Reader’s Response

Christians Challenge the Rabbi’s Response

David M. Stowe
Executive Vice-President, United Church Board for World Ministries

In his forthright and thoughtful “Christian Missionaries and a Jewish Response” (Worldview, May) Rabbi Balfour Brickner asks Christian leaders to repudiate proselytizing missions directed toward Jews and warns that they threaten to impair or even destroy the friendly relationships that have been strengthened, largely by cooperative action on social issues, during recent years.

Balfour Brickner has described a reaction to proselytizing activity that is entirely understandable and that all Christians ought to ponder with utmost sympathy. In the course of such pondering, however, one becomes aware that Rabbi Brickner is actually challenging the legitimacy, not only of evangelizing activity directed toward Jews, but of all such mission. If to approach a Jew with a commendation of Christian discipleship and Christian belonging is to attempt to “rob him of his spiritual and ethnic identity,” then every evangelistic approach to any non-Christian is likewise such robbery.

For the Buddhist, the Hindu, the Moslem, the tribal animist, just as for the Jew or the Christian, one's inherited faith very likely symbolizes very precious memories, expectations, and belongings. I once heard Bishop Lesslie Newbigin tell of a Hindu who, on the night before he was to be baptized, dreamed that there were placed before him two bowls, between which he must choose. One contained the blood of Christ, the other was filled with his mother's tears....

The crucial question remains: Is it a Christian requirement or only an option that a persistent effort be made to ensure that all persons have an opportunity to consider fairly and for themselves the meaning of the Christian vision and of Christian belonging? As Rabbi Brickner notes, the missionary imperative goes deep in Christianity, and those who take this faith seriously are unlikely to reject it.

However, as Rabbi Brickner takes pains to point out, there are Christians—and he cites particularly certain evidences in the Roman Catholic church—who make a clear distinction between missions to Jews and to others. It is true that there are biblical texts that support such a view. But there are other and powerful texts to the contrary. There is, of course, a special historical relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Jesus was a Jew, and apparently a good Jew, although an unconventional one. In many respects one may see the meaning of his mission and that of his disciples in terms of universalizing Israel's faith in a God of righteousness and mercy, justice and love. But the universalizing is precisely the heart of the matter. What made Jesus so controversial was his elimination of all vestiges of concern for blood and soil from his inherited Judaism and his radical downplaying of the sacredness of Jewish folkways embedded in the Law.

The controlling issue for New Testament and Christian faith is the question: Who is Lord? Where is the final point of judgment on all religious claims and moral practices? To what touchstone does one bring Scripture itself, ethical issues, questions of religious practice and belief, one's fundamental conception of God and of his way with his world?

Properly understood, the Bible moves away from any special and unconditional understanding of God and Israel—or God and Christians, for that matter. There are, of course, texts that suggest this; but read discerningly and in the context of the main direction of biblical thought—taking Jesus as the organizing center—God's love and his intentions are absolutely universal. His covenant embraces all people and indeed all creatures. His love is indefatigable and all-inclusive, and his lure toward good all-pervasive. At the same time, all creatures possess a core of self-determination that requires them to affirm or to resist this covenant of divine grace. Consequently every covenant is conditional upon the creatures' response.

In principle, then, missions to Jews are no different from missions to any others. But Rabbi Brickner's critique implies two very important things. It suggests a careful assessment of mission priorities. Toward whom are limited resources best directed? Where are the needs greatest, and where are there most likely to be constructive and creative results in the acceptance of Christ as the controlling center of human existence? In my own view, evangelism directed toward Jews would for several reasons rank fairly low on such a scale of priorities.

