

PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

**Cracks in the Theology of Contempt:
The French Roots of *Nostra Aetate***

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The fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) has seen renewed scholarly interest in this epochal encounter between the Roman Catholic Church and the challenges of modernity. A number of scholars have devoted increased attention to the influence of the Second World War and the Holocaust on the documents of Vatican II, particularly the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, or *Nostra Aetate*.¹ This declaration fundamentally reconceived Catholic-Jewish relations, a reappraisal that had begun more than twenty years earlier in a time of dictatorship, war, and genocide. Recent scholarship shows that during and after the period of the Third Reich, Central European converts to Catholicism challenged the Church to acknowledge the evil of anti-Jewish hatred. Like John (Johannes) Oesterreicher, most of these individuals were converts from Judaism and they struggled to make the Church repudiate centuries of anti-Judaism and combat the consequent

¹ See Stephen Schloesser, "Against Forgetting: Memory, History, Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 67 (2006): 275-319; Neville Lamdan and Alberto Melloni, eds., *Nostra Aetate: Origins, Promulgation, Impact on Jewish-Catholic Relations* (Berlin: LIT, 2007); Marianne Moyaert and Didier Pollefeyt, eds., *Never Revoked: Nostra Aetate as Ongoing Challenge for Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010); Elizabeth Groppe, "Revisiting Vatican II's Theology of the People of God after Forty-five Years of Catholic-Jewish dialogue," *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 586-620.

emergence of racist antisemitism.² While acknowledging the importance of these German-speaking converts, this article adds a new perspective, highlighting the importance of key French figures and events, a perspective that must be included in any historical-theological appraisal of the background to *Nostra Aetate*.

The French roots of *Nostra Aetate* begin in Paris in the first decade of the twentieth century. Like their Central European counterparts, many of these French thinkers and activists were also converts to Catholicism and “border transgressors,” to use John Connelly’s term, men and women who maintained a complex sense of religious identity.³ They exhibited an early willingness to think outside the historically Christian prejudice and contempt for Jews and look beyond the prevailing racist ideologies of their time. At the forefront of this community is the devout, yet anticlerical novelist Léon Bloy, who returned to his childhood Catholicism as an adult. Bloy’s imperfect and sometimes violent rhetoric undeniably expressed revulsion at the antisemitism manifest during the Dreyfus Affair.⁴ Indeed, Connelly writes of Bloy that the “path to Vatican II begins with him.”⁵ Bloy mentored Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, both converts themselves (Jacques from Protestantism and Raïssa from Judaism), who cultivated a philosemitic circle in the interwar period. As the Dark Years

² John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933-1965* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).

³ Connelly, 65 and 287.

⁴ For more on Bloy and Judaism see Philippe Chenaux, “Léon Bloy et sa postérité,” in *Juifs et Chrétiens: Entre Ignorance, Hostilité et Rapprochement (1898-1998)*, ed. Annette Becker, Danièle Delmaire, and Frédéric Gugelot (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Lille, 2002), 47-58; Brenna Moore, “Philosemitism Under a Darkening Sky: Judaism in the French Catholic Revival,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 99 (2013), 262-287.

⁵ Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother*, 185.

of the 1940s approached, this circle widened to include an eclectic mix of converts, devout Catholics, and practicing Jews.⁶

Another insider-outsider intellectual, the secular Jewish historian Jules Isaac, only came to understand Jewish scriptures through a deep immersion in Christian sources, principally the New Testament. His uncovering of the origins of what he called the “teaching of contempt” had a decisive influence on the drafting of *Nostra Aetate*. Indeed one scholar writes that with this declaration, “Isaac’s mission was largely realized,” a quintessential outsider having influenced a number of insiders within the Church, including Pope John XXIII.⁷ On the other hand, Henri de Lubac, at least at first glance, would seem to embody the *insider* French Catholic perfectly. But even though he was a Jesuit priest, theologian, and from an aristocratic French family, de Lubac worked closely with French Jewish converts such as Abbé Glasberg. In that wartime center of Christian resistance, Lyon, a series of projects took shape that aimed at Jewish-Christian friendship and theological collaboration. De Lubac’s friendships and activities enabled him to serve as a leading theologian in the Christian re-appraisal of Jewish sources and offer unambiguous denunciations of antisemitism which were published clandestinely during the Occupation. De Lubac is known as the pioneer of *ressourcement* or “return to the sources,” the impulse that provided the theological orientation for Vatican II. De Lubac’s theological commitment to *ressourcement* focused on the retrieval of the spiritual texts of Christian premodernity, a theological approach not known for its entanglements with the tortured time of war and Holocaust, or as a response to the widespread Catholic acquiescence to antisemitism and Nazism. But on closer examination, the *ressourcement* impulse is

⁶ Jean-Luc Barré, *Jacques and Raïssa Maritain: Beggars for Heaven*, trans. Bernard Doering (South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 1999), 147-79; Nora Possenti, “Au foyer du Meudon,” *Cahiers Jacques Maritain* 51 (December 2005): 11-31.

⁷ Marco Morselli, “Jules Isaac and the Origins of *Nostra Aetate*,” in Lamdan and Melloni, *Nostra Aetate*, 27.

incomprehensible outside of the painful setting of 1940-44, “those terrible years” as de Lubac called them.⁸

An appreciation of some key figures in their French theological and cultural setting enables a richer understanding of *Nostra Aetate*'s condemnation of antisemitism. The Conciliar document proclaimed solidarity with Jews arising from the “spiritual patrimony common to Jews and Christians.”⁹ French “border transgressors”¹⁰ helped make this emphasis on unity possible. Some of the unanswered questions about *Nostra Aetate*, what some have called its “open eschatological vision,”¹¹ can be traced to these Catholic and Jewish figures in France. In their mind, their project of Christian-Jewish reconciliation was only beginning, with several major issues left unresolved, issues that still linger for contemporary Catholics.

Jacques and Raïssa Maritain: Impossible Antisemitism

Although his views underwent considerable development, Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) has been lauded as a rare Catholic voice condemning antisemitism before the Shoah.¹² A

⁸ For a wonderful reading of Vatican II in this direction, see *Schloesser, “Against Forgetting”*; “terrible years,” from Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances That Occasioned His Writings*, trans. Anne Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 55. See also Joseph A. Komonchak, “Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990), 579-602.

⁹ *Nostra Aetate*, paragraph 4.
http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

¹⁰ Connelly, 65 and 287.

¹¹ John Connelly, “Response,” in “Forum Essay [on *From Enemy to Brother*],” *The Catholic Historical Review* 98 (2012): 764.

