



International Council of Christians and Jews  
Amitié Internationale Judéo-Chrétienne  
Consejo Internacional de Cristianos y Judios  
Internationaler Rat der Christen und Juden e.V.

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## ICCJ – President's New Year's Greetings for 2016

January 1, 2016

Dear Members of the ICCJ Family, our member organizations and friends,

Best wishes to everyone for health and happiness in the New Year of 2016 on the common calendar!

The turn of the year is a chance for reflection on the past year and for looking forward to the year ahead. In terms of interreligious relations generally, 2015 has been a year with both positive and negative features.

On the positive side, there were in 2015 many celebrations and retrospective assessments of the progress made in Christian-Jewish relations on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the Second Vatican Council declaration, *Nostra Aetate*. A highlight for the ICCJ was the annual conference in Rome that was hosted by the Amicizia Ebraico-Cristiana di Roma in collaboration with the Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews. In addition to a private audience with Pope Francis, during which the pontiff offered significant remarks and then personally greeted the more than 260 ICCJ participants, the conference featured numerous substantive plenary and workshop sessions that considered the past, present, and future of interreligious relations. Much of the content of these sessions is available on ICCJ's website ([HERE](#)) and a DVD containing additional material as workshop and other reports, pictures and videos is in preparation.

There were also significant anniversary observances held in many countries around the world, several sponsored by ICCJ national member organizations. Important statements and publications were issued in connection with these observances. Besides an ICCJ document in June that was endorsed by most of our national member organizations ([HERE](#)), toward the end of the year three notable statements were promulgated by the French Jewish community, by a group of American, European, and Israeli Orthodox rabbis, and by the Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews. Here are some quotations from such texts and statements by prominent leaders that personally struck me as very noteworthy:

The Christian confessions find their unity in Christ; Judaism finds its unity in the Torah. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh in the world; for Jews the Word of God is present above all in the Torah. Both faith traditions find their foundation in the One God, the God of the Covenant, who reveals himself through his Word. ...

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This pattern of theological reflection on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity arises precisely from *Nostra Aetate* (cf. no. 4), and upon this solid basis can be and must be developed yet further.

*Pope Francis, "Address to the International Council of Christians and Jews"*

In a move whose sincerity has been proven, the Church has made a decisive turning point of theological significance. ... This reversal ... sanctifies God's name, forever commands respect, and constitutes a precedent of exemplary character for all religions and spiritual beliefs on the planet. What is our duty, now that the highest representatives of Christian institutions have expressed the wish to be replanted, to be regrafted onto the trunk of Israel? To welcome Christianity as the religion of our brothers and sisters in synergy with Judaism.

*French Jewish leaders, "Declaration for the Upcoming Jubilee of Brotherhood"*

From the Christian confession that there can be only one path to salvation, however, it does not in any way follow that the Jews are excluded from God's salvation because they do not believe in Jesus Christ as the Messiah of Israel and the Son of God. Such a claim would find no support in the soteriological understanding of Saint Paul, who... decisively asserts: "For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). That the Jews are participants in God's salvation is theologically unquestionable, but how that can be possible without confessing Christ explicitly, is and remains an unfathomable divine mystery.

*Commission of the Holy See for Religious Relations with the Jews,  
"The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable" (Rom 11:29):  
A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations  
on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Nostra Aetate (No. 4)."*

[W]e acknowledge that Christianity is neither an accident nor an error, but the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations. In separating Judaism and Christianity, G-d willed a separation between partners with significant theological differences, not a separation between enemies. ... Now that the Catholic Church has acknowledged the eternal Covenant between G-d and Israel, we Jews can acknowledge the ongoing constructive validity of Christianity as our partner in world redemption, without any fear that this will be exploited for missionary purposes.

*Group of Orthodox Rabbis, "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven:  
Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians."*

As religious people, we believe that making mutual interreligious understanding the priority must guide all of our conversations and actions in the years ahead. We need to strive to be critically self-aware of how our own respective presuppositions and histories can hinder genuine empathy and insight.

