jews has quite recently exceeded a hundred, and where Jews competent and able to seriously engage in dialogue with Christians can be counted on the fingers of one hand, the history of the Polish participants in dialogue is at best of anecdotal value on the global scale. An earnest summary of a few decades of Christian-Jewish dialogue might be ventured in the United States, and perhaps also in the UK or France, where hundreds of thousands or millions of Jews harmoniously and extremely successfully cooperate with Christians in shaping religiously, culturally and ethnically pluralist societies. Thus in these countries, where thousands of competent persons are engaged in animating Christians and Jews' cooperation, nobody formulates opinions as unilaterally pessimistic as those Father Chrostowski was kind enough to share with us. True, a lot still remains to be done there to remove from people's minds and hearts the prejudice and barriers that had been forming for about a dozen centuries. Repeated encouragement to further change the view of Christianity also appears in various Judaist denominations, including the Orthodox current (an example being the activity of Rabbi David Rosen, who is known for his close cooperation with Pope Benedict XVI).

The thing is that where the dialogue has for decades been an everyday way of Christians and Jews' coexistence and cooperation, no sane person with just a touch of good manners will make vague, bitter and pointless accusations against the other side. It is simple to accuse others of the whole evil and to try to outdo them in naming past wrongs. But it is quite an achievement to establish a positive relation with others and to convince them that brotherhood and cooperation for mutual good are possible today despite all the past events.

Nevertheless, there are still many who rationalize their inability to find themselves in the complicated reality of pluralist societies while posing as noble victims of the others' ill will and vileness. But as the saying has it, more healthy flies must gather around a spoon of honey than by a barrel of tar. Therefore, dialogue, which shapes positive stances even if only of some Christians and Jews, has much more value than floods of bitter, ugly and scornful words, which after all manifest powerlessness and not strength.

To join the reality-changing dialogue and to be accepted by the dialogue partners, one needs to seriously assume a perspective which takes into consideration the good of the whole human family and not only of one's own religious or ethnic community. What is needed is a regard not only for one's own, but also others' harms, and respect for not only "our" but also "their" sensitivity and good name.

It is difficult to notice such a perspective in Father Chrostowski's views on dialogue. It seems rather that reading his monologue confessions on dialogue is valuable mostly in that it teaches us which approach to dialogue is doomed to fail.

## Ours Is Beautiful

The tone in which Father Chrostowski talks about what is most sacred for Jews – about their faith, their attachment to the Land of Israel, their remembrance of per-

secutions during the Holocaust and in the Diaspora – and the accuracy with which he always hits where Jews will surely feel pain, confirms that he perceives relations between Christianity and Judaism not in dialogue categories but in categories of opposition, rivalry and conflict of interests. Ultimately, in Chrostowski's book we are confronted not with an attempt to look at "all God's children" from the Creator's perspective – as great pioneers of dialogue such as Abraham J. Heschel or Pope John XXIII tried to – but with a familiar theological vision reminiscent of two neighbors at loggerheads: we are right, it is the "others" who are to blame for everything, and until they apologize to us, we shall not apologize either, and we shall not yield an inch.

While calling for a brave search for truth, Chrostowski disapprovingly quotes Karel Čapek, who likened truth to a country and claimed that we cannot say whether it is true or false, but that we can only say whether it is ours or alien. Chrostowski opposes such biased identification of what is "ours" with truth, and what is "alien" with falseness. But the thing is that, in practice, he himself consistently sticks to the rule according to which each contention that Christians or Poles are or were to blame for something is false (or that at least "reliable history" is able to show the complexity of reasons and motivations effectively absolving them), while each contention that Jews are or were to blame for something is objectively true and Jews should finally make it an object of their examination of conscience (but in such cases Chrostowski is not eager to deliberate over reasons and motivations which would be to Jews' advantage).

To avoid groundless accusations, let us examine a few accusations Chrostowski makes against Jews, so that we can see that the ethical rule known at least since Confucius' times – "do as you would be done by" – is too often absent from his book.

