

Confessions of a Catholic Theologian: On Silence, the Shoah, and the War in Israel-Palestine¹

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Introduction: Love and Fear in Interfaith Minefields²

Who among us is not disturbed, horrified, angst-ridden, and frustrated by the ongoing suffering and deaths in the spiralling conflict instigated by Hamas' attack on Israel on October 7, 2023?³ The failures of political, religious, and governmental leaders—and of the many countries that manipulate, exacerbate, or meddle in the conflict—can generate feelings of hopelessness and helplessness among caring outsiders. Ultimately, what matters to many, though, are the flourishing of peace and justice in the region, the return of the Israeli hostages, the end of the occupation, and the implementing of a viable two-state solution. These are primarily political issues, but they nevertheless touch on concerns central to Catholic theologians, even those living outside the Middle East, and especially to those committed to Christian-Jewish relations.

This is because the events surrounding October 7th also matter theologically and can undermine the fundamental relationship and integrity of the dialogue. This article, a reflection, an anguished cry of a post-Shoah Catholic theologian long committed to Jewish-Christian dialogue, grapples with how and why the current conflict impacts, challenges, and undermines Jewish-Christian relations. It immerses itself in the worries and fears, both theologically and ethically, that might need to be named and then faced because of the current conflict, and how the inter-religious landscape might change in the process. I hope that this naming and

¹ I thank Debbie Weissman, Ed Kessler, John Pawlikowski, Karma Ben-Johanan, Mary Boys, and Phil Cunningham for their valuable discussions and suggestions on an earlier draft. I also thank the anonymous reviewers, one of whom suggested part of the revised title—among other very empowering critiques (and praise). Lastly, immense thanks to Ruth Langer for pushing me towards greater clarity, balance, and precision and her extremely helpful edits.

² See my argument in “Landmines and Vegetables: The Hope and Perils of Recent Jewish Critiques of Christianity,” in *Pathways for Interreligious Dialogue*, edited by Vladimir Latinovic, Gerard Mannion and Peter Phan (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 81–96, that Christians need to hear Jewish critiques of Christianity (and ingest these the way vegetables might be less appetizing than sweets to a child, especially as Christians mostly placed landmines around Jewish life and faith). Such an example would be emblematic of my somewhat jejune Judeo-philial period, touched on below.

³ See the forthcoming book, *Stress Test: On the Impact of the Hamas-Gaza Conflict on Christian-Jewish Relations*, ed. John J. Roth and Carol Rittner (iPub Global, 2025).

exposing of both dreaded, discomfiting questions and laborious, messy truth claims can spur deeper, candid, and transparent discussions and so more genuine interfaith partnerships.

Predictably and necessarily, this confession is mired in potential dead ends and contradictions. This is not only because it is entangled in both the geo-political, historical, and theological knots of Israel and Palestine⁴ and the dilatory and still unrealized potential of post-Shoah Catholic Theology, but also because this confession offers different and conflicting messages. Because of the nature and scope of suffering, violation, and horror, both in the context of Christian historical persecution of Jews and the current miasma in Israel and Palestine, I will first discuss the problematic role of silence in Jewish-Christian relations and assess if there is the right kind of silence and listening within this dialogue. In another context,⁵ I had expressed the hope that silence and listening would be a key intentional practice among Christians (like myself) who were often over-represented in interfaith dialogues. After October 7th, the silence I was advocating seemed problematic. Christian silence during the Shoah was morally sinful, and so too, is any Christian silence which fails to comfort Jews in this time of trauma, missile attacks, and rising antisemitism. But what about Palestinian suffering and the rising civilian death toll from Israeli⁶ bombing and forced evacuations? How do we get the balance right between silence and critique and the right time for silence and words, especially when the right words seem so elusive?⁷

I then trace my own journey from identifying as a post-Shoah Catholic theologian to being a post-Shoah, Catholic pluralist theologian, a journey that was buttressed by the institutional Church's stumbling towards fully disowning supersessionism and truly admiring and learning deeply from Judaism.⁸ In outlining this

⁴ See Nicholas Kristoff, "How to Think Through the Moral Tangle in Gaza." *The New York Times*. June 1, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/01/opinion/israel-gaza-antisemitism.html?unlocked_article_code=1.w00.mXuT.2srAREBr002V&smid=url-share.

⁵ At the 2023 European Association for the Study of Religions conference, I gave a paper titled: "Silence, Listening, and Humility: A Kenotic Turn in Interreligious Dialogue for (Catholic) Christians." Longer abstract available at: <https://nomadit.co.uk/conference/easr2023/paper/73452>. Drawing upon the tradition of kenotic Christology, I argued that those of us linked with any dominant and well-represented system (usually Christianity in the North Atlantic world) should practice and hone silence, listening, and humility in interreligious partnership, dialogue, and engagement. While I was working on an article version of that paper, I felt that after October 7th, the silence I initially had in mind was problematic and pivoted to this current article.

⁶ It is important that I clarify what I mean by Israel here. Unless otherwise specified, when I mention Israel, I only mean the Netanyahu government and those within his administration who support Israel's military response and policies. I especially thank Karma Ben-Johanan for challenging me to differentiate between Israelis and the Israeli government. It is necessary to acknowledge the great diversity of views among Jews, both in Israel and the diaspora, as well as among Muslim and Christians.

⁷ See Debbie Weissman, "A Jewish Reflection" in "Theological Reflections on the Events that have unfolded in Israel and Gaza," *ICJ Website* (March 12, 2024), <https://www.iccj.org/article/theological-reflections-on-the-events-that-have-unfolded-in-israel-and-gaza.html>.

⁸ See Philip A. Cunningham, *Maxims for Mutuality: Principles for Catholic Theology, Education, and Preaching about Jews and Judaism* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2022); and Barbara U. Meyer, *Jesus the Jew in Christian Memory: Theological and Philosophical Exploration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

path, I will also reflect on and evaluate how my appreciation of Judaism matured and was nuanced through my work in witness testimonies of atrocity, humility studies, and religious pluralism. Recognizing the brokenness of all faiths (not just my own) inevitably had consequences for my previously romanticized vision of Judaism. These steps will then help me answer some difficult questions, formulated with an awareness of and in agreement with the ICCJ's statement that not all criticisms of the State of Israel are antisemitic.⁹ These questions are:

1. Is the Christian silence during the Shoah different from Christian silence during the Israeli bombardment of Gaza and Lebanon,¹⁰ especially when many Jews feel abandoned by a lack of Christian support and commiseration for their suffering, insecurity, and the rise of antisemitism?
2. If I condemn the Israeli military response in Gaza (and Lebanon)—after sharply rebuking Hamas, Hezbollah and any other totalitarian and autocratic governments—, is this yet another example of Christian betrayals of Jews, proving some Jews' sceptic claims that Christians voice false intentions and have not genuinely repented their anti-Judaism?
3. The document *Dabru Emet* states, "Christians can respect the claims of the Jewish people upon the land." What does such "respect" mean in the face of Israeli and Palestinian appeals, especially after October 7th?¹¹
4. Does my unvarnished criticism of Catholic ecclesial failures and my religiously pluralist position privilege me to be potentially critical of core Jewish beliefs about chosenness and the land of Israel, or does my (supposed) religious ambiguity gainsay my critique of Judaism as a type of muddled relativism?
5. Am I prepared and willing to even contemplate a position that highlights Jewish (and Israeli) moral failures toward Palestinians, one which could undermine any regard I might have gained from Jews and all the years of joyful work in dialogue with them?

⁹ International Council of Christians and Jews, "A Time for Recommitment: Jewish Christian Dialogue 70 Years after War and Shoah," 16–17 July, 2009, https://www.jcrelations.net/fileadmin//files/pdf/201011271429260.BThesen_engl_kompl.pdf. Especially relevant here is this phrase under heading 4: "To Pray for Peace in Jerusalem": "By critiquing the policies of Israeli and Palestinian governmental and social institutions when such criticism is morally warranted, at the same time acknowledging both communities' deep attachment to the land."