¹² In 1997, France’s Catholic bishops made a statement of repentance at the former internment camp at Drancy, and paid tribute to an early opponent of antisemitism: “Before the war, Jacques Maritain, both in articles and in lectures, tried to open Christians up to different perspectives on the Jewish people. He also warned against the perversity of the anti-Semitism that was developing.” Catholic Bishops of France, “Declaration of Repentance,” September 30, 1997, www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta

disciple of Dreyfusard poet Charles Péguy, he converted to Catholicism in 1906 along with his Russian-born wife Raïssa (1883-1960), a Jewish refugee from the Tsarist pogroms.¹³ The Maritains' godfather, mystic novelist Léon Bloy (1846-1917), set in motion the profound ambivalences that would characterize the Maritains' subsequent thinking on the Jewish question. Bloy taught them that "Israel blocks history, as a dam blocks a river, to raise its level," pointing to the Chosen People's undying vocation to stimulate the conscience of humanity.¹⁴ Envisioning himself a tireless opponent of antisemitism, Bloy insisted that Christianity must keep in mind its Jewish roots. But Bloy also employed violent imagery and denigrating representations of Jews that would shock today's readers. For example, he asserted that the unwillingness of Jews to accept Jesus as their savior meant that "they have Him nailed strongly enough to the Cross that He cannot come down without their permission."¹⁵ These contradictions cannot easily be resolved.

Jacques Maritain long retained Bloy's view of a Jewish mission to unsettle the world. During the 1920s the author of *Antimoderne* consorted with extreme right wing antisemites such as Action Française leader Charles Maurras. The 1926 papal condemnation of Maurras' movement prompted a shift on Maritain's part toward Christian personalism and

elements/texts/documents/catholic/french_repentance.htm (accessed February 10, 2005). See also Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "Jacques Maritain et les Juifs. Réflexions sur un parcours," in Jacques Maritain, *L'impossible antisémitisme, précédé de Jacques Maritain et les Juifs par Pierre Vidal-Naquet* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2003), 7-57.

¹³ On Raïssa Maritain, see Brenna Moore, *Sacred Dread: Raïssa Maritain, the Allure of Suffering, and the French Catholic Revival (1905-1945)* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Philippe Chenaux, "Léon Bloy et sa postérité," in *Juifs et Chrétiens: entre ignorance, hostilité et rapprochement*, eds. Annette Becker, Danielle Delmaire, and Frédéric Gugelot (Lille: Université Charles-de-Gaule-Lille 3, 2002), 48-52.

¹⁵ Léon Bloy, *Le Salut par les Juifs* (Paris: Éditions G. Crès, 1906). The Maritains subsidized this reprint of the book, originally published in 1892.

outspoken philosemitism.¹⁶ This shift in attitude was not free of problematic views about Jews. A 1937 essay branded anti-semitism an affront to Christian conscience, yet reiterated an old anti-Judaic trope: “the Jews chose the world; they have loved it; their suffering comes from having been held to their choice.”¹⁷ Nonetheless, Maritain also warned of an “evil fire that consumes peoples... extermination and death... a general massacre of the race of Moses and Jesus.”¹⁸ Before the war, his ambivalent philosemitism still balanced a practical anti-antisemitism with theological anti-Judaism.

Although his wife Raïssa never fully severed ties with Judaism, her thinking on the Jewish question also underwent significant developments. Shortly after she converted to Catholicism, her earliest writings relied on the classic binary opposition between the true Israelite (as actual or incipient Christian) and the false, carnal Jew.¹⁹ But by the early 1930s, her understanding evolved considerably, and Raïssa came to

¹⁶ Differing interpretations of Maritain’s early writings on the Jewish question are offered by the following: John Hellman, “The Jews in the ‘New Middle Ages’: Jacques Maritain’s Anti-Semitism in its Times,” in *Jacques Maritain and the Jews*, ed. Robert Royal (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 89-103; Robert A. Ventresca, “Jacques Maritain and the Jewish Question: Theology, Identity, and Politics,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 2 (2007); and Richard Francis Crane, “Surviving Maurras: Jacques Maritain’s Jewish Question,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 42 (2008): 385-411. Studies that focus more broadly on Maritain during the interwar years include Guillaume de Thieulloy, *Le Chevalier de l’Absolu: Jacques Maritain entre mystique et politique* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 2005); Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919-1933* (Buffalo, NY: University of Toronto Press, 2005); Philippe Chenaux, *Entre Maurras et Maritain. Une génération intellectuelle catholique (1920-1930)* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1999); and Bernard E. Doering, *Jacques Maritain and the French Catholic Intellectuals* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983).

¹⁷ Jacques Maritain, “L’impossible antisémitisme” in Maritain, *L’impossible antisémitisme*, 78.

¹⁸ “Les Juifs parmi les nations,” in *Ibid*, 103-4.

¹⁹ Raïssa Maritain, “Récit de ma conversion,” in *Oeuvres complètes de Jacques et Raïssa Maritain* (Freiburg : Editions Universitaires, 1982-2000), XV: 827-37. [hereafter cited as *OCJRM*].

be seen by some members of their intellectual circuit as a “pioneer of Jewish-Christian relations.”²⁰ In 1935, she published *Histoire d’Abraham ou La sainteté dans l’état de nature*, an exegetical reading of Genesis to explore the inner life of Abraham.²¹ Raïssa portrayed Abraham (whom Bloy had once portrayed as an “incomparable blackguard”²²) as the first in a long line of mystical heroes whose faith emerged from the dark night of the soul. She thus pushed back on prevailing discourses in Europe that claimed the figures from the Hebrew Bible lacked interiority. She dismantled the classic accusation of Jewish legalism by showing how Abraham’s fidelity to the law is grounded in love, and Abraham consequently becomes the figure who “unites the Old and New Testaments.” She read the later Pauline notion of law as rooted not only in the gospel and but also Deuteronomy.²³ Raïssa’s essay was republished in the postwar period, expanding the conversation her friend Oesterreicher, later one of the drafters of *Nostra Aetate*, had been initiating. When Monsignor Oesterreicher set up an institute of Judeo-Christian studies at Seton Hall University in 1953, he launched a series, *The Bridge*, dedicated to exploring the theme “Spiritually we are all Semites”- the famous 1938 words of Pius XI. The inaugural 1955 volume included a revised version of Raïssa’s *Histoire d’Abraham* published in English under the title “Abraham and the Ascent of Conscience.”²⁴

In *Histoire d’Abraham*, Raïssa explored Jewish-Christian unity through common spiritual lineage, but during the war years, she recast it in more personal language. In 1941

²⁰ Helene Iswolski, *Light before Dusk; a Russian Catholic in France* (New York: Longmans, Greene, 1942), 179.

²¹ Raïssa Maritain, *Histoire d’Abraham ou La sainteté dans l’état de nature* (Geneva: Nova et Vetera: Revue catholique pour la Suisse romande, 1935), reprinted in *OCJRM* 14:568–617.

²² Bloy, *Le Salut par les Juifs*, 25.

²³ Raïssa Maritain, *OCJRM* 14:589.