More important is the forceful way in which a challenge to missions to Jews underlines the need for utmost delicacy and sympathy in all mission. Empathy, intelligent understanding, willingness to listen as well as speak, learn as well as teach, are required in every encounter aimed at introducing Christ to those of other faiths. By pointing up the way in which mission can all too easily be perceived as arrogant or exploitative, Rabbi Brickner has implicitly described the humble, noncoercive, appreciative style that authentic mission must always embody.
Rabbi Balfour Brickner's article is important because it clearly identifies a key issue in Christian mission theology today: Are Jews exempt from the universal Christian mission? It is ironic that while today the debate is over whether Jews are to be included within the Christian mission, originally the issue was whether anyone other than Jews was to be included. Initially, Jesus saw himself as "sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt. 15:24), and he forbade his disciples to go among the Gentiles or even enter a Samaritan town (Mt. 10:5-6). For Paul the pattern of mission was "first the Jew and also the Gentile" (Rom. 1:16; 2:9, 10). This is a key issue in Christian mission theology because if the Jewish people—who were the original focus of Jesus' mission—do not need Christ, then a similar theological case can be projected to apply to other faiths, until it becomes complete relativism and rejection of all Christian witness to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Rabbi Brickner's real problem is not with Hebrew Christians or Messianic Jews; his problem is with the New Testament. "Christ crucified" is still "a stumbling-block to Jews" (1 Cor. 1:23). I deplore the use of deception, coercion, or manipulation by any religious group. But I also regret Rabbi Brickner's slur that it is "simplistic nonsense" for Christians to claim that "one may be at the same time both a believing Jew and a Christian." That claim happens to be profoundly in keeping with the New Testament, unless one does surgery on the Scriptures. It seems quite likely that the first church in Jerusalem consisted entirely of Jews, and it has been pointed out by others that "there is not a church mentioned in Acts that did not have Jewish members." St. Paul called himself "a Hebrew born of Hebrews" (Phil. 3:5), and he usually began his work in every city at the local synagogue. The question in the primitive church was whether Gentiles had to become Jews in order to be Christians. Today the issue is whether Jews have to become Gentiles in order to be Christians.

In our own time there is evidence that many Jews who have accepted Jesus as the Messiah take a new pride in their Jewishness. In 1977 a Roman Catholic student from the Midwest wrote an M.A. thesis at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley on "Jews for Jesus," in which he did a nationwide survey of Jewish Christians related to the civil rights movement. He reports: "The people interviewed were asked if their being Jewish meant more to them now, having become Hebrew Christians. They unanimously responded that it had."

Rabbi Brickner believes there is "an unresolvable tension between the command to 'bring all men to Christ'...and the recognition that the Jewish people live in a unique and enduring covenantal relationship with God." That tension is resolved in the New Testament, where the covenant with Israel continues and is completed in Jesus Christ. The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches says: "We believe that in Jesus Christ God's revelation in the Old Testament finds fulfillment...He, as its representative, fulfills Israel's task of obedience." Any attempt to use Romans 9-11, as Rabbi Brickner suggests, to prove that Paul thought God did not desire the conversion of the Jews to saving faith in Jesus as the Messiah, simply flies in the face of the New Testament as a whole, and Romans 9-11 in particular. I agree with Dean Krister Stendahl of Harvard Divinity School who wrote, with reference to Romans 9-11, that Paul considers "the mission to the Gentiles and the success of that mission in the name of the Messiah, Jesus, only as a detour which ultimately must lead to the point where the Jews accept this same Jesus as their Messiah. To him this is necessary; otherwise, God would not be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...Without such an end the Gospel could not be the Gospel and Jesus could not be the Messiah."

Actually, I wish there were as much interest and support in the mainline Protestant denominations in the United States for witnessing to the Jewish people as Rabbi Brickner implies. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Recently I wrote to the mission agency of the largest Protestant denomination related to the National Council of Churches and asked, "If I sent you a contribution designated for the evangelization of the Jewish people, what would you do with it?" The reply was, "We would return your contribution and ask you to redesignate it for some other purpose, because this Board is not involved in the evangelization of Jews, as a people." ...This is typical of many mainline Protestant denominations related to the National Council of Churches today. In the late 1960's the NCC allowed its Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews to wither away, and then in 1974 established a new Office on Jewish-Christian Relations, which has as its stated purpose: "To respond to the changing situation and need for new relationships between Christians and Jews, and to develop new levels of communication and trust and to encourage the emergence of new groups for common action." In 1973 the NCC's Commission on Faith and Order issued "A Statement to our Fellow Christians," from a study group on "Israel: People, Land, State," that carefully avoided any mention of Christian evangelistic responsibility in relation to Jews.

