

Jews and Catholics: Beyond Apologies

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Something very significant has happened to Jewish-Christian relations, especially Jewish-Catholic relations. Last March, the Vatican issued the statement "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," which was prepared under the direction of Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, president of the Church's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, and introduced by Pope John Paul II himself (see FT, May 1998). The document received wide publicity and stirred up a good deal of controversy. My purpose here is to provide a Jewish reaction to the overall argument of this important document, to express agreement with most of it, but also to point out what I take to be some problems within it.

I first came to Jewish-Catholic relations in 1963, while studying for the rabbinate at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. I became a student—indeed, a close disciple—of the man who to the mind of many was the most important Jewish theologian to work in America, Abraham Joshua Heschel. At that time, Professor Heschel was engaged in serious discussions with the leadership of the Catholic Church, especially with the late Augustin Cardinal Bea, in preparation for the Second Vatican Council. In 1965, the Council issued the landmark declaration *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time"), which outlined the Church's view of Judaism and the Jewish people, undoubtedly the most significant such statement in modern times. I remember how hopeful my teacher was for this new attitude that was emerging in the Church, and the tremendous chance he was taking in becoming the chief Jewish advisor to the Church in this enterprise. Cardinal Bea and Pope Paul VI were also taking a chance, and for similar reasons. Professor Heschel was subjected to harsh criticism—public

and private—by a number of Jewish scholars for assuming that a new relationship was even possible with the Catholic Church. And the leaders of the Church received criticism from those who wondered, since the Jewish people had rejected Jesus as the Messiah, what kind of positive relationship there could be with them.

We are all the beneficiaries of those chances taken more than thirty years ago. Anyone who has watched what has happened from then until now cannot help but marvel at how far we have moved from suspicion to a level much deeper, beyond just good will and tolerance. But the whole Western world and the Jewish people in particular still live very much in the shadow of the Holocaust, the systematic program of mass extermination that resulted in the murder of six million Jews. The question must thus be raised on both sides: Just what role in that tragedy did the Catholic Church play? Until we engage in the most searching discussion of this question, we may very well be at an impasse in this new relationship. The recent statement of the Vatican is certainly a major step in that direction.

With few exceptions, the reaction of the Jewish leaders who have access to the media was negative. The *New York Times* (which although not an "official" Jewish publication certainly reflects and indeed influences a certain type of American Jewish opinion) editorially branded the Vatican statement a whitewash, a rationalization of the conduct of the Church during the Holocaust. The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith expressed much the same disappointment. This view is not unanimous in the Jewish community. Rabbi James Rudin, who heads the department of the American Jewish Committee that deals with Jewish-Christian relations, issued a much more positive and hopeful response. However, Rudin's reaction seems to be a minority voice, at least so far.

What is the reason for this Jewish criticism? After

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all, the statement did condemn the Holocaust, it did condemn anti-Semitism, and it even spoke of "the sinful behavior" of certain members of the Church. Shouldn't Jews be happy to hear all this from the Vatican? Isn't this an important way of putting the Holocaust in the kind of perspective that enables us to get on with our lives, not by forgetting but by remembering? My own view is that the Jewish response is largely mistaken, and that it reflects a misunderstanding not only of Catholic theology but of Jewish theology as well. The Jewish leaders' reactions were not just uncharitable, they were also unjust.

II

The part of the Vatican statement that elicited the most negative Jewish response was a quotation from a speech first made by John Paul II in Rome on October 31, 1997. "In the Christian world—I do not say on the part of the Church as such—erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability have circulated for too long, engendering feelings of hostility toward this people." It is ironic that the Pope should be the focus of criticism, inasmuch as there has been no other pontiff in modern times, perhaps in all history, who has done more to develop rapprochement with the Jewish people and Judaism. Karol Wojtyla as a philosopher and a theologian has been deeply interested in the connection between Judaism and the teaching of the Catholic Church for most of his life. Furthermore, Karol Wojtyla has been intimately related to Jews all of his life, beginning with his childhood in Poland, where Jews were among his closest associates. Indeed, the Pope speaks Yiddish. (I know that for a fact because in 1985, when twelve of us had a private audience with him during a conference to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, I briefly spoke with him in Yiddish.) And in the face of much opposition, it is during this papacy that the Vatican has established formal diplomatic relations with the State of Israel. So, it would seem that Jews have had nothing but good from this Pope. Why, then, has there been such consternation over this one sentence quoting John Paul II in the Vatican statement?