²⁴ Raïssa Maritain, “Abraham and the Ascent of Conscience,” in *The Bridge: A Yearbook of Judaeo-Christian Studies*, ed. John M. Oesterreicher (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955), 23–53.

and 1944, she wrote her famous two-volume memoirs *Les grandes amitiés* where she presented a vivid recollection of her Jewish childhood in Russia. She painted Jewish family life in strokes that humanized Jewish families, and rendered their household piety as quite similar to Christianity.²⁵ Among the many reviews of her work and letters she received, one priest wrote that her portrait of Jewish household piety “reads like a story of the Last Supper in the Gospel. In fact the rite was the same. No good Catholic could possibly take part on hatred or stimulating the hatred of a people who still observe this ritual performed by Our Lord.”²⁶ The portrait, as a one reader put it, helped excise the “repulsion” he had previously felt for Jews.²⁷ Raïssa placed a footnote among this material to make a direct connection to the horrible events of her day: “Of the 9,300,000 Jews who lived in the various countries of Europe before this war, less than 5,000,000 remain. The Nazis have killed all the rest.”²⁸ They would kill almost two million more.

While in exile in America with her husband and her sister, Raïssa also wrote a handful of chilling poems. As the horrific violence across the Atlantic occurred, she established herself as a voice of Catholic lamentation. In 1943, her long poem, “Deus Excelsus Terribilis,” she described Europe as “shattered, fouled, ravaged/ Famine there, wasting bodies/ The children who will not grow up/ Adolescents who are in slavery/ In prison in captivity.” Later, “Four million Jews—and more—have suffered death/ Without consolation./ Those who are left are promised to the slaughter./ It is Your lineage, Lord, which is exterminated!/ Israel was led to the butchery/ Flock without shepherd without fold/ They were tracked down like game/ In the streets of towns and villages.”²⁹ In this and other poems,

²⁵ Raïssa Maritain, *Grandes amitiés*, *OCJRM* 14: 636–37.

²⁶ Rev. Maurice Pierquin, Canada, to Raïssa Maritain, December 13, 1941, Jacques and Raïssa Maritain Archives, Kolbsheim.

²⁷ Rev. Maurice Pierquin, Canada, to Raïssa Maritain, December 13, 1941, Jacques and Raïssa Maritain Archives, Kolbsheim.

²⁸ Raïssa Maritain, *Grandes amitiés*, *OCJRM* 14:1059.

²⁹ Raïssa Maritain, “Deus excelsus terribilis,” *OCJRM* 15:563.

she articulated Jewish suffering in all of its vivid and ghastly detail, and aimed to inculcate awareness, outrage, and compassion among the vast majority of indifferent Catholics. These pleas for compassion had begun in 1938, when she published her poem “Chagall,” in which she describes his paintings of pity for the “wandering Jews.”³⁰

Raïssa Maritain died in 1960, two years before the convening of the Council.³¹ Her influence is therefore less readily visible than others, who sat at the tables of the dramatic proceedings or had crucial audiences with the Pope. Yet, it is unmistakable that from 1935 until her death, her work influenced the broad, transnational effort of “insider-outsiders,” challenging Catholic anti-Judaism and antisemitism. Along with Jacques, her work tilled the soil for what bore fruit in *Nostra Aetate’s* repudiation of persecution and emphasis on Jewish-Christian unity.

As for Jacques, he characterized what we today call the Holocaust as the “passion of Israel.”³² An agonized quest to find redemptive meaning in mass murder led him to conclude painfully that Jesus suffered with “His forgetful people whom he ceaselessly loves and calls...in order to gradually conform His people to Him.”³³ But it was Maritain’s practical measures—refuting the deicide charge and rejecting the image of Jews as cursed or forsaken—that would bear fruit at Vatican

³⁰ Raïssa Maritain, “Chagall,” *OCJRM* 15:551-52; English translation by Thomas Merton, *Jubilee*, 10 (April 1963), 26.

³¹ On Maritain’s death, see Brenna Moore, *Sacred Dread*, 192-200.

³² Richard Francis Crane, *Passion of Israel: Jacques Maritain, Catholic Conscience, and the Holocaust* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2010).

³³ Jacques Maritain, “On Anti-Semitism,” *Christianity and Crisis*, October 6, 1941, in J. Maritain and R. Maritain, *OCJRM* 8:572. Maritain also drew on Jewish influences—writer Maurice Samuel and his close friend painter Marc Chagall—in forming a Christological interpretation of the Shoah. Crane, *Passion of Israel*, 71, 80, and 83-5.

II.³⁴ Oesterreicher credited his *cher ami et maître* with recognizing a lasting Jewish covenant “years before the Second Vatican Council would renew Saint Paul’s theology on the Jews.”³⁵ Oesterreicher had known Maritain since the late-1930s, when the latter contributed to the anti-racist priest’s journal *Die Erfüllung* (fulfillment). In a 1943 letter, Maritain urged Oesterreicher “to speak of the mystery of [Israel’s] faux-pas in a language sufficiently renewed for not running the risk of causing any injury and in order to keep divine things from getting mixed up in the human mélange.”³⁶ Two decades later, *Nostra Aetate*’s drafters would try to accomplish just such a renewal of language.

After the war and France’s liberation from Nazi tyranny, Maritain served as ambassador to the Holy See, where he experienced frustration and disillusionment regarding Pius XII’s unwillingness to categorically condemn antisemitism.³⁷ The 1946 Kielce massacre in Poland demonstrated that, as

³⁴ Jacques Maritain, “The Christian Teaching of the Story of the Crucifixion,” in Maritain, *The Range of Reason*, <http://www2.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/range10.htm> (accessed 23 January 2007).

³⁵ John Oesterreicher, “Cher ami et maître,” in Royal, *Jacques Maritain and the Jews*, 256. See also Jacques Maritain book *The Living Thoughts of Saint Paul*, trans. Harry Lorin Binsse (New York: Longmans, Green, 1941).

³⁶ Jacques Maritain to John Oesterreicher, July 23, 1943, Monsignor John Oesterreicher Papers, Archives and Special Collections Center, Seton Hall University.

³⁷ See Michael R. Marrus, “The Ambassador and the Pope: Pius XII, Jacques Maritain, and the Jews,” *Commonweal* 131:18 (October 22, 2004): 14-18. Regarding Maritain’s relationship with Pius XII, Marrus emphasizes the “supersessionist theological context that was, at the time, inescapably associated with any Vatican-level discussion of the Jews,” and which required the linkage of “any declaration about the Jews with an assertion of Catholic rectitude and universal spiritual hegemony.” Michael R. Marrus, “A Plea Unanswered: Jacques Maritain, Pope Pius XII, and the Holocaust,” *Studies in Contemporary Jewry* 21 (2005): 10. See also Richard Francis Crane, “Heart-Rending Ambivalence: Jacques Maritain and the Complexities of Postwar Catholic Philosemitism,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 6 (2011).

