

# A Smothering Embrace? Hermeneutical Issues in Catholic Discourse about Jews and Judaism

Emma O'Donnell Polyakov  
*Merrimack College; polyakove@merrimack.edu*

## ■ Abstract

This article examines how Jews and Judaism are envisioned in the Catholic imagination, through a critical reading of contemporary Catholic discourse on Judaism. It identifies three problematic areas. The first concerns the tendency of Catholic discourse to project a specifically Christian vision of salvation history onto the Jewish people, which reflects Christian rather than Jewish self-understanding. Second, this article analyzes patterns in language and imagery in Vatican documents about Judaism, alert to troubling allusions implicit in the texts. The third area concerns a hermeneutical obstacle to deep interreligious understanding, one which may be ultimately insurmountable: namely, the challenges of understanding the religious other according to its own self-understanding. This article reaches an ambivalent conclusion, conceding that the goal of recognizing the self-understanding of another religious tradition may ultimately be impossible.

## ■ Keywords

Jewish-Christian dialogue, interfaith dialogue, anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism, Jew, Vatican II, Roman Catholic Church



## ■ Introduction

Anti-Judaic language and imagery have long been deeply embedded in the texts and traditions of Christianity. Beginning from Christianity's polemical origin as a messianic movement arising out of Second Temple Judaism, a long history of theological anti-Judaism has unfolded, which tragically served as fuel for racial ant-Semitism.<sup>1</sup> In the past half-century, many scholars have worked to uncover the roots of this long-standing animosity and have labored, with great reward, to effect changes in Christian thought on Judaism, particularly within the Roman Catholic Church, which officially began to address this entrenched anti-Judaism during the Second Vatican Council. This change in Catholic thought on Judaism, inaugurated by the Council and still in the process of development, has been widely celebrated and praised. Cardinal Walter Kasper claims that *Nostra Aetate* and the creation of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews "mark one of the most surprising developments of the twentieth century, which changed to a great extent the two-thousand-year history of Jewish-Christian relations, with momentous consequences for the whole world."<sup>2</sup> Responses drafted by Jewish organizations have also been largely congratulatory, if less ecstatic.<sup>3</sup> These reforms have indeed been substantial, and in a religious institution that historically values continuity over reform, the shift is truly remarkable. Whereas first-century biblical texts refer to Jews as "you stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears," who are "from your father the devil," contemporary Catholic documents now refer to Jews and Judaism as "Abraham's stock" and "that well-cultivated olive tree," making new curatorial choices from existing biblical language.<sup>4</sup>

Although these changes were indeed groundbreaking, the enthusiastic praise they have elicited from religious and scholarly communities alike has been tempered by only very mild and infrequent critical responses. This reservation of scholarly criticism may be an expression of gratitude for the radical departure from the anti-Judaism of the past that this new discourse evidences and may reflect a prioritizing

<sup>1</sup> This article draws a distinction between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, whereby the former refers to opposition or discrimination against Judaism as a religion and the latter to discrimination against Jews as a racial or ethnic group.

<sup>2</sup> Cardinal Walter Kasper, "Paths Taken and Enduring Questions in Jewish-Christian Relations Today: Thirty Years of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews," in *The Catholic Church and the Jewish People: Recent Reflections from Rome* (ed. Philip A. Cunningham, Norbert Hofmann, and Joseph Sievers; New York: Fordham University Press, 2007) 3.

<sup>3</sup> E.g., Conference of European Rabbis, the Rabbinical Council of America, and the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, "Between Jerusalem and Rome: Reflections on 50 Years of *Nostra Aetate*," August 31, 2017, [https://www.ccjr.us/images/From\\_Jerusalem\\_to\\_Rome.pdf](https://www.ccjr.us/images/From_Jerusalem_to_Rome.pdf); Tivka Frymer-Kensky et al., "Dabru Emet: A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity," *New York Times*, September 10, 2000; International Group of Orthodox Rabbis, "To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians," December 3, 2015, <https://www.cjuc.org/2015/12/03/orthodox-rabbinic-statement-on-christianity/>.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 7:51; John 8:44; Catholic Church, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 4 (Second Vatican Council, October 28, 1965).

of interreligious diplomacy, focusing on affirmations rather than criticism. These concerns are certainly important, and they are necessary to the pressing and ongoing task of improving interreligious relations. However, in the spirit of open inquiry and dialogue, this article provides a critical reading of contemporary Catholic discourse on Judaism and the Jewish people.<sup>5</sup> It considers the images that this Catholic discourse evokes and examines what it suggests about the ways that Judaism and the Jewish people are envisioned in the Catholic imagination.<sup>6</sup> To be clear, the criticism expressed here arises out of a recognition of the magnitude of the Catholic Church's recent progress and is intended to identify tropes in Catholic discourse about Judaism that pose serious obstacles to the rapprochement toward which this discourse aims.

The arguments that I make here identify three areas in which these obstacles are particularly evident, and it is organized into sections addressing these issues in order, with three distinct main arguments. The first concerns the tendency of Catholic discourse to frame Jews and Judaism within a Catholic understanding of salvation. As the following pages argue, despite dramatic progress in Christian-Jewish relations in the years since Vatican II, Catholic discourse continues to project a specifically Christian vision of salvation history onto the Jewish people. This is entirely natural to Catholic thought, however, and arises inherently from an all-encompassing theological starting point. The arguments made in this article, therefore, do not request that the Church abandon this perspective; it would be as absurd to ask the Church to step away from theological reasoning as it would be to demand that a secular scholar adopt it. Nor does I ask the Church to view the world through the lenses of Jewish tradition and experience, which would be similarly absurd. Recognizing that a christocentric faith-based perspective is as inherent to Catholic thought as a hermeneutic of suspicion is to postcolonialist thought, this article makes no demands to abandon faith-based perspectives. It does, however, ask the reader, in this age of interfaith reconciliation, to reflect critically on certain entrenched patterns of Catholic discourse on Judaism. These patterns inevitably recast Jewishness in a Christian frame, and reflect Christian rather than Jewish self-understanding. I propose that this process, although inherent and potentially inescapable, results in an ideological sublimation of Judaism, subsuming Jews and Judaism within a Christian worldview.

The second area of investigation regards the language choices used in this Catholic discourse. With the recognition that there is no such thing as a singular

<sup>5</sup> For the sake of clarity, it may be helpful to draw attention to the distinction between the terms "Jews" and "the Jewish people," as the terms are used in this article. The first refers to Jewish individuals, and the second to a collective, sometimes referred to as the Jewish peoplehood, which spans historical and contemporary contexts.

<sup>6</sup> The importance of reflecting on the religious imagination is also noted by Susannah Heschel: "Jews and Christians might examine the many ways we exist within each other's theological imagination, in both positive and polemical fashion" (Susannah Heschel, "Interfaith Begins with Faith," *American Religion*, 13 September 2022, <https://www.american-religion.org/dabruemet/heschel>).

