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Christ in the Works of Two Jewish Artists: When Art is Interreligious Dialogue

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In 1942, the Puma Gallery in New York City hosted an exhibit entitled "Modern Christs." Of the twenty-six artists showing works, seventeen were Jewish, a startling number; clearly something was afoot. This paper explores this issue of the place of Christ in the works of two Jewish artists, painter Marc Chagall and sculptor Jacob Epstein. When researching these two artists it becomes clear that, in the process of representing Christ, these two men were engaging with Christ and the whole network of Christian meaning and symbolism. Their engagement was dialogue, though not the exchange of words and ideas typically associated with the term today. This paper contends that interreligious dialogue is a multifaceted phenomenon and that restricting our understanding of it to the realm of words and verbal interchange hampers development in this field.

The Cultural Backdrop

The two artists under consideration were roughly contemporaries born into a world in which Judaism had been grappling with the forces of modernity for over a century. It was a world in which Jewish intellectuals and artists had been struggling, since the late 1700's, with the role of Jesus and the place of Jews in Christian society. The work of these individuals led to far-reaching changes, as they "redefined the essence and meaning of Judaism, Jewishness, and Jewish history for the modern age...they also reconceptualized the place of Jesus within the world of Judaism..."¹

During this period Jews were emerging from the isolation of medieval times when the figure of Jesus, indeed all Christian symbols, had been hated objects due to the pain caused by anti-Semitism. Jews were struggling to locate themselves as legitimate members within the Christian world which

surrounded them, and they were attempting to clarify their relationship to the basic issues of Christianity, Jesus and the cross, as a part of this.

In the late 18th century German-Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn was a seminal figure in the *Haskalah*, the renaissance of European Jewry. The transformation of Jesus into a figure of legitimate consideration for Jews was a part of this renaissance. A thrust of his work, as well as of the work of his contemporaries and those who followed, was the reassertion of the Jewishness of Jesus. At times this developed to the point of suggesting that "all Christian teachings and doctrines that can be authentically traced to Jesus were part of one or another normative strand of Judaism and the remaining Christian teachings were mere inventions of Paul and the founders of the early Christian church."²

In the early 20th century two Russian Jewish intellectuals, writer and folklorist S. Ansky and cultural activist Chaim Zhitlovsky, were involved in an ongoing debate regarding "...the dangers and the merits of embracing Christian themes in Jewish thought and literature."³ The controversy in this debate became known, in Yiddish, as "*di tseylem frage*," the Crucifix Question, in which the essential issue was the place of Jews and Jewish culture within modern Western civilization with its Christian underpinnings.

Marc Chagall (1887-1985)

Chagall produced several paintings depicting Christ over the course of his career, most of them appearing during or after World War II. The best known of these are *White Crucifixion* (1938) and *Yellow Crucifixion* (1943), although his earliest work

¹ Hoffman, Matthew. *From Rebel to Rabbi: Reclaiming Jesus and the Making of Modern Jewish Culture* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press) 7-8.

² Ibid., 20.

³ Ibid., 61

of Christ, the 1912 painting *Golgotha*, is also a well-known painting.

Chagall grew up an orthodox Jew in a Jewish enclave in a small Russian village surrounded by a world saturated in Christian imagery, the rich visual world of Russian Orthodox churches and icons. He was impacted by what he saw:

In my youth I often saw Russian icons. I was profoundly impressed by them, but later, I became estranged from them because they seemed to contain too much traditionalism and schematism...the symbolical figure of Christ was always near to me...⁴

The figure of Christ was compelling for Chagall, and in his memoirs he reported "that he had been haunted for a long time by the pale face of Jesus."⁵ At one point he had even gone so far as to set up a meeting with a noted rabbi to discuss this, but then for some reason not stated, he never broached the topic.

Chagall did a crucifixion sketch in 1909 which became a study for his painting *Golgotha*. This early sketch, stylistically, resembled traditional Russian Orthodox icons in many ways. However by the time he did the final painting, these resemblances had dissipated. as Chagall developed his own interpretations.

Dedicated to Christ (1912), Chagall's first crucifixion, originally titled *Golgotha*, is shown below. In this cubist painting, a blue child hangs cruciform on a cross that has partially disappeared into the green background. At the foot of the cross

⁴ Aimishel-Maisels,, Ziva. "Chagall's Dedicated to Christ: Sources and Meaning" in *Jewish Art*, vol. 21-22, 1995-1996, 77.