¹⁰ This article's focus on the impact of the violence in Israel and Palestine on Christian-Jewish relations will not examine Israeli bombing of Lebanon, but see Rania Abouzeid, "The Price Lebanon Is Paying for the Hezbollah-Israel War." *The New Yorker*. November 21, 2024, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/dispatch/the-price-lebanon-is-paying-for-the-hezbollah-israel-war>. Nor will it focus on Israeli bombings in Syria or tit-for-tat attacks between Iran and Israel, but see Reuters, "Israeli attack on Syria's Palmyra kills 36 people, Syrian state media says." Reuters. November 21, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israel-attacks-syrias-palmyra-syrian-state-news-agency-says-2024-11-20/>; and Carrie A. Lee, "The Paradox of Israeli Deterrence: How a Campaign Against Hezbollah Could Lower Iran's Inhibitions." *Foreign Affairs*. November 19, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ united-states/paradox-israeli-deterrence>.

¹¹ "Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity," Institute for Islamic-Christian-Jewish Studies (September 10, 2000), <https://icjs.org/resources/dabru-emet>.

6. To what extent should the Shoah still hover over Christian-Jewish relations?
7. Is Christian guilt, acrimony, and moral debt accrued from Christian supersessionism and its murderous conclusions towards Jews and Judaism so inexhaustible that it can never be repaid and healed? Or can even the (supposedly) repentant perpetrator challenge and question their now empowered former victims? Can the majority of Jews listen to Christians?

This won't be an easy road, but I am also heartened by Jewish interfaith scholar (and recent recipient of the Seelisberg Prize), Ed Kessler, who maintains that even after October 7th and the Israeli response: "It is never too late to talk..."¹² Coupled with a rugged and scrappy humility¹³ and active listening to the victims of all sides, such talk could indeed be fruitful and holy. One problem, though, is the ambiguity of silence.

Silence, (Not) Listening, and Moral Failure

Not all silence is the same. In much spiritual writing, silence is the fuse that lights a connection to the transcendent, a type of soundlessness where communion between a human seeker and a sought-after Divine blend and maybe harmonize. As Czech theologian Tomáš Halík writes: "Theologians, religious specialists, and preachers must speak about God. It is even more important that they should also be capable of being silent about God, of being silent before God and with God, of being silent in God, and of listening to God's silence."¹⁴ Such silences are intended to be cathartic and healing.

However, there are other silences that scream moral failure and complicity. In Paul Lynch's heralded dystopian novel *Prophet Song*, political events in Dublin reveal the stirrings of a totalitarian regime. Trade union leaders, among others, go missing. The fear generated by her husband's detention so paralyzes one distraught wife that she argues against protesting, saying: "This is not a time to speak...but a time to keep silent, everybody has grown afraid, our husbands have been taken from us and placed into this silence."¹⁵ Her silence is enmeshed in inaction, anxiety, and trepidation, not necessarily imagined or misplaced. Some silence is enforced by regimes and institutions. Speaking out incurs a great cost to one's life, health,

¹² Ed Kessler, "It is never too late to talk..." *Wolf Institute Blog* (November 23, 2023), <https://www.woolf.cam.ac.uk/blog/it-is-never-too-late-to-talk>. See also Philip A. Cunningham, Ruth Langer, and Jesper Svartvik, eds., *Enabling Dialogue about the Land: A Resource Book for Jews and Christians*, (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2020); and Gavin D'Costa and Faydra L. Shapiro, eds., *Contemporary Catholic Approaches to the People, Land and State of Israel* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022).

¹³ See my *Humbling Faith, Brokenness, Doubt, Dialogue: What Unites Atheists, Theists, and Nontheists* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019).

¹⁴ Tomáš Halík, *From the Underground Church to Freedom*, trans. Gerald Turner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), 324.

¹⁵ Paul Lynch, *Prophet's Song* (London: OneWorld, 2024), 48.

and status. Jails, gulags, death pits, and blacklists are filled with many good, innocent people who had the courage to sever that oppressive silence.

A third kind of silence appears in journalist Ghaith Abdul-Ahad's harrowing and masterful depictions of the layers of war and rebellion in his Iraqi homeland. He describes the situation after IS was momentarily defeated in Mosul, writing, "The commander and his men knew that in this ruined country the silence of guns did not mean peace, it simply indicated the absence of one kind of war and the start of another."¹⁶ This silence is a babble and cacophony. What should be the joy of silence as a sign that peace may finally be returning is sullied by those who harness that lull for macabre ends.

Ultimately, there are as many silences as there are adjectives, from imperial, haughty, dreadful, and disturbing to heroic, soothing, stoic, and restorative, and all gradations and interpretations in-between. When and how to be silent are major moral imperatives especially for the garrulously privileged and famous, and because of the control of language and silence by government, military, and corporate entities. What silence or breach of silence is of value in troubled interfaith contexts?

For Christians living outside the Middle East, what are the causes of our silence: fear like the mother in *Prophet Song*, or a silence which may not seek some gain, as in the example from Iraq, but perhaps is tinged with self-satisfaction, especially if tired from all the stories about Christians as perpetrators? Or is it a holy silence of prayers and seeking the right words and actions at the right time?¹⁷ I note the following conditions for breaching silence:

1. To ensure conditions are created for the religious other, and especially any victims/survivors of injustice, to speak plainly and fearlessly.
2. To allow those representatives in power to respond in dialogue, with humility and integrity, ideally accepting appropriate responsibility towards any victims' claims.
3. Where victims are not properly heard (or allowed to speak) or those in power offer self-serving replies (or maintain an unhelpful complicit silence), to show solidarity with the suffering through a justpeace response.¹⁸

Historically, there has been a ringing dearth of Christian listening and silence towards Jews and Judaism. Christians rarely if ever listened to Jewish voices and beliefs and filled any silence with Christian claims of superiority and supersession. In another mode, Christians responded to the Shoah with complicit, scandalous silence, if not active participation in six million Jewish murders. In the post-Shoah decades, Christians rejected this silence, generating a transformative theology of

¹⁶ Ghaith Abdul-Ahad, *A Stranger in Your Own City: Travels in the Middle East's Long War* (London: Hutchinson Heinemann, 2023), 398.

¹⁷ I thank Pavol Bargár for raising this issue when I presented this paper at the EuARe conference in Palermo on May 20, 2024.

¹⁸ On justpeace, see Atalia Omer, R Scott Appleby, and David Little, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Jews and Judaism. Many Jews celebrated the Second Vatican Council declaration *Nostra Aetate* or 2015's "The Gifts and Calling are Irrevocable"¹⁹ as positive breaches of the silence and hoped it signalled enduring solidarity.

But Hamas's massacre of 1200 (mostly) Jews and kidnapping of 250 others on October 7th, leading to Israel's retaliatory, brutal, unrelenting, and some say genocidal response, are a turning point and major test of Jewish-Christian relations. Here, the silence and listening initially espoused for Christian leaders in interfaith dialogue become interpreted in different ways by Palestinians and Jews. We are left with what seems a discordance of silences; more failures of listening (to Jews and Palestinians, and the confluence of human rights and Christian Social Teaching); and ill-gotten choices that seem unwilling or unable to embrace the Palestinian and Israeli victims and oppose the terrorism of Hamas, the myopic, imperial, militancy of the State of Israel, and the self-serving and hypocritical realpolitik of nations like Iran, the United States, Russia, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia.

My evaluation of this instance of silence will be shaped by another element, to which I now turn. As a Catholic theologian committed to dialogue with Jews, how do I understand Jews and Judaism? My understanding has evolved over the years in ways that both clarify and complicate this Catholic's reading of the current situation in the Middle East. Below I address my movement from idealizing Judaism to searching for a more realistic and complex picture of Jewish life and beliefs.

The Maturing of Jewish-Christian Interfaith Encounters: Toward Embracing Pervasive Fragility and Brokenness

Like a young, though insecure lover mesmerized by his beloved, I for many years flirted with exalting Judaism while mostly seeing the failure and lost promises of my Catholic tradition, especially as entombed in its all-male institutional hierarchy. However, while ideally, lovers realistically know and respect one another, my love of Judaism seemed mostly one-sided, rarely receiving response outside a rare Jewish public statement like *Dabru Emet* or a Jewish work open to a Christian way for Christians, like Michael Kogan's *Opening the Covenant: A Jewish Theology of Christianity*.

