

Remembering Pope Francis Through a Jewish Lens

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An oxymoron is a figure of speech, usually one or two words, in which seemingly contradictory terms appear side by side. Here are a few examples:

- alone together
- bittersweet
- deafening silence
- deceptively honest

Oxymoron comes from the Greek word *oksús* (meaning “keen”) and *mōros* (meaning “stupid”). The word oxymoron is quite literally an oxymoron!

This morning, as the world stands transfixed on the funeral of Pope Francis, I want to add another to the list: Judeo-Christian. I do this not out of disrespect, but out of a sincere desire to understand how such a profoundly good and caring man could have such seemingly different approaches to the Jewish People, antisemitism and the State of Israel.

Judeo-Christian Ethics: It was first described in print in 1941 by English writer George Orwell. The idea that Judeo-Christian ethics underpin American politics, law and morals has been part of the "American civil religion" since the 1940's. The term served as the conceptual bullwork in the American fight against communism. The West under American leadership, would lead the world toward democracy, standing on the religious traditions of Judaism and Christianity pitted against the godless Communists.

While it made an excellent slogan, the phrase Judeo-Christian is an oxymoron. It combines two very different monotheistic religions and suggests that except for Jesus, Judaism and Christianity are really pretty much the same. After all, we worship the same God and read from the same Bible.

Aside from the illogical nature of forcing two great monotheistic religions together, the term Judeo-Christian deprives them of their essence.

Judaism is a covenantal religion, based upon the notion of the *Am*: A people that understands itself as the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, a land promised by God, and an obligation to follow the Torah to fulfill the vision for the world of the Almighty. Christianity bases itself on the notion it has superseded Judaism through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, universalized the covenant to include all people who accept their Lord's sacrifice, and does away with both the force of the commandments in the Torah, and the land of Israel as the homeland of the Jewish people.

Decoupling Judaism and Christianity allows each of these great religions to stand on their own belief system and their own integrity. It also offers us insight into the way the Vatican has understood the return of the Jewish people to the land of Israel in the modern period.

On this Shabbat, the world is transfixed on the burial of Pope Francis. Since his death on Monday, so much has been written on the legacy of his papacy. It is only natural to reflect on how the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, the Successor of Paul, should be considered in the Jewish community.

An honest appraisal will begin with Pope Francis' true caring and love for all of humanity, but, also, just how our very different religious differences impacted his thinking in ways that were not only painful but dangerous for Jews and most especially Israelis. The timing of his death just a few days from Yom Ha'atzmaut, the 77th anniversary of Israel, makes it all the more pointed.

In his long, consequential career, Pope Francis was an insistent voice for humility within the Roman Catholic Church. Eschewing many of the traditional luxuries afforded to pontiffs, he insisted on living in relatively modest circumstances, choosing a small apartment within the Vatican instead of the usual Pope's living quarters, and cooking his own dinners. "My people are poor, and I am one of them," he was known to say.

In many ways, Pope Francis was a champion for Jewish causes. Before his tenure as Pope, Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Archbishop of Buenos Aires in 1998. In his new role, he reached out to Buenos Aires' sizeable Jewish community, forging friendships with prominent Jewish leaders. One of these was Rabbi Abraham Skorka, an educator and former leader of Bene Tikva Congregation in Buenos Aires. The Archbishop and Rabbi Skorka promoted interreligious dialogue which is something that continued throughout his Papacy. While serving in Argentina he attended a Holocaust memorial service in Bene Tikva, and in 2010 the two men published a book together, *On Heaven and Earth* in which they put forward Jewish and Catholic positions on a range of issues.

Upon ascending to the Papacy, Pope Francis counted Jews among his friends and aided researchers exploring the Catholic Church's role in the Holocaust. Damning information about Pope Pius the 12th, and the manner in which he abandoned the Jews of Europe during the Shoah, was locked away. Pope Francis had the courage to open the Vatican archives to the world.

