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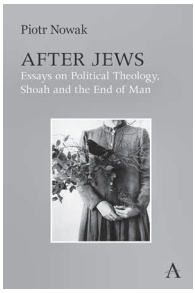

SECULARIZATION AS CULTURAL ANNIHILATION: NOTES ON PIOTR NOWAK'S *AFTER JEWS*[*]

> *The charge commonly made, to the effect that modern civilization overestimates the power of reason, is superficial. It would be true if one meant by reason the mind's capacity to calculate and construct, to which we owe technology and our control over the things around us. But that is one of the mind's lesser faculties and is said to be found in spiders and apes. If on the other hand one means the capacity to grasp the being of things and their meaning, and to adhere to them with the will, then the present world is much more inclined to alogism than to rationalism.*
> [Romano Amerio, *Iota Unum*]

Piotr Nowak's passionate, thoughtful, and elegantly written book is not a systematic treatise but a literary spider's web with many intricately related threads that can be difficult to follow but that return always to the guiding motif of the Jewish "idea of chosenness," the "antinomies" it contains, and its meaning today (x), after secularization and the Holocaust

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– phenomena that Nowak argues are closely linked: "The Shoah could only happen under the conditions of late capitalism rather than in the atmosphere of primitive pogroms, the violent expulsion of Jews from their Anatevkas" (x).[1] The gently hyperbolic title, *After Jews*, refers to the fact that very few Jews remain in Poland today: "There are no more Jews in Poland. They had been murdered by the German Nazis, and those who survived were expelled by the Polish Communists after the war" (xi). But Nowak's concerns are not, or not primarily, historiographical or sociological. This brute fact – the absence of Jews in Poland – serves as a symbol for man's spiritual condition in the aftermath of what Nietzsche called "the death of God." Nowak believes that one must reach for the language of political theology to come to terms with our spiritual condition today: "Ultimately, sociology and political science provide no explanations, so one needs to dig deeper, into theology – political theology" (79). Words such as *anomie* are too weak; we must speak rather of "Antichrist": "The devil, Antichrist is not just a metaphor or a creature with a limp in the left leg and charred wings; it is rather the atmosphere we live in, manifesting itself in turning traditional values inside out, in replacing respect with tolerance, charity with dubious philanthropy, love with sex, family with any social organization, religion with science, freedom with safety, and so on" (xi). However, Nowak is not a theologian, whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or natural (see 201). If one wanted to categorize this uncategorizable book, one could do worse than saying that it belongs to the no longer fashionable genre of "the philosophy of history" – although it is certainly not Hegelian.

The book consists of fourteen chapters, perhaps alluding to Paul's "rich epistolography" ("unluckily, he wrote 13 letters, although some argue it was 14" [2]). They address manifold topics – Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, Rene Girard's theory of the scapegoat, Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, D. H. Lawrence's *Apocalypse* (his meditation, cherished by Deleuze, on the last book of the Bible, which Luther wanted to excise from the sacred canon before changing his mind), Jacob Taubes, Joseph Roth, and Primo Levi, Jean Amery, W. G. Sebald, K. K. Baczyński, Czesław Miłosz, Krzysztof Michalski's interpretation of Nietzsche, Jonathan Lear's Heideggerean reflections on cultural obsolescence, Hannah Arendt (as refugee), and, in the final chapter, "the remainder of Christianity." Nowak's way of reading is invariably illuminating, often surprising, and sometimes perplexing. I cannot do justice to every detail of this remarkable book, so I will begin at the beginning, saunter through the middle (pausing to meditate in locations that seem particularly important to me, although given the variety of the scenery, others will find others more worthy of meditation), then stop at the end.

One might expect a book called *After Jews* to begin with a chapter called "Before Jews," in accordance with T. S. Eliot's maxim that "the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time."[2] Machiavelli's *Discourses on the First Ten Books of Titus Livy*, which diagnoses the weakness that the Roman church has brought to the present age and predicts a future in which ancient, pre-Christian Roman virtue will be renewed, begins with a chapter called "What Have

[1] Piotr Nowak, *After Jews. Essays on Political Theology, Shoah and the End of Man*, Anthem Press, London–New York 2022. The numbers in parentheses are the pages of this edition.

[2] T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, "Little Gidding," 5.

Been Universally the Beginnings of Any City Whatever, and What Was That of Rome." Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, which seeks to reconcile reactionaries to the present and to encourage revolutionaries not to despise the past if they want the postrevolutionary future to preserve some nobility and grace, begins with a depiction of the "External Configuration of North America." This depiction calls to mind that in the Book of Genesis of the newly created cosmos prior to the arrival on the scene of the first pair of human beings, who were also the first human sinners and who departed on a journey of discovery and conquest out of Eden into the world as we know it, the world of disease, misfortune, and death. Tocqueville's second chapter is called "On the Point of Departure and Its Importance for the Future of the Anglo-Americans." The philosophy of history seeks to understand the present and looks to the future, but typically it begins with the past.

Nowak follows such precedents up to a point, but he doesn't go all the way. Nowak's story begins in the first century, with the apostle Paul ("small, insignificant, low-ranking"), né Saul ("grand" – see page 196). Nowak doesn't begin with Abraham, or with Adam and Eve, still less with the "external configuration" of the world prior to the arrival of interiority itself and the "departure" from innocence that it freely initiated. Rather, Nowak begins with the *Epistle to the Romans*. However, one could argue that Nowak's point of departure is indeed an appropriate beginning for a book called *After Jews*. For although there were "Jews" before Paul, the meaning of "Jew" undergoes a transformation in the New Testament. Today, "Jew" is contrasted with "Christian" (even as they are linked in the conventional formula "Judeo-Christian" by means of an act of hyphenation that Jacques Derrida memorably described as "violent"), and this contrast originates in those texts, written in Greek, that Christians regard as holy and Jews today do not.

Nowak observes, "St. Paul emphasizes [...] that it is not ethnic but spiritual descent from Abraham that is necessary for salvation" (2). This idea can also be found in the Gospels, most strikingly in John, when the Pharisees tell Jesus that they are the "seed" (*sperma*) of Abraham, claiming natural descent from the patriarch. Jesus responds, "I know that you are the children [*tekna*] of Abraham: but you seek to kill me, because my word hath no place in you. [...] If you be the children [*tekna*] of Abraham, do the works of Abraham" (John 8:33-39). For the Pharisees, it is bodily kinship (*sperma*) that is important; Jesus acknowledges that the Pharisees are children (*tekna*) of Abraham in *this* sense ("I know that you are [...]") but adds that it is more important to be children in a spiritual sense. The Pharisees demonstrate that they are not Abraham's spiritual children by rejecting Jesus and resting their confidence in racial pride ("ethnic" is too weak, as the Pharisees emphasize their genealogy in the bodily sense, the fact that they *are* the seed or sperm of the patriarch). But for Jesus, it is those who "do the works of Abraham" who are his children in the most important sense, not those who are descended bodily from his seed. What Jesus says to the Pharisees about Abraham coheres perfectly with what Paul says to the Romans about those who are "a law unto themselves" (Romans 2:14), "the righteous Gentiles who were included in the spiritual order long before the birth of the Son of God" (Nowak, 3-4).

This is not to say that the sense of "Jew" referring to natural descent is not important in the New Testament, as we can infer from the genealogy of Jesus with which Matthew's Gospel begins (Matthew 1:1-17). Earlier in John, when Jesus tells the Samaritan woman

that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22), "Jew" is meant in this sense. The savior is born of a virgin, descended from the line of Abraham. But the racial or genealogical (*sperma*) meaning of "Jew" comes to be replaced by a spiritual meaning, which itself gives rise to a bifurcation. On the one hand, with a decidedly pejorative valence, the Jew comes to mean one who belongs to the synagogue that rejected the claim of Jesus to be the long-awaited messiah: "The Jews had already agreed among themselves, that if anyone should confess him to be Christ, he was to be put out of the synagogue" (John 9:22). On the other hand, one could *also* say that the Jew in *this* sense "isn't really a Jew" but rather the antithesis of a Jew (just as Jesus tells the Pharisees that they both are but, more importantly, are not the children of Abraham). Thus, in a striking and crucially important formulation, the Book of Revelation refers to "those who call themselves Jews" but are not really so, regardless of whether or not they are descended bodily from Abraham's seed, because they belong *spiritually* not to the reconstituted Israel but to "the synagogue of Satan" (Revelation 2:9).

