ABRAHAM’S FAITH AND ISRAEL’S DIGNITY
Two Kind Jewish Men:
A Sermon in Memory of the Shoah

for Paul Davidovits and Gene Borowitz,
two kind Jewish men

Being no authority on either Judaism or the Holocaust, dear friends in God, I must ask you to let me fashion this sermon out of personal recollections and reflections. But what prompts me to speak at all is something else. Ever since I came to the United States, in 1968, in the course of twenty-four years in two Jesuit universities, several professional societies, and countless occasions of one kind or another, Jewish colleagues and friends have become a regular as well as a most enriching feature of my life. I would not be speaking to you today without that experience.

I

Before 1968, I had known only two Jews, but at least I had known them at close range. Their names were Samuel Schuijer and Enrico Morpurgo.

Mr. Schuijer, a Dutchman born in The Hague, was a fairly well-known, all-round musician. He became my first violin teacher in the spring of 1939, when I was eight years old; he was a firm, kind old man of sixty-six, who taught music in a bare room that had a few yellowed posters of past performances on the walls. There was also a grand piano and a puzzling little tin box on the door-post, which I now know was a mezuzah. Besides my violin lessons, I vividly remember that he once stopped by our home to cancel class; he was wearing, just below the left lapel of his overcoat, that awful yellow Star of David with the word “Jew” at the center. “I don’t want to get you into trouble,” he said, so he refused to come in, but my mother at least succeeded in getting him to have a cup of coffee with her at
the front door. (Not even that courtesy was wholly risk-free: a next-
door neighbor’s brother was a captain in the German army.) In late
November of 1942, he was picked up. I will never forget the dread-
ful late afternoon of Wednesday, November 25, a few days before my
father’s birthday, when I found myself walking back home in tears,
having discovered that the front door of Mr. Schuijer’s apartment,
where I had gone for my weekly lesson, had been secured by means
of a seal whose significance we had come to understand only too
well. He had been taken to Westerbork (where Etty Hillesum was
just then writing her letters and diaries). In early December, one of
those ominous cattle-car trains took him to Auschwitz, where he was
killed on the day of his arrival, December 11, 1942. I was twelve by
then.

I was more than twice that age when I first met Professor
Morpurgo, an Italian Jew from Venice, who was an expert on the
history of the clock; I was a Jesuit seminarian a little too emphatically
attired in clerical black, doing doctoral studies in English and Italian
literature at the University of Amsterdam. He was easily the most virtu-
oso teacher I have ever had; he never brought a book to class, and
recited large swaths of prose and poetry by heart. He taught me the
survey of Italian literature and sat on my comprehensives board. Unlike
Mr. Schuijer, Professor Morpurgo had survived the war. His life had
been saved by a combination of kindness and shrewdness: he had
spent the war studying, in a Catholic monastery in Italy, dressed as a
Dominican priest. Those Italians. They are made neither for high
principle nor for heroic action, except, perhaps, in the fantasy world
of opera. But in those ugly war years, many of them quietly managed
to overcome boundless evil by doing a lot of carefully aimed good, of
the kind that succeeded in eliciting no further violence from the
oppressor. Theirs was a courage of the everyday kind, but it did take
care of the neighbor in need, like the giving of a drink of water to a
weak person, of which Jesus says that those who do it will not forego
their reward.

II

The very different destinies of these two very different men give
rise to different responses. What I hope to suggest to you is that these
responses meet in a common theme.
Let me start my meditations with Professor Morpurgo. The kindness that had saved his life—he told me about it some time in 1958 or 1959—had been instrumental in making a free, kind, compassionate man of him. One day, at the classroom door, he took me by the right sleeve and pulled me aside. *Lei mi pare stanco*, he said, you look tired. And before I could put together a coherent little answer in Italian, he continued, *Lo so, lo conosco, anche I Domenicani l'hanno; lavorano troppo:* “I know, I understand it, the Dominicans have it, too; they overwork.” End of conversation. From that moment on, I had an older professor-friend—an agnostic Jew who was both demanding and capable of conveying, in the most implicit of ways, a deep appreciation of my vocation. I remember wondering why he did not seem angry at the Holocaust, which had kept him confined for three or four years, in an alien, Catholic garb; if he had been, what could I have said by way of response? But he never brought it up; it probably did not occur to him to complain; for all his artistic intensity, he always struck me as a thankful, contented man.

Many years later, when I was going through Viktor Frankl’s *Man’s Search for Meaning*, and even later, when I read some of Elie Wiesel’s writings and especially Abel J. Herzberg’s *Amor Fati*, I began to wonder. What struck me then for the first time was a deep similarity in tone: Professor Morpurgo, who had been safely sheltered in a religious community, had sounded very much like these survivors, who had lived through the horror of the death-camps. Could it be that there is a capacity for human wisdom in us that can be activated both by Morpurgo’s quiet dependence on the resourceful kindness of others and by Frankl’s and Wiesel’s and Herzberg’s forced engagement with the murderous brutality of Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen? Is there an affinity between humanity acquired by enduring human cruelty and humanity acquired by experiencing human compassion? And consequently, could it be that the unspeakable atrocity of the Shoa and the measureless suffering it inflicted is *not* in a class all by itself? That is, could the Shoa not be the last word? Let us probe further.

IV

We turn to Mr. Schuijer. What was he like once he was in the transit camp, and on his way to death, in the train, and at Auschwitz? We
will never know. But Etty Hillesum’s diary and letters from Westerbork have preserved for us a few infinitely touching sentences from one of its inmates, Philip Mechanicus:

I’ve grown softer here in this camp, everyone has become the same for me, they are all like blades of grass, bending to the storm, lying flat under the hurricane.

And:

If I survive this time, I shall emerge a more mature and deeper person, and if I die, then I shall die a more mature and deeper one.

Everyone has become the same, blades of grass in a hurricane. A softer, more mature, and deeper person. Friends, is this the still, exquisite voice of universal kindness—of a love that understands both goodness and evil and, as a result, does not try to defeat evil, just like God, who gives sun and rain to both the just and the unjust? Let’s rub our eyes, my friends. Can kindness and mature humanity flower in the face of human heartlessness, even when it takes the mad proportions of genocide?

Before we indulge in theoretical speculation about the root of this unexpected, oh so delicate flower, let us observe that it is noticed and appreciated only from close up. None outside the camps knew of it. Inside the camps, a prisoner’s deep humanity would occasionally infuriate the brutes that ran the camps, but it mostly escaped their notice. To this day, rage, fury, and indignation, no matter how principled and righteous, have no access to deep human maturity. It was and is and remains the secret—the tender secret—of the fellowship of the suffering and the long-suffering.

Abel Herzberg, who survived Bergen-Belsen, tells the story of Labi, the young schoolmaster from Benghazi in Libya. In 1942, about to lose the campaign in North-Africa, the Nazis had, with the idiocy of principle, moved the Jewish communities of Tripoli, Tobruk, and Benghazi, first to Italy and from there to the death-camps in Poland. Jews were not to be exterminated locally; they all had to be part of the Final Solution, and that was supposed to take place in the camps, not on the battlefield.
Being from North Africa, Labi is a Jew of the old stamp, older than any European Jew. No wonder he starts a harmless little school, where he teaches the children to sing, in Hebrew:

The people of Israel lives,
The people of Israel lives.

And:

Blessed we are, blessed we are!
How lovely is our lot,
How fair is our portion,
We are blessed, we are blessed!

Labi’s fellow-prisoners explain to him that the food-laws are suspended in the camp. Labi still refuses to eat the only soup available—the one that has bits of horse-meat floating in it. He quietly whispers, “There is a difference between clean and unclean.”

Here we have it, my friends, in the midst of a hurricane of mercilessness and violence and death, the true Israel—the combination of the praise of God and the Law of God: Todah and Torah. Awe-filled faith in a God both faithful and inscrutable beyond compare—the faith that begets a quiet, assured humanity. That humanity does not demand that the world in which it finds itself be perfect; it knows and accepts, quietly and without drama, that we live in a mixed world, in which some things are (and always will be) kosher and some tref, in order to convey that some things are (and always will be) lawful and some forbidden, that some things are (and always will be) good and some perverse. A world, too, where the wheat is mixed in with the weeds, and the just are mixed in with the unjust, and the good people with the evil-doers, and where goodness and virtue will never quite succeed in being victorious, either in individuals or in communities. A world, therefore, in which unjust suffering borne in patience is not infrequently a sign of intimacy with God.

This kind of world needs mercy more than anything else; hence, it is measured by it. We discover the true measure of the shame involved in the Shoa, not in our rage and indignation at the crassness of human crime, but when we are struck by the pity of it all: such deep faith and
such quiet devotion to justice snuffed out! We kill the kindness we should cherish and cultivate!

V

Kindness can take incongruous shapes. Professor Morpurgo’s survival through the kind, unobtrusive services of Italian friars who have remained anonymous is oddly (you might even say perversely) reminiscent of the “Schindler Jews” (the Schindlerjuden)—the people behind the story so memorably told by the Australian novelist Thomas Keneally, in his book Schindler’s List. A German born in 1908 in Zwittau, in the Czechoslovakian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Oskar Schindler was an engineer by training. By the time the second World War began, he had become known for a well-advertised taste for the best in food and drink, in fast motorbikes, and, yes, in fast women. He was also running a few businesses of his own, but he was distinguishing himself mainly by an ability to move around central Europe with the dubious ease of the man who finds it impossible to imagine that somebody might not like him and not get along with him. The only trait that seems out of character with all of this was his marriage, at the age of twenty, to Emilie, the daughter of a nearby gentleman farmer, a quiet, dignified, infinitely patient person, whose love he treasured and who remained faithful to her roguish husband all her life.

Between 1939 and 1945, the criminal vulgarity of the Nazis met its match in the blatant, unprincipled opportunism of this irresistible bon vivant. By dint of extraordinary swagger and bravura, Schindler succeeded in employing, right under the noses of the Nazis whose company he cultivated, as many Jews as he could in his enamel factories near Krakow and elsewhere, which he got classified as Nazi labor camps. By an amalgam of braggadocio, astuteness, and daring he succeeded in turning high-ranking SS-officers, whose sinister passions he understood from almost daily association, into accomplices; he then proceeded to hire hundreds of Jews away from the death camps, especially Auschwitz, and to smuggle them out to freedom—many of them outside Europe.

“Schindler’s camp in Brinnlitz,” an international Jewish organization testified after the war, “was the only camp in the Nazi-occupied territories where a Jew was never killed, or even beaten, but was always treated as a human being.” After the war, he was honored in Israel as
one of the Righteous, and invited to plant a carob tree along the Avenue of the Righteous at Yad Vashem. And in 1966, this cheerful double-dealer was recalled to West Germany to be awarded the Cross of Merit and a state pension by the German Federal Republic, and even a papal knighthood. For this, he had to be brought back from Argentina, where he had emigrated after the war to be a pelt farmer, along with twelve Jewish families, whose passage across the ocean he had paid. In 1974, he collapsed at his apartment in Frankfurt and died a few days later, mourned by Jews on every continent.

Some time after his death, his wife declared that her husband had done nothing remarkable before the war and nothing exceptional after. Yet within weeks of his death, this lifelong but undistinguished, seemingly unprincipled Catholic who had never lived without a mistress or two and who had become an ardent supporter of Hebrew University in Jerusalem got the wish he had shared with many of his Schindlerjuden: he was buried in the city of both War and Peace, Jerusalem, in the Catholic Cemetery just outside the South Wall. Deep down in his soul, he must have held on to something on which he refused to compromise: no high moral principle righteously professed, but a wordless faith maybe, and an un-self-conscious, un-self-righteous sense of justice, to support a practical conviction that Jews are not for abuse and killing any more than any other human beings.