Chrostowski suggests that Jews oppose dialogue in principle, they do not see a need for any negotiations with Christians, and they do not feel like devoting their energy to empathic exploration of Polish attitudes toward the history of Polish Jews. Indeed, according to Chrostowski, when they encounter Christians they typically react by spitting or murmuring a curse. One would like to ask what kind of Jews do so and where Father Chrostowski's vantage point was when he was formulating such opinions? At the New York Stock Exchange? At Harvard University? Or perhaps in the West London Synagogue, where men come in tail coats for service, and where Christians are welcome guests? No, Father Chrostowski simply generalizes, in a biased way, individual events in which totally extreme "elements" of the Judaist landscape take part. And these "elements" are exact counterparts to the Catholic milieus in which Father Chrostowski is nowadays especially popular and whose comments and opinions are an object of symmetrical accusations formulated by some Jews against Polish Catholics. Yet in both cases we deal with nonrepresentative, small groups of religious fundamentalists, which inspire shame and disapproval among representatives of the main currents of Judaism and Catholicism. Father Chrostowski paints in dark colors a monolithic image of Jews and disregards the

pluralism of Jewish beliefs and stances, of which he is surely aware. He does it in a way characteristic of somebody who brings up difficult problems not to convince others that certain views need to be corrected for the common good, but in order to oppress others. There is a chasm between the mentality and religious views of Hasidim from the Jerusalem district of Mea Shearin and Jews from an American conservative synagogue or supporters of "modern orthodoxy," and it is also not without importance that the latter are more numerous than the former.

Chrostowski attempts to strike a particularly severe blow to Jews by frequently mentioning that contemporary Judaism is not identical with the religion described in the Old Testament (by which he certainly wants to say that Christians should abandon the possible inferiority complex of being a schismatic branch of Judaism). While taking about rabbinic Judaism, he uses words suggesting that today we are dealing with a corrupted form of original Judaism, which the rabbis had voluntarily "reconstructed." He stresses that the Talmud "symptomatically" seldom refers to the Torah to justify its rules and recommendations (in other words, regarding their human ideas as something above what God had revealed in the Torah, rabbis themselves made up what is in the Talmud). An image arises in which it is Christianity, if we take ancient biblical Judaism as the starting point, which has remained faithful to the Torah given by God to the ancient Jews. Conversely, at the end of the first century AD (after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple) Jewish rabbis began making their human laws and customs on their own. Consequently, contemporary Judaism, contrary to Christianity, is not ancient Judaism's rightful continuation (and so Jews not only rejected the Messiah professed in "their" Scriptures, but also partly rejected the Torah teachings in favor of the Talmud, which they had created). The point is that Chrostowski "forgets" to stress that Jews believe that the rabbis did not make anything up, since the Talmud is simply the written version of the oral Torah which was given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, just like the written Torah. In their opinion, these two Torahs remain in perfect harmony and express the Law given to Jews by God. More importantly, Chrostowski does not labor the point that the Christian doctrine (particularly the Catholic one) was shaped in a way perfectly analogical to the doctrine of rabbinic Judaism. For apart from the (written) Bible, an important source of many beliefs and practices accepted by the Church is the (oral) Tradition, which as Catholics believe is a faithful account of things communicated by Jesus Christ to the Apostles; therefore it is logical that it is in perfect harmony with what God "said" in the Bible. Hence, perhaps before one communicates to the Jews, with a grace characteristic of Father Chrostowski, that their contemporary religion is a human invention, and not a manifestation of their faithfulness to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, one should remember that Christians do not like to hear the suggestion that Christianity was actually invented by apostle Paul of Tarsus and that it cannot be derived either from the Old Testament or even from the Gospels.

Perhaps for most Catholic theologians engaged in the dialogue with Judaism Father Chrostowski's proposals in the chapter in which he postulates development of

a "new Christian theology of Judaism" would seem particularly odd. Actually, it is difficult to see what is new in his theology of Judaism in comparison with the "old" Christian theology of Judaism, that is the "theology of replacement" (the Church is the new Israel, Christians are the new Chosen People, Judaism is a fossil abandoned by God, and Jewish wanderers serve as a visible proof of Christianity's truthfulness). This novel Christian outlook on Judaism in Father Chrostowski's interpretation comes down perhaps only to acceptance of what must be accepted, that is to embracing the Church's post-conciliar statement that God's Covenant with Israel has never been broken by God and thus it is still valid. But, perhaps, here ends Father Chrostowski's courtesy toward Jews. The remaining elements of his theology of Judaism are theses that Jews are unfaithful to God despite God's keeping his Covenant. Even though God did not reject Jews once and for all, he is patiently waiting for them to see the light and convert to Christianity. Admittedly, the *raison d'être* of the Jews is to testify to the Torah's truthfulness, but they need to realize that Judaism in its present form is not yet what the Torah ultimately indicates.