As Nowak emphasizes, such thinking can also be found in Paul, who "*teaches the Jews* which one of them is a good, real Jew and which one is pretending to be a Jew" (8, Nowak's emphasis). "According to Paul, the true Jews are Christians, the orthodox heirs of the Jewish tradition" (10). Thus, the question of *what it means to be a Jew*, much-debated by Jewish writers in modernity but one that also "kindles the imagination of all sorts of anti-Semites" (8), is fraught with theological-political significance. One cannot answer such a question by calling upon a committee of lexicographers. There is no "neutral" or "impartial" criterion to which one can appeal. One's answer is bound to offend somebody.

Nowak has no truck with approaches akin to that of the influential "New Perspective on Paul" established by the American liberal Protestant biblical scholar E. P. Sanders's book *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.[3] For Sanders, most of the Jewish-Christian theological-political conflict during the past 2,000 years comes down to an unfortunate misunderstanding. Paul in fact believed there were two paths to salvation – one for Jews, who had no need to accept Christ as messiah and savior but were free to reject Him to their heart's content so long as they kept the Law, and another for everyone else, who (whether happily or not) had to confess the name of Christ to make it to heaven. It is difficult to say whether the New Perspective is inspired by misplaced compassion toward a persecuted people or merely by liberal fuzzy-mindedness and sentimentality. However that may be, Nowak demonstrates very clearly, with ample quotations, that Paul (the distinguished rabbi and former zealous persecutor of Christians) was out to tell *everyone* just what it means to be a *real* Jew. From now on, this requires that one accept Jesus as messiah – "those who call themselves Jews" but reject Christ don't get an "alternative option" (Americans love customizable menus, while Europeans expect a chef who knows what he's doing). Of course, Nowak recognizes that the same bifurcation that I noted above appears in Paul, too (see 12). We find it also in 1 Corinthians 1:23, when Paul famously asserts that while "Christ crucified" is "foolishness" to "the Greeks," Christ is a "stumbling block" to "the Jews." But Nowak doesn't emphasize with sufficient clarity what this implies – that the

[3] E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1977).

Jews wanted a powerful warrior, a kind of *Übermensch*, not a suffering servant who freely accepted a humiliating death on the cross.

However, Nowak's own orientation is neither Christian nor Jewish but secular and philosophical, one might say "Greek" (for Nowak, the crucified savior who literally rose from the dead is not a "stumbling block" but rather "foolishness") – even as Nowak believes that the language of political theology remains indispensable for comprehending our spiritual condition today and perhaps in any time. Nowak's fundamentally Greek orientation can be seen in his acceptance of a modified version of Nietzsche's hypothesis that there is a contradiction between Jesus's teaching and that of Paul, such that Paul is the real founder of Christianity (is this why he starts from Paul and not from the Gospels?) and thus the real originator of the Jewish-Christian split as we know it today. For Nowak as for Nietzsche, Jesus didn't teach doctrine or dogma, and (Nowak implies) all the evidence in the Gospels that suggests otherwise are distortions or fabrications. Jesus "trusted" in God *without* "believing" in God, for belief takes the form of doctrinal assent to propositions, whereas trust, Nowak posits, doesn't require any such thing:

> To sum up: There are two types of faith – a "better" one and a "worse" one. The "better" faith is that which *trusts in God* rather than *believes in Him*. At its best, this faith [...] is driven by spontaneity – it is natural, just like some poems and all sunsets are natural. It is born out of the experience of an entire nation, not an individual human being (which is why it attaches importance to law and rituals). The other type of faith (*pistis*) is created outside the history of a nation – on its margins, so to say – and consists in the conversion of an individual human being toward a credo, most often an absurd one. His or her individual choice is thus made outside the community and is ahistorical. Jesus inclined to the first type of faith, whereas the second characterized St. Paul. (14)

Nowak's confident assertion about the fundamental difference between the faith to which Jesus "inclined" and the kind that "characterized" Paul implies that Nowak understands Jesus better than Paul understood Jesus. It is worth noting that Nietzsche himself does not share Nowak's confidence in the very hypothesis that Nowak borrows from *The Antichrist*, with some modifications (e.g., Nowak's suggestion that Jesus "attaches importance to law and rituals," contrary to Nietzsche's claim in *The Antichrist* that "the Redeemer" was utterly indifferent to law and ritual).[4] This can be inferred from the fact that Nietzsche proposes three different, competing hypotheses about the teaching of the historical Jesus: the hypothesis he develops in *The Antichrist* and on which Nowak relies, but also two others in different aphorisms in *Beyond Good and Evil*, 164 and 269, the first of which presents Jesus as an antinomian and egalitarian religious teacher, while the other emphasizes the doctrine of eternal punishment and, in fact, fits rather well with Paul and with later Christian tradition.[5] One may conclude that Nietzsche didn't believe it possible,

[4] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, 32-35.
[5] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 164 and 269.

given the nature of the sources, to reconstruct the teaching of the historical Jesus with anything even distantly approaching certainty; all one can do is to develop and to explore various more or less plausible hypotheses. This distinguishes Nietzsche not only from Nowak (who, however, follows Nietzsche's psychological and literary approach to the sources) but also from biblical scholars, such as those of the so-called "Jesus seminar," who believe that empirical-scientific criteria can be developed by means of which it is possible to break down the Gospels, as if in a laboratory, into those particular elements that are Jesus's own words, translated *verbatim* into Greek, and those that are later fabrications (Nowak shows no sign of such superstitious vulgarity).

From the perspective of traditional Catholic (or Orthodox) theology, Nowak's distinction between trust in God and belief in God, as if the former could exist in the absence of the latter, his valorizing of noncreedal trust at the expense of creedal belief, the opposition he posits between the community and the individual and between exterior ritual and interior assent, his dismissal of the importance of interior assent, and above all the fundamental antithesis he affirms between Paul (as someone whose attitude anticipates that of hard-line theological pedants and heartless inquisitors) and Jesus are all unsustainable. It is important to point this out because, although Nowak is not an antireligious polemicist – on the contrary, he is favorable toward Christians today, whom he describes as "an unpopular minority" comparable in this respect to "gay people and transvestites" (Nowak, 192) – his argument directly implies that later Christian tradition is founded on a lie, and not an altogether noble one.

I noted that Nowak's orientation is neither Christian nor Jewish but "Greek." However, Nowak's take on Paul *is* Jewish in a certain, decisive sense. Nowak writes, "By going out into the wilderness, Moses starts a new People of God, whereas Paul wants to start his people anew. Obedient to the dead law, the 'old Jews' mark time, do not move on, while the 'new Jews,' those who proclaim the divinity of Christ, represent a genuinely new opening" (12). Now, it's true that, for Paul, Jesus inaugurates a new covenant (Thomas Aquinas even speaks of a "New Law"). But for Paul, those who call themselves Jews without accepting Jesus as messiah do not represent *authentic continuity* with the religion of Hebrew scripture, as if non-Christian Jews are simply doing things the old way when it's time to move on. Likewise, those who follow Christ do not practice a new religion. Rather, the Christian religion is the *same* as that of Hebrew scripture (the Old Testament), only manifest in its plenitude now that the prophesied messiah has arrived, while the religion of those who call themselves "Jews" but reject the messiah (this includes the Jews who were living in Poland in the first half of the twentieth century) is an essentially *different* faith from that revealed in Hebrew scripture, indeed a *new* faith, founded on the rejection of the *true* Jewish messiah and thus a misunderstanding of, and decisive *break* with, the older Jewish tradition. For Paul, those who reject Christ as messiah are not true to the faith of the prophets and the patriarchs.