Catholic discourse across the wide variety of Catholic communities found around the world, I utilize Vatican documents about Judaism as expressions of perspectives and theologies that are widely accepted across Catholic communities, even if their dissemination and integration into local discourse varies across different contexts. I employ a literary reading of these documents, analyzing overall patterns in language and imagery, alert to the allusions implicit in the texts. I also consider the texts within their broader cultural context, as documents intended to address a long history of anti-Judaism. As this section of the article will conclude, this analysis reveals some overarching patterns in the language and imagery used to refer to Jews and Judaism. These patterns are characterized by evasive and elliptical language, suggestive of an effort to tiptoe linguistically around what remains left unsaid. I propose that this language evidences an ongoing uneasiness in the relationship of the Catholic tradition to Jews and Judaism, perhaps symptomatic of a guilt yet to be fully addressed, or potentially indicative of unacknowledged residual strains of anti-Judaism.

The third problematic area addressed here concerns a hermeneutical obstacle to deep interreligious understanding, one which may be ultimately insurmountable: namely, the challenges of understanding the religious other according to its own self-understanding. The ability to see from outside one's own perspective is limited, particularly in the context of faith-based viewpoints. This article concludes that this limitation may fundamentally obstruct the goal of fully understanding the perspective of the religious other.

Honoring the complexity of the issues discussed here, this article thus makes the unusual move of putting forward a proposal and arguing against this proposal in the same breath: I argue that Catholic discourse intended to foster reconciliation often ends up subsuming and reducing Judaism within a Catholic worldview; at the same time, I also concede that this may be an innate extension of Catholic faith, and that the Church's understanding of the universal nature of religious truth may preclude full recognition of the self-understanding of other religious traditions. The secular cultural arguments made in this article are foreign to the Catholic theological worldview, and the two perspectives make unusual conversation partners. In this way, this article demonstrates the attempt to see from outside of one's own worldview and to recognize multiple perspectives, putting into practice the hermeneutical move that it urges.

This article intentionally abstains from making specific recommendations for theological reform for two main reasons. First, its arguments do not arise from a faith-based perspective but from a cultural- and historical-critical perspective. It does not partake in the faith-based reasoning of theology, and it does not feign to be in a position to suggest specific revisions to a perspective not its own. Second, the purpose of this article is to identify—but not to presume to have a solution to—issues that have been sidestepped or only indirectly suggested in much existing scholarship. In short, it analyzes the problem but stops short of the hubris of proposing to fix it.

## ■ Framing Jews through a Christian Lens

### *A. The Task of Interreligious Hermeneutics*

This article is, in essence, a study in interreligious hermeneutics—that is, a study of ways of interpreting the religious other, examining the patterns through which Catholic perspectives inevitably frame Judaism through the lenses of Catholic traditions. The practice of interreligious hermeneutics involves examining the processes through which the religious other is perceived and interpreted, which is inevitably shaped by one's own context and point of view. As described by Catherine Cornille, “the main presumption in interreligious hermeneutics is that all understanding of the religious other is tainted by a degree of misunderstanding.”<sup>7</sup> In this perspective, the capacity to understand the religious other, once assumed to be readily accessible, is now recognized as ultimately unattainable, given the inescapable subjectivity through which the other is viewed and interpreted. This recognition, and the postmodern critique of objectivity more generally defined, has inspired a shift toward reflexivity in scholarship across many disciplines and, in religious studies, toward postcolonial critiques of Western and primarily Christian patterns of framing the other.

This hermeneutical shift, while commonly recognized across most disciplines, remains a foreign concept to much Catholic discourse. In Catholic approaches to interreligious dialogue, the primary area of concern is often soteriological, searching for ways in which the truth claims of Christianity might function in relation to other religions. The problematic issues in this tendency are addressed by Marianne Moyaert, who cites scholarly criticisms that this soteriological approach “amounts to a perversion of the virtue of openness . . . developed without reference to any particular religious tradition other than the Christian tradition,” and that it can be seen as “both insulting and patronizing because the religious other is understood without being heard.”<sup>8</sup> Moyaert notes a recent shift among scholars of interreligious dialogue toward hermeneutical questions, which ask not how the religious other may be saved, but rather, address issues of reflexivity and examine ways of seeing the other.<sup>9</sup> This article follows this turn, shifting attention away from doctrinal and soteriological claims and toward an analysis of the perspectives through which one perceives and attempts to understand the religious other.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Cornille, “Types of Misunderstanding in Interreligious Hermeneutics,” in *Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and Interreligious Hermeneutics: Ways of Seeing the Religious Other* (ed. Emma O'Donnell Polyakov; Leiden: Brill-Rodopi, 2018) 11–28, at 12.

<sup>8</sup> Marianne Moyaert, “Recent Developments in the Theology of Interreligious Dialogue: From Soteriological Openness to Hermeneutical Openness,” *Modern Theology* 28 (2012) 25–52, at 26.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>10</sup> Volumes that explore the new field of interreligious hermeneutics include *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People* (ed. David Cheetham et al.; Amsterdam: Brill, 2011); *Interreligious Hermeneutics* (ed. Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway; Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2010); J. R. Hustwit, *Interreligious Hermeneutics and the Pursuit of Truth* (Lanham:

*B. Seeing the Jewish People through a Christian Biblical Frame*

In much Christian discourse, the notion of the Jewish people is automatically identified with the biblical people—that is, as the chosen people whose narrative is told in the Hebrew Bible and reinterpreted in the New Testament. It is only natural for a biblical religion to draw its concepts from the biblical text, but a problem arises when biblical Judaism becomes a primary paradigm in Christian understandings of the Jewish people. In other words, the use of the biblical narrative in and of itself is certainly not problematic, but allowing the biblical text to define and delimit a historical reality that has continued to develop for two thousand years after the completion of the text is a gross misinterpretation.

While the argument can rightly be made that Jewish tradition also takes its own notion of Jewish peoplehood from the biblical text, the crucial distinction is that Jewish tradition begins from the biblical text but does not end with it, drawing from postbiblical rabbinic literature as well as from centuries of Jewish history. The difference between Christian and Jewish patterns in uses of the biblical text in this case should now be clear: when the concept of the Jewish people is understood by Christians in the biblical sense, a definitive historical parameter is established, reaching only as far as the years that the biblical narrative encompasses. This includes the time range of ancient Judaism up through the end of Second Temple Judaism, leaving out the development of rabbinic Judaism and the following two thousand years of history.