Maritain put it to papal undersecretary Monsignor Giovanni Battista Montini (the future Pope Paul VI) “the antisemitic psychosis has not vanished.”³⁸ Rebuffed in his papal audience, Maritain found other opportunities to attack the “moral fifth column of the Christian conscience.”³⁹ In a letter read to the Christians and Jews gathered at the 1947 International Emergency Conference on Antisemitism at Seelisberg, Switzerland, he asserted that “[b]efore being a problem of blood, of physical life and death for Jews, antisemitism is a problem of the spirit, of spiritual life and death for Christians.”⁴⁰ Before leaving Rome for Princeton, Maritain also participated in the 1948 UNESCO conference that laid the groundwork for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In the 1960s during the years of the Council, Jacques dedicated himself to preserving his late wife’s papers and establishing her legacy, confessing to his friend Cardinal Charles Journet that “if any good remains in the work people want me to do, it is owed, every time, to what I receive from her[.]”⁴¹ In December 1965 the widowed Maritain emerged from his monastic hermitage to be publicly honored and embraced by Paul VI at the end of the Council. *Nostra Aetate* gratified but also saddened him, as it reflected successive reductive drafts to satisfy curial conservatives and Arab prelates.⁴² Maritain confided

³⁸ Jacques Maritain to Giovanni Battista Montini, July 12, 1946, reprinted in *Cahiers Jacques Maritain* 23 (October 1991), 31-33. On the Kielce massacre, see Jan Gross, *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (New York: Random House, 2006).

³⁹ Maritain, “On Anti-Semitism,” 566.

⁴⁰ Jacques Maritain, “Lettre à la Conférence du Seelisberg,” in Maritain, *Le Mystère d’Israël et autres essais* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1965), 226. Maritain could not attend the conference, so his message was read to the sixty-five assembled Christian and Jewish delegates.

⁴¹ Jacques Maritain to Charles Journet, in Journet and Maritain, *Correspondance*, vol. 6, edited by René Mougel. (Fribourg: Éditions Universitaires, 1996-2008), 478.

⁴² See Mathijs Lamberigts and Leo DeClerck, “Vatican II on the Jews: A Historical Summary, in Moyaert and Pollefeyt, *Never Revoked*, 13-56, particularly 23-51. See also Arthur Gilbert, *The Vatican Council and the*

to Journet that “I have suffered a real wound in seeing that the words ‘and condemn’ after the word ‘deplore’ (hatred, persecution, manifestations of antisemitism) have been suppressed.”⁴³ But he also could recognize his long-held hopes in the declaration, having written as early as 1942 that “our relation to the Jewish people is not only a human one... it is also a divine one, a relation of spiritual consanguinity within God’s redeeming scheme.”⁴⁴ And his vision of Christian-Jewish rapprochement remained above all eschatological, envisioning a day when the “*cross of survival* carried by the Jewish people and the *cross of redemption* carried by the Church... will recognize themselves finally and will constitute but a single cross.”⁴⁵ Given the traditional invocation of the Cross as an incitement against Jews, Maritain’s vision must be seen as indicative of the unfinished business of Christian-Jewish reconciliation.

Jules Isaac: The Teaching of Contempt

Jules Isaac (1877-1963) is remembered mainly for his unrelenting research of the historical-theological roots of anti-semitism. He lobbied the Catholic Church to rectify centuries-old teachings that reinforced popular prejudices against Jews as cursed, deicidal followers of a dead, legalistic religion. Isaac took on these labors only in the last two decades of his long life, after the horrors of the Holocaust reawakened his own Jewishness.⁴⁶ The scion of an assimilated French-Jewish family,

Jews (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1968), 61-63, 79-105, 150-7 and 179-81.

⁴³ Jacques Maritain to Charles Journet, October 7, 1965, excerpted in *Cahiers Jacques Maritain*, 23: 35n.

⁴⁴ Jacques Maritain, “Atonement for All,” in *Pour la Justice: Articles et Discours (1940-1945)* (New York: Éditions de la Maison Française, 1945), 155-56.

⁴⁵ Jacques Maritain, *On the Church of Christ: The Person of the Church and its Personnel*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 174-75.

⁴⁶ Isaac numbered among countless French Jews, or Israelites, who had lost all contact with Judaism when they were affected by the Vichy regime’s an-

his father and grandfather decorated army veterans, Isaac considered himself first and foremost a “Jew of the Republic.”⁴⁷ During the Dreyfus Affair he collaborated with Péguy in the name of republican justice, and he was wounded and decorated in the Great War. An accomplished historian, he achieved fame and influence as a textbook author, and in 1936 became France’s Inspector General for Public Instruction.

The Holocaust instilled in the agnostic Isaac a new, tragic sense of Jewish identity. He lost his post in 1940 under the Vichy regime’s anti-Jewish legislation. By 1942, the Nazi Final Solution embraced France, and led Isaac to inquire into the historical and theological origins of Jewish persecution. As he later recalled, his classical education and lack of familiarity with Jewish traditions inclined him to mine the Christian scriptures rather than the Hebrew Bible:

In that year ’42, I began to reread the Gospels. Why not the Old Testament, you might ask? I came to the Old by way of the New. I told that to Pope John XXIII and he laughed. As a historian I know one should not rely on translations. Now, I was enough of a Hellenist to read the New Testament in the original, but I was not at all a Hebraist. Thus I was drawn back to the Gospels. And after reading them, I wrote about a dozen pages that I sent to Maurice Blondel and to Pastor André Trocmé, in which I noted my discovery, the basis for all my subsequent work: on a number of points

ti-Jewish statutes. His biographer, André Kaspi, quotes him as registering his repugnance to Judaism even as the worst antisemitic persecutions began in 1942: “Even in the present circumstances, I am loath to Judaize. If I were Jewish, I would be a Christian. [...] I will go further: I give thanks to God that there was a Greek people, not that there was Jewish people, to propagate the passion of religious exclusivism. [...] I prefer Socrates, man of God.” *Jules Isaac ou la passion de la vérité* (Paris: Plon, 2002), 140 and 150.

⁴⁷ Pierre Birnbaum, *The Jews of the Republic: A Political History of State Jews in France from Gambetta to Vichy*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996).

there is a vast difference between the reality of the Gospels and a certain traditional Christian teaching.⁴⁸

Two things are significant about this passage. First, Isaac's re-discovery of his Jewish identity through Christianity ("I came to the Old by way of the New") is a refrain Raïssa Maritain and many Jewish-born Christians like her echoed. Raïssa converted to Christianity with only a nominal understanding of Judaism. Along with other Jewish converts she had come to know she described themselves as "strangers to the Mosaic faith" who through conversion came to understand the meaning of Israel.⁴⁹ Although Raïssa Maritain was a convert and Jules Isaac was not, both embodied something of that "insider-outsider" status to both Christianity and Judaism, a status that helped these religious thinkers think their way out of Christian antisemitism.

