

*Culture:
Blessing or Misfortune for
the Jewish Religious Commitment?*

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I'm grateful to have been invited to address the American Maritain Association for several reasons. For one, because of my spiritual debt to Jacques Maritain. In my native Argentina, I started reading his work in high school. In those days, the political liaison between General Juan Domingo Perón, president of the country, and the hierarchy of the Catholic Argentinean Church resulted in the fact, among other things, that Catholic religion was being taught in high schools. Jewish and Protestant children, or children of parents who didn't have any religious commitment, or children whose parents were left-wing politically oriented, had to take a course on "Morality." The course on morality was, naturally, closely related or indirectly inspired by Catholic moral standards—standards that belonged to the days of Vatican Council I or were inspired by the spirit of *L'Action Française*, an ideology still dear in certain Argentinean circles. I had to take the course during my last two years of high school. My school followed the model of a French Lycée, an educational experience that didn't last long because General Perón, with his populist policies and neo-fascist ideology, degraded the entire system to a standard mediocrity and expelled the good teachers, replacing them with mediocre ones or nationalists.

My first teacher was a nice middle-class Catholic girl, who was saving for her dowry and was clearly terrified by the class. It was evident that she was told that her Jewish students were part of the people who, according to medieval and contemporary reactionary Catholic thought, "killed Jesus," that socialists or communists and other dangerous representatives were in her class, and that she should be very careful of her spiritual integrity. She was so

terrified that she gave all of us "A's" on the final exam and we devoted each class to reading our favorite literature: Marxist books for the left-wingers or the latest French novels, as some of us read. I read Camus and Sartre, and tried not to fall asleep while exploring Marcel Proust. The teacher for the second year, however, was a young Catholic man who, from the very first day, said that we shouldn't waste time with the official high school text and gave us a bibliography to read. Among the writers that we read with great interest were: Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier, Léon Bloy, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber and other writers of the twentieth century. We were enchanted with this teacher and we had long, passionate discussions presenting different points of view, from a traditional, committed-Yiddish background that I came from, to people who were "illuminated" by contemporary culture, or left-wing ideology. The teacher, naturally, lasted but one year and was replaced by a sweet soul, who tried to convert the students to Catholicism. She failed, but some of us felt that after reading the new trends of Catholic thought recommended by the previous teacher and represented by intelligent philosophers, Maritain among them, we had been introduced to new thinking dimensions of Catholicism.¹

And here I am, in the United States, at the University of Notre Dame, in a program honoring Jacques Maritain. I feel like the Marcel Proust character, though nobody has invited me yet to eat a Madeleine. But, at the same time, I feel that by rereading some of Maritain's books, after so many different experiences in Argentina and in the United States, that I would like to propose to you some thoughts on the question of culture as it relates to my Jewish religious commitment and Maritain's thought. I reread Jacques Maritain's *Religion and Culture*² and much of my thinking before preparing this paper was reflected in this little book, but there also was my uneasiness about some of Maritain's ideas about the meaning of God's Covenant with Israel, religious Judaism, and our presence in the world—a presence that will continue despite the historical horrors of Nazism and Communism or the ongoing, ever-present teaching of spiritual and political contempt, vis-à-vis my religious commitment, and my people.

¹ Leon Klenicki, "Jacques Maritain's Vision of Judaism and Anti-Semitism," in *Jacques Maritain and the Jews*, ed. Robert Royal (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994).

² Jacques Maritain, *Religion and Culture* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1931).

CULTURE: BLESSING OR MISFORTUNE?

The subject of my paper will be "Culture: Blessing or Misfortune for the Jewish Religious Commitment?"

Jews as a community of faith have a long history since Abraham's call by God and the Sinai covenantal relationship. Jewish spirituality is a meeting, an encounter entailing two dimensions. One is the covenantal relationship God-Israel, the other is its implementation in a daily actualization of the experience of God, His Call and Presence, in individual and community existence.

There is no precise theological expression for spirituality in Hebrew, though two terms could be considered: *Halahah* and *Emunah*. *Halahah*, wrongly translated as law, *nomos*, by the Christian biblical translators, is a way of being and doing, a means of implementing the covenantal relationship in ritual. *Emunah*, faith, is the experience of reliving daily the covenantal relationship in prayer. *Emunah* is an attitude of the spirit, of hope and realization. It is the spiritual acceptance of God followed by the implementation of God's Call in and through the ritual commitment. It is to say continually yes to God. *Emunah* and *Halahah* convey the whole range of Jewish spirituality.