VI

At this point, friends, allow me a few musings of my own. I have never been able to feel any violent rage or indignation at the Holocaust and its atrocity; I often used to wonder why. I do remember my revulsion when Rolf Hochhuth’s play The Deputy hit the stage. Hochhuth makes an acceptable enough theoretical case for the thesis that a public protest against the treatment of the Jews on the part of Pope Pius XII might have made an enormous difference, given his position of influence in Europe and in Nazi Germany; but he goes on to suggest that such a protest was simply incumbent upon him as the deputy of Christ, and that his failure to protest was an act of cowardice as well as cold-blooded calculation. I have often been embarrassed at my own distaste for Hochhuth’s thesis, and I used to wonder why. Incidentally, my problem has never been either an excessive devotion to the Papacy, or a poor sense of justice, or an incapacity for passion. Like any ordinary
Catholic, I know that some popes have been guilty of serious mistakes. I have always found Nazi-hunters like Simon Wiesenthal and, later on, Beate Klarsfeld fairly easy to understand and accept: the persistent search for criminals in hiding is part of our agreement to live in a world of laws, not expediency. And as for passion, I understand indignation. I was only fourteen when the war ended, but that made me old enough to have been affected for life. Now, fifty years after the war, I am still no stranger to rage. I confess that over the years I have uttered some harsh words to Germans who acted or sounded a little too much like the Germans we knew in the nineteen-forties, and just over twenty years ago, near the Heidelberg Schloß, a close friend had to restrain me physically to prevent me from jumping from behind the steering-wheel and taking after a hapless German parking guard who had needlessly yelled at me.

So I used to wonder, why have I never experienced any violent reaction to the Shoah? Over the years, I have come to a conclusion.

VII

Between them, I now think, kind, defenseless Mr. Schuijer and kind, compassionate Professor Morpurgo have inoculated me against raw rage as well as against the kind of principled, righteous indignation at the Shoah that young Hochhuth’s play celebrates and makes an effort to induce. Thanks to these two men, the Shoah, to me, for all its horror, has never become a cause. Thanks to them, it has remained a human fact; and human facts resist reduction to theory.

Why? Human facts are created and cherished and suffered in neighborliness, whereas causes and theories are made and upheld and refuted from a distance. There is an unholy affinity between distance and fury; absence obviously makes the heart grow, not only fonder, but also more enraged. I remember a difficult person I was friendly with at one time. A man of considerable talent and idealism, he was also discouragingly intolerant. He had a few preferred ways of countering those of us who even mildly questioned him and his doings. He would vehemently refer us to the writings of the young Marx (with which he had only a glancing acquaintance); he would go on about the murder of Allende (which had occurred in faraway Chile); and he would quote Nietzsche (whom he had scarcely read) to inveigh against what he called the prevailing “slave-mentality.” That is, he availed himself of
faraway causes and theories of undisputed righteousness to browbeat people right in front of him, by implicitly accusing them of not caring about the wrongs of the world. Deep down, I guess, he must have felt impotent and lonely: as impotent as the powerless and the overwhelmed and the abandoned who see no option other than that of conveying their offended sense of justice by means of the threat of violence; as impotent as the many little people in a Germany humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles, ready to run after a small man with a shrill voice and a large ego and a murderous theory, who was ready to find fault and to pass the suffering on and to take the impotence—his own and a whole nation’s—out on all of Europe, and above all on the Jews.

It is in human facts, my friends, that our thirst for violence and our appetite for faultfinding is quenched. For human facts are tender and make tender.

My personal link with the Shoah, I know, is flimsy indeed: what’s two elderly Jewish men, one dead and one a survivor, in comparison with the Shoah’s millions of silent Jewish dead and its twelve million anguished Jewish survivors, forced to be spectators at the Shoa from abroad or to remember it after the fact, many of whom have drawn the conclusion that it marks the end of any possibility of faith in Israel’s God—my God—the Lord of history and the God of mercy?

And what are those two in comparison with the countless Jews who suffered violence before the Shoah? This year marks the fifth centennial, not only of Columbus’s discovery of the New World in 1492, but also of the event that up until the Holocaust was regarded as the high point of Jewish suffering—the event that put an end to the most significant Jewish community of the Middle Ages: the expulsion of the Sephardis from Spain. There were Jews who stayed of course, but some hundred thousand of them were compelled to forswear their faith and adopt the Catholic religion. At the risk of their lives, many of these Jews continued to attend the synagogue in secret. To this day, every time the Kol Nidrei is sung or said before sundown during the service that opens Yom Kippur, to declare the annual dispensation from all vows, the Spanish persecution comes back to mind, when the Jews sang the Kol Nidrei text as a way of freeing themselves from the vows enjoined upon them by the Inquisition. And the evil did not stop there.
A cloud of suspicion continued to hang over the heads of the Jews (and, incidentally, of the many Moors who had not fled to North Africa before the armies of Ferdinand and Isabella) who had become Catholics and even their descendants, since they could not claim the purity of blood—the \textit{limpieza de sangre}—that marked the true, “old” Christians. In this way, my friends, five hundred years ago, it was Spanish Jewry’s turn to be the field of blades of grass lying low in a hurricane of unkindness. Again, what’s two kind, elderly Jewish men in comparison with those hundreds of thousands?

The answer is that two kind Jewish men are a human bond, a tenuous bridge of human kindness delicately but firmly leading to further human kindness; through them, thank God, I have been placed close enough to the Shoa to make it impossible for me to get stuck in distant rage or to resort to high theory to support indignation or to insist on determining who is to blame. Thank God for human kindnesses—the kindness shown to Professor Morpurgo by a handful of obscure Dominican friars and to the \textit{Schindlerjuden} by Oskar Schindler. Thank God, too, for the softness and the maturity and the depth of Philip Mechanicus and so many others in the camps, who never came back. They give us hope for a humanity renewed by kindness, in the name of the God whose self-revelation to Moses in chapters 33 and 34 in the Book of Exodus consists of two inseparable elements: the proclamation of the Ten Commandments calls us to responsibility, and the glorification of the divine Kindness and Compassion calls on us to be compassionate as our dear God is compassionate.

\textbf{VIII}

Friends, the \textit{Shoa} urges us to be on guard against all unkindness. Violence of every kind inures us to further violence, and makes us forever enamored of the kind of heroism that stirs the ego but dries up the source of life in us. Self-righteousness encourages us to equate everyday human resourcefulness and shrewdness with cowardice and to despise ordinary virtue; the righteous forget that real cowards are seldom gracious and often violent. Most forms of rage and indignation will make us desperate to see some kind of justice harshly done—say, by a furious Pius XII inflicting a mortal wound on the monster that went around ravaging Europe and the Jews, thus goading it on to further senseless ravage. What a deadly mess it was. What a horrible
waste of human life and talent, knowingly inflicted. But if we are to
dread the instincts that made the mess and caused the waste, we must
also dread the murderous instinct in ourselves.

This means, among other things, that all of us are to dread the
moment when we feel that we are in the right in regard to the
Holocaust. Who is entitled to feel right in the face of unspeakable
suffering? The Shoah is simply too appalling and painful an event for
anyone to have a right to claim to be right about it. This kind of
“being right” occurs, for instance, when we find ourselves coming to
the conclusion that the only true virtue at the time of the Shoah was
extraordinary virtue, and that particular persons other than those
who practiced ordinary virtue should have practiced it. “Being right”
also happens when we, today, inflict another indignity on the Shoah
and its victims: overstatement with an air of finality. Liars make a
habit of calling things unprecedented and historic only because they
know neither precedent nor history. We must resist the rhetoric of
those who use superlatives only because they are both ignorant and
convinced they are right. The Shoah has horrors all its own, but it is
neither better understood nor more deeply repented of by being
called history’s worst sin. God knows what we may do next, or what
has really happened in the past. And only God knows the ultimate
sin.

IX

Kindness enables conversion. Conversion on the part of us
Christians first. We cannot plead innocent. Our own unhealthy broth-
ers and sisters committed the sinful crime, and we are members of the
same body. We have to beg our Jewish brothers and sisters for mercy.
Part of our penance will be that we endure their anger and agree to
suffer whenever their despair about the Shoa should turn out to have
robbed them of their historic faith in God. Part of our penance will also
be that we will kindly but resolutely disagree with them when their
anxiety drives them into the overstatement that the Shoa is the unique
and final evil, the unforgivable sin.

Why? Among human persons, mercy given to people begging for
it is mercy only if it softens and matures the people who give it. If we
Christians do not implore the Jews for mercy, we will rob them of an
opportunity to be kind, and so encourage them to feel justified in
giving us only wrath. Thus our prayer for mercy can give growth in kindness and maturity to Jews. They need it; after all, they now share with the nations the dubious privilege we Christians have had for centuries: that of wielding weaponry that can kill. Now that we are united by the capacity for institutional violence, kindness and forgiveness must unite us even more deeply.

X

In the Art Institute in Chicago, where I live, hangs Marc Chagall’s *White Crucifixion*. It depicts Christ crucified surrounded by Jews killed, Jews hunted down, Jews driven around, synagogues burning, Torah-scrolls desecrated.

To a Jew, this is the world upside down: the cross, the traditional symbol of the pogroms, has become the emblem of compassion. For Christians, too, the tables are turned. Jesus is no longer (as even the Gospels depict him) the victim of Jewish rejection; he is on the side of the victims: the Jews. Naked and exposed, the picture of innocence, his only covering is the *talith*, the shawl worn by Jewish men at prayer; he has become the associate of the suffering Jews who have none but God to commit themselves to.

And so, my friends in God, may I end by suggesting that Jesus can unite us, Christians and Jews? We Christians think of his execution as history’s worst sin. But we do not claim to understand this dreadful sin down to the bottom, and consequently, our faith does not entitle us to profess the ugliness of the killing of Jesus in such a way as to suggest that other appalling historic sins are less deplorable by comparison. And in any case, we profess above all that the dying Jesus embodies God’s life-giving embrace of all of us sinners—an embrace that calls for universal reconciliation and kindness, not discrimination. Together, then, could we not all abandon ourselves, in worship, to the Compassionate God who has made us and who forever wishes to restore us? And together must we not recognize in one another the family features we have in common with all of humanity? Kind knows kind. Those who have eyes to see know the secret: humanity—all of humanity!—visibly, indelibly made in the image and likeness of the invisible God.
Notes


If Jesus, crucified, had remained gone and away, I would in all likelihood not have openly acknowledged the cross, for I would probably have covered it up, along with my Master. But with the resurrection coming after the cross, I am not ashamed to speak about it at length.¹

What is it to be a Jesuit? It is to know that one is a sinner, yet called to be a companion of Jesus was: Ignatius, who begged the Blessed Virgin to “place him with her Son,” and who then saw the Father himself ask Jesus, carrying his Cross, to take this pilgrim into his company.²

Preliminary: The Cross

Jews executed by stoning. In the Greek world, crucifixion was universally regarded as a barbarian import. For the Romans it became summum supplicium—the severest and worst form of execution.³

In the New Testament, the noun “cross” (Gk. stauros) occurs twenty-seven times.⁴ In twenty-two instances, a firm majority, the word is directly associated with Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ—an unsurprising fact given that the New Testament writings were produced by a far-flung network of small communities worshiping as alive, right in their midst, a Jew fairly recently executed by crucifixion.