Nowak doesn't appear to notice that, in claiming that Paul did not "[recognize] the continuity of the Jewish tradition" (14), he thereby takes sides in a religious dispute that ought not to concern him as a "Greek." Later, when discussing Jacob Taubes's interpretation of Paul, Nowak writes, "Over two thousand years have passed since the Lord promised man the Second Coming, and he has not kept his promise. Jews, who have already had

many messiahs, such as Jesus or Sabbatai Zevi, have been awaiting salvation even longer" (74). Further on: "For the Jews, revelation has a public dimension – its arena is human history: God is coming from the direction of their history. Revelation is always connected with that which already came to pass. For Christians, however, it is a spiritual event that wholly belongs to their private, apolitical world" (77). Nowak ignores the fact that "public revelation" is a concept integral to Catholic theology (unless he means to imply that Catholics aren't really Christians due to their distortion of the evangelical message?). Aquinas argues for the orthodox position that public revelation came to an end with the Book of Revelation, written by John the Evangelist.[6] In *Dei verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation of the Second Vatican Council (1965), we read: "The Christian dispensation, [...] as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (see 1 Tim. 6:14 and Tit. 2:13)."[7] More importantly, however, in affirming a fundamental continuity between the Jews of antiquity and those who came later and a radical discontinuity between the Jews of antiquity and the Christians, Nowak unwittingly takes the side of the Jews *against* the Christians with respect to a question recognized as profoundly important by both parties to the dispute. Leo Strauss asked of Spinoza, who was born a Jew, "Why does he take the side of Christianity in the conflict between Christianity and Judaism, in a conflict of no concern to him as a philosopher?"[8] Similarly, one might ask of Nowak, who was born a Catholic, why he takes the side of Judaism "in a conflict of no concern to him as a philosopher." Might it be that philosophers have an irresistible tendency, which may be more or less conscious, toward the inversion of origins?

I return now to the title of the book. Nowak is more correct than he seems to realize in beginning *After Jews* with a chapter on Paul because for Paul there were indeed no "Jews" *in the sense in which Nowak has in mind* before Christ. Why? Because it is not Jews but rather Christians who (in their acceptance of the messiah prophesied by the Jewish prophets) represent authentic continuity with prior Jewish tradition, while those Jews who reject Christ – "Jews" in Nowak's sense, including the Jews of Poland – represent a radical break with Jewish tradition. Christians and Jews, then, both represent novelty, but Christians represent the kind of novelty that fulfills the old law, whereas Jews (in a moment of dramatic irony) represent the kind that abolishes, or at least distorts, it. This idea would later be taken up by Muhammad against both Christians and Jews. The Qur'an teaches that both religious groups received authentic revelations ("the Torah" and "the Gospel") from the One God, which they subsequently distorted to suit their own particular purposes, turning mendaciously against the God who was so merciful as to communicate with them.[9]

It is interesting that Nowak supplies considerable textual detail for his mostly convincing reading of Paul but none at all for his idiosyncratically neo-Nietzschean picture of Jesus. One knows how Nowak reaches his conclusions about Paul; one can only speculate why he speaks with such confidence about who Jesus really was and the

[6] Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, Question 174.

[7] https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/dogmatic-constitution-on-divine-revelation-1539.

[8] Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 244.

[9] See Mun'im Sirry, "The Falsification of Jewish and Christian Scriptures," in *Scriptural Polemics: The Qur'an and Other Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 100-132.

kind of faith toward which Jesus had a certain "inclination." However, in a way the second chapter of *After Jews*, "The Secret of the Scapegoat (Rene Girard)," is about Jesus – not the historical Jesus as Nowak imagines him but rather the image of Jesus as sacrificial victim whose freely accepted death on the cross atoned for the sins of the human race.

In exile on St. Helena, Napoleon recognized in *this* Jesus a general who conquered the world posthumously through the loyalty and devotion he inspired in his army, a devotion analogous to but far greater than that inspired by glorious military leaders of world-historical importance, such as Alexander the Great (who, in fact, makes an appearance in the Qur'an as a prophet comparable to Moses or Jesus),[10] Caesar, or Napoleon himself:

> You speak of Caesar, of Alexander, of their conquests, and of the enthusiasm which they enkindled in the hearts of their soldiers; but can you conceive of a dead man making conquests, with an army faithful, and entirely devoted to his memory. My armies have forgotten me even while living, as the Carthaginian army forgot Hannibal. Such is our power! A single battle lost crushes us, and adversity scatters our friends. Can you conceive of Caesar as the eternal emperor of the Roman senate, and, from the depth of his mausoleum, governing the empire, watching over the destinies of Rome? Such is the history of the invasion and conquest of the world by Christianity; such is the power of the God of the Christians; and such is the perpetual miracle of the progress of the faith, and of the government of his Church. [...] I have so inspired multitudes, that they would die for me. [...] But, after all, my presence was necessary: the lightning of my eye, my voice, a word from me, then the sacred fire was kindled in their hearts. I do, indeed, possess the secret of this magical power which lifts the soul; but I could never impart it to any one. None of my generals ever learned it from me. Nor have I the means of perpetuating my name and love for me in the hearts of men. [...] Now that I am at St. Helena, now that I am alone, chained upon this rock, who fights and wins empires for me? who are the courtiers of my misfortune? who thinks of me? who makes effort for me in Europe? Where are my friends? [...] Such is the fate of great men! So it was with Caesar and Alexander. And I, too, am forgotten. [...] Behold the destiny, near at hand, of him whom the world called the great Napoleon! What an abyss between my deep misery and the eternal reign of Christ, which is proclaimed, loved, adored, and which is extending over all the earth! Is this to die? is it not rather to live?[11]

In this way, Napoleon tells us, Jesus survives in the hearts of men, whether or not the God-Man of church dogma is a historical or a theological reality. Having presented Paul as the first Christian theologian, it is appropriate that Nowak take up the theme of the Christ of faith, the Christ who conquered European culture, in the second chapter.

[10] Qur'an, Surah 18:89-98.

[11] Cited in John Stevens Cabot Abbott, *The Life of Napoleon Bonaparte*, vol. 2 (London: Ward, Lock and Co., 1899), 616-18.

However, Nowak takes this theme up in a rather indirect way, by means of a harsh critique of Rene Girard's theory of the scapegoat, which relies on an "infantile anthropology" (22).

This is the most polemical chapter in the book and one of the most persuasive. Nowak presents Girard as a philosopher for whom religion is of great importance, just as it is for Hegel, Heidegger, and Nowak himself: "There is mystery in a human being, and only religion can reveal this mystery to us. [...] In order to properly understand philosophy and science, one must first understand religion" (17). Religion is the most important dimension of our subphilosophical or transphilosophical spiritual life – for Hegel, the second most adequate form of appearance of the Absolute (philosophy is the most adequate); for Heidegger, the form of human existence (*Daseinsform*) antithetical to philosophy, its "mortal enemy" (*Todesfeind*), but for this very reason an important theme of ontological reflection.[12] Girard likewise recognizes the importance of religion, but for Girard, culture in all its complexity is reducible to imitative desire, the "mimetic" impulse. We want things only because other people want them; if I fall in love with a beautiful woman, it is only because she is desired by others or because I assume that she is so desired. As in Nietzsche, value is created, not discovered, but it is created not by the creative legislation of the superior individual but rather by the cowardly and vain collective, which is understood not on the model of Hegelian *Geist*, progressively developing more and more rational transparency and self-consciousness (albeit through the painful means of "the slaughterbench of history" and "the terrible labour of the negative"), but rather as trapped in a vicious circle of mimetic desires, guided by no authentic teleology. If nothing were done to stabilize this situation, human beings would tear each other to pieces. So the crisis is obviated by fixing on a scapegoat, an innocent and defenseless victim, "thanks to whom the entire community will then unite in the medium of hatred" (18).

For Girard, all culture is rendered comprehensible through this theory, but the Christian religion is unique in bringing the truth of culture to light. Nowak cites Girard: "Christianity, in the figure of Jesus, denounced the scapegoat mechanism for what it actually is: the murder of an innocent victim, killed in order to pacify a riotous community. That's the moment in which the mimetic mechanism is fully revealed" (19). Girard rejects the doctrine that Jesus's death in fact atoned for our sins. As Nowak paraphrases, "Here is the essence of Christian doctrine that is a great betrayal of the Gospel message. Christianity betrayed Christ, saying that He redeemed our sins, that He saved us from the fatal consequences of original sin, while in fact He only released our mutual anger" (20). Christianity teaches that it is precisely because Jesus was innocent that he was able to save us from our sins; Girard claims that it is precisely because Jesus was innocent that he could *not* save us from our sins: "Christ, however, could not be a victim because he was not guilty. *He did not voluntarily burden himself with man's evil in order to later redeem it*" (21, Nowak's emphasis). For Girard, the doctrine of the atonement is a "betrayal of evangelical values" (22).

Nowak argues, convincingly, that Girard's theory of culture is monstrously reductive and crude:

[12] "Phenomenology and Theology," in Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, trans. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 53.