The halahic experience requires an explanation. Its meaning has been misunderstood since Paul's days and this theological misapprehension is evident in Maritain's discourse.

The Roman destruction of the Jerusalem Temple resulted in the exile of the Jewish community from the city, but not from the Land. It marked the end of the sacrificial ritual, its atoning and salvific symbolism, and the ecclesiastical bureaucracy of the Sadducees. The end of the sacrificial offering yields to the exercise of inner life and the service of the heart, prayer. Study and the sanctification of daily existence, the halahic exercise, become a substitute for sacrifice and the splendor of the Temple. The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple started the rabbinic rebuilding that no power or political upheaval could destroy; the Temple became an interior construct in the heart of Judaism both at the individual and community levels.

Rabbinic spirituality was rooted in the Ezra-Nehemiah exploration of the biblical text and the need to actualize the covenantal relationship after the destruction of the Temple. The rabbi's task was to enlarge the Oral Torah, *Torah She ba'Al Peh*, oral halahic tradition, by expounding the Written Torah, *Torah She-bikhtav*, the tradition received at Mount Sinai. The expounding, commentary and explication unfolded *Halahah* as a normative criterion that guided the life of the community as a whole and each member's personal commitment.

Biblical ordinances are presented in an outline and require an explanation.

For example, Exodus 20:8–11 and Deuteronomy 5:12–18 do not detail the prohibition of working on the Sabbath. Rabbinic expounding of the text itemized what was permitted and what was not. While the *Mishnah* devotes one book, twenty-four chapters to the subject, the *Talmudim* present a phenomenology of Sabbath-spirituality in a dense volume of commentaries and explanations. The observance of dietary laws, the synagogue service of the Sabbath, and family purity are directed to lift up everyday existence toward God, so that all of life becomes holy.

Several theological and halahic compilations resulted from the rabbinic expounding of the biblical text. The *Siddur*, prayerbook, the *Mishnah*, halahic interpretation of biblical law, the *Midrash*, literary interpretation of the Bible, and the two *Talmudim*, the *Jerusalem Talmud* and the *Babylonian Talmud* are examples of the rabbinic search for implementation of the Word of God in daily life.

THE MEANING OF CULTURE IN JEWISH COMMUNITY EXISTENCE

God's Call and religious life have been with us from the very beginning of our history. This is not so with culture. Culture was present in the surroundings of the covenantal experience, as well as throughout history, but it was not part of the Jewish commitment. We have been consumers of culture, in general, though we are producing culture now, both in Israel as well as outside Israel, especially in the United States. But we can ask honestly if it is "Jewish" culture.

Culture was a luxury for those who lived in medieval Europe and the ghettos, and even after the French Revolution and Modernism. Culture was the enterprise of "the others," not necessarily ours. But ironically, culture in its philosophical dimension was influential in some of our most important thinkers. Greek thought was present in medieval philosophy, as well as in the whole Cultural Revolution started by the *Haskalah* cultural experience in Eastern Europe. *Haskalah* is the Hebrew term for the Enlightenment movement and ideology which began within Jewish society in the eighteenth century. The movement helped Jews, in many ways, to enter into European society, but it did not help Jews to be accepted by European society. European culture, even civilization, tolerated Jews rather than accepted them as part of their societies. The encounter with European civilization, at times was a dialogue, and at times a confrontation between general culture, the wisdom of the nations, and the Torah tradition, which was not a phenomenon of modern times.

One of the first challenges of rabbinic theology was the encounter with Greek thought. A good example of that was Philo of Alexandria, who wrote biblical commentaries under the influence of Greek philosophy, a cultural experience that ended in the confrontation between Jerusalem and Athens in the centuries preceding the Common Era and continuing for centuries. Elias Bickerman says in his book, *The Jews in the Greek Age*:

We have often contrasted Hebrew and Greek thought . . . but we have rarely pointed to Greek influences. In the first place, Jerusalem was no more unchanging than Athens. Many unexpected trades that appeared to be un-Jewish . . . may result from . . . the existence of an unknown force of the first magnitude that disturbs any calculation of influences . . . a common Levantine civilization stubbornly persisted under Macedonian rulers . . . on the other hand, Greek ideas did percolate down to the Jews in Judea, even to those who lacked the advantages of a Greek education. Although, in isolated and fragmentary manner . . . the Jews drew upon new insights, adopting those elements of Greek culture that appeared to them useful or stimulating, and neglecting the rest . . . discoveries of borrowing and influences have only a modest heuristic value unless we can learn why and to what purpose the new motive was woven into the traditional design. . . . As Vico observed more than two centuries ago, people accept only the ideas for which their previous development has prepared their minds, and which, let us add, appear to be useful to them.³

