

The Bible and Inter-religious Dialogue, especially Jewish-Christian Conversations:
Response to Donald Senior, C.P., Hein-Fry Lectures
David L. Balch, PLTS, March 16, 2007

Introduction

I am deeply honored to be responding to Donald Senior, C.P., President of Catholic Theological Union. Father Senior is also the author of land-mark commentaries, a renowned one on Matthew (1998) and a more recent one on 1 Peter (2003). He clearly enjoys being the book review editor of *The Bible Today*. I do not understand how he adds being an editor to his other activities; book reviews take an enormous amount of time! He also serves as one of twenty scholars on the Pontifical Biblical Commission, appointed first by Pope John Paul II, then reappointed by Pope Benedict XVI. May I repeat: I am honored to be responding to such a gifted scholar who has given so much to the both to the university and to our churches.

Father Senior has covered a vast amount of ground, so I must choose only a few points on which to comment. In Father Senior's first lecture, I will comment primarily on the second document of the Biblical Commission relating to the historical nature of the scriptures and their interpretation today, the document entitled "The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible." As a crucial preface, I choose to respond to some of Father Senior's remarks in his second lecture on inter-religious relationships, so I am responding to his lectures in reverse order.

Father Senior laid out Karl Rahner's vision of three great historical periods,¹ emphasizing the transition from the first, Jewish Christian period, lasting from CE 30 to 70, to the second period of church history, the movement from Jerusalem to Rome, from Jewish toward Greco-Roman culture, which in Rahner's scheme lasted from CE 70 to 1960.

¹ Donald Senior, C.P., "Living Together in the 21st Century: Some Biblical Probes," quoting Karl Rahner, S.J., "Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979) 716-27.

Observing the church's style of change from the first to the second stage, Senior suggests, may well help us as we navigate changes in our time, as colonial systems continue to break up and as indigenous churches throughout the world gain a sense of their potential contribution to the whole. Going beyond Rahner, Senior emphasizes that inter-religious relationships must be creatively addressed in our time. The rising tide of religious conflicts, the relationship of Christianity to Islam, not only in the Middle East, but also in Europe and the United States becomes a key concern. We no longer associate Islam only with the Middle East and Hindus with India, because as Diana Eck demonstrates clearly, migrations and displacements in our world mean that mosques and temples to Krishna now grace the streets in our own urban areas.²

Father Senior comments extensively on how Paul and Matthew negotiated these changes, how both negotiated tensions between community identity and community outreach. Both Paul and Matthew faced missionary challenges, how to justify non-Jews entering the people of God. Let me quote one paragraph from the second lecture:

For us, I believe, the challenge is to build healthy multi-cultural communities—something of an overlap with the challenges of Matthew and Paul—but also how to relate in peace and mutual respect to world religions such as Islam and Judaism for the sake of our common humanity, without the real prospect of conversion or incorporation within the Christian community, and without diminishing our Christian identity. (p. 7)

Senior then lays out how Paul and Matthew accomplished this, observing that in one of Paul's late letters, Romans 9-11, he imagined the future of God's world in a way that had never occurred to him before his mission experience. (p. 10³) Paul "transcended the traditional boundaries of his own faith community to make way for a new people and a

² Diana L. Eck, *A new religious America: how a "Christian Country" has now become the world's most religiously diverse nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001).

³ Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005, from German of 2003) agrees that Paul's theology developed and changed through his life of mission.

new experience of God's future." (p. 11) Likewise, Matthew wrote during a time of substantial transition, which included conflict over interpretation of the Mosaic laws, not abrogation of the law.⁴ (p. 12) The Matthean Jesus instructs his disciples not to go to the Gentiles, but to restrict the mission to Israel (10.5), but beyond the lifetime of the earthly Jesus, this restriction falls away (28.16-20). "Matthew and his community" moved "from a mission directed only to Israel [but] ... now, in the final age of salvation, [the mission] would also break out to the Gentiles." (p. 14) Senior draws these conclusions:

Thus under the impact of religious experience and the encounter with peoples whose religious experiences and religious history were far different from their own, both Paul and Matthew retrieved intuitions embedded in their religious heritage and forged them into a new mode of understanding the present and imagining the future. Both authors were conscious of their religious and cultural heritage and prized it. Yet they were also faced with the pastoral challenge of opening their communities to new religious reality posed by a people different both culturally and religiously, and had to find a deeper and to some degree underdeveloped level of their tradition that would enable them to move to new ground. (p. 17)

Responding to these stimulating observations, I want to add an example from Luke's gospel.⁵ In Acts 10:28 Peter tells the Roman centurion Cornelius that "you yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew[ish follower of Jesus] to associate with or to visit a Gentile" (*alloghulos*, a "foreigner"). The word Luke wrote is always translated "Gentile," but it is not the usual term for "gentile"; it means "foreigner." In the Greek translation of the Bible, the Septuagint, it occurs 290 times, typically to translate "Philistine"! To make a long argument short, Peter is baptizing a Philistine like Goliath into the people of God!

⁴ Compare/contrast use of the Greek verb *kataluo*, "abolish," in Matt 5.17 and Gal 2.18.

⁵ Documentation in David L. Balch, "Metabole Politeion. Jesus as Founder of the Church in Luke-Acts: Form and Function," 139-88 in *Contextualizing Acts: Lukan Narrative and Greco-Roman Discourse*, ed. Todd Penner and Caroline Vander Stichele (SBL Symposium Series 20; Atlanta: SBL, 2003), esp. 180-83.

Now that is an “underdeveloped level of tradition moved to new ground,” prizing the religious heritage while simultaneously radically revising it!

Senior asks, “Are there lessons here, and even a biblical warrant, for bolder thinking about our own very different situation, but one with some analogies to those early Christian generations that had to navigate between worlds?” He emphasizes both continuity and profound transition, engaging in dialogue, searching for common ground, and imagining a new future. (pp. 17-18)

A. The case of Father Dupuis, S.J.,
a parallel development in contemporary Roman Catholicism

Our guest is Roman Catholic, and I want to suggest that we Lutherans could benefit from a highly stimulating debate on precisely this subject within the Catholic church: I refer to the writings of Father Jacques Dupuis, S.J, particularly his book *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*.⁶ I was myself introduced to Father Dupuis’s books by his friend and confrere, Gerald O’Collins, while living at the Lay Center, a Center that hosts lay Catholic students studying in Rome.⁷ In fact, O’Collins co-edited a Festschrift for Dupuis, and I will draw on his introductory article.⁸ O’Collins met Dupuis, he writes, when he went for several weeks to visit him in a Jesuit theological college in north India, which he describes as one of the most beautiful places in the world with astounding views across rich forests and tea plantations to the majesty of mountains beyond. Dupuis took O’Collins to visit the first man who climbed Everest along with Edmund Hillary: “as Dupuis raced his Yugoslavian motorcycle along the narrow roads of the Himalayan foothills, I clung to him for dear life, and prayed not to fall down the sheer precipices so

⁶ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1997).

⁷ Donna Orsuto is Director of the Lay Center. See her book, *Holiness* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

⁸ Gerald O’Collins, “His Person and Work,” 18-29 in *In Many and Diverse Ways: In Honor of Jacques Dupuis*, ed. Daniel Kendall and Gerald O’Collins (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003).

close to our wheels.” (18) Later, both men joined the faculty of the Gregorian University in Rome.

A year after the publication of *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, clouds appeared, including a discussion by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), directed by Cardinal Ratzinger. After intense discussion, the CDF applauded Dupuis’s “willingness to provide the necessary clarifications” and “desire to remain faithful to the doctrine of the Church and the teaching of the magisterium” (O’Collins 22). During this time Dupuis also responded to 100 English, French, and Italian reviews of his book!⁹ The book has certainly been tested by fire, so is surely worthy of our close attention. I will be unreasonably brief in my summary of some of Dupuis’ theses, leaning on O’Collins’ compact summary.