Secondly, Isaac's analysis of historical-theological antisemitism was grounded in Christian scripture, even as he averred that modern antisemitism is not faithful to the gospels. These intellectual impulses situate him within a broader current of historically-minded French theologians "turning to the sources" in order to gain a new perspective on modern issues. This perspective would appear in a critical line in *Nostra Aetate* that urges Jewish-Christian solidarity to proceed through biblical and theological studies as well as fraternal dialogue. Yet unlike most ressourcement theologians, Isaac pursued his study of the scriptures and patristic texts in hiding, while his wife and daughter were murdered at Auschwitz. His wife's last message to him urged him to continue the new research he had begun on the Christian origins of antisemitism.⁵⁰ He dedicated his influential 1948 book *Jesus and Israel* to his wife and

⁴⁸ Jean Toulat, *Juifs, mes frères* (Paris: Fayard, 1968), 137.

⁴⁹ Raïssa Maritain, "A propos du Christianisme de Henri Bergson," *OCJRM* 14:1146.

⁵⁰ Kaspi, *Jules Isaac*, 184.

daughter: “Martyrs, Killed by Hitler’s Nazis, Simply because their name was ISAAC.”⁵¹

After the war, despite overwhelming grief and health problems, Isaac brought his thesis into the public square, engaging interested Catholic interlocutors such as Henri Marrou and priests Jean Daniélou and Paul Démann, the latter a Hungarian-born Jewish convert who himself wrote an influential study of anti-Jewish catechesis.⁵² In 1947, a year before *Jésus et Israël* reached the public, Isaac founded *les Amitiés Judeo-Chrétiennes* and helped draft the Ten Points of Seelisberg, an interfaith statement that reminded the world of Christianity’s Jewish origins and called for a curbing of anti-Judaic rhetoric, exegesis, and catechesis.⁵³ In Isaac’s trenchant words, Christianity had the God-given power “to break at last with these evil habits of mind and tongue, contracted over a period of nearly two thousand years as a result of what I have called the teaching of contempt—itsself the child of bitter polemics now obsolete.”⁵⁴ The chorus of praise for his book fell short of universal acclaim. The otherwise sympathetic Daniélou rejected Isaac’s Jewish Jesus, and asserted that “M. Isaac has mutilated the Gospel” by depicting a dechristianized Jesus entirely comprehensible within—and limited to—his historical context.⁵⁵ This moment of disagreement would not be the only time serious critique arose from the *nouvelle théologie*

⁵¹ Jules Isaac, *Jesus and Israel*, trans. Sally Gran (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), xix.

⁵² Toulat, *Juifs*, 138-9. See also Paul Démann, *La catéchèse chrétienne et le peuple de la Bible: constatations et perspectives* (Paris: Cahiers Sioniens, 1952).

⁵³ Kaspi, *Jules Isaac*, 192. The Ten Points of Seelisberg can be found in, among other places, in Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith, and Irena Steinfeldt, eds., *The Holocaust and the Christian World* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 245-6.

⁵⁴ Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Antisemitism*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 146.

⁵⁵ Kaspi, *Jules Isaac*, 212-3.

pioneers about just what kind of historical methodologies were proper for the historian of theology.⁵⁶

Certainly, Isaac's own secular approach to the question of what he termed "the teaching of contempt" emphasized a historian's careful diagnosis and relentless dismantling of what he found to be pernicious readings of the New Testament. In *Jesus and Israel*, he draws the methodological distinction between the order of faith and that of history:

In the order of faith, I agree, there is no comparison possible, even thinkable: the distance between the event and any other event is infinite. In the order of history it is a different matter. By his human, fully human life, Jesus belongs to history, to the fullness of history. Jesus' trial, his sentencing to death, his nailing to the cross are historic events, as such susceptible of being placed face to face with their ilk—or events of the same family—and as such are subject to all the rules which are requisite in historical inquiry.⁵⁷

Jules Isaac did not share Jacques Maritain's faith convictions or eschatological preoccupations. But as an activist he did match Maritain's willingness to carry his convictions to the highest level of the Catholic hierarchy. Isaac's encounters with Pius XII (1949) and John XXIII (1960) each had a measure of success. Pius later reinstated the genuflection during the Good Friday prayer for the "unbelieving Jews," and his successor suppressed the *pro perfidis* altogether. Most importantly, John's warm welcome to Isaac in June 1960 set the tone for an audience in which the pope assured Isaac that the upcoming ecumenical council would face the task of rectifying Christian-Jewish relations.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ For more on these debates, see Brenna Moore, "How to Awaken the Dead: Michel de Certeau, Henri de Lubac, and the Debates in Catholic Ressourcement." *Spiritus* 12 (2012): 172-9.

⁵⁷ Isaac, *Jesus and Israel*, 236-7 and 285.

⁵⁸ Morselli, "Jules Isaac and the Origins of *Nostra Aetate*," 26-7.

While we know a great deal about Maritain's reaction to *Nostra Aetate* and Vatican II in general, Isaac's likely response (he died in 1963) remains something of a mystery. Four months after his audience with John XXIII, Isaac learned that no special commission would be established to deal with the Jewish question, but that the task would be delegated to the German Cardinal Augustin Bea and the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity,⁵⁹ which historian Alberto Melloni describes as "effectively a secretariat for the unthinkable problems and the impossible missions of Roncalli's curia."⁶⁰ Nonetheless, when writing to his friend (and Maritain's) the French-Israeli writer André Chouraqui, Isaac painted this as a promising step: "This looks to me like a positive initial result, even if it is not completely what I hoped for. The problem is going to be examined and, if I can trust the words of Cardinal Bea, it will be done so in a favorable setting."⁶¹ Isaac understood from his Seelisberg experience the incremental nature of moving from a straightforward repudiation of antisemitism to a laborious reappraisal of theology.⁶² But he almost certainly would have seen *Nostra Aetate's*

⁵⁹ Kaspi, *Jules Isaac*, 235.

⁶⁰ Alberto Melloni, "Nostra Aetate and the Discovery of the Sacrament of Otherness,"

http://www.bc.edu/dam/files/research_sites/cjl/texts/center/conferences/Bea_Centre_C-J_Relations_04-05/melloni.htm (accessed July 23, 2013).

⁶¹ Jules Isaac to André Chouraqui, 10 October 1960, in Chouraqui, *Le Destin d'Israël: Correspondances avec Jules Isaac, Jacques Ellul, Jacques Maritain et Marc Chagall* (Paris: Parole et Silence 2007), 50-51. Isaac understood that "The Pope... wishes to avoid the uproar that would surround the creation of a special Commission (I am summarizing what he wrote to me—doubtless there is resistance)."

