

INTERPRETING THE PAIN OF OTHERS: JOHN PAUL II AND BENEDICT XVI ON JEWISH SUFFERING IN THE *SHOAH*

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PRECIS

Theological responses to the suffering of religious “others” (those outside one’s religious community) rest on claims not necessarily shared by them. This essay analyzes the theological and interreligious implications of statements by popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI about the Nazi murder of Jews in light of this tension. Their statements are grounded in contemporary Catholic teachings about the interdependence of Judaism and Christianity, which leads them to blur both the boundaries between Judaism and Christianity and the different experiences of Jews and Christians. The popes use theological concepts such as vicarious suffering and divine purification that, while based on scripture shared by Jews and Catholics, rest on distinctly Catholic interpretations, which are then applied to Jews. They also rely on this Catholic linkage between the traditions to align actual (Jewish) victims of the Nazis with supposedly potential (Catholic) victims. Their statements, a welcome indication of improved interreligious relations, reveal continuing challenges for Catholic views of Judaism and for theological approaches to the suffering of members of another religion.

Introduction

The historical, moral, and, above all, theological issues raised by the *Shoah* have profound implications not just for Jews but for Catholics and other Christians as well. Popes John Paul II (1979–2005) and Benedict XVI (2005–13) offered some of their most important teachings on both suffering and the relationship between Jews and Catholics in statements made during visits to death camps and former ghettos and at gatherings of Jewish survivors and leaders at such solemn sites as Yad Vashem.¹ Their statements suggest that vitally important issues—about the nature of God, the church, and the covenant between God and Israel—need to be addressed in the wake of the *Shoah*. In this essay, I critically analyze their statements about this event (specifically, their theological interpretations of Jewish suffering) and consider what these reveal about changing Catholic views of Jews and Judaism.

I focus in particular on the two popes’ perceptions about what was and is at stake for Christians, and Catholics in particular, in the losses experienced by Jews during the *Shoah*. The theological issues are complex, for the popes struggled to make sense of what occurred not primarily to their Christian co-religionists but to members of another group, the Jews, with awareness that their Christian religious convictions are affected by another’s suffering. These statements were offered during a time of unprecedented change in Jewish-Christian relations, after the Catholic Church broke with centuries of anti-Jewish teaching at the Second Vatican Council

¹Documents referred to herein are listed in the appendix below, with name or location and year.

(1962–65). Their views on the *Shoah* yield valuable insights into these dramatic changes and deserve more scholarly attention than they have received.

I consider here some of their claims about Jewish suffering during the *Shoah* and relate these to how, for example, popes nonetheless affirmed God's goodness and justice, viewed Nazism as a threat not just to Jews but also to Christians, and cast Nazi hostility to Jews as ultimately hostility to God. I present their views and also evaluate them. As a Jew, I note positive contributions to Catholic-Jewish relations, as well as some troubling or unacceptable historical or theological claims. At times, I am critical of the popes' failures to reckon with the complexities of interpreting the suffering of those outside their own religious community. I argue that their insistence that Jews and Christians are alike people of God led them to blur the boundaries between the communities, overlooking the distinctly Catholic theological assumptions that they employ when interpreting Jewish experiences. This is especially problematic when they cast Jews in largely symbolic religious categories that obscure their actual experiences and responses. Even when these symbols (for example, of Jews as a witness people, as representatives of God) are positive and break with past, negative symbolic portraits, the reliance on traditional categories yields historically dubious views of Nazi hostility and sometimes religiously insensitive claims about Jewish suffering and sacrifice. Despite my criticisms, however, I strive to see the statements in context, to illuminate their underlying assumptions, and to consider the implications for Catholic-Jewish relations.

There are a few surveys of papal statements on the *Shoah*, mostly focused on those by John Paul.² However, my study, which includes his many statements, also includes more recent statements by Benedict (listed below in the appendix.) This approach reveals broader and more nuanced theological trends than were evident in past studies of statements of John Paul alone. I chose statements containing explicit reflections on Jewish suffering and the *Shoah*. I also occasionally refer to other papal documents, such as Apostolic Letters and addresses that are directly relevant to this topic. While a fuller survey of Catholic post-*Shoah* theology could include other Church documents besides those largely devoted to the *Shoah*, as well as statements from local and national churches and from theologians, these selected statements provide a valuable opportunity to explore some prominent and recurring themes.

As will be apparent, on the most important issues there are few differences between the views of the two popes.³ This is perhaps not surprising for two successive leaders of a church that values continuity and who worked closely for decades. Interestingly, this is true despite the two popes' stunningly different life experiences. John Paul grew up in Poland, a country brutally subjugated during and after the war, and was friendly with Jews who were later killed. Benedict is a German who

²See Eugene Fisher, "Mysterium Tremendum: Catholic Grapplings with the Shoah and Its Theological Implications," in Steven L. Jacobs, ed., *Contemporary Christian Religious Responses to the Shoah*, Studies in the Shoah 6 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), pp. 60–84; and Remi Hoekman, "Good and Evil after Auschwitz in Papal Teaching," in Jack Bemporad, John T. Pawlikowski, and Joseph Sievers, eds., *Good and Evil after Auschwitz: Ethical Implications for Today* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 2000), pp. 271–283.

³Later statements also quote from earlier statements. In Auschwitz 2006 and Rome 2010, Benedict quoted John Paul. In Cologne 2005, John Paul quoted his own words from Birkenau 1979.

was forced to join the Hitler Youth as a teenager. Yet, while both occasionally refer to their backgrounds, their personal remarks are short and largely separate from the main points being made.⁴

In Part I, a largely descriptive section, I survey the popes' statements, highlighting some of the prominent topics that recur over a few decades. These include Jewish suffering and its implications for religious faith, the nature of God, and explanations for the *Shoah*. In Part II, I assess their statements critically, situating them in the context of the remarkable changes in Catholic teachings about Jews after Vatican II and also evaluating the historical and exegetical claims the popes made. My views reflect my Jewish perspective, but, even when critical, I hope they also indicate ways of improving Jewish-Christian relations and in particular how Jews and Catholics talk about and to each other.

I. Survey of Papal Statements

A. "We believe in the purifying power of suffering."

In their statements the popes consistently spoke of the terrors of the *Shoah*. When recalling Auschwitz, John Paul said, "I bow my head," and he insisted, in language reminiscent of the post-Auschwitz promise, "Never again, in any part of the world, must others experience what was experienced by these men and women."⁵ Benedict said that the Jewish people were "led to an infamous operation of death, which has remained as an indelible disgrace in the history of humanity."⁶ During the *Shoah* "with tremendous brutality [they] were killed."⁷

In these and other statements the popes painfully described Nazi barbarity. However, I want to focus on their efforts to minimize the apparent meaninglessness and absurdity of these murderous acts. It is clear that there is much at stake for the popes theologically. The impulse to offer a theodicy of Jewish suffering in the face of the horrific and seemingly inexplicable losses faced by millions of Jews (and non-Jews) prompted the popes to offer—perhaps better, grasp at—explanations for why it took place. There is a palpable, understandable, even noble desire to find some good in the midst of unfathomable evil, for fear that, without some redemptive or divine purpose, all that is left is nihilism. In particular, a "Christian tendency to find both meaning and hope in representations of the *Shoah*" is prominently on display here.⁸

John Paul, for example, repeatedly presented Jewish suffering in sacrificial

⁴E.g., John Paul spoke of his Polish identity and of Poland's suffering in Birkenau 1979, Warsaw 1987, and Anniversary 2005. Benedict spoke "as a son of the German people" in Auschwitz 2006. Elsewhere, they did discuss their pasts. E.g., John Paul's recollection of the murder of the Jews of his home town in his letter to his childhood friend Jerzy Kluger reveals deep sadness; in Eugene J. Fisher and Leon Klenicki, eds., *The Saint for Shalom: How Pope John Paul II Transformed Catholic-Jewish Relations—The Complete Texts, 1979–2005*, Presented by the Anti-Defamation League (New York: Crossroad, 2011), pp. 188–189.

⁵Anniversary 2005. Similar statements are found in Vienna 1988 and Cologne 2005.

⁶Vatican 2005.

⁷Rome 2010.