I came to see that I had perhaps generously given Jews and Judaism excessive credit and over-spotlighted Christian failures. Why? Because my theological formation coincided with the degradation wrought by the Catholic Church's child abuse scandal and cover-up. My professional theological work also began with the

¹⁹ See Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "'The Gifts and the Calling of God Are Irrevocable' (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on the Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of 'Nostra Aetate' (No. 4)," 10 December 2015, <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crre/documenti-della-commissione/en.html>. See also John Pawlikowski, "The Uniqueness of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue: A Yes and a No," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12.1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v12i1.9799>.

problem of theodicy raised by words and images of victims of mass atrocities. There too, Christians were often bystanders, perpetrators, planners, and victims.²⁰

This many-sidedness demanded humility, attention, and nuance. While Christian martyrs and victims should not be forgotten or silenced, Christian systemic failures regarding Jewish victims have been catastrophic and catalogue an abysmal, phoney, and self-serving application of Christian teachings, beliefs, and praxis amid the reality of genocidal and societal atrocities. Where we place the blame is never foolproof, but Christian excuses are legion, often differentiating between the sinning Christian and the faith, Scripture, or Church, as if they're all not graced and stitched together. The Vatican document "We Remember" was a prominent missed opportunity for truth and reconciliation.²¹ Regardless, especially in the context of Jewish-Christian relations where most crimes were perpetrated by Christians against Jews, theologians like Johann Baptist Metz and David Tracy powerfully called for deep Christian repentance and purification, or in my language, "humbling."²²

Thus, when I was a young Catholic theologian, chastened and embarrassed by past and present Christian failures to follow Jesus of Nazareth in discipleship, I felt mostly shame and stuttering wisdom in the company of Jewish friends and colleagues. This mostly revealed itself in a blushing and gushing philo-Judaism,²³ where I was more likely to connect with Jewish authors like Rabbi Abraham Skorka than with his dialogue partner, Mario Bergoglio (Pope Francis) in their co-authored book, *For the Sake of Heaven and Earth*. Especially during various Church scandals or theological tone-deaf moments, like Pope Benedict's (inanely) welcoming

²⁰ As one recent example, see Sari Horwitz, Dana Hedgpeth, Emmanuel Martinez, Scott Higham, and Salwan Georges, "In the Name of God," *The Washington Post* (May 29, 2024), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/interactive/2024/sexual-abuse-native-american-boarding-schools/>.

²¹ See, John Pawlikowski, "'We Remember': A Complex Narrative," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, 18.1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v18i1.16711>; and Peter Admirand, "Remembering the Shoah without Jewish Voices: 'We Remember' as a Failure of Memory," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, 18.1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v18i1.16709>.

²² See, for example, David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987); David Tracy, *Dialogue with the Other: The Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 1990); and Johann Baptist Metz, "Facing the Jews: Christian Theology after Auschwitz," in *Johann-Baptist Metz and Jürgen Moltmann, Faith and the Future: Essays on Theology, Solidarity, and Modernity*, trans. John Griffiths (Nijmegen: The Concilium Foundation), 38–48. For helpful analysis of Tracy's oeuvre, see Stephen Okey, *A Theology of Conversation: An Introduction to David Tracy*. Foreword by David Tracy (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 2018); and on Metz, Tracy, and liberation theology, see Raúl E. Zagarra, *A Revolutionary Faith: Liberation Theology Between Public Religion and Public Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023).

²³ These five resources are particularly useful in forming a healthy Christian love and respect of Jews and Judaism:

1. Jesus' lived Jewishness;
2. Wisdom gleaned from Jewish thinkers and writers from antiquity to today, especially in the post-Shoah period;
3. Genuine friendships and relationships with Jews;
4. The Vatican's positive statements towards Jews and Judaism and Jewish-Christian statements of partnership; and
5. Healthy humility and self-critique of both Christian and Jewish blind spots and moral failures.

Holocaust denier Bishop Richard Williamson or censoring feminist, liberation, or pluralist theologians, I actively sought avenues into Jewish thought and belief that could inform, cleanse, nurture, and mature Christian thought. I especially found resonance with many post-Shoah Jewish thinkers, from my teacher Elie Wiesel to Irving Greenberg and Eliezer Berkovits. Just as Paul Knitter felt he could not be Christian without the Buddha, I felt this way about Judaism.

As contemporary Catholic theology grappled and struggled with its past failures and the related demise of its own relevance, Jewish life (and confidence) reached new heights after the 1948 establishment and growth of the State of Israel and with robust Jewish diasporic life, especially in America, Australia, and Western Europe. Such a Jewish renaissance encouraged more Jewish engagement with Christianity. Christians now appreciated and welcomed this Jewish attention to their faith. After years of hostility and silence towards Jews, Christians instead seek out Jewish biblical scholars like Amy-Jill Levine for New Testament talks in Christian seminaries and colleges. *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, edited by Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, showcases numerous Jewish experts on the Christian Scriptures/New Testament and early Christian theological works and themes. In interfaith circles, Jewish-Christian dialogue is lauded as the interfaith dialogue par excellence, offering hope and example to other supposedly less successful or prominent pairings.²⁴

Meanwhile, my own two-decade period of interfaith learning and purification (especially by encountering Judaism more deeply) humbled my personal Catholic faith and moved me first tentatively, but now openly, from an inclusivist to a pluralist position.²⁵ This move was spiritually tumultuous and risky. While my faith

²⁴ According to Karma Ben-Johanan, there have also been signs of (covered-over) fissures or a lack of full transparency, especially about critical Jewish views of Christian theology held by a diverse section of religious Jews. See her *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2022); and for my commentary, see Peter Admirand, "Further Stepping Stones for Jewish-Christian Dialogue," in *Critical Questions in Contemporary Theology: Essays in Honour of Dermot A. Lane*, ed. Ethna Regan and Alan Kearns (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2024), ch. 20.

²⁵ The Second Vatican Council guided the Church from an exclusivist position—no salvation outside faith in Christ and participation in the Sacramental Church—to an inclusivist position that acknowledges and praises what is good and holy in other faiths, usually deemed as seeds of the Word or preparation for the Gospel, while maintaining that Jesus remains the ultimate source of salvation. Pluralism is the belief that other religious faiths and ways are (or can be) salvific or redemptive through their own traditions and practices without any meditation of belief in Christ or sacramental participation in the Church. Note that not all faiths see their purpose or aim reflected in the Christian language of salvation. The views of some are explicitly nontheist. (For my views on pluralism, see my *Humbling Faith*, chapter 3; and my "Humbling the Discourse: Why Interfaith Dialogue, Religious Pluralism, Liberation Theology, and Secular Humanism Are Needed for a Robust Public Square," *Religions* 10 (2019):450, DOI: 10.3390/rel10080450). The Vatican, especially during the papacies of John Paul II and Pope Benedict, rebuked any belief in religious pluralism as false, as encapsulated in the 2000 declaration by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus* (https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html) and buttressed by the investigations and warnings against theologians who advocated some form of religious pluralism like Jacques Dupuis or Paul Knitter.

remained rooted in following Jesus, my interfaith work questioned Christ's universal relevance, especially in encountering holy people who rejected (or were not drawn to Christianity). If I claimed my Christology was meant to be empowering, social justice oriented, and loving, how could a failure to follow Jesus matter when so much of that choice is rooted in geography and contingency? I also began to see the value of studying and teaching an interfaith Christology, where any orthodox Christology would learn and listen in dialogue with non-Christian views of Jesus.

Such an interfaith Christology also unmoored me from some standard Christian theological language. When I speak of salvation,²⁶ for example, I usually meant post-mortem healing and afterlife relationship with God and God's creation, but how does traditional belief in Jesus as Savior and Redeemer apply to those who practice another theistic faith where "salvation" is not the focus (perhaps it is doing the will of God) or whose way of life is nontheist or atheist? Is there a way to theologically respond beyond trite phrases like: God works in mysterious ways, who am I to judge (?), or we will find out after death?

