

Revisiting "Confrontation" After Forty Years

A Response to Rabbi Eugene Korn

Aryeh Klapper



Let me begin by saying that my experience with Jewish-Catholic conversation, gained largely as a member of the United Ministry at Harvard, does not approach that of Drs. Berger and Korn. My knowledge of recent and ancient Catholic doctrine, similarly, does not measure up to theirs, all the more so to Dr. Cunningham's. Finally, I was never privileged to learn from Rabbi Soloveitchik in person, unlike Drs. Berger and Korn, and I cannot claim comprehensive knowledge of his writings. My contribution to this discussion, accordingly, is largely as a representative of the generation which will determine whether Rabbi Soloveitchik's words survive beyond his living memory, and if yes, how they will be read and what they will mean. The evolution of my own views from my original presentation to this paper may be of interest in that regard. I can perhaps also serve as an example of what a fairly educated, open, and interested Orthodox Jew currently feels and thinks with regard to Catholicism.[\[1\]](#)

"Confrontation" has generally been understood as distinguishing sharply between cultural cooperation and theological dialogue between Jews and Catholics, endorsing the former (at least in principle) while rejecting the latter (at least in practice). Dr. Korn argues powerfully and at times inspirationally that Jewish-Catholic theological dialogue is currently desirable and perhaps even obligatory, albeit not without risks. Dr. Berger, while adding numerous cautions, does not rule it out under all circumstances.

I have much sympathy with both Dr. Korn's openness and Dr. Berger's caution, and it may be that the practical gap between the three of us is not large. However, I arrive at my conclusions via a different intellectual path, and even small differences may be very significant.

Dr. Korn's primary theses are:

1. that the restrictions "Confrontation" places on Jewish-Catholic dialogue should no longer be observed owing to changes in Catholic doctrine and attitudes
2. that Rabbi Soloveitchik himself would no longer insist on such restrictions, and
3. that in any case, Rabbi Soloveitchik set those restrictions as policy, rather than as law.

I will address these theses in reverse order.

Dr. Korn contends that "Confrontation" is a policy statement rather than a *psak*, or legal decision. His evidence that it is not a *psak* is that the language is English, and the terms used and mode of argument are entirely nonlegal. This is inarguable (although I question

whether the responsum of Rav Moshe Feinstein cited as contrast is, in fact, much different^[2]), but I submit that the rhetoric of presentation does not necessarily determine the status of the material. “Confrontation” may not be a halakhic responsum, but nonetheless either record or reflect a halakhic determination. And it was, I think, certainly taken by his students and the RCA as a *psak*. However, we have no formal written legal decision by Rabbi Soloveitchik, and as hearsay reports of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s opinions are notoriously unreliable, Dr. Korn is certainly within his rights to deny that Rabbi Soloveitchik’s halakhic opinion, if he had one, is relevant to contemporary discussion.

My sense is that this issue is a red herring. Let us grant for the moment that the Rav’s halakhic authority was absolute (within Modern Orthodoxy) in his lifetime, and let us even grant, far more problematically, that it remains so years after his passing. Any *psak* the Rav issued forbidding interfaith theological dialogue was a response to specific circumstances, and the heart of Dr. Korn’s argument is that circumstances have changed. No *psak* regarding one set of facts can bind us, any more than policy statements can, when the relevant facts have changed. I am therefore interested in whether “Confrontation” records a halakhic decision primarily because it raises the question of why the Rav chose not to write it as a *teshuvah*.

While it is true that the Rav rarely if ever published *teshuvot*, I’d like to suggest that in this case he had an excellent and specific reason for avoiding halakhic discourse. “Confrontation” is clearly aimed at least as much at a Catholic as a Jewish audience, and any halakhic discussion of Catholic-Jewish dialogue would perforce begin with a discussion of whether Catholicism is considered *Avodah Zarah*, or “alien worship”. Bringing that up would have been both impolite (as a response to an invitation to dialogue), and impolitic (as Catholicism had been a primary source of virulent anti-Semitism, and had played an at best ambiguous/ambivalent role in the Holocaust a mere two decades before “Confrontation” was written.)