⁸Tom Lawson, "Shaping the Holocaust: The Influence of Christian Discourse on Perceptions of the European Jewish Tragedy," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 21 (Winter, 2007): 412.

language. As with a sacrifice, an experience of loss can contribute to a greater good—for others if not for the victims. This made it possible for him to claim that, out of Jewish losses, there has been a positive outcome. He sometimes expressed this vaguely and without detail. For example, he spoke in 1980 to Jews in France of the “dark years of the [Nazi] occupation” and the Jewish victims who were murdered. However, he added, their “sacrifice, we know, has not been fruitless.”⁹ It was for some benefit, he said without explanation, nonetheless making clear that he believed that Nazi violence was not meaningless or its outcome entirely negative.

This theme appears elsewhere. Addressing a delegation from the Simon Wiesenthal Center, John Paul recalled the Jewish victims of the Warsaw Ghetto and asked that “God accept this sacrifice for the well-being and the salvation of the world.”¹⁰ This “horrible and tragic” event has the potential to benefit all humanity, for the Jews’ experiences have broad, even universal repercussions. These are both practical (“well-being,” perhaps in fostering more compassionate behavior by all) and soteriological (“salvation”). While still vague, the claim is theologically provocative. The portrait of Jewish victims is reminiscent of biblical sacrifices upon the altar presented with the hope that they be “acceptable as an offering . . . to the Lord.”¹¹ Here, John Paul aimed to redeem terrible Jewish slaughter as also a potentially holy event. He cast it in terms of a religious sacrifice, as an offering to God.

Addressing Jewish leaders in Warsaw in 1987, he spoke with obvious sympathy when he said that the Jews’ losses are well-known and widely mourned: All humanity gives “great prominence to your nation and its sufferings, its Holocaust.”¹² Again, to describe Jewish murder, he employed sacrificial terminology: “It was you who suffered this terrible sacrifice of extermination . . . We believe in the purifying power of suffering. The more atrocious the suffering, the greater the purification. The more painful the experiences, the greater the hope.”¹³ Their losses yielded a spiritual good. Embracing a seemingly paradoxical claim, he says that Jewish suffering is, in effect if not in intent, beneficial. Despite these terrible events, the Jewish people, especially (only?) the victims, reap a reward. Staring into the abyss, John Paul looked for some reason for hope and for some redemptive value in the massacre. The physical toll on Jewish bodies cannot be denied, but he nonetheless found some religious purpose and identified a salutary outcome for the afflicted people.

Terms such as “purification” and “hope” are of course common to Jews and Christians alike, though, importantly, John Paul did not consider the voices or views of Jews in this interpretation. That is, whether any Jews faced worsening suffering with increased hope is irrelevant; perhaps some did, though that was not his concern. Rather, his statement reflects his own Catholic theological interpretation of the salvific effects of loss, even for non-Christians. These at least partly dispel

⁹Paris 1980.

¹⁰Los Angeles 1983.

¹¹E.g., Lev. 22:27 (NJPS). The different terms used for the Nazi extermination illustrate profound ambiguity about the event. The English word “Holocaust” (from Greek, for totally consumed sacrifice) has sacrificial and biblical connotations missing from the Hebrew “*Shoah*” (destruction). Popes use both terms; e.g., Auschwitz 2006.

¹²Warsaw 1987.

¹³Ibid.

the terrible meaninglessness of “suffering” and “painful . . . experiences.” Of course, the greatest Christian response to apparently meaningless suffering is found in the experience of Jesus. At Auschwitz, John Paul drew on this event. Recalling the crucifixion, he described the death camp as the “Golgotha of the modern world,” when referring to Jewish victims, among others.¹⁴ This casts the extermination in terms of the death of Christ upon the cross, traditionally understood in sacrificial terms as ultimately for the good of all humanity.

In addition to explicitly sacrificial imagery, we find claims that Jewish suffering is beneficial for others, such as Christians, who were also destined for destruction by the Nazis (see also below). Following a visit to the Mauthausen camp in Austria, John Paul said of the Jews who died there, “With their suffering they enriched the world.”¹⁵ Their deaths were not meaningless but of service to humanity, perhaps in giving evidence of their faith. Earlier, to Jews in Warsaw, John Paul was even more direct about their service. He said, “One might say that you [Jews] suffered [in the *Shoah*] also on behalf of those [Christians] who were meant for extermination like you.”¹⁶ According to this view, Jews and Christians are inextricably linked. The fate of the former is not unrelated to that of the latter but was actually of benefit to them. To John Paul, this linkage is historical, as the Jews were the original victims of the Nazis, in a sense consuming their attention before (he assumes) they eventually turned on the Christians as well. More importantly, this linkage is also theological, for the Jews have a unique role in salvation history and were not just coincidental victims. He therefore added that “in this Church all peoples and nations feel united to” them in their suffering. He calls this a “mission in the contemporary world.” It is not incidental, but the very definition of what it means for Jews to “continue [their] particular vocation, showing [themselves] to be still the heirs of that election to which God is faithful.”¹⁷ They have a mission given to them by God and for the good of others. Christians, fellow worshipers of the same God and included in a soteriological drama within which Israel plays a key role, are inevitably affected—in this case, benefitted—by the Jews’ experiences at a theological level. That is, Jewish suffering impacts Christians and, while never celebrated, has positive effects for them.¹⁸

This last claim introduced an unusual alteration to the idea of the election of Israel that was, sadly, relevant to the circumstances. Rather than focus on the blessings that God traditionally promised to the elect people, John Paul focused on their suffering at the hands of the Nazis as a demonstration of their unique, divinely ordained religious status. That is their continuing “vocation.” Suffering offers evidence not of divine rejection but of divine election. Suffering Jews are chosen Jews,

¹⁴Birkenau 1979.

¹⁵Mauthausen 1988.

¹⁶Warsaw 1987. That “those” (in the phrase “on behalf of those”) refers to Christians is clear from the preceding sentence, which refers to Polish Catholics.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸There are hints of overlapping images between John Paul’s statements about righteous suffering and traditional Polish views of the nation as the righteous, even Christ-like, sufferer, whose unjust afflictions ultimately benefit all of humanity; see Alan Davies, “The Crucified Nation—Poland,” in Alan Davies, *The Crucified Nation: A Motif in Modern Nationalism* (Portland, OR: Sussex University Press, 2008), pp. 6–24.

of service to “the peoples, the nations, all of humanity, the Church,”¹⁹ yet by no means forsaken by God.

More recently, Benedict offered a remarkable and sophisticated argument against the meaninglessness of Jewish suffering during his visit to Auschwitz. After mentioning the many different groups of victims murdered there, he reflected on the efforts by the Nazis to “crush the entire Jewish people.”²⁰ He cited the famous words of Ps. 44:22, a complaint to God over the apparent injustice of Israel’s suffering: “We are being killed, accounted as sheep for the slaughter.”²¹ This ancient cry was, he said, “fulfilled in a terrifying way.” However, the psalm reflects not just anguish over loss but also, in the few preceding words from the psalm that he omitted (but of which many listeners no doubt were aware), the idea that the Jews suffered for their faithfulness to God: “It is for your [God’s] sake that we are slain all day long.” That is, Jews were murdered because they are the people of God and faithful to God. Benedict drew on this biblical theme of the suffering of the righteous to situate the *Shoah* in familiar and ultimately hopeful terms. Like the Psalmist who concluded with an affirmation of God’s “faithfulness” (44:27), Benedict as well shared such hope and ended “with a prayer of trust.”²²

B. “The favors of the Lord are not exhausted.”

Undergirding the popes’ idea that the Jews’ suffering in the *Shoah* was for some purpose and not meaningless is the claim that, despite the *Shoah*, one should have steadfast faith in God and in God’s goodness. Both popes insisted that the loving God, as always, cares for humanity, including the Jewish people, of course. This does not entirely preclude rare expressions of anguish and confusion over God’s seeming failure to act. For example, at Auschwitz Benedict cried to God, “Rouse yourself! Do not forget mankind, your creature!” At this place of slaughter, he wondered, “Where was God in those days? Why was he silent?”²³ However, the dominant goal, here as elsewhere, is the reassertion of divine benevolence, even when apparently hidden or “mysterious.” Though humans may not understand all of God’s ways and may even complain about apparent injustice, there should ultimately be no doubt about God’s love. That is why Benedict, at the edge of the largest Jewish cemetery in the world, could finish his speech “with a prayer of trust,” quoting from Psalm 23 that “the Lord is my shepherd.” God, he said, is sure to act, whether in invisible or visible ways (perhaps through the actions of other humans). One should not doubt this; to do so would be “to set ourselves up as judges of God and history.”²⁴

These recent quotes from Benedict evince optimism about the future and a traditional faithfulness found in his and John Paul’s statements generally. Both said that the shock of the *Shoah*, while recognized, should not undermine belief in God

¹⁹Warsaw 1987.