This failure of faithfulness toward the biblical mandate for mission to all "the nations"—including, even with priority, the Jewish people—stems in part from the desire for religious détente in American civil religion. Reinhold Niebuhr was a major influence in causing the Protestant drift in this direction on this particular issue. In 1958 Niebuhr proposed that there should be an end to all Christian efforts to evangelize the Jews. David M. Stowe of the United Church Board for World Ministries has pointed out that Niebuhr was "two culture bound—like most of his fellow theologians—to realize that his proposal cut right at the heart of the whole enterprise of mission to other faiths" (Ecumenicity and Evangelism, pp. 50-51). Niebuhr's efforts to remove the "stumbling-block" in Jewish-Christian relations were motivated more by socioeconomic than theological considerations. In his book No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste (1978) John Murray Cuddihy contends that Niebuhr's "public theological peace" with the Jews was influenced largely by his personal ambitions and professional aspirations in social circles where mission to the Jews was considered in bad taste.
The result, says Cuddihy, was “not essentially different from what happened with that other end-product of the liberal Protestant epoch, Norman Vincent Peale.”

Christians have much to regret and repent for in the history of their relations with the Jewish people. But while there is no special Christian mission to the Jews, neither is there any special exemption of the Jews from the universal Christian mission. The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches has spoken clearly on this point:

“In Christ’s cross and resurrection it has become manifest that God’s love and mercy embraces all men...No one can be excluded from [the Church’s] message of forgiveness and reconciliation; to do otherwise would be disobedience to the Lord and the Church and a denial of her very nature, a negation of her fundamental openness and catholicity.”

Jewish-Christian relations require serious theological dialogue. No good purpose will be served, however, by avoiding the central Christian conviction that Jesus Christ is for everyone.

Richard R. De Ridder
Calvin Theological Seminary faculty

Rabbi Brickner is to be commended for the open manner in which he has expressed his opinions with respect to the way he views the contemporary Christian approaches to the Jewish people. There are many possible ways to respond to his article and even enter into debate concerning the validity of his interpretation of what has been happening in Jewish-Christian relationships. Such an approach would probably not serve to advance understanding and dialogue, however. It is my purpose in this response to center on a few major issues so as to provide an agenda for further discussion.

First of all, a few observations. Rabbi Brickner is quite intolerant of those of his own people who have embraced Christianity and are now actively engaged in witness to their own people. In doing so, he seems to see the gospel as a threat to the cultural beliefs and practices as well as to solidarity (continuity) of the Jewish people. I cannot agree with him that this is a necessary consequence, nor would those Jews who have become Christians agree that this is so. His denial that one can be both a Jew and a Christian (implied in his article) simply is not true. Christianity in its gospel of the Christ of universal grace does not doubt that God still moves into Jewish lives by the pathway of faith, while waiting patiently, true to its own loyalties, for Jewish recognition of Jesus. Kenneth Cragg stated this in his own way: “Mission lives by its disciples: but it lives for its absentees.” Whether one thinks of the Christian mission to Jews or non-Jews, witness is at the heart of the Christian faith.

I am not so sorry as Rabbi Brickner over the inability to maintain dialogue on a purely social action basis. With him I regret very much if this should cease. But a social action agenda was never of value in bringing about a resolution of the “unsolved problem of possible conversion.” Such a limited agenda did not merely avoid the issue; it buried it. Dialogue must be out of one’s faith and cannot escape reference to one’s faith.

