

“Supersessionism and Messianic Judaism”

– a response to Matthew Levering

There are certainly madmen who deny the importance of the ongoing dialogue between the Catholic Church and the different religious currents that characterize contemporary Judaism. As is of common knowledge, Churches are full of madmen. If I am one of them – a possibility which a number of people around me would probably consider worth contemplating - my madness is however of a different kind. I do regard as vital that the Catholic Church should be given a chance to reach a better understanding of a people and a religious tradition she has repeatedly debased, if not openly discriminated against, in the course of centuries, quite forgetting the fact that she inherited everything -including Her God - from it. I know what it has taken and still takes for the representatives of traditional Judaism to respond to the invitation to further the dialogue with the Church. I am thoroughly impressed by their courage. I am also deeply appreciative of the effort of Catholic theologians to become familiar with the inner logic of the Jewish religious attitude, so that they might tackle divisive issues with both a great respect for Judaism and a renewed sense of their Catholic identity. There is hardly any doubt that Matthew Levering is one of the most remarkable examples of such theologians, as the collection of essays published under the title *Jewish Christian Dialogue and the Life of Wisdom* unambiguously demonstrates¹. This being said, the book contains a chapter which strikes me as highly questionable. Since I find the matter at stake to be of utmost importance for the Catholic Church, I would like to launch a discussion about it. The fact is that Levering, in trying to preserve the chances of a dialogue with Judaism which, after The Second Vatican Council’s *Nostra Aetate*, has become somehow “traditional”, deems it necessary to discard the chance of opening a different kind of dialogue with Judaism, or rather with a different kind of Judaism; namely, Messianic Judaism. In order to do that, Levering takes issue with the ideas brought forward by Mark Kinzer,

¹ Continuum, New-York:2010.

who is quite certainly the most conspicuous and original figure of Jewish Messianic theology to date.

One can regard the idea that a Jew can remain faithful to his or her Jewish identity while acknowledging Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel as the founding statement of Messianic Judaism. Accordingly, the fact that for a Christian corporate body such as the Catholic Church, the dialogue with traditional Judaism and the dialogue with Messianic Judaism rest on two mutually exclusive sets of axioms is a hardly disputable one. The condition for the first dialogue is that she will respect her partner's rejection of the very stone upon which she is built; that is, the claim that Jesus Christ happened to be the Messiah that Israel had been and still is expecting. The first part of the chapter I am examining here precisely aims at showing that such a dialogue is possible. As expounded by Levering (p.14-22, 44-45), David Novak's understanding of "mild supersessionism" implies for each partner the commitment not only to recognize the other's existence, but also to value it from one's own theological standpoint, while firmly keeping to one's conviction of being granted access to a superior truth. This "mild supersessionism" simultaneously dismisses the Catholic tradition of radical supersessionism, which sees the survival of Judaism as devoid of religious justification, and the Jewish trends towards a counter-supersessionism that denies any theological relevance to Christianity in spite of its Jewish historical roots. With Messianic Judaism, however, it is no longer a matter of determining how close to each other two partners who disagree on the essential can come. The issue is about identifying what still separates two partners who agree on the essential.

In principle, it is difficult to see why the Catholic Church should not be allowed to engage simultaneously in the two types of dialogue. The fact that she is involved in a dialogue with the Protestant world does not prevent her from pursuing a dialogue with the Byzantine Orthodox Church, although the dogmatic and ecclesiological claims made by Protestants and Orthodox Christians are often strictly incompatible. True, the Catholic Church may not, for instance, acknowledge two mutually exclusive Protestant entities as equally representative of the Protestant world simultaneously. Just as for national governments immersed in the subtle practice of foreign politics, a willingness on the side of the Catholic Church to conduct a dialogue with a particular group of non-Catholics implies recognition that these constitute a more genuine expression of the corporate body they stand for than other groups with which they are in theological disagreement. But what if the dissenting groups do not claim to share the faith of those who are already

acknowledged by the Holy See? What if they stand for a faith which is substantially and explicitly different from the others? The Catholic Church can pursue -and is actually pursuing- separate dialogues with different, mutually disagreeing, fractions of the Protestant world, such as the Lutherans and the Calvinists or the Pentecostals, without any of these denominations taking exception to such a policy.