²⁰Auschwitz 2006.

²¹This psalm historically has been applied to Jesus, too (e.g., Acts 8:32), though Benedict did not explicitly draw out the parallels here.

²²Auschwitz 2006.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid.

or encourage doubt or questioning. The biblical model of a just, merciful, even active God is ubiquitous in the statements. Despite Auschwitz, it continues to shape the popes' views.

Speaking at Yad Vashem in 2000, for example, John Paul recognized the human capacity for evil but adhered to an optimistic view of history as under God's providential control. He said that the believer, full of "trust in you [God]," knows "that never again will evil prevail."²⁵ On the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, he made a similar claim. The "truth . . . often expressed in the Bible" is that "evil itself will never have the last word. In the very abyss of suffering, love can triumph."²⁶ One's hopes should not be dashed, regardless of one's experiences. Note that his statement is vague. It is not clear who will experience this triumphant love or how they will experience it. This reflects a deeper ambiguity regarding about whom the popes speak (see below).

Benedict was also emphatic about the need to have strong faith. At Yad Vashem in 2009, he offered a message that resembled John Paul's. He said, "Professing our steadfast trust in God, we give voice . . . 'The favors of the Lord are not exhausted.'"²⁷ Despite possible evidence to the contrary, he affirmed that "God lives." He noted the losses of the *Shoah* but refused to let them undermine either religious faith or a linear view of history that will culminate in the triumph of the good. What gives such force to these convictions is that they are juxtaposed with painful descriptions of terrible suffering and brutality. Nonetheless, the victory of the good and of God, though in the future and perhaps at the end of the days, should not be doubted.

Because there was no direct, miraculous intervention to stop Nazi brutality, these bold affirmations of faith in a loving and attentive God need to be explained. In "We Remember," there appears a vague claim about "discern[ing] in the passage of history the signs of divine Providence at work."²⁸ Yet the nature of the signs is not explained. However, in the popes' own statements, God's support for those who suffer is largely an interior process. God, John Paul said at Yad Vashem, affects the "believer's heart."²⁹ Speaking earlier in Vienna about the victims of the *Shoah*, John Paul said, "God does not desert the persecuted, but rather reveals himself to them and by [faith] enlightens that people on the way to salvation." God has a role, in this case, in bringing people to a "much deeper hope."³⁰ They can, John Paul insisted, face terrible trauma and yet, with God's intervention, retain a traditional faith in God and in a future redemption.

In a meeting with the chief rabbi of Rome, Benedict also largely interpreted God's activity in history in private, mostly nonvisible terms. He spoke of God's "giving [Jews] the strength to overcome trials." This is evidence that "[t]he favor of the God of the Covenant" never ceases to be shown to the people of the covenant. He said, strikingly, that God did not and does not forsake the Jews but is ever-

²⁵Yad Vashem 2000, quoting Ps. 31:14.

²⁶Anniversary 2005.

²⁷Yad Vashem 2009, quoting Lam. 3:22.

²⁸-"We Remember" 1998.

²⁹Yad Vashem 2000.

³⁰Vienna 1988.

present: God “always accompanied them.”³¹ It is inconceivable that the covenanting God would not be faithful to God’s covenant with the Jews (recalling Romans 11).

Alongside these statements we find hints of bolder claims about actual divine aid to the Jews. These go beyond examples of God’s entering people’s hearts to examples of God’s entering human history to aid these tormented people. Most striking is Benedict’s juxtaposition of earlier great acts by God to deliver Israel, above all at the Exodus, with the *Shoah*. In the meeting with Rome’s rabbi, he said that, just as “[t]he people of Israel have been liberated many times from the hands of their enemies . . . in the dramatic moments of the Shoah, the hand of the Almighty has supported and guided [the Jews].” Benedict incorporated the *Shoah*, the Jews’ most recent and worst trauma, into a narrative of continuity in divine kindness and aid. Reviewing God’s kindness to Israel during earlier traumas—from Egypt through later “times of antisemitism”—he expressed “gratitude for the salvation we [Jews and Christians?] have received.”³² He sought confirmation of an earlier, more hopeful and optimistic pattern. It is no surprise that Benedict therefore believed, as he said at Yad Vashem, that “[God] has revealed himself and continues to work in human history. He alone governs the world with righteousness and judges all peoples with fairness.”³³ However, he said little about the evidence that supports this claim.

C. “The threat against you was also a threat against us.”

The popes often derived broad theological implications from Jewish suffering. The *Shoah*, they argued, reflected Nazi hatred not only of Jews but also of God and of Christianity. Specifically, they pondered the motives that led Nazis to impose such terrible losses on the Jews. They voiced the central conviction that the Nazis’ murderous hostility to this one people actually reflected an expansive quasi-religious hatred (even by a secular regime) of Judaism, the God of Israel, and therefore Christianity as well.

For example, John Paul, addressing Jews in Vienna, connected opposition to Jews with opposition to God. He said the Nazis’ death camps revealed a regime “without, and even against, God, whose intentions to kill were clearly directed against the Jewish people.”³⁴ The Nazis’ presumed religious motivations explained their actions. In his logic, the two objects of their hatred were inseparable. Jews were the obvious enemies of those resolutely opposed to God and eager to replace God with a perverse cult of secularist human superiority. To John Paul as a post-Vatican II Catholic, and presumably to the Nazis, then, Jews are the paradigmatic God-representatives on earth. It was for this singular aspect of their identity that they were so brutally persecuted by Nazis.

In an encyclical from 1991, he presented the attack on the Jews as evidence of a rejection of God. He said their “terrible fate has become a symbol of the aberration

³¹Rabbi 2006.

³²Ibid.

³³Yad Vashem 2009, quoting Ps. 9:9.

³⁴Vienna 1988.

tion of which man is capable when he turns against God.”³⁵ Uniquely, the suffering of the Jews manifests the deepest form of this estrangement. A bolder claim that the Nazis aimed to replace God as rulers of the world and, therefore, murdered Jews appears in “We Remember.” It says the Nazi State “arrogated to itself an absolute status and determined to remove the very existence of the Jewish people, a people called to witness to the one God and the Law of the Covenant.”³⁶ There are two linked parts of this statement. The Jews by their very existence witness to God, a conviction, the statement implies, shared by the popes and Nazis alike. Therefore, those who hate God and seek “absolute status” for their secular order must hate them, too. It is Jewish religious identity as the people of God that furnished the essential motivation for Nazi acts.

This view of Nazi hostility as a wide-ranging religious attack on God is found in the claim that, ultimately, their hostility went far beyond the Jews. From this perspective, Jewish suffering was a means to a larger end: the elimination of God. In his speech at Auschwitz, Benedict explained their motives: “[T]hose vicious criminals, by wiping out [the Jews], wanted to kill the God who called Abraham.” The Jewish people are, in his view, in “its very existence . . . a witness to the God who spoke to humanity.”³⁷ There is a necessity in his interpretation. Nazis, believing that “power had to belong to man alone—to those men, who thought that by force they had made themselves masters of the world,” knew that they had to destroy the Jews. This was a way for Nazis to strike at God, who “had to die” if their malevolent worldview was to triumph.³⁸ Benedict imputed these motives to the Nazis because he viewed the Jews in religious terms as symbolic representatives of God and assumed that Nazis, whether or not they used similar religious language, must have viewed them this way as well. After his return from Auschwitz, he reinforced this message, pointing to the “death factories” as the places “where the Nazi regime attempted to eliminate God.”³⁹

Both popes, therefore, claimed that Jews were not, and were not to be, the Nazis’ only victims. Beyond the terrible reality that many Catholics and others were, in fact, murdered is the theological claim, a corollary to the claim just discussed, that an assault directed against God, manifested in an assault on the Jews, necessarily would have to include *all* of God’s worshipers. This means that Christians, and sometimes particularly Catholics, would inevitably have been victims too. Without in this case addressing other motivations for hostility to Catholics (such as opposition to fascism, aiding the persecuted, or some who were converts from Judaism), the Nazis’ motives, deduced from their hostility to Jews, were presumed to be theological.