It is in the latter part of his article that Rabbi Brickner gets at the heart of our relationship as Christians and Jews. The confrontation he speaks about is a deeply theological one. So long as either party fails to reckon with that basic fact, dialogue will get nowhere. Brickner correctly notes that what is needed is not a “re-Judaization of Christianity.” One could add, neither is it a Christianization of Judaism. Either alternative is superficial as well as in violation of the whole tenor of God’s purpose for all men.

The article can be read as an agenda of sorts for further Jewish-Christian relationships in theological dialogue. We Christians should heartily endorse the author’s suggested agenda items:

1. Israel is God’s beloved (Rom. 11:2—“God has not cast off his people” and Rom. 11:28—“They are beloved”).
2. The Abrahamic covenant is irrevocable (Gen. 17:7).
3. Jews have a mission to the world (Gen. 12:3, e.g.) in the purpose of God.
4. What is the essence of what it means to be a Jew as well as a Christian?
5. What is the meaning of salvation in the Old Testament and the New Testament?
6. The interrelationship of Jew and Christian as the people of God.
7. The continuing meaning of Torah (“a divine invitation to human cooperation, a walking with God”).
8. The tensions between works and faith for the Christian and of birth and works for the Jew. Judaism is not a bare legalism. Its deepest Torah vocation is at the very heart of New Testament religion.
9. The theme of Messiah, which brings all other issues to a climax.
10. The significance of the differences between Christianity’s focus on the fall of man and Judaism’s stress on creation.

Others can supply equally important items for such an agenda, I am sure. For one would welcome a beginning of theological consultation on these issues. The questions dividing Judaism and Christianity are not first of all those of increasing secularization of the Jewish people, a lack of self-consciousness as to Jewish identity, the failure of Jews to train their children, conversion and mission methodology. These are matters of concern to us Christians as well as to Jews. But we shall never find the way through these and other concerns until we have honestly, open-heartedly, forthrightly sought answers to the basic, theological issues which are at the heart of our differences.

How strange it is that two parties who are in many ways so close together can at the same time be so far apart. We Christians long for the time when the unity God desires shall characterize all men in their relationship to him.

Thomas Robbins
Sociology Department, Queens College

Rabbi Balfour Brickner quotes with apparent approval the recent resolution of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations that affirms “the right to use legal deprogramming efforts” but disavows “illegal coercive measures.” What, pray tell, are “legal deprogramming efforts”? I hope this
term does not refer to conservatorships and guardianships granted by certain misguided lower court judges to parents of adult converts to "cults," permitting such parents to receive the assistance of the police in seizing and forcibly confining their sectarian progeny. Such conservatorships, sometimes granted in ex parte procedures in which the future conservatees are not present or represented, constitute despicable violations of religious freedom and abuses of civil commitment. The use of the judiciary to enforce compulsory "therapy" for allegedly "brainwashed" adherents to religious movements has totalitarian implications, as L.H. Gann pointed out in his excellent piece, "The Fatal Assumptions of Social Therapy" (Worldview, April; see also my article, "Even a Moonie Has Civil Rights," The Nation, February 26, 1977).

As Rabbi Brickner's article makes clear, the concern of Jewish parents and rabbis over the attraction of "cults" and Jewish-Christian sects for young Jews is a religious concern with the threat of Jews forsaking Jewish traditions and following false teachings. The obvious religious quality of this (legitimate) concern discards the "psychiatric" rationales for conservatorships-for-deprogramming. Jewish parents who employ deprogramming to "rescue" their children from Krishna, Moon, or Jews for Jesus are seeking to use physical force as a weapon of religious conflict. This is true whether or not some lower court judge has placed a stamp of "legality" upon the use of force.