Still, in the five remaining instances—all of them occurring in sayings attributed to Jesus—the noun is immediately associated not with Jesus, but with discipleship, and in a hypothetical sense: “if someone should wish to be a disciple, . . .” Of these five, three occur in synoptic parallels, combined with their apparent equivalents, “if someone should wish to save/lose his life, . . .,”—the latter phrase being also
found in the fourth gospel (Jn 12, 25). In the remaining two cases, presumably deriving from the sayings source known as Q, the cross is coupled with that other requisite of discipleship around Jesus: if you should wish to be a disciple of Jesus, “leave everything behind and pick up your cross” (Mt 10, 38-39 par. Lk 24, 25-27).

It seems unlikely that Jesus actually—i.e., historically—picked up his own cross; Simon from Cyrene was forced to do that (Mk 15, 21); only in the fourth gospel does he carry it for himself (Jn 19, 17). Historically speaking, did he pronounce those five sayings? There are good reasons to assume he did not. But the historical fact of Jesus’ crucifixion does make it easy to understand why “carrying one’s cross” should have become a pregnant Christian phrase. In fact, the Pauline corpus shows a number of other, expressive, very quotable phrases, no two of them identical, most of which can be confidently dated between 50 and 90 A.D.—i.e., older than (or at least as old) the gospels as we have them. Here they are: the cross must not be “voided” or “nullified”; “talk of the cross” is hard to take; “the cross’ scandal” has consequences; yet paradoxically, Christ’s cross is also a “boast”; and while Christ was dying to do the Father’s will to the point of “death on a cross,” some people are “enemies of Christ’s cross”; God has united two enemies of long standing—Jews and Gentiles—“in and by means of the cross”; thus, Christ’s “bloodied cross” has created peace; God has “posted on the cross the writ listing the charges against us” (1 Cor 1, 17-18; Gal 5, 11; 6, 12. 14; Phil 2, 8; 3, 18; Eph 2, 16; Col 1, 20; 2, 14). In this context, the verb “crucify” (Gk. stauro) is relevant as well, especially in the form “letting oneself be crucified” (Gk. staurthnai): Christ (not Paul!) let himself “be crucified out of weakness.” Even the author of the Book of Revelation can talk about the Evil City where the two Olive Trees were killed and left lying in the street and where “their Lord, too, let himself be crucified” (Rev 11, 8). Finally, the Letter to the Hebrews sums the meaning of the cross in a single word: shame. In Hebrew, “shame” (אבה) is the appalling contrary of God’s Holy Name, meaning “Abomination,” and used to avoid dignifying “Ba’al” with his proper name.

No wonder the theme of shame takes us back all the way to the “original shame” in the account of the Fall in Genesis. Adam and Eve are hiding from God, behind the bushes, ashamed because naked on account of having committed the one sin God had forbidden: eating
the food that will give them the powerful wisdom enabling them to hold others accountable for good and evil. Overwhelmed by shame, they now sit in judgment on themselves and overlook the most obvious thing they can do: emerge right into the presence of God, even if defeated by shame. Instead, they settle for what they have wished for: along with shame and miserable self-consciousness, ingrained preference for judging will be their doom; it will unmake their lives—with themselves and with others.

If Adam and Eve have lost their ability to enter into the Presence of God, Jesus of Nazareth does precisely that at his Baptism, right in the teeth of John the Baptizer’s protest that he is turning the world upside down. By replying that this is the proper way “to fulfill all justice,” Jesus makes the saving difference. Still, eventually, his offensively kind approach to sinners turns out to be more than anyone can live with: he is forced out into death, once and for good, with the shame of human sin beaten into his innocent body—“made sin for all” (2 Cor 5, 21. Cf. 1 Pet 2, 24). At last, there he hangs, on “his” cross, put to the utmost test but found true to God, ready to get himself revealed as the sacrament of God’s new creation, to the ever-greater glory of God’s faithful, merciful Love.

Thus, if anything qualifies as a Christian means to help bring on conversion and repentance among the world religions it is the combination of the twin ingredients of true worship: giving glory to God by confession of human sin, and vice versa, taking responsibility for human sin in praise of God, as Augustine reminded his listeners. Our late pope, John Paul II, has been doing this time and again, whether the cardinals liked it or not, especially on his later journeys: acknowledging the Catholic Church’s past sins and asking for forgiveness, and praising God in hopes of a humanity renewed by justice and peace based on mutual forgiveness and appreciation.

Let this be the opening thought for this essay. It is also found in the two epigraphs at the top of this essay.

**Religions Crossing Borders: Surprises, Anxieties**

In the city of Chicago, in the Art Institute, hangs Marc Chagall’s *White Crucifixion*. In that remarkable painting, finished well before the *Shoah* and its horrors, the crucified Christ is surrounded by scenes from
East European pogroms—Jews harassed, hunted down, driven out of town, synagogues on fire, Torah-scrolls desecrated. What sense do Jewish eyes make of this? Surely, this must be the world upside down? Is the cross, the immemorial sign and symbol of persecution, becoming the emblem of God’s compassion with the suffering Jews?

However, in any case, Chagall’s painting turns the tables on us, Christians. Here, Jesus is not the victim of Jewish rejection, as he is portrayed even in the gospels; rather, naked and forlorn, he is on the Jewish—i.e., the victims’—side; his only covering is the talith, worn by Jewish men at prayer. He has become the exemplar of the suffering Jews on their endless way through “the desert of the nations” (Ez 20, 33-38), with only the Living God to abandon themselves to. The Exodus all over again, pictured by a Ukrainian Jew in the nineteen-thirties, when the worst was yet to come for the Jews in Europe.

Is Jesus Christ really scorned by Christians? In Chagall’s painting the answer to this question is all the plainer for being wordless: Yes, those who acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as God’s Messiah and their Savior do disavow him in the persons of the Jews they persecute systemically—i.e., as a matter of habit. But how can this be? Another Jew, Zvi Kolitz, in his famous short story Yossel Rakover Speaks to God, written in 1946, not only asks the question but also very explicitly answers it: in the figure of Yossel Rakover, about to die with the words of the dying Jesus on his lips, Jesus Christ is rejected by those who actively inflict violence on the Jews, but more insidiously, by all the self-absorbed, apathetic Christians who by their silence become accomplices to that injustice.10

A change of scene. What comes to mind is Chaim Potok’s novel My Name is Asher Lev—the story of the Jewish painter whose Brooklyn Crucifixion gets him estranged from his Ladover Hasidic community, albeit with the tacit blessing of its mysterious rabbi.11 There is also the voice of Hans-Georg Gadamer, born in 1900 and at the age of ninety-nine still asking questions raised by the future. He was also saying that he was now aware of “how often I have been wrong.” But then again, he was also raising a theme he had always treated with agnostic (if respectful) silence, namely, the great religions’ common responsibility. They must keep their differences from degenerating into violence, he said; only thus will they succeed in doing justice to the Mystery beyond all of our horizons. In Gadamer’s eyes, this was the hermeneutical challenge of
our day. In saying this, was he repenting of his long silence on religion? Was he a prophet speaking up with a voice he had long heard inside? Was he both: Who knows? But does it matter?

Yet another scene. There is our Holy Father Pope John Paul II at prayer in Assisi, flanked by so many other people of the Spirit in positions of prophetic opportunity and responsibility in the religions. But on the rebound, I hear the panic-stricken laments, begun by fellow Catholics less than twenty-four hours after the prayer at Assisi and still heard as well as disseminated in print today, declaring that Pope John Paul II is a near-heretic misleading the whole world about the truths of the Catholic faith, that we Catholics are now being told to eat the bitter fruits of the apostasy authorized by Nostra Ætate, the second Vatican Council’s decree on the Catholic Church’s relations with the non-Christian religions, and even that the recent earthquakes at Assisi simply must be considered divine punishment for the iniquity committed there.¹²

In our day, what is befalling us? Let us go back to the other end of the spectrum. In August 2000, the Elijah School for the Study of Wisdom in World Religions in Jerusalem invited an international team of professors and students to raise the following questions: What is conversion? Is it conceivable for persons or even communities to be members of more than one great religion? Thus, could I, a committed Jesuit priest, be a Jew or a Hindu as well, recognizably, in a meaningful sense of those designations? The teaching team consisted of a Baptist Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a dean of a religious studies department at a North American university, an orthodox Jew, and a Jesuit priest, a Roman Catholic by both default and choice, not to mention election.

Something else. A few years ago, we have witnessed the publication of Hindu Wisdom for All God’s Children, written by a Jesuit priest; could this be a promise of a new harvest—of peace?¹³ Some more facts. After centuries of oblivion, the writings of the sixteenth-century Dominican priest and bishop Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566) are being read again; they are the single most poignant indictment of the Spanish Conquista in what is now Northern Latin America.¹⁴ They decry the soldiers’ and missionaries’ tactic of demonizing the native Americans’ deities and rituals in order to create pretexts for destroying the culture and seizing the people’s lands. Six years ago, an old Jesuit friend who
has lived, learned, and taught theology in Indonesia for over fifty years, told me that the Portuguese (“who have never bothered to do anything for the indigenous peoples they colonized except bring them the faith”) are loved to this day by the natives everywhere, at least in the coastal areas they colonized—East Timor being one example. Hard to believe. But could it be true, at least to a degree? And to that degree, could it tell us something today?

So we could go on and on, especially in Jerusalem—still as pregnant with the Promise of Final Justice and Peace as it has been the scene of perpetual injustice and war, starting (arguably) with King David’s capture of Zion, the Jebusite stronghold that became the City of David, whose third millennium was commemorated at the Shalom Hartman Institute in 1991.

What is happening to us, I suggest, is that the great religions are at last beginning to find it within themselves not only to affect other great religions—that has happened a lot, often with a vengeance—but also (and especially) to let themselves be affected by them. Are the mixed-up fortunes of past history really turning into today’s moral agenda? Is fated encounter at last occasioning human encounter? And will this encounter beget peace or war? My answer is provisional. It may lead to peace, if only we can stop living our religions politically and instead, let ourselves be fed at the wellsprings of repentance within each of our religions. Why repentance? Because it is the only way to create something new and gracious out of our centuries-old history of blaming and meting out punishment to each other. So what I will discuss with you is the following question: What are the inner resources for repentance in the Christian faith I find myself privileged to profess?

**Universalism**

In a prophetic essay, Karl Rahner explained years ago that the Catholic Church is now *empirically* catholic—i.e., universal—for the first time in history. It had always been universal by virtue of the Creed (“I believe in the Church, One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic”), but now there actually are Catholics everywhere, along with their nuns, catechists, deacons, priests, even bishops. This is a fact of elemental religious significance, and I wish to explain that it represents not a Catholic success, but a new Christian (and thus, Catholic) responsibility, one of
whose critical elements is voluntary repentance. Empirical universalism is here, and here to stay. So must repentance be. Why? Let me start with a few thoughts on universalism.