The criticism seems to be about the fact that the Pope did not apologize for "the Church as such." Those who criticized the Church—and the Pope—have for years placed great hope on the utterance of an official apology by the Church "as such." But in the Pope's statement the Church seems to have separated herself as an institution from her condemnation of the behavior of those of her sons and daughters who cooperated with and endorsed the Nazi program of persecution and murder of the Jews. We must understand just what the Pope meant by "the Church as such." If we do that, we can arrive at a dif-

ferent perspective on this statement, and it can be a Jewish perspective properly informed by an understanding of the Jewish tradition. Jewish statements that are not informed by our own tradition are not really "Jewish" in any essential sense, but simply express the views of a group of people who happen to be Jews. None of the negative reactions I have seen to date has been informed by the Jewish tradition—though I do not rule out the possibility that an authentically Jewish negative response could be so formulated.

When a Catholic speaks of "the Church," let alone when the occupant of the Throne of Peter speaks of "the Church," he can mean one of two things. On the one hand, the Church is undoubtedly a collection of fallible human beings. The Church is made up of her members, the parts of her body, so to speak. At this level, it is certainly recognized that these fallible members of the Church can do either good or evil as is their free human choice. On the other hand, when the Pope speaks of the Church "as such," he is not speaking about a fallible collection of human beings; instead he is speaking about what the Church understands as her *magisterium*, her teaching authority, which Catholics see as expressing God's will beginning with Scripture and extending into the ongoing development of Church doctrine. At one level the Church is a human association in the world, but at another level the Church is *mater et magistra*—"mother and teacher" of her members. Understanding the Church at either of these levels, however, one can see why an "apology" is inappropriate. Later, we will examine the word the document did use, a word of far more theological significance than "apology" ever was or will be.

Let us first take the Church as a group of human beings, which is certainly the easier thing for a non-Catholic like myself to do. Now just *who* would apologize to *whom*? If one takes a Catholic who actually participated in the Nazi atrocities against the Jews, how could such a person possibly apologize? How do you apologize to someone in whose murder you were a participant? In order to apologize, you have to make your apology to someone who is capable of accepting your apology. But those who were murdered are hardly in a position to absolve anyone. And who am I as a Jew, who was only a potential victim of Nazi murder, to forgive someone who asks my forgiveness for what he or she did to Jews now dead? How can I exonerate somebody for what he or she did to somebody else? Wouldn't that be what Christians call "cheap grace"?

There is a parallel to this in the Jewish tradition. When the Sanhedrin functioned in ancient Israel and had the power of capital punishment, a criminal about to be executed for murder had the right to confess his or her crime and assert that the death to be undergone was to be "atonement for all my sins." This

was seen as one's reconciliation with God in the world-to-come, but it did not release the criminal from the punishment he or she deserved in this world. I am reminded of the report that Hans Frank, the Nazi governor of Poland, when he was about to be executed after having been sentenced to death at Nuremberg in 1946, said that a thousand deaths would not atone for the crimes he committed. But that is between Hans Frank and God. We who have survived have no right to forgive him for what he did; we have no right to accept any apologies from him or anyone like him. On the other hand, if an apology is made by people who did not commit any such crimes, directly or even indirectly, and who do not even sympathize with the murderers, then what would they be apologizing for?