⁵ J. Wilson, "Divine Muse: A Jewish Artist Haunted by the Face of Jesus" in *Wall Street Journal Online*, Friday April 27, 2007, 1.

stand a disciple and Mary and at the right a figure disappears with a ladder—an important theme in Chagall's work which will be discussed later.

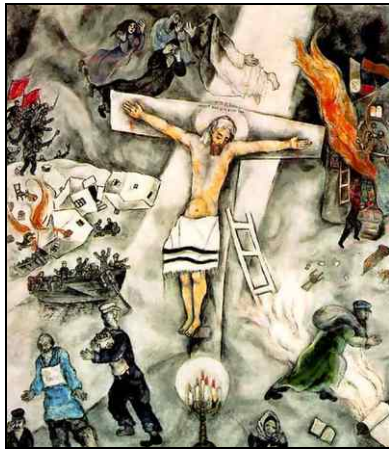


Golgotha/Dedicated to Christ

In her article on this painting, Ziva Aimishel-Maisels traces the evolution of this work through a series of drawings and paintings and concludes that the initial drawing may have been done in response to a June 1906 pogrom which was set off by false allegations of Jewish blood-libel (murdering Christian children for blood to be used in rituals). Icons of crucified children that referred to this blood libel were in circulation, and Aimishel-Maisels surmises that *Golgotha/Dedicated to Christ* was Chagall's complex and angry response to the accusations of blood libel and the pogroms that ensued.⁶ From Chagall's own statements, it is apparent that he is very conscious in his use of Christian dogmatic symbols to illustrate the volatile

⁶ General conclusion drawn by Aimishel-Maisels, Ibid.

religious situation of the times and the precarious position of the Russian Jews.⁷



White Crucifixion

Chagall's fascination with the crucified Christ re-emerged in the upheaval of the late 1930s and remained a continuing theme in his work for the next thirty years. His 1938 painting *White Crucifixion* stands at a great distance from the joyous apolitical scenes that had characterized his work.⁸ At the time it was painted the National Socialist Party had come into power in Germany and there "...the anti-Jewish pogroms were raging, the concentration camps were filling...synagogues were going up in flames."⁹ In *White Crucifixion* Chagall depicts these atrocities around the central figure of Christ, which is described as:

⁷ Ibid , 78.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Walter Erben, *Marc Chagall*, NY: Frederick A. Prager, 1957, 111.

...a recognizably Jewish Christ with a prayer shawl for a loincloth dominates the large canvas...but all the scenes clustered around him are unaffected by his presence. Revolutionary mobs attack from the left, the matriarchs and patriarchs weep up above, a synagogue burns on the right, Jews flee the destruction on foot and by boat, the Torah scroll is in flames, a mother clutches her baby, an old Jew weeps... ."¹⁰

Despite the presence of Christ on a cross, Chagall scholar Franz Meyer emphasizes how *White Crucifixion* differs from Christian portrayals of the cross. He writes that in *White Crucifixion* "this Christ is really crucified, stretched in all his pain above a world of horror...,"¹¹ but that, in contrast to Christian portrayals of the event, the suffering of Christ is not the most significant component. For Meyer *White Crucifixion* is primarily "an exemplary Jewish martyrology"¹² in which Chagall is "raising the shrieks of the dying and the horror of death into the realm of legend."¹³

Yellow Crucifixion (1943), painted in response to the second World War, reworks the themes of *White Crucifixion*.¹⁴ The Christ figure is suspended mid-air on the cross, sharing the central focus of the painting with a large green Torah scroll, which reinforces Jesus' connection to Judaism and Jewish law. The lower part of the painting shows burning buildings and people, in agony, fleeing. In *The Martyr* (1940), the Christ, shown as a contemporary cap-wearing Russian Jew, is bound to a stake rather than a cross. In this painting, Chagall moves

¹⁰ David G. Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984, 294.

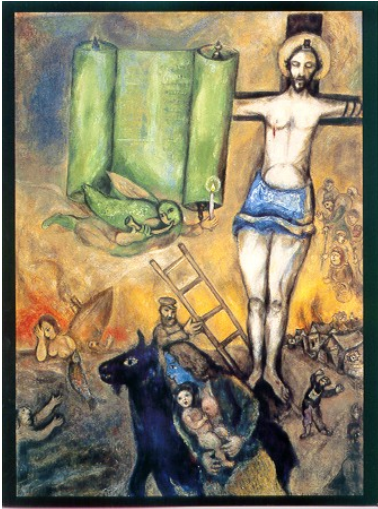
¹¹ Franz Meyer, *Chagall*, NY: Harry N. Abrams, 1964, 414.