For example, at Auschwitz Benedict said, “By destroying Israel, by the *Shoah*, [the Nazis] ultimately wanted to tear up the taproot of the Christian faith.”⁴⁰ The violent erasure of Christianity was the goal of an attack on the Jews. Their deepest

³⁵ *Centesimus* 1991, no. 17.

³⁶ “We Remember” 1998.

³⁷ Auschwitz 2006.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Vatican 2006.

⁴⁰ Auschwitz 2006; see John L. Allen, Jr., “Attempting to Slay God Was Auschwitz’s Greatest Evil, Pope Says,” *National Catholic Reporter*, May 28, 2006.

desire was to replace God with human rule, so the Nazi plot was to be carried out in stages, first against the Jews, and then culminating in violence against the pope's co-religionists. Without denying Nazis' hostility to Jews, Benedict suggested their murderous gaze was fixed upon Christians as well. This theme reappeared in a 2011 address to Berlin's Jewish community: "The Nazi reign of terror was based on a racist myth, part of which was the rejection of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of Jesus Christ and of all who believe in him." Jews (those who follow "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob") and Christians (those who also follow "the God of Jesus Christ") were at risk, both groups of believers joined together in shared vulnerability.⁴¹

John Paul presented the Nazis' murderous motivations in expansive terms so as to include Christians as well. In 1989 he wrote, "The new paganism and the systems related to it were certainly directed against the Jews, but they were likewise aimed at Christianity, whose teaching had shaped the soul of Europe. In the [Jewish] people of whose race 'according to the flesh, is the Christ' (Rom. 9:5), the Gospel message of the equal dignity of all God's children was being held up to ridicule."⁴² As above, Jews and Christians alike were seen as enemies of the Nazis. Christianity, beyond the opposition to paganism that it shares with Judaism, posed an additional, unique threat because it formed the religious culture of Europe that the Nazis sought to undermine. Furthermore, John Paul assumed that the Jewish people, whom he viewed (positively) in Pauline categories, were seen similarly by the Nazis. Their hostility reflected their presumed acceptance of a link in the Christian scriptures between the people of Christ's "flesh," the Jews, and the Christian believers, so that an attack on them was "likewise aimed at Christianity." John Paul thus imputed to the Nazis Pauline theological categories linking Jews and Christians. He could then include the latter among those who faced murderous threats.

The two religious communities, despite their many differences, share this key feature of vulnerability. In the words of "We Remember," the Nazis, by beginning with an assault on the Jews, displayed "a definite hatred directed at God himself. Logically, such an attitude also led to a rejection of Christianity, and a desire to see the Church destroyed or at least subjected to the interests of the Nazi State."⁴³ Jews and Catholics, by giving faithful witness to God, are thus united as (potential) victims. That is why Nazi violence, John Paul said in 1998, was "directed against the Jewish people, but also against the faith of those who revere in the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, the Redeemer of the world." A world "without, and even against, God"⁴⁴ must threaten both peoples and religions.

Sometimes Nazis were accused of threatening not just Christians but Catholics in particular. John Paul, in a speech to Jewish leaders in Warsaw, offered his views on the likely scenario of events had the Nazis not lost the war. After emphasizing Polish Catholic solidarity with the Jews, he said, "The threat against you [Jews] was also a threat against us [Polish Catholics]; this latter was not realized to the

⁴¹Berlin 2011.

⁴²Vatican 1989.

⁴³"We Remember" 1998.

⁴⁴Vienna 1988.

same extent, because it did not have the time to be realized to the same extent.”⁴⁵ While scholars might debate the accuracy of this statement, John Paul was not making a historical claim. Rather, his statement is about an inevitably expanding threat grounded in his view of Nazi anti-religious and anti-Catholic motivations. He suggested not just that Catholics suffered but also that Catholics—in this quote, Polish Catholics—would have had to suffer like Jews because they were Catholics and, as noted above, “meant for extermination like you [Jews].”⁴⁶ It is an argument about (theo)logical necessity—a threat that was not abstract. In 1989, he said, “This pretension on the part of the ideology of the National Socialist system did not spare the Churches, in particular the Catholic Church, which before and during the conflict experienced her own ‘passion.’”⁴⁷ Again, the statement is less a historical assessment than a religious conviction about Nazi opposition to Christians—and especially to Catholics. The effect is to ratchet up the stakes of the Nazi assault against them dramatically, by casting them alongside Jews as fellow victims (sometimes potential, sometimes actual) of a secular, murderous ideology.

The uniformity of the popes’ views, presented in diverse settings over many years and in sharp theological language, illustrates the depth and consistency of these explanations. John Paul laid out the main ideas, though his views reflect broader changes in Catholic teachings about Jews that began in the 1960’s during the pontificate of John XXIII.⁴⁸ Benedict’s views largely conform to John Paul’s, as do his choices about where and to whom he spoke of the *Shoah*. Both popes repeatedly returned to the event and offered theologically sophisticated and provocative reflections on Judaism and suffering.

II. Evaluation of the Papal Statements

A. Interpreting the *Shoah* after Vatican II

There is much in these statements that I both welcome and also find troubling. On the one hand, they reveal the lasting influence of the remarkable changes inaugurated at Vatican II in the popes’ favorable views of Judaism and their deep sorrow over Jewish suffering.⁴⁹ On the other, they contain ideas that I find religiously or historically problematic and sometimes objectionable. In this section, then, I analyze the popes’ interpretations of Jewish suffering, especially as they relate to Catholic-Jewish relations. I first evaluate the relationship between these statements and modern changes in Catholic views of Judaism and then critique these statements. I

⁴⁵Warsaw 1987; see Fisher, “Mysterium Tremendum,” pp. 65–66.

⁴⁶Warsaw 1987.

⁴⁷Vatican 1989.

⁴⁸John Paul’s immediate predecessor, Paul VI, though pope during the conclusion of Vatican II, had little personal interest in improving Jewish-Christian relations and contributed little to John Paul’s thought on this topic; see Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930–1965* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), pp. 210–212.

⁴⁹However, for a more critical view of Benedict’s fidelity to changing Catholic views of Judaism generally after Vatican II, see John Pawlikowski, “Defining Catholic Identity against the Jews: Pope Benedict XVI and the Question of Mission to the Jewish People,” in Alan L. Berger, ed., *Dialogue and Terror: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam after 9/11* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), pp. 102–120.

show how the popes view the *Shoah* in strictly Catholic theological categories, which strongly influenced the ways they interpreted both Jewish suffering and Nazi motivations. Likewise, I argue that the popes' insistence on the close connection between Judaism and Christianity leads them to blur the boundaries between the two peoples historically (for example, casting Nazis as equally hostile to all who worship the God of Israel, meaning Jews and Catholics) and theologically (for example, viewing Jewish suffering as a challenge to Catholic theodicy). While my evaluations are shaped by my Jewish perspective, which makes me sensitive to the popes' presentations of Jews and Judaism, I hope my judgments also reflect sound historical, theological, and exegetical judgments.

These statements clearly show the profound influence of "*Nostra aetate*" (1965)⁵⁰ and of subsequent Church documents such as "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration '*Nostra Aetate*' (n. 4)" (1974)⁵¹ and "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis of the Roman Catholic Church" (1985).⁵² In these statements, among other things, the Church affirmed the Jewish roots of Christianity, rejected the deicide accusation against the Jews, and denied that the Jewish covenant was abrogated with the coming of Christ. Of particular relevance here is a defense of the legitimacy of Judaism and the belief that its existence through the present is God's will. Finally, the insistence that Christians listen to and learn from Jews about Judaism is sound guidance for interreligious dialogue and exploration.⁵³

In the statements on the *Shoah*, we find echoes of some of these themes. For example, John Paul, affirming the ongoing vitality of Judaism, said in Warsaw that Jews "*still* [are] the heirs" of their ancient covenant with God.⁵⁴ He insisted that Catholics and Jews alike "adore the one Creator and Lord."⁵⁵ The popes emphasized not discontinuity but continuity in shared biblical roots, faithfulness to the one God, and hopes for a better future. John Paul said that this is why "in this Church all peoples feel united to you [Jews]." This unity is cast in traditional biblical terms. In the Cologne Synagogue Benedict said both peoples "look to the teachings of Moses and the prophets,"⁵⁶ and John Paul, at Yad Vashem, said Jews and Catholics "look to Abraham as our common father in faith."⁵⁷ The religions are not irrevocably divided or estranged but are intimately related, their fates joined to each other. John Paul memorably summarized this during his 1986 visit to the synagogue in

⁵⁰Available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

⁵¹Available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19741201_nostra-aetate_en.html.