The Jewish tradition on this point is quite clear: We do not believe in inherited guilt. Indeed, when the Church declared in *Nostra Aetate* in 1965 that she no longer regarded the Jews as collectively guilty of "deicide," that is the murder of Jesus as the son of God, she was making a point she now holds in common with the Jewish moral tradition. Each person is responsible only for his or her own sins. Even the Christian doctrine of "original sin" does not mean that humans are punished for the sin of the first human pair but, rather, that humans seem inevitably to copy the sin of the first human pair. Thus the Talmud asks about how God can in all justice "visit the sins of the fathers on the sons" (Exodus 20:5). It answers that children are punished for their parents' sins only when they themselves willingly identify with them and repeat them by their own free choice. Justice, whether human or divine, must recognize with the prophet Ezekiel that only "the person who sins shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20). Thus at either of these levels of humanly applicable justice, an apology makes no sense. At either level, an apology could only be empty rhetoric.

But what about the second notion of the Church, namely, "the Church as such"? This refers to the magisterium, the teaching authority of the Church. Now the teaching authority of the Church does not refer to what we usually mean by "teaching," that is, imparting information. Magisterium means teaching that calls upon the one taught to do something or believe something that is essential for the very existence of that person within the community for whom that teaching is authoritative. When the Church is understood "as such," then she cannot possibly apologize based on her own theological assumptions. For if the Church at this level were to apologize, that would presuppose a criterion of truth and right higher than the revelation upon which the Church bases its authority, the revelation that the Church claims as her own. In other words, the Church cannot criticize herself based on criteria external to her own revelation and tradition because the Church not only

claims what she teaches is true, she claims that what she teaches is the truth per se, the ultimate criterion whereby everything else is either true or false, right or wrong. So, for example, the great encyclical of Pope John Paul II is called *Veritatis Splendor*, "the splendor of truth." That is the way the Church presents herself in and to the world.

Now, of course, presentation of oneself as *the* truth is highly offensive to people of a largely secular mentality. That is much of the modern charge against all religion. Religions, in this view, seem to arrogate to themselves divine authority. They seem to hold themselves above judgment by "impartial" criteria. This lies at the heart of much of the criticism of the "authoritarian" character of the Catholic Church. But on this score, Judaism is no different. Even though Judaism and Catholicism make some very different—and in some cases mutually exclusive—claims, the logic of the way the Jewish tradition makes its claims and the way the magisterium of the Church makes its claims is virtually identical. When Jews thank God for giving us the Torah (by which we mean not only the Five Books of Moses but the whole authoritative tradition of the Jewish people throughout history), we speak of *torat emet*, which means not just "true teaching" but that "the Torah is *the* truth." The Jewish tradition presents itself as the greatest revelation of God's truth that can be known in the world. That is why we call ourselves "the chosen people." It is not that we choose ourselves. It means that we have been elected by God and given the Torah. The law of heaven has now come down to earth to a singular community entrusted with its teaching. This does not mean we should not share that truth with other people, nor does it mean this truth has nothing in common with other sources of truth. We do not reject science; we do not reject the proper findings of human reason. But a Jew who is committed to the Torah as the word of God cannot in good faith criticize anything taught within the Jewish tradition from a standpoint external to that tradition. Traditionalists like myself have criticized liberal versions of Judaism for in one way or another judging Judaism based on criteria outside Judaism itself, for that is simply contrary to the way the tradition has always defined itself in the past.

That does not mean that religious traditions like Judaism and Catholicism are incapable of any critical development or cannot ever change their minds. Religious traditions are in a constant state of development and renewed self-understanding. But the criteria of development, the standards for change, are internal. If we discover that something we taught in the past now appears not to be God's will, or is even contrary to God's will, then we must discover again the fundamental principles of our revelation and tradition and reinterpret our teaching so that we do not again lead our people astray. Thus the rabbinic principle that "the Sages be careful in their words" means

that even correct teaching, when not properly formulated, can lead people to conclusions that are really unwarranted by the tradition. They can lead to "erroneous and unjust interpretations"; in fact, these are the very words the Pope used when speaking in a self-critical mode about Catholic teaching, words repeated in the document on the Holocaust.