⁶² Isaac clearly appreciated even incremental progress in Christian-Jewish relations, especially those made at the only conference dealing with Christianity and antisemitism in the decade after the war at which Jews were invited participants: "Only in Seelisberg did Christian thinkers submit their thinking to Jewish colleagues for critique. Only in Seelisberg was the starting point a Jewish critique of Christianity, the study paper written by French historian and humanist Jules Isaac, 'The Rectification Necessary in Christian Teachings: Eighteen Points.'" Victoria Barnett, "Seelisberg: An Appreciation," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 11 (2007), 56.

implicit renunciation of the centuries old deicide charge as an important step in this process.

Isaac did not overemphasize his influence on either Pius XII or John XXIII. The latter received a number of other pleas and proposals to deal with the Jewish question in the upcoming council. Oesterreicher, who recounts at least three other missives coming from within the Catholic Church, concludes: "That Jules Isaac's visit had a lasting effect on John XXII cannot in my opinion, be doubted. Yet, it is questionable whether his was the decisive influence in moving the Pope to act, as has sometimes been asserted. What he did however, was to cause the Pope's sentiments, until then not fully expressed, to come to the fore."⁶³ However, according to Connelly, in the case of at least one of these Catholic initiatives, the memorandum of the Apeldoorn Working Group, which came from a 28-31 August 1960 meeting in the Netherlands, "the drafters of these theses were relying upon Jules Isaac."⁶⁴ So the momentous statement known as *Nostra Aetate* was also made possible in part by Isaac's painstaking historical deconstruction of the theological genealogy of antisemitism and his tireless mission to the gentiles. This compelling work involved more than a dramatic papal audience at a key moment, and it helped shape a reappraisal of Christian-Jewish relations that continues to this day.

Henri de Lubac: Ressourcement of the Old Testament

In addition to the lay Catholic converts like the Bloys and Maritains, and Jewish intellectuals like Isaac, a thorough assessment of the French contributions to the ideas articulated

⁶³ Oesterreicher, *The New Encounter*, 108; see also 114-28. For another perspective, from one of Oesterreicher's colleagues, see Thomas Stransky, "The Genesis of *Nostra Aetate*: An Insider's Story," in Lamdan and Melloni, *Nostra Aetate*, 29-53. Stransky does see this audience as decisive, and describes "the trio—Angelo Roncalli, Augustin Bea and Jules Isaac" as three octogenarians with a "shared dream" that would materialize in *Nostra Aetate* and its new perspective on the Jewish religion and people (32).

⁶⁴ Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother*, 142.

at *Nostra Aetate* must also include some key clerical theologians, particularly those active in the French resistance to Nazism, such as Henri de Lubac (1886-1991). According to de Lubac, he “never had the slightest personal contact” with John XXIII before the Council, and was shocked to pick up an issue of *La Croix* while waiting for a friend one August afternoon in 1960 and see his name listed as consultor to Vatican II’s Preparatory Theological Commission.⁶⁵ There had been signs, however, of the new papacy’s affinity for de Lubac’s *ressourcement* project: just after his election, John XXIII made a significant donation to the *Sources chrétiennes* series de Lubac and fellow Jesuit Daniélou launched in 1942, followed by a personal note of appreciation to de Lubac.⁶⁶ De Lubac had established his reputation as the “*grand lumière*,” and “*maître incontestable*” of the French Catholic theological milieu in the war and immediate postwar period.⁶⁷ Famously, he described the whole task of theology as the “rediscovering” of Christianity by “going back to its sources, trying to recapture it in its periods of explosive vitality.”⁶⁸ For de Lubac, the “sources” included the Church Fathers and the New Testament, but also, crucially—and less well-known—the Hebrew Bible. According to de Lubac, *L’Ancien Testament* had become for Christians an “embarrassment rather than a support in their faith...it was a cumbersome treasure which people no longer knew how to use.”⁶⁹ De Lubac spoke those words in a 1941 lecture under the benign topic “Un Nouveau ‘Front’ Religieux,” in which he waged war on the Nazi program to purge Christianity of Judaism and restore it to a purer “Aryan

⁶⁵ Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church. Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances That Occasioned His Writings*, trans. Anne E. Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 116

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ For a useful exploration of de Lubac’s postwar stature at Lyon see Étienne Fouilloux, Bernard Hours, Dominique Avon, *Les Jésuites à Lyon, XVIe-XXe siècle* (Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2005), 124-146, 231-245.

⁶⁸ Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 57-58.

⁶⁹ Henri de Lubac, “Un Nouveau ‘Front’ Religieux,” in *Israël et la foi chrétienne* (Fribourg: Éditions de la *Librairie de l’Université*, 1942), 9-39.

mysticism.” The lecture was published in Switzerland in 1942 and circulated clandestinely in France.⁷⁰

When de Lubac gave this lecture in 1941, he had been involved for more than a year with a group of underground communities focused on Jewish-Christian friendship in Lyon, started by the Jesuit Pierre Chaillet and the Ukrainian émigré Jewish convert, Abbé Alexandre Glasberg.⁷¹ In Lyon, with the support of Chaillet, Abbé Glasberg formed an “organization of solidarity” that would be of “an interconfessional character,” that became known as *Amitié chrétienne*.⁷² De Lubac was an active member of this group (as he was of Isaac’s similarly named *Amitiés Judeo-Chrétiennes*, formed a few years later).⁷³

Among de Lubac’s closest colleagues in Lyon who also collaborated in *Amitié chrétienne* with Glasberg and Chaillet, was Jesuit professor of the Old Testament, Joseph Chaine. Chaine initiated the drafting of a statement condemning the Second Statute of Jews emanating from Vichy in 1941. The document became known as the “Déclaration Chaine” (Chaine had also helped secure the safe exile of French Jewish philosopher Henri Bergson’s wife and daughter). Along with de Lubac, other Jesuits at Lyon assisted Chaine with the declaration including Fr. Joseph Bonsirven (a biblical scholar who in 1938 had held a conference on Judaism each week at the Institut of Paris), and Fr. Louis Richard. After helping draft the Chaine declaration with these colleagues, de Lubac then joined fellow priests Victor Fontoyant and Jules Monchanin in

⁷⁰ For more on de Lubac’s activities in the resistance see Renée et François Bédarida, *La Résistance spirituelle, 1941-1944 : Les cahiers clandestins du Témoignage Chrétien* (Paris : Albin Michel, 2001); Etienne Fouilloux, *Les chrétiens français entre crise et libération, 1937-1947* (Paris: Seuil, 1997) ; Henri de Lubac, *Christian Resistance to Anti-Semitism: Memories from 1940-1944* (San Francisco: Ignatius. Press, 1990).

⁷¹ Bernard Comte, *Initiatives de théologiens face à la persécution antisémite à Lyon en 1941-42* (Lyon : Institut catholique, 1993), 15-16.