Bernard Jackson, in his *Essays in Jewish and Comparative Legal History*, says very intelligently that, "The effect of Greece was also that of a catalyst—a fertility drug rather than a parent."⁴

Culture was a tool rather than an end in itself. This was the reality in the experience of Philo or Maimonides, but it was a serious problem when Jews had to decide between their religious heritage and a society that was demanding of Jewish citizens to be like the other citizens in the country, putting aside a tradition of millennia for a culture that was essentially deeply influenced by Christianity. Culture became a source of danger, and even a tool of destruction for Jewish spirituality. The study of Goethe, good spoken German, or the influence of French literature, became more important than the study of Torah. The wisdom of the world took over the wisdom of God's Covenant. This is a problem that we faced in the past, but it is still present in our lives, though it has been reinterpreted in a more creative way, as we shall see later on.

³ Elias Bickerman, *The Jews in Greek Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 298.

⁴ Bernard Jackson, *Essays in Jewish and Comparative Legal History* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), pp. 1–24.

TORAH UMADDA AND TORAH IM DEREH ERETZ

The relationship of culture and Torah, understood as religious study and the religious exercise of God's Revelation, is a problem still open for consideration in Jewish religious life. It was a question in rabbinic days in the discussions of the writers of the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*, as well as in medieval philosophical thought. In general, the rabbis and teachers wished to demonstrate to both private individuals and to those in rabbinic seminaries the permissibility, even the desirability, following *Halahic* criteria, of involving oneself in the study of the various disciplines that are part of general culture. General culture was to be incorporated, but not to become an end in itself, replacing the religious way of living.

The beauty and meaning of learning, and religious study, was brilliantly described by Simon Rawidowicz in his book, *State of Israel, Diaspora, and Jewish Continuity*:

What learning meant to traditional Judaism can probably be best inferred from the fact that the rabbis linked it up with the supreme Jewish idea, the *idea of God*. Christendom, speaking in the name of a God of love and mercy, has always castigated Israel for its God of law, legality, revenge, and so on. Neither Christianity, Islam, nor any other of the creeds has ever noticed the fact that with the establishment of learning as a national ideal, the national ideal in Israel, the God of Israel became a *learning God*.

A learning God! Learning, of course, indicates a want, a need to fill a gap, a desire to improve one's mind, to widen one's understanding, to make up for deficiencies, to free oneself from ignorance and all imperfection involved in it. It is, therefore, of the greatest interest that midrashic-talmudic Judaism, though considering God the symbol of highest perfection possible, created at the same time the concept of a God who studies, a learning God. . . . God has not only studied His Torah more than a hundred times before He gave it to Moses for Israel. God is in midrashic Judaism the *eternal student*. He learns *with* Israel, learns always and everywhere. . . . Rav, the leading *amora* of the second century, went even so far as to describe exactly the daily agenda of God Almighty: The first three hours of his twelve-hour day of work, God learns Torah; the second three hours, He judges all the world; the third three hours, He feeds all the world; the last three hours, He plays with the Leviathan. God learns three periods daily. I wish some of our "non-professional" Jewish brothers and sisters would believe in *imitatio Dei*—or in the commandment "*Ve-halakhta biderakhav*," "You shall go in His Ways"—and would have at least one period of Torah a day.⁵

⁵ Simon Rawidowicz, *State of Israel, Diaspora, and Jewish Community* (Hanover, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 1998), pp. 135–36.

Two Hebrew phrases translate the word culture: *Torah Im Dereh Eretz* and *Torah Umadda*. The word *Dereh Eretz* has several meanings. One is "labor" as it appears in *Pirkei Avot*, the *Ethics of the Fathers*, when it says that the study of Torah should be accompanied by labor. A second meaning is "proper norms of conduct." The Midrash, *Genesis Rabbah* 76:3, declares that *Dereh Eretz* preceded the teaching of the Torah by twenty-six generations. The German-Jewish nineteenth century theologian, Samson R. Hirsch, interpreted the words *Dereh Eretz* to be identical with the concept of culture as understood in the Western world. This is the way we will interpret it, including in this concept: literature, philosophy, the arts and science.