¹² Ibid.

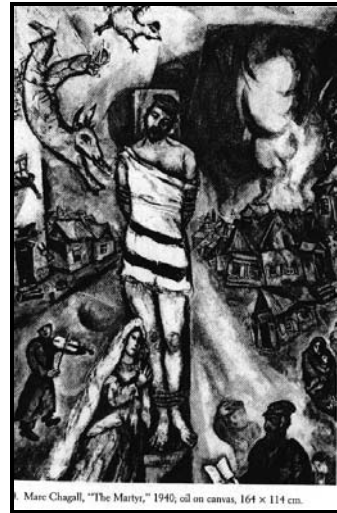
¹³ Ibid. 415

¹⁴ Edward N.McNulty, "Three Artists View Christ: Marc Chagall, Abraham Rattner and Robert Lentz" in *Christianity and the Arts*, 6 Winter, 1999, 13.

toward a more explicit identification of the crucified Christ with the present suffering of the Jewish people.



Yellow Crucifixion



The Martyr

Although each of the paintings described above has its unique symbolism and elements, what is common to all of them is the way in which the function of Christ and the crucifixion motif have been transformed by Chagall. It has already been mentioned that in his paintings there is the repeated theme of the ladder being removed from the cross, which implies that this Christ will simply remain there crucified. This Christ is not the Redeemer of Christian theology, but an eternally suffering Christ who cannot be removed from the cross and remains isolated from the rest of humanity while simultaneously summing up the suffering in the world around him.¹⁵ Referring to *White Crucifixion*, Plank writes:

¹⁵ McNulty, 13.

Chagall's Messiah, this Jew of the Cross is no rescuer, but himself hangs powerless before the chaotic fire. This portrayal of Messiah as victim threatens to sever the basic continuity we have wanted to maintain between suffering and redemption...¹⁶

While Chagall is almost obsessive in his use of Christ as the main image of martyrdom, he is simultaneously aware that "...images of Christ are tough for a Jewish audience to swallow."¹⁷ Particularly after World War II, depicting a Jew on the cross "...was to confront a stronger taboo, for to do so required the victim to borrow from the oppressor's cultural tradition."¹⁸ The rise of fascism and antisemitism made inroads on the earlier modernizing movement within Judaism and no longer was Christ a subject for intellectual or artistic consideration, as Jews

turned away from their embrace of Jesus in the face of the Nazi genocide implying that the outburst of rage and violence unleashed against the Jews in Europe once again tainted the figure of Jesus with the stain of Jewish as in earlier times...¹⁹

Chagall remained one of the few cultural figures who continued to use Jesus as "an iconic image of Jewish martyrdom"²⁰ in the course of and after the Second World War.

Chagall's work preserves for us an image of the "Jewish Jesus" that was salient in some circles of modern Jewish

¹⁶ Karl A. Plank, "Broken Continuities: Night and White Crucifixion" in *The New Christian Century*, Nov. 4, 1987, 964.

¹⁷ Jonathan Wilson, xi.

¹⁸ Plank, 964.

¹⁹ Hoffman, 252.

²⁰ Ibid.

culture before the Holocaust. Chagall's Jesus is "a Jewish Jesus who would not have understood himself in any way existing beyond the boundaries of a normative Judaism of his time... ." ²¹ His paintings illustrate for us the Jesus of history, the "Jewish Jesus" who was to become a central impetus of late 20th century Christian theology. There has been a tendency throughout Christian history to extract Jesus from his context and to forget that the gospels referred to him as rabbi. Following centuries of such de-Judaization, "scholars have not only put the picture of Jesus back into the setting of first-century Judaism; they have also rediscovered the Jewishness of the New Testament... ." ²² Chagall's works help put a face on this reclaimed part of Christianity.