> In his view, all cultural phenomena can be explained by the empirical theory of the scapegoat and the mimetic impasse. The complexities of human nature are questioned, the puzzles of the inner life are solved, and everything is reduced to the "social phenomena," just like in today's theater. Seen through Girard's eyes, human beings are flat and one-dimensional, consisting only of words and behaviors that are easy to fathom. Therefore, they are predictable, cowardly (they act in groups), cruel and dangerous. Is this the truth about man? There is no other, says Girard. (22)

This chapter includes one of the shrewdest observations in the book:

> One might presume that his scapegoat theory was first hardened on personal, psychological, typically *resentful* grounds, only later acquiring the features of a scientific concept. [...] Girard tends to emphasize the fact that he likes puzzles and secrets, or that he studies obliterated traces and explores forlorn paths. I do not think this is true. Girard is not at all interested in the human depths. (22, Nowak's emphasis)

Rather, Nowak demonstrates, Girard reduces human interiority to just so many instantiations of the same crudely external causal mechanism at work everywhere. There is no depth to be found anywhere, at all.

One wonders why Nowak chose to insert a chapter on Girard at just this place. Girard shares with Nowak the opinion that Christianity distorts the original message of Jesus, that the image of Jesus that conquered and ruled over European culture in a more-than-Napoleonic manner is an imaginative construction, not the preservation of an authentic "public revelation." But Girard understands culture itself through a crudely reductive mechanism, which Nowak elegantly dismantles. Perhaps, then, Nowak introduces Girard here because he wants to point us toward the structure of the problem that Girard solves in a grotesquely simplifying fashion – namely, the philosophical comprehension of post-Christian culture in all its glory, but also in its shame. In particular, the Holocaust of European Jews might seem to lend itself to explanation through Girard's theory of the scapegoat; the Nazis and their accomplices freed themselves from the mutual rage engendered by the vicious circle of mimetic desire by fixing on a victim (here a group, not an individual) who had done nothing to harm them. However, Nowak suggests that, just as human history as a whole cannot be understood through this simple mechanism, neither can this most recent catastrophe. The "founding murder" of postmodernity demands an approach more nuanced and more profound.

After Jews itself begins with two founding murders, though of an intellectual kind. The first two chapters, on Paul and Girard, share a certain polemical structure. Although Nowak is far more respectful of Paul than of Girard, both chapters end with a clear critique of their subject, which in each case appeals to Jesus. The first chapter ends by contrasting the faith of Paul with that of Jesus, while the second ends with a harsh criticism of Girard's theory of culture, a theory that Girard himself presents as the true meaning of Jesus's death, in contrast to the distortions of official church doctrine.

Having established his own authority through this double patricide, Nowak's attitude to his various subjects in the remaining chapters becomes, on the whole, more ambiguous. For example, the fourth chapter deals with D. H. Lawrence's interpretation of the Book of Revelation and Christianity itself. Like Nowak and Girard, Lawrence wants to recover the original teaching of Jesus, which he regards as distorted by later Christian tradition and even by much of Christian scripture, although like Nietzsche, and unlike Nowak and Girard, Lawrence goes so far as to criticize Jesus as an individual. Lawrence maintains that "Christ demonstrated a lack of political acumen" and "lied to the common people" (58). Nowak appears to sympathize with aspects of Lawrence's religious thought, such as the contempt with which Lawrence views the doctrine of rewards and punishments after death (see 47-48, 52, 55), and he defends Lawrence from the facile charge of "fascism" on the part of dogmatic egalitarians and partisan cheerleaders for democracy such as Bertrand Russell and Anthony Burgess (see 59-60). However, the conclusion to the chapter reserves judgment about many details of Lawrence's thought, which Nowak has just analyzed with sympathetic neutrality.

As the book develops, it becomes difficult to follow the thread of its argument because it doesn't develop in a linear fashion but rather in the manner of a well-patterned novel, the meaning of which is conveyed less by the plot than by the characters (Jews, Germans, Poles – Shylock, Sebald, Miłosz) and less by the characters than by the patterns that emerge and the themes that gradually crystallize.

Nowak is concerned with the idea of chosenness and with the Christian-Jewish split, which he presents as a historical dialectic that unfolds from the former, not, however, with the necessity of Hegelian teleology, the wound of Spirit that heals and "leaves no scars" – *die Wunden des Geistes heilen, ohne Narben zu hinterlassen* – but rather in a manner closer to that of Walter Benjamin's notion of a "stalled dialectic." Does the idea of chosenness manifest itself properly in the people who remain stubbornly apart, who cannot assimilate without ceasing to be themselves?

> *A Jew needs to be different than everybody else, or he is not a Jew at all.* [...] Under the mask, the Jew can pretend he is like others, that is, he can lie. Also to his God. But in reality, the Jew *has* different eyes, for he sees other things, looks somewhere else; he eats differently than Christians (kosher!), also he takes care of his bodily cleanliness in a decidedly different way (mikvah!). The Jew is different. (35-36, Nowak's emphasis)

Or does it manifest itself properly in Christian universalism focused on the God on the cross, the particularist Everyman, whose Holy Name offers salvation? Neither Christian nor Jewish but Greek, Nowak intentionally leaves these questions hanging.

Nowak is also concerned with the grittier historical dimension of the conflict between Christians and Jews, for example, in the third chapter, on *A Merchant of Venice*. With respect to this dimension, Nowak takes no sides but seems at times more sympathetic to the Christians (see the description of Antonio's Greco-Christian magnanimity [28]), at other times to the Jews:

> Hasidic religiousness created a highly sensual, quasi-erotic bond; faith was supposed to trigger a spontaneous joy in the believers, rather than a concern for what may come after death; it was meant to release and appreciate the sensual side of the human, rather than negating it, coaxing them, to take the first example, into a necessity of months-long fasting. Stripped of sensuality, religion promptly turns into fear (Catholicism) or a barren, intellectual speculation (Protestantism). (84)

But while Nowak recognizes that the Christian-Jewish split was a kind of formal precondition for the Holocaust, he doesn't resort to a facile blaming of Christianity. Rather, with darkly anti-Hegelian irony, Nowak presents the Holocaust as the culmination of the totalitarianism implicit in the modernization process itself. Nowak's argument echoes the famous thesis of Horkheimer and Adorno, while embracing the cultural nostalgia such a thesis implies more straightforwardly and honestly than do those quasi-Marxists.

Quite correctly, Nowak asserts that industrial-scale slaughter of human beings is possible only in modern conditions – and he emphasizes that this applies to the Allied bombings of German civilians, serving no military purpose (see 111), documented by the writer W. G. Sebald, no less than to the Nazi slaughter of defenseless Jews and gypsies. But as a philosopher of history, Nowak is concerned less with historiography than with *Zeitdiagnose*, "comprehending one's age in thought." For Nowak, the elimination of European Jews, *especially* the alien, unassimilable, eastern Jews of the shtetl (who might be contrasted with the cultured, assimilated Jews of western Europe, the doctors, professors, art-collectors, and piano-players, such as the protagonist of Roman Polanski's *The Pianist*, that liberal intellectuals like to portray in their novels, movies, and television shows and instinctively call to mind when they lament the Holocaust, preferring not to sully their imagination with images of dirty Lithuanian peasants or stinking village rabbis with unruly forelocks), is not only a horrifying fact of modern European history but *also* a symbol for the spiritual atmosphere of the secularized present:

> The Shoah was a necessary result of processes of modernization annihilating, one by one, every element of the old world, which came to be regarded as "swamped in gross superstitions," unfit for assimilation, and anachronistic. Eastern Jews, due to their incorruptible attitude to religion and tradition, played no accidental role of the victim in the work of destruction. It turned out that negotiating conditions of renouncing their forefathers' faith with the chosen people was impossible. They valued their religion over the miracles of the latest technology or the newest social solutions prompted by ideologies and lay prophets. [...] The requiem over the world of Eastern Jews is a mourning after the loss of truly human values – God, tradition, remembrance of the dead – after a fierce religiousness unharmed by an aggressive atheism and thoughtless boredom. Without them, without Jews, whose very own tradition transformed them into guardians of human values, we have been diminished in our very essence. (96-97)

No passage in *After Jews* conveys so clearly why Nowak regards the extermination of the Polish Jews – *not* the German Jews of the salons and the universities, Jews such as Rahel Varnhagen (immortalized in Hannah Arendt's famous study) or Hermann Cohen, but the unassimilated Polish Jews of the shtetl – as a symbol of the cultural devastation unleashed on the human spirit by modernity itself. Nowak's sympathy for the Jews *as* Jews (i.e., not "merely" as victims, like the victims of the Rwandan genocide, for example, an event to which Nowak, curiously, alludes several times), which at times seems even stronger than his sympathy for believing Christians *as* Christians, comes from a sense, similar to certain thoughts of Leo Strauss, that Jews of this kind are those denizens of twentieth-century Europe *most* untouched by European modernity (recall that Strauss characterizes the Christian tradition as "the perverse interweaving of a *nomos*-tradition with a philosophical tradition,"[13] something that Strauss would surely never say about Jewish Orthodoxy or the sages of the Talmud).