⁷² On *Amitié chrétienne*, see François Delpech, *Sur les Juifs* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1983), 238-249.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 16-21.

an intensive re-reading of scriptures on the Jewish question (Fontoyant would eventually publish an influential re-reading of Romans XI), intended to reassert a spiritual bond between Jews and Christians, and mine the enduring theological richness of the Jewish sources.⁷⁴ De Lubac called the meetings between Jews and Christians “a small oasis of peace in the center of hatred.”⁷⁵ De Lubac claims to have learned from this community that it “was not possible to separate the two halves of the Bible.”⁷⁶

In a series of lectures and essays between 1941 and 1945, de Lubac began writing on the topics that had been circulating in these clandestine communities. He used meticulous historical research to dismantle Nazism’s gross misreading of both Christianity and Judaism in the fearless language of critique. For example, in January, 1941 in Lyon, de Lubac gave two lectures on “*Le fondement theologique des missions.*” The lectures exposed pseudoscientific theologians who wanted “to purify” Christianity of Judaism. He dealt with the same shady cast of characters Susanna Heschel recently analyzed in her excellent study *The Aryan Jesus*, such as Arthur de Gobineau, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, and Hitler’s own racial “expert” Alfred Rosenberg.⁷⁷ He also pulled an excerpt from *Mein Kampf* to expose the absurdity of Hitler’s claims that religion is a product of blood, and racial hierarchy fundamentally creates different orders of human beings. He spoke of the risk of taking such “bloody filth” too

⁷⁴ Ibid., 16-21.

⁷⁵ Henri de Lubac, *Christian Resistance to Anti-Semitism: Memories from 1940-1944*, trans. Elizabeth Englund (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 16.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ This lecture was published as Henri de Lubac, “*Le fondement theologique des missions,*” *Bibliothèque de l’Union mission du clergé de France* (1941), 3-29. Partially reproduced and translated in Henri de Lubac, *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 367-427. Also see Susanna Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

seriously.⁷⁸ He offered authentic Christian alternatives to Nazi racism and antisemitism. In his speech, de Lubac imagines the Church as “distributing a spiritual food,” the food of human “universalism, a universalism inherited from Israel” in order to defend Europe “against itself.”⁷⁹ The doctrine of human unity could subvert what he later called the “progressive invasion of Hitlerian poison,” a Christian doctrine fundamentally indebted to Judaism.

Published in 1942, de Lubac’s contribution to the book *Israël et la foi chrétienne* claimed that the broad acceptance of Nazism and antisemitism is purely “of the religious and theological order.”⁸⁰ De Lubac claimed that most Christians “know too little about their faith” [*trop peu au courant de leur foi*].⁸¹ How else to explain the vast acceptance of ideas that should be condemned for both “their stupidity and their blasphemy?”⁸² Again and again, de Lubac called Christians to recall the “indissoluble bond between our two Testaments, always, in the final analysis, interpreting the Old by the New, but also always basing the New in the Old [*fondant aussi toujours le Nouveau sur l’Ancien*]... We will thus remain faithful to the teaching of Saint Irenaeus, which was that of all our Doctors: the writings of Moses are Words of Christ.”⁸³ Similarly, Joseph Chaine wrote “The New Testament “does not destroy the old, but there is the most perfect synthesis...between the two Testaments there is only continuity.”⁸⁴ Unity between Judaism and Christianity animated the wartime activism and scholarship of this eclectic community of French Catholics.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 466.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 409.

⁸⁰ Henri de Lubac, Joseph Chaine, Louis Richard, Joseph Bonsirven, *Israël et la foi chrétienne* (Fribourg: Éditions de la Librairie de l’Université, 1942), 1.

⁸¹ Ibid., 8.

⁸² Ibid., 12.

⁸³ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁴ Joseph Chaine, “La Révélation de dieu en Israël,” in *Israël et la foi chrétienne*, 80.

In addition to identifying Judaism as a profound precursor to Christianity and asserting the unity of the two faiths, de Lubac articulated the inherent spiritual worth of the Hebrew scriptures as living resources for the present. The Hebrew Scriptures were “sources” in the truest sense of that term, in that they shed light on the most profound aspects of the human condition, and could speak to the human *sens du sacré*.⁸⁵ De Lubac wrote in *Israël et la foi chrétienne*:

The faith of Abraham is already our faith... The great men of Israel are truly Fathers. The Prophets shake us still today with the great lesson God charges them to give to his people. They console us in our distress and revive hope in us. The gentleness of the breeze in which the Spirit comes to visit Elijah announces the gentleness of our Christ. The roaring of Amos awakens us to justice, yet Hosea prepares our souls for love. The majesty of the God of Isaiah makes us bow down with him before the Face holy three times. Jeremiah hollows out a new dimension in our hearts. Job exhorts us to a manly patience. The Psalms nourish our prayer every day. Daniel and the Maccabees teach us fidelity. And everywhere, from one end to the other, the fidelity of God is revealed... In truth, all this is our heritage. All this has become our flesh. We will no longer allow them to tear it away from us [*Nous ne souffrirons pas qu'on nous l'arrache*].⁸⁶

De Lubac perceived rich resources in the Hebrew scriptures; he urged listeners to think about the Jewish scriptures as something other than “cumbersome treasure” Christians fumbled with or cast aside. The condemnation of antisemitism, positive scholarship on Judaism, and efforts at Jewish-Christian friendship and collaboration helped crack the Christian theology of

⁸⁵ For more on “sources” in this context see the quintessential but anonymously published essay, “La théologie et ses sources,” in *Recherches de science religieuse* 33 (1946): 385–401.

⁸⁶ Henri de Lubac, *Israël et la foi chrétienne*, 38–39.

contempt and helped conceive the documents of *Nostra Aetate*.

Conclusion

When the Second Vatican Council convened, twenty years had passed since the horrible period when de Lubac voiced those declarations of the spiritual worth of the Hebrew scriptures and the fundamental unity between Judaism and Christianity. At a first glance, by the 1960s he seemed to have moved far beyond such issues. During the Vatican II period, de Lubac's diaries show he was preoccupied with defending fellow Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin from condemnation, and in the latter half, from stemming the tide of what he saw as a late conciliar tendency to secularize the Christian faith (a concern Maritain shared).⁸⁷ As John W. O'Malley recounts the story of *Nostra Aetate's* near death and eventual rehabilitation at the council, unlike Jacques Maritain, and especially, Isaac, de Lubac does not figure as one of the main dramatic characters.⁸⁸ Yet, de Lubac's courageous, meticulous work on the *question juive* in the context of the Occupation in many ways animates the heart of *Nostra Aetate*, as much as do the labors of the Maritains and Isaac. The bond de Lubac reiterated again and again was the bond that Raïssa Maritain aimed to articulate when she claimed Abraham "unites the Old and New Testament." This impulse at unification comes to the surface when *Nostra Aetate* calls us to "remember the bond that spiritually

⁸⁷ Henri de Lubac, *Carnets du Concile*, 2 vol., ed. Loïc Figoureux (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2007). See the excellent review article by Jared Wicks, S.J., "More Light on Vatican Council II" in *The Catholic Historical Review* 94 (2008): 75-101. On de Lubac in the latter half of the council see Christopher J. Walsh, "De Lubac's Critique of the Postconciliar Church," *Communio*, 19 (1992): 404-32. Also see Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself About the Present Time*, trans. Michael Cuddihy and Elizabeth Hughes (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1967).

