

The Mystery of “The Mystery of Israel”

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In a certain, perhaps unfortunate, sense, Catholics who think about Jews, and Jews who think about Catholics must show a particular tact and consideration toward one another. It has almost come to the point where we are so ecumenical and conscientious that we no longer speak to one another of anything serious. Yet the very spirit of religious devotion and of intellectual honesty presumes that, at some level, we can speak, in spite of the things that separate us, of how we understand ultimate things.

In religious questions, the spirit always predominates. For example, the story is told of a certain clergyman—he could have been interchangeably a priest, a minister, or a rabbi—who was known by a few of his congregation to enjoy cherry brandy. One of the members of the congregation, with not a little pious maliciousness, offered to present the clergyman with a bottle of the said cherry brandy on the condition that the gift be fully acknowledged in the next church bulletin. Naturally, the shrewd clergyman accepted the cherry brandy. Sure enough, the next time the congregation met, the following item was found in the church announcements: “The Pastor thanks Mr. McTavish for his gift of fruit and especially for the spirit in which it was offered.”

If I might continue this rather strained analogy, the spirit in which these reflections are offered presumes that we can talk of serious things both because others like Maritain have talked of them and because they concern the deepest meanings of human existence. No one should be

blamed very much for taking his own philosophy or religion seriously. No one should be unaware that many divergent views exist. No one should doubt that the truth is, in the end, one and that we all ought to seek it with all our strength

Walker Percy, I believe, once asked the provocative question, "Why are there no Hittites in New York City?" The import of his question was not some nostalgia for the lost Hittites, but rather the curious fact that Jews are still quite visible, from the sidewalks of New York to the depths of old Dixie, and Hittites quite lacking. That is to say, why did not the Jews disappear like the Hittites and other ancient peoples? Is it merely luck or an odd sort of historic accident? Does it perhaps have something to do with the meaning of history itself?

In an essay published just after he died, Percy further remarked that two "signs (exist) in the postmodern age that cannot be encompassed by theory." The first sign concerns the nature of the self. "Why is it possible to learn more in ten minutes about the Crab Nebula in Taurus, which is 6,000 light years away, than you presently know about yourself, even though you've been stuck with yourself all your life?"—so Percy had amusingly wondered in his *Lost in the Cosmos*.¹ The proliferation of diverging theories about the self are almost more scientifically perplexing than the self as such.

The second sign of postmodern science's inability to explain all things neatly, Percy maintained, is the very existence of the Jews, "The Jews are a stumbling block to theory," Percy affirmed.

They cannot be subsumed under any social or political theory. . . . The great paradox of the Western World is that even though it was in the Judeo-Christian West that modern science arose and flourished, it is Judeo-Christianity which the present-day scientific set finds the most offensive among the world's religions.²

Percy thought that the reason why the existence of the Jews was particularly offensive and enigmatic to science was because the Jews in their history are a concrete and unique people, not a mere instance of an abstract and universal "theory," as other peoples presumably are.

¹Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983), 7.

²Walker Percy, "Why Are You a Catholic?: The Late Novelist's Parting Reflections," *Crisis* 8 (September 1990), 18.

"Judaism is particularly offensive," Percy surmised, "because it claims that God entered into a covenant with a single tribe, with it and no other. Christianity is doubly offensive because it claims not only this but also that God became one man, he and no other."³ Scientifically, God should have become a lot of men, or better, all men, not just one unique man. If more is at work in the world than "science," that is, if there is a divine will at the origin of nature, then it must mean that science, whatever its worth, cannot by itself account for the ultimate or complete explanation of all the singular events in time. Paul Johnson's widely read book, *A History of the Jews*, concluded in a not dissimilar fashion:

That Jews should over the millennia attract such unparalleled, indeed inexplicable, hatred would be regrettable but only to be expected (by believing Jews looking back on their own history). And above all, that the Jews should still survive, when all the other ancient people were transmuted or vanished into the oubliettes of history, was wholly predictable. How could it be otherwise? Providence decreed it and the Jews obeyed. The historian may say: there is no such thing as providence. Possibly not. But human confidence in such an historical dynamic, if it is strong and tenacious enough, is a force in itself, which pushes on the hinge of events and moves them. The Jews believed that they were a special people with such unanimity and passion, and over so long a span, that they became one.⁴

Johnson is willing to grant that there may be both a providential reason for the survival of the Jews and a natural one, itself based on at least a belief in providence. In any case, whether the Jews exist by terms of providence or by accident, their unique existence contains, on any scientific grounds of social science, an element of improbability, of perplexity, yes, of mystery.

In a 1991 essay on "The Future of American Jewry," Irving Kristol noted, furthermore, the intellectual collapse of the widely held quasi-religion or ideology of "secular humanism." Ironically, Kristol observed, this occurred just as many modern Jews and Christians implicitly abandoned their own religious beliefs. What may take the place of a dying secular humanism, Kristol thought, could well be a

³Ibid.

