

Philip A. Cunningham
Maxims for Mutuality:
Principles for Catholic Theology, Education,
and Preaching about Jews and Judaism

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Philip A. Cunningham is both a respected scripture scholar and a longtime veteran of efforts to improve Jewish-Catholic relations. In this engaging book he pulls together lessons he has learned over many years of engagement in this area, which has become all the more important in recent years with the resurgence of antisemitism in the United States and in many other places around the world. Cunningham continues the dominant paradigm in the United States for improving Jewish-Catholic relations since the Second Vatican Council, in which Catholics acknowledge and apologize for many centuries of vilification and mistreatment of Jews and strive to be more knowledgeable about Jews and Judaism and more respectful in words and deeds. He reviews conciliar, papal, and other authoritative Catholic statements that condemn antisemitism and supersessionism and that admonish Catholics to study and dialogue with Jews in an atmosphere of respect and to work with Jews to foster shared values. Cunningham offers an excellent overview of a wide range of materials that foster an overall tone of harmony and mutual appreciation among dialogue partners. He calls attention to multiple dangers that Catholics face; of his ten maxims, six are framed in the negative: “You shall not” or “you are not competent.”

Cunningham’s scholarship is impeccable, and his recommendations are based on a deep knowledge of both the Jewish and Catholic traditions. He seeks to address a broad audience of “Catholic educators, preachers and theologians” (xiv), and he offers many helpful resources in the areas he addresses. The limitation of his discussion is that he does not devote much attention to some of the most pressing and conflicted issues in Jewish-Catholic relations.

In my experience as a priest in Catholic parishes in the Chicago, New York City, and Washington, DC, metropolitan areas, the most important and pressing challenge for ordinary Catholics regarding relations with Jews involves marriages

between a Catholic and a Jew. I have participated with a rabbi in a joyous celebration of a Jewish-Catholic marriage where both families were accepting of the union; I have listened to a Jewish bride tell me through her tears that some members of her family were rejecting her because she was marrying a Catholic; I have heard an undergraduate student at Georgetown University state that his parents raised him to be both Jewish and Catholic. The Catholic Church today acknowledges the legitimacy and validity of Catholic-Jewish marriages, and Catholic priests regularly preside at them. Some rabbis agree and also participate in such ceremonies, but others are fiercely opposed to these unions on the basis of traditional Jewish teaching and object to Catholic priests' officiating at them. In my experience in parishes, this is the area in which Catholics most urgently seek guidance about relating to Jews. It is also one of the most difficult issues for clergy to discuss, both between Catholics and Jews and also among Jews themselves. Cunningham is silent on this issue, but it poses the question of what mutuality means with regard to interreligious marriage and what maxims might be appropriate.

In my experience as an educator teaching at Georgetown University, including its campus in Doha, Qatar, one of the most pressing areas of student concern in Jewish-Catholic relations involves the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, especially for Catholics, the place of Palestinian Catholics amid the ongoing struggle. Here again Catholics hear a variety of conflicting Jewish voices, some seeking Catholic support for the policies and actions of the government of Israel and others calling for Catholic criticism of these same policies and actions. Cunningham quite properly calls the reader's attention to the long and tragic history of Christian hostility to Jews, but he has little to say about Catholic-Jewish relations in Israel-Palestine since the end of the Second World War. Palestinian Catholics have a distinctive experience of living under Jewish rule, and they have repeatedly asked Catholics elsewhere to pay attention to their situation. Often they feel neglected in discussions of Catholic-Jewish relations, and Cunningham's discussion continues this pattern. He does refer the reader in passing to another volume where he has discussed the land of Israel. Again, the value of mutuality presents a challenge: if mutuality is a value to be promoted and fostered, then it is important to listen to Palestinian Catholic experiences of suffering and to include these in the process of understanding and shaping of Jewish-Catholic relationships.

Cunningham notes that in many areas of the world, including the Global South, Catholics live in areas where there are few Jews, and he expresses concern about the importance of bringing the lessons of Jewish-Catholic dialogue to them (25). In my experiences among Catholics in countries in the Global South with large Muslim populations, one of the first and most pressing questions that I have repeatedly been asked concerns how Catholics should view the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Catholics in these countries hear strong criticisms of the actions of the government of Israel from their Muslim neighbors and want to know how to respond as Catholics. In many circles, criticism of the government of Israel intertwines with traditional antisemitism, but I have known many Catholics in the Global South who do not want to be antisemitic but who are critical of the government of Israel. There is a vigorous debate concerning the relation between criticism

of the government of Israel and traditional antisemitism. Simply to condemn antisemitism without offering Catholics a perspective on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict risks leaving Catholics in the Global South (and beyond) in a state of perplexity. For example, in addition to noting that the Holy See established diplomatic relations with the state of Israel in 1993 (11), it would be helpful to review the statements and actions of popes and other Catholic leaders expressing solidarity with both Israelis and Palestinians and proposing principles for addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. These could include Pope John Paul II's visit both to the Western Wall and to the Dheisheh Palestinian refugee camp; Pope Benedict XVI's visit to the Yad Vashem Memorial and Aida Refugee Camp; and Pope Francis's invitation to the presidents of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority to come to Rome to pray for peace. While Cunningham does not offer maxims for addressing these controversial relationships in an atmosphere of mutuality, in the areas he does discuss he does offer very helpful guidance for developing harmonious relations.