

The other in Israel: Orthodox rabbis reckon with Christianity

by [Mordechai Beck](#) in the [June 11, 2014](#) issue



St. Peter's church, Tel Aviv-Yafo. Photo by [Berthold Werner](#)

Read the [interview with Rabbi David Rosen](#).

Christian-Jewish relations may be a topic familiar to many American Christians, but it is not often taken up by Orthodox rabbis within Israel. The Jerusalem Institute for Israel Studies, a secular think tank, recently hosted a discussion on the topic to mark the publication in Hebrew of a booklet by an American rabbi titled “Christianity in the Eyes of Judaism.” The author, Eugene Korn, was among the Orthodox rabbis invited to address the topic. The discussion and the Hebrew publication were both sponsored by the American Jewish Committee.

Korn, who is North American director of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation, offered a historical overview of the relationship. He noted that in the first two or three centuries of the common era, when Christianity was taking root and Jews had to contend with its rising popularity, the rabbis were highly critical of what they viewed as Christians’ worship of an idol. The medieval period gave rise to a more positive view. A number of rabbis of that era observed that at least Christians believed in a divine creator, biblical morality, and the coming of the messianic age.

Amnon Ramon of the Jerusalem institute turned the discussion to current issues in Israel. He pointed to acts of discrimination against Christians, and especially to the actions of radical Jewish settlers who are part of the Tag Mehir (or “price tag”) movement. This group responds to perceived threats to Israeli settlers in the

occupied territories by punishing Palestinian or Christian groups by defacing or vandalizing their property. He reported that when members of the Tag Mehir group were taken to court, “the lawyer for the defense stated that freedom of expression allows you to spit at your adversary.” (The court was not impressed by that argument.)

Ramon said the institute had surveyed the attitudes of Israeli Jews toward Christians in Israel and found that as the age of the interviewees went down, the level of intolerance went up.

“Local-born Israelis have little firsthand knowledge of Christians, and they receive little or no study of other religions in school. This is true of religious and secular schools alike. When schoolchildren visit Jerusalem, for example, very few enter churches. So there is a minimum awareness of ‘the other’ given to them in schools. Thus they are not given any direction in terms of the complex situation, particularly in Jerusalem. We have a lot of work to do to improve this situation.”

Rabbi David Rosen, founder of the Interreligious Coordinating Council in Israel and one of the conveners of the meeting, said that this situation is precisely what made the conference so important. “The rabbis assembled here are pioneers in the Torah world in that they are dealing with this issue.”

Rosen noted that Korn’s booklet would be distributed among educational institutions, *yeshivot* (rabbinical seminaries), and synagogues in Israel, “where hopefully it will be read and studied.” He added: “There is generally a lack of knowledge or interest in the subject matter among rabbis. Nevertheless I think the situation has improved over what it was ten or 20 years ago.”

Korn said his work grew out of two major events. One was the creation of the state of Israel. “That transformed us. We were no longer a weak people. We are a strong people, with a place in the world. We are no longer subordinate to others. This is a major change in our identity and in the history of our people.”

The second event was the transformation in the Christian view of Judaism that occurred in the shadow of the Holocaust. He observed that almost all heads of churches in the United States have visited Israel and that there is widespread agreement on key points—on rejecting anti-Semitism and the old claim that the Jews are guilty of deicide; on believing that the church must repent for its part in the Holocaust; on recognizing the state of Israel as the state of the Jewish people; and

on rethinking attempts to convert Jews to Christianity.

In responding to this revolution in the Christian world, Rabbi Korn said, he is careful not to transgress Jewish law. “As a religious Jew I am concerned with whether there is a problem in *halakhah* [Jewish law] in taking a more positive attitude toward Christianity. After an extensive search, I concluded that there is no overwhelming obstacle. Many religious Jews don’t realize that some of the great rabbis from the 16th century onward insisted that Christianity is not idolatry for gentiles.”

Korn quoted, among other rabbinical sources, the 19th-century German rabbi Jacob Emden: “Jesus brought a double goodness to the world—he removed idolatry, and he obligated the nations of the world to follow the seven commands of the Sons of Noah, so they shouldn’t be like the animals of the field, and he instilled them with moral faith. We should view Christianity as the fulfillment of the prophecy that one day the world will be filled with the knowledge of God.”

Korn concluded that there is no obstacle to appreciating Christians and Christianity. “But unfortunately,” he added, “not too many people learn this in yeshiva.”

“As a religious Jew,” said Korn, “I believe that Christians believe in many of the fundamentals of Judaism. So religiously there is every reason to have better relations. . . . Christians were our enemies for 1,900 years—they persecuted us and tortured us. There is no way we can restore the victims of these persecutions. But the question for us is can we make the world a better place for our grandchildren. I believe that a full appreciation of the Christian world . . . is both possible and desirable.”

Rabbi Schlomo Riskin, founder of the Center for Jewish-Christian Understanding and Cooperation, spoke of his own journey of interfaith discovery, influenced by David Flusser, a teacher at the Hebrew University in the 1960s:

“I learned from Flusser about Jesus the Jew, that every word that came from his mouth had its source in the Torah. The Jewish people entered the world with a sign of holiness—this is our universal message and we have to explain it to the world. In Israel, we have not taken the responsibility of having a universal message. Yet the temple was a place where all the peoples of the world could come to pray in their own way.”

A word of caution was uttered by Oded Wiener, director general of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel: "There are many who are not excited by these dialogues." Partly this resistance grows out of an awareness of a resurgent anti-Semitism in Europe, he said. But he also reported on hopeful developments, such as the creation of a website where Palestinians can discuss the acts of Tag Mehir and carry on a dialogue with various religious groups. "We've gone far in encountering the others. It's for us to overcome our history."

"Most Israelis have never heard of these dialogues," Ramon concluded. "It is therefore necessary to bring this news to the people."