Significantly, this time period also is bounded on one end by the life of Jesus of Nazareth, so that when this biblical historical parameter is used, the representation of the Jewish people ends precisely with the end of the life of Jesus and the beginning of early Christianity. So, when the Jewish people are understood from a Christian biblical perspective, it is seen in relation to Jesus: first, as a precursor to his birth, and then as a people who encountered him and, in Christian interpretation, failed to recognize him as the messiah.<sup>11</sup> Thus, the parameter established by the biblical perspective sees the history of the Jewish people to conclude with their rejection of Jesus as the messiah.

This results in a recasting of Judaism through Christian lenses, which subsumes the Jewish people within the Christian narrative and worldview. It portrays Jews as a biblical people, defined not through Jewish narratives, but through their

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Lexington Books, 2014); *Antisemitism, Islamophobia, and Interreligious Hermeneutics* (ed. Polyakov).

<sup>11</sup> In the biblical narrative, this Jewish encounter with the messiah is portrayed as collective; i.e., Jesus came first to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 15:24). From the perspective of Christian history, with this encounter the Jewish people were faced with the choice of accepting or rejecting the messiah. To be clear, however, nearly all of the people featured in the New Testament were Jews, and when its authors identified people as Jews, they were referring primarily to the Jewish majority who did not follow Jesus, as opposed to the Jewish followers of Jesus, the latter of whom comprised the earliest Christian community. In this way, the New Testament usage of the term “Jew” became an accusatory label; although the majority of characters in the New Testament were Jews, the identification of Jewishness was often reserved for those who did not believe in Jesus.

relationship to the life of Jesus. Furthermore, despite the religious development of two thousand years of rabbinic Judaism, it portrays the Jewish people as continuing to live in error for having failed to recognize the messiah.<sup>12</sup> This is what I call here the mythologization of Jews. In this process, the notion of the Jewish people is seen through the colored lenses of a distinctly christocentric worldview: it is framed as a biblical relic, beginning and ending within a Christian vision of salvation history.

To be clear, the Catholic Church's recent move toward greater recognition of the Jewish roots of Christianity is laudable, and the problem is not that it acknowledges that Judaism served as a precursor to Christianity; the problem lies in reducing it to primarily, or even only, a precursor. In short, if the concept of the Jewish people is understood as a biblical concept from a Christian perspective, then the Jewish people are understood not on their own terms but in relation to Jesus and to Christianity.

While from a Catholic viewpoint this may be seen as a welcoming perspective that embraces Judaism as a sibling tradition, when taken to its logical conclusion within the framework of Catholic thought, it results in the eventual (and perhaps only eschatological) melding of the two religions into one, for, as *Nostra Aetate* expresses, "the Church awaits that day, known to God alone, on which all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice."<sup>13</sup> When this is the case, the welcoming embrace becomes a smothering embrace, extinguishing the particularity of Jewish history, practice, and people within the universal claims of Christian faith.

This mythologization of the Jewish people is reminiscent of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, but here it is Jews who are portrayed as the exoticized other, rather than Muslims or Arabs more generally, as in Said's formulation.<sup>14</sup> Said's main critique of Orientalism is that it casts the cultures of the "East" in exoticized and exaggerated imagery, allowing the colonial perspective to distort the object of its

<sup>12</sup> For more detailed discussions of the treatment of supersessionism in "The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable," see Philip A. Cunningham, "The Sources behind 'The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable' (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of *Nostra Aetate* (No. 4)," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12 (2017) 1–39; Gavin D'Costa, "Supersessionism: Harsh, Mild, or Gone for Good?" *European Judaism* 50.1 (Spring 2017) 99–107; Adam Gregerman, "Superiority without Supersessionism: Walter Kasper, *The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable*, and God's Covenant with the Jews," *Theological Studies* 79 (2018) 36–59; Matthew Tapie, "Christ, Torah, and the Faithfulness of God: The Concept of Supersessionism in 'The Gifts and the Calling,'" *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12 (2017) 1–18.

<sup>13</sup> Catholic Church, *Nostra Aetate* #4.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Said acknowledges the connection between Orientalism and anti-Semitism in his introduction to *Orientalism*, referring to the former as "the strange, secret sharer of Western anti-Semitism." However, he immediately qualifies this connection with irony, alluding to his own very critical views of Zionism: "That this anti-Semitism and, as I have discussed it in its Islamic branch, Orientalism resemble each other very closely is a historical, cultural, and political truth that needs only to be mentioned to an Arab Palestinian for its irony to be perfectly understood" (Edward Said, *Orientalism* [New York: Pantheon, 1978] 27). Elsewhere in the book, he turns the focus away from the similarity, instead casting anti-Semitism and Orientalism as polarized, one distorted portrayal antagonizing the other (*ibid.*, 286, 337). Therefore, Said's theories are utilized ambivalently in this article, and only as an introductory framework.

gaze into an “other.” This pattern is also evident in some Christian perspectives on Judaism, but ironically, in Christian thought, Jews and Judaism are rarely seen as *fully* other, or as entirely distinct from Christianity. To the contrary, they are often reduced and instrumentalized as just one aspect of a sweeping Christian narrative. When this occurs, Jews are portrayed either as too far or too close: as a relic of an obsolete history or subsumed as an intimate component of Christian history.

Said applied his theory to different ends than it is applied here, but the basic principles of his theory help cast light on the patterns evident in Catholic discourse on Jews. Said’s foundational work informs this article’s argument that the subsuming of Jews and Judaism within a Christian salvation history and worldview constitutes an ideological reformulation of Judaism, in which Christian perspectives inhabit and lay claim to the landscape of Jewish identity, history, and belief.

## ■ A Case Study in Language

### *A. An Analysis of Language Choices in Catholic Documents*

Language choices make a powerful impact within religious texts, traditions, and concepts. A well-cited example of this is found in the implications of the term “Old Testament,” which have been interpreted as denigrating the text as an outdated or even obsolete precursor of the New Testament.<sup>15</sup> In even more evocative language, the Russian equivalent of the term “Old Testament,” *Верхий завет*, is most literally translated as “Decrepit Testament”; in other English translations, it could also be rendered “dilapidated,” “ramshackle,” or “tacky.” Terms such as this shape the way that their objects are received, even when—or perhaps particularly when—the language is used reflexively, without critical analysis or reflection on all that the language choices suggest.

To trace how language choices shape the way that Jews and Judaism are interpreted, and how that language can also reveal the implicit intentions of its authors, we now turn to a literary analysis of the language of six documents addressing Jewish-Christian relations from *Nostra Aetate* to the present, drawn from the conciliar documents of the Second Vatican Council and the documents of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews.<sup>16</sup> This section employs literary rather than theological methods, observing broad patterns in the images and associations utilized in portrayals of Judaism and the Jewish people, and analyzes the texts in light of the cultural contexts and worldviews out of which they arise.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> E.g., Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Bible* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2005) 7–8.