Hirsch wrote about the relationship of *Dereh Eretz* and Torah, saying that "twenty-six generations did *Dereh Eretz* precede Torah . . . the way is culture, and only then can one reach to the Tree of Life, to the Torah. Culture starts the work of educating the generations of mankind, and the Torah completes it." In this way, culture might be a prerequisite to acquire the total knowledge of religious teaching, the Torah.⁶ As Sol Roth elaborates in *The Jewish Idea of Culture*:

Primarily the followers of Hirsch adopt the positive view of human experience in general; they maintain openness to the achievements of the human mind and to cultural progress. They are willing to take the risk that science and philosophy might be perceived, though erroneously, as antagonistic to religion, and erode Jewish commitment. They believe, however, that the risk is minimal; that given the open society in which we live, the risk is, in any case, ever-present; and that integration of culture into Torah is a better expression of Torah's attitude toward human life and experience than the bifurcation that results from its exclusion.⁷

Torah Umadda is a concept shared by religious people who feel that there should be a synthesis between two universes, the covenantal religious life and the world of culture, though culture is devoid at times of any religious value. The religious mind has to integrate those two dimensions, Torah and culture, into a significant, useful unity. The attitude of the followers of *Torah Umadda* would say that the two, Torah and culture, can be harmonized and that this is a creative manner to live a truly religious life.

Such a view is followed by the great Jewish theologian, Joseph B. Soloveitchik, who explains these ideas in his classic, *The Lonely Man of*

⁶ Samson R. Hirsch, *The Nineteen Letters of Ben Uziel* (New York: Feldheim, 1960), Letter 16, and Samson R. Hirsch, *Judaism Eternal* (London: Soncino Press, 1956), pp. 174–78.

⁷ Sol Roth, *The Jewish Idea of Culture* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1997), pp. 4–5.

Faith.⁸ He points out that the two Genesis accounts of the Creation of Man correspond to two human attitudes that are part of the human experience in the world.

Genesis I says: "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female created them. And God blessed them and God said unto them: 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the heaven, and over the beast, and all over the earth.'" This narrative corresponds to the description of what Soloveitchik calls "Adam the First." Adam the First receives the mandate from God to fill the earth and subdue it. Both male and female were created concurrently. Adam the First describes the man of culture who is creative in the domain of nature. The aim and task of his life is to exercise control over nature and have the world serve him. He takes initiatives, he faces the complicated world, solving problems and finding ways that will improve, in general, the quality of life. Adam the First is a man of action, whose task it is to change himself, change the world and make of it a better place for humanity.

The second narrative of the creation of the human being differs greatly from the one I have just read. It says: "And the Eternal God formed the man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living soul . . . and Eternal God planted the Garden eastward in Eden . . . and Eternal God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden to serve it and to keep it." Adam the Second was fashioned from the dust of the ground and God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. While Adam the First was created in the image of God, nothing is said about his body. Adam the Second is charged with the duty of cultivating a garden and to keep it, and he emerged alone, while Eve appears later on as his helpmate and complement. Adam the Second is the man of the Torah, concerned with his acceptance of God's Will through obedience to Torah and classical teaching precepts, and involving himself in a direct relationship with God through prayer.

Soloveitchik, in his rabbinic interpretation of the two stories, attempts to harmonize the two versions projecting an understanding of the possibilities of Torah and culture being blended creatively. One creation of man explains the work of culture, and the other the religious covenantal creativity of the God-person relationship. Still, is not religion tempted to submerge itself in culture

⁸ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), chaps. 1 and 2.

and lose its own vocation? Following Soloveitchik's idea of confrontation, is not the relationship religion-culture essentially a confrontation between two points of view?

Mordecai Kaplan (1881–1983), an American Jewish thinker, added a special dimension to the question of culture and religious commitment. He started a new religious movement called Reconstructionism, rooted in Jewish theological tradition but aimed towards a new concept of God and its implementation in daily, individual, and community existence. In 1935 Kaplan published *Judaism as a Civilization*, where he defined Judaism as an evolving religious civilization where the covenant God-Israel is expressed in stages of spiritual development, of understanding the religious experience in prayer and ritual. Culture should be incorporated, according to Kaplan, to help shape the new religiosity that makes meaningful God and its translation in word and community action in this century. Kaplan contributed as no other Jewish theologian to bridge culture and religion in a meaningful experience as an example of a response to the world and its challenges.