That Christ is the Truth which enlightens me, to paraphrase *Nostra Aetate*, can remain personally compelling, but no longer entails that I view other paths as mere "reflections or rays of that Truth."²⁷ This is especially the case for Jews and Judaism in all its various iterations, so long as they uphold what the Jewish Jesus summarized as love of God and love of neighbor (Mark 12:30–31). Highlighting Popes John Paul II and Francis' celebrating the Jewish covenant²⁸ as never revoked by God (echoing Paul), I move beyond Pope Benedict's calculated interpretation that this simply means God never abandons God's side of any agreement.²⁹ Instead, I believe Judaism's teachings are salvific in themselves. Elsewhere, I even responded "yes" to Alan Berger and David Patterson's question, asked with fear-and-

²⁶ For a helpful pluralist conception of the afterlife, see S. Mark Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995).

²⁷ "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate*," §2, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html. For helpful interreligious commentary, see *The Future of Interreligious Dialogue A Multireligious Conversation on "Nostra Aetate"*, ed. Charles L. Cohen, Paul F. Knitter and Ulrich Rosenhagen (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2017).

²⁸ Strictly speaking, covenant should be in the plural, from the Noahide to the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and perhaps, post-Shoah, as outlined by Irving Greenberg and others, though this position contradicts Pope Benedict's insistence on a single covenant theology. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Many Religions - One Covenant: Israel, the Church and the World*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999). See also *Two Faiths, One Covenant?: Jewish and Christian Identity in the Presence of the Other*, ed. Eugene Korn and John Pawlikowski (Lanham: Rowan & Littlefield, 2005).

²⁹ For Benedict's view of "the never revoked covenant," see his "Grace and Vocation without Remorse: Comments on the Treatise De Iudaicis." *Communio* 45 (2018), 180–184 (163–184). For a helpful collection of essays during Benedict's papacy, see *Never Revoked: Nostra Aetate as Ongoing Challenge for Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, ed. Marianne Moyaert and Didier Pollefeyt (Louvain: Peeters Press, 2010). On Pope Francis, see John T. Pawlikowski and Malka Z. Simkovich, "Pope Francis and The Jewish Law (Torah)," *Sightings* (October 14, 2021), <https://divinity.uchicago.edu/sightings/articles/pope-francis-and-jewish-law-torah-0>; and Edward Kessler, "The Church Also Is Enriched When She Receives the Values of Judaism": Shared Faith Responses to Pope Francis and Interreligious Dialogue," in *Pope Francis and Interreligious Dialogue Religious Thinkers Engage with Recent Papal Initiatives*, ed. Alan Race and Harold Kasimow (Cham: Springer, 2018), 85–100.

trembling, “Is Jesus then superfluous for Jews?”³⁰ The resultant Christology allows for paths other than the Christian one to be potentially salvific. It allows Christians to learn from the Jewish “no” to Jesus, who might even understand it as a gift that:

1. Helps Christians appreciate Jesus’ Jewishness as distinctive.
2. Counters Christian triumphalism.
3. Inspires and challenges Christians to acknowledge other covenants and ways toward/with God.³¹

Religious pluralism requires similar engagements with other religions. What might also be learned from their “no’s” to Jesus? A humble Christian engagement with the contemporary crises of the Middle East requires inquiring deeply into the salvation offered through Islam as well as learning from its “no” to Jesus’ divinity.³² My personal journey on this path is only starting.

Interfaith Humbling and Audacity: Critiquing Oneself and the Other

Learning from other faiths is essential but demands remaining open and aware of our blind spots and biases and celebrating how this process of humbling, as I wrote in my 2019 book, *Humbling Faith*, never ends. In that work I traced five areas of humbling for all faiths and ideologies. These areas that humble are: interfaith dialogue, religious pluralism, history, testimonies of mass atrocity, and the need of receiving and giving forgiveness. A subsequent co-authored book also focused on shared virtues in atheist-theist dialogue, and how both positions are humbled in the face of dialogue with one another.³³

Humbling thus has significant theological and practical consequences. It makes sense, then, that I would (eventually) transfer humbling insights regarding Christianity to my understanding of other religions, including Judaism. I argued that not only Christians benefit from adopting this stance. If I am right, then all

³⁰ For context, see Alan L Berger, and David Patterson, with David P. Gushee, John T. Pawlikowski, and John K. Roth, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Drawing Honey from the Rock* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2008), 124 and 180–181; and for my attempt at a response, see Peter Admirand, “Following the Bread-crumbs: Jesus as Superfluous to Salvation? A Catholic Search,” *Studies in Jewish-Christian Relations* 15/1 (2020), 1–22.

³¹ See Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2000), including her summaries of the ways that Christian understandings of this “no” has led to catastrophic consequences. See also Didier Pollefeyt, *Ethics and Theology after the Holocaust* (Leuven: Peeters Press, 2018), whose inspiration is central here.

³² This area is particularly important in the context of Gaza and the Middle East where most people are Muslim. For two helpful sources examining Christology in light of Christian-Muslim dialogue, see Klaus Von Stosch, “Can Christians Learn from Qur’anic Christology? Leo Lefebure’s Theology of Judaism and Islam,” in *Christian Perspectives on Transforming Interreligious Encounters: Essays in Honor of Leo Lefebure*, ed. Peter C. Phan and Anh Q. Tran, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2024), 117–135; and Paolo Dall’Oglio SJ (with the collaboration of d’Églantine Gabaix-Hialé), *In Love with Islam, Believing in Jesus*, trans. Richard Kimball, Marie Salün, and Masha Refka (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2023).

³³ See my, *Humbling Faith*; and Andrew Fiala and Peter Admirand, *Seeking Common Ground: A Theist/Atheist Dialogue* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021).

faiths and ideologies have reasons to be humbled, including Jews and Judaism. This meant I no longer primarily saw a contrite, broken Christianity but a wiser, more authentic Jewishness, a Christianity that needed Judaism, but a Judaism that could shrug that it did not need Christianity. Tentatively, I moved into a more audacious position where the call for humbling and recognizing woundedness would be shared and embraced by all dialogue participants. This means calls for Christian renewal and mature growth towards Judaism invites a mutual Jewish renewal and growth towards Christianity (and other faiths). I hoped a balanced but still humbled vision and awareness of the other and self could follow.

If I, as a devout Catholic, could contemplate, and ultimately espouse a salvific role within Judaism outside professed recognition and belief in Jesus as Savior and God Incarnate, then other exclusivist and parochial tendencies in other faiths could also be similarly scrutinized and critiqued. This attitude encourages a different and potentially constructive stance for dialogue about today's war between Israel and Israel's neighbors, one where stances of humility allow for deep listening. Such deep listening, though, demands hearing traumatic witness testimony, too. In this light and to help me further to respond to the questions at the beginning of this article, I turn now to listen to and reflect on Jewish and Palestinian survivors amidst the latest conflict.

Listening to Israeli and Palestinian Victims and Survivors

An expression of humbling is for all theologies to listen and dialogue with victims of mass injustice and atrocity, or where that is not possible, then to engage in what Mario Aguilar has called “a hermeneutic of bones at the periphery.”³⁴ Perhaps all that remains is a bloodied shirt, a hidden diary, a scrap of paper tossed from a cattle car, bits of bone in an unmarked grave. Whatever is left must be “read” and listened to, and that horrible silence that follows must allow itself to linger out of respect for the deceased and the travesty of what was endured. If one wants to speak theologically, then one should start with Irving Greenberg's working principle, inspired by Elie Wiesel's testimony of the living children burned alive at Auschwitz: “no statement, theological or otherwise, should be made that would not be credible in the presence of burning children.”³⁵ Greenberg is advocating praxis ultimately, seeking to heal and save the victims. While I have evaluated this principle elsewhere (and challenged critical interpretations like Marilyn McCord Adams'),³⁶ for our context here, what matters is the need both to listen to the victims and to accompany victims and survivors in that uncomfortable ensuing silence. Such accompanying may also involve speech, especially to rebut false portrayals of the

³⁴ Mario Aguilar, *Theology, Liberation, and Genocide: A Theology of the Periphery* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 10–13.

³⁵ Irving Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity and Modernity after the Holocaust,” in Eva Fleischner, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav, 1977), 7–55.