Accordingly, if the reaction of the Jewish traditional world to the possibility of the Catholic Church opening a serious dialogue with Messianic Judaism is hostile to such an extent that it leads a Catholic theologian such as Levering to argue in favor of discarding it, I believe this has to do with Jewish idiosyncrasy. Jewish religious authorities have a long historical experience of being responsible for a nation, and not only for a specific creed. For just under two millennia, they have fought so that the members of this nation, scattered throughout Christian Europe and elsewhere, might be granted the right to live like normal citizens while disagreeing on the fundamental tenets of the Christian faith. The claim of a number of bio-ethnic Jews to remain Jews while accepting these tenets appears to inflict a mortal blow to the notion that granting the right of Jews to live as Jews implies respecting their refusal of Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel. In the course of European history, campaigns of forced conversions have drawn on the denial of the equation between Jewish identity and the refusal of Yeshua's Messianhood. As the argument ran, being born a Jew was not a sufficient reason not to be faced with the supreme necessity of accepting Christian faith. However there is little likelihood that in modern secular societies an official recognition of Messianic Judaism by the Catholic Church would entail a process of discrimination towards non-Messianic Jews. In actual fact, the only risk that such a recognition would present to the survival of the Jewish nation has to do with suppressing the barriers that held it apart from a huge corporate Body of Jesus believers. This is by no means a minor danger. Indeed, as history shows abundantly, the worst threat to Jewish survival is not discrimination, but integration or assimilation. What then about the claim of Messianic Judaism (later MJ) to form a separate and distinctive body of *Jewish* Yeshua believers? True, for a number of reasons, this is perhaps the less satisfactory aspect of MJ in its present-day form.

Be that as it may, while nothing is more understandable than the rejection of the Messianic venture on the side of Jews who do not believe in Yeshua, whether a Catholic theologian should endorse such a rejection appears to be a much more controversial matter. The logical premises on which the Catholic Church must decide whether to conduct a separate dialogue with Messianic Jews are obviously different from those which traditional Jews apply in order to delegitimize Messianic Judaism.

In addition, the Catholic Church is not bound to sacrifice her intimate convictions in order to preserve the chances of pursuing a dialogue with some specific religious entity, as legitimate as this dialogue might be *per se*. Accordingly, there must be serious reasons to decline engaging in a dialogue with Messianic Judaism from a Catholic point of view. What could they be? Matthew Levering is a Gentile theologian who contends that the Catholic Church should endorse the anti-Messianic attitude of traditional Jews. Let a theologian of Jewish descent be allowed to highlight the significance of the encounter between the Catholic Church and Messianic Judaism in spite of the criticism leveled against it by traditional Judaism.

The relative density of Levering's argument does not prevent it from being fairly easy to summarize. To cut it as short as possible, MJ is no longer Jewish, so that it may not be seen as representing a Jewish entity, while it is not yet Christian, since it clings to an understanding of the Law which must be rejected by Christianity. *Ergo*, MJ as such is – *horribile dictu*– a non-existent entity. Spinoza might have called it an illusory mode of the finite understanding. The Catholic Church knows of a simpler notion, although Levering refrains from using it; namely, that of heresy. Of course, there is nothing more ordinary than the Catholic Church engaging in dialogue with heretics, providing it is really worth it (please take here a Dominican brother on his word!). However, what would be the point of opening a dialogue with a religious group which, not satisfied with being seen as heretical from a Catholic point of view, is equally seen as such by the authorities of the nation they claim to represent?

Paradoxically it is at this point that one comes to realize what paramount significance such a dialogue *could have* from the point of view of the Catholic Church. Indeed is it not precisely the fact that these Jews are seen by traditional Jewish authorities as heretics even as they claim to represent the “enlightened” part of the Jewish nation, a sign that from a Catholic perspective there might be more to say about them than that they are the n-variation on the theme of Judaizing heresies? To put it more distinctly, does it not pertain to the founding and most specific awareness of the Catholic Church that she might identify in those Jews that are rejected by their religious peers the first fruits of the “restoration” of the whole Israel prophesied by St Paul in chap.11 of his Epistle to the Romans (cf. v. 11-12)? From a formal point of view, the question that needs to be addressed reads as follows: on what grounds should the Catholic Church deny to MJ the right to identify with a living eschatological sign foretelling the “re-integration” of the whole Israel? After all, Novak can from a traditionally Jewish perspective assign the encounter between Christians and Jews to a point beyond history; that is, to the ultimate

Revelation that will seal its end. It remains as a fact that this Jewish perspective does not chime in with that of St. Paul. If, together with Paul, we place the end of time from this -our- side of history (*olam-ha-ze* and not *olam-ha-baa*), we come across a very different picture of the role of Jews in God's design. The revelatory mission entrusted to Jews no longer seems to hang somewhere in the air, *tel qu'en lui-même l'éternité le change*, from the moment of the destruction of the Temple to the very end of history². At least from a Catholic standpoint, one cannot rule out the possibility of a reversal of cosmic proportion occurring in the course of human history; namely, the spontaneous and totally free – for the first or rather the second time in history – coming of Jews to faith in Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel.