⁴Paul Johnson, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Harper, 1987), 587.

more orthodox Jewishness or Christianity. But it may also and more likely be a revived “paganism,” the signs of which are so prevalent in many brands of ecology, feminism, and naturalism:

The real danger (to American Jews) is not from a revived Christianity, which American Jews (if they are sensible) can cope with, but from an upsurge of anti-biblical barbarism that will challenge Christianity, Judaism, and Western civilization altogether. The passing of secular humanism is already pointing to such a “shaking of the foundations.” American Jews, alert to Christian anti-Semitism, are in danger of forgetting that it was the pagans—the Babylonians and the Romans—who destroyed the temples and twice imposed exile on the Jewish people.⁵

One might add, I suppose, following Ezra 6 in biblical times, that it was the Persian rulers and Darius, likewise pagans, who brought the Hebrews back to the Holy Land and helped build their temple. And Britain, France, and the United States did have something to do with the present Jewish state.

Jews in America, however, Kristol observed, do not so easily see that America is a “home” to them. Jews who immigrated to Israel, however, do feel that they are “at home” there. “They do not doubt that they are where they ought to be, that the ‘immigration’ experience is a narrative that comes to a proper—perhaps predestined—ending.”⁶ No one can forget that in the Bible the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans were in some sense instruments of providence. What possible natural reason could there be, moreover, why the territory of Israel could be a “home” to anyone, especially as at its origins it was somehow seized from the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Canaanites, and other peoples who once occupied this same land before and since?

Maritain and the Mystery

One of the most insightful discussions of this persistent destiny or “mystery” of Israel’s history and survival, as both Percy and Johnson described it, was that of the French philosopher Jacques Maritain. The fact that he lived during the Nazi era and that his wife, Raïssa, had

⁵Irving Kristol, “The Future of American Jewry,” *Commentary* 92 (August 1991), 26.

⁶*Ibid.*, 21.

converted to Catholicism from a Russian Jewish background no doubt made Maritain particularly attentive to the meaning of the Jewish experience. Maritain's writings on the general topic of Israel's meaning, which are frank and insightful, have been noteworthy.⁷

Yet Maritain had his own Christian grounds for this consideration of Jewish experience. If Israel is a mystery to itself, it is perhaps an even deeper mystery to Christians. If the Jewish experience signifies nothing, then Christianity means nothing. As Walker Percy had intimated, if it is unscientific to think that God could choose a tribe, it is even more unscientific to think that His Son could become incarnate as a member of this same tribe. The Jew could still be a Jew if somehow Christianity were integrated into it. If Christianity is true, Judaism is true in so far as it is explained and completed in Christianity.

Maritain wrote a small book on Saint Paul, in which he examined as did Paul, "the Mystery of Israel."⁸ Summarizing Romans 11:22–24, Maritain wrote:

A veil has now fallen over the hearts of the Jews, but it is not forever; the day will come when it will be taken away. For God's promises are without repentance. Throughout all the vicissitudes of its exile and of worldly history, Israel remains ever the people of God—stricken, but ever beloved because of its fathers.⁹

No Jew will read these lines as optimistically as a Christian will, yet they are optimistic. They serve to remind us that the mystery of Israel is both a Christian mystery and a key mystery in the broader history of the world itself.

⁷Jacques Maritain, *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question* (New York: Arno Press, 1973); "The Destiny of the Jewish People," *On the Philosophy of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), 85–92; *Antisemitism* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1939). See also Charles Journet, *Destinées d'Israël: — À propos du Salut par les Juifs* (Paris: Egloff, 1944).

See also the following essays on Maritain: James V. Schall, "Metaphysics, Theology, and Political Theory," *Political Science Reviewer* 11 (Fall 1981): 2–25; "The Law of Superabundance," *Gregorianum*, (#3, 1991): 515–42; "Calvary or the Slaughterhouse," *From Twilight to Dawn: The Cultural Vision of Jacques Maritain*, ed. Peter A. Redpath (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 1–16; "'Everything That Can Be Saved Will Be Saved,'" *What Is God Like?* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992).

⁸Jacques Maritain, *The Living Thoughts of Saint Paul* (New York: Longmans, 1941), 78–88. See the Commentary on Romans 9–11, by Joseph Fitzmyer, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990), 856–62.

⁹Maritain, *Saint Paul*, 86.

What is of particular interest here is the Christian “reading” of the persistence of Israel. This reading may sound improbable to the Jew or impossible to the philosopher. To the Christian, Israel is “mysterious” because God’s promises are “without repentance.” The fact that Israel remains throughout the changes of history and exile reveals not Israel, but the paths of God. And these paths are closed to scientific history on its own grounds, though not to sacred history, in which God can choose small tribes and send into the world from this very tribe an utterly unique man, “light from light.”