³⁶ See my *Amidst Mass Atrocity and the Rubble of Theology: Searching for a Viable Theodicy* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2012), chapter 5.

victims or to advocate tenderly and compassionately for a voiceless victim. Always, words should be weighed carefully because in our globalized world, we are always in the presence of burning victims, whose blood cries even now from the earth (Genesis 4:10).

One overriding problem in the human-made disaster that is ravaging the Middle East is the ongoing demonization and othering of entire groups because of the unabashed horrors, moral indifference, and depravity committed by the minority. Each side has stories, tales, and proofs of violation, and these cases are often easily documented and proven (even as sceptics will always remain). Again, it is fitting then to turn to Israeli hostages and witnesses who depict their hellish ordeals during Hamas' rampage and to a sample of Palestinian voices amidst the latest catastrophic war in Gaza.³⁷

Violence committed against Israelis, particularly because they are Jewish, cannot be minimized, especially in regard to the events of October 7th. IDF volunteer Sharia Mendes, for example, tells Sky News that she and her team saw the mutilated faces of Israeli victims, shot repeatedly in the face, genitals, or breasts and some of these women were naked or wearing little clothing, usually bloody, all signs of sexual violence.³⁸

Freed hostage Mia Schem, in her first public interview, depicts Hamas terrorists firing at innocent unarmed civilians at a rave, then shooting her fleeing car, shooting her close-up in her arm, and then holding her hostage in a dark room. After three days, she was taken to a hospital, given some kind of surgery (that she believes was for propaganda purposes), and then forced after surgery to speak in a video for her captors. She was then not allowed to shower for 55 days, given no medication, and hardly any food. The captive of a married Hamas man with kids, Mia was particularly distraught at the hatred the woman felt towards her, sometimes bringing food to her husband in Mia's presence but not to her. Their children even stared at Mia as if she were in a zoo. In one encounter, the couple's son enters the room of Mia's captivity where she is guarded by his father. The boy opens his bag of candy and gives some to his father. He opens it again as if to share some with Mia, but closes it and walks away. She comments: "You know, pure evil. There are no innocent civilians there. Families there live under...Hamas."³⁹

A few comments before I turn to some Palestinian voices. When the interviewer mentions to IDF volunteer Sharia Mendes that some are doubting claims of sexual violence—Hamas, for example, has consistently denied any claims that their

³⁷ On intergenerational trauma in light of the Nakba, see Tareq Baconi, "Living the Nakba." *The New York Review of Books*. October 3, 2024, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2024/10/03/living-the-nakba-raja-shehadeh-fida-jiryis/>.

³⁸ Sky News, "Hamas victims showed 'systematic genital mutilation', says IDF volunteer," (January 31, 2024), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cP_oTVyrdxE.

³⁹ News 13, "Freed Israeli hostage Mia Schem in first interview since her release from Hamas captivity in Gaza," (December 31, 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y02xPRX6vCE>.

forces have sexually violated their victims or captives⁴⁰—she then describes how she is a second-generation Holocaust survivor and links the once doubted testimony of Shoah survivors like her mother to the survivors and witnesses of October 7th. Mia also refers to her ordeal as: “I suffered a holocaust.” Such links to the Shoah are telling and understandable. While some might interject that there are differences in scope and even intent,⁴¹ the point is that these Jewish and Israeli victims and witnesses see an existential threat and must endure the reality of murdered and broken bodies of friends, lovers, and family members—and a world that hesitates or often refuses to listen to these ordeals and support these innocent survivors.

Regarding Mia, I was also struck not just by her stoicism, bravery, and Jewish faith, especially when her captives forced her to watch her mother plea for her safety on television, but also how awareness of the IDF gave her hope. It told her that she was not forgotten and that Israeli forces were active, unlike during the Shoah when most Jewish victims were helpless and had to rely on (unlikely) non-Jewish liberators. Statelessness during the Shoah meant millions of Jews were unwelcome and had nowhere to escape the Nazi (and Soviet) onslaught. In a world with rising anti-Semitism (even before October 7th), the State of Israel, no matter how flawed its treatment of Palestinians (again before the current war) or how corrupt or unpopular its current government among Israelis, remains the safest country for Jewish life and practice.⁴²

While meeting and listening to survivors require empathy and compassion, it should not be bereft of historical and judicial probing and weighing of evidence. We are, though, still in the era of witnesses,⁴³ and while there was a time that witness testimonies were disparaged or seen as unreliable, that is no longer tenable (even as some fake news or radical groups may try to undermine any testimony or

⁴⁰ Such denials of course are not uncommon, though it is only in recent times that sexual violence is deemed a war crime against humanity. See especially Christina Lamb, *Our Bodies, Their Battlefields: War Through the Lives of Women* (London: William Collins, 2020).

⁴¹ For an account contending that both Hamas and Israel should be brought before the International Court of Justice, see Graeme Wood, “Charge Palestine with Genocide Too,” *Atlantic*, (April 30, 2024), <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/04/icj-genocide-cases-israel-palestine/678235/>. As noted above, on November 21, 2024, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu as well as his former defense minister Yoav Gallant and the Hamas military leader Mohammed Deif. Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader and plotter of the October 7th attacks, was killed in an Israeli bombing on October 17, 2024. Otherwise, he, too, (along with Hamas chairman Ismail Haniyeh, assassinated in July 2024), would have been issued an arrest warrant. Note the Israeli government also claimed Deif was killed in July 2024. See Cassandra Vinograd, “I.C.C. Prosecutor Sought Warrants for 3 Hamas Leaders. At Least 2 Are Now Dead,” *The New York Times* (November 21, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/21/world/middleeast/hamas-leaders-icc-arrest-warrant.html>. Following the ICC warrant, media reports focused on Israelis uniting across the political spectrum in opposition to it. See James Shotter and Neri Zilber, “Israelis unite to condemn ICC Warrant,” *Financial Times* (November 23, 2024), 8.

⁴² With ongoing missile and drone attacks from Hamas and Hezbollah (and intermittently from Iran), such “safety” referred to above is not felt by many Israelis, especially those who had to flee their homes in the north and don’t envision being able to return anytime soon. See Veronica Neifakh, “One year in limbo: Displaced Israeli families continue life in hotels with no end in sight,” *The Jerusalem Post* (October 31, 2024), <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-827032>.

⁴³ The field of testimony studies is immense, but see Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

truths that challenge their ideology). Moreover, witness testimony, because of the human-to-human power of connection, especially from people who have little or nothing to do with the horrible ordeals they undergo, speak a kind of truth that repels, haunts, and inspires us. We want healing and justice for these individuals, whose suffering we cannot even pretend to comprehend.⁴⁴

At a local Irish Council of Christians and Jews meeting, one Jewish member told the story of her granddaughter whose friends were murdered at the Re'im music festival and the horrors of family members trapped in houses while Hamas fired weapons and searched for survivors. Such stories pull me towards an Israeli "side," but then how can we not hear accounts of Palestinians caught in the maelstrom of Israeli bombardment and Hamas complicity? Palestinian suffering seems both ubiquitous and concealed, though nobody reading this will likely be unaware of accounts of families and children wiped out by Israeli forces and rockets. Just as the 1200 Israelis murdered on October 7th have stories that would break and shatter most of us, so, too, but on a vaster scale, do the tens of thousands of Palestinians killed since October 7th.

In depicting the catastrophic suffering of Palestinians following the October 7th massacre by Hamas, it is difficult not to also mention earlier periods of killings, if not daily acts of Israeli disrespect towards Palestinians. Palestinian physician Izzeldin Abuelaish, whose three daughters were killed by Israeli soldiers in 2009, writes in his 2010 memoir: "I imagine it would be hard for anyone who hasn't lived in Gaza to understand our lives. We were everything the word *refugee* stands for: disenfranchised, dismissed, marginalized, and suffering."⁴⁵ In the heralded graphic novel *Palestine*, based on his interviews and travels in Gaza in late 1991 and early 1992 (the first Intifada), Joe Sacco depicts unforgettable images and testimony of Palestinian victims of Israeli antipathy and reprisals. What is most glaring in these stories is the utter disregard Israeli soldiers have for Palestinians. In one subtle retelling, Sacco shows Israeli soldiers, in the pouring rain, stopping a young Palestinian boy of 12 or 13 to ask him some questions. As the soldiers shelter under an awning, they make the boy take off his keffiyeh and stand in the rain. The panel shows three towering and dry soldiers, all armed, and one pointing to a spot for the boy to stand. In the next page, which consists of three panels, the top panel is from the perspective behind the boy, who is now dripping with rain and looking up at the men (so only seeing up to their noses). Sacco adds the caption: "The boy stood there and answered their questions, and what choice did he have?"⁴⁶ For Sacco, this

⁴⁴ Elie Wiesel repeated how even words like thirst or hunger could never explain what he and others suffered and yet words were all they had.

