

**Karma Ben-Johanán**  
***Jacob's Younger Brother:***  
***Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II***

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**Review of Chapter 3,**  
**“John Paul II and Christian-Jewish Reconciliation”**

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After demonstrating in chapters 1 and 2 how Vatican II reopened the major questions about Judaism for theological discussion and how this discussion threatened to undermine essential Catholic doctrines, Karma Ben-Johanán analyzes in chapter 3 the role of John Paul II, who “handled this tension through transforming the essence and the focus of the Catholic-Jewish relationship” (82). According to Ben-Johanán, John Paul II, unlike his predecessors, pursued reconciliation with the Jews not through theological discussion but through acts and gestures: he “shifted the center of gravity in relations with the Jews from the theological to the symbolic” (108). This attitude allowed him to maintain his conservative theological convictions, while presenting a progressive line toward Judaism in the non-theological realm. As a result, this move caused “a certain overshadowing of the importance of theology to Christian-Jewish relations altogether and blurred the theological tensions that remained unaddressed” (83).

In the first part of chapter 3, Ben-Johanán illustrates that this attitude was not specific to the Christian-Jewish relationship but characterized the whole style of his pontificate. John Paul II worked “in two parallel trajectories”: consolidating a firm doctrinal line on the one hand, and, on the other, “replacing theology with an alternative medium through which to communicate with the world, and especially the world outside the Catholic Church” (83). In an attempt to “put an end to the confusion” in postconciliar theology, the pontificate confronted liberal theologians such as Edward Schillebeeckx, Hans Kung and the representatives of the “liberation theology.” However, outside of the doctrinal realm, John Paul II was “invested in promoting radical reforms in the church's communication both with its own members and with non-Catholics” (85), as illustrated by the World Day of Peace held in Assisi in 1986. This “double effort” of John Paul II was motivated by the

desire “to bring the masses back to the church, and he believed that this end would be more easily accomplished through symbols and gestures than through theological sophistry” (86).

In the second part, the author shows how, in the 1980s, the pope used the Christian-Jewish rapprochement to reconnect the secularized modern culture of Europe with its religious Judeo-Christian roots. Contrary to other analyses insisting on the youth and personal Polish history of John Paul II, Ben-Johanan particularly emphasizes his European viewpoint, considering Judaism as a partner for the construction of a common civilization. In this perspective, the pope worked by means of a series of symbolic gestures, which were not always without ambiguity, since they “embedded Jewish suffering within a Christian metanarrative” (89) that maintained Christian-Jewish relations as an antithesis to atheism. Already during his visit to Auschwitz in 1979, while stressing the singularity of the Jewish history of Auschwitz, John Paul II exalted Maximilian Kolbe, who provided to Auschwitz a dimension of Christian martyrdom. In a similar way, the figures of Edith Stein and of Jean-Marie Lustiger “symbolize the Christian-Jewish connection that linked the annihilation of the Jews with the cross and marked the appropriate horizon for Europe” (91). This treatment of the Holocaust by the pope had contradictory consequences. On the one hand, he “boosted the global importance ascribed to the preservation of the memory of the Holocaust and the struggle against antisemitism in a way that probably far exceeded what theological arguments could have achieved.” On the other hand, “the highly public symbolic expropriation of the Holocaust to incorporate it into a Catholic historical meta-narrative of a ‘Judeo-Christianity’ gave rise to bitter antagonism over many years and created obstacles to Christian-Jewish reconciliation.” Indeed, “When directed at the Holocaust, the embrace of the Jews by the Catholic Church since *Nostra aetate* was perceived as suffocating” (93). This use of Jewish symbol found its most significant expression in the dispute over the Carmelite convent at Auschwitz established in 1984. The fact that the Holy See refused to recognize the State of Israel as a political entity was a further cause of resentment within the Jewish world.

The visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome in 1986 marked a turning point. By entering into the synagogue, John Paul II “signaled that he took seriously the plea of many Jews to be seen according to their own terms and not as an inner Christian category.” However, the affirmation that Judaism is not “extrinsic,” but “intrinsic” to Christianity, may be understood, from a Jewish perspective, as if “Judaism was ‘subsumed’ within Catholic identity.” Moreover, the expression “elder brothers” used by John Paul II was also not without ambiguity if read in the biblical tradition. In this context, notwithstanding the success of the visit to the synagogue, the 1980s ended in an atmosphere of suspicion.