The thrust of Rabbi Brickner's essay is the injunction to Christians to maintain a self-denying ordinance with respect to the proselytization of Jews. But if one truly believes that Jesus is the Messiah, isn't it essential to spread the word to the unbelievers, Jews as well as gentiles? Any faith or religious tradition that can only survive through either the use of force (i.e., deprogramming) or the requirement that other faiths renounce proselytization would appear to be desperately feeble. In fact Judaism is hardly that moribund and can well afford to tolerate the renewal of Christian evangelism without undue hysteria. The same religious upsurge that is generating "cults" and syncretic movements is also revitalizing American Judaism. Unfortunately for some synagogues, it may not be the Reform Judaism that Rabbi Brickner represents which becomes the real Jewish beneficiary of the current ferment. Hassidic and Neo-Orthodox groups, which in some ways constitute Jewish counterparts of the conservative churches that are now growing at the expense of liberal denominations, are flourishing as a consequence of the same spiritual tumult that appears to threaten the UAHC. I would be interested to know if there is appreciable concern within the community of Reform Judaism about the defection of young persons raised as Reform Jews to (somewhat more authoritarian) Neo-Orthodox groups that view Reform Judaism as no Judaism at all.

In the long run it is neither the "cults" nor the Christian evangelicals that threaten mainstream Judaism. Reform Judaism is caught between assimilation and Orthodox renewal, as liberal Protestantism is caught between secularism and evangelical revival.

Balfour Brickner Responds:

I must respectfully disagree with a number of points made by my dear friend and old colleague, David Stowe. First, he suggests that by challenging Protestant missionary activity directed toward Jews I have challenged the legitimacy of all Christian evangelical activity. If I did, I did so unintentionally. It would be presumptuous of me to suggest how Christians should see their relationship to other non-Christians. I direct myself only to the Christian-Jewish relationship. I do so, first, because I am a Jew interested in maintaining my own religious, ethnic identity and, second, because I believe Jews and Judaism stand in a relationship to Christianity that perhaps no other group or religion occupies. That relationship is historically and biblically fashioned and, I believe, ought to put Jews outside the need for a Christian form of redemption. This is precisely the point made by Professor Federici in his paper to which I referred in my article. The gifts and the call of God (i.e., the covenant established between God and the Jewish people) are irrevocable. To the Israelites of old belong...the covenant...and the promises (see Romans 9:4).

Dr. Stowe recognized the implications of these texts, but suggests that "there are other and powerful texts to the contrary." If so, one might conclude that texts cancel themselves out and thus there is no clear New Testament basis or mandate to justify efforts to convert Jews. If that is the case, then the justification would have to be based on other grounds. He suggests one: the universal nature of Jesus and his message. Jesus, Stowe tells us, downplayed his Jewishness and his Judaism. His message was that God and His covenant are absolutely universal.

But Jesus never downplayed his Jewishness. He was not a Christian but a Jew, and not just by birth. His life and his teachings were totally Jewish. He was a very particular Jew who taught what Jewish prophets who preceded him had taught; that the One, invisible, incorporeal God of the patriarchs was a God for all mankind whose covenant was one into which everyone could enter if he chose to take seriously the divine "demandment" to live ethically and to act out that ethical imperative by doing the "mitzvot"—the particular activities prescribed by Judaism as the way to fulfill that ethical imperative. The universality of this message was never designed to rob its adherents of their particularity or their existence as a separate or unique people. Jesus would have been the last to seek to universalize the Jew out of existence, although for many centuries those who used his name did so try.

While there exists a special relationship between Judaism and Christianity, of greater importance is the covenantal relationship that exists between Judaism and God. That relationship preexisted Jesus by a thousand years and, at least in the Jewish self-definition, makes the continuation of Jewish particularity critically important.

I am troubled by Dr. Stowe's rejection of a Christian evangelism of Jews on the grounds of impracticality. He calls this "mission priorities." One would hope there might be better reasons for not seeking the conversion of Jews than the reality of limited re-
sources. Otherwise, one wonders what those Christians who perceive no theological inhibitions, but are only limited by "practical considerations," would do to Jews: Given greater resources, energy, manpower, etc., would they then launch an aggressive conversionary campaign directed toward Jews? That worry is exactly what troubles Jews and what initially caused me to raise this issue in my article. This "practical argument" seems to beg the question: the theological justification for the conversion of Jews.

Dr. Anderson deals more directly with this issue. He believes there is a theological mandate for the conversionary effort directed toward Jews. He objects to my saying that one cannot be at the same time a believing Jew and a Christian.