⁴⁵ Aizzeldin Abuelaish, *I Shall Not Hate: A Gaze Doctor's Journey on the Road to Peace and Human Dignity* (New York: Walker & Company, 2012), 68. In an interview with National Public Radio in late December 2023, Abuelaish revealed that 20 members of his extended family were killed from an Israeli strike of a house they were sheltering in the Jabalia refugee camp. See Greg Myre, "A Palestinian doctor pushes for peace, but suffers a devastating blow from war." NPR.ORG. December 5, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/12/05/1215600036/palestinian-doctor-gaza-israel-hamas-war>.

⁴⁶ Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003), 283.

imbalance of power and the indignity of powerlessness would inevitably have negative consequences for everyone.

While the examples above highlighted events in 1991, 1992, and 2009, we could cite numerous examples of violations committed against Palestinians starting from 1948 and all the decades following. In an article commemorating the 76th commemoration of the Nakba on May 15, 2024, Umm Shadi Sheikh Khalil, displaced from Gaza City and finding temporary shelter in a tent in the central Gaza town of Deir al-Balah, commented to AP reporter Joseph Krauss: “We lived through the Nakba not just once, but several times.”⁴⁷

In an April 2024 *Washington Post* visual article, “Parenting in Gaza today is so much more than keeping your children alive,” Louisa Loveluck and Hajar Harb drew upon interviews with 21 parents and children from 15 families in Gaza between January and April, 2024. Especially moving in the article are the illustrations by Ghazal Fatollahi depicting what the Palestinian children and parents convey in words. 13-year-old Ahmed Abu Lebda tells the reporters: “I lost all my friends, my family, and my home. I saw death with my own eyes. I was pulled from under the rubble. All I tell my parents is that I want to live. I don’t like death.”⁴⁸ The accompanying image shows a kneeling boy crying and towering over half-destroyed buildings below him. Abu’s father, Muhammad al-Nabahin, “described the shame that seeped through him as Ahmed spoke. ‘I have nothing more than my arm to hide them from death,’ he said.”

A child from another family, twelve-year-old Mayar Abu Haben comments:

I saw the bodies and the dead when our house was bombed at the beginning of the war. When will I return to my home? My mother tells me that we will return soon, but I do not believe her because the missiles do not stop and everything around me says that we will not return.”

Other stories portray children screaming every night from terror and trauma, wetting their beds. Some who were rescued from the rubble still believe they are buried or can’t block recurring images of the dead and dying. Recall how kidnapped victim Mia called all Palestinians evil and brainwashed. Instead, we see how victims on all sides are further divided and isolated from one another. While the violent losses of all lives are tragic, there are so many demoralizing stories and elements to this conflict, from the killing and scarring of Palestinian children and Hamas’ massacres in Kibbutz Be’eri, which included many devoted peace workers like Vivian Silver,⁴⁹ to documented cases of Hamas using human shields or civilian

⁴⁷ Joseph Krauss, “Palestinians across the Middle East mark their original ‘catastrophe’ with eyes on the war in Gaza,” *Associated Press* (May 15, 2024),

<https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-hamas-war-news-05-15-2024-e9696aa2da25e447219f2be0c1926b11>.

⁴⁸ Louisa Loveluck and Hajar Harb, “Parenting in Gaza today is so much more than keeping your children alive,” *The Washington Post* (April 30, 2024),

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2024/gaza-parents-children-fear-war/>.

⁴⁹ See Maya Levin, “Mourners gather in Israel to honor memory of longtime peace activist Vivian Silver.” NPR.org. November 17, 2023,

buildings for military purposes,⁵⁰ or the IDF's targeting of journalists, aid workers, schools and hospitals.⁵¹ What kind of silence, words, and actions should follow these testimonies and demoralizing stories?

Treading on Holy Ground: Jewish Chosenness, the Land, October 7th, and Accusations of Genocide

Contemporary Catholic theology about Judaism finds itself in an unenviable place. Much of the younger generations in the West have little or no connection to the institutional Church and feel scant obligation and responsibility for crimes of the Shoah. Catholics with little contact with living Judaism perceive Judaism only through the acts of the State of Israel's current government rather than through living Judaism's nuance, beauty, humor, values, contradictions, complexity and religious diversity.

These gaps are not helped by recent diplomatic spats between Israel and the Vatican.⁵² Pope Francis has repeatedly called for a ceasefire⁵³ and referred to Israel's "indiscriminate striking" of civilians in Gaza (and Ukraine).⁵⁴ Attendees at a meeting with Palestinians in November 2023 reported that he called Israeli attacks in Gaza genocide, which the Vatican later tried to rebut.⁵⁵ On November 21, 2024, Netanyahu rebuked Pope Francis after more recent reports that the Pope called for

<https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2023/11/17/1213523321/israel-gaza-peace-activist-vivian-silver-funeral-service>; see also Francesca Sabatinelli and Roberto Cetera, "Nadav Kipnis: 'My parents died on kibbutz where they worked for peace.'" *Vatican News*. October 25, 2023, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/world/news/2023-10/interview-israel-kibbutz-peace-family-hostages-palestine-war.html>.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Beverley Milton-Edwards and Stephen Farrell, *Hamas: The Quest for Power* (London: Polity, 2024), 127–129.

⁵¹ Yolande Knell and Sean Seddon, "Gaza's al-Shifa hospital in ruins after two-week Israeli raid," *BBC.com*, (April 1, 2024), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68705765>.

⁵² Crux Staff, "Israel protests talk of Gaza 'genocide,' 'ethnic cleansing' at Vatican event," *Crux.com* (May 13, 2024), <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2024/05/israel-protests-talk-of-gaza-genocide-ethnic-cleansing-at-vatican-event>; and Cindy Wooden, "Israeli embassy objects to Cardinal Parolin's remarks on Gaza death toll," *America* (February 14, 2024), <https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2024/02/14/israel-cardinal-parolin-gaza-247312>.

⁵³ Vatican News, "Pope Francis Decries Grave Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza, Appeals for Ceasefire." *Vatican News* (August 15, 2024), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-08/pope-decries-grave-humanitarian-crisis-gaza-appeals-ceasefire.html>.

⁵⁴ Pierre Emmanuel Ngendakumana, "Pope laments 'indiscriminate striking' of civilians in Gaza and Ukraine wars," *Politico* (January 8, 2024), <https://www.politico.eu/article/pope-francis-ukraine-palestina-israel-gaza-denounces-indiscriminate-striking-of-civilians/>.

⁵⁵ Philip Pullella, "Dispute erupts over whether pope called Gaza situation a 'genocide,'" *Reuters* (November 22, 2023), <https://www.reuters.com/world/pope-says-conflict-between-israel-hamas-has-gone-beyond-war-terrorism-2023-11-22/>.

further investigation into whether Israeli military action was genocide.⁵⁶ Other accusations of genocide, ethnic cleansing, and war crimes, though controversial, persist, but without Vatican amplification.⁵⁷

In seeking to atone for the pervasive Catholic silence and complicity during the Nazi Genocide against the Jews, the Catholic Church sought a new and redemptive relationship with Jews and Judaism. However, this new relationship is now struggling to find a way forward even as the current political and military situation in the Middle East threatens to undermine the bonds and hope that had nurtured Jewish-Christian engagement over the last sixty years. Instead, silence, words, and actions all seem unable to heal any interfaith rifts about how best to respond to developments in Israel and Palestine, let alone stop the violence. Instead we see the number of Palestinians continue to die and cannot forget images of bullet and blood-spattered walls in Jewish settlements on October 7th; the scene of Palestinian people smiling and celebrating as an Israeli female, Shani Louk, barely dressed and unconscious if not already dead, is driven away in a truck;⁵⁸ Israeli young men stomping and destroying aid meant for Gazan civilians; or images of Palestinian children lying buried under rubble from Israeli bombing of houses, schools, and hospitals. All point to continual acts of revenge and spirals of parallel self-destruction.