In *Ransoming the Time*, where he went more fully into this question, Jacques Maritain explained that, in France in 1937, he had written an essay entitled “The Mystery of Israel.” He noted at the time “certain racist publications,” of a “very low quality.” They “dishonored the French press.” Still, the anti-Jewish legislation stemming later from the Vichy government, Maritain observed, “seemed impossible.” These laws were “treason against the French spirit. . . . The vast majority of the French people were nauseated by anti-Semitic trends.”¹⁰ The occasion for Maritain’s reflections on Israel, consequently, was the anti-Semitism of the Nazi era and by extension the transcendent meaning of anti-Semitism as such.

In one sense, it seems unfortunate to approach the question of “the Mystery of Israel” from the angle of anti-Semitism, however much that might indeed be pertinent to the issue. Israel—and here I do not mean the state of Israel—would be a mystery even if there were no anti-Semitism whatsoever.¹¹ But anti-Semitism almost serves to keep forever before our minds, lest we should forget it, precisely “Semitism,” that is, the meaning of Israel.

Nevertheless, as Maritain suggested, it is quite proper and legitimate to approach the question of Israel from the point of view of a Christian philosopher. “We must never despair of intelligence and

¹⁰Jacques Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, trans. Harry Lorin Binsse (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941), 141. There exists an edited version of “The Mystery of Israel.” in *The Social and Political Philosophy of Jacques Maritain*, ed. Joseph W. Evans and Leo R. Ward (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 195–216.

¹¹In the instruction, “Presenting Judaism in Catechesis,” of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Johannes Cardinal Willebrands wrote: “The existence of the state of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law.” (*The Pope Speaks*, 30, [#4, 1985], 369)

the healing power of its dispassionate attempt toward understanding," Maritain continued soberly.¹² The Christian philosopher retains a certain dogged insistence on reason even before issues that have torn mankind apart in hatred and strife for ages. Grace does build on nature.

First Steps to Common Ground

This appeal to intelligence, however, was first an effort to establish grounds common to Jews and Christians, to all men capable of recognizing a legitimate question to which they could address themselves. Notwithstanding this philosophical basis, Maritain explained more directly that,

If these pages are seen by Jewish readers, I hope they will agree that as a Christian I could only try from a Christian perspective to understand the history of their people. . . . I am perfectly aware that before agreeing with the statements proposed in my essay, it is necessary to admit, as a prerequisite, the whole Christian outlook; therefore it would be inconsistent to hope for any agreement from a reader who does not place himself in this perspective. I do not intend to try to convince such a reader, but, for the sake of mutual understanding, I think it would perhaps be interesting for him to know how a Christian philosopher considers this question.¹³

Maritain's approach was thus philosophical, yet not oblivious to issues that arose from theological sources. Convincing was one thing; understanding another. Maritain was unwilling to hold that nothing could be said of these issues simply because someone might not understand his purpose in stating them. The essence of what concerned him, however, was precisely the "Christian perspective" on understanding the history of Israel. It was not prejudice, nor bias, nor arrogance to speak of this understanding.

We live in a world in which two remarkable things have happened, apart from the demise of Marxism. Marxism itself had, no doubt,

¹²Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, 142.

¹³Ibid., 142–43. "The Church and Christians read the Old Testament in the light of the event of the dead and risen Christ and that on these grounds there is a Christian reading of the Old Testament which does not necessarily coincide with the Jewish reading. . . . But this [differing reading] detracts nothing from the value of the Old Testament in the Church and does nothing to hinder Christians from profiting discerningly from traditions of Jewish reading," Willebrands, *ibid.*, 364.

considerable Jewish and Christian intellectual origins. Moreover, its recent fate has been considered by many Christians, at least—I am thinking of something like Fatima—to be in the hands of God in a particular way.¹⁴ The first of these changes is the growing recognition that what is called modern science in the good sense, science not “scientism,” does have origins in Jewish and Christian theology, in the belief in valid secondary causes, in the belief in order itself, in the belief that the universe has a definite, finite origin.¹⁵

The second of these changes is that Christianity, Islam, and Judaism stand interrelated to one another in a way that requires not merely “tolerance” but Maritain’s “dispassionate understanding.” What lies behind their long-standing antagonism to each other, an antagonism that seems to be manifested on the news every night? Is it just a question of economics and politics, or of prejudice and bad will? Or is there something more fundamental at work here, something having to do with their respective relationships to God, of which economics, politics, and culture are mere external manifestations?