RELIGION AND CULTURE: JACQUES MARITAIN'S VIEW

Jacques Maritain devoted a book on the question of religion and culture, expressing his Catholic, essentially Thomist view, of this matter. At the very beginning of the book, he pointed out the attitude of the prophets vis-à-vis culture and their critical approach. The prophets denounced the culture of nations surrounding Israel as well as the culture infiltrated in the King's palaces, influencing behavior in society. The prophets were critical of culture in its pagan manifestations when it tried to replace the covenantal relationship God-Israel, its duties and commitment. The problem is ever present and Maritain read the Hebrew biblical text *in situ*.

Maritain points out that, "[E]verywhere in the ancient world, nationalism sponged upon and corrupted religions; it absorbed religion in culture, made it an element of a civilization, of a culture." He would also add:

I mean to say that the ancient world, while riveted in social life too, and occasionally crushing it, and while honoring religion with a terrifying power of veneration, while enslaving man to the gods, nevertheless enfeoffed religion to civilization—not in the least after the manner of the modern profane world, which makes religion the mere servant of civilization considered as something superior, but on the contrary, by making religion the governing principle of the state, yet individuated by the state, living with the same unique and indistinct life, ruling like a despot over the state, but inconceivable without the state, and bound substantially to it, enclosed within the state, determined and circumscribed by

the state and, finally in an absolutely metaphysical sense, existing for the state, as the soul of a plant exists for that plant.⁹

He would emphasize:

True religion, however, is supernatural, come down from Heaven with Him who is the author of grace and truth. It is not of man, or of the world, or a civilization, or a culture, it is God. It transcends every civilization and every culture. It is the supreme beneficent and animating principle of all civilizations and cultures, while in itself independent of them all, free, universal, strictly universal, Catholic."¹⁰

I agree totally with Maritain, though as a religious Jew I feel uncomfortable with his reference to "Catholic." I would ask if "Catholic" is a synonym for "universal," as he stresses previously, or a reference to the Catholic Church?

Later on in his book, Maritain will emphasize the need for Catholicism to penetrate culture and give it its essential meaning. He says: "It is of fundamental necessity to the life of the world that Catholicism penetrate to the very depths of, and vivify, culture and that Catholics form sound cultural, philosophical, historical, social, political, economic and artistic conceptions, and endeavor to transmit them into the reality of history."¹¹ He would later add:

That the religion of Christ should penetrate culture to its very depths is not required merely from the point of view of the salvation of souls and in relation to their last end: in this respect, a Christian civilization appears as something truly maternal and sanctified, procuring the terrestrial good and the development of the various natural activities by sedulous attention to the imperishable interest and most profound aspirations of the human heart. It ought, from the point of view also of the specific ends of civilizations itself, to be Christian. For human reason, considered without any relation whatever to God, is insufficient by its unaided natural resources to procure the good of men and nations. As a matter of fact, and in the conditions governing life at present, it is not possible for man to expand his nature in a fundamentally and permanently upright manner unless under the sky of grace.¹²

Would Jews and non-Christian religious people, or indifferent people, be able to act or live in a culture that is totally foreign to their religious or spiritual commitments? This is a problem that we Jews have faced for millennia, and it has been a serious problem in our so-called integration into Western European culture. A difference should be made, however, between

⁹ Maritain, *Religion and Culture*, p. 11.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 29-30.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

the “integration by toleration” of European societies, societies that were essentially intolerant and prepared an atmosphere that made the Holocaust possible. Quite different is the Jewish experience in pluralistic societies where Jews are either accepted or not, but not tolerated only as second-class citizens, which is the case in many countries in Europe and Latin America.