I suggest that we must condemn at least two pernicious ideologies, both adulterating and misrepresenting their religious faiths:

1. the genocidal and militant core of Hamas' perversion of the Islamic principles of compassion and justice (note article 1 of the Hamas Charter: "The Movement's program is Islam"); and
2. the Netanyahu-led Israeli government's invoking dubious elements within Jewish faith and violating core biblical and rabbinic teachings, especially to justify their political and military actions against Palestinians.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Vatican News, "Pope Francis calls for investigation to determine if Israel's attacks in Gaza constitute 'genocide'," *National Catholic Reporter* (November 18, 2024), <https://www.ncronline.org/vatican/vatican-news/pope-francis-calls-investigation-determine-if-israels-attacks-gaza-constitute>; and "Netanyahu slams Pope Francis after calling for international probe into Israel's genocide in Gaza," *Middle East Monitor* (November 22, 2024), <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20241122-netanyahu-slams-pope-francis-after-calling-for-international-probe-into-israels-genocide-in-gaza/>.

⁵⁷ See, for example, Adam Gregerman, "Unfulfilled Promise: Pope Francis and the Israel-Hamas war," *The Tablet*, November 20, 2024, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/unfulfilled-promise-pope-francis-israel>. As Gregerman writes: "With the possible exception of Russia's war on Ukraine, no other conflict has received such frequent mention by Francis, nor has he engaged so intimately with the specific features of other, often more deadly conflicts."

⁵⁸ Her dead body was recovered in October 2023.

⁵⁹ See, *National Public Radio*, "Netanyahu's references to violent biblical passages raise alarm among critics," NPR.org (November 7, 2023), <https://www.npr.org/2023/11/07/1211133201/netanyahus-references-to-violent-biblical-passages-raise-alarm-among-critics>. More recently, Michael Freund (a former Deputy Communications Director for Netanyahu), wrote an opinion piece on justifying IDF forces in southern Lebanon by citing Genesis 10:19 to argue "that back in biblical times, southern Lebanon was clearly part of the Land of Israel." ("Southern Lebanon is actually northern Israel," *The Jerusalem Post* [November 17, 2024], <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/article-829140>).

Both ideologies encourage terror, racism, revenge, and division. The co-opting of biblical and Qur'anic verses for divisive, ethno-racist, or violent ends is always perverse and sacrilegious. If military operations are believed to be needed, geopolitical realities (in line with human rights doctrine) must be used as justifications. In this light, Israel contends that they are surrounded by hostile forces and countries that seek their destruction (views borne out by history and embodied in October 7th). Palestinians, moreover, need no reminder of the nearly 70 years of misery, poverty, and human rights violations they have endured under Israel. Yet, even if the geo-political arguments could be defensible, they have failed to bring lasting stability and peace.

In response, my belief in a compassionate, all-inclusive, and non-violent Christ calls me to:

1. Focus on liberation theology's seeking of human rights and justice for all;
2. Celebrate religious pluralism and the many ways and paths to God;
3. Promote peace, dialogue and partnership against any form of coercion and violence (a justpeace standpoint);
4. Reject claims of supersessionism in all its forms; and
5. Condemn any religious triumphalism and exclusivism.

In initially preparing this paper, I feared that in answering this call, I would be forced to name the Israeli bombardment of Gaza a genocide or a genocidal moment (tellingly, I had no such hesitation in censuring Hamas). I also feared that in seeking deeper causes (beyond October 7th), I would have to rebuke both the Jewish notion of chosenness (if deemed exclusionary or superior to non-Jews) and the Jewish belief in the holiness and sanctification of the Land of Israel. As my struggle reveals itself below, my initial fears about critiques of Jewish beliefs and views on the Land, as well as any claims that Israel is guilty of genocide still need to practice deeper listening to and trust in Jews—while also listening to Palestinian voices.

For this Catholic, struggles over elements of Jewish faith are the easier issues. Biblical passages and tradition include many conflicting and less appealing ideas that are no longer, if they ever were, morally tenable or justifiable. Just as I think that Christians should reject any blood atonement Christology or theologies of salvation only through explicit belief in Christ, I think Jews should reject concepts of chosenness and religious claims of a Jewish sacred land. These seem myopic or untenable, causing more harm than good both to believer and nonbeliever. Such aspects of Judaism would be better expressed by sheltering the homeless and displaced and striving for equal rights for all. Such would be signs of that chosenness and God's love for all through the Jewish people and covenant(s). However, this would be imposing my Catholic values on Jews. Here is where empathetic silence and listening can play a pivotal role. Seeking to uphold an integral religious plurality and the viability of the Jewish covenant unrevoked by God, I need to accept or

try to understand what to me are uncomfortable, confusing, or unappealing aspects of Judaism. For this, I need to keep engaging in dialogue.

Regarding Israeli military actions in Gaza, I see (as an American expat) a deep resemblance to the untoward and excessive response of the US War on terror. That war was probably not genocidal in the strict definition but was culpable of wide-ranging atrocities and human rights abuses. A starting point here is for all Israelis (and especially Jewish supporters of the Netanyahu government) to admit the possibility or conditions for which Israel would be guilty of genocide or genocidal moments in Palestine, and deeper soul searching on how and whether the right to defend oneself or to respond to an attack have clear moral limits. If so, what are they? No such limits seem to be identified, especially by the Netanyahu government.⁶⁰

Regarding Hamas, the explicitly anti-Jewish and anti-Israel aspects of its Charter can only be condemned. Hamas' original charter was explicitly genocidal and updates to the charter have been less than convincing, especially following the massacres and kidnappings of October 7th and ongoing attacks. The 1998 charter called for Israel's destruction, while the preamble in its updated 2017 charter still adds: "Palestine is a land that was seized by a racist, anti-human and colonial Zionist project that was founded on a false promise (the Balfour Declaration), on recognition of a usurping entity and on imposing a fait accompli by force." It also defines the territory of Palestine "from the River Jordan in the east to the Mediterranean in the west and from Ras al-Naqurah in the north to Umm al-Rashrash in the south,"⁶¹ which Israel would rightfully see as a genocidal threat.⁶² While many peaceful Muslims are under siege from corrupt rulers using a myopic and militant understanding of Islam to further their aims, we can only hope that intra-Muslim discourse and dialogue can be strengthened by greater geo-political cooperation and peace, which includes provisions to counteract climate change and other economic and environmental factors that fuel the rise and support of despotic regimes.

The history of anti-Judaism in Christian, Muslim and atheist lands, and the reality of the Shoah legitimately propel Jews to support (and reform) the viability

⁶⁰ Meanwhile, the global condemnation of Israeli military actions has been growing. See Aryeh Neier, "Is Israel Committing Genocide?" *New York Review of Books* (June 6, 2024), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2024/06/06/is-israel-committing-genocide-aryeh-neier/>; Omer Bartov, "As a former IDF soldier and historian of genocide, I was deeply disturbed by my recent visit to Israel," *The Guardian* (August 13, 2024), <https://www.theguardian.com/world/article/2024/aug/13/israel-gaza-historian-omer-bartov>; Gideon Lewis-Kraus, "The Angst and Sorrow of Jewish Currents: A little magazine wants to criticize Israel while holding on to Jewishness," *The New Yorker* (September 9, 2024), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/09/16/the-angst-and-sorrow-of-jewish-currents>; and United Nations, "UN Special Committee finds Israel's warfare methods in Gaza consistent with genocide, including use of starvation as weapon of war," *United Nations Press releases* (November 14, 2024), <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/11/un-special-committee-finds-israels-warfare-methods-gaza-consistent-genocide>.

⁶¹ Hamas' updated 2017 charter is available here: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/hamas-2017-document-full>.