Nowak's thesis recalls Heidegger's notorious assertion (endorsed by Alexandre Kojève) that democratic America and Soviet Russia are "metaphysically the same" and his even more notorious comparison of the "mass production of corpses" in death camps with mechanized agriculture.[14] Perhaps partly to ward off the misunderstanding that his emphasis on the symbolic dimension of the Holocaust implies neglect of the nonsymbolic, fleshly suffering of the victims, Nowak includes a chapter on Jean Améry, who depicted his torture at the hands of the Nazis in vivid, horrifying detail in *At the Mind's Limits* (1966). Whatever might have to be said of Heidegger, whose "neglect of the body" can arguably already be found in *Being and Time*,[15] Nowak is surely immune to this criticism.

However, Nowak's argument proceeds on both a symbolic and an empirical level, and it is at times difficult to determine how exactly they are meant to be intertwined. Nowak observes, "The racist theory of the superiority of the Aryan race over others was only a screen, a pretext for the Holocaust. Its real cause was the unenlightened religiousness of the chosen people, which presented a challenge to the Enlightenment model of civilization" (186). Surely the survival of such unassimilable relics as the Jews of the shtetls poses a challenge to "the Enlightenment model of civilization," but the Nazi movement itself was in many respects an attack on this very model.

However, the Nazi movement cannot be opposed to the Enlightenment in the simple way that many partisans of secularism would like. Kant and Hegel, for example, found little to justify the continued existence in modernity of the Jews as a distinct people, stubbornly holding onto their traditions. Notoriously, Kant even called for "the euthanasia of Judaism."[16] Kant would surely never have called for, or even remotely sympathized

[13] Cited in Heinrich Meier, *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, trans. J. Harvey Lomax (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 8.

[14] Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. G. Fried and R. Polt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 48. For Kojève's approbation of this remark, see Waller R. Newell, "Kojève's Hegel, Hegel's Hegel, and Strauss's Hegel: A Middle Range Approach to the Debate about Tyranny and Totalitarianism," in *Philosophy, History, and Tyranny: Reexamining the Debate between Leo Strauss and Alexandre Kojève*, ed. T. Burns and B.-P. Frost (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 247-49.

[15] See Kevin Aho, *Heidegger's Neglect of the Body* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009).

[16] E. Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (New York: Albaris, 1979), 95.

with, the physical extermination of Jews, although it is easy to see that someone with similarly "enlightened" goals but a more brutal and impatient approach to the morality of means might be inspired by such formulae to contemplate the unthinkable. As for the leading Nazis themselves, it is well known that Eichmann appealed, however spuriously, to the categorical imperative to justify his crimes; it is less well known that Hitler praised Kant in an extremely banal way, but quite sincerely, appealing to Enlightenment clichés: "His complete refutation of the teachings which were a heritage from the Middle Ages, and of the dogmatic philosophy of the Church, is the greatest of the services which Kant has rendered to us."[17]

Nowak's proposal, then, even if suggestive and hyperbolic at the same time, is worthy of reflection and further development. John Lukacs, the Hungarian Catholic historian of Jewish descent who survived the Fascist and Communist occupations of Budapest before escaping in 1946 to the United States, argued that Hitler was not a reactionary or even a straightforwardly counter-Enlightenment figure. Rather, Hitler's political orientation, and the policies of the movement he spearheaded, combined traditional and modern, conservative and revolutionary elements in a dynamic synthesis, a point completely missed by neo-Marxist interpretations of Hitler as the archreactionary. Consider the following remarks from *The Hitler of History*: "Already during Hitler's lifetime, the terms 'right' and 'left' did not properly apply to him. Was he to the right or to the left of, say, the Pope? Or Franco? Or even Churchill?" (77); "The prospect he evoked was not that of a *return* to the Middle Ages but that of an enormous leap *forward*, to a new Dark Age" (77-78); "There were many things in National Socialism and in Hitler's ideas that were *modern*" (80); "He himself said on many occasions: reactionaries, as well as Communists or Marxists or Jews, were his main enemies, within Germany as well as abroad. Indeed (he said this often), within Germany the reactionaries were his most dangerous enemies" (82); "Often during the war, he told his circle that the business of taking the churches to task would have to wait until the end of the war. Then they would be properly dealt with, and German youth would be liberated from their influences" (91); "Hitler's interest in and respect for technology were considerable" (98); "Modernization does not necessarily mean a cult of youth; but for Hitler the latter was dominant. [...] The impression he gave of himself was seldom [...] that of a particularly youthful person. But his party and movement *were* youthful: In 1931, in Berlin 70 per cent of the SA were men under thirty, and in the Reichstag in 1930, 60 per cent of the National Socialist deputies were under forty, while only 10 per cent of the Social Democrats were [...]. Hitler seems to have been the creator of a free country of the young. Before them he plays not the role of a severe father but of a mother, a source of many pleasures and of love. He allows them pseudo-revolutionary freedom for their biological and sexual impulses, adding to his appeal" (99-100); "Hitler often used the word 'modern' approvingly" (103).[18]

[17] H. R. Trevor-Roper, ed., *Hitler's Table Talk, 1941-1944: His Private Conversations*, trans. Norman Cameron and R. H. Stevens (New York: Enigma Books, 2008), 720.

[18] All from John Lukacs, *The Hitler of History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

The leading Nazis saw themselves as executing the imperatives of a *true* Enlightenment and quite consciously forging a *new* unity of the German nation, even if – like most revolutionaries – they saw their revolutionary agenda as rooted in, and fulfilling, the highest potentialities of the past. Furthermore, it is quite true that the doctrine of biological racial superiority was more an effect than a cause of the Nazi movement and more a means to achieve its goals, a political weapon or instrument, than an end-in-itself, even if Nowak's formulation (the "real cause" of the Holocaust was "the unenlightened religiousness of the chosen people") risks oversimplification. Certainly, however, one cannot dismiss Nowak's thesis by observing that, unlike Kant or Hegel, Hitler didn't allow individuals of Jewish descent to assimilate by renouncing the Jewish religion. For a policy of crude biologism – and horrific physical violence – can *itself* serve idealistic or spiritual goals, including the most demonic ones. Lukacs writes, "Deterministic idealism [...] proved to be more inhumane than the deterministic materialism that had preceded and (lamentably) survived it. [...] And an incarnation of an unstinting belief in a determinist idealism was Adolf Hitler."[19]

But what about the symbolic dimension of Nowak's thesis? Can we say that the Holocaust of European Jews considered *as* Jews (not as anonymous, innocent victims, with no status other than mere suffering, fleshly humanity, although they can *also* be considered in this way, as can all victims of violent persecution), and more particularly the disappearance of Jews from Poland after Nazi murders and Communist expulsions, crystallizes the world-spirit of modernity, the cultural annihilation wrought by secularization, which must also be described (even by a Greek) as the spirit of Antichrist?

In one sense, Nowak's thesis is surely correct and brings to light the intolerance concealed in secular modernity's promise of freedom: "European, post-Enlightenment modernity cannot – it is not able to – incorporate into its own bloodstream those elements that in its eyes are considered pre-Enlightenment, 'barbaric' remnants that deserve 'hospitalization' or rejection" (181). Nowak's account of the present age, dominated by "Canadian policemen," as the world of Antichrist is similar to the Catholic political philosopher James Kalb's characterization of modernity as an "antiworld," "a rebellion against God, nature and history," which has "led to the suppression of many things that have always been fundamental to human society – religion, cultural particularity, even the distinction between the sexes."[20] Kalb observes,

> The contemporary liberal state cannot allow people to take seriously the things they have always taken most seriously. They can say they are Catholics, Muslims, or anything else, but what they mean by that has to be consistent for practical purposes with the liberal view. In effect, they have to accept that their religion – their understanding of the nature of man and the world – has to become a matter of private taste. Those who do not accept the transformation are excluded from public discussion as cranks who oppose freedom, equality, and reason.[21]

[19] Lukacs, *The Hitler of History*, 258.
[20] James Kalb, "Out of the Antiworld," *Modern Age* (Summer 2013).
[21] Ibid.