I am willing to raise the issue of the halakhic status of Catholicism, albeit in passing, because I agree that Catholicism has in fact changed significantly since the writing of “Confrontation.” Dr. Korn gives an impressive list of changes in official Catholic theology. My own summary would be that over the past 40 years the Catholic church has engaged in a stunning and perhaps unprecedented act of mass *teshuvah*, of genuine repentance unmotivated by any external fear. The church was not defeated, but nonetheless reassessed its ways and theology almost wholly in response to a recognition of its own past evil. I agree with Dr. Korn that this is a development of extreme significance, of which Dr. Cunningham’s paper in this symposium is a moving instantiation.

At the same time, I am less confident in the comprehensiveness and especially permanence of this repentance than Dr. Korn. What one pope has done, another can put asunder – I will never forget Hirsh Goodman, in the August 2001 issue of Jerusalem Report, explaining that the peace of Oslo had become entrenched in Palestinian hearts to the extent that it was irreversible. The Vatican’s grudging and belated diplomatic

acceptance of the Israeli state is to my mind far from an acknowledgement of the Jewish right to our homeland. My strong sense is that an America-centric perspective dramatically overestimates the extent to which the new church theology about Jews has penetrated the actual church, both hierarchy and laity.



Nonetheless – the church as an institution, and particularly this Pope, of whom I am an admirer despite the occasional moral blindness of his Mideast policy, have engaged in a repentance of sufficient depth that I believe we as Jews are morally compelled to respond. The question is what form that response should take. Surely it should include the form we all agree that the Rav endorsed, and which, Dr. Korn correctly notes, the Modern Orthodox community has unaccountably and inexcusably ignored – to stand shoulder to shoulder with Catholics in the work of building a just society that upholds the dignity and worth of each of its members. Dr. Korn argues that it should also take the form of interfaith dialogue, and particularly of interfaith dialogue with regard to theology, and contends that the author of “Confrontation” would not disagree. This brings us to his reading of “Confrontation.”

“Confrontation” is clearly divided into two sections, the first of which provides a general philosophic exposition of religious being and the second of which sets up models and parameters of Jewish being in relation to Christians. The first section sets out three levels of human existence, labelled as unconflicted, conflicted, and double-conflicted. Unconflicted man is unaware of norms; conflicted man is aware of and finds meaning in norms, which justify his separateness from the natural world; double-conflicted man finds added meaning, perhaps holiness, in his relationship with G-d and the particular experiences that express and embody it^[3]. Jews are called to this double-conflictation, challenged to both participate in the general human conflictation, i.e. to impose the Divine norm on a normless world, and yet to remain apart from humanity with regard to their relationship with the Divine. Rabbi Soloveitchik fiercely critiques what he refers to as “single-conflictation philosophy”, which argues that Jews must choose either to be members of a common humanity or to remain utterly apart. The model for double-conflictation is marriage, in which men and women are, as per Genesis, both helpmates (*ezer*) and opposites (*k'negdo*).

The second section of “Confrontation” sets out four conditions for discussion with the Catholic Church. It analogizes the then-contemporary Jewish situation to that of Jacob going to meet his brother Esav, who, as the Rav interpretes the text, affirms the bonds of brotherhood while at the same time denying spiritual affinity. The same point is made via an analysis of Abraham’s self-description as *ger v'toshav*, stranger and sojourner.

Dr. Korn argues:

1. that the four conditions outlined in “Confrontation” are the Rav’s requirements for engaging in the second conflictation, which is between faith communities, not for engaging in the first conflictation, and that

2. central to those conditions is the idea that dialogue must be distinct from debate, with the former encouraged but the latter discouraged, and that
3. those conditions have now been met by the Catholic Church.

I will address those arguments seriatim, but some background is necessary first.