In 2016, Francis carried out a significant gesture of solidarity with the Jewish world, by praying at Rome's Great Synagogue alongside Italy's Jewish community. In the same visit, he paid homage to the Holocaust survivors present at the ceremony and memorably kissed their hands.

Pope Francis has regularly spoken out against anti-Semitism. One of his most recent condemnations was in 2024, amidst a terrifying spike in antisemitic attacks worldwide. He spoke forcefully when he said that the Roman Catholic Church "rejects every form of anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism, unequivocally condemning...hatred towards Jews and Judaism as a sin against God."

It was regarding Israel that the relationship between Pope Francis and the Jewish people was most fraught throughout his life. It seems illogical that a man who had such warm relations with the Jewish community, who was outspoken on anti-Semitism, had such a difficult relationship with the Jewish State. Here it is important to reflect for a moment on how the Church has viewed the land of Israel over the ages. In many ways, Pope Francis' approach reflected the very real differences between these two great religions. Christianity universalized the very particular Jewish covenant. For them, Jesus became a symbol for the Temple and disconnected the land of Israel from the

Jewish people. The holiness of the land was determined by the life of Jesus on it. A Pilgrim went to Israel to walk in the places Jesus walked, to baptize themselves in the waters that Jesus was immersed, to stand at the place of Jesus' birth and death. That experience superseded any Jewish connection to Israel. The lack of importance of the earthly Israel is best exemplified by the centering of the Vatican in Rome, and not Jerusalem. It is important for us to understand that for Jews, the land of Israel was never holy, it was our eternal homeland.

For the Church, God's plan was to see every Jew either convert to Christianity or wander the earth as the eternal witness of what happens to those who reject the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. So, the Jewish return to the land, the rise of political Zionism, made things especially complicated for the Church. For them, the notion that God would allow the Jews, who had rejected the Christian message to return to their homeland, flew in the face of all of that. It made no theological sense.

This helps us understand the words that Pope Pius spoke to the Theodore Herzl in their meeting in January of 1904. Herzl had an audience with Pope Pius X, where he sought the Pope's support for Zionism. The Pope replied, "We cannot give approval to this movement. We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem — but we could never sanction it. The soil of Jerusalem ... has been sanctified by the life of Jesus Christ. As the Head of the Church, I cannot tell you anything different. The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people."

But despite those views and the Holocaust, in which Church was complicit, the Jewish people established the State of Israel, which the Church chose not to officially recognize. That was until the mid-60's when the Church reassessed their relationship with the Jewish people and their return to the Jewish homeland. In 1964, Pope John Paul 2 visited the land of Israel and the Church broke new ground in its relationship with the Jewish people. However, the recognizing of the land of Israel as the fulfillment of God's promise to the Jewish people, proved to be a bridge too far.

On the 60th anniversary of the Jewish state, Pope Benedict the 16th gave thanks to the Lord, that the aspirations of the Jewish people for a home in the land of their fathers have been fulfilled. Notice the lack of connection to the Covenant itself.

Returning to Pope Francis' visit to Israel, he did something striking. The Pope visited the grave of Theodor Herzl. He laid a wreath at the tomb. While the act of laying the wreath itself was a significant gesture of respect and recognition of Herzl's role in the Zionist movement, it is noteworthy that the Pope did not utter a word at that place. Perhaps his silence reflects the fact that the theological difficulty of the Jewish people rising from diaspora, a free people in its own land, no longer powerless, remains a theological conundrum for the Church.

One thing that the Pope has not been silent about are the Palestinians. At one point, the Pope had them stop the car so that he could pray at the security fence separating Israel from the West Bank. He stood and prayed at a wall covered with anti-Israel graffiti as if it was the Kotel. I don't remember him ever acknowledging the fact that the security fence was built not to pen Palestinians in, but to protect Israelis from the incessant terrorist attacks.