⁶² For a concise description of the updated charter, see Veronika Ponisejakova, "Hamas: what you need to know about the group that attacked Israel," *The Conversation* (October 12, 2023), <https://theconversation.com/hamas-what-you-need-to-know-about-the-group-that-attacked-israel-215288>.

of a morally aspirant State of Israel. Utilitarian, if not moral and biblical injunctions, should also demand a Palestinian State governed by its people.

Christians must support the viability of a Jewish State of Israel but critique and challenge any of its human rights failures, especially regarding the 20% of minorities within its 1967 border, and human rights violations committed in the West Bank and in Gaza. Any independent Palestinian state, furthermore, must also be held to universal human rights standards. Silence at Hamas' genocidal ideology and Charter and Iranian-supported violence against Israel cannot be tolerated.

Conclusion: A Chasm Furthered or Some Kind of Interfaith Pontoon?

Finally, returning to the questions raised at the beginning of this piece, how would I begin to answer them?

1. Is the Christian silence during the Shoah different from the silence during the Israeli bombardment of Gaza and Lebanon, especially when Jews feel abandoned by a lack of Christian support and commiseration for their suffering, insecurity, and the rise of antisemitism?

Christians should condemn all forms of violence against civilians, clear human rights violations, and any possibility of genocide or genocidal moments. Silence before and during the 1994 Rwandan genocide was wrong; so too in Darfur or the Chinese internment of Uyghurs; and likewise in Hamas' killings on October 7th, and the IDF's forced evacuations of Palestinian people.

2. If I condemn the Israeli military response in Gaza (and Lebanon) —after sharply rebuking Hamas, Hezbollah, and any other totalitarian and autocratic governments—is this just another example of Christian betrayals of Jews, proving some Jews' sceptic claims that Christians voice false intentions and have not genuinely repented their anti-Judaism?

Christians must accept the possibility and reality of an unconscious anti-Semitism, but previous Christian failures towards Jews do not give Netanyahu's Israeli government a military and moral *carte blanche*—regardless of Hamas' stated intentions and ideology. At the same time, more consistent Christian condemnation of worldwide anti-Judaism is needed.

3. The document *Dabru Emet* states: "Christians can respect the claims of the Jewish people upon the land." What does such "respect" mean in the face of Israeli and Palestinian appeals, especially after October 7th?

This issue was examined above but I find it theologically dubious that a land and a specific people are intended to be so by God at the cost of God's other beloved peoples. I do not pragmatically or politically oppose a democratic and

Jewish-majority State of Israel, though. I simply don't know how such a balance is maintained or whether it can be done ethically. If I were Jewish, though, I would fully understand why a nation, government, and military committed to protecting Jewish life would be (sadly) needed, but my understanding of God is a "theology without borders."⁶³

4. Does my unvarnished criticism of Catholic ecclesial failures, and my religiously pluralist position privilege me to be potentially critical of core Jewish beliefs about chosenness and the land of Israel, or does my (supposed) religious ambiguity gainsay my critique of Judaism as a type of muddled relativism?

Jewish thought highlights those, like Abraham, who may question God because of their faith and fidelity to God. Might Jews understand non-Jews to also have this privilege? If an individual or community is (healthily) self-critical, does that mean they also have the credibility to criticize others? So much depends on criteria, aims, and hopes. In my case, I'm seeking greater interfaith and intercultural peace and harmony and to challenge and purge aspects of one's faith or ideology that inhibit such flourishing. But I also recognize the need to tread carefully here.⁶⁴

5. Am I prepared and willing to even contemplate a position that highlights Jewish and Israeli moral failures toward Palestinians, one which could undermine any regard I might have gained from Jews and all the years of joyful work in dialogue with them?

For, me this question seems detrimental and hopeless, or even "useless" in a Levinasian sense of useless suffering, that reveals nothing of value and worth and cannot be justified in any way. Do I risk losing Jewish support for the sake of a people about whom I know even less (Palestinians) and who are ruled by, and often supportive of, a terrorist group with a militant understanding of Islam? Confusion, fear, and guilt abound. This question also testifies to my deep love and respect for Jewish people and Jewish life and faith. It would sadden me tremendously if some Jewish people were to label me anti-Jewish for even thinking through these dilemmas, let alone taking some final, definitive stand. But there are costs to discipleship—even if that means rebuking Israel for what it is doing in Gaza. There seems little cost to me for rebuking Hamas, though it is worth repeating that the Palestinians in Gaza are ruled by a terrorist group

⁶³ Cf. Leo D. Lefebure, ed., *Theology Without Borders: Essays in Honor of Peter C. Phan* (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 2022).

⁶⁴ On the issue of religious identity, commitment, and the problem of relativism from a transreligious position (and why a confessional comparative theology enables a way forward), see Catherine Cornille, "Resisting Religious Relativism in Comparative Theology," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Comparative Theology: A Festschrift in Honor of Francis X. Clooney, SJ.*, ed. Joseph L. Kimmel and Axel M. Oaks Takacs (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2024), 29 (21–31).

who, for a range of complicated reasons, were elected in 2006.⁶⁵ However, just as some may unfairly equate actions of the IDF with all Jews, so unfortunately the peaceful aspirations and identity of many Palestinians have been hijacked by Hamas.⁶⁶

6. To what extent should the Shoah still hover over Catholic-Jewish relations?

My generation is the last with a living connection to the Shoah. Therefore, we need to work especially diligently to devise ways to make learning about the Shoah relevant for younger generations who will never meet a Shoah survivor and (outside places like the US, Australia, or parts of Western Europe), are more likely to know Judaism by media coverage of the State of Israel than through learning about Christian failures in the Shoah. As Phil Cunningham and others have shown through surveys and interviews, lack of knowledge of the Shoah often corresponds with anti-Semitism.⁶⁷

7. Is Christian guilt, acrimony, and moral debt accrued from Christian supersessionism and its murderous conclusions towards Jews and Judaism so inexhaustible that it can never be repaid and healed? Or can even the (supposedly) repentant perpetrator challenge and question their empowered former victims? Can the majority of Jews listen to Christians?

Few of us can be so sure of our moral integrity and innocence that we cannot hear of our mistakes, oversights, and failures. Moreover, just because some are survivors of a deep injustice or wrong does not mean they can't also become perpetrators in other contexts. Numerous historical studies, from the genocidal actions of Rwanda in the DRC (after the 1994 genocide) to the war in the Balkans (where, even if Serbia should bear the brunt of the blame, war crimes were committed by all sides), highlight this. That Jews are the victims of anti-Semitism; that 6 million Jews were murdered in the Shoah; and that Christian complicities and failures are culpable; are all true. However, none of that erases the reality that what is happening in Gaza by the Israeli military—and by proxy those who have given them weapons like the US—and on the other side, the violence proclaimed and enacted by Hamas, supported by Iran, and co-opted by other majority-Muslim countries, is a sacrilege against God, the Abrahamic faiths, and humanity. Such a statement, which is driven by love

⁶⁵ Ishaan Tharoor, “The election that led to Hamas taking over Gaza.” *The Washington Post*. October 24, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/10/24/gaza-election-hamas-2006-palestine-israel/>.

⁶⁶ David Ignatius, “How a deep Palestinian yearning has been hijacked by Hamas.” *The Washington Post*, October 31, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/10/31/palestinian-gaza-war-hamas-terrorism-history/>.

⁶⁷ Kirill Bumin, Philip A. Cunningham, Adam Gregerman, and Motti Inbari, “American Catholic Attitudes Toward Jews, Judaism, and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 18.1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v18i1.16589>.

(even if a matured and more world-weary love) is one that hopefully can be listened to by all sides. If Jews really believe in post-Shoah Christian repentance, then they should also listen to warnings from Christians who fear some Jews are making the same mistakes Christians committed previously against Jews and other marginalized groups.

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Ultimately, the following has been one Catholic theologian's personal, fraught, and perhaps untimely attempt to try to work through the conflicting and harrowing theological, moral, and geopolitical terrain when lives and dignity continue to be trampled. It is hoped that these tenuous, but still probing reflections can help other Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers to articulate an approach, language, and response that can bridge and heal Jewish-Christian-Muslim divisions and work together for peace and justice in Israel and Palestine, and beyond.

Editor's note: Those wishing to think further "out loud" about the issues raised in this article should submit their responses and reflections to SCJR for editorial consideration before publication.