So the charge that the Pope could not criticize "the Church as such" is true yet mistaken. Of course, the Pope cannot criticize the Church the way an uncommitted outsider might criticize her. The Church, like the Jewish tradition upon which she is largely patterned, can only look inward for guidance. The only criticism, then, that could be made either by an insider or a sympathetic outsider is if either the Jewish tradition or the Church as such refused to engage in any self-criticism at all. But, clearly, if that were the stance of the Church, a document like "We Remember" or *Nostra Aetate* could never have been written. That is how the Pope, when he spoke in the synagogue in Rome (by his own unprecedented invitation), condemned anti-Semitism: "at any time from any source," which means that when anti-Semitism has come out of Church teaching, those who so taught it are to be considered in error by the internal criteria of the teaching authority of the Church itself.

Much the same is the case with reappraisals of morally charged issues within the Jewish tradition, which enables Jews who know that tradition and the way it operates to appreciate something quite analogous in another tradition. A good example of this type of reappraisal is the way Jews have been dealing with the question of the role of women in Judaism. Such reappraisal would be false to the internal integrity of the Jewish tradition if it simply assumed that because the role of women had changed so radically in the surrounding culture, therefore it ought to change within Judaism. One must look into the tradition itself for sources for a process of careful and responsible reinterpretation. That is not to deny that religious traditions are, to a certain extent, influenced by what is happening in the surrounding culture, even when the culture is largely indifferent or even hostile to these traditions. Nevertheless, those external influences can only stimulate thinkers within a tradition to be sensitive to some issues more than others, issues for which there are already sources within the tradition itself.

To make this analogy between Jewish and Catholic moral logic is not to say that the issue of the Holocaust for the Church and the issue of women for Judaism have the same moral gravity. The analogy simply illustrates how much of the logic employed in the criticism of the Church on this issue could be similarly employed against Judaism. Of course, it might well be true that many of the Jewish critics of the Vatican statement on the Holocaust think Judaism can

and should be subjected to the same type of criticism they have leveled against the Church. But if that is so, I find it rather disingenuous that such critics would label their criticism in any way "Jewish," unless, that is, they regard the Jews as nothing but a contemporary political interest group, having no tradition from which to draw authority to make any kind of authentic Jewish critique.

When one sees how moral logic within religious traditions like Judaism and Catholicism operates, then it is possible to understand why it is not an apology that is called for. Apologies are cheap. It seems that everyone is apologizing for just about everything in the past these days. No, this is not an apology nor should it be. Instead, it is a process of profound introspection. As such, Jews can appreciate the way the Church, and especially the Pope, are grappling with this issue in the way Jews grapple with this and similar issues. Indeed, as regards the Holocaust, as current scholarship is showing, we Jews have great moral questions of our own to confront and judge.

If, then, the Church, either as an association of fallible human beings or as a community claiming authority from the revelation of God, could not and should not utter an "apology," what should it be doing? Well, the statement says it is "an act of repentance." And then, *mirabile dictu*, in parenthesis we see the Hebrew word for repentance: *teshuvah*. Here the Church has quite consciously and deliberately chosen a central term straight out of the Jewish theological tradition. Why an act of *teshuvah*? It is because, as the statement goes on to say, "as members of the Church, we are linked to the sins as well the merits of all her children." This means a certain kind of collective responsibility. Of course, in a literal moral sense, I am not responsible for somebody else's sins, and so a Catholic today who is horrified by Nazism and all it stood for and wrought in the world is certainly not responsible for what Hitler did, simply because Hitler was baptized a Catholic. It is not that person's responsibility according to any moral logic I know.

However, both Judaism and Catholicism are "covenantal"; for each, the relationship with God is primarily a communal affair, not merely a relationship between an individual person and God. Human beings are essentially communal creatures. If we are to be related to God in the fullness of our humanity, it has to be in the context of a community. In the covenant, God chooses a particular community for a unique relationship. Traditional Jews can recognize this point quite readily. For example, virtually all Jewish prayer is uttered by plural subjects, "we" not "I." And that is the case even when a Jew is unable to pray with a congregation. He or she is always part of the congregation, even when unable to be physically part of it.

In a covenantal religion, the ties are not only between the community and God. For these very ties with God undergird the ties between the members of the community itself. These ties within the community are much more intense and long lasting than the ties among those in our largely secular society and culture. In a covenanted community, even though one is not *morally* responsible for the sins of fellow members of the community, there still is an *existential* sense of collective sorrow and shame when other members of the community—even those as estranged from the community as the Nazis were—commit sins, especially sins having great public consequences.