The premise of our discussion at the conference, and of Dr. Korn's paper, is that "Confrontation" in practice distinguished between cultural dialogue, which the Rav permitted and encouraged, and theological dialogue, which he discouraged or banned. This is taken as the concretization of the Rav's openness to commonality on the level of the first confrontation and rejection of it at the second, and at the time of the conference, I read the essay with that assumption. In this I think I was quite conventional. On rereading, with the stimulus of Dr. Korn's critique, it seems to me that such a distinction is not the conclusion of the essay, nor does it appear in the RCA statement published following the article, which was explicitly inspired by and I presume approved by the Rav^[4]. Rather, "Confrontation" demands that we engage in both confrontations, the second of which requires communication with the religious Other. "We are called upon to tell this community not only the story it already knows – that we are human beings, committed to the general welfare and progress of mankind, that we are interested in combating disease, in alleviating human suffering, in protecting man's rights, in helping the needy, *et cetera* – but what is still unknown to it, namely our otherness as a metaphysical covenantal community."

In other words, the second confrontation is in principle mandatory. Here I thank Dr. Korn again for correcting my reading, and regret again the absence of time for discussion at the oral presentation. At the time of the conference, I agreed completely with the point made by Dr. Atarah Twersky from the audience that the four conditions of "Confrontation" related to the first confrontation rather than the second. It now appears to me that this requires modification. The second section describes itself as setting out the conditions for "a confrontation of two faith communities"^[5], not the joint confrontation of those communities with the natural world. The question is whether that confrontation requires the type of theological dialogue Dr. Korn argues for.

Here we must note that the distinction between cultural and theological dialogue does appear explicitly in the article. However, it appears not in the conclusion but rather as part of the first and second conditions! There the Rav argues *inter alia* that as faith is incommunicable, the religious logos must not be the medium of communication between two faith communities. Communication should rather take place on a mundane, human, ethical, cultural, "secular" level. So we have an apparent paradox, for the Rav both mandates a confrontation of faith communities and at the same time appears to discourage or even forbid it.

Dr. Korn ably points out several other apparent paradoxes, or contradictions, both within "Confrontation" and between "Confrontation" and the Rav's actions and writings. How, for example, could the Rav, a man steeped in Christian theology,



who delivered the intensely personal confession “Lonely Man of Faith” to a Catholic audience, claim that the attempt to communicate religious experience across faith communities is worthless? When he analogizes the impossibility of communicating across faith communities to the impossibility of communicating within a faith community – does he mean that Orthodox Jews ought not talk about their faith to one another? Absurd! When he analogizes both to the impossibility of communication between individuals, and particularly between men and women – does he intend to forbid marriage? I would add that in “Lonely Man of Faith” he argues that it is precisely the experience of G-d which enabled Adam and Eve to break out of their monadic existences and form a community – why then, cannot Jews and Catholics do likewise?

To resolve these difficulties, Dr. Korn argues that:

R. Soloveitchik’s critics have misread him. His dismissal of religious dialogue as absurd does not refer to the personal expression of faith, but to proof or refutation of the grounds of faith. As an existentialist who believed that the deepest yearnings and satisfactions of human life were not intellectual, R. Soloveitchik maintained that the foundations of Jewish faith were located in the experience of the Jewish people, in the traditions of our patriarchs and in the passional life of individual Jews. What was absurd to him was any attempt at rational demonstration, scriptural analysis or logical deduction to prove or disprove faith. Perhaps this is why he frequently talked of Kierkegaard, but rarely of Anselm.

I fear that I still cannot agree with this reading, although I understand its grounds far better than I did at the oral presentation. Dr. Berger correctly notes that the distinction between debate and dialogue is unrelated to the argument about the incommunicability of experience, and in fact appears to contradict it. If the issue is debate, and power imbalances, what Dr. Korn elegantly describes as “a theological duel to the death that the Jews could not afford to win”, what relevance does the argument about the impossibility of communication have?