Christians, Jews, and Muslims (and remembering Northern Ireland, we should add Protestants and Catholics) have been engaged in verbal, civic, and military hostilities throughout the modern era, indeed throughout their respective histories. The secular mind claims to be scandalized by this inability of religions to get along with each other. The secular liberal mind in particular insists that the solution lies in theoretic tolerance and relativism, in the denial of the importance of dogma, ultimately in the denial of intellect as such.

The religious mind is also itself perplexed by all of this religious-based struggle. It has sought ecumenism and dialogue to overcome it. The liberal solution of modern political philosophy, of tolerance theory, insofar as it did not erect itself into a substitute religion, however, has proved more and more incapable of *confronting* not merely Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, and Islam, but, more and more, the so-called philosophical religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, and the myriads of religious-related enthusiasms of our planet.

¹⁴See the remarks of John Paul II on his visit to Fatima, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 13–15 May 1991, English edition of 20 May 1991.

¹⁵See Stanley L. Jaki, *The Road of Science and the Ways to God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

Tolerance and Transcendence

Eric Voegelin sought to incorporate the many "moments" of divine intervention in the world, represented to him by the various philosophers and religions, into a system of thought, into a way to avoid the language of doctrine and dogma through a parallel equivalence of the experience of transcendence.¹⁶ Yet, it would seem that the essential task is precisely the weighing of the truth of the various religions and their experiences. In this sense, whatever the value of theoretic or practical tolerance, the world is not safe until the truth of the religions be explicitly confronted.

Modernity has tried to avoid this particular effort, an effort that may, in fact, be unavoidable because of the very nature of man, who is so made as to seek this very truth. Though, like the early modern liberal, Maritain was more concerned with the practice of tolerance than the truth of thought when he addressed this issue, his systematic effort to distinguish practical and theoretical understandings of the differing religions and philosophies did not underestimate the need to address the truth of the theoretical explanations of man and God contained in the various religions and philosophies.¹⁷

Keeping in mind Irving Kristol's remark about the contemporary dangers of paganism, let us examine the beginning of Maritain's 1937 essay. "The most impressive Christian formulas concerning the spiritual essence of anti-Semitism," Maritain wrote of Maurice Samuel, come from "a Jewish writer, who seems profoundly unaware of their profoundly Christian meaning." Here is what Samuel wrote, as cited by Maritain:

We shall never understand the maniacal, world-wide seizure of anti-Semitism unless we transpose the terms. It is of Christ that the Nazi-Fascists are afraid; it is in *his* omnipotence that they believe; it is *him* that they are determined madly to obliterate. But the names of Christ and Christianity are too overwhelming, and the habit of submission to them is too deeply ingrained after centuries and centuries of teaching. Therefore, they must, I repeat, make their assault on those who were responsible for the birth and

¹⁶Eric Voegelin, *Order and History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956–87), 5 vols.

¹⁷Jacques Maritain, *Man and the State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 108–87.

spread of Christianity. They must spit on the Jews as the 'Christ-Killers' because they long to spit on the Jews as the Christ-givers.¹⁸

In the context of the contemporary deconstructionist and relativist ideology that sees specifically Western Civilization, with its understanding of reality, as the enemy of mankind, this reflection seems particularly insightful.¹⁹ The passage also remains significant both for Jews who see the "holocaust" exclusively as witness to their reality and for Christians who see Christ, born of the tribe of David, as the central "holocaust" before the Father.

Maritain, whose reflections on Israel are always rooted in Saint Paul, began by pointing out that the Jews are not a "race" in the biological sense of the word, nor for that matter is anyone else. Nor are they a nation, nor a "people." The Jews gathered in Palestine, Maritain thought, are "a special and separate group bearing witness that the other Jews are not a nation."²⁰ Rather "Israel is a mystery. Of the same order as the mystery of the world or the mystery of the Church. Like them," Maritain continued,

It lies at the heart of the Redemption. A philosophy of history, aware of theology, can attempt to reach some knowledge of this mystery, but the mystery will surpass that knowledge in all directions. If Saint Paul is right, we shall have to call the *Jewish problem* a problem *without solution*. . . . To wish to find, in the pure, simple, decisive sense of the word, a solution of the problem of Israel, is to attempt to stop the movement of history.²¹

Israel is, Maritain does not hesitate to say, following Eric Kahler, a kind of "mystical body," whose destiny is not encompassed by scientific categories alone.²²

Maritain's essay on "The Mystery of Israel" naturally divides itself into three related issues. The first is that even though its specific leaders at the time of Christ's trial, these and only these, specifically rejected

¹⁸Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, 144. The book cited is Maurice Samuel, *The Great Hatred* (New York: Knopf, 1940).

¹⁹See Allan Bloom, "Western Civ—and Me," *Commentary* 91 (August 1990): 15–21; Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Of Heroes, Villains, and Valets," *Commentary* 91 (June 1991), 20–26.

²⁰Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, 147–48.

²¹*Ibid.*, 149.