In Father Chrostowski's reflections on the future of Judaism there is no trace of the lesson which contemporary theology (not only Christian) has learnt in a postcolonial and pluralist world. What I mean here is the realization of the truth that faith seems obvious only to one who believes, and its content seems universally obvious only in religiously monolithic communities, like the one which Father Chrostowski grew up in. Not only do Jews not regard Christianity as obviously truthful; similarly, after hundreds of years of Christian missions in India, China or Japan, Christian theologians are asking if God's intention to bring humankind to Himself is perhaps not more subtle than it until recently seemed to Christians who expected all people on Earth to soon convert to Christianity. Thus, describing God's outlook on contemporary Jews in categories of sin of unfaithfulness to God is so banal theologically that it significantly reduces Father Chrostowski's chance of being recognized as a leader in theology, even though his list of publications is evidently impressive.

## Jews Are to Blame for Everything

Chrostowski is outraged with too easy generalizations which are the basis for the critique of Polish attitudes toward Jews throughout history. Meanwhile, he frequently resorts to a unifying maneuver: he treats the reader to a never-ending list of accusations against Jews "as such" – all put into one category, regardless of whether they are Hassidim or communists, Zionists or advocates of assimilation, whether they wanted to live in Europe or in Palestine, whether they were ultraorthodox or supported a "progressive" reading of Judaism teachings done in agreement with the spirit of the times. Chrostowski treats Jews as one collective subject, and he attacks it if not with a stick, then with a club – he pays back in the same coin those Jews who attribute all the factual or presumed offences committed by individual Poles from various epochs to the collective subject named "Poles."

Chrostowski sets up pretensions of practicing "reliable history," as opposed to Jewish "history falsifiers." Here is one of many examples of his using a double standard in assessing "our" and "alien" stances. While presenting motives explaining Poles' negative attitude toward Jews in the 19th century, Chrostowski says that during the partitions of Poland Jews ceased to be loyal to Poland and became loyal to the new rulers. And who was the Polish nobility and aristocracy in the 19th century loyal to? Did they not accept titles from the new rulers and sometimes pay a lot to obtain them? Did they not hold positions in the Russian, Austrian or Prussian governments? And what were they doing when "the folk seized the cannons during the battle of Stoczek?" And the Polish peasants – did they really spend 123 years of captivity mostly pondering over their Polishness? And the Polish clergy – were all priests really mostly thinking about how to organize the next uprising against the partitioners? I think it is appropriate to mention here the symptomatic history of the Polish general of the Jesuits, Count Włodzimierz Dionizy Ledóchowski, whose uncle during the *Kulturkampf* was the Primate of Poland, loyal to Prussia, and whose two sisters were pronounced saints of the Catholic Church. During World War I Ledóchowski was against the creation of an independent Poland since he thought that the Catholic Habsburg monarchy would better secure the position of the Catholic Church in this region of Europe. There are no reasons to think that such a stance was considered shocking among the Polish clergy; after all, Piłsudski was a socialist and nothing indicated that the Church would be in a comfortable position in an independent Poland.

So if Chrostowski practices "reliable history," should he not approach Polish Jewish attitudes with more understanding? What were they supposed to do when nobody expected a Polish state to be reborn soon? Should they have stood in the first ranks of the fighters against the new rulers even when none of the Polish nobility did so? And the latter group, as opposed to the Jews, had been a rightful subject in the lost state. After all, the nobility did not regard Jews (or peasants) as a part of the Polish nation. Moreover, since their religious beliefs ordered them to look out for the Messiah, who would lead them back to Zion, should they have abandoned these hopes and accept Polish messianism in the form envisioned by Mickiewicz? And did the Church advise its Polish followers to fight for liberation or did it praise Polish messianism? No, it recommended obedience to the new rulers, leading a peaceful Christian life and awaiting eternal life. So what is so strange in the fact that Jews also tried to protect their existence which enabled them to survive as an ethnic and religious minority among Christian and Polish, Russian, Ukrainian or German elements? And later, in the communist era – was it really so that 100 percent of Poles contested the new order? Did the entire nation really perceive Gomułka as somebody "brought on Soviet tanks"? Was Gierek really an alien element to everybody? Was it not that many people were thinking about how best to survive – just like both Poles and Jews usually do in any circumstances?

Chrostowski addresses many rhetorical questions to Jews, but he does not formulate questions that would make the reader assume a position of a man of dia-

logue, in which position "to understand a lot means to forgive a lot." If one had to pin down the main message of Chrostowski's book it would be: Jews are to blame for everything. From his argument it follows that Jews are to blame for anti-Semitism/anti-Judaism/anti-Jewishness/anti-Zionism, Jews are to blame for the tensions in Polish-Jewish relations, Jews are to blame for the failure of the Christian-Jewish dialogue. But Chrostowski goes beyond the grotesque when he suggests that Jews are ultimately to blame for the Holocaust.