In talmudic teaching, “every Jew is responsible for every other Jew”; that is what it means to be part of a covenanted community. I remember how my grandmother would occasionally read in the newspaper that some Jew or other had committed a crime—someone she didn’t even know—and she would express her sense of sorrow and shame at what that person had done. She felt that what had been done personally affected her, even if by standards of ordinary morality her reaction would have to be judged irrational. And in the same way, by contrast, she would take pride when some Jew or other—also someone she didn’t know—did something that had benefited others. Although my grandmother was not a learned woman, her attitude reflected, in the form of folk wisdom, what the Rabbis called *qiddush ha-shem* (“the sanctification of God”) or *hillul ha-shem* (“the profanation of God”). When Jews do good in the world, it reflects well on God who elects them for the covenant; and when Jews do evil in the world, it reflects badly on God. With this in mind, we Jews can see how the Church, which after all learned about covenant from us, is engaged in the covenantal act of repentance, of *teshuvah*.

As regards the Holocaust, the Church feels sorrow and shame about those of her faithful who did not respond properly to Nazism, or who did nothing more than sympathize with what was being done to the victims of Nazi persecution. That sorrow and shame is not because of a mere association of baptized Catholics with Nazis and Nazi sympathizers; it seems to be sorrow and shame that the teaching authority of the Church did not do enough to encourage such persons to resist the evil to which they succumbed. In other words, perhaps the Church did not do a good enough job of teaching the principles of Christianity to many of her sons and daughters. This failure has led the Church to reiterate its condemnations of racism and anti-Semitism.

The Church learns from her mistakes, and she seems to be doing this by an ongoing process of introspection more prolonged and more painful than any mere apology. An apology under these circumstances would either be a way of getting the Holo-

caust “out of the way,” or it would be an act of moral suicide. That is, again, because no religious community can judge itself by someone else’s standards and still exercise its existential claims upon its own faithful. A covenanted community engages in *teshuvah*, literally a “return.” Those responsible for teaching the tradition must constantly be returning to its true, revealed sources, always discovering how to interpret them better and make their principles more intelligible and more effective.

To expect an apology rather than *teshuvah* is to call for something quite cheap when there is the possibility of something much more precious. An apology is an event; *teshuvah* is a process. An apology gets us “over” the past, putting it permanently behind us; returning is always on the horizon. Jews pray three times daily for God to enable us to return to Him and for Him to forgive us the sins that have placed a barrier between God and us. To be a member of a covenanted community means to acknowledge the sins of all one’s fellow members. This is an awesome covenantal responsibility, beyond the demands of ordinary morality. Indeed, one can only bear such responsibility when one believes that the community has been elected by God and is the object of God’s special, supernatural concern. What all of this shows, I hope, is that only Jews who are theologically sensitive can appreciate what the Church is trying to do in this statement. Of course, Jews have a different view than do Catholics about *how* God makes contact with us and *what* that contact consists of. By properly understanding what we hold in common with Catholics, we are better able to understand what makes us different from them. To assume we have nothing in common is as erroneous and spiritually dangerous as to assume that there is nothing that separates us.

III

The Vatican statement is very significant, not only because it is immediately beneficial to Jews, but even more importantly because it is part of a larger process of the Church’s coming to grips with her Jewish origins and her coexistence with the Jewish people until the end of history. I must state, though, in a spirit of friendly response, what I find lacking in the statement. This criticism is neither moral nor theological, but rather rhetorical. On one point in particular, I think the statement tries to say too much and thus does not say it well.

The statement raises the issue of the behavior of Christians who did resist Nazi policies, especially Nazi policies against the Jews. Thus it cites the 1937 encyclical of Pope Pius XI, *Mit brennender Sorge* (“with burning concern”), which condemned Nazi racism quite explicitly. And this was an encyclical, an official statement of Church teaching—written in German rather than the usual Latin—making its

point directly to the Nazi powers in Germany. It seems quite likely that the actual author of this encyclical was Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli, the Vatican Secretary of State, who was to become Pope Pius XII two years later in 1939. The Vatican statement goes on, especially in a long footnote, to note and defend the record of Pius XII with respect to the Holocaust.