Chagall's burial in France was an ecumenical event. He was buried in Saint-Paul-de-Vence's Catholic cemetery, in a plot donated by the mayor of the town. Chagall had asked for a burial without religious rites. Yet a man unknown to anyone present stepped out from among the trees and recited Kaddish, the Jewish prayer for the dead. ²³

Jacob Epstein (1880-1959)

Epstein was born into an orthodox Polish-Jewish family that had emigrated to New York City. They lived on the lower east side of the city, in an area that was teeming with people from nearly every corner of the globe. This exotic variety of ethnicities and races is reported to have fascinated Epstein from an early age. As a child Epstein was made to attend lengthy synagogue services on a regular basis and he also had a *bar mitzvah*. However, he did not like organized religion and described himself as follows: "Certainly I had no devotional

feelings, and later, with my reading and free-thinking ideas, I dropped all practice of ceremonial forms." ²⁴ Nonetheless, he remained identified as a Jew throughout his life and maintained his own form of religiosity, not some abstract form of spirituality, but one in which biblical themes were important as is reflected in the themes he chose to sculpt. Although, as will be discussed later, he often used non-conventional primitive sculptural forms in his religious sculptures, this was not an effort to side-step Judaeo-Christian spirituality, which remained an important theme for him throughout his life.

Epstein was an innately religious man, although he subscribed to no organized religion. He read the Bible, both the Old Testament and the new, all through his life and he grappled with the search for significance... . ²⁵

The world in which Epstein grew up was very different from the *shtetl* of Chagall's youth. In 1886, when Epstein was six years old, a group of young idealistic Christian reformers, moved to the lower East Side of New York to help educate and expose the youth there to a wider cultural context. This contact "freed [the children] from the strictures of a closed orthodoxy" and opened them to the "vigorous Yiddish culture of the intelligentsia of Polish Jewry." ²⁶ It is not inconceivable that he had some contact with the sorts of debates about Judaism's relationship to Christianity and Jesus that were on-going at the time.

Epstein moved to Paris in 1902 to pursue his artistic education. There he met and was influenced by a number of avant-garde artists and, like them, he rebelled against 'pretty'

²¹ J. Wilson, 2.

²² Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997, 19.

²³ J. Wilson, 215.

²⁴ Jacob Epstein, *Let There Be Sculpture: The Autobiography of Jacob Epstein*. London: The Reader's Union, Ltd., 1942, 7.

²⁵ June Rose, *Demons and Angels, A Life of Jacob Epstein*, NY: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2002, 118-19.

²⁶ Rose, 22.

art. Characteristic of the avant-gardes, he was drawn to primitive art, including African art, because, in his words, "African work opens up to us a world hitherto unknown, and exhibits characteristics that are far removed from our traditional European rendering of form in Greek, in Gothic or in Renaissance traditions."²⁷ Primitive art, for Epstein, opened new avenues of expression, but he was not so caught up in rebellion that he was willing to discard traditional forms. He maintained a respect for these, and as his words indicate, was critical of those who had chosen to demean what had come before: "In the reaction against European sculpture, the newly enlightened are inclined to declare European, Greek, and Egyptian sculpture insipid and meaningless. This is a great error."²⁸ Epstein went on to become a serious collector of primitive art, with "an obsession to possess it which led him eventually to own the finest collection of African and Pacific art in Europe."²⁹

Epstein was a prolific sculptor and over his lifetime his works included 450 portrait bronzes, for which he is best-known, and 50 large carvings which were received mixed reviews. His first statue of Christ, *The Risen Christ*, stands over seven feet in height. It was done between 1917 and 1920..

As Epstein reports it, the initial inspiration for *The Risen Christ* came to him while he was working on another project:

...I began it as a study from Bernard Van Dieren (a friend) when he was ill. Watching his head, so spiritual and worn with suffering, I thought I would like to make a mask of him. I hurried home and returned with clay and made a mask

²⁷ Epstein, 189.

²⁸ Epstein, 190.

²⁹ Rose, 78.

which I immediately recognized as the Christ head...I saw the whole figure of my 'Christ' in the mask....³⁰



The Risen Christ

Epstein interprets this episode as a sort of mystical experience and compares it to that of the author Turgenev, who while standing in a crowd felt the presence of Christ in the man next to him. Epstein's interpretation reveals conversancy with Christian religious and spiritual traditions, as well as the New Testament, as he goes on to further compare his own experience with Christ with that of the disciples' recognition of Christ in a stranger on the road to Emmaus.³¹

Epstein's service in the British army during the first World War was a very distressing experience and he ended up hospitalized with some sort of a break-down. Richard Cork considers the *Risen Christ* to contain some autobiographical component:

³⁰ Epstein, 104.