All the great religions are universalistic. One way or another, they have a world view; the universe is their horizon. Jews and Christians start their Scriptures with a God who creates “the heavens and the earth”; they know of eternal Wisdom, Word from the beginning, pre-existent Torah dwelling with God’s human children, which will bring humanity and the universe home to God, Holy, Faithful, and Just. Hindus know of the Lord Vishnu and his consubstantial Consort Sri—the Unity from which and to which flows all that lives and dies, in a perpetual quest for a Universal Self-Knowledge and Liberation (moksa). Buddhists know of the Nirvana—the Lightsome Nothing-of-any-Kind-in-Particular beyond all change and beyond all the passion change has caused, is causing, and will always cause. China knows of the Tāo, the unchartable Road that invisibly maps all charts and roads—the everyday ones we think we know as much as the ones we do not know, or do not know yet. Muslims worship Allah Who is no less Merciful for being Great, and Who will judge the whole world accordingly: in Majesty and Mercy. And even the “little,” “local” religions—of the tribes, the clans, the nomads, the marginals—are “great”: for they, too, have their broad horizons and their intimations of a Transcendent Mystery that bears and carries and steers and judges all of us and the whole world as well.

Yes, no human soul, and few if any human cultures, are without a taste for the Infinite, and thus, no world religion is without universalism. Wonderful. Entrancing. And so, the place where we can fall prey to great illusions. Let us see.

The Bewitchment of False Universalism

It is the height of irony that the cultural movement which first got interested in the world religions, namely, the early Enlightenment, not only put tolerance at the top of its agenda, but also ended up drawing the worst conclusion from these religions’ existence. How so? In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Western Europe and North America saw the rise of a new type of faith in God, now better known as Deism. It was residually Christian in that it did not altogether drop either the Bible or Jesus. Still, disgusted with the religious wars of
the recent past and enchanted by a largely implicit Platonism, it viewed worship and doctrine as root causes of hypocrisy and violence and wrote them off; instead, it put its faith in ethics. Accordingly, in Deism, sincerity and reasonableness became humanity’s chief religious virtues, and the Living God became distant: on principle, God ceased to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of Moses and the prophets, God the Father of Jesus Christ, and Allah Great and Merciful—the latter probably unbeknownst to most Muslims at the time Deism developed.

The first victims of Deist Enlightenment were the educated Jews, especially in the German-speaking countries. In Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum (1783), Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86) agreed that the truths of Judaism were none other than those which God had taught to all rational beings “by fact and idea”; hence, practices enjoined by the written Torah are a matter not of truth but (like all things in “organized religion”) of optional acceptance of special, non-universalist traditions.

On the rebound as it were, the new, enlightened cultural arbiters of the West decided they had now at last understood what religion really was, namely, humanity’s natural religiosity, pure, unspoilt, and so, universal as well as tolerant on principle. Accordingly, Jews were considered “wise” people and nothing else—Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-81) wrote Nathan der Weise to show just that. In fact, all the religions of India, Japan, China, “Turkey” (i.e., the world of Islam), and Ethiopia (not to mention all the noble savages that the Enlightened thought they were seeing all over the world) were deemed fascinating as well as pure—far purer, in fact, than unenlightened European Christianity and ditto Judaism, both of which were largely mired in the darkness of custom and credulity, since they had mistaken worship and doctrine for something they were certainly not, namely, integral to religion.

I leave it to my Muslim friends to tell us if they agree that the Deist depiction of their religious observances as a matter of custom rather than reality is a compliment. Somehow I doubt it. Somehow, too, I doubt that Christian theologians like John Hick (whose thought was shaped by Vedanta neo-Hinduism, whose literature is entirely in English) have done us an enduring service. For in the real world, filled with resentment as it is, we cannot expect a peaceful future except if we agree in principle to settle our accounts with the past. But I am running ahead of myself.
Universalism and the Modern Study of the Religions

That all human beings and cultures live by a native, undeniable sense of Transcendence is one thing. But I wish to propose that the idealization of human religiosity as the common umbrella of principled tolerance, under which all actual religions can feel equally at home, amounts to a huge exercise in overlooking and forgetting—one of laissez-faire Western devising. Let me start with a few quick arguments.

I am an educated Christian believer, thank heavens; but precisely my education must teach me that I must be wary of thought-systems that authorize me to make positive truth statements about things I have never studied—matters I know just enough about to realize I do not really know about them at all. In my case, an example would be Hinduism. Let me put this in more general terms. It is clearly sound to distinguish between humanity’s common, innate orientation to the Infinite on the one hand and the particular cults, codes, and creeds of the “positive” religions on the other. But it is equally clearly unsound to separate the two, and then to proceed to idealize the religious impulse at the expense of the great religious traditions. Idealizing the former is implicitly to declare that the religions’ distinctive traits are of no religious (or, for that matter, human) significance.

Quite rightly, therefore, historians of religion have concluded that world religions must be studied in their particular manifestations if they are to be understood. Yet even here a caution is fitting: the religions must be studied not “neutrally” or “objectively” (as if they were mere folklore or social construction) but sympathetically—i.e., precisely as the distinctive traditions that enable the many members of actual religious communities to live in awe, docility, self-awareness, and intellectual integrity in the face of the Always-Greater Unknown Present in the Cosmos, and closer to home, somehow Present here and now, with, among, and in us. Here if anywhere, “God is in the details.”

This is where an eminent hermeneutical challenge meets us, at two levels of increasing ontological intensity.

False Universalism, Enlightened Irresponsibility

First off, the hermeneutical task involved in the study of the religions is in and of itself daunting. Friedrich Schleiermacher intuited this when over two centuries ago he wrote that
in those despised positive religions . . . everything proves to be
real, vigorous and definite; there every single intuition has its
definite consistency, and a connection, all its own, with the
rest; there every feeling has its own sphere and its particular
reference. There you will find every modification of religiosity
somewhere, as well as every state of feeling to which only reli-
gion can transport a person; there you will find every part of
religion cultivated somewhere, and each of its effects achieved
somewhere; there all common institutions and every individ-
ual expression are proof of the high value placed on religion,
even to the point of forgetting everything else. There the holy
zeal with which religion is observed, shared, and enjoyed, and
the childlike desire with which new revelations of heavenly
powers are anticipated, are your guarantee that not a single
one of religion’s elements, which it was possible in any way to
perceive from this standpoint, has been overlooked, and that
not a single one of its moments has vanished without leaving
a monument behind.19

So, understanding a religion other than one’s own from within its
own amazingly coherent world is a huge interpretive undertaking. Let
me remember here with admiration the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith
(1916-2000), a Christian missionary who came to love the Muslim
subculture of India, and so came to understand it deeply. His works
evidence both the blessings inherent in the task and its difficulty.20 For
great blessings are indeed attached to understanding religions different
from one’s own, and the great philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has
made it his life’s work to explain how and why. Only by attempting to
understand the unfamiliar “other” (Gadamer has shown) can we, famil-
lar with ourselves but always to a degree prejudiced as well, come to
refreshingly authentic self-discovery; painstaking discovery of the other is
the royal road to self-awareness.21 And self-awareness— “Know Thyself”—
purified by long-suffering has a way of turning us into serene and fair
judges in all things human.

Please allow me to transpose this into the language of the Christian
Creed. Only the one who comes down “for our sake and for the sake
of our salvation” and is “crucified under Pontius Pilate” can be trusted
to “come in glory to do justice to the living and the dead.”
So far so good. We must turn to the second level. Schleiermacher is aware that religions often appear in “the form of a servant”; not only do they bear the marks of their limitations in time and space; they also bear the multifarious marks of their adherents’ human poverty. The religions, he implies, are not above criticism. But, so Schleiermacher goes on, if we are to criticize them correctly, we must make thoughtful efforts to interpret them as they deserve to be interpreted, namely, in light of what he calls the reverential feeling of absolute dependence on the Deity. This is what I just referred to as “humanity’s common, innate orientation to the Infinite.”

Now this is exactly where Deism has let us down. It has reduced religiosity to an exclusively human attribute and left the question of its reference to the Infinite to its own devices; in doing so, it can be said to have missed a major theological issue—one that it took geniuses like Maurice Blondel and Karl Rahner to develop: humanity’s “transcendental” orientation to an actual Infinite. But what concerns us at this point is something else: Deism’s proposal for an enlightened religiosity is an anthropological error. The Enlightened Few, basking in their enlightenment, and preaching a gospel of simplicity, sincerity, rationality, and tolerant optimism à la Voltaire’s Candide, took their leave of reality. Firstly, they did not dignify us, common humanity all over the world, with any informed interest in our diverse ways of being human; but secondly and far more importantly, by declaring us natively pure, they tacitly disavowed any association with failure, evil, and sin—ours and (presumably) their own. By thus treating humanity’s history of violence and discrimination en bagatelle, the Enlightenment did all of us an injustice in the very act of paying all of us a compliment: at first blush, what it told us about our original “pure” humanity was flattering, but the naiveté hidden in the compliment was sinfully misleading. For, by calling us unspoilt children, the Enlightenment and its aftermath came to wash its hands of moral responsibility and encouraged all of us to do the same. Schleiermacher did not make this mistake. He recognized “the human form” as “the form of a slave” when he saw it; dare I presume he saw it in Jesus to start with?

Blaming? Forgetting? Repenting?

All this raises a big theological issue. Let me begin by giving you fair warning: this issue cannot be raised without embarrassment, and
embarrassment is just that: embarrassing. Around the Mediterranean basin, embarrassment has long been one of the worst crimes against humanity: loss of face, brutta figura. “Thou shalt not embarrass” is regarded as a near-divine commandment—one (let me quickly add) far from unknown in other parts of the world. One of the characteristics of Pope John Paul II’s indubitable courage has been to fear neither embarrassment nor human judgment. Chagall did the same by portraying Jesus as the associate of the persecuted Jews; even while criticized by many Jews, he also faced the traditional Christian self-understanding with a major embarrassment, by suggesting that Christians could, or should, recognize the suffering Jesus in suffering Jewry.

So, can we Christians tolerate the embarrassment of being faced with the sins of a culture which we have played a principal part in shaping? Can Jews here in Israel learn how do it? Can Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists? Or are we all doomed to at once remind all those who embarrass us by challenging us how wrong they are, or in any case, that they are at most only partially correct—something that typically applies to most of us?

Accordingly, can (or should) we Catholics see the suffering Jesus in the victims of the Crusades—many of them simple Muslims whose religion was defamed in the interest of a Holy War—a Christian one this time? Can we see Jesus in Jan Hus, burned at the stake for reasons that had far more to do with city-dwellers’ anti-peasant affect than with God? Can we see Jesus in Galileo, a testy man for sure, but silenced, imprisoned, and discredited for trying to understand what he had observed? Can we see him in wild souls like Giordano Bruno and Girolamo Savonarola and Michele Sozzini and Menocchio the miller, a bit of an influential village particularist bullied by the Inquisition in Northern Italy in the late sixteenth century—all of them burned at the stake? Do we really owe it to ourselves to be ready first of all to resort to history or apologetics in the interest of at least partly excusing ourselves, by explaining that those things were due to “emergency situations” or “different times”?