O’Collins (23) observes that certain verbs are, of course, crucial: repeatedly Dupuis “distinguishes” but does not “separate” the divine and human operations of the incarnate Son of God; he distinguishes but does not separate paths of salvation within the one divine plan to save all human beings. Here he follows the Council of Chalcedon that “distinguished” but did not “separate” the two natures of Christ. Dupuis consistently argues that “within the one person of Jesus Christ we must distinguish the operations of his (uncreated) divine nature and his (created) human nature. Dupuis does not want to reduce Christ to being one Savior among many, but he is sensitive to the limits involved in the historical incarnation of the Son of God (O’Collins 24). The knowledge of God revealed to us in Christ is therefore limited, not “absolute.” The revelation that reached its completeness in Christ is not incomplete or imperfect. Still, the relation between Christianity and other religions is “complementary”; that is, in prayerful and respectful

⁹ Jacques Dupuis, S.J., “‘The Truth Will Make You Free’: The Theology of Religious Pluralism Revisited,” *Louvain Studies* 24 (1999) 211-63. His response to Italian reviews was published as “La teologia del pluralismo religioso revisitata,” *Rassegna di teologia* 40/5 (September-October 1999). See also Dupuis, *Christianity and the World Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001) 260-63, “Postscript,” which addresses *Dominus Iesus*. For the storm of protest against *Dominus Iesus* by Christian and non-Christian scholars, see Peter C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously: Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue* (Maryknoll; Orbis, 2004) chap. 9, “Jesus as the Universal Savior: God’s Eternal Covenant with the Jewish People.”

dialogue with other traditions, Christians may “hear” something which enriches us spiritually. We can receive as well as give. (O’Collins 24) Dupuis excludes any talk of two “economies” of salvation, for example a pneumatocentric one separated from a Christocentric plan of salvation.

Dupuis values the ongoing power of the Spirit working in and through the glorified Christ: the Holy Spirit poured out at Pentecost gives life to the church in mission to preach to all people the goodness of Christ crucified and risen for our salvation.

But on the other hand, Dupuis also emphasized the action of the Spirit is not confined to acting in and through the risen humanity of Christ. Before the incarnation, the Spirit acted in a revelatory and salvific fashion (Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, 4). With the resurrection and Pentecost the Spirit, while working in total communion with the glorified Christ, does not lose his/her universal, divine activity, so as to exercise his/her mission ‘ad extra’ only through the mediation of Jesus’ risen humanity. To allege that the Spirit’s saving and revelatory action takes place exclusively through Christ’s glorified humanity means maintaining the kind of Christomonism which Eastern Christians have often rightly denounced....

This activity of the Spirit reaches and enriches the members of various religions in and through their religious life and practice. There is no other way possible, since that is where Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and others live and worship. Since these religions contain elements of truth and goodness (Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*) and the Spirit of God is mysteriously but powerfully present to them, adherents of these religions can reach salvation by following the ways proposed to them. In some sense their religions are ways of salvation for them. (O’Collins 27)

Jacques Dupuis has succeeded both in proclaiming an orthodox Christology, as judged by one of the severest tribunals, and in denying that our merciful God will condemn all those who have not heard of or been persuaded of the incarnation of the Son of God.

There are, of course, theologians who are more traditional and others who are less traditional than Dupuis. Our own Professor Ted Peters raises questions about

“pluralism.”¹⁰ Peters sets forth certain necessary assumptions for dialogue, e.g. “First, each party to the dialogue must have a position to put forth,” and second, “a genuine disposition toward openness combined with the willingness to listen sympathetically to the position being advanced by representatives of the other traditions.” (Peters 339) He rejects both “confessional exclusivism” and “supraconfessional universalism,” the latter term one that he employs to describe the positions of John Hick, Paul Knitter, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, and Hans Küng (Peters 340-48, with bibliography at p. 343¹¹) He observes, surely correctly, that “dialogue requires two different perspectives..., but if we look at the Christian chair and find it empty, it will leave the non-Christian to engage in a monologue.” (347) In particular, Peters questions easy use of the word “salvation,” when Marxists, Buddhists, and Hindus have such different conceptions, e.g. the Marxists and Buddhists have nearly opposite goals. Christian expectations differ from both; in particular, Christians’ hope for “resurrection appears problematic from the point of view of both materialists and mystics” (Peters 350). Before we assert that all have salvation, we should probably pay some attention to what kind of salvation diverse groups say they want.