³¹ Ibid.

There is nothing triumphal about this resurrection. With a gaunt and etiolated body, Christ emerges from death in a state of somber stillness. He scarcely seems to have recovered from his own martyrdom...Although he head was based on the ailing Dutch composer Bernard van Dieren...the sculptor's own traumatic experience in the army surely informs *Risen Christ* as well....³²

It was Epstein's aim to create a Christ that would convey the horror of the war that he had experienced. Of this Christ Epstein wrote, "It stands and accuses the world for its grossness, inhumanity, cruelty, and beastliness, for the World War and for the new wars..."³³ For Epstein, *The Risen Christ* was prophetic and as he wrote in his later years:

I should like to remodel this 'Christ'. I should like to make it hundreds of feet high and set it up on some high place where all could see it and where it would give out its warning ...to all lands... 'Shalom, Shalom' must be still the watchword between man and man.³⁴

Despite Epstein's hopes, the *Risen Christ* was too radical a departure from convention and was not well received by parts of the viewing public. Difficulty in accepting Epstein's use of primitive forms is revealed in the critical review of one Father Vaughan:

...I felt ready to cry out with indignation that in this Christian England there should be exhibited the figure of a Christ which suggested to me some degraded Chaldean or African, which wore the appearance of an Asiatic-American or Hun-

Jew...I call it positively wicked and insulting to perpetrate such a travesty of the Risen Christ.³⁵

However the potential of the *Risen Christ* to transform the image and understanding of Christ was understood by some of the public as revealed in the humorous assault of a contemporary writer on the critique of the just-quoted Father Vaughan. Referencing the cookie-cutter quality of existing images of Christ, this writer makes the comment: "Father Vaughan will find his Christ in every Roman Catholic Church in the land and in all the shops that furnish them..."³⁶



Ecce Homo

Ecce Homo (1934-35), Epstein's next Christ, was his biggest carving and in some way resembles the god of an indigenous religion. What Epstein wanted to convey in this work was "...a symbol of man, bound, crowned with thorns and facing with a

³² Richard Cork, *Jacob Epstein*, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999, 41-42.

³³ Epstein, 103,

³⁴ Epstein, 105.

³⁵ Father Bernard Vaughan in *The Graphic*, February 14, 1920, cited in Epstein, 107.

³⁶ Cited in Epstein, 109.

relentless and over-mastering gaze of pity and prescience our unhappy world...".³⁷ Like *The Risen Christ*, *Ecce Homo* was met with contemporary criticism, although some contemporaries were able to grasp the possibilities of seeing and understanding that *Ecce Homo* opened to viewers. As one favorable reviewer of the time assessed the value of this work that departed so radically from convention, "There was much sentimentality and clap-trap to be cleared away from the idea of religious art...".³⁸ *Ecce Homo* was never sold and eventually found a site in 1969 in the ruins of Coventry Cathedral "where it still can be seen in all its power...in a setting that resonates with tragic history and the inhumanity of man to man which had prompted *The Risen Christ* after the first World War".³⁹



Consummation Est

Epstein found the inspiration for his next Christ, *Consummation Est*, while listening to the 'Crucifixus' section of Bach's *B Minor Mass*. The way he described his recognition of the figure in the block of marble from which it was to be carved,

³⁷ Epstein, 147.

³⁸ From *The Spectator*, March 15, 1993 cited in Epstein, 152.

³⁹ Rose, 194.

"I see the figure complete as a whole,"⁴⁰ is another instance of the intuitive-spiritual component in Epstein's mode of working, that was also evident in the creation of *The Risen Christ*. As had been the case with his two previous Christ sculptures, *Consummation Est* received scathing criticism from some clergy and, in particular, from Roman Catholic journalists.⁴¹ The sculpture is now housed in the Scottish Gallery of Art.⁴²

The post-World War II climate was better for Epstein. By then, public anti-Semitism had become unacceptable, and many cathedrals and churches had been damaged in the bombings and were in need of reconstruction. Epstein was commissioned to do a Christ for the Llandaff Cathedral—the Llandaff Christ or *Christ in Majesty* (1954-55).



Christ in Majesty

⁴⁰ Epstein, 154.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴² Rose, 276.