Insofar as the Jews were exterminated because *as* Jews they were unassimilable, the Holocaust can be taken as a symbol for the intolerance implicit in secularism – a thesis with a certain poignant irony, given that the Holocaust is often taken as *the* justification for a secular, modern, liberal-democratic order insofar as it is assumed that *only* such a political order can prevent history from repeating itself with catastrophic effect.

On the other hand, however, while Nowak argues that Jews *as* Jews were the most characteristic *victims* of the modernization process (even as similar things could be said about, for example, unassimilable Catholics *as* Catholics, Muslims *as* Muslims, and so on), it has often been argued – with some plausibility – that Jews *as* Jews are paradigms of modernity itself. For example, in *The Jewish Century* (2004), historian Yuri Slezkine argues that modernization is the process by which *everyone* becomes Jewish:

> The Modern Age is the Jewish Age, and the twentieth century, in particular, is the Jewish Century. Modernization is about everyone becoming urban, mobile, literate, articulate, intellectually intricate, physically fastidious, and occupationally flexible. It is about learning how to cultivate people and symbols, not fields or herds. It is about pursuing wealth for the sake of learning, learning for the sake of wealth, and both wealth and learning for their own sake. It is about transforming peasants and princes into merchants and priests, replacing inherited privilege with acquired prestige, and dismantling social estates for the benefit of individuals, nuclear families, and book-reading tribes (nations). Modernization, in other words, is about everyone becoming Jewish. [...] But no one is better at being Jewish than the Jews themselves. In the age of capital, they are the most creative entrepreneurs; in the age of alienation, they are the most experienced exiles; and in the age of expertise, they are the most proficient professionals. Some of the oldest Jewish specialties – commerce, law, medicine, textual interpretation, and cultural mediation – have become the most fundamental (and the most Jewish) of all modern pursuits. It is by being exemplary ancients that the Jews have become model moderns.[22]

Perhaps there is something unique about the Jewish people – the chosen people – that allows them to serve equally well as symbols for, or living embodiments of, opposite things?

This difficulty may be related to a well-known ambiguity at the heart of Jewish identity. Does "being Jewish" mean being the adherent of a particular religion (like "being Christian")? Or is it rather a national identity, connoting belonging, not necessarily to a particular *state* (like "being Israeli"), but rather to a particular *people* (like "being Polish" or "being Kurdish")? Or is it somehow *both* and – if so – how do they fit together? Difficulties of this kind are not unique to the Jews, but the Jews somehow instantiate them in an exemplary way. Dramatically, but rather carefully, Leo Strauss wrote, "From every point of view it looks as if the Jewish people were the chosen people, at least in the sense

[22] Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 11.

that the Jewish problem is the most manifest symbol of the human problem insofar as it is a social or political problem."[23] Hannah Arendt's study of Rahel Varnhagen concludes, in effect, that to be Jewish is to be just like everyone else – only even more so. That is to say, irreducibly singular, unable to escape one's origins, even (or especially) if one is willing to betray them, but equally unable to embrace them fully, always somewhat alienated, not only from others but also from oneself, but – if one is sufficiently wise and sufficiently human – ultimately thankful for the difficulties resulting from the identity with which one is thrown into the world.[24] More brutally, Theodor Herzl wrote, "Universal brotherhood isn't even a beautiful dream. The enemy is necessary for the highest exertions of the personality."[25]

Nowak comes down hard on one side of the debate about identity. Twice he says that the formula "religious Jews" is a "pleonasm" because "there are no nonreligious Jews" (2, 186). The Jews in the title *After Jews* are unassimilable orthodox Jews and by extension or analogy every stubbornly religious person, Jewish or not, who refuses to bow the knee to "Antichrist" – that is to say, to the spirit of our age. But it's not clear that Nowak sticks consistently to this principle. Discussing Uriel Acosta, the seventeenth-century freethinker, Nowak writes, "The rebellion Acosta started was Talmudic in its character; certainly, it was a strong rejection, yet it was directed against Jewish orthodoxy and not against Jewishness in its entirety. This is indicated by the last sentence in which he not only renounces the Jewish name he adopted in his youth but also decides to keep it" (31). In the preface, he observes, "Within the borders of the Republic of Poland [...] there was a lack of unanimity on many fundamental issues within the Jewish community. Jews wanted state subsidies for Jewish schools, but could not decide whether the language of instruction should be Hebrew – the language of Zionists and Orthodox Jews – or Yiddish, spoken by the people, workers, laymen and socialists" (viii). Nowak doesn't seem to want to imply that the nonreligious Zionists and socialists "aren't really Jews" or don't belong to "the Jewish community." Nor does he excommunicate from the synagogue such Jews of ambiguous religiosity as Leo Strauss (was he Jewish or Greek? – after all, in a private letter, he said that Maimonides was "absolutely *not* a Jew"!),[26] Jonathan Lear (an adopted member of the Crow tribe, whom one assumes worships the Crow gods or spirits and is thus a polytheist or at least an idolater) or Primo Levi ("from a family of Italian Jews that had for centuries been assimilated" [95]). Nowak denies none of them the status of "Jew."

In different ways, Jews like Strauss (who was born a Jew but became a philosopher who believed that philosophy cannot be united with *any* religion) and Arendt (who wanted to be both a Jew and German but found out the hard way that she was merely a Jew in Germany, living precariously), Herzl (who was a Jewish anti-Semite as a young man[27] but

[23] Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 230.

[24] See Hannah Arendt, "One Does Not Escape Jewishness (1820-1833)," *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: Harcourt, 1974), 216-28.

[25] Theodor Herzl, *Der Judenstaat* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 1920), 68 (my translation).

[26] Leo Strauss to Jacob Klein, February 16, 1938, cited in Catherine Zuckert, "Stauss's Return to Premodern Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Leo Stauss*, ed. Steven B. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 106n29.

[27] See Jacques Kornberg, *Theodor Herzl: From Assimilation to Zionism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

later became the founder of modern political Zionism) and Saint Paul (who remained a Jew in one sense by virtue of the very act through which he ceased to be a Jew in another) draw our attention to the question: Is being a Jew a choice, something that requires loyalty and commitment (or else one ceases to be a Jew, through apostasy or assimilation) and, perhaps, something one can therefore *become* (in converting to Judaism, *one chooses to be chosen*) – or is it rather something one can't escape from, even if one would dearly like to?

One can begin by saying, provisionally, that the Jew is defined in part by his relationship to the "seed" (*sperma*) of Abraham, a kinship that can be established also through religious conversion to the religion *of* the people descended from Abraham's seed (as in Judah Halevi's *Kuzari*), not only through actual biological descent. However, the Jew can also be defined negatively, through his not having converted to a different religion, especially Christianity. The conservative rabbi and renowned scholar of Judaism Jacob Neusner distinguishes "Judaists" from "Jews": "The ethnic group does not define the religious system. [...] All Judaists – those who practice the religion, Judaism – are Jews, but not all Jews are Judaists. That is to say, all those who practice the religion, Judaism, by definition fall into the ethnic group, the Jews, but not all members of the ethnic group practice Judaism."[28] However, Neusner also claims that Christianity has a unique *negative* function in determining who counts as a Jew, not only religiously but *also* ethnically: "The ethnic community opens its doors not by reason of outsiders' adopting the markers of ethnicity [...] but by reason of adopting what is not ethnic but religious. [...] While not all Jews practice Judaism, in the iron-clad consensus among contemporary Jews, Jews who practice Christianity cease to be part of the ethnic Jewish community, while those who practice Buddhism remain within."[29]

The negative function of Christianity in determining Jewish identity manifests itself in many ways, both personal and political. The Catholic apologist of Jewish descent Roy Schoeman describes his search for God prior to his conversion: "I remember praying, 'Let me know your name – I don't mind if you are Buddha, and I have to become a Buddhist; I don't mind if you are Apollo, and I have to become a Roman pagan; I don't mind if you are Krishna, and I have to become a Hindu; as long as you are not Christ and I have to become a Christian!'"[30] The example of Oswald Rufeisen, who converted to Catholicism and became a Carmelite monk, is telling. Rufeisen – who had saved hundreds of Jewish lives through a feat of remarkable daring in Belarus in 1941 – applied for Israeli citizenship under the Law of Return on the grounds of his Jewish *ethnicity*, which in his view his *religious* conversion to Christianity did not erase: "My ethnic origin is and always will be Jewish. I have no other nationality. If I am not a Jew, what am I? I did not accept Christianity to leave my people."[31] However, his application was rejected on the grounds that he had become a Christian; he appealed the decision, but it was upheld by the Supreme Court of Israel (Rufeisen vs. Minister of the Interior, 1962). Rufeisen later became an

[28] Jacob Neusner, "Defining Judaism," in *The Blackwell Companion to Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery-Peck (Hoboken, NJ: Blackwell, 2003), 5.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Roy Schoeman, *Salvation Is from the Jews: The Role of Judaism in Salvation History from Abraham to the Second Coming* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2003), 360.
[31] *Time Magazine*, December 7, 1962, 54.