<sup>16</sup> Gavin D’Costa suggests that the documents of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews “are not doctrinal teaching documents but come from the main dicastery devoted to the area, thus reflecting the universal church’s thinking about matters” (Gavin D’Costa, *Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People after Vatican II* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019] 12).

<sup>17</sup> A traditional theological analysis of these documents would require that their varying levels of ecclesial authority be taken into consideration. This is particularly important to D’Costa, who makes



It engages in this analysis through a rather unorthodox crossing of disciplines: rather than following the expected path of theological engagement with theological texts, it critically challenges Catholic theological statements with nontheological arguments that draw instead from reflections on the history of anti-Judaism and contemporary cultural concerns. This unusual method is not without limitations: theological reasoning is inherent to the Church and does not always converse well with secular forms of reasoning. Nevertheless, applying a secular analytical method to theological texts is a useful exercise and sheds light on some obstacles to interreligious reconciliation and understanding.

### *B. Nostra Aetate and the Second Vatican Council*

The 1965 conciliar document *Nostra Aetate* was one of the major documents emerging from the Second Vatican Council, and the first to explicitly address Catholic understandings of Judaism and to seek to rectify anti-Judaic sentiments in Catholic thought. The document was groundbreaking when it emerged, and yet despite its clearly reconciliatory aim and the radical shift that it evidences, the language that it uses is strained. As the following analysis demonstrates, the document goes through complex linguistic turns in what appears to be an effort to avoid using the words “Jew” or “Judaism,” suggesting what may be an uneasiness with the subject matter it discusses.

The following list, drawn from the English translation of the document, contains every word and phrase used to refer to the Jewish people, in order: “Abraham’s stock”; “the chosen people”; “the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant”; “the root of that well-cultivated olive tree”; “Jews”; “[St. Paul’s] kinsmen”; and “the Jewish people.” Nowhere in the document is the word “Judaism” used. It is not until well into *Nostra Aetate* # 4 that Jews are named as such, after a third of the total passage; prior to that, the document only alludes to Jews through biblical language and metaphors. This results in a depiction of a certain people, unnamed for a substantial portion of the document, who are not portrayed as members of a distinct religious tradition in and of their own right. Rather, they are depicted as constituting a peoplehood only inasmuch as they set the foreground on which Christianity arose and served to foreshadow Christianity.

Addressing each of these terms in order, we begin with “Abraham’s stock.” This suggests that Jews are seen as descendants of Abraham, promoting a quasi-biological interpretation of the biblical narrative. Ironically, when the drafters of early versions of what became *Nostra Aetate* decided to use the phrase “stock of Abraham” (*stirps Abrahae*), they chose it in place of “the Jews” (*Judaeis*) because, as the drafters explained, the phrase “stock of Abraham” was intended to present Judaism as a purely religious community rather than as an ethnic or racial community. However,

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the impassioned claim that “[scholarship cannot] be forgiven for overlooking such ‘fine points’” regarding differing levels of authority (*ibid.*, 9). However, this current analysis is linguistic and cultural rather than theological, and therefore, such distinctions are far less relevant to this study.

as John Connelly points out, this resulted in “a great irony at the end point of the church’s struggle against racist antisemitism: that the effort to find an unequivocally religious formulation produced words that sound racialist.”<sup>18</sup>

Immediately following the phrase “Abraham’s stock,” *Nostra Aetate* refers to “Abraham’s sons according to faith”; however, with this phrase the document is referring to Christians, not Jews, which has the effect of robbing Jews of the distinctiveness of the title the document had just assigned them. This same sentence continues with an assertion that “the salvation of the Church is mysteriously foreshadowed by the chosen people’s exodus from the land of bondage,” directly attributing the central narrative of freedom in Jewish tradition to the Church, as inheritor of the covenant made with the Jewish people.

Continuing to portray Judaism exclusively as the precursor to Christianity, the next phrase the document uses to refer to the Jewish people is “the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant,” which in this context describes the role of the people from whom *Christianity* “received the revelation of the Old Testament.” Following in this pattern, “the root of that well-cultivated olive tree” is used to highlight the sustenance that the roots provide to the growth of the church; in other words, the value of the Jewish roots lies in their generation of the gentile church. It is only after this introduction that the document identifies this previously unnamed people as “Jews,” in the context of discussing Jews at the time of Jesus.<sup>19</sup> However, it continues to portray Judaism as an aspect of a comprehensive Christian worldview, nearly suggesting that Judaism and Jews are the handmaiden of Christianity.<sup>20</sup>

A similar pattern is evident in *Lumen Gentium*, another document from the Second Vatican Council. Paragraph 16 reads:

In the first place we must recall the people to whom the testament and the promises were given and from whom Christ was born according to the flesh. On account of their fathers this people remains most dear to God, for God does not repent of the gifts He makes nor of the calls He issues. But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first

<sup>18</sup> John Connelly’s critique, while very valid, is complicated by the fact that Judaism is a peoplehood as well as a religion (John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–1965* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012] 259).

<sup>19</sup> Historically, the term “Jew” or “Yehud” became widely used only in exilic and postexilic contexts. In the strictest historical sense, then, the term is appropriate at this point in the document but not earlier. However, in a document that claims to discuss the Jewish people from history to the present, this distinction becomes cumbersome, if not irrelevant.

<sup>20</sup> Connelly observes that in drafts of *De Judaeis*, which was eventually adapted into *Nostra Aetate*, the passages that portrayed Jews as having a role in salvation history—that is, the Christian vision of salvation history—“referred either to the Jewish people of the past (‘Israel of the Patriarchs’, ‘people of the Old Covenant’) or beyond the end of history (‘the Church believes in the union of the Jewish people with herself as an integral part of Christian hope . . .’).” These drafts evidenced a struggle to express the elements of both religion and peoplehood with Judaism, but the result was language that suggested that “after Christ the Jewish people had been erased from history” (Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother*, 259).

place amongst these there are the Muslims, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind.<sup>21</sup>

In its brief discussion of Judaism, *Lumen Gentium* refuses to use the words “Jews” or “Judaism.” However, the document immediately proceeds to refer to Muslims as Muslims. The effect of this word choice on a Christian audience is that this unnamed people is associated with the ancient biblical people. Although the document adds the present tense (“they *are* a people”) after its reference to biblical Judaism, suggesting that it might also refer to the present-day Jewish people, the linguistic choice to abstain from naming this people suggests an image of an unformed, unnamed ancient people, rather than an acknowledgment of Judaism after the time of Jesus.