In the third part Ben-Johanan illustrates how John Paul II, during the last fifteen years of his pontificate, “adopted and made use of a system of Jewish symbols and how he came to be regarded as the greatest friend of the Jewish people of all popes in history” (83). John Paul II “completed his about-face from focusing on Judaism ‘on the inside’—inside the Christian canon, inside the postconciliar polemics, and inside the array of forces that were contending over the future of Europe

—dealing with Jews ‘on the outside’ who were largely unconcerned with these matters” (99). Indeed, more than seeing Christians as partners for the construction of a common civilization, Jewish representatives addressed two main requests which were, in fact, “two sides of the same coin”: the acknowledgement that the Jewish past in Europe was “a past of persecution, often Catholic persecution”; and the recognition of the State of Israel “as the only possible alternative to a persecuting Europe” (100). In the 1990s, the Catholic Church progressively conceded these demands. In 1993, the pope required that the Carmelite nuns leave Auschwitz. That same year a fundamental agreement was signed between the State of Israel and the Holy See.

In 1998, the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ) published the document “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,” underlining the responsibility of Christians in the persecution of Jewish people, with two distinctions delineating the boundaries of this responsibility: first, it clarified that Christian hostility toward Jews does not stem from Scripture but only from a distorted interpretation of Scripture; second, it emphasized that the nature of Christian anti-Judaism differed from secular-pagan antisemitism. The document was different from the two previous documents issued by the CRRJ since it “adopted its perception of the ‘Jewish view’ as the criterion for examining the history of the relations between the church and the Jews, even if it did not necessarily identify with the Jewish claims” (104). Yet some critics felt that the document “was intended not so much to encourage the church to contend with its share in the Holocaust as to provide cover for the church to shirk its responsibility” (104). These criticisms disappeared in the following years, during which “instead of painstakingly defining the precise historical circumstances and insisting on forming the exact boundaries of the church’s responsibility, the pope and his representatives placed expressing remorse to the Jews at the center of their endeavors, without splitting too many historical hairs” (104).

On March 12, 2000, the first Sunday of Lent, as part of the millennium celebrations, John Paul II held a special mass for repentance, where he confessed “sins against the people of Israel.” Two weeks later, his pilgrimage to the Holy Land marked a new turning point. In contradistinction to Paul VI’s visit to the region, this one was an official state visit to Israel; the pope did not limit himself to just the Christian sites but came to the Western Wall and respected Jewish customs by placing a note in a crack in the ancient wall; during his visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, paraphrasing *Nostra aetate*, he went on to denounce antisemitism but added a reference to Christian acts of antisemitism. During the visit, John Paul II also asked to initiate official dialogue between representatives of the Holy See and the Chief Rabbinate, recognizing Israeli institutions as partners for dialogue with the church. “According to public opinion, within three short days, the pope seemed to have done more for Christian-Jewish reconciliation than had been accomplished in three decades of cautiously articulated statements,” writes Ben-Johanan, observing that by the end of John Paul II’s pontificate in 2005, “the relations between the Jews and the Catholic Church were, at least on the surface, better than ever” (106).

Expressions such as “elder brothers,” and images such as the pope leaning against the Western Wall or talking with the rabbis of Rome and Jerusalem became the new symbols of Christian-Jewish relations. However, the theological meaning of these gestures remained unclear. According to Ben-Johanán, “It appeared that both Jews and Christians had agreed to abandon their complex theological polemics around the Jewish refusal to recognize Christ, divine election, the covenant, and salvation, and befriend each other on a human and diplomatic basis, with religious tradition adding an aspect of dignity to this setting, which largely transcended its original language” (107). This abandonment was in fact acceptable to the public opinion of both Jews and Christians. For the Jews, “the theological discourse had always been alien, and they had always protested against their conversion into a theological category.” For Christians, “the theological discourse had been charged and traumatic, threatening the fragile balance between the existence of the church as an ethical entity in an enlightened world and its loyalty to a tradition that was often mired in contradictions” (107). As Ben-Johanán concludes laconically in the *Epilogue* of the book: “it is better to stick a note into the cracks of the Western Wall than to poke around the unpleasant question of whether the Jews can be saved without converting to Christianity” (277).