²²*Ibid.*, 151.

Him as their Messiah, Israel retains a proper "vocation" in the plan of Yahweh. This plan does not change in any way the Father's original intention in Creation and specifically in the Creation of Man, to lead each human person freely and in his totality as a complete person, body and soul, to everlasting life, which is considered to be the divine life of the Trinity itself. God is faithful to His nature, to Himself.

The very meaning of Creation, however, included a reflection of God in this world, a reflection at its highest expression put into being by human choice and culture. There was, as it were, an "inner-worldly" vocation of mankind, of which perhaps the Garden of Eden and the City of God were the best biblical symbols, that is, a world in which there was a harmony of man, nature, and God. The Fall of Man was the initial disorder, the remedy for which, the selection of the Jews, was intended to be the first step. But God would not and could not carry out His plan for mankind without mankind's own choice or participation. The rejection of Christ meant that God was faithful, yet it also meant another order of history ensued by which and in which the remedies of the Fall and sin were to be confronted.

"The communion of this 'mystical body' (of all the Jews) is not the Communion of Saints," Maritain reflected, but

it is the communion's earthly hope. Israel passionately hopes for, awaits, wants the advent of God in the world, the Kingdom of God *here below*. It wants, with an eternal will, a supernatural and unreasonable will, justice in time, in nature, and in community. Greek wisdom has no meaning for Israel; neither its reasonableness nor its felicity in form. The beauty Israel seeks is ineffable, and Israel wants it for this life, the flesh, today.²³

This analysis of Israel on the part of Maritain was not intended to be utopian or paradoxical. Rather it reminds us of the faithfulness of Israel to the original vocation given to it by Yahweh.

In this context, we might recall two further points. The first appears in Leo Strauss's famous essay "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy" in which he argued that Greek wisdom and Jewish revelation cannot refute each other. The second is Eric Voegelin's remark that modern ideology is the result of weak Christian faith wrongly seeking to find the Kingdom of God in this world. We will

²³Ibid., 155.

catch in these sources some of the import of this analysis of Maritain about the relation of the Jew to this world.²⁴

Reason in Revelation

Let me take each of these scholars, Strauss and Voegelin, as representative of a certain type of responsible Jewish and Christian analysis. From their premises, it becomes clear that a meaning for reason in revelation and a lack of faith among believers both lead to the same conclusion. That conclusion is that the destiny of the world, its well-being, remains possible within Christian revelation provided this world be not conceived as resulting solely from human intelligence and enterprise and provided that revelation has some impact on reason itself. What both of these tendencies lead to, as Maritain hinted, is Saint Thomas Aquinas, an Aquinas alien neither to reason nor to Israel.

Irving Kristol was thus right to see that modern secular humanism, the belief in everything as coming from the hands of man, including the distinctions between right and wrong, was the bitter enemy of Israel. To be sure, secular humanism and Israel both envisioned a perfect world. But the latter saw it as the result of God's choice, while the former saw it as the product of man's autonomous will.²⁵

The argument of modern political philosophy about creating a world based on action and charity, as Strauss put it, is not alien either to Judaism or Christianity except in spirit and philosophic intent.²⁶ But this compatibility does not mean that such an improved world will come about. Nor does it deny that a world totally alienated from the things of God can arise out of human will. What it does mean is that any reality of a better world, short of the divine life itself, depends in some sense on the personal relationship of man to God, to the trust in this relationship, to the truth of this relationship as that is revealed to us.

Earthly Hope and Transfiguration

Saint Augustine, in one of his sermons, "On Pastors" (#46), observed that "there are men who want to live a good life and have already decided to do so, but are not capable of bearing sufferings even

²⁴Leo Strauss, "The Mutual Influence of Theology and Philosophy," *Independent Journal of Philosophy* 3 (1979): 111–18; Eric Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Gateway, 1968), 109.

²⁵Kristol, "Future of American Jewry," 23.

²⁶Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 3.

though they are ready to do good. Now it is a part of Christian strength not only to do good works but also to endure evil." This thought brings us to Maritain's second point about the mystery of Israel in relation to its own vocation. "Of earthly hope the Jews have an excess, and of this virtue many Christians have not enough," Maritain wrote. "The basic weakness in the mystical communion of Israel is its failure to understand the Cross, its refusal of the transfiguration."²⁷

We should not neglect to notice that this problem of the Cross and its implications goes back to the Platonic discussion of justice: what can stop the cycle of vengeance on earth? It might be said that the crucial intellectual difference between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism lies here.²⁸ Maritain added with regard to this question of suffering and the Cross, its implications, that "the moment he (the Jew) begins to be aware of this mystery of forgiveness and of this putting off of self, he finds himself on the road to Christianity."²⁹ The Holy War and the "eye for an eye" are themselves theoretical issues. This is why political problems are not independent of but rooted in theology, in the understanding of God and His relationship with the world, in the question of whether the Cross was true, existentially true, of whether forgiveness alone can stop vengeance.