Let us tighten our question. Pascal wrote that “Jésus sera en agonie jusqu’à la fin du monde: il ne faut pas dormir pendant ce temps-là.” Could we Christians, Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants, agree that,
as a matter of habitual ecumenical effort, we will attempt to discern first of all—i.e., before we say anything else—in the measureless suffering in our world, the suffering Jesus? Will we try to listen before we get to profess the clarity of our consciences or to defend our reputation? Can we become more open to corrections ventured and charges brought by others and less interested in self-maintenance and self-assertion? Do we have an habitually open ear to the cries of the otherwise voiceless poor? Can we suspend our habits of insisting on being our own judges, and try to determine the precise extent of our mistakes before we listen to others? Or will we let ourselves and our exploits be called into question only after we have come up with answers that show our past mistakes are “not so bad as they are being made to appear”? And are we ready to suffer embarrassment at least partly deserved? And if so, does this require of us Catholics and all other Christians, first, a change of imagination, and then, too, a reinterpretation of the Christian doctrine about the person of Jesus and his ministry of showing understanding for “the ignorant and the wayward”? Will we undertake such a reinterpretation in the light of our past relationships with Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, with honest dissenters inside the Catholic Church, with pioneers in scholarship and science? We could go on. Will we try to follow Jesus in his silence when he was facing his judges, as Origen tried to do, witness the preface to his Contra Celsum? Will our theologians? Will our bishops? Will the Roman curia?

Praise and Repentance

This essay has become more homiletic than readers can be expected to tolerate. In fact, the human frailty obvious even in such powerful communities as the Catholic Church or indeed, the Christian world, may make it hard even for those giants to tolerate it. So let us end by suggesting more articulately where in our own Tradition we Christians can go to repentance school.

Saint Augustine puts it quite tersely: *confessio* and *confiteor* mean both “praising God” and “accusing ourselves;” the two are but two sides of one and the same coin. And we have his Confessions to prove it: they are the longest prayer of praise and thanksgiving offered to God in Christian history as well as the longest act of penitence for a sinful and
misguided past life—a life which, being incomplete, is apt to continue
to be plagued by sin.

Augustine, original as he may be, is not the one who discovered
what I just pointed out. He found this habit of praise and penitence
in the Bible, and specifically in the Book of Psalms. “It is not
surprising that the Confessions, suffused as they are with a dramatic
sense of God’s interventions in Augustine’s life, are studded with the
language of the Psalms.” In ever so many Psalms, laments about
one’s own weakness and sin, professions of innocence in God’s pres-
ence, indignation about the lack of fairness and justice in the world,
denunciation of violent and cunning enemies all around,
complaints about God’s apparent indifference to the just, and more
than anything else, consternation at the prospect of losing one’s life
are being shamelessly uttered, with a passion; yet, in the very act of
being uttered they turn into the very stuff of praise and thanksgiv-
ing offered to God, “the Lord, Mighty, Merciful and Gracious,
Longsuffering and Abundant in Love and Truth, keeping faith with
thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, but who will
by no means clear the guilty” (Ex 34, 6-7). The knowledge and
acknowledgment of God and the profession of unworthiness are
inseparable, witness Moses and Elijah.

Faith and Asking Questions

For Christians, faith in God through Jesus Christ is inseparable
from what we call Jesus’ Resurrection. We are a habitually disconso-
late humanity, often caught in failure and sin; yet like Adam and
Eve, rather than appearing shamefaced before the Living One, we try
to abscond in the underbrush and cover our nakedness in front of
each other. But no cover-up will do; what we need is not a palliative
but the truth: an image of the very snake that has bitten us, lifted up
on high, a monument to our lostness for all of us gaze on (Num 21,
6-9); we need Jesus, trotted out by Pilate as the witness—bringing
up the rear of a large cloud of witnesses to both our humanity and
our inhumanity, all of them Jewish (Heb 12, 1)—to be lifted up on
high and impaled (Jn 3, 14-15; 19, 5). Only that kind of encounter
with wounded humanity will ready us for the revelation by God (and
by God alone) of “the Faithful and True Witness” and “the Just and
Holy One” (Rev 3, 14; Acts 3, 14). He enables us to glory again, in God, in the world, in each other and thus in ourselves. Glorifying and glorifying and dignifying—in practice, how are they done? Let me end with a hint.

Smack at the midpoint of Mark’s gospel we have the scene of the recognition of Jesus, by Simon Peter, as God’s Anointed One—the Messiah (Mk 8, 27-33). The recognition happens in response not to a teaching proposed by Jesus but to a question he asks: “But you, who do you think I am?” In other words, to get his identity established, Jesus delivers himself up to others—fallible others, frail and sinful; they are liable to misinterpret him. In fact, Simon Peter at once does just that: he explains to Jesus that suffering and dying are the last thing he has in mind for the Messiah, and Jesus at once turns his back on him and tells him to get lost: “Go away, Satan.” So Jesus shows who he is by opening himself to others by means of a question; implicitly, however, he lives not on the strength of the human judgment he requests but by virtue of God’s assurance. In that assurance, he can also afford to live like the lamb led to the slaughter, confident that God is the God of Life. He can afford to lose his own life, for he is all trust in the Living God.

I once had a curious dream. Jesus and Gautama the Buddha actually met and conversed with each other. Neither had any ready answers to give; both had only questions to ask. Unsurprisingly, in my dream, Jesus ended up asking more questions than even the Buddha could answer. But both Jesus and the Buddha began by asking questions, one of the other, trying to understand each other’s wisdom and folly, disappointments and pains, fulfillments and joys. Thus, dignifying each other by questioning, probing, and searching, they were giving glory to the One to whom Glory is due, now and always and forever.

So let us Christians settle for a waking dream. Can we abandon ourselves into other’s hands, only to end up finding ourselves in the hands not of enemies but of lasting friends? Two things we will certainly need. First, the fortitude of those who bravely stay awake in the dark in hopes of Light—the watchmen commended in Psalm 130. And besides, for the time being, endless patience inspired by compassion—of the curious, questioning kind.
Notes

A revised version of a contribution to the Festschrift offered to an almost life-long Jesuit friend, Tom Jacobs, *Di Jalan Terjal: Mewartakan Yesus yang Tersalib di Tengah Masyarakat Risiko*. Persembahat untuk Tom Jacobs, S.J., Teolog-Pewartaka (Yogyakarta: Penerbit Kanisius 2004, 165-91). The piece was in its turn a rewritten and much expanded version of a paper titled *The Wisdom of Penitence, Praise, and Asking Questions: Inner Resources for Growth-by-Repentance in the Christian Faith*. That paper was read in Jerusalem, on March 21, 2000, at an Interfaith Conference under the title *Religions and Repentance: Growth in Religious Traditions, Facing a New Era*. It was sponsored by the Elijah Interfaith Institute, and held in honor of Pope John Paul II’s visit to the Holy Land. In Jerusalem, the two other lecturers at the event were Rabbi René Shmuel Sirat, former Chief Rabbi of France and Vice President of the European Council of Rabbis, and Sheikh Professor Abdul Hadi Palazzi, Director of the Cultural Institute of the Italian Islamic Community, Rome, Italy.

1. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catech.* XIII, iv; *PG* 33, 777A.
4. Unsurprisingly, the verb “crucify” occurs as many as 44 times.
5. See the English saying, “In the house of a hanged man you don’t talk about rope.”
7. *Stauron aischyns*—a so-called explicative genitive.
8. Mt 3, 15. Here lies the source of Irenaeus’ later claim (*Adv. Haer.* 5, 2, 1-3; *SC* 153, 30-41), that God treated human sin justly, and not by eminent domain: “he did not . . . steal what belonged to another; rather, he regained what was his own, [and he did so] both justly and generously.”


17. See *Nostra Ætate*, 2.


Gestalten zu betrachten, von dieser erleuchteten zu den verachteten positiven Religionen, wo alles wirklich, kräftig und bestimmt erscheint, wo jede einzelne Anschauung ihren bestimmten Gehalt und ein eignes Verhältnis zu den übrigen, jedes Gefühl seinen eignen Kreis und seine besondere Beziehung hat; wo Ihr jede Modification der Religiosität irgendwo antrefft, und jeden Gemütszustand, in welchen nur die Religion den Menschen versetzen kann; wo ihr jeden Teil derselben irgendwo ausgebildet und jede ihrer Wirkungen irgendwo vollendet findet; wo alle gemeinschaftlichen Anstalten und alle einzelnen Äußerungen den hohen Wert beweisen, der auf die Religion gelegt wird bis zum Vergessen alles übrigen; wo der heilige Eifer, mit welchem sie betrachtet, mitgeteilt, genossen wird, und die kindliche Sehnsucht, mit welcher man neuen Offenbahrungen himmlischer Kräfte entgegensieht, Euch dafür bürgen, daß keines von ihren Elementen, welches von diesem Punkt aus schon wahrgenommen werden konnte, übersehen worden und keiner von ihren Momenten verschwunden ist, ohne ein Denkmal zurückzulassen.”


22. Schleiermacher uses the word *Knechtsgestalt*—a clear allusion to Phil 2, 7.


26. Heb 5, 2, where Jesus is characterized by his μετριοπαθεία—his habit of suspending acting on one’s own emotions, in the interest of showing compassion to others who are suffering.


Our Approach to Ecumenism, Especially in the Light of Contemporary Judaism

In this essay, I intend to make four points. First, recently, in the context of the millennium Jubilee, we received from the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith a document titled *Dominus Iesus*;¹ I wish to explain why I am taking this document as the launching pad for my paper. On that basis, I will propose, secondly, that interreligious dialogue, to be fruitful, requires what I call “virtually unconditioned commitment” on the part of all participants. My third, brief point will be a huge contention: viz., that the sheer factual existence of Jewish people today has created a dynamic situation of historic proportions—one that requires of all Christians that they engage contemporary Jews, wherever they are, in dialogue and cooperation.² My fourth point, which is substantially autobiographical, will explain the considerable obstacles this requirement involves, yet also that it lies at the root of any Christian attempts at interreligious dialogue today.

Introduction: *Dominus Iesus*

*Dominus Iesus* leaves no doubt about its intentions. The two signatories, the well-known theologian Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI and Archbishop Tharcisius Bertone, now the Cardinal Archbishop of Genoa, a canonist, explain what they are going to offer and why. Interreligious dialogue is one of the things which the Church must do in representing Christ to the world. It is also a new issue in the Catholic Church, and many problems still remain to be identified. So in the encounter between the truths of the faith and non-Christian cultures there is a need for precision.

One wonders if this is true, and if it is true, how true it is; and even more importantly, how (i.e., in what manner) it is true. The late
Herbert McCabe, O.P., would probably say: We do need rules of the game, and players should know them, but they are chiefly for umpires; what players need, not so much just to play the game as to play it well, is “coach’s advice.” Dominus Iesus claims to state the rules of the game of Catholic participation in interreligious dialogue. Fair enough. The problem is that Dominus Iesus does not offer “coach’s advice” on how the game should actually be played well. Unhappily, it offers no strategies—just ground rules. Unsurprisingly, it adds that expository prose is the appropriate stylistic medium for this activity; rules of the game are invariably written in expository prose; they are non-negotiable. They are also unreadable. The fatal mistake of Dominus Iesus is that it does not help. It puts “Stop” signs at signed side streets while commending main street and leaving any side alleys unsigned. On the former you follow the rules; on the latter you travel at your own risk.

So, finally, Dominus Iesus is tedious. It seems to forget that playing the game is what counts; I know of no players who prefer reading rule books to playing the game. And the few umpires I have known are virtuoso former players, not theoreticians, let alone lawyers.

The document lists eight ground rules, and treats them under six headings. They are the following: (1) the revelation given in Iesus Christ is full and definitive; (2) the Holy Spirit and Iesus Christ are ever co-active in the work of salvation; (3) the salvific work of Christ Jesus is both of one piece and unique; (4) the Church of Christ is both unique and one; (5) the Church is inseparable from God’s Kingdom and the Reign of Christ; (6) as far as salvation is concerned, there are relations between the Church and the religions.