⁵²Available at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_19820306_jews-judaism_en.html.

⁵³There are many discussions of these statements; see Mary C. Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a Source of Christian Self-Understanding* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000), pp. 247–266; Philip A. Cunningham, "A Catholic Perspective," in Franklin Sherman, ed., *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, vol. 1: *The Road to Reconciliation (1945–1985)* (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2011), pp. 13–26.

⁵⁴Warsaw 1987; emphasis added.

⁵⁵Yad Vashem 2000.

⁵⁶Cologne 2005.

⁵⁷Yad Vashem 2000; see also Yad Vashem 2009.

Rome: “The Jewish religion is not ‘extrinsic’ to us, but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion.”⁵⁸ This is a powerful break with the past trend of defining Christian identity in contrast to and separate from Judaism. Importantly, the emphasis on shared (that is, Jewish and Catholic) vulnerability to the Nazi threat, despite my critiques of this idea (see below), buttresses claims of solidarity between the two faiths up through the present. The popes extended the new Catholic teachings on the linkage between the faiths beyond the obvious connections in the distant past (for example, Jesus was a Jew; Christianity emerged from biblical Judaism) and applied them to the two contemporary religions.⁵⁹

In these statements, there is no hint of the idea, common in Christian teachings for centuries, that the Jews, having rejected Christ, were justly condemned to suffer powerlessness and exile. In this long anti-Jewish tradition, their fate was seen as didactic: Suffering Jews served as symbolic witnesses and warnings to Christians of divine punishment.⁶⁰ By contrast, in these post-*Shoah* papal statements, Jewish losses were solemnly mourned and never presented as punitive. Especially striking is the claim noted above, from John Paul’s 1987 speech in Warsaw, that Jewish suffering is a mark not of reprobation but of election, that “because of this terrible experience . . . you continue your particular vocation, showing yourselves to be still the heirs of that election to which God is faithful.” Here, John Paul reversed a near-ubiquitous millennia-old trope that linked suffering and sin.

However, there are troubling continuities with earlier teachings as well. In the statements surveyed above, the popes continued to see Jews’ experiences in largely idealized and symbolic categories. Jewish loss is thoroughly theologized in Catholic religious terms (for example, “Golgotha”; sacrificial images) and analyzed for its implications for Catholic faith. This perspective appears often, as in simplistic (mis)readings both of the Jews’ fate during the *Shoah* and of Nazi motivations. As noted, the popes offered a theoretical model that cast Jews and Nazis in fixed religious roles, as endangered symbols of God and as enemies of God, respectively. Their interpretations of Jewish suffering, though alien to Jewish thought, are reminiscent of past symbolic portrayals of Jews as objects of Christian theological speculation similar to the role of a witness people with a (to Jews unknown and unchosen) part in a Christian theological drama.⁶¹

Unlike those earlier cases, in which the Jews were negative witnesses to Christian truth and divine punishment, these popes gave the Jews a positive “post-New Testament role in the history of salvation.” As a Jew, I welcome John Paul’s claim (in Eugene Fisher’s words) that “the story of the people of Israel, today no less than in biblical times, remains a story, with all its tragedies and hopes.”⁶² Yet while the

⁵⁸In Fisher and Klenicki, *Saint for Shalom*, p. 112.

⁵⁹See also Los Angeles 1983, Rabbi 2006, and Rome 2010.

⁶⁰The roots of this idea, much developed over time (e.g., by Augustine), can be found already in the Christian scriptures (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:14–16).

⁶¹Even though John Paul painfully recalled the murder of Jews with whom he grew up (e.g., in his letter to Jerzy Kluger; see note 4, above), more often he, like Benedict, largely spoke about Jews in symbolic terms.

⁶²Fisher, “Mysterium Tremendum,” p. 66. The term “witness” is used repeatedly in the statements; see Auschwitz 2006 and “We Remember” 1998. Also see Hans Hermann Henrix, “Pope Benedict XVI and the Jews: A Relationship under Suspicion?” *Israel Affairs* 16 (October, 2010): 538.

negative implications are removed, a Christian casting of Jews in roles they might not recognize or choose continued. In this case, they are supporting actors in a larger dualistic conflict between God and the opponents of God, their undeniably terrible fate evidence of a cosmic battle with profound stakes for Catholics as much as for Jews. Whether before or after the *Shoah*, this interpretation reflects the belief that (in Stephen Haynes's terms), as a witness people still, "the existence, fate, and redemption of the Jews are signs for God's church."⁶³ Thus, Catholics can learn about God from the experiences of Jews. Notably, the Jews' own perceptions are irrelevant in all of these theological narratives. This seems unavoidable when citing the Jews' experiences in the world as evidence for one's own religious interpretation of history (anti-Jewish or not).

B. Theological Explanations for Nazi Motivations

Turning to the popes' discussions of the Nazis' motivations for murdering Jews, their judgments reflect what could be called a mirror-opposite model. Though the Nazi leaders (not to mention lower-level figures) obviously held diverse views on religion, the popes cast them in dualistic and unnuanced categories.⁶⁴ They reconstructed Nazis' motives by assuming that Nazis and Catholics alike viewed Jews almost entirely in symbolic religious categories, using traditional theological or biblical terms. These two groups' views are near mirror opposites of each other. This was seen, for example, in Benedict's statement at Auschwitz that Jews are representatives of "the God who called Abraham," a view implicitly shared by their Nazi tormentors, though of course with the opposite implications for their actions. That is, the popes imputed to both Catholics and Nazis the view of Jews as representatives of God and the biblical tradition and covenant. The popes therefore presented the *Shoah* as ultimately a dualistic split between those—the Jews—who symbolize God in this world and those—the Nazis—who wanted to destroy God and God's symbolic people.

While undeniably a positive view of Jews, this contributes little to our understanding of the Nazis' actual beliefs and may distort or oversimplify them. Rather, it reveals much about the popes' highly theologized reconstructions of Jews. The

⁶³Stephen R. Haynes, *Reluctant Witnesses: Jews and the Christian Imagination* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), p. 7.

⁶⁴Of the many historical studies of Nazi hostility to Catholicism and Catholic fears about the fate of the Church in the event of a Nazi victory, see Richard Steigmann-Gall, "Old Wine in New Bottles? Religion and Race in Nazi Antisemitism," in Kevin Spicer, ed., *Antisemitism, Christian Ambivalence, and the Holocaust* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), pp. 285–308. On the lack of a consistent approach by the Nazis to Christianity, see Elias H. Fullenbach, "Shock, Renewal, Crisis: Catholic Reflections on the Shoah," in Spicer, *Antisemitism*, p. 222. Criticism of Benedict's broad view of the Nazi threat to religion in general is found in John T. Pawlikowski, "Developments in Catholic-Jewish Relations: 1990 and Beyond," *Judaism* 55 (Fall–Winter, 2006): 99. Some Catholic leaders have offered evidence for their claims about Nazi motivations. E.g., in a recent speech, Cardinal Kurt Koch, president of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, cited Joseph Goebbels's diaries to argue that "Hitler hated Christianity just as much as Judaism," in Kurt Koch, "Theological Questions and Perspectives in Jewish-Catholic Dialogue," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, vol. 7, no.1 (2012), p. 2 (available at <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjtr/>). For criticism that Koch "overlooks the fact that while Hitler may have hated Christianity, he chose to kill Jews," see Karla Suomala, "Response to Kurt Cardinal Koch," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2012), p. 4.

popes relied not on evidence but on their religious assumptions about the Jews as well as about the Nazis and, more broadly, about the dangers posed by those without faith in God to those with faith in God, as in John Paul's statement, "The threat against you [Jews] was also a threat against us [Polish Catholics]." ⁶⁵ Notably, this frequent claim also overlaps, in a far less extreme form, with prominent concerns of many in "the Church's leadership class" over the last few decades about the "evils of secularization" and indifference to God. ⁶⁶ The Nazi regime, by being integrated into this polemic, thus represents the nadir of a broad, contemporary trend often decried by John Paul, Benedict, and others.