Unsurprisingly the criteria for a legitimate recognition of MJ that can be derived from Romans ch.11 are precisely those which need to be questioned according to Levering. First, MJ must be recognized as a Jewish phenomenon, otherwise it would not be seen as foretelling the reintegration of Israel. Second, it should be acknowledged as abiding by the teaching of Christ – otherwise it would fail to announce the “re-acceptance” of true faith. Allow me therefore to question the questions of Levering, as I first turn to examine why MJ does not deserve to be called Jewish, and then why it is not worthy of the true Christian name either.

No longer Jewish?

Levering prudently does not make the claim that no traditional rabbi would make: namely that Messianic Jews have ceased to be Jews from the moment they accepted Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel (p.24, 25). As should be of common knowledge, a Jew remains a Jew even if he or she becomes the worst possible kind of Jew. If I am not mistaken, what Levering sees as problematic is not the Jewish identity of Messianic Jews, but their claim to represent the Jewish nation. How could those who are considered as heretics by authorities whom the Catholic Church ordinarily considers as the legitimate representatives of Judaism be acknowledged by the Catholic Church as the legitimate representatives of the Jewish nation without *ipso facto* this leading her to stop considering traditional Jewish authorities as the legitimate representatives of Judaism?³ Levering makes clear that what is at stake here is much more than a problem of “Church politics”. According to

² Levering rightly points out that conceiving the end of history as the ultimate revelation of Messianhood to both Christians and Jews is true from a Jewish perspective but not from a Christian one (p.24). Of course, one could elaborate further on this concept from a Christian point of view, but this is not our topic here.

³ Cf. p.25: “How could Christians continue to dialogue respectfully with Jews whom Christians deny can even be trusted to understand what belongs to Rabbinic Judaism qua Rabbinic Judaism?”

him, the intimate self-contradiction of MJ lurks behind this quandary. Indeed the very traditional authorities MJ draws upon in order to nourish its doctrine and ascertain its legitimacy seem to condemn it as heretical and illegitimate (cf. p.43). Meanwhile, provided *via reductionis ad absurdum* that MJ is right, and traditional Judaism errs when it condemns it, then traditional Judaism is illegitimate (cf.p.30, 44, 46). But if traditional Judaism is illegitimate, the whole survival of Israel, as secured by traditional Judaism, is a mistake. The conclusion is that MJ, being incapable of granting any positive value to the survival of the Jewish nation, falls prey to the very threat it claims to challenge; that is, supersessionism in its most radical, “un-mild” form (cf.p.26).

As I will explain, I do not think that Levering’s critique bears scrutiny. At this point however it is important to realize that even if this critique was to be found relevant, it would not prevent the Catholic Church from acknowledging the significance of a dialogue with MJ from her own -Paulinian, as I have argued- perspective. In actual fact, a Jew does not need to be in agreement with Rabbinic authorities or with “Judaism” as a body of religious doctrine distinct from Christianity or Islam, in order to speak authoritatively on behalf of the Jewish nation⁴. Why, indeed, should challenging Judaism for the sake of the Jewish nation be necessarily un-Jewish? Would, for example, Levering refuse the epithet of Jewish to a socialist movement like the *Bund* or the present-day Labour Party of Israel on the grounds that these movements have been promoting a fairly different concept of Jewish life and values than Hassidic rabbis? Judaism, as defined above, is in itself only one - homogeneous only to the most superficial eyes! - interpretation among many others regarding the goal and purpose of Jewish existence. I would personally add that it, from this point of view, is as incomplete as the others. This does not mean that Judaism as we know it stands for the only *religious* interpretation of Jewish destiny. The Bible tells of numerous prophets who have challenged the religious establishment in the name of Israel’s divine calling. From a Catholic point of view, Jesus Christ might be the last, but he is hardly by any means seen to be the least. Jesus spoke to Jews about the accomplishment of their religious calling as Jews in a way that openly challenged the judgment of the religious authorities of his time. He did so precisely because none of these authorities could have denied him the right to be counted as a Jew. Each and every Jew has the right to speak on behalf of the

⁴ Accusing MJ of depriving non-Messianic authorities and together with them “living Judaism” of the right to represent Judaism, as Levering hints (p.25), does not make sense. If Judaism is this religious communal thinking which dismisses the teaching of Yeshua, MJ does not claim to speak on behalf of living Judaism. It speaks on behalf of the living Jewish nation, which is something very different. Rabbis would be surprised to hear that someone like Golda Meir spoke on behalf of “living Judaism”.

calling of the Jewish nation. Of course present-day Judaism is very different from what it used to be in the days of Jesus. Still why should it be considered as more authoritative on this issue than its ancestor of 2000 years ago? Why should a Jewish disciple of Yeshua be less entitled to speak on behalf of the religious calling of the Jewish nation now than 2000 years ago? For what reason should the denial of Yeshua's Messiahhood by a number of Jewish authorities be seen more favorably by the Church now than 2000 years ago? If the Church believes that Christ is a Jew whose teaching was primarily addressed to the Jewish nation, there is no reason why she should refrain from granting to those Jews who have recently come to consider Yeshua's teaching as true, the right to speak on behalf of their nation's divine calling.