The architect on the reconstruction project of the cathedral had written to Epstein asking if he would have an interest in sculpting "a great figure of Christ Reigning from the Cross".⁴³ In contrast to the vulnerability and woundedness of *The Risen Christ*, this "Christ was conceived as Pantocrator in the spirit of Byzantine mosaics...".⁴⁴ In the 1970's, Riverside Church in New York City acquired Epstein's original plaster cast for *Christ in Majesty*, which now gold-leafed, hangs in its magnificence, in the back of the main sanctuary.

In addition to his Christs, Epstein also sculpted two major works of the Madonna and Child, a 1927 work which was donated in 1959 to Riverside Church and a second one that was commissioned as part of the reconstruction of the Convent of the Holy Child on Cavendish Square in London.



Madonna and Child for reconstruction of Convent of the Holy Child, London

⁴³ Rose, 255.

⁴⁴ Richard Buckle, *Jacob Epstein, Sculptor*, London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1963, 385.

The nuns at this convent had planned on hiring a Catholic sculptor, but architect Louis Osman held out for Epstein, whom he felt was the only sculptor capable of doing justice to the architectural design. Epstein is reported to have been very humble in his dealings with the nuns and is reported to have made the following comment: "Short of baptism I don't mind listening to them."⁴⁵ This arrangement work out well and the sculpture was warmly received by the convent.⁴⁶

Epstein also sculpted *St. Michael and the Devil* for Coventry Cathedral from 1955-58. He was the choice of architect Basil



St. Michael and the Devil

Spence and this choice was supported by the bishop of the cathedral. Still, a reconstruction committee member protested that Epstein was Jewish, to which the architect, Spence, is reported to have replied, "So was Jesus Christ".⁴⁷ Epstein was questioned about his religious beliefs in the course of dealing

⁴⁵ Rose, 247.

⁴⁶ Buckle, 350.

⁴⁷ Rose, 264.

with the cathedral hierarchy and his reply was, "My tendency has always been religious" adding, "most great sculpture is occasioned by faith..."⁴⁸ Despite the intimate familiarity Epstein, at times, displayed with the Christian faith, one writer's assessment of Epstein's connection to Christianity was that "Epstein's visual imagination was fired by the Christian story, but it seems clear that for him the divine spark might take many forms".⁴⁹

Epstein died on August 18, 1959 and his burial six days later, like that of Chagall, was an ecumenical event. Despite the fact that Epstein died a Jew who had kept his tallis and menorah,⁵⁰ the Dean of Canterbury Cathedral performed the ceremony. Later that year, on November 10th, there was a memorial service for Epstein at St. Paul's Cathedral in London, and the plaster cast of his *Christ in Majesty* hung on the wall during the service. Canon C.B. Mortlock gave an incredible eulogy, finishing with the words:

...If we ask how it was that a boy born and bred in the Jewish faith and never embracing any other, should become the interpreter of the sublime mysteries of our religion there can be no clear answer. Such things belong to the inscrutable wisdom of God...⁵¹

Impact of the Work of Chagall and Epstein

Why Jewish artists choose to express themselves within the idiom of Christian iconography has been a matter of interest and curiosity for many. David Roskies in his book *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish*

Culture, theorizes that perhaps it is because of the second commandment, the prohibition of graven images, and the fact that "...synagogue art...had never developed into a cumulative self-conscious tradition...",⁵² that some modern Jewish artists have turned to Christian imagery as a vehicle for conveying their spiritual concerns. However, it is also important to include historical factors and precedents, such as the focus on Christ in the period of modernization of Judaism, as discussed in this paper, when trying to reach an understanding of the choice of Christ as a subject for Jewish artists.

Neither Chagall nor Epstein used Christian iconography in its traditional, expectable way. Chagall's Christ was not a redemptive figure, but stood a victim on the cross surrounded by chaos and suffering. Chagall was not simply recycling a Christian symbol, but using it in a new way that "...creates an intense interplay of religious expectation and historical reality that challenges our facile assumptions."⁵³ Chagall changes the meaning of the cross, which has helped both Christians and Jews to see it in a different way. Referring to *White Crucifixion*, Plank spells out the fruit of Chagall's dialogue with Christian symbols, showing a major way in which Chagall enriched the meaning of Christ and his cross, thereby opening new vistas of theological understanding.

...expressions of Jewish anguish distinctly not our own return us to the meaning of the cross in its most powerful form. The Jewish testament enables us to see anew what centuries of resurrection enthusiasm have obscured in our own tradition: the fractured bond between God and the world".⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Ibid., 265.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Cited in Buckle, 420.