Israeli citizen through naturalization, but the Supreme Court decided that a Jew who converted to another religion would lose their automatic right to Israeli citizenship *as a Jew*. However, as Neusner suggests, conversion to Christianity is typically regarded as uniquely scandalous; had Rufeisen been a Buddhist monk or a Hindu swami at the time of his application, it is unlikely that it would have been rejected on these grounds, leading to the setting of new precedent. Finally, I mention the example of Gillian Rose, the British Jewish critical theorist, author of *The Melancholy Science*, a pioneering study of Theodor Adorno's thought, and *Hegel contra Sociology*, who converted to Christianity (she was received into the Church of England) just before she died of ovarian cancer at the age of 48 in 1995. The news was greeted by intensely hostile accusations of betrayal despite – or, perhaps, partly owing to – the intimate character of the event.[32] Death underscores the limits of ecumenical tolerance.

Nowak's claim, then, that strictly speaking there is no such thing as a nonreligious Jew is a little too hasty. There is of course a difference between Israeli law and Jewish religious law – and Nowak would correctly insist that the latter is far more important for the question of Jewish identity. The state of Israel is a political construction, a hybrid of the modern nation-state and the colonial settlement; the Jews are a *people*, who preceded this construction and would survive its dissolution. But one must make a further distinction: according to the Halakha, anyone born of a Jewish mother remains a Jew, regardless of his religious divagations, *precisely because the Jews are a people*, but according to the Jewish "man on the street" (that is to say, the overwhelming majority, secular or religious), as Neusner emphasizes, the Jew who converts to Christianity is not only an apostate from his faith but also a traitor to his people. The Jew who converts to Buddhism or even to Islam, by contrast, will merely be the object of curiosity or ridicule. This is one of those rare occasions where the Jewish "street" (no stranger to pork and cheeseburgers) is more stringent than the rabbis.[33]

The distinctively Jewish mix of peoplehood and religious identity, in which neither can be detached from, nor wholly collapsed into, the other, and which involves a peculiar relation to Christianity of negative self-definition (Hegel would call it "determinate negation"), is a conundrum to which Jews have devoted much reflection but which the most thoughtful among modern Jewish thinkers – such as Leo Strauss (who compared Husserl's putatively insincere conversion to Christianity to Heidegger's enthusiastic submission to Nazism, saying that it would be "a task for a casuist of exceptional gifts [...] to weigh their respective demerits and merits"!)[34] – rarely claim to have resolved.[35] Taking the physical annihilation of Jews, especially the unassimilable Jews of the east, in

[32] See Arnold Jacob Wolf, "The Tragedy of Gillian Rose," *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought* 46, no. 184 (1997).

[33] I'm grateful to Prof. Andrew German (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel) for illuminating discussions on this topic.

[34] Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 31. This remark is particularly strange if viewed in the context of Strauss's own thesis of esotericism as an imperative of philosophical prudence.

[35] See the inconclusive discussion of "Why We Remain Jews: Can Jewish Faith and History Still Speak to Us?," in Leo Strauss, *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity: Essays and Lectures in Modern Jewish Thought*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), 311-15.

the Nazi Holocaust as a symbol for the cultural devastation wrought by secularization is a suggestive and thought-provoking thesis, and true enough as far as it goes, but it takes us to the doorstep of problems that Nowak doesn't address, perhaps because it is not his intention in *After Jews*.

In support of Nowak's thesis, one can note that the Nazis were neo-pagans of a sort, who persecuted not only Jews but also, albeit to a lesser extent, Christians (especially Catholic Poles), while modernity itself has always contained an integral neo-pagan stratum. The latter can be traced to the very inception of modernity in Machiavelli, who praised the old religion for the terror and ferocity it produced. This is what he says:

> Our religion [...] makes us esteem less the honor of the world, whereas the Gentiles, esteeming it very much and having placed the highest good in it, were more ferocious in their actions. This can be inferred from many of their institutions, beginning from the magnificence of the sacrifices as against the humility of ours. [...] Neither pomp nor magnificence of ceremony was lacking there, but the action of the sacrifice, full of blood and ferocity, was added, with a multitude of animals being killed there. This sight, being terrible, rendered men similar to itself. Besides this, the ancient religion did not beatify men if they were not full of worldly glory, as were captains of armies.[36]

But the post-Christian ferocity and violence of modernity, directed against both the body and the spirit (unlike the pagan holocaust of animals that Machiavelli depicts), has rendered men alternately terrifying, like Hitler and his "captains," and terrifyingly banal, like Nietzsche's last men, "whose race is as inextinguishable as the flea-beetle."[37]

In the discussion period after a 1959 lecture called "The Meaning of Working through the Past," Theodor Adorno was asked if he thought that Christianity could play a role in combating murderous anti-Semitism. Adorno's response contains two interesting and related remarks. First, Adorno relates that in the camps, Nazi murderers would mock their victims by challenging God to intervene on their behalf, taking His nonintervention as a confirmation of His powerlessness, in a way that recalls Annas and Caiaphas mockingly telling Christ that if He came down from the cross they would accept Him as messiah: "It's in all the Nazi atrocities, for instance, also in that they hauled off eighty- and ninety-year-olds into the camps and killed them, even this is part of it, as it were to challenge the Christian or Jewish God: come on, show us what You can do. And if He allows it and there's no bolt of lightning, then it is a sort of triumph."[38] Second, Adorno emphasizes that religion instrumentalized for political purposes, even noble and compassionate ones, ceases to be religion:

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[36] Machiavelli, *Discourses on Livy*, trans. Harvey Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov, bk. 2, chap. 2, para. 2 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 131.

[37] Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, bk. 1, prologue 5 (my translation).

[38] Theodor Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Harry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 301.

> One cannot pronounce something like a religious ideal for the sake of the effect it has. There is only one legitimation for pronouncing an ideal, and that is its own truth. I would say that the collective role Christianity plays today in a large measure is that people seek and accept it because they believe they find a bond in it. But not at all for the sake of its own truth, and I think that in this tendency there is something that is extraordinarily dangerous for these very religions. And I think, the theologians would grant me this most heartily, that enlisting so to speak religious motives in order to confirm something else, as long as these religious motives are not entirely transparent and as long as they are not based on the truth, that this is a very double-edged matter.[39]

With the difficulties raised by Adorno in mind, I turn now to the final chapter of *After Jews*, "The Remainder of Christianity," where Nowak addresses the question of theology more sustainedly than anywhere else in the book. In the conclusion to the preceding chapter, Nowak qualifies his praise of Giorgio Agamben's diagnosis of "the degeneration of European reason" with a gentle criticism of his excessively "harsh" relationship with theology: "He himself admits that his relationship with theology is somewhat harsh. It is similar to that between blotting paper and ink" (190). Nowak proposes instead to return political philosophy to "the inexhaustible source of theology" (190). But what precisely does this involve?

I observed that Nowak is neither Christian nor Jewish but "Greek." But Greeks can have rather different attitudes toward religion, from barely disguised contempt (Hobbes), for example, to appreciation of its political usefulness combined with concern with the dangers of superstition (Spinoza). There is also a long and venerable tradition of viewing religion as an imaginative or representational articulation of philosophical truth, inferior to a properly intellectual articulation, but nonetheless valuable insofar as it makes such truth accessible, in a mediated and thus limited and perhaps distorted form, to those who lack the capacity for philosophy proper. One finds different versions of this approach stated very explicitly in Alfarabi and Hegel; arguably, it can be traced all the way back to Plato's *Republic*, even though there is no word in classical Greek that can be translated directly as "religion."