So far so good. Besides, I have found no positive inaccuracies or departures from Vatican II in these six sections of the declaration. The only thing that I miss is incentive toward interreligious dialogue.

It is common knowledge that Dominus Iesus ran into considerable reception problems. Pope John Paul II acknowledged as much by his many clarifications of Dominus Iesus in the weeks after its publication, delivered from his window; after all, the universal primacy of Jesus Christ has been the single most important theme of his pontificate. What happened? If I were a practicing Vaticanologist, I would say that the Pope was disappointed not with the theme but with the document that purported to broadcast it. Was he signaling that he had put up with the Declaration but decided he did not want to sign it?
Well, what the media I follow made of Dominus Iesus was theolog-ically and spiritually meager: the Pope is a great and exciting man, but his message is, as usual, “conservative.” This is plainly untrue. For one thing, no pontiff has more frankly faced the troubled relations of the Catholic Church with other Christians. But as a former ecumenist and ecclesiologist, I profess I can see a few reasons for the umbrage taken at Dominus Iesus by irritated spokespersons for the Protestant Communions and even the Oriental Churches. Which are they?

First of all, speaking as a Catholic in the narrow sense of the word, the notion that Dominus Iesus is addressed to “Bishops [capital “B”], theologians (lower-case “t”), and “all the Catholic faithful” is both an illusion and a mistake.

As for “Bishops and theologians”—transeat. Let us address the illusion. Is Dominus Iesus written for “all the faithful”? Poppycock. Only theologically educated persons are capable of reading it. Still, mistakes in identifying audiences raise suspicions. Are Catholics-at-large being intimidated by distant, higher-up teaching authorities who imagine they can put the church as a body under orders? And, are the laity not entitled to truthfulness?

Now for Dominus Iesus as a mistake. Let me speak as a Catholic ecumenical theologian. Some developments in the Great Tradition and its teaching are historic and normative simply because they happened. The second Council of the Vatican happened in the presence of invited, recognized non-Catholic observers. It made a huge difference. From that experience on, it has become virtually impossible to limit Catholic discourse to Catholics alone. Non-Catholic Christians are now part of the conversation at least in the role of auditors and presumed commentators—a fact of enormous ecclesiological importance. Ecumenism is no longer optional. I suggest it would have been wise to write Dominus Iesus not only with Catholic Bishops and Catholic theologians in mind, but also the governing bodies of the non-Catholic churches and ecclesial communities. Like it or not, others are listening in on us these days, and Vatican II has taught us that we Catholics are to be happy that this is so. In all probability, a modification of the intended reading publics such as I propose would have led to a better document.

Thirdly, elsewhere I have elaborated, virtually without contradic-tion or correction from either fellow-theologians or from the teaching
office, the proposition that the Christian faith taken as a whole requires an understanding of its three fundamental, distinguishable but inseparable moments (or “components”): worship, life, and teaching, and that a dynamic hierarchy prevails among them—worship being the pinnacle, life the mediating element, and teaching the humblest. I have also proposed, virtually without contradiction or correction, that “Roman Catholicism must be on guard against what may very well be its greatest weakness: a systemic affinity with sectarian, monolithic conceptions such as those favored by integralism,” though I did immediately add that “the mainstream catholic tradition agrees with Newman, and views the Christian faith as a fundamentally open (i.e., growing, developing) system.”

Once again, with Herbert McCabe as my mentor, let me put this in a more positive manner. Catholics have a right to expect from the teaching office not just “rules of the game,” but also coach’s advice and encouragement as to how to play the Catholic game as a whole in actual life and how to play it well—in liturgy, in shared conduct, and in the understanding and teaching of the Catholic truth. If Dominus Iesus is indeed addressed to all the Catholic faithful (again, an illusion in my judgment), it is far too narrowly doctrinal to meet their expectation; the document itself admits this, but that does not take away the fact that legitimate expectations remain largely unmet by a highly visible Roman office. An honest, prudent acknowledgment of this limitation in the very text of Dominus Iesus might have helped alleviate the irritation of many Christians who want a life, and a life with God, both within the Catholic Church and outside it.

Finally, I want to take what I just said one step further. For good reasons, the document opposes cultural errors of the day—“relativism” being the principal culprit. But its authors never acknowledge that ever so many educated, practicing North American, European, and Asian Catholics find it very hard to understand, let alone explain, how the truths of the Catholic faith can be anything but relative. How so? The Roman document, like it or not, sounds absolutistic, and the repeated references to the requirement of “firmity of belief” scratch exactly where the itch is—not a helpful remedy. I am speaking not “pastorally” but as an ordinary Catholic theologian when I propose that the Catholic faithful are entitled to more than diagnosis and condemnation from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. There is such a
thing as theological balm, and Cardinal Ratzinger, who wrote a distinguished dissertation on Bonaventure, knows this. Thus, *Dominus Iesus* could have been far more prudent; as it is, it is at best correct and at worst intemperate.

Let me conclude this first section by making a suggestion. In any interfaith situation, including conversion-situations, framing the question determines the way in which you think about the “firm assent of faith” so forcefully commended by *Dominus Iesus* (7). How absolute and ultimate is it or can it be, what does it imply? For a moment, I wish to concentrate on the mystical aspects of both religious commitment and commitment to interfaith encounters—mystical aspects that have consequences in the park of logic. I propose that the assent of faith must be understood as a “virtually unconditioned commitment.” This is a truly ultimate matter, as follows.

“Virtually Unconditioned Commitment”

Just how committed can any convert to any religion (and thus, any Christian who has deliberately requested Baptism) claim to be? Or, for that matter, any believers who find themselves attempting to give themselves an account of their present religious commitment? Is it really possible to embrace any positive religion in an absolutely unconditioned manner? This question raises a terrifying dilemma, for the following reasons.

If we affirm that faith is “a wager,” an “individual choice,” or “a matter of personal taste for spirituality,” no convert to, say, Catholicism nor any Catholic believer can be expected to be unconditionally committed. But then things begin to look as if explicit religious relativism in the style of Neo-Hinduism, John Hick, or the Vedanta Society is our only reasonable alternative to stated Christian faith. The statement “All religions state and do virtually the same” is then apt to become the fundamental thesis of all religions, and interreligious dialogue will turn into an exercise in both harmlessness and ignorance. The problem is that this relativism—for that’s what it is—will eliminate, certainly in the long run, the ability of most of us to live our religious commitments as a matter of ultimate concern—of the kind that takes us outside ourselves, ecstatically, into God, into the Body of Christ, into the sacramental (i.e., mystical) Communion of the Church.
Now let us turn the coin to look at the other side. If a convert or believer must be unconditionally committed, how can we tell the difference between faith and fanaticism, not just within our church communities but also among outsiders? Human beings, both alone and with others, are essentially conditioned—i.e., “situated,” as the late Piet Schoonenberg used to explain so often; no storm-free zone is available to those who profess a religion that entertains truth claims. Like Christian marriage, the Christian’s religious life is a tested life, and at least part of the test of faith is a commitment to searching fidelity to the Church’s teaching.

What, then, is the nature of any religious conversions, commitments, and claims? Lonergan’s expression “virtually unconditioned assent” can be helpful here: it must be understood as the mystical protection against religious absolutism. Mystical in what sense? Should believers’ claims to be engaged in a formally (or absolutely) unconditioned assent, then they cannot help engaging in the kind of self-supporting, self-sufficient dogmatism in which faith loses every connection with a “transcendent object” and becomes an exercise in purely subjective autarky—graceless and thus, ungracious. But absolute assurance does not sum up a properly religious commitment; rather, it is a declaration of absolute religious independence (usually masking a deeper-seated dependence), be it individual or social. You know, the aggressively overstated catechism-and-bible quotations and the set jaw of the fanatic.

I once argued that faith in God cannot survive without a sense of privilege. Not until the Church’s teaching office makes a habit of conveying that a deep sense of privilege is a virtually indispensable prerequisite for the acceptance of definite doctrines, numerous modern Catholics will continue to feel they are mainly being told. Inner ease and harmony are the signs of God’s presence, not rigid orthodoxy and forced conviction.

So, come on, Pope Benedict, come on, Archbishop Bertone, we know that “teaching with authority” (Mk 1, 27; Mt 7, 29) is a hard thing to do any day, but you can afford to drop some of your professorial and canonistic seriousness, at least once in a while. We’ll understand. In fact, we’ll understand better. For we will have no interreligious dialogue until we become as well as meet dialogue partners who profess their faiths with a virtually unconditioned commitment to
them, i.e., with commitments based on a sense of privilege, not on alleged tradition or on whatever else is a pseudonym for fanaticism. They are those who are liable, as a matter of transcendental theological principle, to find the faith-commitments of actual neighbors admirable or curious enough to be intrigued and attracted by them—I mean, by the neighbors rather than by their faiths. Odds are this will happen not at the hierarchical top—but who knows?—but at the bottom, among God’s people, i.e., unpredictably.

I wish I could have stopped this paper here. I am an elderly man now, and finishing projects already started is plenty to keep me occupied; I am not looking for fresh trouble. Specifically, I do not expect to be an expert in Hebrew any time soon. Still, in my judgment, Dominus Iesus suffers from a most serious theological and ecclesiological error not committed by Vatican II, which has to be part of our ecumenical agenda. I am referring to the absence of any positive reference to the Jews.

“The Covenant Never Revoked”

“God’s salvation begins with the Jews” (Jn 4, 22). After the Holocaust, none of us Christians can afford to continue to act and speak as if the history of salvation starts with Jesus Christ and as if the Jewish nation—which Paul expected to be saved in the end (Rom 9-11)—is extinct. The simple fact of contemporary Judaism’s existence demands of us, divided Christians, that we do justice to it. And the first step of this actual dialogue with actual Jews must start with the realization that we Christians worldwide are simply ignorant of contemporary Judaism; every time we rely on our (much-needed!) familiarity with the Jewish Bible to profess our openness to Judaism we forget that we have everything to learn about Jews today. Only to the extent that we become the disciples of modern Judaism can we Christians claim to enjoy the worldwide “game” of interreligious dialogue—Hippolytus of Rome hints it is really a playful dance, viz. “the dance of the Word Incarnate.” Why?