This being said, I consider Levering's view according to which MJ would be quintessentially incapable of developing a positive and coherent relationship to the "non-Messianic" Rabbinic tradition (as if the Rabbinic tradition could be non-Messianic!) as misleading. If historically the development of this tradition implies the deliberate omission of Yeshua's teaching, this tradition does not draw its substance from such a rejection -nor was it born from it, contrary to a commonly spread opinion among Christians. What then about the Pharisees of the time of Jesus? What about the great schools of Shammai and Hillel, the flourishing of which is coeval to the Jesus movement in Palestine? It is not anti-Christian apologetics which made Mishnaic and hence Talmudic wisdom traditions evolve out of the reflection of the Pharisees on the Law and the Temple. It is the destruction of the Temple and the experience of Exile. Subsequently if, on the one hand, the teaching of Yeshua is really in line with the Torah of Moses and the tradition of Israel and if, on the other hand, what we understand by Rabbinic tradition is the attempt to draw from the Torah of Moses and the tradition of Israel the elements that will keep the nation spiritually alive in a time of *Galut*, why should there be an inbuilt incompatibility between the two traditions? Are Christian Gentile exegetes the only ones allowed to compare the two traditions and marvel at the inner convergences of all sorts they are led to discover between them (cf.p.29)? Does this become a futile and deceitful intellectual exercise only from the moment when Jewish followers of Yeshua decide to practice it?

Still, let us assume the worst on the content and number of the coded anti-Christian passages of the Talmud. After all, we no longer run the risk of seeing -in the Western world at least- Jewish religious literature burnt at the stake. I would ask Levering how these passages compare with the content and number of anti-Jewish passages in the writings of the Fathers of the Church. If post-Holocaust Christian

theologians can still delight at the reading of the Fathers, it is because they have learnt to focus on the essential -the positive teaching of the Fathers- while leaving aside what they regard as accidental, such as the Fathers' regular and maddening anti-Jewish fits. Why could Jewish followers of Yeshua be forbidden to adopt a similar attitude when they study the Talmud or practice the *mitsvot* that derive from such study? Claiming with Kinzer that the explicit "no" of Jewish authorities to the teaching of Yeshua hides an unconscious but ontological "yes" of the Jewish tradition to this teaching, does not go together with a systematic distortion of the literal meaning of this tradition, in spite of what Levering contends (p.42-44). This "no" pertains to a totally different register than the "yes" which I take to mean an inner openness of the Jewish tradition to the substance of Yeshua's teaching, as both draw on an identical transcendent source. In actual fact, one could go so far as to claim that the purpose of this exoteric "no" is to hide the esoteric "yes" from intellectual sight. This is not only about checking Gentiles who are always keen on spreading their faith, but about preventing Jews from getting freely acquainted with the Christian tradition. Once again, preserving the chances of a Jewish survival threatened at times by discrimination and at times by assimilation, has always been the primary concern of Jewish religious authorities.

At this point, we come across the second type of criticism leveled by Levering at MJ. Actually, it seems to contradict the first. Levering is no longer blaming MJ for falling away from traditional Judaism, but for being unduly influenced by it. The Catholic Church should not grant official recognition to those who, while claiming to follow Yeshua, distort its soundest interpretation by emphasizing the importance of Jewish learning and practice.

Not yet Christians?

From a Catholic point of view there is nothing less original than the way Levering relates to the claim that, when it comes to Jews, the recognition of Yeshua as the Messiah of Israel does not imply the abrogation of Torah-faithfulness and practice, including the way they are dealt with in post-biblical and Rabbinic Judaism. Since the Council of Elvira (305), the Church has seen in the will of her Jewish members to keep to their Jewish customs, the indication that they had not fully or really welcomed the radically new and transforming message of the Gospels. It would not be fair here to bring to mind the various anti-Jewish persecutions that this traditional stance has produced in the course of European history. A Catholic

theologian can hold to a truth conveyed by Church tradition while being – in a tacit mode usually- grateful to the modern secular State for banning religious discrimination. Levering views Kinzer’s “bilateral ecclesiology” as a perfect illustration of the disastrous ecclesiological consequences entailed by the Judaizing interpretation of Yeshua’s teaching. The distinction between Jewish and Gentile members of the Church, as a logical consequence of the Jews’ “Torah obligation”, restores the “wall of hatred” between the two components of mankind that was meant to be abolished once and for all by the sacrifice of Christ (cf. Eph.2:13-16).