Beginning his argument on the Holocaust, Chrostowski calls at first for opposing "mythologization and ideologization of the past" (he suggests between the lines that Jews will do everything not to allow for real historical analysis of the Holocaust). What should writing the Holocaust's "reliable history" begin with? "First and foremost, there is a need for historical reflection over the genesis and nature of communism and national socialism," writes Chrostowski. Why? It is simple. Nazism was just a natural reaction to communism, which was a Jewish invention ("Who supported and financed the Bolshevik revolution in Russia?" he asks). Chrostowski has no doubts whatsoever that Jews came up with the idea of the Gulags (Nazi concentration camps were only a copy of them), and figures such as the Georgians Jughashvili and Beria and the Polish nobleman Dzerzhinsky were just a fig leaf for the Jews. According to Chrostowski, the fact that Trotsky renounced his Jewish identity is of no importance here; his mentality and conduct remained typically Jewish. To sum up – it is logical that the Nazis had to exterminate the Jews to crush Soviet communism in the bud. In other words, Jews themselves are responsible for the Holocaust, because they provoked the birth of Nazism by creating Soviet communism.

But an analyst as subtle as Father Prof. Chrostowski had to notice a burning question as to how somebody openly and for years preaching ideology of a racist and not anti-communist nature could gain power in a Christian country (the fact that Hitler's ideology was racist is precisely the reason why gypsies were also to be exterminated, although not much is known about their "overrepresentation" among Soviet revolutionary leaders). Chrostowski approaches this problem using his favorite method, that is by asking a series of rhetorical questions: "Why did Hitler rise to power? Who supported him? Who financed his campaign? Soon afterwards many Jews left Germany – what was the connection between this and national socialists and Zionists' special agreement which permitted such emigration?" Well, how is it possible that nobody has ever thought of that? It was German Zionist activists who raised Hitler to power, because they wanted him to force sluggish Jews to emigrate to Palestine. And well, Jews miscalculated (just as they miscalculated about Stalin, who after the war conducted anti-Semitic purges). They raised Hitler to power but Hitler did not manage to get rid of them, since it turned out that nobody wanted to take them in (the British closed the gates of Palestine for the Jews). In the end, Hitler had no other option, and to combat the communist plague, he was forced to resort to the "final solution." Perhaps he did consider the possibility (which Father Chrostowski does not formulate) that perhaps only some Jews from among the mur-

dered millions were ardent supporters of communism (for Jews allegedly prospered in capitalism, so why would they all support the Soviet one-size-fits-all policy? And why would most Polish Hassidim support an atheist system?).

In any case, deideologized and demythologized Holocaust history turns out to be, according to Prof. Chrostowski, not a culmination of persecutions that had lasted for many centuries – which is how Jews would like to see it – but a simple mistake of Jews, a side effect of the Jewish experiment with communism and Zionism. Chrostowski also suggests that perhaps it was not entirely a matter of chance, for the Jews' alliance with communism "was forced by the Jewish fate." Yes, this further deepens the brilliant analysis carried out by Father Chrostowski, who is the first in history to have the courage to face Jewish "falsifiers of history."

And what was God doing then? After all, we are dealing with a history of a nation, with which God still remains in eternal Covenant – which Chrostowski does not deny. Father Chrostowski is irritated and outraged by such a question. It seems that he would like to say:

> Jews, you must not involve God in your business. You yourselves have provoked this tragedy, so do not blame God, upon whom you have brought enough shame. Was God silent? And what was he supposed to do, since Jewish communists themselves provoked Hitler? They had made their bed, so they had to lie in it. Besides, in their theology there is an old conviction that if they suffer they surely must have earned it.

Thus spoke the author of the "new Christian theology of Judaism."

Translated by *Anna Brzostowska*

**Abstract**
The article is a polemic with a pessimistic assessment of the current state of the Christian-Jewish dialogue presented by Waldemar Chrostowski in his recent book *Kościół, Żydzi, Polska* [The Church, Jews, Poland]. The author criticizes Rev. Chrostowski for defining Christian-Jewish and Polish-Jewish relations in terms of strict opposition and unavoidable conflict of interests, and for putting all the blame on the Jews, while absolving Christians from all their past and present sins which contributed to the tensions between the two communities.

**Key words**
anti-Semitism, curiosa, Christian-Jewish dialogue