⁵² Roskies, 275.

⁵³ Plank, 963.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 966.

The transformation in the Christ-image catalyzed by Chagall is not only important for Christians, but Jews as well. Chagall, in his own ways was continuing the work of the earlier Jewish modernizers who, in their quest for the Jewish Jesus, sought to create a place for Jesus within Jewish understanding and theology.

...It is only in the work of Marc Chagall...that the crucifixion is wholly transformed into a central Jewish icon. No other Jewish artist went as far as Chagall in inscribing the figure of Jesus and the crucifixion into the canon of modern Jewish culture."⁵⁵

Epstein's sculptures offended the sensibilities of many in the very proper England of his time. He was aware of the conservatism of believers concerning the symbols of their faith as is revealed in his statement :

Today Ecclesiastical authorities fight shy of any work which shows any religious intensity of feeling, and merely wish for innocuous religious 'furniture' that will not disturb the mind of the beholder."⁵⁶

Yet, Epstein was a man of intense feeling who did not hold back from injecting his passion into his religious works. Although, as has already been described in this paper, much of Epstein's public had difficulty accepting the novelty of his work, some contemporaries did grasp the significant transformational potential of Epstein's art. That Epstein's original interpretations were recognized as bringing new life to a religious art that had become moribund, is reflected in these comments from reviewers of the time:

⁵⁵ Hoffman, 251

⁵⁶ Epstein, 102.

...The great difficulty which has faced religious artists in Europe is that our natural tradition for expressing religious feeling is utterly used up and dead...there was much clap-trap and sentimentality to be cleared away from the idea of religious art....⁵⁷

The point is that several hundreds....of people who will go to see a Christ will come away with the shock of recognition that, although they had never imagined such a Man of Sorrows, this strange embodiment of a traditional figure has impressed them deeply. So they will discover what art can do...they may feel...that civilization itself depends .on the possibility of achievements like Epstein's Christ."⁵⁸

The claim was made by one contemporary clergyman, that Epstein's Christs even had the capacity to expand Christians' understanding of the Gospel:

In his daring figure of the Christ, Mr. Epstein has broken with the tradition of Christian art...It must be admitted at once that this Christ would never make sense of the Gospel as a whole...Yet there is another figure in the Gospel, and the value of this great work lies in the insight which has led the artist to interpret this other strand in the story..."⁵⁹

Implications for Contemporary Jewish-Christian Dialogue

Contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue is prevalently understood as a post-Holocaust phenomenon, with little awareness of the lively Jewish debate and dialogue about Jesus and the Cross that ensued from the late 18th through the

⁵⁷ Anthony Blunt in *The Spectator*, March 15, 1935 cited in Epstein, 152.

⁵⁸ Jon Middleton Murry in *The Nation*, February 12, 1920, cited in Epstein, 257-8.

⁵⁹ The Rev. Edward Shillito in *The Sunday Times*, February 12, 1920, cited in Epstein, 152.

early 20th centuries. This Yiddish modernism, "lived a tragically curtailed existence,"⁶⁰ dying when many writers "turned away from their embrace of Jesus in the face of the Nazi genocide."⁶¹ So, it is understandable that the general perception is that contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue largely began in the mid-twentieth century with the Vatican's *Nostra Aetate* and *The Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews*. However, the earlier efforts to narrow the divide between the two faiths do deserve attention and have a significant contribution to make to contemporary dialogue efforts.

Although the intense inquiry of Jews into the figure of Jesus characteristic of the Yiddish modernist dialogue no longer survives as an intact movement, the spirit of the enterprise still exists. There have been Jewish scholars, of whom Geza Vermes and Paula Fredriksen are two notable examples, who have written extensively about Jesus within the Jewish context.⁶²

Although the Jewish inquiry into Jesus has, for the most part, remained a scholarly enterprise, this is not universally true. Back in 1987, a Jewish author, Dan Bloom, wrote a children's story *Jesus for Jewish Children*.⁶³ He reports that he was asked why, as a Jew, he would want to write about Jesus? It was his experience that most of the resistance to his book came from within the Jewish community who did not consider Jesus a topic for Jewish consideration. Ironically, the book did

⁶⁰ Hoffman, 252.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Of this writer's own acquaintance, there is the young rabbi with a Ph.D. in New Testament from a prominent academic institution who was a popular teaching fellow in the New Testament courses in its divinity school.