Maritain exemplifies what we said about “toleration” and “acceptance”:

I have already observed that it is proper to insist upon it: “All religions other than the Catholic religions are in more or less narrow and servile fashion, according, as their metaphysical level is more or less elevated, integral parts of certain definite cultures, particularized to certain ethnic climates and certain historical formations. The Catholic religion alone is absolutely and strictly transcendental, super-cultural, super-racial and super-national, because it is supernatural.”¹³

Maritain will express a thought that pictures for us post-Holocaust Jews the essence of Western “toleration” of its Jewish citizens, both culturally and religiously:

What I mean (to speak in general and of the inner attitude of the average Christian) is that for a long time we loved non-Christians—truly and sincerely—although they were not Christians (it was this visible fact which took precedence). In other words, we loved non-Christians primarily inasmuch as having the misfortune not to be Christians, they were called to become so; we loved them primarily not as men or for what they were, but as Christians to be or for what they are called to become. . . . But now, by virtue of the great inner reversal I am stressing, we love non-Christians above all because they are, at least potentially, of this incarnate Truth whom they do not know and whom the errors professed by them deny. In short, we love them first of all in their own unfathomable mystery, for what they are, and as men in regard to whom the first duty of charity is simply love. And so, we love them first and foremost the way they are, and in seeking their own good, toward which, in actual existence, they have to advance within a religious universe and a system of spiritual and cultural values where great errors may abound, but where truths worthy of respect and of love are likewise certainly present. Through these truths, it is possible for the One who made them, for the Truth who is Christ, to touch their hearts in secret, without themselves or anyone in the world being aware of it.¹⁴

Maritain, however, aware of a Jewish concern over Catholic triumphalism, will be careful in separating Catholics, as individuals, from Catholicism. He would also point out that certain religious attitudes might transform

¹³ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁴ Jacques Maritain, *The Peasant of the Garonne: An Old Layman Questions Himself About the Present Time* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), p. 71.

“Catholicism in the minds of those affected by it into a party and Catholics into partisans.” He would also add: “Such a transformation appears with most manifest characteristics in the state of mind of anti-Semites, who proclaim the gospel by a series of pogroms, and people who attribute all the wars of life to a permanent world-wide conspiracy of the wicked against the good.”¹⁵

Maritain would stress, to the surprise of many in Eastern Europe or in Latin America today, that “Catholicism is not a religious party; it is religion, the only true religion, and it rejoices, without envy, in every good, even though it may be achieved outside its boundaries—for that good is only apparently outside the boundaries of Catholicism, in reality it belongs to it invisibly.”¹⁶ Maritain’s words reminded me sadly of a new Holy See document, which the Holy See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has issued called “Declaration *Dominus Iesus*” on “The Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and The Church.”

The document issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith deals with the centrality of Jesus in the message and mission of the Church. It is not directed to Jews but rather to other Christians who do not belong to the Catholic Church. The first reactions to the document came from the World Council of Churches, as well as the Church of England, and many other Christian voices. The document, by stressing that Jesus is the way of salvation and its instrument is the Church, reflects a fundamentalist overtone that reminds Jews of the teaching of contempt of centuries gone by. The document recalls the old expression, “Outside the Church there is no salvation,” a theological concept that hurt the Jewish people for centuries and justified the Crusades and the contempt for the Jewish people. By emphasizing the uniqueness of Rome, the other Christian denominations appear as being not totally Christian and require, for their return to Jesus, the acceptance of Rome as the central voice of Christianity. The document is in clear contrast to what the Talmudic sources say about the righteous of all nations of the world who have a stake in the world to come.

The document also follows a line that was common many years ago, which pointed out that non-Christian people are “secret Christians” and that their faith is essentially a way of Jesus to manifest his message. The document says, “Therefore, the sacred books of other religions which in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers, receive from the mystery of Christ the element of goodness and grace which they contain.”

¹⁵ Maritain, *Religion and Culture*, p. 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Paragraph twenty-two of the Holy See document is a text that concerns Jews and especially the Catholic-Jewish relationship. It says: "With the coming of the Savior Jesus Christ, God has willed that the Church founded by Him be the instrument for the salvation of all humanity (cf. Acts 17:13-31). This truth of faith does not lessen the sincere respect which the Church has for the religions of the world, but, at the same time, it rules out, in a radical way, the mentality and indifferentism, characterized by a religious relativism which leads to the belief that one religion is as good as another." The document also stresses that "If it is true that the followers of other religions can receive divine grace, it is also certain that objectively speaking they are in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation."

This language is of great concern to us Jews because of past experiences. It reflects concepts used by medieval theologians, as well as theologians up to the Vatican Council II statements on Jews and Judaism. We seem to be back to triumphalism and contempt. This triumphalism is reflected in Maritain's theological consideration of Judaism.