Maritain then does not criticize the Jew for his longing for perfect justice in this world. In divine providence, as the Christian sees it, such a world—always assuming we distinguish the promise to share divine life from a world imbued with justice—is still possible, though not on Jewish terms alone. What is at issue is rather the means to this sort of world and whether this more just world is the final destiny that God had in mind for mankind. Maritain continued:

If the world hates the Jews, it is because the world is well aware that they will always be *supernaturally* strangers to it; it is because the world detests their passion for the absolute and the unbearable activism with which this passion stimulates it.³⁰

²⁷Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, 155.

²⁸See Hannah Arendt, "Irreversibility and the Power to Forgive," *The Human Condition* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 212–18; James V. Schall, "On the Disappearance of Mercy from Political Theory," *The Politics of Heaven and Hell: Christian Themes from Classical, Medieval, and Modern Political Philosophy* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984), 253–78.

²⁹Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, 155.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 163.

Thus, the very notion that the well-being of the world itself is not best accomplished by man is the root challenge that revelation has given to the world, in particular to modern political philosophy and ideology. Classical political philosophy already had some awareness of the fact that the best society only existed in speech, that all actual societies were not perfect, even if they were good.

We can see the import of this challenge from modern political philosophy based on human theoretic autonomy in Maritain's remarks about the question of means. It is to be noted that with Saint Thomas, the legitimacy of this world, of politics and economics, of the earthly tasks, is not to be seen in opposition to God's plan of redemption. The whole theory of natural law is itself a way to incorporate revelation and reason into the same intellectual world.

Maritain was correct in seeing exactly how much of Judaism and Christianity are united in an understanding that stands in opposition to modernity:

The hatred of the Jews and the hatred of the Christians spring from the same source, from the same will of the world *which refuses to be wounded* either with the wounds of Adam, or with the wounds of the Messiah, or by the spear of Israel for its movement in time, or by the Cross of Jesus of eternal life. Man is well off as he is; he needs no grace, no transfiguration; he will be beatified by his own nature. Here there is no Christian hope in God the Helper, nor Jewish hope in God on earth.³¹

And yet, as Maritain added in anticipation of Voegelin's thesis, in spite of its rejection of grace and doctrine, modern ideology and political philosophy have in effect retained that part of the revelational tradition that concerned itself with a perfect human life in this world. "History has so intoxicated them with Judeo-Christianity," Maritain remarked of the modern ideologues, "that they cannot help wishing to *save the world*."³²

Mutual Action and Reconciliation

The third point that Maritain made about the mystery of Israel was that, at bottom, we cannot leave Jewish and Christian life merely

³¹Ibid., 166.

³²Ibid., 167.

in separate and mutually non-relating spheres, as Strauss seemed to conclude. The Christian reading of the mystery of Israel is not apart from the divine plan whereby the Jewish vocation to Yahweh and the Christian vocation to God lead to the same divine end. Israel's sufferings are real enough, in Maritain's view, but they serve almost as Socrates' gadfly did, to keep the world from ignoring its own highest destiny. "Israel's passion is not a co-redemptive passion, achieving for the eternal salvation of souls what is lacking (as conscious applications, not merits) in the Savior's sufferings. It is suffered for the goading on of the world's temporal life."³³

This passionate goading of temporal life for its own justice, moreover, is intended not for itself alone but, indirectly at least, for eternal life. While not denying an apocalyptic ending of the world in some sort of human tragedy, Maritain maintained that the destiny of the world itself was concerned with, dependent on, the reconciliation of Israel and Christianity.

On the spiritual level, the drama of love between Israel and its God, which makes gentiles participate in the economy of salvation, and which is but one element in the universal mystery of salvation, will be resolved only in the reconciliation of the Synagogue and the Church. . . . In any case, nothing requires us to think that the resolution will come at the end of human history, rather than at the beginning of a new age for the Church and the world.³⁴

Thus, there is an inner-worldly, essentially positive outlook in Maritain's reflections on Israel and Christianity.

With the end of Marxism and the publication of *Centesimus Annus*, the papal encyclical that recognizes the best in modernity for the achievement of a better world order, it becomes clear that the struggles are no longer those of learning how to improve the world or whom to blame for its dire condition. Rather the issue becomes one of the proper understanding and motivations for whatever tasks, real tasks, remain for man in the world. But these tasks are not to be conceived in opposition to the Kingdom of God already at work through the Church, leading through sacrament and doctrine to eternal life.³⁵ These tasks

³³Ibid., 177.

³⁴Ibid., 169.