There is a tremendous historical debate about Pius XII. On the one hand, it is well known that the Pope saved a number of Jewish lives and encouraged others who were doing likewise. On the other hand, Rolf Hochhuth's 1963 play *The Deputy*, which builds on the plausible assumption that the Pope did know about the mass extermination of the Jews from 1942 on, raised the question of why the Pope didn't publicly condemn what the Nazis were doing to the Jews. On that question, the jury is still out. If we assume that the Pope knew what was happening, then the question is whether his public silence was an act of moral cowardice or an act of moral prudence.

Those who make the case for moral cowardice argue that the Pope feared to upset the Nazis under whose control he was living during the German occupation of Italy. Furthermore, he had always seemed more concerned with the danger of communism, with its explicit anti-Christian and anti-Catholic bias, than he had been concerned with Nazism. After all, wasn't it the future Pope who, as Cardinal Pacelli the Vatican Secretary of State, had negotiated the concordat of 1933 with the new Nazi regime in Germany, an act that gave this questionable new regime much international respectability? And wasn't the Pope a good deal less reticent in condemning the evil of communism than he was in condemning the evil of Nazism, as evidenced by the fact that after the war he excommunicated any Catholic who voted for Communist candidates, something he never did to Catholic supporters of Nazism?

Those who make the case for moral prudence note that the Pope reasonably feared that many other Catholics, especially the clergy (who would be taken as his agents), would be killed if he spoke out. There is also, of course, the question of whether public criticism by the Pope of Nazi policies would have had any positive effect. It might well even have been counterproductive.

Because moral judgment in this case requires much more historical inquiry, one can hardly be conclusive about either judgment. The case is further complicated by the fact that we are dealing with a moral judgment that if unfavorable would be for a sin of omission rather than a sin of commission. No one could say that the Pope actually spoke or acted positively on behalf of the Nazi regime (as did some bishops), and certainly not on behalf of the crimes of the Nazis.

It is far more difficult to fix blame on somebody for what he or she could have done but did not do than it is to affix blame on somebody for what he or she should not have done but did do. Of course, that does not mean we cannot condemn sins of omission. We would morally condemn somebody who would, as Scripture puts it, "stand idly by the blood of [his] neighbor" (Leviticus 19:16). But it is not clear that that judgment can legitimately be made in this case.

We can hope that in time historians will be able to allow us to decide whether Pius XII was blameworthy, praiseworthy, or somewhere in-between. That cannot be done now. For that reason, and for the sake of presenting an undiluted theological-moral statement, the Vatican document would have been stronger and less open to the wrong kind of criticism from those hostile to anything Catholic if it had simply not raised an issue it could not possibly have treated adequately.

IV

Finally, the document asserts, "The Nazi regime was determined to exterminate the very existence of the Jewish people, a people called to witness to the one God and the law of the covenant." No Jewish statement could have enunciated more precisely why Jewish people exist in the world. Jews are committed to survival. Much of our language, uttered both to ourselves and to others, is the language of survival. Surely, that is quite understandable considering what the Jewish people have suffered, especially in this century. But survival for Jews is not enough. Jews always have to understand *for what*—better, *for whom*—we are surviving. Perhaps the true source of the Nazi venom against the Jewish people is that for which or for Whom the Jews are to survive.

This statement of the Catholic Church recognizes the chosenness of the Jewish people, the vocation of the Jewish people, a fact nothing short of *qiddush ha-shem*, "the sanctification of the name of God." If the Church, from the top down, recognizes this as the reason for the survival and continuing strength of the Jewish people, then, despite any reservations, Jews have to see this document as making a positive contribution to the always complex relationship between the Jewish people and the Catholic Church. It is a document Jews can and should embrace because its theological argument and conclusions have a resonance in our own theology and law. It is by no means the last word—nothing is in this world—but its integrity and wisdom should not be missed because of moral and political antagonism stemming from those having less integrity and less wisdom. ^[2]