At the conclusion of this utterly brief discussion, I recommend both Prof. Peter’s cautions and confess deep admiration of Father Dupuis, who has certainly not left the Christian chair empty, but has made new, creative proposals, which are provocative and clearly disturbing to some, but which combine an orthodox Christology and ecclesiology with an emphasis on both Christ’s uncreated divine nature and on the activity of the Spirit that reaches and enriches the members of various religions in and through their religious life and practice.

¹⁰ Ted Peters, “Chap. 11: Eccumenic Pluralism,” *God—the World’s Future: Systematic Theology for a Postmodern Era* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), published five years earlier than Dupuis’ book.

¹¹ I add a reference to the important pluralist discussion by Roger Haight, S.J., “Chap. 14: Jesus and the World Religions,” *Jesus: Symbol of God* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999). Haight is one of the reviewers to whom Dupuis responded in *Louvain Studies* 24; see Haight, *Theological Studies* 59/2 (1998) 347-49. For the reference to Haight, I thank Eric Crump of Gettysburg Seminary.

I return to the Hein-Fry lectures of our guest, Father Senior, who, I recall, summarized the task of both Paul and Matthew as follows: “they were faced with the pastoral challenge of opening their communities to new religious reality posed by a people different both culturally and religiously, and had to find a deeper and to some degree underdeveloped level of their tradition that would enable them to move to new ground.” Father Jacques Dupuis’ proposals courageously address that theological challenge in our own time, successfully address it according to a rigorous judge, Cardinal—at the time—Joseph Ratzinger. I recommend his books to students at PLTS and the GTU.

B. Pontifical Biblical Commission, “The Jewish People
and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible” (2002)

Now I return to Father Senior’s first lecture, “Living Together in the 21st Century: The State of the Bible in North America and its Significance for Communities of Faith.” I am not explicitly responding to the profoundly important 1993 statement, “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,”¹² but given limited time, I focus on the second document, issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 2002, “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,”¹³ which also involves an understanding of the Bible.

The relationship of Judaism both to the Roman Catholic and to the Lutheran churches has undergone profound transformation since World War II, visible in Vatican II’s revolutionary declaration *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions). Senior summarizes the documents’ four major sections: first, both implicitly and explicitly, the NT recognizes the authority of the Old. The next section explores major themes that run through both Old and New Testaments: convictions about God, the human person, the election of Israel, the covenant, the law,

¹² Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993). This can be found on line under “Vatican,” “Vatican Publishing House,” “Catalogue,” “Inglese” (English).

¹³ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002).

messianic expectations, worship, land, and temple. There is both continuity and discontinuity, which from the Christian vantage point the document names “progression,” that is, development of understanding or fuller meaning given to texts now read in light of Christian faith. The third section concentrates on the portrayal of Jews and Judaism in the NT texts, and a fourth concludes with reflections and pastoral implications. (Senior, p. 14)

The document inseparably relates Christianity and its Scriptures to Judaism and its Bible, recognizing that the two read the OT¹⁴ in different ways. Christians do not read the OT just as preface to the NT, but the former “in itself has great value as the Word of God.” (Senior 14) “Christians can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one....” (Senior 15)

Taking its cue primarily from Paul’s reflections in Romans 9-11, the text also insists that the NT never presumed or taught a definitive separation from Israel or that the church substituted for Israel. God’s promises to Israel, including the covenant, remain valid, and the ultimate relationship between Judaism and Christianity will be resolved only in the eschaton. (Senior 15)