One cannot but be impressed by Ben-Johanán's capacity for analysis and synthesis in illustrating the unique role of John Paul II in Christian-Jewish reconciliation. The chapter convincingly demonstrates how John Paul II progressively changed his approach from a Christian and European viewpoint that considers Judaism as a partner for the construction of a common civilization, to a perspective taking into account the Jewish and Israeli perception. In other words, from a focus on Judaism “on the inside” to dealing with Jews “on the outside.” It also shows the paradigmatic changes in Catholic theology that this approach implies, changes that have not yet been articulated in a satisfactory way.

However, the accuracy of the main thesis—that John Paul II preferred “performative gestures rather than any theological argument” (96), to “eschew semantics and rely on pragmatics instead” so that “the emotional expression replaced theological work” (98), “shifted the center of gravity in relations with the Jews from the theological to the symbolic” (108), and that “church officials preferred diplomacy to theology” (133)—depends on what is understood by “theology” and what can be considered as being “theological.”

First, the thesis must probably be qualified by the fact that Pope John Paul II not only made gestures but made numerous and sometimes lengthy statements about Judaism and Jewish-Christian dialogue. The recently published anthology of John Paul II's statements on these topics gathers more than 150 texts, which constitutes a corpus of papal teaching unparalleled in the history of the Catholic Church,<sup>1</sup> even if this corpus includes declarations of very different authority and does not reflect a systematic approach (yet Church Fathers too were not systematic theologians, and we know their thoughts through their sermons or pastoral letters). Some statements of John Paul II have fundamental theological importance, such as

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul II, *Une fraternité renouvelée* (Paris: Bayard Cerf Mame, 2022).

his application of Romans 11:29 to rabbinic Judaism during his meeting with Jewish representatives in 1980 in Mainz. It is also important to envisage the teaching of the Catholic Church not only as a collection of magisterial statements of the pope, but as a dynamic process including different actors. The “reception” of some documents will give them a certain authority even if they don’t officially belong to the magisterium, such as the documents of the CRRJ, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, or some Bishops’ Conferences.

Second, cannot symbolic language also be theological? In some passages of chapter 3, Ben-Johanan acknowledges the theological significance of Pope John Paul II’s symbolic gestures, affirming for example that they “often entailed theological overtones” (83), recognizing “the implicit theology that resonated” from them (86), identifying the tension “between official ideology, as encoded in doctrinal formulations, and the unexpressed ideology that arose from his gestures” (86). While demonstrating that John Paul II’s narrative echoed the arguments raised by the pioneers of the Christian-Jewish dialogue of the 1950s, she also explains that “this theological position, already stressed by the council, was expressed by John Paul II in a variety of ways, which transformed it from an apologetic argument into the existential-religious experience of many Catholics vis-à-vis the Jewish people” (91). In a similar way, she explains that “John Paul II’s Judeo-Christian symbolic system provided an apt illustration of the theological claim that the attitude of Catholic Christianity toward Judaism was one of ‘fulfillment’ rather than ‘replacement,’” yet “instead of formulating the new paradigm via theological arguments, John Paul II formulated it performatively” (93). As rabbi Yehiel Poupko underlined, wouldn’t this symbolic language constitute a “performative theology” (133)?

*Mutatis mutandis*, the example of ecumenical dialogue is perhaps helpful here. Relations between the Churches in all their dimensions, including symbolics, are considered as a “*locus theologicus*,” a “theology in action,” capable of opening new theological perspectives. At the eve of his meeting with Paul VI in Jerusalem in 1964, responding to a journalist asking what theologians would think of this, Patriarch Athenagoras declared: “Church leaders act, theologians explain.” As John Paul II stated in 1995 in the encyclical *Ut unum sint*: “acknowledging our brotherhood [...] is something much more than an act of ecumenical courtesy; it constitutes a basic ecclesiological statement” (*UUS* 42). And recently Pope Francis himself affirmed that “the *dialogue of doctrine* must be theologically adapted to the *dialogue of life* that develops in the local, everyday relations between our Churches; these constitute a genuine *locus* or source of theology.”<sup>2</sup> The same could perhaps be said for Catholic-Jewish relationships which should be interpreted and reflected upon theologically.

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<sup>2</sup> Francis, “Address to the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the Catholic Church and the Oriental Orthodox Churches,” Vatican, 23 June, 2022, available at <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2022/june/documents/20220623-dialogo-teologico.html>.