

# **MATER DEI INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION**

**in association with the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart**

## **Annual Memorial Lecture in honour of Rev. Dr. Michael Maher MSC**

**“Judaism and Christianity: Reflections on the Parting of the Ways  
and the Prospects for Future Dialogue”**

by

**Dr Philip Alexander**

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chaired by Dr. Dermot A. Lane, Mater Dei Institute of Education

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Professor Philip Alexander at the outset made it clear that he was approaching his subject as a historian. His presentation was systematic and clearly presented. He dealt with the subject in historical order, from the person of Jesus himself and the early Jesus movement down through Jewish-Christian relations to our own day, ending with prospects for future dialogue.

During the first two centuries of our era there were two significant movements as to how define Judaism and where Judaism should go, namely Pharisaism, followed (after A.D. 70) by Rabbinic Judaism and Jesus of Nazareth and the Jesus movement (Christianity). For the historian there are a number of reasons why the Jewish people did not accept Jesus himself or the Christian message as proclaimed by the early church. The parting of the ways began this early. One reason was the Jewish concept of the Messiah, which included leadership that would bring liberation from Roman rule to the Jews. Even the apostles are represented as asking Jesus: 'Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?' Jesus, with his predilection for the marginalized and 'sinners', did not fit this definition. Then there was the question of Jesus' relation to God which was perceived as incompatible with Jewish monotheism. There was also the question of politics. The Christians, accepting Jesus as the promised Messiah, stood aloof from Jewish politics and the military campaigns against Rome in 66-70 and 132-135 AD. They were, in fact, persecuted by Bar Cochba, the leader of the second (132-135) revolt. Over the first two centuries both movements were defining their identity, and by AD 200

Judaism in Palestine had defined its identity along Pharisaic-Rabbinic lines, a definition that would be taken up by Judaism in Babylonia and in the West.

The separate identities of Jews and Christians were acknowledged over this period and later by Roman authority. Christians were persecuted while Judaism was a recognized religion. Then with Constantine (312-312 and later) came the great change: the persecuted became acclaimed and Christianity the state religion.

While the ways had parted, dialogue continued, and Jerome (*ca.* 342-420) became the first Christian Hebraist. Jerome maintained that the Church should take the Hebrew Bible as its official text instead of the Greek Septuagint. For him truth was to be found in the *Hebraica veritas*, the 'Hebrew truth'. In this Augustine disagreed with him, but Jerome's version from the Hebrew became the accepted translation in the West – the Vulgate. Jerome regarded the books not in the Hebrew text but in the Septuagint as 'Apocrypha', suitable for spiritual reading but not a base for doctrine (the later Anglican position). While Jewish learning became accepted by Christians during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, a negative attitude to Jews and Judaism (with occasional persecution) continued.

The Jewish-Christian dialogue continues today, in fact flourishes. When considering the question of "Prospects for Future Dialogue" the following points seem relevant. There is the question of 'the Academy', where Jewish studies, Christian theology and history are studied at academic level, without denominational attachment. This academic study of both Judaism and Christianity may be a help in getting members of both Judaism and Christianity to have a better understanding and appreciation of each others' positions. Notice must also be taken of Messianic Judaism, a religious movement whose adherents believe that Jesus of Nazareth, whom they call Yeshua, is both the resurrected Jewish Messiah and their Divine Saviour. This movement is particularly strong in the United States. A factor that cannot be ignored for present or future prospects is the Holocaust. Not that Nazism was inspired by Christianity, but the question remains whether the negative attitude of Christians towards Jews facilitated the Holocaust. The existence of the state of Israel is a new dimension which has been added to this dialogue, and with this the question of Jewish-Arab relations in Palestine and the entire Palestinian question. This leads to the question of Jewish-Islam relations and dialogue. Thus in any consideration of the question of future prospects in Jewish Christian relations there is question of "trilogue", not just dialogue.