As I understand it, a Christian is one who believes that Jesus was indeed the Christ—the Messiah. No believing Jew can accept that assumption. One may be a Jew and believe that Jesus was Christ but one cannot be a Judaically believing Jew and accept that idea. In Judaism the concept of messiah never meant what at least early or traditional Christianity made of it—a belief that Jesus as the Christ was a divine son of God who came to redeem mankind out of this world. For Judaism, the mashiach, the redeemer, was a normal, natural man, a linear descendent of the Davidic line, who would restore Israel to its national independence and former glory. Actually, King Saul was the first mashiach—appointed one. While the concept went through many transformations in the thousand years between Saul and Jesus, it never became, in Jewish thought, what Christianity later made of it.

As an evangelical Christian, Dr. Anderson seems to have a serious disagreement with some of his Christian colleagues, particularly some in the National Council of Churches who do not share his theological views regarding the legitimacy of converting Jews. I choose not to enter into that internal dispute. Neither shall I comment on his impugning of the motives of the late and revered Reinhold Niebuhr. However, it should be noted that at least some may feel that Dr. Niebuhr was motivated as much by theological conviction as by sociological considerations when he too rejected the idea that Jews should be the object of Christian conversionary efforts.

Dr. De Ridder quite properly calls for more dialogue. I welcome that desire. It is long overdue. Moreover, I totally agree that social action engaged in interreligiously is no substitute for theological discussion. But, interreligious social action is important, and I am concerned that it might be further damaged by Protestantism's reluctance, if not refusal, to give up its efforts to convert Jews. Unless that happens there will be neither social action nor dialogue. True dialogue can take place only between parties who deeply respect each other's integrity, who consider themselves equal in every way.

One or two further observations. I am not intolerant of Jews who become Christians. I respect everyone's right to go to hell or to find salvation in any way that person sees fit.

Neither do I "see the gospel as a threat to the cultural beliefs and practices as well as to solidarity (continuity) of the Jewish people." It is not the gospel that is a threat to Jews. The threat is from those who use the gospel as a club with which to beat others into a brand of belief and submission with which they may disagree or find no need.

Let me stress the distinction I made above between a believing Jew and Christian. "Jew" is a word that describes ethnicity and peoplehood of those who may or may not be invested with or by faith. "Believing Jew" suggests a faith dimension. With these distinctions in mind, I would reassert my hypothesis that "believing Jew" and "Christian" are mutually exclusive terms.

Thomas Robbins's questioning of the distinction between legal and illegal deprogramming is legitimate, and I fully sympathize with his criticism of coercive, though perhaps "legal," practices. Legal deprogramming efforts mean to me efforts that are only persuasive, where the door is always left open in the room. A person must have the right freely to come and go at will.

Dr. Robbins feels it is essential to "spread the word to the unbelievers, Jews as well as gentiles." That suggests that because Jews reject Jesus as Christ they are unbelievers. Does he mean that? What if Jews believe in God: One, invisible, incorporeal God? Is that not sufficient?

There is a serious fallacy of logic in his thinking that affirms "any faith ... that can only survive through ..." (italics mine). The word "only" is mistakenly applied. Obviously the use of force or the denial to others of the right of proselytism is not the only ways Judaism does survive or has survived. To suggest this demeans Judaism and indicates an unawareness of the history of Judaism. Even a cursory examination of that past and the present would suggest that Judaism survives because (among other reasons) it gives its adherents something of theological, psychological, and sociological value, quite apart from what others may try to do to proscribe it.

Finally, while I think he is correct in suggesting that orthodoxies now benefit from the current ferment and "spiritual tumult," I perceive that he seems to take a kind of joy in pointing out that liberal approaches to religion are today not as popular as once they were. Is there implicit in this observation just the hint of a suggestion that liberal religions are not really "true" religions? I would hope not. We all know that orthodoxy (read the observance of ritual practices) does not necessarily equal religiously.