In spite of Levering’s denials, I believe the logic of the position he advocates implies supersessionism in its most radical form. Of course the Church welcomes the survival of the Jewish nation. She goes as far as to acknowledge the enduring value of the First Covenant after the Second. If she notwithstanding keeps praying in the manner of Paul for the conversion of the whole Israel -no matter how difficult it is for traditional Jews involved in dialogue with Christians to cope with this decision- this means that she wishes Jews to join the Body formed by the disciples of Christ, a Body which she substantially identifies with herself. However if Jews that join this Body have no other option than to abandon all the customs that distinguish them from their Gentile counterparts, this means that the Church has always –since this prayer is consubstantial to her very existence- longed for the moment when the Jewish nation, having lost all possibility of cultivating an idiosyncratic form of presence in her midst, will have ceased to exist⁵. Or does the Church want in reality the opposite of what she prays for? When she prays for the conversion of Israel, does she mean that the Jews should never come to the knowledge of the true Messiah of Israel, so that they will be able to survive as a nation? From what Levering writes, the enduring value of the First Covenant does appear as a second-best option which is called to recede with the integration of Jews into the Second. The only difference I see between Levering and radical Christian supersessionism is the resignation to the likelihood that this will never happen before the Parousia. In one way or another, sooner or much later, the election of believers in Christ is to replace the election of the Jewish nation in the Torah received by Moses.

⁵ Is the fact that Jews are welcome to participate in the sacramental life of the Church sufficient to dismiss the accusation of supersessionism (p.39)? Indeed, is it not wonderful that those to whom the whole tradition of the Church is indebted are allowed to take part in it, just as if they were decent human beings? No matter how difficult I find it, I will refrain from ironizing further. At any rate, the idea that the Jewish nation has a place in the Church because its members are welcome to join it, is little more than a play on words. How can the Jewish nation as such have a place in the Church if Jews, in order to become members of the Church, are expected to abandon all the elements that characterize their membership of the Jewish nation? If nothing subsists of what produces the awareness of being member of a nation once chosen by God (circumcision, *kashrut*, Jewish feasts, etc.), how could the Jewish nation subsist as a nation in the Church?

I wonder why it seems that the cultivation of Jewish idiosyncrasy in the Church cannot be perceived otherwise than a slap on the face of the novelty and fullness of Christ's revelation. One does not see as an offense to Christianity that Maronite Christians will hold to their customs instead of vanishing in the mass constituted by the adepts of the Latin rite. However, when it comes to the Nation from which the Church has received everything that she has, a Nation which is acknowledged as being the beneficiary of a divine election distinct from all others, the striving towards idiosyncrasy of those who claim to share the faith of all the genuine disciples of Christ becomes a crime. Of course there is little doubt, at least from a theological point of view, that the distinction between Jews and Gentiles is about something different than the variety of cultures and ethnic identities. It is precisely about a distinction that has no other basis than a theological one. Still, *qui magis potest et minus potest*. Why are theologians so keen on minimizing the difference that theology makes? I might be mistaken, but it seems to me that the problem lies on the inequality associated with the distinction Jews/Gentiles, something with which the modern mind is particularly uncomfortable. Even Levi-Strauss would find it difficult to argue that a Gentile is "differently chosen" by the God of the First Covenant. A Gentile is simply *not chosen*, by contrast with a Jew, and this "non-chosenness" is what defines him or her. However, the good news of the Good News is that Gentiles are now chosen in Christ and thus integrated into the People that God chose for His own. Still, one wonders how the calling of Christ could truly re-establish the balance between the two elections if, in order to respond to it, Jews needed to give up their own calling? The uniformity that goes around under the guise of equality rather warrants the *de facto* monopoly of Gentiles in the Church.

In the most conventional manner conceivable, Levering tries to establish that the cultivation of Jewish idiosyncrasy would go against the Gospel because the teaching of Yeshua is meant to free those who follow it from the Law. However can one simply continue to equate the concept of Torah, as it emerges from 2000 years of post-biblical Jewish tradition, with what Paul means when he writes about the curse of the *Nomos*? Jews who, not content with having become disciples of Yeshua, thought that by obeying to the prescriptions of the Law they would gain some advantage over Gentiles when it came to personal salvation set themselves under the harsh judgment of the Law, thus reducing *de facto* to naught the judgment of Mercy associated with the sacrifice of Christ (Gal.5: 2-4). As far as I know, however, no Messianic Jew has ever claimed that circumcision or *kashrut* was needed for personal salvation. If Messianic Jews keep Jewish observances, it is with reference to the way Jewish observances are kept in traditional postbiblical Judaism. When a Jew makes