It is understandable that the popes cast Nazi violence in terms of a threat to 'their' God too, for this makes Nazi hostility far more relevant to Catholics and other Christians, as in Benedict's statement at Auschwitz about their desire to "tear up the taproot of the Christian faith." However, I believe that few Jews, especially Jewish victims, thought that Nazis massacred Jews largely because they hated God, let alone as a first step toward wiping out monotheism (including Catholicism/Christianity). The popes seem to have shifted the focus away from both Nazi hatred of the Jews as such and their murder as a prominent goal in itself—what most Jews (and likely most historians) naturally focus on—and toward hatred of Jews as a means to an end only partly related to Jews. Yet, for the popes, that broader goal makes Nazi actions directly relevant to Catholic theology. They saw Catholics as somehow enmeshed in this unprecedented cosmic battle of good versus evil and of God versus the devil. However, the prominence of Nazi hatred specifically of Jews—and the enormous losses suffered by Jews, as well as the losses suffered by others such as Roma, Slavs, gay people, and the mentally ill—inevitably are downplayed in this presentation.

Furthermore, the popes' claims of a shared vulnerability of Jews and Catholics/Christians to Nazi hatred, while perhaps grounded in a genuine sense of Nazi peril to both, nonetheless minimized the significance of Jews' experiences. In other contexts, such historical speculation may be appropriate; for example, it is not incorrect to note Nazi hostility to Catholicism. However, by repeatedly highlighting a debatable claim about the Nazis' broader intentions to eliminate Christianity eventually, the popes too quickly skirted past what really *did* happen in order to speculate about what *might* have happened. Especially when speaking in places such as a former death camp or a destroyed ghetto, this speculation is inappropriate. Theological claims of a shared threat minimize or obfuscate the actual evidence of different losses—sometimes at locations where the results of such hostility are vivid and un-

⁶⁵See also these statements by John Paul: "It is precisely an absence of faith in God and as a consequence, of love and respect for our fellow men and women, which can easily bring about such disasters" (Vatican 1985); "Here we recall the Jewish people in particular, whose terrible fate has become a symbol of the aberration of which man is capable when he turns against God" (*Centesimus* 1991, no. 17); "How could man have such utter contempt for man? Because he had reached the point of contempt for God" (Yad Vashem 2000). On this idea, see Hoeckman, "Good and Evil," 274–275; and Bjorn Krondorfer, "Of Fire and Water: Holocaust Testimony, Biblical Texts, and German 'After Auschwitz' Theology," in John K. Roth and Elisabeth Maxwell, eds., *Remembering for the Future: The Holocaust in an Age of Genocides* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 768.

⁶⁶John L. Allen, Jr., *The Future Church: How Ten Trends Are Revolutionizing the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), p. 58.

avoidable. I do not claim that suffering is a zero-sum game. However, the repeated juxtaposition of the two groups on the grounds of shared vulnerability suggests a shift of Catholics into the category of victims, alongside Jews, and out of another category of bystanders or even perpetrators, when the actual data are complex and contested.⁶⁷

Likewise, by presenting a linear view of Nazi violence—first Jews, then Catholics—John Paul suggested that (some) differences between the two religions were fundamentally insignificant. This appears, for example, in his statement to Warsaw Jews that Christians, “united to you in this mission [to serve God],” were “meant for extermination like you.” This emphasis on similarity, supposedly also in the eyes of the Nazis, reflects remarkable developments in Catholic thought about Judaism as a legitimate religion. I appreciate these theological improvements, but I am uncomfortable with attempts then to find much similarity in the groups’ experiences or dangers in this period. These changes seem to risk diluting the significance of actual Jewish suffering. Even John Paul’s reference in Warsaw to the solidarity of the “Polish Church” with persecuted Jews, while accurately recalling Nazi brutality to (non-Jewish) Poles, should not obscure that Polish Catholics suffered largely as Poles rather than as Catholics.

An emphasis on Catholics’ (potential) victimhood in these statements also has the effect of neutralizing painful questions about the contribution of Christian anti-Judaism to Nazi Antisemitism. Admittedly, some statements, such as “We Remember,” do say that the murder of Jews was encouraged, for example, “by the anti-Jewish prejudices imbedded in some Christian minds and hearts”⁶⁸ and express sorrow for this. However, the popes’ emphases on Nazi hostility to Catholicism in effect elide discussions of the influence of historic Christian hostility to Judaism on Nazism. The former crowds out the latter, though the obviously unsettling implications of a possible linkage between Catholic actions or teachings and the murder of Jews hovers over all these statements. It occasionally surfaces in denials of any Church support for Nazi racial Antisemitism and in suggestions that guilt for encouraging hatred of Jews should be attributed to individual Catholics and not to the Church itself.⁶⁹ Unfortunately, the troubling evidence that many Catholics and other Christians, including many Poles, victimized Jews is obscured or ignored in the statements.⁷⁰ The popes’ frequent references to the theological linkage between

⁶⁷On Christian claims to victim status, see Krondorfer, “Of Fire and Water,” pp. 765–771.

⁶⁸“We Remember” 1998.

⁶⁹E.g., see statements by John Paul (“It would be, of course, unjust and untrue to put the blame for those unspeakable crimes on Christianity” [Vienna 1988]) and by Benedict (“the Church has not failed to deplore the failings of *her sons and daughters*” [Rome 2010; emphasis added]), as well as “We Remember” 1998 and Rome 2010. By contrast, some national Catholic groups were highly critical of the actions or inactions of the Catholic Church; see the 1997 French Bishops’ “Declaration of Repentance” in Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, ed., *Catholics Remember the Holocaust* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), pp. 31–37. Also see Pawlikowski, “Developments in Catholic-Jewish Relations,” p. 99; and Peter Phan, “Judaism and Christianity: Reading Cardinal Koch’s Address between the Lines and against the Grain,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2012), pp. 2–3.

⁷⁰On Poland (an obviously sensitive issue for John Paul), see Dariusz Libionka, “The Catholic Church in Poland and the Holocaust, 1939–1945,” in Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith, and Irena Steinfeldt, eds., *The Holocaust and the Christian World: Reflections on the Past, Challenges for the Future*, Beth Shalom Holocaust Memorial Centre, Yad Vashem International School for Holocaust

Catholics and Jews, in effect, if not in intention, help to downplay possible Catholic culpability for encouraging hatred of Jews historically.

C. Catholic Interpretations of Jewish Suffering

Next, I shift from the popes' interpretations of Nazi motivations to cause Jewish suffering to their interpretations of Jewish suffering itself. As shown above, the popes sometimes spoke of Jewish suffering as a form of service to others (for example, a "vocation" for suffering; a "sacrifice for the well-being and the salvation of the world"). This idea may reflect generic notions of election for the benefit of others—indeed, of all humanity—with resonance in the biblical tradition (Gen. 12:3; Is. 42:6, 49:6). Even suffering for the sake of others may be reflected in the famous passage about the suffering servant of Isaiah (53:4–12). However, John Paul's emphasis on election's being defined by suffering is an emphasis not likely to be shared by most Jews.

First, it is doubtful that most Jewish victims understood their experiences in these terms. The idea that Jewish suffering, let alone mass slaughter, can benefit humanity is marginal in the Jewish tradition, especially among the presumably unwilling victims.⁷¹ Vicarious suffering is far more Christian than Jewish. Sometimes popes expressed this explicitly in Christian terms (for example, Auschwitz as "Golgotha"); sometimes they expressed this implicitly (for example, "With their suffering they enriched the world"). Second, the potential parallels to sacrificial imagery are awkward, for they seem to cast Nazi murderers as servants of God and Jewish victims as sacrificial offerings to God. Or, perhaps, John Paul, in asking God to accept the Jewish victims as a "sacrifice for the well-being and the salvation of the world," may have had in mind the ritual in which a violent and bloody act is also a holy deed that benefits others.

There may be precedents for this idea of unmerited or undeserved suffering as sacrifice in both Judaism and Christianity.⁷² However, in neither tradition is there significant precedent for specific claims that the suffering of members of another group is salvific for or beneficial to one's own group.⁷³ The two types of suffering—one's own/one's own group's and another's/another group's—are very different, for claims about a positive purpose in suffering depend on religious assumptions that may be plausible for co-religionists but doubtful for others. A Jew might look on the suffering of another Jew as meaningful, even beneficial, by assuming that both share traditional beliefs about, say, God's loving affliction of the righteous, temporary punishment leading to future rewards, or sacrifice on behalf of the

Studies (New York: Continuum, 2000), pp. 74–78; and John T. Pawlikowski, "The Response of the Polish Church to the Holocaust," in Rittner, Smith, and Steinfeldt, *Holocaust and the Christian World*, pp. 79–82.