### C. The Multivalence of the Word “Jew”

The word “Jew,” however, is far from uncomplicated, given the broad range of its historical uses and abuses. From one perspective, it can be seen as a fairly neutral or straightforward word for a Jewish person. From another perspective, its utterance reverberates with a dark history, as seen in the German “*Jude*” or the Polish “*Jid*,” both of which are forever marked by historical associations with violence. The negative associations of “Yid” (an alternate spelling of “Jid”) are so culturally embedded that the early Zionist leader Ze’ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky used the term as a foil to construct the image of the ideal Jew of Zionist ideology: for everything that the “Yid” is, Jabotinsky wrote, the new Zionist “Hebrew” would be the opposite.<sup>22</sup>

The word “Jew” is multivalent, and its associations are far-ranging. As Cynthia M. Baker observes:

*Jew*, for some, is a term of deep pride or desire; for others, it is a term of deep loathing. Is it ever “neutral” . . . ? Were one to see *Jew* spray-painted on a wall almost anywhere in the world, in almost any language, would its impact not be measurably different from the same treatment of these other terms? And yet the words Jew and Jews are also stock-in-trade in the mundane world of academic Jewish studies, where they regularly serve as descriptors whose meaning is often treated as self-evident.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Catholic Church, *Lumen Gentium* (Second Vatican Council, November 21, 1964) 16.

<sup>22</sup> Arguing for a new vision of Jewish identity, Ze’ev Jabotinsky wrote, “Our starting point is to take the typical Yid of today and to imagine his diametrical opposite. . . . Because the Yid is ugly, sickly, and lacks decorum, we shall endow the ideal image of the Hebrew with masculine beauty. The Yid is trodden upon . . . the Hebrew ought to be proud and independent. . . . The Yid wants to conceal his identity from strangers and, therefore, the Hebrew should look the world straight in the eye and declare: ‘I am a Hebrew’” (quoted in Cynthia M. Baker, *Jew* [Key Words in Jewish Studies; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017] 63).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

Like many other historically weighted words, the associations evoked by the word “Jew” can also be affected by the identity of the speaker; the term “Jew” used by Jewish speakers can have a different resonance than the same term used by people who are not Jewish.

The distinction between the terms “Jew” and “Jewish” also raises a few issues relevant to this discussion. The adjectival form is often used when a speaker is careful to avoid offense—referring to someone as “a Jewish person” may be seen as less weighted with negative associations than referring to someone as “a Jew.” As Baker discusses, this uneasiness is particularly noticeable in contemporary Germany, where the historically weighted word “Jude” is often replaced with phrases translated as “a German of Mosaic faith” or “our Jewish fellow citizen.”<sup>24</sup> In another example, the use of the phrase “a person of the Jewish faith” may be intended to avoid offense, but in the process, it can result in a representation of Judaism that is implicitly Christianized, through the suggestion that the theological concept of faith plays as central a role within Judaism as it does in Christianity.

The existence of a noun that is distinct from the adjective, as “Jew” is to “Jewish,” is quite unusual among English terms for members of religions. In English, members of most other religions can be referred to by the adjective alone, used as a substantive; e.g., a person who is Christian is a Christian, and a person who is Muslim is a Muslim, but a person who is Jewish is a Jew. This existence of the distinct noun may reflect, or at least perpetuate, the notion of Jews as a distinct type of person, in yet another case of mythologization.

Given these issues, the choice to avoid the term “Jew” in *Nostra Aetate* and *Lumen Gentium* may reflect a sensitivity to the negative cultural and historical associations of the term. If such sensitivity is indeed the motivation, it would signal an admirable attempt to reckon with the contemporary reception of the Catholic Church’s discourse. And yet, the very fact that these documents, as well as much Catholic discourse in general, goes through such extended verbal acrobatics to find language to refer to Jews and Judaism might also suggest an underlying unease. In a pattern similar to the way that the presence of prohibitions on certain behavior in ancient texts indicates to the modern reader that these behaviors may have been common, the use of strained language intended to not offend often indicates that the sentiment being expressed might be interpreted by some as offensive.

However, whether the Church’s linguistic turns to avoid the use of the word “Jew” signal a cultural sensitivity or an attempt to hide an underlying offense—or even a combination of both—it is neither feasible nor helpful to argue for the avoidance of all biblical framings of the Jewish people. Biblical language is the currency of both Christian and Jewish religious traditions, and the lens through which each tradition has defined itself throughout history. Avoiding such language and using only secular terms and images in the name of neutrality—which is in itself an unreachable goal—can strip both Judaism and Christianity of their particularity as

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 12–13.

biblically based religious traditions. An attempt to frame the Jewish people through language devoid of any biblical associations would overlook the religious identity of Judaism, and could suggest a racial definition dangerously close to that used by anti-Semitic racist ideology. Portrayals of the Jewish people framed in biblical language can also serve as a counterbalance for deconstructions and disavowals of the very concept of the Jewish people as a distinct historical people.

As appropriate as the use of this biblical language may be in some contexts, such language is not sufficient on its own and is unable to address the multiple components of Jewish identity. Jewish identity is a complex combination of multiple components and, as Zvi Gitelman writes, “has continually redefined itself, sometimes as a faith community, sometimes as an ethnic group, nation, cultural group, or even a race.”<sup>25</sup> To account for this, language used to refer to Jews and Judaism must be similarly varied and flexible. The exclusive use of biblical language fails to acknowledge contemporary Judaism and two millennia of postbiblical Judaism, and inversely, avoiding biblical language entirely would fail to address Judaism as a biblical religion. Biblical terminology is integral to religious concepts of the Jewish people, but this in itself is not enough and is incapable of addressing the Jewish people as a historical, cultural, national, and transnational peoplehood, which encompasses both religious and secular elements.<sup>26</sup> When Catholic discourse uses nearly exclusively biblical language to refer to Jews and Judaism, it portrays Judaism as a museum piece of biblical history and mythologizes the Jewish people, subsuming it within a Christian worldview.

#### *D. Documents of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews*

The 1974 document of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews,<sup>27</sup> “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, 4,” opens with a promising statement in the preamble: “Christians must therefore strive to acquire a better knowledge of the basic components of the religious tradition of Judaism; they must strive to learn by what essential traits Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience.”<sup>28</sup> This passage from “Guidelines” is such a clear directive that Philip Cunningham refers to it as “an

<sup>25</sup> Zvi Gitelman, “Introduction: Jewish Religion, Jewish Ethnicity—The Evolution of Jewish Identities,” in *Religion or Ethnicity? Jewish Identities in Evolution* (ed. Zvi Gitelman; New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009) 1.

<sup>26</sup> Adin Steinsaltz claimed in an interview: “Jewish peoplehood is always central. It comes before the Jewish nation or the Jewish state. We live in modern times, but our peoplehood is still essential, primitive. We never ceased to be a clan or tribe” (“Is There Such a Thing as the Jewish People?” *Moment* 37.4 (2012) 46–49, at 46).

<sup>27</sup> In English, this commission is also referred to as the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jewish People, although the Vatican uses the English name given here. The alternate name may reflect a discomfort with the word “Jew,” as discussed above.