t'shuva and decides to bear the yoke of the Torah, he or she does it out of love for the God of Israel. If the fear of not observing *mitsvot* is not rooted in this love towards God which comes as a response to the choice of Israel by God, it has no redeeming value whatsoever. Just as traditional Jews, Messianic Jews do not practice *mitsvot* because they think that this practice, taken in itself, “saves” them individually. For traditional Jews, redemption is a Messianic event on the horizon of history which concerns the nation as nation. The hope that the observance of *mitsvot* contributes to “hasten” this event is the hope of an individual to contribute to the spiritual welfare of the nation, not the hope to avoid personal punishment for rejecting an act of unilateral divine Mercy which has not occurred yet. As for Messianic Jews who believe that this act of Mercy has already occurred in the course of history, they do not practice *mitsvot* on the grounds that this practice saves them the way Christ does. They would not be genuine disciples of Yeshua if they did. They practice them because they believe that these *mitsvot are saved* or preserved in Christ, together with the whole heritage of Israel. From this point of view, they have nothing to do with the Judaizing disciples whom Paul wrestles with in his epistles ⁶.

True, Kinzer sometimes speaks the language of religious obligation regarding “Church-Jews” or Messianic Jews (cf.p.41). However, I believe Kinzer would agree with the idea that these Jews are not obligated to do so on the grounds of Salvation (how could Gentiles be saved if Jewish practice was a necessary element of Salvation?), but on the grounds of their Jewish identity and memory which hinge upon the First Covenant. For these Jews, the certainty of salvation in Yeshua does not suppress the significance of *mitsvot*. On the contrary, this certainty gives them the freedom to choose the way of *mitsvot* as the mode in which they will live the Covenant sealed in Christ’s sacrifice. They will not experience this Covenant as

⁶ Levering (p.38) refers to the position of St. Thomas Aquinas who, himself drawing on St. Augustine, argues that after the first apostolic generations, Christians sin mortally when they display signs of the enduring relevance of the First Covenant (*Summa Theologiae*, q.104, q.1, a.4). Giving up those signs is in itself the sign that Jews have understood that the sacrifice of Christ accomplishes once and for all the purpose of the precepts of the First Covenant. Conversely, keeping those signs is a sign that the value of Christ’s sacrifice is not fully acknowledged. What Levering fails to mention is the fact that no Messianic Jew would dispute the belief that the sacrifice of Christ relates to the sacrifices of the Temple as the perfect relates to the imperfect, the advent of the perfect rendering the imperfect obsolete. Contrary to the long-standing accusation against Marranos, Messianic Jews are not fake Christians who would secretly deny the redemptive value of Christ’s sacrifice. What MJ contends is that this sacrifice does not render the Covenant itself between God and the Jewish nation obsolete. If I am not mistaken, St Paul (Rom.9, 4) and the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium* par.16, *Nostra Aetate* par.4) hold a similar opinion. Accordingly, if the signs that characterize membership of the Jewish nation do not express a faith that denies the fullness of Christ’s sacrifice, but refer to the belief that the fullness of this sacrifice includes the preservation of the First Covenant, I cannot see why their display by Jewish disciples of Christ should be counted as a mortal sin any longer. The problem has to do with the meaning that the Church attributes to those signs, not with their intrinsic meaning. In actual fact, this meaning is identical in traditional Judaism and MJ. These signs indicate the unbroken Covenant between Jews and God, no matter what happened in the course of history - a position which is now clearly endorsed by the Catholic Church.

Gentiles; that is, as that through which they become incorporated into the People of God. They will experience this covenant as Jews; that is, as that through which the promises made to Abraham, their forefathers and their fathers come to their fulfillment. From this point of view, those disciples of Yeshua who carry the Torah of Israel do not “stand under” the Torah, as if they would be judged by it or as if their salvation depended upon it (Gal.3: 15-16; 28). It is the survival of Israel, not its salvation, which hangs upon the observance of Messianic Jews in the Body of Christ.

This spirit of freedom, rooted in the certainty of the salvation of God in Christ, is manifest in the way the first apostolic generations spontaneously integrated Jewish observances into their new faith. Paul is certainly the greatest theoretician of such “freedom” in Christ. Of course, circumcision and uncircumcision count for nothing when it comes to salvation (I Cor.7: 9; Gal.5:11-12; 6:16-15). But if uncircumcision cancelled henceforth circumcision, how could it count for nothing? I do not know of a passage in the epistles where Paul would argue that the novelty of Christ’s salvation demands that everybody in the Church should be left uncircumcised. However what Paul saw clearly was that, *unlike the distinction between Jews and Gentiles*, the principle of communion within the Body *had to do with what mattered* from the point of view of Salvation. As such, the commandment of communion was to take precedence over the decision to observe Jewish *mitsvot*. This in some way *anti-halachic halacha* was totally unknown – and remains unknown- to traditional Judaism. Accordingly, when Paul scolds Peter on the grounds that, being Jew, he behaves as a Gentile (Gal.2:14), this is not to be understood as if Peter led a Gentile life-style (why would he “fear” the Jewish members of the Church to the effect of withdrawing from meals taken with Gentiles in that case?), but that, being the head of the Church, he needed sometimes – most probably, often - to suspend his personal Jewish observance in order to deal with the Gentile members of the Church. Paul gave himself as an example of such flexibility for the sake of communion (I Cor.9: 20-21). Indeed, how could Paul have wanted Gentiles to be granted the right to live as Gentiles if the right of Jews to live as Jews had not been universally acknowledged in the Church?