As a professor at PLTS, I choose to respond to Father Senior by recalling parallel Lutheran efforts to address Jews and the question of the relationship between the Jewish Bible and Christian scriptures, efforts begun by Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer¹⁵ in WWII, efforts that have been continued by the great Swedish Lutheran scholar and

¹⁴ Both Alan Segal, *Rebecca’s children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1986) and David Novak, “From Supersessionism to Parallelism in Jewish-Christian Dialogue,” 95-113 in *Jews and Christians: People of God*, ed. Carl E. Braaten & Robert W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003) argue, to use the words of Novak, that “Christianity *and* Rabbinic Judaism are two different traditions that emerged at roughly the same time, and they were both responses to the imminently future or imminently past destruction of the temple as the center of the covenant between God and Israel.... Historically, our Judaism is no older than your Christianity; and your Christianity is no newer than our Judaism.” (Novak 108) Novak carefully explains, but suggests “that the Hebrew Bible functions very much like an ‘Old Testament’ for the Jews too.” (Novak 109) Not all would agree, of course.

¹⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment 1940 — 1945*, ed. Mark Brocker (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 16: Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

bishop, Krister Stendahl.¹⁶ I want to highlight the efforts of Franklin Sherman. Sherman was involved in the decision whether to translate Luther's tractate *Von den Juden und ihre Lügen* (On the Jews and their Lies) in the Fortress edition of *Luther's Works*.¹⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann decided that it must be done and asked Sherman to edit the volume, to which he wrote an introduction. Sherman writes that he became more and more aware of the depth of late medieval *Judenhass* (hatred of Jews), which Luther shared in his youth, out of which his idealistic zeal as a reformer lifted him, but which he fell back into in old age. (Sherman 65) Sherman persuaded Fortress Press to join him in repudiating the treatise in the very act of republishing it (1971).

Later, when the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in Washington, D.C., a brief film on the history of anti-Semitism gave prominence to Martin Luther. Sherman is proud that Lutherans never asked that this be suppressed. Instead, the ELCA drafted a "Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community" (April 18, 1994),¹⁸ which Sherman helped author, acknowledging Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and rejecting his violent invective, expressing sorrow over its tragic effects. Sherman later assisted with a subsequent document entitled "Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations."¹⁹ (Sherman 68) I will return to Sherman below.

The best recent, North American example is a conference sponsored by The Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology, published as *Jews and Christians: People of God*.²⁰ In the "Introduction" Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson observe that "the Christian scholars

¹⁶Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles, and other essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

¹⁷ *Luther's Works*, vol. 47, *The Christian in Society IV* (1971). Franklin Sherman, "Steps along the Way," 51-70 in *Faith Transformed: Christian Encounters with Jews and Judaism*, ed. John C. Merkle (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2003), esp. 62-69. Sherman is the Founding Director of the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding, Muhlenberg College, Allentown, Pennsylvania. After his retirement (1996), Peter A. Pettit became the Director (1999-). See Pettit, "Christ Alone, the Hidden God, and Lutheran Exclusivism," *Word & World* 11/2 (Spring 1991) 190-98.

¹⁸ Available at www.elca.org/ea/interfaith/jewish/declaration.html.

¹⁹ Available at www.elca.org/ea/interfaith/jewish/guidelines.html.

²⁰ Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Jews and Christians: People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

in this volume all repudiate supersessionist theory, which holds that in the providence of God the church is a ‘new Israel’ in such fashion that there can be no other, thus removing Judaism from God’s plan.” (viii) The same could not be said for all Lutheran scholars and members of the ELCA, so that these conference papers challenge the church. In this volume the Christian author George Lindbeck²¹ and the Jewish author Peter Ochs²² make quite important proposals.