⁶³ Jeff Berliner, "Jesus story for Jewish Children Raises Storm," *Chicago Sun Times*, Dec. 13, 1987, *Highbeam Research*, Oct. 12, 2009.

not raise protest in Israel, where school textbooks have long taught children about Jesus in a sympathetic way.⁶⁴

A distinction about interreligious dialogue drawn by the Catholic theologian Ewert Cousins is relevant, here. Cousins distinguishes between dialectic dialogue and what he terms "dialogic dialogue."⁶⁵ The former is the typical claim/counter-claim pattern of intellectual discourse that has characterized much of 20-21st century inter-religious dialogue. It can be polite and politically-correct or it can be vituperative, but it still typically involves psychological distance between the participants.

In contrast, Cousin's "dialogic dialogue" is a dialogue of depth, an "I-thou" encounter to employ Buber's terminology. This is a dialogue in which an individual meets another religion and then "passes over into the value consciousness of the other religion,"⁶⁶ and comes back with a new synthesis, a unique and personal understanding of the other religion. This was the dynamic behind the dialogue that both Marc Chagall and Jacob Epstein had with Christ and Christianity. The Christ that emerged from each of their dialogic encounters was unique and offered an expanded understanding of the central figure of Christianity to Christians and Jews alike. Their visual christologies, which in essence is what the work of both artists was, have been transformative for viewers, and hold the potential for interreligious healing.

The mind-set that gave Chagall and Epstein the freedom, as Jews, to do their Christological exploration, largely ended with the advent of the second World War when doors that had been

⁶⁴ Shmuley Boteach, "Discovering the Jewish Jesus," *Jerusalem Post Online*, Dec. 7, 2005, 15.

⁶⁵ Ewert H. Cousins, *Christ of the 21st Century*, NY: Continuum, 1998, 9.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 105

opened slammed shut in the face of the horrors of the Nazi atrocities.

Late in the 20th century, some of these doors have begun to reopen in the form of a renewed interest in the Jewish Jesus, both among Jews and Christians. Yet, how many contemporary Jewish laypersons would think of personally undertaking the in-depth grappling with the figure of Jesus or the relationship of Judaism to Christianity, such as is reflected in the work of Chagall and Epstein, that was prevalent earlier in the century? How many people, Jewish or Christian, even know that Jewish writers wrote plays about Jesus or that Jewish artists painted and sculpted Christ?

Yet, as Cousins points out, there is a need for in-depth, transformative, intimate grappling with the 'other', because talk will get us just so far. Chagall, Epstein and the other writers and artists formed in the crucible of 19th–20th century Jewish modernism have much to offer contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue, because they remind us of one way in which there was an effort to encounter the heart of the religion of the "other", that is so essential to interreligious dialogue. Chagall, Epstein and others took on the central figure of Christianity, Christ, and what emerged were works of transformative potential.

21st century Jewish-Christian dialogue needs to begin casting its nets wider in terms of how it understands dialogue. There is much that a renewed exploration of the works of the writers, poets and artists influenced by earlier Jewish modernism have to offer to contemporary Jews and Christians alike. Information about this period just does not show up in books on Jewish-Christian relations. Just one small instance is the best-selling book *Constantine's Sword*, in which author James Carroll spends some 600 pages clarifying the fact that he says has been forgotten by too many Christians, often with

tragic consequences, that Jesus was indeed a Jew. Yet, in this massive volume, there is just one tangential reference to anything to do with Jewish modernism. Apropos of the current paper, this was a mention of Chagall's *White Crucifixion*, of which Carroll writes: "Can the Christian imagination envisage Jesus as the Jewish artist Marc Chagall did, as a crucified figure saved from the indignity of nakedness not by a loincloth, but by a *tallit*, the fringed shawl worn by a Jew when praying?"⁶⁷ The answer to Carroll's rhetorical question would have to be "yes", because Christians as well as Jews have seen and been moved by Chagall's masterpiece. Who knows how many Christians and Jews, or people of any religious background, have come away from viewing *White Crucifixion* with a changed outlook on Christ? Perhaps, in the field of inter-religious dialogue, as elsewhere, the old adage holds true: a picture is worth a thousand words.

⁶⁷ James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword*, NY: Houghton-Mifflin, 2001, 101.