⁷¹However, one finds some parallels to John Paul's ideas on suffering in the highly controversial work by Jewish theologian Ignaz Maybaum, *The Face of God after Auschwitz* (Amsterdam: Polak and Van Gennep, 1965).

⁷²E.g., the Jewish idea of "*kiddush hashem*" (the sanctification of God's name by Jewish martyrs) may be a relevant parallel.

⁷³Traditional Christian anti-Judaism saw Jewish suffering largely as a theological proof of the correctness of Christianity, though not of direct benefit to Christians.

Jewish people. However, such a claim, when offered by one who stands outside the religious tradition of those who suffer and who does not share the same religious convictions is speculative and even presumptuous.

In order to understand the popes' reasoning, we should consider the murky, overlapping theological contexts out of which their statements emerged. If attempts by one religious group to explain another religious group's suffering are in general perilous and potentially insensitive, attempts by Catholics to explain Jewish suffering are doubly so. Such efforts are undertaken in enormously complex circumstances. These traditions are both intimately linked historically and religiously and also long-estranged. In the case of the *Shoah*, there are painful questions about the contribution of Christians or Christian theology to Jewish suffering. In addition to these complexities, I believe that the popes oscillated between two different, even mutually exclusive contexts. By making these two contexts explicit, we can better understand the assumptions that underlie the popes' statements.

In the first context, the Jews are outsiders. The popes, in their statements quoted above, looked upon them as members of a different religion and, specifically, as an "other" persecuted by the Nazis. Not surprisingly, the popes repeatedly addressed Jews as a discrete and separate group (for example, "you who suffered"). Paradoxically, their emphasis on theological commonality (for example, "Abraham as our common father in faith"; Jews as comparable "heirs" of the biblical covenant) shows their awareness of historic and continuing separation between the two communities. Their noble efforts to affirm the legitimacy of Judaism are premised on this stark divide.

More problematically, the sense of Jewish "outsiderness" and otherness is sometimes evident in the (lack of) attention they gave to Jewish victims. While neither pope of course denied Jewish suffering, they gave it relatively less attention than it is given by Jews and, more importantly, disproportionately less attention than I believe it deserves. For example, John Paul, visiting Auschwitz-Birkenau in 1979 (where the vast majority of the murdered were Jews), dwelled at length on a few Catholic victims (and future saints) but said very little about the Jewish victims.⁷⁴ In a speech following his 1988 visit to Mauthausen, John Paul never mentioned Jews at all, leading to some controversy.⁷⁵ At the 2005 commemoration of the liberation of the camps, despite Jewish criticism of earlier Catholic statements, he simply repeated what he said more than a quarter-century earlier.⁷⁶

When Benedict visited Auschwitz, he gave Jewish victims slightly more attention, although, like John Paul's, his comments were heavily theological, focusing on the biblical roots of the Jewish people rather than their recent experiences. Hints

⁷⁴Birkenau 1979.

⁷⁵His spokesperson said that he did mention Jewish victims during a tour of the camp; see Mauthausen 1988.

⁷⁶Anniversary 2005. On Jewish responses, see Leon Klenicki, "Commentary by Rabbi Leon Klenicki," in Avery Dulles and Leon Klenicki, *The Holocaust, Never to Be Forgotten: Reflections on the Holy See's Document "We Remember,"* A Stimulus Book, Studies in Judaism and Christianity (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), pp. 23–46; Abraham H. Foxman, *Never Again? The Threat of the New Anti-Semitism* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), pp. 90–94; and Kevin Madigan, "A Survey of Jewish Reaction to the Vatican Statement on the Holocaust," in Roth and Maxwell, *Remembering for the Future*, pp. 425–436.

of this lack of attention appear as well in Benedict's generic, vague descriptions of, for example, "those who died here," "individual persons who ended up here," and "men and women who suffered here."⁷⁷ Jewish losses, though numerically predominant, are consistently subsumed into broader losses. This is pushed to somewhat extreme levels, for example, in John Paul's remark at the commemoration of the liberation of Auschwitz that "it must not be forgotten that in [the war] the Russians had the highest number of those who tragically lost their lives."⁷⁸ While true, this remark at such a moment is reminiscent of others that reveal a surprising indifference to the major Jewish significance of Auschwitz and its liberation, both in fact and also in Jews' perceptions, and to differences between genocide and war.

As noted earlier, there also was almost no attention to how Jews perceived these experiences. The two popes often addressed Jewish audiences at highly significant locations, something they usually highlight. However, "actual" Jews, whether as victims, survivors, or otherwise, seem to get obscured amid the biblical imagery and the heavily theological descriptions of their very real experiences. Again, underlying this is a perception of these experiences as happening to others and only accessible when recast in the popes' theological categories. This contributes to the instrumentalist views of the experiences of Jews in confirming Catholic claims. None of this is nefarious. A focus on Catholic victims (whose experiences are described in detail)⁷⁹ and a reliance on Catholic theology are natural for popes. However, the sometimes minimal focus on Jewish losses and indifference to Jewish reflections reveals a perception of a wide divide between two very different religious traditions.

Further, their reflections are complicated by the perception that the popes partially view Jews as (quasi-)insiders to their own religion. This is the second context, evident in affirmations about an intimate connection between the two faiths because of their shared scripture, shared faithfulness to the God of Israel, and shared historical roots. It is the counterpart to the recognition of historic and theological separation just noted. It was famously captured in John Paul's 1986 statement about Judaism "as 'intrinsic' to our own religion."⁸⁰ In the case of the *Shoah*, this insider status is reflected most clearly in statements that assign Jews a central role in a Christian theological narrative and posit shared threats to Judaism and Christianity—and, indeed, to Jews and Catholics themselves. It is reminiscent of the symbolic role Christians have long assigned to Jews as a witness people to the God worshiped by both Jews and Christians. What happens to Jews has direct implications for Christians.

Likewise, when assessing Nazis' motives, the theological connection between Judaism and Christianity gets mixed in with the historical claim of shared danger to Jews and Christians. Jewish suffering is therefore not (just) about an "other" (the "you" noted above) but also about "a threat against us" (that is, Catholics, too). The claim is based on enormously positive improvements in Catholic views of Jews starting in the 1960's, above all the insistence on religious commonalities and con-

⁷⁷Auschwitz 2006.

⁷⁸Anniversary 2005.

⁷⁹Cf. the discussion of Maximilian Kolbe's experiences in Birkenau 1979.

⁸⁰See note 58, above.

tinuities. However, it reflects the widespread, traditional conviction that what befalls the Jews—as expressed in theological terms—has implications for Christians as well.

Because of this putative insider status, the popes seem to have assumed a sort of ease of transition between certain theological concepts such as sacrifice and divine beneficence—and perhaps between Jewish and Catholic faith generally. They not only made claims *about* Jews but even addressed their most controversial claims about the Jews' own experiences directly *to* Jews. These included survivors of the *Shoah*, who in some cases literally sat before the popes when they explained how God always supports the Jews, how Jews suffered on behalf of others, or how Jews might interpret God's role in history (for example, "God does not desert the persecuted"; "God "always accompanied them" during their travails). Implicitly, Jews were expected to welcome and even share some of the popes' claims.

While I do not want to deny that, from a Jewish perspective, one might posit a theological and not just historical linkage to Catholicism and Christianity, John Paul and Benedict blurred the boundaries between the traditions in presuming to make such claims about and to others. Such boundaries should have restrained them from imputing religious motives to members of another faith or evaluating the other's unmerited suffering in positive terms. There are, of course, similarities that encourage this, such as shared scripture, but more profound theological and historical differences between the traditions should caution against it. The perceived insider status led to a confused and confusing theodicy of Jewish suffering, as the popes tackled the theological questions raised by the *Shoah* without apparent reflection about how they, as Catholics, stand *vis-à-vis* the dominant Jewish victims. They shifted too easily into the position of co-sufferers, even potentially, without attending to historical differences in Nazi motivations or Jewish perspectives.