MARITAIN AND TRIUMPHALISM

I admire Maritain for his religious life and his thought. As I mentioned earlier, it inspired my spiritual development in Argentina while I was in high school. I feel, however, that he also expressed a teaching of contempt for Judaism, one that reflects much of Christian thought through the centuries. It has been expressed in some of his books, indirectly in *Religion and Culture*, but clearly in his commentary on St. Paul. This is not to our total surprise because the teaching of contempt is part of the Western culture and Jews have faced and experienced it for centuries. I would even say that it is part of the Western collective unconscious.

Maritain's reflections on Israel represent "a Christian perspective" that is "metaphysical and religious." His interpretation is a Catholic examination that reflects in many ways tendencies that are difficult to accept or understand after Vatican Council II. This is evident in a 1938 text where he pointed out that:

If there are Jews among the readers of this essay, they will understand, I am sure, that as a Christian I try to understand something of the history of their people from a Christian viewpoint. They know that according to Saint Paul, we Gentile Christians have been grafted onto the predestined olive tree of Israel in place of the branches which did not recognize the Messiah foretold by the prophets. Thus we are converts to the God of Israel who is the true God, to the father whom Israel recognized, to the son

whom it rejected. Christianity, then, is the overflowing fullness and the supernatural realization of Judaism.¹⁷

This is indeed triumphalism at its best!

There is a paradox in his approach, an ambiguity of the heart. This text seems to contradict another text in his book, *On the Philosophy of History*:

[Israel] is not only a people, but a people endowed with a mission which pertained to the very order of the redemption of mankind. And Israel's mission continues in a certain manner—no longer as an “ecclesial mission”—after its lapse, because it cannot help being the chosen people, for the gifts of God are without repentance, and the Jews are still beloved because of their fathers. So we might say that whereas the Church is assigned the task of the supernatural and supratemporal saving of the world, to Israel is assigned, in the order of temporal history and its own finalities, the work of the *earthly leavening* of the world. Israel is here . . . to irritate the world, to prod it, to move it. It teaches the world to be dissatisfied and restless so long as it has not God, as long as it has not justice on earth. Its indestructible hope stimulates the life forces of history.¹⁸

Maritain defended the Jew as a citizen, his rights and equality in society, and denounced anti-Semitism passionately. His theology, however, and especially his reading of St. Paul, projected a sense of contempt for Judaism, for the Sinai God-Israel commitment and its development through the centuries. He fought for the civil rights of Jews, but denied meaning to Jews in their spirituality and covenantal vocation. In many respects, and I tremble in pointing this out, he was a metaphysical anti-Semite, as Martin Buber classified some Christian theologians in Germany before Nazism, especially Adolf Von Harnack.

FAITH AND LAW

A theological confrontation originated with the Church Fathers, which has become part of Western culture in the alternative “Law” and “Faith.” Maritain's reference to the limitations and death of the law reminds the Jewish reader of the theological teaching of contempt towards Judaism, which denied Israel a place in God's design after Jesus:

The Law is holy because it is the created expression of the wisdom of God. But while the Law makes us know evil, it does not give us the

¹⁷ Jacques Maritain, *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question* (New York: Arno Press, 1973), pp. 23–24.

¹⁸ Jacques Maritain, *On the Philosophy of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), p. 92.

strength to avoid evil. And by making evil known, the Law is, for evil (Romans 2:3). Thus the Law bears death with it. If there were no law, there would be no transgression, and hence there would be no death. . . . Paul's line of reasoning supposes this fact, that the Jews are set apart, in view of the world's salvation, for a purity and holiness of life—highly superior, even though principally external, to the moral ideals of all the gentiles—which were required by the Law and for whose fulfillment not the Law, but the grace of the Christ to come (and now come) alone is efficacious. A people elect, and a people victim—they are bound up in their Law as though in God's trap—so long as they withhold faith in Him Whose death, wrought by their priesthood in the name of the Law, now brings them their deliverance. But this deliverance, which implies their salvation comes to all by the Cross, not by the Law, requires also that the Jews recognize that the regimen of the Law has come to an end, and that at the same time they renounce the keeping to themselves alone of the privileges which that regimen conferred to them.¹⁹

Maritain's Pauline critique of law shares some characteristics with other Christian thinkers who are not at all in theological harmony. Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, commenting on Romans 10:5–8, points out that "righteousness which is given through the Gospel has been freed of all conditions of the law. . . . The Gospel promises are free and dependent solely upon God's mercy, while the promises of the law depend on works."²⁰ Law is criticized here as an end in itself, while Jews would experience and live *Halalah* as a means, a way to make actual God's Covenant and command.