Pope Francis made a point of calling Palestine a state and referred to leaders of the Palestinian Authority and the PLO as leaders of the state of Palestine. He referred to Mahmoud Abbas quite inexplicably as a *Prince of Peace*. In 2015, he ordered the

Vatican to officially recognize Palestine as a country. The Pope made no mention of the fact that many of the lands claimed by the PLO, such as the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Judaism's holiest site, are located inside of Israel.

To his credit, Pope Francis spoke forcefully on October 7th about the slaughter at the hands of Hamas. But after that point, his statements were almost all universally critical, not of Hamas, but Israel's conduct of the war, calling for a ceasefire as the war began.

It must also be noted that the Church has been universally silent about the persecution of Christians in the Middle East. Consider this. There were 5,000 Christians in Gaza when Hamas took power in 2007. There are fewer than 1,000 today. Soon after taking control, Hamas (or Hamas affiliated figures) firebombed the only Christian bookshop in Gaza and kidnapped, tortured, and murdered its owner. The Church did not react. Pope Francis took little interest in Christian suffering when it came at the hands of Hamas. After Israel attacked Hamas fighters in the wake of October 7, however, Pope Francis began calling members of Gaza's minute Catholic community daily. Even when he was deathly ill in recent weeks, these daily phone calls - and the publicity they generated in the world's press - were one of his top priorities.

Pope Francis did meet with the family of hostages, but it was only on the condition that he also meet on the same day, people from Gaza and hear their thoughts about Israel's attempts to root out Hamas soldiers. This attempt to "balance" Israel's self-defensive war with Hamas' actions continued over the next year and a half.

Pope Francis did call out Hamas as "evil" and called for them to return Israeli hostages. Yet these moments of moral clarity were overshadowed by Pope Francis' frequently harsh and unjustified attacks on Israel. As the war went on, he ramped up his language, calling Israel's self-defensive war in Gaza "disproportionate" and "immoral." In a book he published in November in 2024, Pope Francis referring to Israel's war on Hamas as "a genocide" and urged the world to investigate.

A month later, Pope Francis was present at a ceremony unveiling a nativity scene in the Vatican featuring a baby Jesus lying on a keffiyeh. Also present was Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, who has attempted to rewrite history, claiming that Jesus was not Jewish but Palestinian. At the ceremony, Pope Francis made no move to correct this though the keffiyeh was removed shortly thereafter.

In her book, *People Love Dead Jews*, Dara Horn writes persuasively about the world's discomfort with Jews with power. As she puts it, "*People in non-Jewish societies tend to only respect Jews when Jews are powerless, whether that means politically impotent or dead. This is why a sovereign state run by Jews is never going to be okay with them. Because the whole idea is that Jews as a collective are not allowed to have power.*"

The source of this pernicious idea stems from the theology promulgated by the Church over centuries. This is the ultimate proof that Judea-Christian is an oxymoron.

No one should doubt that Pope Francis was a genuinely good man who loved people and cared deeply for the poor. No one should doubt Pope Francis' courage to challenge the hierarchy of the Church and address hard truths. No Jew should doubt Pope Francis' genuine concern for the Jewish people, the scourge of anti-Semitism, or his desire that the Holocaust never be forgotten. Nor should Jews blind themselves to the complicated relationship with the State of Israel or its theological source. Pope Francis referred to Jews as "the elder brothers" during his visit to Rome's main synagogue.

As family members we need to be honest with each other and praise a person when they do right and acknowledge the pain that has been caused as well.

The story of Judaism and Christianity, our family story, has evolved greatly in the last 77 years, and I believe that it will continue to do so. I pray that Pope Francis will rest in peace, and that the next Bishop of Rome will work to bring Jews and Catholics closer, as well as making room in their theology for the Jewish people returning to their own land and all that entails. To not simply tolerate the Jewish return, but to embrace the words of Hatikva:

Lihiyot am Hofshi, B'Artzeinu
Eretz Zion V'Yerushalayim
To be a free people in our land
The land of Zion, and Jerusalem