<sup>28</sup> Catholic Church, “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, 4” (Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, December 1, 1974, preamble).

enduring commandment to future Catholic theologians: ‘When speaking of Judaism, thou shalt not theologize without respect for Jewish self-understanding.’”<sup>29</sup> The document, intended to develop and implement the theologies introduced in *Nostra Aetate*, progresses further than its predecessor in addressing Jewish concerns, but it falls short of carrying forward the entreaty it makes in the prologue.

In the conciliar documents, the notion of the Jews refers only to those of Second Temple Judaism, overlooking two thousand years of rabbinic Judaism, which has developed side by side with Christianity, in a constant process of tension and exchange. The choice to refer to Jews solely within a historical context that ends with the life of Jesus reflects a Christocentrism that sees the Jewish people only as they relate to or serve Christianity. “Guidelines and Suggestions” departs from this pattern by acknowledging, in a single line, that Judaism did not end in the first century. However, it carefully delimits this statement by appending an interpretive gloss that effectively reduces rabbinic Judaism to a set of values: “although we believe that the importance and meaning of that tradition was deeply affected by the coming of Christ, it is still nonetheless rich in religious values.”<sup>30</sup>

Twenty years later, the 1985 document “Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,” also by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, finally succeeded in referring to postbiblical, post–Second Temple Judaism without presenting it as theologically flawed. It observes: “The history of Israel did not end in 70 A. D. It continued, especially in a numerous Diaspora which allowed Israel to carry to the whole world a witness—often heroic—of its fidelity to the one God and to ‘exalt Him in the presence of all the living.’”<sup>31</sup> “Notes” is also the first of the commission’s documents to extend the notion of the irrevocability of the covenant explicitly to rabbinic Judaism, rather than applying it only to biblical Judaism.<sup>32</sup>

In the sixth part of the document, titled “Judaism and Christianity in History,” “Notes” includes a single sentence referencing the existence of the State of Israel, a paragraph that discusses the “permanence of Israel”—that is, the fact that the Jewish people continue to exist today—and a final paragraph denouncing displays of anti-Semitism. This is a rare and necessary acknowledgment of postbiblical Judaism, and

<sup>29</sup> Philip A. Cunningham, “God Holds the Jews Most Dear,” in *A Jubilee for All Time: The Copernican Revolution in Jewish-Christian Relations* (ed. Gilbert S. Rosenthal; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014) 52.

<sup>30</sup> Catholic Church, “Guidelines and Suggestions,” III.

<sup>31</sup> Catholic Church, “Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church” (Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, June 24, 1985) VI.1.

<sup>32</sup> D’Costa writes: “Taking the step from biblical Judaism to Rabbinic Judaism involved more than the Council could deliver. Its aim was to remove the deicide charge. Even in *Guidelines* (1974) there is no mention of contemporary Jews being the inheritors of the gifts and promises. In the Preamble, instead, it refers to the ‘spiritual bonds and historical links binding the Church to Judaism’. Only in *Notes* (1985) does this new step appear. The justification for taking the step is Pope John Paul II’s speeches of 1980 and 1982” (*Catholic Doctrines*, 16).

particularly of twentieth-century historical developments, and evidences substantial progress in the Catholic Church's effort to address contemporary Judaism. This laudable development also points to the length of the road ahead: the fact that the document warrants praise for acknowledging that Judaism has continued to exist over the past two millennia and for abstaining from commentary demeaning the validity of Judaism signals the work still to be done.

The more recent documents of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews make substantial progress. The 1998 document "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah" differs substantially in its scope from the others, which leads to a different portrayal of Jews and Judaism than that found in other documents. Its purpose is not to clarify or develop Catholic thought so much as to comment on the historical event of the Shoah, and to distinguish Nazi ideology from Christian thought, while expressing deep sympathy and regret for the Shoah. It also contains a detailed passage on the parting of ways, which helps clarify the distinction between the Second Temple Judaism of Jesus's time and rabbinic Judaism. In addressing the Shoah, it remains firmly engaged with the contemporary reality of Jewish experience in the modern world and avoids the tropes of other documents in its portrayal of Jews and Judaism.

The direct discussion of the relationship of Christian theology to anti-Semitic ideology is an absolute necessity on the path toward reconciliation, and in this regard, "We Remember" takes important beginning steps. Even with the progress made in Catholic discourse on Judaism in recent decades, reconciliation cannot come easily, given a historical background so rife with anti-Semitic violence, much of it fueled by Christian theology. From many Jewish perspectives, this history looms at the forefront of collective cultural memory and colors efforts at Christian-Jewish dialogue. Yet, the long history of anti-Semitic violence is skirted in much contemporary Catholic rhetoric, which tends toward only indirect allusions to this history, devoid of concrete statements of culpability or repentance.<sup>33</sup> From the perspective of the Church, reflection on secular history can be seen as orthogonal to the main goals of Catholic discourse, which is concerned first and foremost with more overtly theological issues. However, from Jewish and other non-Catholic perspectives, the omission can seem glaring.

The 2015 document "The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable" evidences further progress, and makes a refreshingly thorough departure from the tropes of the earlier documents.<sup>34</sup> Not only does it include a lengthy and detailed discussion

<sup>33</sup> John T. Pawlikowski sees this tendency as a major obstacle to interreligious dialogue: "To my mind there is little question that the greatest challenge posed to Christians in dialogue with Judaism is coming to grips with the history of antisemitism" (John T. Pawlikowski, "Historical Memory and Christian-Jewish Relations," in *Christ Jesus and the Jewish People Today: New Explorations of Theological Interrelationships* [ed. Philip A. Cunningham et al.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011] 14–30, at 24).

<sup>34</sup> The title "The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable" is drawn from Rom 11:28–29. Critiquing the use of this biblical passage in Christian-Jewish dialogue, Jon D. Levenson observes

of rabbinic Judaism, but it also expresses a laudable recognition of Jewish perspectives when it reflects, “It is easy to understand that the so-called ‘mission to the Jews’ is a very delicate and sensitive matter for Jews because, in their eyes, it involves the very existence of the Jewish people.”<sup>35</sup> The remarkable progress the document makes in its numerous attempts to recognize Jewish perspectives has not gone unrecognized; although Ruth Langer offers some important critiques of the document, she also concludes that it “consistently acknowledges and engages with Jewish self-understanding, even when turning to topics on which Catholics and Jews differ,” and while Rabbi David Rosen argues that “there are passages in it that do not and cannot resonate with a Jewish theology,” he also concedes that the document “seeks to reflect a sincere comprehension of Jewish self-understanding.”<sup>36</sup>