Dr. Berger’s own reading, however, seems to be subject to a variant of the same critique. Dr. Berger explains that the Rav declared theological conversation “out of bounds” because it presumed to enter a realm in which communication is impossible. He does not, so far as I can see, explain why the impossibility of ultimate success makes the attempt not worthwhile. After all, much of the Rav’s philosophy is built on a tragic vision of humanity ever-engaged in a Sisyphean effort to draw near to G-d the Wholly Other, knowing all the time that the closer we draw the more powerfully we are repelled^[6]. And I reiterate that rhetorically “Confrontation” mandates engaging in the second confrontation.

I suggested in my oral presentation as an alternative that Rav Soloveitchik believed that the existential chasm could be bridged, via G-d – but only by forming a community. And Rabbi Soloveitchik makes clear that his vision of community is one which creates a shared identity while preserving separate identities. His depiction of the marital community is rooted in the phrase “*ezer kenegdo*”, helper and opposer. The marital community is desirable because men and women cannot lose their genders, because

gender is irreducible. But Jews and Christians, Judaism and Christianity, are not irreducible. And so the result of community on the theological level, must, Rabbi Soloveitchik, argues, lead inevitably to the loss of individual identity. Judaism and Christianity should not marry at the theological level; to maintain the dynamic of *ezer k'negdo*, we join in the first confrontation, but maintain our separate identities with regard to the second. "However, our joint engagement in this kind of enterprise must not dull our sense of identity as a faith community. . . . If the debate should revolve around matters of faith, then one of the confronters will be impelled to avail himself of the language of his opponent. This in itself would mean surrender of individuality and distinctiveness".

Another way of putting it – Judaism and Catholicism develop their religious identities out of their respective experiences of G-d. Using that experience to build community will create shared experience, in other words shared identity, with no lines to preserve individuality.

What I suggest now is that the Rav makes a very subtle distinction here. He is of course opposed to debate, but he is also opposed to dialogue that blurs distinctiveness, that seeks to build theological community and blur distinct identity. His bete noire in this regard is the phrase "Judeo-Christian tradition". I do not agree with Dr. Korn that the Rav's dismissal of theological dialogue as absurd referred only to proof or refutation of the grounds of faith; this seems to me a very difficult fit with the Rav's rhetoric in the second condition about experience, logos and the like, for example: "The word of faith reflects the intimate, the private, the paradoxically inexpressible cravings of the individual for and his linking up with his Maker. It reflects the numinous character and the strangeness of the act of faith of a particular community which is totally incomprehensible to the man of a different faith community. Hence it is important that the religious or theological logos should not be employed as the medium of communication between two faith communities whose modes of expression are as unique as their apocalyptic experiences."

However, I do agree with Dr. Korn that the Rav did not dismiss the second confrontation as impossible, but rather, as noted above, mandated it..

The question is how we can formulate the path between this Scylla and Charybdis, whether we can find a dialogue which is neither debate nor community building. In other words, how can we communicate "our otherness as a metaphysical covenantal community" without employing the religious or theological logos?

In my oral presentation I said:

Dr. Korn argues against this – and I do not deny his right to disagree, but I do think this is a disagreement with rather than an interpretation of the Rav – that contemporary dialogue need not involve this shared identity. I completely fail to comprehend this; why is this dialogue so important if it doesn't change the participants? and it seems to me that his own paper undermines this claim. He is not afraid that we will dictate to the community of the many, yet he writes "I believe that *We Remember* is a beginning of the Church's confrontation with its role in the Holocaust. It is not its last word. Continued discussion,

reflection, and soul-searching are necessary” – what is this if not dictation? He is not afraid that we will trade theological favors. Yet the dialogue must take place under the condition that each side affirms the validity and incommensurable worth of the other, at least in non-eschatological times – what is this if not the trading of theological favors? Let me even grant that Catholicism has come to this recognition on its own – halakhic Judaism has not on its own reached this recognition with regard to Christianity, and if this is a precondition of dialogue, we are far from prepared to engage in it. Perhaps we should – I am open to the claim that the ongoing Catholic repentance should cause us to reevaluate our attitudes – but such reevaluation cannot be required if the dialogue is to be genuine. We have much internal dialoguing to do first.