I have one more, final project in this response to Father Senior. Jewish-Christian dialogue is certainly more stimulating person-to-person than in the abstract, so I want to give one specific example, Christians relating to Abraham Joshua Heschel. For this purpose, I return to Franklin Sherman. Browsing in a bookstore near the University of Chicago, Sherman came across Heschel’s book, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion*.²³ Sherman writes that as he browsed through the book, “I realized that what Heschel was describing was *the reality of God*, and doing so in a way that was more persuasive than any I had known before.”²⁴

So here was I, someone reared in the Christian faith, trained for the Christian ministry—for I was already a seminary graduate, and beginning doctoral studies—finding myself “ministered to” (to use a Christian phrase) by a Jewish philosopher/theologian, and that at the most basic level, that of my sense of the reality of God. (Sherman 54)

A second example of such Jewish Christian dialogue is the correspondence between Abraham Heschel and Thomas Merton. I returned recently to Linfield College in Oregon, where I once taught briefly, and met a former colleague, William Apel, whom I

²¹ George Lindbeck, “The Church as Israel: Ecclesiology and Ecumenism,” 78-84 in *Jews and Christians*.

²² Peter Ochs, “Recovering the God of History: Scriptural Life after Death in Judaism and Christianity,” 114-47 in *Jews and Christians*.

²³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1951).

²⁴ Sherman, “Steps along the Way,” in *Faith Transformed*, ed. Merkle, 53. In a series edited by Martin Marty, Sherman published *The Promise of Heschel* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970).

discovered had written a book on the interfaith letters of Thomas Merton.²⁵ Apel's fifth chapter contains a sensitive account of Heschel and Merton working in concert during the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965).

Third, I add that Abraham Heschel's daughter, Susannah Heschel, came to teach at Southern Methodist University in Dallas around 1990; I was teaching at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth. She taught briefly at SMU before moving to Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, then to Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. In both North America and Europe, she is intensively involved in Jewish / Christian dialogue. I found her dialogue with Christians fascinating. In 1996 she edited forty-two of her father's most important short essays in a book entitled *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*.²⁶ This year is the one hundredth anniversary of Abraham Heschel's birth, so one week ago in *The Jewish Week* (New York City, March 9, 2007), she wrote an article entitled "The Private Heschel: a Daughter's Memories."²⁷

At a Lutheran seminary, given our typically critical attitude toward Mosaic laws, in I choose to read a few sentences from the second article in that book, "The Moment at Sinai,"²⁸ which may break some stereotypes. Perhaps we Lutherans and also Roman Catholics may learn from a holy one in Israel:

History may be described as an attempt to overcome the dividing line between past and present, as an attempt *to see the past in the present tense*....

It is a supreme necessity for human beings to live in more or less durable and dependable relations to each other.... Social relations are not given naturally; they do not originate in a process; they are initiated in an act or in an event *at a definite*

²⁵ William Apel, *Signs of Peace: The Interfaith Letters of Thomas Merton* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006), chap. five, 67-84: "Holiness: The Merton-Heschel Letters." The research was carried out at the Thomas Merton Center Archives, Bellarmine University, Louisville, Kentucky (see Apel 201).

²⁶ *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity. Abraham Joshua Heschel: Essays edited by Susannah Heschel* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996).

²⁷ <http://www.thejewishweek.com/top/editletcontent.php3?artid=5790>

²⁸ Abraham Heschel, "The Moment at Sinai," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* 12-17, quotations from pp. 14-16.

moment of time. These relations can endure only if we remain loyal to the promise we have made....

The paradoxical nature of such loyalty is obvious. Why should a person be bound all his life by what he did or said at a single moment of it? ...

The decisive moment in the spiritual history of our people was the act that occurred at Sinai.... All generations of Israel were present at Sinai....

It was an act of transcending the present, *history in reverse*....

Some of us may think: How unwise of our ancestors to have committed all future generations to a covenant with God. Yet the life of a historic people is not unlike the life of an individual....

Socrates taught us that life without thinking is not worth living....

The Bible teaches us that a life without commitment is not worth living; that thinking without roots will bear flowers but no fruit. Our commitment is to God, and our roots are in the prophetic events of Israel....