Maritain turns his attention to Paul's concept of justification:

And now all the moral precepts of the Law, far from being destroyed, are confirmed, because Faith makes it possible to fulfill them in a lasting and complete fashion, and because from thenceforth they represent only that behavior which is fitting to a being already made just and free of sin in his root powers, to the extent that he clings to Christ and receives his life from Him. The meaning of those precepts has thus been transfigured: They no longer command bad men to be good and to grow into something which they are not; rather do they command good men not to be bad, and not to fail in that which they already are, not to fall back into the state of slavery from whence they have been freed. Justification is received through faith, quite apart from works. But once justified, man is more than ever held to good works (be it only, as it was in the case of the good thief, as far as the disposition of the soul is concerned). And this is not because the works of man would have power to save man by themselves, but because good works proceed from the charity which has been

¹⁹ Jacques Maritain, *The Living Thought of Saint Paul* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1941), p. 70.

²⁰ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Battles, ed. John McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), vol. 1, p. 751.

given to man and which is his life—his new and eternal life—and which is joined to faith when faith is living: “faith working through charity” (Galatians 6). And also because the works of charity, which is a fruitful and effective life, themselves are deserving of life, to the extent that man, acting freely under the inflowing of grace, receives from God’s mercy the dignity of being a cause—secondary and instrumental—in the matter of his salvation. “God is not unjust so as to forget your works. . . .” (Hebrews 6:10). “The crown of righteousness which the Lord, the just judge, shall award to me on that day” (2 Timothy 4:8).²¹

Grace and faith are not foreign to Jewish spirituality as Maritain seems to imply. Both concepts are present in the core of the biblical account and guide Jewish life. Grace is loving kindness (Psalms 89:3), and according to rabbinic theology one of the three elements by which the world is sustained (*Mishnah Avot* 1:2). Grace and faith (*emunah* in Hebrew, an amen to God’s Call) are part of the *imitatio dei* exercised by the *halahic* discipline.

A FINAL REFLECTION

I have dealt in my presentation with two aspects. One is what culture means in our Jewish involvement, with culture as part of the Jewish integration into Western society. The other aspect is Maritain’s view of culture and religion, and his understanding of Judaism, or in his words, “the mystery of Israel.”

Culture was our goal in the nineteenth century when the social changes in Europe opened partially their doors for Jews to enter a society that essentially disliked them. Culture was our way to return to social normalcy. Our acceptance of culture brought about in general an abandonment of religious tradition and God’s Covenant. Culture became our obsession up to our own days when we reflect on a past full of illusions. Auschwitz shattered that hope and obligated us to return to a more realistic view of tradition and general culture. We do not deny the importance of culture where we play a special role as consumers and producers—to a certain degree. *Torah Umadda* is our goal, God’s Covenant and culture as enriching the religious life. This is still a challenge and especially after the Holocaust.

Jacques Maritain is still my teacher despite his ambiguities vis-à-vis Judaism and the witnessing of Israel. His ambiguities remind us of the ambiguities of culture, specifically, Western culture, vis-à-vis Judaism. This culture allowed us to enter its realm as semi-equal citizens. It did not accept us as persons of God. Maritain reflected this attitude in his thoughts on Judaism.

As a Catholic thinker, Maritain was sincerely concerned about the human

²¹ Ibid., p. 62.

situation of the Jewish people in the days of Nazi and Communist totalitarianism. He denounced and condemned anti-Semitism at times of ecclesiastical silence or indifference to the Jewish situation. Yet ironically his understanding of Judaism and the God-Israel covenant was negative and he did not recognize the ongoing meaning and validity of the Jewish religious commitment. He accepted the Jewish citizens and their social rights. Yet, he denied the Jewish person the privilege of continued covenantal partnership with God. This duality requires all who are members of the contemporary joint Christian-Jewish reflection to make efforts to fathom the full meaning of God's Calls to all of us.

The matter of our presentation, "Culture: Blessing or Misfortune," is still a question for us. The response depends on how we exercise our religious commitment. I am inclined to accept culture—philosophy, science or art—in the measure that it strengthens my faith commitment, the faith commitment to Israel, and advances the understanding of God's Word and world. That was done by Philo, Maimonides or Soloveitchik in our days. It can be done again and very especially in the pluralistic reality of American democracy, but we should be aware of the constant danger of making the cultural exercise an end in itself. Our basic concern is God and the ongoing relationship with God: our religious duty.