It seems to me now that the first critique was somewhat unfair – the Rav himself believed that the second confrontation involved telling the other that we are other without changing ourselves. I note, however, that while the Rav may have believed that it was important for us to listen to the other faith community as well as talk to it, he makes no mention of this in the essay^[7]. I would also say that in the essay he seems to suggest that the dialogue should be limited to explaining that we are other, rather than how we are other. It seems to me most likely that the second confrontation is described from our perspective – we need to tell the other because telling another is an important aspect of our identity, not because we wish to find shared solace or to change them. Here again Dr. Korn’s rhetoric about why specifically Catholics should be our dialogue partners seems to me at variance with the Rav’s.



I note finally, to turn to the practical arena, that as I understand the Rav there is a significant difference between a dialogue of individuals and a dialogue of institutions. The Rav responded to an official Catholic invitation to engage in official dialogue; private dialogues, where the goal is human rather than religious community, may be entirely different. I note also that "Lonely Man of Faith" refers to an experience of the Divine that the Rav claimed was generically human rather than particularistically Jewish, and so did not implicate his religious identity. Finally, as Dr. Berger notes, there may well be times when some greater good justifies some degree of risk. For example, the process of Catholic *teshuvah* may require an understanding of Judaism to get past or appreciate the importance of particular issues, and that understanding should generally not be deliberately withheld. My wife Deborah adds that the universal availability of English Judaica means that our refusal to engage others merely prevents us from shaping knowledge they already have access to.

At the same time, I note again that halakhic Judaism has not gone quite as far as official Catholicism in our recognition of the other’s values, and accordingly it behooves us not to dictate how Catholicism regards us theologically, so long as its theological positions do not infringe on our human and religious rights. A mutual non-proselytizing pact is highly desirable, but Orthodox rabbis are not likely to stop seeing conversion from Judaism to Catholicism as apostasy, even if – as I know and greatly appreciate - some priests express their understanding for the reverse case. Perhaps this asymmetry should give us pause, but that should be the topic of an internal rather than an external dialogue.

I repeat in conclusion my endorsement and encouragement and strong support for Dr. Korn's call for us to fulfill Rabbi Soloveitchik's imperative that we engage in the human confrontation side by side with men of good will among all religions, and I agree that the ongoing Catholic *teshuvah* is one reason among many that we should look to Catholics in particular in our efforts to fulfill this. In the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, author of *The Dignity of Difference* – “rather than engaging in dialogue, let us become friends”. Let us become good friends, even best friends, and may our joint efforts produce a better world.

[1] In the oral version of this paper, I began by stating forcefully my disagreement with Dr. Korn's reading of "Confrontation," but without providing specific textual grounds for that disagreement. Dr. Korn has justly criticized both my forcefulness and my lack of evidence; with regard to the former, I apologize, especially as rereading has convinced me that I overstated the textual difficulties faced by his thesis. The latter was a decision forced by the time constraints I was under, and I happily take advantage of this opportunity to correct it. I had anticipated a more-discussion friendly format at the original panel.

[2] I do not attach any significance for our purposes, however, to Rabbi Soloveitchik's failure to respond to Rabbi Feinstein's invitation to join him in a proposed halakhic ban. Rabbi Feinstein clearly intended a far more sweeping ban than Rabbi Soloveitchik could have considered endorsing, including manifestations of the first confrontation that Rabbi Soloveitchik strongly endorsed!

[3] It seems to me likely that the Rav here is glossing Mishnah Avot 3:14, which reads in relevant part “Beloved is humanity, for it is created in the image of G-d . . . Beloved are the Jews for they are called ‘children of G-d’ . . .”

[4] It does however seem to appear in a 1966 RCA statement cited by Dr. Korn, which I have not seen outside his citation.

[5] The Rav throughout relates to Catholicism as if it were the universal non-Jewish faith community, for reasons that are not at all clear to me.

[6] And the rhetoric here seems consciously to recall the rhetoric of those other pieces.

[7] This relates, of course, to the broader issues of “chosenness” and uniqueness of covenanting.