³⁵See James V. Schall, "From Catholic 'Social Doctrine' to the 'Kingdom of God on Earth.'"

themselves essentially come into view in a proper and reasonable fashion when attention to man's final end as seen in revelation is kept in view.

Two years after the publication of "The Mystery of Israel," Maritain wrote a reply to an unnamed Belgian critic of his essay. Maritain, I think, was genuinely annoyed by this man, whom he called simply "Mr. So and So." Maritain continued huffily, "I prefer, for the sake of charity, not to name (him)."³⁶ Maritain is said, by this "Mr. So and So," to have been too theological in his essay. "Mr. So and So" apparently saw the political, economic, and cultural aspects of the question of Israel to be simply of the order of nature.

I want to emphasize Maritain's response to this critique of his understanding of Israel because it is in line with John Paul II's remark that "in order that the demands of justice may be met, and attempts to achieve this goal may succeed, what is needed is *the gift of grace, a gift* which comes from God. Grace, in cooperation with human freedom, constitutes that mysterious presence of God in history which is Providence" (*Centesimus Annus*, #59).

The "mystery" of the mystery of Israel, I think, is contained in these reflections which suggest that the reconciliation of the Synagogue and the Church is itself the mysterious work that most needs doing by mankind if it is to attain the end of the modern project by the only means by which it can be attained, essentially spiritual means. We already know the natural means, as it were. Our problems lie not only in the order of knowledge, in the truth about God, but also in the sphere of spirit and will.

"Israel is not supernaturally a stranger to the world *in the same way* as is the Church," Maritain replied to his Belgian critic in a remarkable passage.

The latter is the Kingdom of God, in a state of pilgrimage and crucifixion; the former is the people of God which God ever calls and which does not listen, but which preserves the hope of God on earth and a nostalgia for the absolute, and the Scriptures and the prophecies and the promises and the faith in the divine Holiness and the longing for the Messiah. The

Readings in Moral Theology, no. 5: Official Catholic Social Teaching, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1986), 313–30.

³⁶Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, 180.

Jews are not hated by the world *in the same way* as are the Christians: the latter are hated by the world because of Jesus Christ and because of the Cross; the former because of Moses and the Patriarchs and because of the earthly stimulation which came to them as concerning the flesh. The Jews are not and will never be of the world, not because they share in the redeeming life of Christ and of the Kingdom of God, but because they are *owed* to Christ, because, set apart for God by their messianic vocation, they remain, even after their misstep, separated from the world by their passion for a Justice which is not of this world.³⁷

This conclusion would seem to suggest that the classic project of Christian philosophy, that of reconciling the Greeks with revelation, together with that historic and turbulent relation of Jews and Christians, remains the central intellectual task. Into this task comes the relationship to Islam, to the other non-revealed religions, to the condition of a world having exhausted the ideologies designed to bring on a perfection by revolutionary and political processes themselves attributed solely to autonomous man.

Maritain ends his remarks to the Belgian philosopher with a passage from Saint Thomas's Commentary on *John* (xviii, 1). In this passage, Aquinas compares the relation of Israel and Christianity to Peter, who represented the Gentiles and natural law, and John, who represented the Jews and the Scriptures, both racing to the Tomb of Christ. "The Jewish people, the first to know the mystery of the Redemption," Aquinas wrote,

will be only the last converted to faith in Christ. *Then*, says the Gospel, *John went in*; Israel is not to remain eternally at the entrance to the Sepulchre. After Peter shall have gone into it, it will itself go in, for at the end the Jews also will be received into the faith.

How and in what form such faith will be received, of course, is not known to us. To know that, as Maritain said, would be to stop history.

There is no separation of grace and providence in the actual workings of the relations of Christians and Jews nor in the common destiny of mankind to which they are respectively ordained in the choices made about them and by them. In the midst of a world in which too often, as Irving Kristol remarked, Jews seem bent on eliminating

³⁷Ibid., 184-85.

all signs of Christianity from public expression and whose common civilization academics are now devoted to eliminating in terms of culture and education, it seems clear that the intellectual meaning of the great faiths and their relation to the tasks of the world, for its own sake, has never been more pressing.³⁸ Many things have suddenly been clarified.

One might well argue, with Kristol and Voegelin, that the weakness of the faith of Jews and Christians is itself the cause of the secular humanist and autonomous world that is now proving its own inadequacy even to itself. "Christianity and Judaism have been infiltrated and profoundly influenced by the spirit of secular humanism," Kristol remarked.

There are moments when, listening to the sermons of bishops, priests, and rabbis, one has the distinct impression that Christianity and Judaism today are, for the most part, different traditional vehicles for conveying, in varying accents, the same (or at least very similar) sentiments and world views. Of other-worldly views there is very little expression, except among the minority who are discredited (and dismissed) as "fundamentalists" or "ultra-Orthodox."³⁹

Needless to say, this analysis fits perfectly well with Maritain's understanding of the "mystery of Israel" and its relation to Christianity.