First of all, Jews are virtually everywhere in the world, in numbers. In the State of Israel, those who have returned “from the desert of the nations” (Ez 20, 35) are now living, as a very troubled, internally deeply fractured nation, not effectively living by faith, almost completely at the mercy of Jews elsewhere and everywhere. But, secondly as well as far
worse in my Christian view, only small is the number of Jews carrying out the mission entrusted to them by God in the Diaspora:

   It is not enough that you should serve me to raise up Jacob’s tribes, and to restore those of Israel left over; I have also appointed you as a light to the nations: you are to be the source of my salvation to the end of the earth. (Is 49, 6; Acts 13, 47)

But then again (as the Pentecostal movement has not ceased pointing out, mainly to Christians, but in places also to Jews), how large is the number of Christians shouldering their vocation in the Holy Spirit to bring the nations home to (in Blaise Pascal’s words) the “God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob, not of the philosophers and the men of learning”?23

What is the history that gave rise to the picture I have just painted? First of all, there is no doubt that by the end of the second century Judaism and Christianity had become religions related to each other only by mutual disputes.24 This dissociation of Jews and Christians was already underway in the City of Rome in the second half of the first century. After the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D., only a small number of Christian Jews remained in Palestine, probably poor, and on speaking terms with the Aramaic-speaking Jews in the area. Eventually, they drifted out of communion with the Christian communities elsewhere around the Mediterranean.25 On the other hand, Jews began to get reorganized, both in Palestine and in the diaspora, and by the turn of the first century Christians were no longer welcome in some synagogues, whether they spoke Greek or Hebrew or Aramaic. The process of independent development had started. For Paul, the mixed Jewish-Gentile community in Rome had still been a “dramatic” situation, forcing him to rethink what he had written in Galatians, especially since a good number of the Gentile Christians, attracted by the noble way of life of the Jews, had been proselytes before they became Christians.26 But eventually, slowly but surely, the largely Gentile Church settled for the facts: Christians and Jews, while often not disrespectful, lost contact with each other. The segregated ghettos of the ancient city enhanced the estrangement, and, after Diocletian’s persecution, positive imperial favor toward the Christians did the rest.
From this point on, please allow me to be substantially autobiographical—the privilege of the professional dilettante I have been all my life. The brief amateurish survey just completed leads to a most important conclusion for all of us Christians: much as we have had varying relationships with Jews for the past seventeen or eighteen centuries, we have remained ignorant of Judaism as an actual religion. In the interest of clarity, let me rephrase this: the only probable difference between me and some of you is that I have learned not to treat Judaism—and thus, contemporary Jews—as a religious phenomenon I somehow understand on the sole basis of my being a Catholic Christian, and despite the fact that the Jewish Scriptures are part of the air I breathe. This implies I admit that I am substantially ignorant of the world of contemporary Judaism—i.e., ignorant enough to want to learn at least the minimum. How has that happened to me? Incidentally, here the word “contemporary” in the title of this essay comes into its own.

Two early personal encounters helped me. The first was the elderly Jewish gentleman who was my violin teacher for about three years; he was arrested when I was twelve and murdered in Auschwitz. The second was a learned Italian Jew from Venice, my professor of Italian literature in graduate school, who was also one of the best lecturers I have ever had. He once said to me, as I walked into his lecture hall dressed in clerical suit, that I looked tired; while I was groping for an answer in decent Italian, he explained that the Dominicans had the same problem, as he had noticed during the three war years he had lived with them dressed up as a Dominican. In this way, I was decisively taught by two emblematic Jews—one an observant Jew who would wear a torn jacket on Yom Kippur and had mezuzas on all the doorposts in his apartment, the other a mischievous agnostic humanist who was also an expert on the history of the pendulum clockwork and who enjoyed making fun of the Devil in front of Catholic students and (especially) Protestant ones. But what has helped me most was a triad of life-changing works by Jewish thinkers: Martin Buber’s *Ich und Du* (read when I was twenty-two or twenty-three), Abraham Heschel’s two-volume *The Prophets* (my first encounter with a non-Catholic reading of the Hebrew Scriptures), and most of all, Emmanuel Lévinas's
roundly polemical radio address *Aimer la Torah plus que Dieu.* Much later on, I was to remember

the consternation that invaded me as I read Lévinas's short, squarely polemical piece—originally a radio talk broadcast from Paris on Friday, April 29, 1955. Rereading only made things worse. There it was. Right under my nose I had the single most compelling intellectual and moral challenge to my Catholic and Christian faith I had ever experienced.29

This is where I was really learning, from a contemporary Jew equally disappointed by the cheap Judaism among his modern fellow Jews as he was certain of the superiority of classical, tough, intellectual Jewish-Lithuanian religiosity over Christianity as he had come to understand it. He saw a Christianity which (to use an insipid North American phrase in common use today to express approval) had grown “comfortable with God”—a “God” ratcheted down to the level at which he becomes “a God I can live with”; Lévinas was shocked at this “children’s God,” who saves softly, and lets human adults remain perpetual children, and allowing them to turn a majestic world into a nursery governed by mere indulgence. He had written:

The true humanity of Man and his virile tenderness come into the world along with the severe words of a demanding God; the spiritual becomes present, not by way of palpable presence, but by absence; God is concrete, not by means of incarnation, but by means of the Law; and his majesty is not the felt experience of his sacred mystery. His majesty does not provoke fear and trembling, but fills us with higher thoughts. To veil his countenance in order to demand—in a superhuman way—everything of Man, to have created Man capable of responding, of turning to his God as a creditor and not all the time as a debtor: *that* is truly divine majesty!31

An unpleasant anecdote. Over thirty years ago, a Jewish American woman born after 1945 insisted on telling me that I did not have the slightest idea what the Holocaust meant to Jews, so I did not have the right to disagree with her, even on points unrelated to the
Shoah. I told her that my excuse for treating her as an adult, without any guilt-feelings on my part, was something I had earned: I was there to find Mr. Sam Schuijer’s front door sealed the day after he was snatched from his bed; it gave me at least an opportunity to weep for him on my way home. Emmanuel Lévinas has made the same point, if in a very different context.32

What I mean is this. One—I mean only one—of the most unfortunate things that has happened in the wake of the Holocaust is the rise of an aggressively complacent form of undifferentiated Judaism aimed at silencing non-Jews across the board. First and in my Catholic view worst of all, this form of global Judaism has few religious or theological claims to make, and so, few elements of an interreligious dialogue to offer. Secondly, miserably, it is apt to succeed only in reviving the broad anti-Semitisms of the past; this is not a reason for condemnation, but for compassion. For thirdly, Judaism is miserably divided, and post-Holocaust Judaism has long done everything to conceal this fact. Too many Jewish congregations are little more than local benefit societies, and the present State of Israel is only the most visible instance of the calamitous and obstinate and often unprincipled divisions within Judaism. After a century of ecumenism, one thing that all Christians, must learn is this: how to forge, patiently, charitably, and with tough-minded intellectual integrity, as well as with a desire to learn, differentiated accounts of the truth of Judaism—many of them offered by contemporary Jews. This means: the only dialogue that may enlighten is a Christian dialogue with local Jewish communities less interested in Judaism as a cause than in God and in faith-cum-justice in God, within Judaism and outside it. It is also wise, and not any sign of anti-Semitism, to recognize that the continuing spate of Jewish expatriations upon the horrors of the Holocaust is an aggressive political cottage industry claiming the privilege of victimhood for all Jews by taking advantage of the wide-spread ignorance about Judaism among Christians and half-Christians. It aims to remind the world of selected past horrors inflicted on Jewry and stifle honest dialogue. North American culture has swallowed this fraudulent propaganda hook, line, and sinker.

Another point—a properly ecumenical one this time. Mainly (but far from exclusively) outside North America, it is often overlooked that Catholicism and Protestantism have had significantly different histories

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with regard to Judaism. Needless to say, this influences our ecumenical relationships as well; an example is my discovery, years ago, that the card catalogue of the theological faculty at the University in Lund was chock full of New Testament items and surprisingly short on Old Testament. Does such crypto-Marcionism reflect Lutheranism’s sharp distinction between Law and Gospel? If it does, it is hard to imagine it does not affect Lutheranism’s relationships with Judaism. In fact, there is enough reason to think that much Jewish agnosticism of German stock is the bitter fruit of Moses Mendelssohn’s decision to accede to the Enlightened version of Lutheranism current in eighteen-century Prussia. Complete ignorance forbids me to comment on the Jews in the Orthodox world picture.

Let us return to things Catholic. Numerous Catholics these days are aware only that Catholic relations with Jews have been conflicted at least since 1492 A.D., when Ferdinand and Isabella, the “Catholic Kings” of Spain, ordered the expulsion of the Jews from Spain. Nowadays this event is apt to be presented as the event that started modern Catholic anti-Semitism, which was to reach its hideous pinnacle in the Holocaust, and even more (at least since 1963, when Rolf Hochhuth’s play Der Stellvertreter was first performed) in the very person of a calculating Pope, Pius XII. As a result, Western (and especially American) Catholics have become easy targets for modern Jewish anti-Catholicism, which is now all the harder to heal for being predicated on wide-spread liberal-agnostic affect on the part of “secularized” (i.e., non-religious) Jews. The latter have a way of regarding the Catholic Church largely as a political reality, as anybody who reads the New York Times knows. In parts of Western Europe negative moods among liberal Christians have led to a largely uninformed yet obligato philo-Semitic mood aimed at undoing, at least in appearance, the undifferentiated “anti-Semitism” of past centuries. Catholics shaped by these contemporary judgments and sentiments are largely unaware of the fact that from the mid-eleventh to the early sixteenth centuries the urban Jews were better integrated into the societal fabric of Western Europe than heretics and suspected heretics, including the worlds of learning, art, literature, and (most of all) banking and commerce.

Nevertheless, right in the teeth of our own ignorance, being a Catholic Christian after the Holocaust plainly means this: after close to eighteen centuries of separate development, we are to pick up where we
began to settle for a practically abstract affinity with the Jews. For it is part of Christian faith to believe that God’s Covenants with Noah, with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with his friend Moses, and with the Second-Temple community can never be repealed—a theme declared by Pope John Paul II in his discourse in the Synagogue in Rome in 1986,34 and capably elaborated by Jewish traditionalist David Novak in several notable books.35 Today, Christians cannot be Christians without realizing that they have an essential feature of faith in God in common with those Jews who still insist on keeping Israel’s divine election alive.36 Emmanuel Lévinas rightly describes this Judaism as virtually unknown to Jews and Christians alike:

> Over the past one hundred years, Hebrew learning has faded, and we have lost touch with our sources. What learning is still being produced is no longer based on an intellectual tradition: it remains self-taught and untutored, even when it is not improvised. And what worse corruption can befall an author than being read only by people who know less than he does! With none to check them, none to put them in their places, authors tend to mistake the lack of counter-pressure for freedom, and this freedom for the touch of genius. Small wonder that the reading public remains skeptical; for them, Judaism, with its few million unrepentant adherents left in the world, is no more than a matter of quibbling over religious observances—something uninteresting and unimportant.37

Thus, we, Jews and Christians, find ourselves “dramatically together” once again, thank God, after centuries of impoverishing separation. What unites us most obviously is a common environment: the ignorance of nominal Jews and nominal Christians. This ignorance is all the more deceptive for being fatally predicated on the best of human intentions and a faith in the power of moral resolve that is being proved illusory every day. But what also unites us, less obviously, in the Spirit, is an identical eschatological mission: bringing the nations home to the Living God. Both of us are awaiting the Messiah, and in the mean time we are to speak of God. For that reason, the worldwide interreligious dialogue is not a hobby, let alone a luxury, but a way of life. For the foreseeable future, at least we Christians will
have our hands full learning the game, first with Jews, and then with all other non-Christians.

_Dominus Iesus_ quite rightly emphasizes time and again that it is a mistake to separate Jesus Christ from God’s Holy Spirit. Yet it is undeniable that Israel and Judaism have known of the Holy Spirit apart from God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and it is a theological mistake so to speak of the Spirit as to imply that the presence of the coeternal Spirit of God remains somehow less real without explicit reference to Jesus Christ Risen. To us Christians, of course, Christ’s Resurrection has definitively enhanced the historic, attested presence of the Spirit in Israel and its Scriptures. In and among neither of us is God’s Holy Spirit a stranger. We have no excuse for not talking with each other, or for that matter, to every believer in the world.

One conclusion of this essay should probably be: ecumenism and efforts in the direction of interreligious dialogue are now a lot more intertwined than they were as little as fifty years ago. But let me conclude on a far more Catholic note. As far as the rules of the game are concerned, they can wait, as long as the rulers can wait and let us be.