Nowak has a certain affinity with this tradition. For example, he rejects the idea of otherworldly rewards and punishments as an old wives' tale, a crudely literal understanding of "eternal life" or "the Second Coming"; even if the common people believe in such things, Nowak prefers to understand this teaching as an image or symbol for a temporal event "that gathers an entire life in a brief moment, in a chance, a jump, a short flash," illuminating its significance and bringing to light what is essential and what is not (199), somewhat like Nietzsche's thought of eternal return when he first introduces it in *The Gay Science*.[40] While the "second death" that unrepentant "murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers" will suffer is traditionally taken to refer to hell (Revelation 21:8), Nowak claims that the "second death" captures rather the failure *in this world* to arrive at "the meaning of one's own life" (198). Nowak's point isn't about the historical intention of

[39] Ibid., 302.
[40] See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (Leipzig: Fritzsch, 1887).

the New Testament writers but rather about the *philosophical meaning* of their poetic, revelatory speech.

However, Nowak is far less confidently rationalist than a medieval "Averroist," to say nothing of Hegel; for Nowak, the reason we "talk about God" is that "it is impossible to stay silent about God," even as the name "God" signifies "the elementary human relations with what remains hidden, what is obscured by darkness and oblivion" (191). Anticipating the objection that there's no reason to call this "God," Nowak responds that there's no better alternative than the time-tested one: "You can try some other way" (191). Such inchoate theological yearning is rooted in human nature and hallowed by tradition. In his approach to religion, Nowak comes closest, among all the great philosophers, to Heidegger insofar as he sees religion as an inexhaustible source of metaphysical depth, which philosophy ignores at its peril, while adopting a resolutely nondoctrinal approach to religious experience. Seth Benardete observed that "Heidegger may be the first philosopher to think the sacred without a theology."[41] Nowak is in this lineage. He says that "a living faith must break away from theology" (201), a claim utterly alien to every Catholic saint, for example, including those who were not scholars or theologians, including even the illiterate. Calling to mind Heideggerean theologians such as Jean-Luc Marion, Nowak claims that it is "idolatrous" and "ungodly" to ask questions such as, "Does God exist?" or "Do unbaptized babies really go straight to hell?" (201). Nowak thinks that catechisms are for children, Sunday school teachers, country parsons, and the pathologically fearful or credulous, not for those intransigently seeking the truth.

Given that there is a certain Straussian inspiration in *After Jews*, it is important to emphasize that Nowak's approach to religion is far more Heideggerean than Straussian, as I suspect that he is aware. While Strauss saw philosophy and religion as fundamental alternatives (in contrast to Aquinas, whom one could plausibly argue is *the* alternative to Strauss), the kind of religion that Strauss took as representing a serious challenge to philosophy is not the elusive Heideggerean or Nowakian kind but the more traditional kind about which Heidegger and Nowak are respectfully dismissive (the early Heidegger would tell his students that "we honor theology by keeping silent about it,"[42] curiously reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's claim that today "theology [...] is wizened and has to keep out of sight").[43] Strauss by contrast took seriously "that notion of providence according to which God literally governs the world as a just king governs his kingdom"[44] and observes that "traditional theology had a proper regard for the objective evidence concerning the beginnings of revealed religion."[45] In short, Strauss would not dismiss traditional apologetics as impatiently as Heidegger or Nowak.

One's response to the final chapter of *After Jews* will depend on one's personal religious or theological "inclination," to use the language that Nowak applies to Jesus (see

[41] Cited in Richard Velkley, *Being after Rousseau* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 190n50.
[42] Cited in Andrzej Wierciński, *Existentia Hermeneutica: Understanding as the Mode of Being in the World* (Zurich: LIT Verlag, 2019), 249.
[43] Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 253.
[44] Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958), 197.
[45] Ibid., 204.

14). I found it to be among the weaker chapters in the book, but the reader who perceives religion to be of profound human importance in a sense that goes beyond the merely political and finds the thoughtless arrogance of modern secularists superficial and repellent, but who *also* finds the notions of life after death, rewards and punishments, miracles and resurrection, to say nothing of the dogmatic teaching authority of the church or the postulate of a God who "literally governs the world as a just king governs his kingdom," to be unworthy of belief, will find a kindred spirit in Nowak, as he would in Heidegger.

Nowak's approach to religion can be illustrated by his claim that faith is the "causative principle in Christianity" – without faith, the communion wine will certainly *not* become the body and blood of Christ (199). Although Nowak leaves it ambiguous to *whose* faith he refers, this claim is in direct opposition to traditional Catholic doctrine, according to which the substance of the consecrated bread and wine is transformed wholly irrespective of whether the communicant receiving, or even the priest consecrating, the bread and wine has a committed, sincere faith. This is not an arbitrarily selected point of disagreement; rather, this example succinctly illustrates Nowak's general approach to religion – for him, it is not an objective system in relation to which the potential or actual believer can position himself, rooted in an act of revelation by which God reaches down to man of His own initiative, but rather a phenomenon internal to the human spirit. The substance of religion is the human spirit reaching out into the darkness for a God who may not exist, not God reaching down into *our* darkness in order to illuminate it supernaturally, enabling us to share in His knowledge of Himself. As Nowak puts it, "Faith does not even need the object of faith; faith is sufficient for itself" (201).

I conclude with the theme of "Antichrist." Summarizing centuries of Catholic tradition and scholarship, from the Church Fathers to John Henry Newman, the entry on "Antichrist" in the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1907) tells us:

> Koppe, Nitzsch, Storr, and Pelt contended that the Antichrist is an evil principle, not embodied either in a person or a polity; this opinion is in opposition to both St. Paul and St. John. Both Apostles describe the adversary as being distinctly concrete in form. [...]
>
> The individual person of Antichrist will not be a demon, as some of the ancient writers believed; nor will he be the person of the devil incarnated in the human nature of Antichrist. He will be a human person, perhaps of Jewish extraction.[46]

Unsurprisingly, Nowak by contrast emphasizes that the Antichrist is certainly *not* a particular human individual but rather the spiritual atmosphere of the times in which we live (see 186). This is not the place to adjudicate this dispute. I will merely note that Nowak emphasizes that the Antichrist should not be thought of as a cartoonish amalgamation of clichés come to life ("charred wings," etc.), and this is quite right from every point of view. In his autobiography *Confessions of an Original Sinner*, John Lukacs makes this point well: "The Anti-Christ will be well-combed and smiling and popular, not someone with disrespectable

[46] https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01559a.htm.

ideas, crazy hair and a spiky Luciferian goatee."[47] In *The Hitler of History*, Lukacs is less playful but no less serious: "The Antichrist will not be horrid and devilish, incarnating some kind of frightful monster – hence recognizable immediately. He will not seem to be anti-Christian. He will be smiling, generous, popular, an idol, adored by masses of people because of the sunny prosperity he seems to have brought, a false father (or husband) to his people. Save for a small minority, Christians will believe in him and follow him."[48]

Confronted by the alternately gruesome and banal horrors of modernity, one cannot help but sympathize with Nowak's decision to use the language of "Antichrist." For Nowak, the only appropriate response to the devastation unleashed by the modernization process is to reach for the language of "political theology," to draw sustenance from the "inexhaustible source" of faith. But for Nowak, we turn *to* theology and faith not *as* theologians or believers but as philosophers who feel the inadequacy of our own rationalism, the darkness coloring the *lumen naturale* and threatening to extinguish it, without thereby ceasing to be "Greeks" and becoming Christians, Jews, or Muslims because "no reasonable person will believe in God" (201). Is this sufficient? Nowak comes dangerously close to the two difficulties raised by Adorno for those who would wield faith as a weapon, or even just as a shield, against the murderous neo-paganism of late modernity, whether we confront murderers only of the body or also of the soul. "And fear ye not them who kill the body, and are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him that can destroy both body and soul in hell" (Matthew 10:28). On the one hand, we may find ourselves in a despairing conversation with our torturers resembling Winston's conversation with O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

> "I *know* that you will fail. There is something in the universe, I don't know, some spirit, some principle, that you will never overcome."
> "Do you believe in God, Winston?"
> "No."
> "Then what is it, this principle that will defeat us?"
> "I don't know. The spirit of Man."
> "And do you consider yourself a man?"
> "Yes."
> "If you are a man, Winston, you are the last man. Your kind is extinct; we are the inheritors. Do you understand that you are *alone*? You are outside history, you are non-existent."[49]

On the other hand, as Adorno wisely reminds his interlocutors, the only "legitimation" for advocating religion is sincere belief in its divinely revealed truth, and any other approach will be a very "double-edged" enterprise indeed.

[47] John Lukacs, *Confessions of an Original Sinner* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1990), 196.
[48] Lukacs, *The Hitler of History*, 266.
[49] George Orwell, *Ninteen Eighty-four* (New York: Signet, 1977), 222.