Because of these murky and overlapping contexts, the popes offered a highly unconventional theodicy. Theodicy traditionally is a response to one's own/one's own group's suffering and the threat it poses to one's religious convictions. That is, in the wake of an inexplicable experience, one faces "chaotic disintegration" that threatens to completely undermine one's own group's "sacred order."⁸¹ Theodicies therefore allow the group to reaffirm some sense of meaningfulness in the cosmos, despite baffling and destabilizing experiences of affliction. However, in the case of the *Shoah*, despite the obvious separation between the two religious traditions, the popes view their own sacred order as imperiled by the potentially meaningless suffering of Jews. My critique is not meant to suggest that their interests are inherently illegitimate; perhaps more than any other event of unmerited and horrific suffering, the *Shoah* prompted the efforts seen above to integrate non-Christian suffering into a Christian theodicy of divine goodness and omnipotence.⁸² More broadly, then, the popes raised the important but little-studied theological issues of the suffering of others and theodicy in an interreligious context, but they did not grapple with the

⁸¹Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 53–59.

⁸²Also see Richard L. Rubenstein, "Religion and the Uniqueness of the Holocaust," in Roth and Maxwell, *Remembering for the Future*, p. 13.

challenges of their ambivalent position.⁸³

III. Conclusion: Catholic Theologies of Judaism and the Imperative of Jewish-Catholic Dialogue

There is a unifying theme in much that the popes said: When considering the sufferings of Jews, they integrated them into pre-existing Catholic religious categories. They seem indifferent to Jewish perceptions of the same events or show little awareness of the presumption of applying their religious views to those outside their own community. Unlike Jewish commentators, who speak as Jews to Jews about Jews and within the Jewish tradition and community, the popes, though speaking to and about Jews, stand outside the tradition and community. There is no dialogic quality to their statements, nor was there any effort to bridge this divide. This applies not only to Jewish experiences but more seriously to Jewish doubts about God raised by the *Shoah*. These, too, were ignored by the popes in favor of a traditional defense of God. While they repeated that the *Shoah* was terrible, they simply affirmed God's goodness. This type of traditional affirmation, while understandable, also seems stunningly unself-conscious, at least when addressing Jews. I would not expect them to jettison their beliefs; I would, however, expect much greater awareness of the challenge that the event poses to such beliefs.⁸⁴

For many Jews, of course, the events of the *Shoah* have raised serious doubts about traditional claims about God's goodness and omnipotence, as well as about the covenant between God and Israel. There has been widespread and anguished re-evaluation of beliefs about God's nature and, specifically, the covenant.⁸⁵ Many Jews have given up hope of finding meaning in suffering, let alone of finding a way steadfastly to affirm God's goodness. Emil Fackenheim, recalling the language of Psalm 121, has written, "Jews cannot read, as they once did, of a God who sleeps not and slumbers not."⁸⁶ Even Norman Lamm, intellectual and spiritual leader of American Jewish Orthodoxy for decades, struggled to say anything about the *Shoah*, because it "was the ultimate expression of meaninglessness."⁸⁷ Across the Jewish theological spectrum, these struggles have been prominent and painful. Importantly, the idea of the *Shoah* as an "interruption" of inherited traditions and assumptions holds true for many Catholic (and other Christian) theologians as well.⁸⁸

⁸³See Emmanuel Lévinas, "Useless Suffering," in *Entre nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, tr. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University, 1998), pp. 91–101.

⁸⁴Benedict's mention of Psalm 44 is an exception, in Auschwitz 2006.

⁸⁵See Steven T. Katz, "Introduction" (to Part III, "European and American Responses during and following the War"), in Steven T. Katz, Shlomo Biderman, and Gershon Greenberg, eds., *Wrestling with God: Jewish Theological Responses during and after the Holocaust* (Oxford, U.K., and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 360–368. Most of the prominent Jewish commentators on the *Shoah* (whether academic theologians or otherwise) largely eschew traditional theodicies that link suffering and sin and that exculpate God from accusations of injustice.

⁸⁶Quoted in Jacques B. Doukhan, "Reading the Bible after Auschwitz," in Roth and Maxwell, *Remembering for the Future*, p. 695.

⁸⁷Norman Lamm, "The Face of God: Thoughts on the Holocaust," in Bernhard H. Rosenberg and Fred Heuman, eds., *Theological and Halakhic Reflections on the Holocaust* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav Publishing House, 1992), p. 132.

⁸⁸I refer here to Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza and David Tracy, eds., *The Holocaust as Interruption*,

It is on this issue especially that the nondialogic quality of the papal statements is clearest. Though they are not formal theological treatises with explicit theodicies, together they present a largely uniform, multi-decade reflection on the *Shoah*. Therefore, it is reasonable to observe the absence of an effort to wrestle with or respond to the threats it poses to their claims about God's unfailing commitment to humanity and the need for humanity to respond faithfully to a beneficent and active God. It is precisely these types of affirmations made by the popes that have faced sustained critiques by Jews and non-Jews; yet, the popes, even before Jewish audiences, evinced no awareness of this. Alan Brill, referring to Benedict (though his judgment could apply to John Paul, too), noted that the pope was surely sympathetic to Jewish suffering but nonetheless betrayed an indifference to any "sense of the Jewish memory of the tragedy," even when addressing a Jewish audience.⁸⁹

While I would not have expected Benedict to make Jewish memory or interpretation his own, I regret the absence of any reflective or responsive quality to his and John Paul's statements. Even though papal statements were not presented in settings that encouraged discussion and feedback, the Jewish community has offered detailed responses over time to much that has been said. However, the popes were apparently unaware of or chose to ignore these responses and did not broach prominent trends in Jewish theology in the wake of the *Shoah*, perhaps because such views were threatening to traditional affirmations about God's goodness. This, however, undermines a sense of genuine Jewish-Catholic interaction, especially as the popes' main claims seem not to have been influenced by this interaction over the decades.

At the most basic level, then, the noble requirement of the Vatican's 1974 "Guidelines"—to learn "by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own religious experience"⁹⁰—is one not met consistently in these statements. This is especially unfortunate, for the issues, such as divine goodness, evil and suffering, and faith, could not be more profound. Catholic historian Kevin Spicer's sharp judgment is therefore apt: "The most potentially disruptive issue concerning Catholics, Jews, and the Holocaust is the postwar and contemporary posture of a Holy See that does not seem to comprehend what Jews have suffered and lost as a result of centuries of antisemitism culminating in the Holocaust."⁹¹ This divide in understanding between Jews and Christians is wide, complicating

Concilium (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984). Among the many examples one could list, see the recent discussion of post-*Shoah* Christian theology in Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God* (New York: Continuum, 2007), pp. 49–69.

⁸⁹Alan Brill, "Does the Church 'Get' the Holocaust? A Response to Kevin Madigan's 'Has the Papacy 'Owned' Vatican Guilt for the Church's Role in the Holocaust?'" *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2009), p. 7 (available at <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/1549/1403>). On tensions between different perspectives on suffering, also see Zev Garber, "Insiders and Outsiders: For Whom Do We Toil?" in Hubert G. Locke and Marcia Sacks Littell, eds., *Holocaust and Church Struggle: Religion, Power, and the Politics of Resistance*, Studies in the Shoah 16 (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1996), p. 79; and Alastair G. Hunter, "Intruding on Private Grief," in Harry James Cargas, ed., *Problems Unique to the Holocaust* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), p. 125.

⁹⁰"Guidelines," Preamble.

⁹¹Kevin P. Spicer, "Catholics," in Peter Hayes and John K. Roth, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies* (Oxford, U.K., and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 245.

efforts by one religious tradition to comment on the experiences of another. I recognize, of course, that there are no simple ways to address these profoundly difficult issues, especially in an interreligious context. However, the popes' statements contribute to this divide because they raise enormously complex historical and theological questions and often provide answers that are religiously or historically problematic. This does not undermine the remarkable and unprecedented improvements in Jewish-Catholic relations; on the contrary, many of these statements also buttress these changes with highly positive views about Jews and Judaism.

By highlighting some of the shortcomings and weaknesses of the popes' statements, I hope not to be accused of expecting too much. I do not expect that the popes would go so far as to adopt, for example, Catholic theologian David Tracy's "radical hermeneutics of suspicion" toward Christian claims about God and suffering in the face of what Tracy has called the "countersign" of the *Shoah*.⁹² The popes' fidelity to traditional Catholic ideas about God's goodness and omnipotence (if not about Jews and Judaism, with which the Church broke dramatically at Vatican II) imposes limits to such bold challenges. Nonetheless, the popes here contribute to the remarkably positive trajectory in Jewish-Catholic relations, even though difficult work remains to be done both between and within these communities.

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⁹²David Tracy, "Religious Values after the Holocaust: A Catholic View," in Abraham J. Peck, ed., *Jews and Christians after the Holocaust* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), p. 97.

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