The Secular Undermining

When both Jews and Christians express themselves in what are essentially terms of a secular religion and not in their own terms, the very understanding of the same world that each religion was designed to uphold is undermined. The *Wall Street Journal* (8 August 1991) carried a column on the question of who is a Jew. Some time later (11 September), adding to Irving Kristol's point about secularism in the faiths, the following letter appeared in the same *Journal* from a doctor in Grosse Point Park, Michigan:

I have been attentive to Jewish theological discourse over a half-century, and know most learned rabbis state that the essence of Judaism is "love thy neighbor" and the "golden rule"—*all else is commentary.*

³⁸Kristol, "Future of American Jewry," 24.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 23.

It should be clarified that Jews can be divided into *four* significant ways, not three: Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, and Secular. Contrary to those rabbis who require synagogues and a flock of followers to make a living, it is possible to be a Jew in the best sense of the word without participating in organized religion. The Chosen People are free to choose, and America is the Promised Land.

Ironically, in this brief letter, we find laid bare most of the issues that we have been confronting.

In the context of this discussion, furthermore, it is impossible not to recall the passage in Luke, in which Christ is asked by a lawyer what he must do to be saved. The lawyer is asked what he read "in the Law." He replied: "You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." To this response, Christ replied, "You have answered rightly, do this and life is yours" (10:25–28). Kristol's secular Jew or Christian, like the doctor, but unlike the lawyer with whom Christ spoke, has forgotten the first part of the commandment. Perhaps that is why he identified a given nation with "the Promised Land." The proper location of the Kingdom of God remains the crucial theological issue because it remains the crucial issue of actual politics.

But Maritain had it right. In a passage that agrees substantially with that of John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus*, Maritain wrote:

There is a certain apex of perfection and of supreme achievement, an acme of nature and of natural law to which the regime of grace inaugurated by the New Law is happily suited to carry nature, and to which nature left to itself could not succeed in attaining. Here is one of the essential aspects under which it is true to say that Christianity lifts up within their own order the things of culture and of the commonwealth. Thus there is a Christian honor, natural Christian virtues, a Christian law; thus there is, at work in history, and countered by powerful adverse forces, a Christian leaven which tends to cause human society to pass on into conditions of higher civilization.⁴⁰

The importance of this passage, in the context of the mystery of Israel, is that the work of God goes on even when our choices, which can

⁴⁰Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, 194.

easily have world-historic proportions, go against the good that God intends for and through us.

God is faithful. Israel will live with the choices of its leaders and be led to further choices. Christians will imitate the world and be weak in their faith, so weak that men will seek to establish the Kingdom of God not through Israel nor through the Cross, but on earth through their own efforts, efforts which specifically deny not merely Israel and Christianity, but Aristotle and Plato. The “mystery” of the mystery of Israel is not merely that Jews, and not the Hittites, are still here, contrary to all the lessons of modern social science. It is how the existence of Israel, of the Jewish people, in their universalism and in their particularism, serve to focus our attention on reason and revelation, on Jerusalem and Athens, on Islam and the justice that is so desired by all people, on eternal life itself.⁴¹

The leaven for a higher civilization is at work among us. But that leaven does not and cannot bypass completely the intellectual understanding of the mystery of Israel and through it the relation of Israel to Christ and to all men at the ends of the earth, to whom the Apostles were sent to preach at the Ascension. The right understanding of God and His redemptive plan for the human race is not found apart from the nations and their turmoils. The “mystery” of the mystery of Israel is its divine destiny being worked out through secular history. The Christian reading of this destiny leads to an understanding and subsequent choice about Christ, a choice unintelligible and unmeaning outside the mystery of Israel itself.

God’s will for mankind, for each of its members, in conclusion, remains constant, however human choices are made. But God would not be God if these choices did not make a difference. These choices are the deepest currents moving through the history of mankind and enable us, require us, again and again to ask ourselves if, in the light of what happened to us as a result of them, our choices were right. The first commandment remains, as the ancient lawyer said, “Thou shalt love the Lord the God with thy whole heart and soul and mind.” Without this first commandment, the second commandment will always lead us to attempt to build the world by ourselves.

⁴¹See James V. Schall, *Reason, Revelation, and the Foundations of Political Philosophy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987).

The real penalty for this false attempt at autonomy will simply be that God allows us our choices, allows us to love our neighbor on our terms, not His. But allowing us our choices, our autonomy, we find no rest, no Promised Land. We are again led to Augustine's question about where the City of God is finally located. The "double offense" of Israel and Christianity, to recall Walker Percy, remains in fact, "God entered into a covenant with a single tribe, with it and no other; God became one man, he and no other." These mysteries are scandals to certain forms of science. God's promises are without repentance.