In the so-called “incident of Antioch”, the object of Paul’s rebuke was not *kashrut* but, just as in the case of circumcision, the idea that the *kashrut* of Jewish members of the Church was worthier, more “salvific”, than the absence of *kashrut* among her Gentile members. In actual fact, was it not the most obvious interpretation of Peter’s tendency to shun meals with the “Greeks”? True, Peter had to infringe *kashrut* in this case, especially due to the fact that he had a special responsibility

when it came to implementing the principle of communion in the early Church: “Do not let what you eat cause the ruin of one for whom Christ died” (Rom.14: 15). But why should we think that this principle applies only in favor of the Gentile part of the Church? Could one conceive of a “Greek” being hosted by a “Jewish” community of disciples and ordering them to renounce *kashrut* for his sake? This would have rightly been understood as a no lesser infringement of the *koinonia* principle (1 Cor.10: 23-24). Thus, destroying the “wall of hatred” between Jews and Greeks in the living Body of Yeshua does not mean getting rid of the Jewish component of the Body. The communion of Gentiles among themselves is no longer the communion between Gentiles and Jews. There are no longer “Jews and Greeks...in Christ Jesus” (Gal.3:28) just as there are no longer men and women, masters and slaves in him. These distinctions remain, but they no longer mark some inequality in relationship to Salvation. What the principle of communion means therefore is *a mutual acceptance* between Gentiles and Jews, notwithstanding the different manners in which the two communities follow Yeshua. Nothing more than a Jew accepting to share the meals of a Gentile, or a Gentile abiding by the laws of *kashrut* in a Jewish community could manifest this mutual acceptance, rooted in the common conviction that Salvation stems from the sacrifice of Christ and only from it.

The objection that Levering levels at the analogy between the communion between man and woman within the bonds of marriage and the communion between Jews and Gentiles in the Body of Christ is symptomatic of his misreading of Kinzer’s bilateral ecclesiology. According to this analogy, it is not the Church, *pace* Levering, which enters in communion with Jews (p.35). This would indeed render the “Bride of Christ” absurdly twofold: a whole cannot be simultaneously a part of itself. However, may I respectfully ask Levering if it has ever occurred to him that the Church was not to be identified with her Gentile component? The communion in Christ between Gentiles and Jews, which is the formal object of Kinzer’s bilateral ecclesiology, is not the communion in Christ between the Church and Jews. True, Kinzer emphasizes the fact that, by becoming members of the Church, Jews create a bridge between her and the wider Jewish nation. However, this is a bridge between an entity that accepts the Messiahhood of Christ and an entity that rejects it. The bridge-builders are the members of a nation who simultaneously accept Christ’s Messiahhood. There would be no point in building a bridge if the two sides were already in communion. Besides, supposing that by some turn of fortune or misfortune - depending on what side of the bridge one stands- the whole Jewish nation was one day to become part of the Body of Christ, the communion that would result in this Body would be a communion between Jews and Gentiles, not between Jews and the

Church. The relationship of a Jewish member of the Church to the Church will remain a relationship of communion of faith, exactly as that of a Gentile member. How could the relationship of a member of the Church to the Church ever become a relationship of communion to a foreign Body? Is this not a sheer *contradictio in adjecto*? True, in the hypothesis of the mutual inclusion between Israel and the Church, a formal distinction would subsist between the Church and the Jewish nation, since the entity to which the New Covenant gave birth is founded on the election of faith, whereas the entity that stems from the First Covenant is founded on the election of a nation. By way of parenthesis, this is why Kinzer finds such relevance in Frank Rozenzweig's speculations on the Star of David: they provide a model to conceive the mutual inclusion of the Church and Israel. However, even then, claiming that the Church would rest on the communion between Jews and the Church would be as relevant as claiming that she would rest on the communion between France and the Church, were all the French to become Catholics again (*utinam!*).

