

Review Essay

Lev Gillet, *Communion in the Messiah: Studies in the Relationship Between Judaism and Christianity* (London: Lutterworth, 2003).¹

1. Orthodoxy and Jewish-Christian Relations

In 2003, the Lutterworth Press of London helpfully republished a work it had originally put into print in 1942: Lev Gillet's book, *Communion in the Messiah: Studies in the Relationship Between Judaism and Christianity*. Notwithstanding the fact that this book was published some sixty years ago, and the fact that it has recently been reissued, it was and remains little known and rarely cited in Orthodox theological literature or that of Jewish-Christian relations. This is unfortunate because, as Bishop Kallistos Ware has rightly remarked, *Communion in the Messiah* "still remains timely and challenging today."² Gillet's book is a remarkably prescient work that anticipated many of the developments in Jewish-Christian relations in the last fifty years and deserves a hearing still.

Gillet is not usually considered for his work on Jewish-Christian relations. The "Monk of the Eastern Church," as he is often called, is best known for his books on Orthodox spirituality.³ His ecumenical and inter-religious work has received much less attention. Yet he is one of the only Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century to reflect deeply on Jewish-Christian relations, and more than anyone else took a personal interest in advancing understanding between Christians and

¹ This paper is based on a presentation made at the 2005 Colloquium of the University of Sherbrooke program in Orthodox Studies. I am grateful to Dr. Paul Ladouceur for his editorial help.

² Cited in Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, *Lev Gillet: A Monk of the Eastern Church*, trans. Helen Wright (Oxford: Fellowship of Saint Alban and Saint Sergius, 1999), 10. The French original was published in 1993.

³ For example, these books re-printed and widely distributed by St Vladimir's Seminary Press: *Orthodox Spirituality* (1945); *The Jesus Prayer* (1951); *The Year of Grace of the Lord* (1972); *Serve the Lord with Gladness: Our Life in the Liturgy* (1973) and *Be My Priest* (1962).

Jews. *Communion in the Messiah* is all the more remarkable for having been written in 1941 during the Holocaust. Gillet acknowledged that Christianity, and especially Orthodox Christianity, had a heavy historical guilt for the anti-Judaism of the past which no doubt prepared the ground for the Nazi campaign. His book needs to be taken seriously by Eastern Orthodox Christians, whose cultures have traditionally been especially Judaeophobic.⁴

Huge progress has been made in the last fifty years in Jewish-Christian relations. The Roman Catholic Church has been in the forefront of this movement, most prominently with the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate*.⁵ Pope John Paul II made improved relations with Judaism a personal priority.⁶ The Orthodox world has lagged behind, but there is progress

⁴ Moscow State University currently has a project underway to examine Christian attitudes towards Jews and Judaism in “Latin” and “Orthodox” medieval and early modern Christendom to answer the question as to just how Judaeophobic the Eastern Church was in comparison with the West. See www.his.msu.ru. Anti-Semitism is especially virulent among non-religious Russians, but even church bookstores sometimes carry anti-Jewish literature. In one case, an acquaintance had written to the local bishop to protest this. On returning to the parish bookstore she found that the offending books were removed from the bookshelves. When asked about this the attendant explained that someone had complained and so the books were no longer on the shelves. But then he obligingly produced a copy for her from under the table!

⁵ The document itself is available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html. Pope Benedict XVI recently remembered the fortieth anniversary of this revolutionary document with a commemorative letter: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20051026_nostra-aetate_en.html.

⁶ It was during Pope John Paul’s pontificate that several revolutionary things took place in Catholic-Jewish relations: inter alia, the Holy See finally recognized the State of Israel and established relations with her in 1993; and in 2000, the pope went to the Holy Land, visiting the Holocaust museum and praying at the Western Wall for forgiveness where Christians had harmed Jews. The pope also promulgated several significant statements or documents including “We Remember: a Reflection on the *Shoah*” of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews” presented in Rome on 16 March 1998 and available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_16031998_shoah_en.html.

here too. Five international academic meetings on Judaism and Orthodox Christianity have been held. The latest, in Thessaloniki, Greece (2003), was chaired by Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and adopted five principles:

- i) Judaism and Christianity, while hearkening to common sources, inviolably maintain their internal individuality and particularity.
- ii) The purpose of our dialogue is to remove prejudice and to promote a spirit of mutual understanding and constructive cooperation in order to confront common problems.
- iii) Specific proposals will be developed to educate the faithful of both religions to promote healthy relationships based on mutual respect and understanding to confront bigotry and racism.
- iv) Being conscious of the crises of ethical and spiritual values in the contemporary world, we will endeavour to identify historical models of peaceful coexistence, which can be applied to minority Jewish and Orthodox communities in the Diaspora.
- v) We will draw from our spiritual sources to develop programs to promote and enhance our common values such as peace, social justice and human rights, specifically addressing the concerns of religious minorities.⁷

These ideas have become commonplace today and they are a long way from the ghettos, pogroms, and *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* many Jews associate with Orthodox Christianity. But the “rapprochement in relations and the development of a new way of thinking were pioneered by a small

⁷ See the website of the International Council of Christians and Jews, <http://www.jcrelations.net/en/?id=1988>. Other gatherings have also been held. In November 2005, Saint Andrew’s Biblical Theological Institute in Moscow sponsored a conference on the fortieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*.