We must remember that God is involved in our doings, that meaning is given not only in the timeless, but primarily in the timely, in that task given here and now....

What is the spirit of the Bible? Its concern is not with the abstract concept of disembodied values, detached from concrete existence. Its concern is with man and his relation to the will of God.

In conclusion, just for fun, really for more than fun, let me compare Abraham Heschel with the Pontifical Biblical Commission's document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1993). Heschel wrote his *Prophets* as a dissertation at the University of Berlin, surely quite scientifically rigorous! Not "faithfully Catholic," but indeed, faithfully Jewish, even though written for a German Protestant faculty in the 1930's.²⁹ According to the Pontifical Biblical Commission, liberationist and feminist perspectives are to be included. Given Heschel's marching arm in arm with Martin Luther King, Jr., in Selma, Alabama, there is no doubt about Heschel's prophetic stance. Susannah Heschel records thoughts from her father's memoirs about walking with King: "I thought of my

²⁹ Susannah Heschel, "Introduction," *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, xi-xiii.

having walked with Hasidic rabbis on various occasions. I felt a sense of the Holy in what I was doing.” (xxiii) As for “feminist,” he suggested to Susannah, his daughter, that she apply to rabbinical school, years before they began ordaining women! (xxviii) There was most certainly, I think everyone would agree, an “affinity” between interpreter and prophetic text. Those agreeing would be not only the Herren Doktoren Professoren in Berlin, but thousands and thousands of readers since. He had “love, reverence, and respect” for the text. Then Father Senior lists seven principals; I suspect that our rabbi would also have appreciated the number seven, as in his famous book on the Sabbath.³⁰

The first of the seven principles is that the scriptures are the inspired word of God. None other than Thomas Merton and also Franklin Sherman affirm that Heschel enabled them to perceive the reality of God more clearly, and to perceive the relation of the text to prayer. Second, the Pontifical Biblical Commission affirms, the Bible has multiple levels of meaning. No Christian I know comes close to being able to perceive various levels of meaning in the Bible as can and do most rabbis, including Heschel. Third, scriptures and their interpretation resonate with the collective wisdom of the community of faith. Here we might call to testify such diverse figures as Martin Buber (xv) and Jacob Neusner, one of Heschel’s students. We might add Reinhold Niebuhr (xxvi), Thomas Merton again, Martin Luther King, Jr. (xxvi), and as Susannah Heschel narrates in her Introduction, their favorite household guest, William Sloan Coffin, Jr., who teased him by calling him “Father Abraham.” (xxvii) “Niebuhr himself asked my father to deliver the eulogy at his funeral.” (xxvi) Many have called Heschel the greatest Jewish theologian and prophet of the twentieth century; others have called Niebuhr the greatest Christian theologian of that century. At the Christian’s funeral, the rabbi said:

Your life was an example of one who did justly, loved mercy, and walked humbly with his God, an example of unity of worship and living.... He has, to quote his words, ‘sought to strengthen the Hebraic prophetic content of the Christian

³⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951).

tradition.’ ... How shall we thank you, Reinhold Niebuhr, for the light you have brought to our lives? For the strength you have given to our faith?³¹

These two, teaching across the street from each other at Jewish Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary, took evening walks together in Riverside Park. Later when I studied at Union, students were still wishing that they might have overheard those conversations! Heschel and Niebuhr show us the way in Jewish-Christian conversations. Fourth, there is certainly a powerful link with tradition, although not ecclesial tradition. Fifth, the canon is not Christian, but is a canon of the people of God, including both written and oral tradition. Seventh, the text is “actualized” by an “attentive community.” Number six fails, that is, Heschel did not read scripture in the light of Christ and the teaching authority of the church, but this returns us to the other lecture by Father Senior, which touched on Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, and the more recent Pontifical Biblical Commission document discussed here, “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible.”

³¹ Abraham Heschel, “Reinhold Niebuhr,” *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity* 301-02.