*ICCJ, "Celebrating and Deepening the New Christian-Jewish Relationship."*

To attack Jews is anti-Semitism, but an outright attack on the State of Israel is also anti-Semitism. There may be political disagreements between governments and on political issues, but the State of Israel has every right to exist in safety and prosperity.

*Pope Francis, remarks to a World Jewish Congress delegation.*

And I say to you that a true Jew cannot be anti-Christian or anti-Muslim.

*Israeli President Reuven Rivlin at reception for heads of Israeli Christian communities*

Even removed from their larger contexts, these quotations testify to the advances of recent decades in interreligious understanding. They also provide cues for how the new relationship between Jews and Christians can further develop and how deeper ties with Islam can be pursued.

As we're all deeply aware, 2015 also witnessed the intensification and spread of wanton terrorism, frequently accompanied by incitements to hatred and violence couched in pseudo-religious language. The mass murder of innocent people, some targeted because of their religious affiliation, contributed to the displacement of vast populations of helpless refugees. In several countries extreme and divisive rhetoric played on religious and ethnic fears for political advantage.



These circumstances make even more crucial the mission we all share of providing accurate information about religious traditions and dispelling stereotypes and vile caricatures. In September, the ICCJ's Executive Board and the International Abrahamic Forum issued "You Shall Love the Stranger as Yourself (Lev 19:34): A Statement on Migration and Refugees in Europe" ([HERE](#)), which concluded, "Let our shared religious values shine forth and welcome all seeking refuge, irrespective of race or religion." Additionally, in December the International Abrahamic Forum, in cooperation with the Council of Christians and Jews of the United Kingdom and other local organizations, offered a highly-praised seminar in Manchester, U.K. entitled "Challenging Antisemitism and Islamophobia." (Details can be found [HERE](#).) National member organizations have also launched many noble initiatives in service of interreligious amity.

On behalf of the Executive Board, I want to thank everyone who labors with great dedication to unite people of different religious heritages in our common humanity, especially in a climate that promotes division and fear. We stand ready to be of service to our member organizations as best we can.

Some of the challenges we all face stem from the fact that people of different religious convictions are increasingly in contact with one another on a shrinking globe. Religious pluralism and how it affects different national contexts has been a theme of recent ICCJ annual conferences, and we will return to it at our 2016 gathering in Philadelphia. Hosted by the national member organization for the United States, the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations ([ccjr.us](http://ccjr.us)), it will occur from Sunday, 10 July through Wednesday, 13 July 2016. The theme will be "The Dynamics of Religious Pluralism in a Changing World: The Philadelphia, USA, and International Contexts." The new year of 2016 will mark the 240th anniversary of the signing in Philadelphia of the "Declaration of Independence," a document that led in 1789 to the Constitution's "non-establishment" clause, which legally prohibits preferential treatment by the government of any particular religious tradition. In the course of history, this principle has sometimes been ignored, but it is appropriate that it was inscribed in the city founded by the Quaker William Penn as a place where all religions could be practiced freely. The 2016 ICCJ conference will explore this and other topics—ongoing and new—that impinge on interreligious relations.

Allow me to conclude with a catena of excerpts from an essay by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. Although written fifty years ago, his insights are perhaps even more compelling in 2016 than they were in 1966:

The religions of the world are no more self-sufficient, no more independent, no more isolated than individuals or nations. Energies, experiences and ideas that come to life outside the boundaries of a particular religion or all religions continue to challenge and to affect every religion. Horizons are wider, dangers are greater. *No religion is an island.* We are all involved with one another. Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us affects the faith of all of us. Today religious isolationism is a myth. We must choose between interfaith and inter-nihilism. Should we refuse to be on speaking terms with one another and hope for each other's failure? Or should we pray for each other's health, and help one another in preserving one's respective legacy, in preserving a common legacy? Is it not our duty to help one another in trying to overcome hardness of heart, in cultivating a sense of wonder and mystery, in unlocking doors to holiness in time? Perhaps it is the will of God that in this aeon there should be diversity in our forms of devotion and commitment to Him. In this aeon diversity of religions is the will of God.

*Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, "No Religion is an Island", Union Seminary Quarterly Review 21, 1966*

May 2016 be a year filled with blessings for all of us!

*Philip A. Cunningham*

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