⁸⁸ John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 247-260.

ties the people of the New Covenant to Abraham's stock."⁸⁹ De Lubac and Raïssa Maritain's reading of the Hebrew Scriptures as sources that speak to human interiority concurs with *Nostra Aetate's* poetic vision of other religions as answering the "unsolved riddles of the human condition," which "deeply stir in the hearts of men."⁹⁰

Moreover, the story of France and the Catholic reappraisal of Judaism must also include French Jewish intellectuals like Jules Isaac and others like André Chouraqui. In the interwar period, they intermingled regularly with non-Jews in Paris—that "Catholic" city that had, become one of the largest Jewish centers in the world.⁹¹ Although Isaac, a modern historian par excellence, failed to acknowledge how deeply modernity itself was implicated in antisemitism and genocide, his unsparing examination of antisemitism's early Christian antecedents sealed the post-Auschwitz argument.⁹² The Church could no longer postpone the project of coming to terms with its Jewish roots and its long estrangement therefrom.⁹³

⁸⁹ *Nostra Aetate*, 4

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/va_at_ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

⁹⁰ *Nostra Aetate* 1.

http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/va_at_ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html

⁹¹ Esther Benbassa, *The Jews of France: A History of Antiquity to the Present*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 148-149.

⁹² See Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 219.

⁹³ *Nostra Aetate* makes no reference to the Shoah, but its terrible shadow figured in the Council's deliberations. When Cardinal Bea introduced the schema "On the Jews" (which would later form the key part of the larger declaration) in November 1963, he addressed the Council as follows: "Therefore, the aim of this very brief decree is to call to the attention of Christ's faithful these truths concerning the Jews which are affirmed by the apostle and contained in the deposit of faith, and to do this so clearly that in dealing with the children of that people the faithful will act in no other way than did Christ the Lord and his apostles Peter and Paul. [...] But why is it so necessary to recall these things? The reason is this. Some decades ago anti-Semitism, as it is called, was prevalent in various regions and in a

Moreover, it was the borderland position of so many of these French intellectuals, and their willingness to learn from their insider-outsider colleagues whose marginal status brought new perspective to the tradition.

In a recent essay, Thomas Stransky, C.S.P., reflected on the influences of people, institutions, and ideas that “flowed into the genesis of *Nostra Aetate*.”⁹⁴ Stransky was an original staff member for the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity that helped draft *Nostra Aetate*. Stransky points out often overlooked French circles like the communities consisting of Maritain, de Lubac, and Isaac, all of whom he names. At the end of his remarks on the French scene, Stransky poignantly comments on some of the unresolved questions in *Nostra Aetate* and in subsequent postconciliar statements on the Jews: What is the Church’s mission to the Jews; and what is the Jewish mission to the Church in an ecumenical context? He recalls a long conversation with Oesterreicher before he died in 1988, in which Stransky sensed that these unresolved questions “privately lingered in [Oesterreicher’s] serene twilight years.”⁹⁵ These issues also linger within this community of

particularly violent and criminal form, especially in Germany under the rule of National Socialism, which through hatred for the Jews committed frightful crimes, extirpating several million of Jewish people... it would have been almost impossible that some of the claims of that propaganda did not have an unfortunate effect even on faithful Catholics, the more so since the arguments advanced by that propaganda often enough bore an appearance of truth, especially when they were drawn from the New Testament and from the history of the Church.” Augustin Cardinal Bea, *The Church and the Jewish People: A Commentary on the Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, trans. Philip Loretz (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 157.

⁹⁴ Nelson M. Minnich, Eugene J. Fisher, Thomas Stransky, Susannah Heschel, Alberto Melloni, and John Connelly, “Forum Essay [on *From Enemy to Brother*],” *The Catholic Historical Review* 98 (2012), 758.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 760. This problem of mission figures in a post-Council dialogue between Daniélou and Chouraqui, in which the former insisted that “We cannot give up trying to convert you. We can respect you profoundly in your sincerity and your religious values; we can fully recognize your right to exist as a people; we can condemn all that comes from any pressure whatever to convert you. But there is something I cannot do. I am unable *not*

French thinkers and activists such as Bloy, the Maritains, Isaac, and de Lubac. De Lubac, for example, always believed that the Old Testament must be read Christologically, even as he insisted that contemporary Christians needed to “surpass” even the ancient Church Fathers in better reading the New Testament in light of the Old.⁹⁶ How can one do this simultaneously? Similarly, although Jacques and Raïssa Maritain never vulgarly or openly proselytized Jews, they never abandoned the hope for Jewish conversion. De Lubac and the Maritains also share *Nostra Aetate’s* more deeply ambivalent claims that God “mysteriously concluded the Ancient Covenant” with Israel. The philosemitic projects of French Catholics like the Maritains and de Lubac were imperfect, even episodic, but they carved out a new path to subvert the bigotry that preceded genocidal horrors, and they valiantly contended against these horrors as they occurred.⁹⁷

Recognizing the importance of holding together the Old and New Testaments, de Lubac also acknowledged the difficulties: “Nothing is more wonderful, in the reality of things, than the way the two Testaments hinge on one another,” he wrote, and added: “But neither is there anything trickier than the accurate perception of such a fact. Christian Tradition has been meditating on this for two thousand years, and will go on doing so. *It will go on, from one age to another*

to say to you who sit beside me that in Jesus Christ the event foretold by the prophets has come, as St. Peter told your ancestors on the day after Pentecost.” Jean Daniélou and André Chouraqui, *The Jews: Views and Counterviews* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1967), 70.

⁹⁶ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis, Volume I: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 265.

⁹⁷ For a good historical precedent see Thomas Kselman “The Bautain Circle and Catholic-Jewish Relations in Modern France,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 92 (2006): 177-196. For more on the particularities of French antisemitism and philosemitism, see Julie Kalman, *Rethinking Anti-Semitism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Ruth Harris, *Dreyfus: Politics, Emotion, and the Scandal of the Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010); and Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in French Postwar Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010),

finding in it the mainspring of a solution for the most contemporary and seemingly unknown problems."⁹⁸ In the wake of *Nostra Aetate*, it is difficult to imagine the Christian Tradition meditating on such problems without acknowledging and honoring the Jewish Tradition, including its scriptures, in its own right.

⁹⁸ Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes*, 145-6.