However, the portrayal of the distinctiveness of Judaism encounters, quite unfortunately, a major obstacle later in the document. In what appears to be intended as an effort to emphasize the deep relationship between Judaism and Christianity, the document speaks of a familial relationship between Judaism and Christianity in which Judaism is “intrinsic” to Christianity. While this relationship is crucial to Christian understandings of Judaism, a number of scholars have argued that it is not a symmetrical relationship, and that the reverse is not true: e.g., as Rabbi Riccardo DiSegni argues, “Theologically, the Christian cannot do without Israel; the Jew, in his faith, must do without Christ if he does not want to deny his own faith.”<sup>37</sup> Despite this lack of symmetry, the Church’s understanding of its relationship to Judaism as one in which the latter is “intrinsic” is not inherently problematic. However, in its enunciation of this relationship, “The Gifts and Calling” pushes the relationship into threatening territory: “The faith of the Jews testified to in the Bible, found in the Old Testament, is not for Christians another religion but the foundation of their own faith.”<sup>38</sup> Whereas from Christian perspectives this may seem to be a way of expressing an unbreakable relationship with Judaism, from Jewish perspectives this statement touches precisely on what, for some, may be the greatest threat that

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that the passage is “pro-Jewish without being pro-Judaism. Its point is that God bears with the Jews despite the failure of so many of them to become Christians” (Jon D. Levenson, “How Not to Conduct Jewish-Christian Dialogue” *Commentary* 112.5 [2001] 31–37).

<sup>35</sup> Catholic Church, “The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable: A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ‘Nostra Aetate’ (No. 4)” (Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, December 10, 2015) 15, 40.

<sup>36</sup> Ruth Langer, “‘Gifts and Calling’: The Fruits of Coming to Know Living Jews,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12.1 (2017) 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.6017/scjr.v12i1.9797>; David Rosen, “Reflections from Israel” (Vatican press conference, December 10, 2015), <https://ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/analyses/crrj-2015dec10/rosen-2015dec10>.

<sup>37</sup> Riccardo Di Segni, “Progress and Issues of the Dialogue from a Jewish Viewpoint,” in *The Catholic Church and the Jewish People: Recent Reflections from Rome* (ed. Philip A. Cunningham, Norbert Hofmann, and Joseph Sievers; New York: Fordham University Press, 2007) 12–22, at 13.

<sup>38</sup> Catholic Church, “The Gifts and Calling,” 20.



Christianity presents: namely, the threat that Christianity would attempt to subsume Judaism within itself, which would amount to the destruction of Judaism.

The document later clarifies that: “While there is a principled rejection of an institutional Jewish mission, Christians are nonetheless called to bear witness to their faith in Jesus Christ also to Jews, although they should do so in a humble and sensitive manner, acknowledging that Jews are bearers of God’s Word, and particularly in view of the great tragedy of the Shoah.”<sup>39</sup> Despite the slight amelioration caused by the “humble and sensitive manner,” this renewed injunction for Christian evangelization to Jews not only does little to assuage the suspicion that the Church still aims to convert Jews, but also reinforces the images of Judaism as ultimately wrong, and of Jews as being in need of evangelization.

In his analysis of the underlying message regarding mission in “The Gifts and Calling,” Adam Gregerman challenges the overly optimistic assumption that “post-*Nostra Aetate* positive views of the Jewish covenant, including the claim that Jews are already ‘saved’, preclude a desire for Jews to convert to Christianity.”<sup>40</sup> Gregerman argues that “The Gifts and Calling” portrays Jewish conversion to Christianity as desirable, and that it promotes the notion that even though the old Jewish covenant is “good,” the new covenant through Jesus is “better.”<sup>41</sup> He observes that this message is interwoven subtly throughout the document, in a delicate strategy that cloaks the primary argument that Jews should indeed convert within secondary arguments that suggest otherwise.<sup>42</sup> Gregerman’s concern is not unfounded; in Gavin D’Costa’s precise and comprehensive study *Catholic Doctrines on the Jewish People after Vatican II*, D’Costa concludes, “While there is a strong Catholic culture that says there is no such thing any longer in the light of the new post-supersessionist teachings, I argue that magisterial clues point elsewhere. They point to the necessity of witness to all those who do not know Jesus Christ and his Church.”<sup>43</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>40</sup> Adam Gregerman, “The Desirability of Jewish Conversion to Christianity in Contemporary Catholic Thought,” *Horizons* 45 (2018) 1–38, at 1.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>42</sup> As Gregerman explains: “Kasper and the authors of Gifts often present their arguments for the desirability of converting Jews to Christianity indirectly and elliptically. They cite but do not quote verses and statements endorsing or illustrating the conversion of Jews. They elaborate complex eschatological scenarios for which there is no need to convert Jews, before more succinctly presenting arguments in favor of converting Jews” (ibid., 36).

<sup>43</sup> D’Costa, *Catholic Doctrines*, 189. In an earlier discussion of the Church’s mission to Jews, Gavin D’Costa argues that although the Church’s mission is not directed to any one particular group of people, mission is as necessary to Jews as it is to all people. Enumerating his points, he argues: “(1) The magisterium teaches that mission to the Jewish people and individuals is required if Catholics are to be faithful to the truth of the gospel. (2) There is also recognition that Jews may adhere to their ancient religion in good faith . . . which contains true revelation, but that this revelation is completed in historical and eschatological time, in Jesus Christ.” He concludes, “But there should be no misunderstanding of the basic principle: mission to the Jews is theologically legitimate. Learning how best to implement that principle is the complex task that still awaits the careful attention of the contemporary Catholic Church in honest dialogue with Jewish groups and

These documents were largely motivated by a desire to counter theological anti-Judaism and to correct centuries of teachings of contempt, and they evidence a continual evolution, beginning with Vatican II and gradually continuing in the years that have followed, which very well may continue to progress in positive directions in the future. However, despite these good intentions and despite the remarkable progress that has been made, the documents continue the ongoing process of reinforcing a specifically Christian understanding of the Jewish people, one that is abstracted from the realities of contemporary Jewish life, and remote from Jewish self-understandings.

## ■ Reflections on Hermeneutical Obstacles

This concluding section explores what, precisely, the recognition of Jewish self-understandings in Catholic discourse might entail, and whether such recognition is ultimately possible. What does it mean for Catholic thought, or for any other non-Jewish religious tradition, to recognize this self-understanding? This question might initially be answered by saying that it requires deep learning about what constitutes Jewish understandings of Jewish identity and experience, and reflection of this learning in Catholic discourse. However, an unmitigated grasp of the self-understanding of a religious community other than one's own may not be possible, given that one can ultimately see only from one's own perspective. The difficulties of comprehending the self-understanding of another religious tradition are heightened when speaking not only of the perspectives and empathetic capacities of individual people, but of an institution such as the Catholic Church as a whole, represented by the episcopal offices and bound to certain fundamental and underlying theological principles.