Via reductionis ad absurdum now, does the idea that the communion between Jews and Gentiles is a founding dimension of the Church entail, as Levering contends, that the true Body of the Messiah does not subsist in the present-day Catholic Church (p.40-42)? Moreover does it entail that the Church would not have been entitled at any point in history to represent this true Body? As noted by Levering, Kinzer acknowledges that the Gentile *Ekklesia* preserved the "essential message" inherent to biblical Revelation (p.40). Notwithstanding Levering's *interpretatio maligna* of Kinzer's way of formulating this message, claiming that the Gentile Church has been faithful to biblical Revelation implies that the Church's teaching on the Trinity, the Incarnation and the other basic truths of her faith is in line with the message conveyed in this collection of sacred Books, the core of which has to do with the election of a nation called Israel.

Does Kinzer's idea, which was, by the way, also shared by such a highly respected Catholic theologian as Dom Lambert Beauduin, that a schism between the Church and the living part of the biblical Israel took place at an early stage of Christian history, leave us with no other option than to radically question the self-awareness of the Church as being faithful to the teaching of Yeshua?

First of all, the notion of schism implies that a part wrongly separates from the whole. If the Church is the whole composed of Jews and Gentiles, as Kinzer argues, the schismatics are, strictly speaking, those who separate from the Church -a number of Jews in this case- and not the Church. This remains true even if the Church is to blame for having caused and nourished the schism, because of her inability or

her unwillingness to secure a place for the biblical Israel in her midst. Second, it is true to say that a schism which is not based on a heresy weakens the Church, as it makes it more difficult for her to display visibly the Mystery which subsists in her core invisibly. If I believed that the fact of the schism between the Church of Rome and the Churches of the Byzantine East implied the unfaithfulness of the Church of Rome, I would not be a Catholic. If I believed that the Churches of the Byzantine East were guilty of heresy, I would not pray for the recovery of the unity between them and the Church of Rome. The fact that the leaders of the Church have often showed themselves to be ill-advised does not entail that their conviction that the Church was faithful to the teaching of Christ as well as constantly blessed by the gifts of the Holy Spirit was misguided or deceived. Otherwise the Church, speaking through the voice of the most solemn magisterium of the late Pope John-Paul II, would not have publicly repented for the numerous sins of her children, including the most pre-eminent ones. What matters is that, in spite of the sins and misunderstandings of her leadership, the Church has, as argued by Kinzer, always managed to convey the “essential message” of God’s Revelation. An ever-increasing understanding of the truth contained in this “essential message” is the reason that explains the Church’s ever-increasing understanding of the ways in which this “essential message” has been distorted in the course of centuries. Revisiting the anti-Judaizing legislation of past centuries would certainly be less of a strain for Catholic theologians than showing that the decisions of the Council of Trent did not target Martin Luther’s quintessential insights regarding faith and sacraments. As far as I can see, Kinzer does not dispute the claim of the Catholic Church to be called the “new Israel”, understood as Israel according to the Spirit of God (p.41). What he advocates is that, in order to fully or visibly deserve to be called such, the Church should grant recognition and space to the members of the old but still kicking (and how!) Israel according to the flesh. As a theologian who is not less Catholic than Levering for being at the same time Jewish, I cannot but give my whole support to Mark Kinzer’s request.

My conclusion is that, contrary to what Levering writes, the way Kinzer interprets the teaching of Paul and the terms he uses to define his bilateral ecclesiology do not inflict a lethal blow to a purely Catholic understanding of the fundamental connection between Scriptures and ecclesiology. There is nothing anti-Catholic, let alone anti-Christian, in the idea that Jewish followers of Yeshua should be granted recognition and space within the Catholic Church. What becomes then of

the reasons that would justify a refusal to engage in a dialogue with MJ on the part of the Catholic Church? If, on the one hand, Messianic Jews are Jews from a Jewish perspective and if, on the other hand, they are not heretics from a Catholic point of view, I cannot find the slightest reason that would prevent the Catholic Church from identifying them with the first-fruits of Israel's re-integration prophesied by Paul. After all, why should the 2000-years uninterrupted prayer of the Church in favour of the illumination of the Jewish nation be left without any sort of outcome? Messianic Jews do not need to be saints to be acknowledged and welcomed as this eschatological sign. They do not even need to be part of a homogeneous religious body. They simply need to be what they say they are and, after due examination, what I believe them to be. How could the Catholic Church shy away from opening and furthering a theological dialogue with MJ in these circumstances? Of course, neither side can expect such steps to be welcomed by the authorities of traditional Judaism, no matter the love that they both feel for the tradition that these authorities rightfully represent. However the Catholic Church knows of the story of an innocent voice silenced because it disturbed the humdrum consensus of official religious and political authorities: "And though Herod and Pilate had been enemies before, they were reconciled that same day" (Luk 23:12). I am not convinced there is a sure way to avoid repeating the errors of past history, but it is certainly one's duty to try.

fr. Antoine Lévy, OP

Director of the Helsinki *Studium Catholicum*

Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Eastern Finland (School of Theology)

Member of the Roman Catholic/Jewish Messianic Dialogue Group