Notes


2. Hans Urs von Balthasar would probably call it “dramatic.”


4. The image was used at the press conference held on September 5, 2000 on the occasion of the official presentation of _Dominus Iesus_. Rev. (now Archbishop) Angelo Amato, S.D.B., stated that “the theological discussion remains open,” and that “only the alleys that have proved blind have been barred (“Il debattito teologico, cioè, resta aperto. Sono state chiuse solo quelle strade che portavano a vicoli ciechi.”) He did so after stating that the theological
task ahead of us is the following: exploring what Vatican II was teaching when it wrote that “far from excluding various degrees of participative cooperation on the part of creatures, the Redeemer’s one and only mediation stimulates it (Lumen Gentium 62: “unica mediatio Redemptoris non excludit sed suscitat variam apud creaturas participatam ex unico fonte cooperationem”). I suppose this is an encouragement of sorts, but it sounds bureaucratic.

5. Careful here! Surely the Scriptures of the Old Testament know of the Holy Spirit as active before Christ?

6. Here, it is fairly explained that “Christianity” is not the same as “Church,” as John Bossy has well set out in his Christianity in the West, 1400-1700 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

7. Very concretely, the document repeats Vatican II’s teaching of that the Church of Christ “subsists in the Catholic church” and goes on to explain that precisely for this reason Catholics must expect to be judged more severely.

8. I am old enough to remember very specific instructions and prohibitions of the this has to “Stop!” variety appearing on the notice-boards of large religious communities; all the rector or his assistant needed to do is ask around quietly about who the real culprit(s) was/were. But that would have required a confrontation with actual people. As it was, all that happened was that everybody was put on notice, without effect other than a cynical shrug of the shoulders. Speaking more autobiographically, I vividly remember the veiled threats issued by the German commanders and publicized on billboards everywhere during the years 1940-45; looking like communications of general importance, they were de facto vulgar threats. We merely smiled and learned how to live.


11. God Encountered, esp. §23, 7; §43, 7; §53.


13. At a conference at the University of Chicago shortly after the promulgation of Dominus Iesus, my friend Paul J. Griffiths, who now holds the chair of Roman Catholic studies at the University of Illinois in Chicago, was one of three presenters. He pointed out to us that the Creed in Dominus Iesus does not include the filioque. I am sure this is intentional, and it is a sound, generous gesture in the direction of the Orthodox. But it takes a trained theologian to notice it! He also took issue with the first chapter of Dominus Iesus by observing that if the completeness of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ means that (as he put it) this completeness is not only ontological but also epistemological, (i.e., that the Catholic Church has nothing left to learn, that would be
unacceptable. Both in the light of the history of doctrine and in light of the
Church’s need to keep on getting to know and appreciate and love ever more
fully both Christ and God, and the world and the cosmos, in the Holy Spirit.
In good American idiom, the Church’s present knowledge, appreciation, and
love of Jesus Christ is incomplete, and hence, relative to God’s promised fulfill-
ment. This is something the Catholic laity will readily understand, and it has
the advantage of appealing to the eschatological sensibility of the Jews, too—
no small matter for Catholic theology, especially in North America.

14. But remember, Neo-Hinduism arose as an attack on colonialist non-
universalist Christianity by fairly agnostic culturally Hindu intellectuals
writing in English.

15. The former comes from the fact that existing differences are ignored,
the latter from the fact that one cannot make judgments on things one has not
properly studied.

123, no. 6 (March 22, 1996): 15-19.

17. Gerard Manley Hopkins puts this in his own inimitable way (see
Press, 1986], “My own heart,” 170):

Soul, self; come; come, poor Jackself, I do advise
You, jaded, lét be; call off thoughts awhile
Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy size
God knows when to God knows what; whose smile
’S not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather—as skies
Betweenpie mountains—lights a lovely mile.

18. See Norbert Lohfink, Der niemals gekündigte Bund: Exegetische Gedanken
zum christlich-jüdischen Gespräch (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1989); trans-
lated into English as The Covenant Never Revoked: Biblical Reflections on
from a discourse delivered by Pope John Paul II to a representative group of Jews
in Mainz, as far back as 1980, Here is what the Pope said: “Die erste Dimension
dieses Dialogs, nämlich die Begegnung zwischen dem Gottesvolk des von Gott
nie gekündigten (vgl. Röm 11, 29) Alten Bundes und dem des Neuen Bundes,
ist zugleich ein Dialog innerhalb unserer Kirche, gleichsam zwischen dem ersten
und zweiten Teil ihrer Bibel” (‘The first dimension of this dialogue, viz., the
encounter between the People of God of the Old Covenant—the one never
revoked by God—is at the same time a dialogue within our Church, between the
first and second parts of its Bible, as it were.’). See also Jared Wicks, “Pieter
Smulders and Dei Verbum 3: Developing the Understanding of Revelation to
19. Gk. ὑστηρία ἑκ τῶν Ἰουδαίων. Note the definite article ὑ; accordingly, “salvation” does not denote a general well-being enjoyed by humanity, but the “actual salvation as God’s gracious gift; the traditional acutus ἔστιν on confirms this.

20. I would be less than candid if I did not confess that my position is substantially (though negatively) predicated on Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger’s Die Vielfalt der Religionen und der eine Bund (Hagen: Urfeld, 1998)—a gift from my friend Rudolf Pesch. Unsurprisingly, Ratzinger’s is a learned book. My problem is that I cannot imagine that any of my Jewish friends would want to read it. It is a declaration of Catholic faith and openness throughout, but it does not touch on any existing theological or cultural Jewish issues that I am aware of. Nowhere in the book did I find evidence that the author was in actual dialogue with any actual Jews’ beliefs and practices. I admit this is a harsh judgment on a fine Catholic theologian of obviously good intentions, but a comparison of Ratzinger’s book with the consistently dialogical and illuminating writings on Hinduism by my unmistakably Catholic confrère Francis X. Clooney will illustrate what I mean. For my basic position on interreligious dialogue, see “Christian Faith and Theology in Encounter with Non-Christians: Profession? Protestation? Self-maintenance? Abandon?” Theological Studies 55 (1994): 46-65.

21. Hugo Rahner wrote: “Hippolytus . . . interpreted this [dance theme] with a view to the mysteries of the work of salvation, in words that mystical theology would be unable to forget, right down into the Middle Ages: What great, great mysteries! “See, my beloved (‘sister’s-boy’) has come skipping, he has arrived [see Song 2, 8].” What does ‘skipping’ imply? The swiftness of the Word! He skipped from heaven into a Virgin’s womb, [skipped] from a [sacred] womb onto the wood, [skipped] from the wood into Hades, [skipped] from Hades up to earth again in this [our] human flesh [Such good news: resurrection!], [then skipped] from the earth to heaven. [There he is seated at the Father’s right hand. And once again] from heaven [he will skip] to earth, [as he did] once to save, but this time to judge [offer the reward of recompense].” (Der spielende Mensch, [Einsiedeln: Johannes-Verlag 1952]; translated into English as Man at Play, or, Did You Ever Practise Eutrapelia? [London: Burns and Oates, 1965], 67-68.)

22. Christians wishing to face reality must learn to accept this most perplexing fact.

23. From Pascal’s Mémorial; text in Oeuvres complètes, ed. Jacques Chevalier, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 34 (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), 618. Pascal’s words, of course, raise the whole issue of the continuity between the God of Israel and the “God” of modernity. On this, see my tentative


25. Writing around 150 A.D., Justin Martyr, born in Palestine, on the West Bank of the Jordan, in what is now Nablus, is still prepared to celebrate Eucharist with the Ebionite (“poor men’s”) Jewish-Christian communities around Jerusalem, in spite of their adoptionism; Jesus, they say, was born of Joseph and Mary. Less than half a century later, in Lyons, Irenaeus writes he is no longer prepared to do so; the Ebionites are no longer catholic; Jesus, they say, was not possessed by the heavenly Christ till his baptism. Besides, they reject Paul and limit the gospels to Matthew and parts of Luke.


30. Zvi Kolitz was a born Lithuanian; Emmanuel Lévinas was of Lithuanian stock. Lévinas’s recognition of Kolitz’s story as a piece of authentically Jewish fiction must have been rooted in a deep-seated experience of kinship.

31. “La vraie humanité de l’homme et sa douceur virile entrent dans le monde avec les paroles sévères d’un Dieu exigeant; le spirituel ne se donne pas comme une substance sensible, mais par l’absence; Dieu est concret non par l’incarnation, mais par la Loi; et Sa grandeur n’est pas le souffle de son mystère sacré. Sa grandeur ne provoque pas crainte et tremblement, mais nous remplit de plus hautes pensées. Se voiler la face pour exiger de l’homme—surhumainement—toujours, avoir créé un homme capable de répondre, capable d’aborder son Dieu en créancier et non point toujours en débiteur—quelle grandeur vraiment divine!” Emmanuel Lévinas, *Difficile liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), 192-93. Incidentally (but not entirely
so), we post-World War II Christians are apt to hear in Lévinas’s words echoes of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s passionate rejection of “cheap grace”; see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, revised ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1963), esp. 61-86.

32. See *Difficile liberté*, 190: “Nous n’allons pas raconter tout cela, bien que le monde n’ait rien appris et ait tout oublié. Nous nous refusons à offrir en spectacle la Passion des Passions et à tirer une quelconque gloriele d’auteur ou de metteur en scène de ces cris inhumains. Ils retentissent et se répercutent, inextinguibles, à travers les éternités. Écoutons seulement la pensée qui s’articule en eux.” (“We are not going to recount that whole story, even though the world has learned nothing and forgotten everything. We pass when invited to stage the Passion of Passions as if it were a show; we refuse to derive even the smallest bit of author’s or play-director’s glory from those inhuman cries. They resound and reverberate, never to be silenced, through the everlasting ages. Let us listen only for the thought that articulates itself in them.”)


34. He spoke as follows: “gli ebrei rimangono carissimi a Dio, che li ha chiamati con una vocazione irrevocabile” (‘the Jews remain most dear to God; he gave them a vocation not to be revoked’).


36. “Il primo è che la Chiesa di Cristo scopre il suo legame con l’Ebraismo scrutando il suo proprio mistero. La religione ebraica non ci è estrinseca, ma in un certo qual modo, è intrinseca alla nostra religione. Abbiamo quindi verso di essa dei rapporti che non abbiamo con nessun’altra religione. Siete i nostri fratelli prediletti e, in un certo modo, si potrebbe dire i nostri fratelli maggiori” (“Firstly. Christ’s Church discovers its bond with Judaism by scrutinizing its own mystery. The Jewish religion is not foreign to us, but in some way intrinsic to our own religion. Thus, in regard to it, we have relationships that we do not have in regard to any other religion. You are our favorite brethren, and one could say you are in a way our elder brethren.”).

37. “Le tarissement des études hébraïques, depuis cent ans, nous a éloignés des sources. Le savoir qui se produit encore, ne repose pas sur une tradition intellectuelle. Il demeure autodidacte, même quand il n’est pas improvisé. Et n’être lu que par de moins savants que soi, quelle corruption
pour un écrivain! Sans censeurs, ni sanctions, les auteurs confondent cette non-résistance avec la liberté et cette liberté avec le trait de génie. Faut-il s’étonner que des lecteurs n’y croient pas et voient dans le judaïsme, auquel dans le monde s’attachent encore quelques millions d’impénitents, un amas d’arguties charnelles sans intérêt ni importance?” (Lévinas, Difficile liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme, 189.)