In a study of the virtues required for interreligious dialogue, Catherine Cornille writes that "every confessional understanding of the relationship between religions thus seems to inevitably entail a certain degree of domestication of the truth of the other."<sup>44</sup> While this domestication can be evidenced to varying degrees in different religious traditions, it is particularly acute in Catholic thought. The Catholic Church's insistence on its doctrinal superiority, which it asserts even in attempts at interreligious dialogue and reconciliation, is made clear in the 2000 document *Dominus Iesus*: "Equality, which is a presupposition of interreligious dialogue, refers to the equal personal dignity of the partners in dialogue, not to doctrinal content."<sup>45</sup> Cornille proposes that recognizing this limitation can lead to a new sort of equality, in which dialogue participants are equal to the extent that they equally judge the other

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individuals in their great diversity" (Gavin D'Costa, "What Does the Catholic Church Teach about Mission to the Jewish People?" *Theological Studies* 73 [2012] 590–613, at 613).

<sup>44</sup> Catherine Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 2008) 130.

<sup>45</sup> Catholic Church, "*Dominus Iesus*: Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, August 6, 2000) 22.

by their own criteria: "If this is so," she writes, "then true equality would have to lie in the very fact that all participants enter the dialogue convinced of the superior truth of their own beliefs and practices."<sup>46</sup> However, being convinced of superior truth presupposes a characteristically Christian approach to religion, one which equates religion with doctrinal certainty. Judaism does not share this focus on "superior truth" and is more often characterized by debate than by proclamations of truth. Furthermore, claims of theological truth are not only less central to Jewish thought than they are to Christian thought but are also less determinate.<sup>47</sup> An interreligious dialogue based on equally firm assertions of ultimate truth would be incongruous with most Jewish conceptions of truth and would be framed through Christian philosophies and priorities.<sup>48</sup>

Given that there seems to be no option for an equality in Christian-Jewish dialogue based on mutually contradictory convictions of superior truth, as Cornille proposes, an alternative approach might propose that the Church practice a soteriological restraint, in which it would refrain from extending its truth claims outside the bounds of its own tradition. In this proposal, statements of truth would bear upon Catholic tradition, but would not be extended into proclamations about the validity of other religions. However, this proposal too encounters an obstacle: just as it is a misjudgment to assume that theological truth claims hold a primary place in Jewish thought, it is naïve to presuppose that Catholic thought might place a limit upon the reach of its truth claims. Inherent in traditional Catholic thought is the belief that truth is universal, and that salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is an absolute and not a relative truth, and applies to all people.<sup>49</sup> Given this, the proposal to refrain from applying one tradition's own truth claims onto another tradition may be categorically impossible within traditional Catholic thought. While a greater admittance of the

<sup>46</sup> Cornille, *The Im-possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, 89.

<sup>47</sup> Although rabbinic literature assumes certain fundamental beliefs, such as the existence of God and the authority of the Torah, in general, theological truth claims are far less definitive for Judaism than they are for Christianity. In *The Mind of the Talmud*, David Kraemer argues that the Babylonian Talmud, and by extension much Jewish thought, "embodies a recognition that truth, divine in origin, is on the human level indeterminable," and that humans "have only human approaches to truth and they are all, of necessity, merely relative" (David Kraemer, *The Mind of the Talmud: An Intellectual History of the Bavli* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990] 7). See also Ruth Langer's discussion of the lack of a singular or determinate understanding of salvation in Judaism (Ruth Langer, "Jewish Understandings of the Religious Other," *Theological Studies* 64 [2003] 255–77, at 271–72).

<sup>48</sup> In a related issue, Michael J. Cook notes the shortcomings of the Christian tendency to focus on issues of religious truth in dialogue, rather than on issues that may be of more relevance or interest to many Jews, such as historical-critical analyses of the New Testament. He argues, "Catholic understanding of how lay Jews self-identify may remain elusive unless we rebalance dialogue on [*Nostra Aetate*] matters by welcoming historical-critical dimensions on par with those doctrinal" (Michael J. Cook, "*Nostra Aetate*'s Processing of Gospel Texts," in *A Jubilee for All Time* [ed. Rosenthal] 248–61, at 253).

<sup>49</sup> This is asserted throughout *Dominus Iesus*, which argues firmly against relativistic theologies that suggest otherwise (Catholic Church, "*Dominus Iesus*").

philosophical limits of any understanding of truth might meliorate the tendency to colonize the religious other doctrinally, the relativity of truth that this would suggest is anathema to traditional Catholic thought.<sup>50</sup>

We have now reached a hermeneutical obstacle that may be inherently unbridgeable. The Catholic Church's understanding of the absolute and universal nature of religious truth may be an insurmountable obstacle to its capacity to fully recognize the self-understanding of other religious traditions. This understanding of truth may also be ultimately irreconcilable with the proposals raised in this article; indeed, the arguments made in this article are quite external to the Catholic worldview. It is neither feasible nor equitable to expect Catholic theologians to step so entirely out of their worldview and think un-Catholically in this way, and to do so would be a form of colonization of Catholic thought by a secular worldview. This article makes no such presumptions and urges no specific points of theological reform; it leaves issues of theological reform to theologians.

Despite all these caveats, and given the limitations of seeing outside of one's own religious worldview, there is still room for steps to be made in this direction. While it may be impossible for the institutional Roman Catholic Church to reach a complete realization of Jewish experiential and existential self-understanding, it is not unreasonable to expect a greater sensitivity to the foundational elements of this self-understanding, as shaped by religious tradition and historical circumstance. Recognizing the self-understanding of another is very different than assenting to the full legitimacy of another religious tradition according to its own self-understanding; as Jon D. Levenson argues: "It is one thing to say that those involved in dialogue need to know their partners' self-understanding. It is quite another matter to say . . . that dialogue requires 'a mutual recognition of each other's religious legitimacy.'"<sup>51</sup> Assent to the full religious legitimacy of the other tradition—inclusive of its doctrines, rites, authoritative texts, self-understanding, etc.—can be expected neither of Catholicism nor of Judaism; however, greater recognition of the other's self-understanding can. While there may be no solution possible to the irreconcilability of religious worldviews and self-understandings, greater efforts can be made to neither reduce nor instrumentalize a religious tradition by portraying it as a portion within another tradition's narrative, and to relax the grip of a smothering embrace.

<sup>50</sup> *Dominus Iesus* states this unequivocally: "The Church's constant missionary proclamation is endangered today by relativistic theories which seek to justify religious pluralism, not only *de facto* but also *de iure* (or in principle). . . . The roots of these problems are to be found in certain presuppositions of both a philosophical and theological nature, which hinder the understanding and acceptance of the revealed truth" (Catholic Church, *Dominus Iesus*, 4).

<sup>51</sup> Jon D. Levenson, "Must We Accept the Other's Self-Understanding?," *JR* 71 (1991) 558–67, at 563.