

# Abraham Joshua Heschel and Thomas Merton: Dialogue and Difference?

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## Introduction

*"If I affirm myself as a Catholic merely by denying all that is Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Hindu, Buddhist, etc, in the end I will find that there is not much left for me to affirm as a Catholic and certainly no breath of the Spirit with which to affirm it."*

So wrote Merton in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. His dialogue with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel at a time when the Second Vatican Council was pondering its historical and future relationship with other faiths is an interesting insight into the implications of such statements. Through their correspondence with one another - beginning in 1960 with just one face-to-face encounter - and by considering their particular individual perspectives, we might discover insights which inform contemporary Jewish-Christian relations.

Born in Warsaw and grandson of the Rebbe of Apt, after whom he was named, Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) was heir to a Hasidic dynasty spanning several generations. A child prodigy whose mastery of classical Jewish texts included "the sea of Talmud"<sup>1</sup>, he was ordained in his teens and then went on to study in Berlin at the *Hochschule für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* and at the Friedrich Wilhelm University. His

doctoral thesis on prophetic consciousness was written up and defended against a backdrop of escalating political tension and violence which accompanied Hitler's rise to power and the expulsion of Jews from German academic institutions. Deported to Warsaw, Heschel managed to escape the Holocaust through an invitation to teach at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. This would be followed by a chair at the Jewish Seminary of America where he taught until his death. As a writer, Heschel's output was impressive. In *A Passion for Truth*, he explored the life and work of two great religious thinkers: Kierkegaard, who had made it his task to re-introduce Christianity into Christendom; and Kotzker, who sought to reintroduce authenticity to Jewish life. Elie Wiesel, a friend of many years up to the time of Heschel's death described Heschel as "profoundly Jewish, a deep believer and a sincere pacifist"<sup>2</sup>. Merton, meeting Heschel for the first time, was driven to remark, "I like his depth and his realism. He knows God!"

## Theological Outlooks

Heschel and Merton are both known for their deep faith, personal piety and lives marked by prayer, the Bible and other sacred texts, religious ritual, a profound sense of the mystical, and a strong belief in religiously-inspired ethical action. Evidence of a common thread

running through their lives of faith does not diminish difference, however. Merton – though sometimes accused of syncretism, particularly in his later engagement with Buddhism – remained explicitly a Christian whose world-view was bound up with his belief in the Incarnation and whose mysticism had been shaped largely by the apophatic *via negativa* of Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross. Moreover, his reading of the Hebrew Bible often betrayed a tendency towards the kind of Christian typology that had been the basis of Catholic biblical interpretation before Vatican II.<sup>3</sup> Heschel's living out of his Judaism included Biblical and Talmudic study, halakhically established ritual and 'prophetic social action'. In his reading of the Bible, he had no patience with those who did so from a sociological or psychological perspective, believing that sacred scripture should be read in terms of God's anthropology; i.e. not as man's need for God but in terms of "what God has to say about us". In this, he posited an understanding of the Divine-human relationship which took the opposite view put forward by his friend, Martin Buber. In Heschel's construct, *God* is the 'I' while man is the 'thou'. In *Man is Not Alone* he writes: "There is an eternal cry in the world: God is beseeching man. Some are startled, others remain deaf. We are all looked for. An air of expectancy hovers over life. Something is asked of man, of all men".<sup>4</sup> Both Heschel and Merton derived much of their theological outlooks from a close study of the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. For Merton, the narrative of the Fall was interpreted from a quasi-Jungian stance which saw the rupture between God

and Adam and Eve as a fall from the original unitive state of perfect being in relationship to God, self and other that we call 'paradise', and the emergence of a 'false' or illusory self (the ego). The 'real' self, hidden in God, can only be recovered by returning to being God-centred and other-centred. For Heschel, the touchstones in Genesis were the bestowing of the Divine image and a reading of the Fall which interpreted guilt not in the disobedience of Adam and Eve but in, firstly, their failure to accept personal responsibility for their actions and, secondly, their choosing to hide from God. Such an interpretation was a key influence in his thought on a wide range of issues.

### *The Holocaust*

In a journal of the early 1960s, Merton records his mounting sense of horror and disbelief over the disclosures of Holocaust survivors and perpetrators. In an entry dated 27th March 1963, he states: "It is just incredible and shattering... All that remains is a general sense of loss, of horror, of disorientation." Though the Second World War had ended in 1945, it was not until the 1960s that the full extent of the systematic annihilation of six million Jewish men, women and children would start to become more widely disseminated. That 'silences were long after the event'<sup>5</sup> can come as no surprise given the scale of suffering and sense of abandonment experienced by survivors. For Merton, the account of the trial of Adolf Eichmann in a series of articles in the *New Yorker* magazine written by Hannah Arendt<sup>6</sup> impacted on his consciousness to such an extent that it caused profoundly troubling questions to surface. The trial

of Eichmann was not solely an indictment of one human being or even of one particular system but was "a sordid examination of the entire west" (*Journal*, 27/3/63). On a more personal and immediate level, the concept of unquestioning obedience to a 'higher authority' caused Merton to anguish over the very life that he, as a monk, was vowed to.<sup>7</sup> In *Contemplation in a World of Action*, he voices his unease by stating that the "awful details of the case can give monks food for thought... *Are novices not sometimes trained to do everything as if the abbot were watching you?*"<sup>8</sup>

As a refugee from Warsaw, Abraham Joshua Heschel's engagement with the Holocaust or *Shoah* (literally, "catastrophe") was tempered by a reticence which caused him to shrink from sharing his feelings about the ways in which this most catastrophic of events in the history of humankind had affected him personally. Haunted by the deaths of his mother and two unmarried sisters in the Warsaw ghetto, and by the murder of his married sister and brother-in-law in Auschwitz, Heschel once publicly described himself as "a brand plucked from the fire". He was, he said, a survivor who had been fortunate enough to escape "just six weeks before disaster began" and one whose destination had been New York but could have been Treblinka or Auschwitz.<sup>9</sup> In the United States, efforts to enlist support for the Jews of Warsaw fell on deaf ears. He recounts three instances between 1941-1943 when he tried to speak out but was dismissed. "They called me a mystic, unrealistic... I had no influence on leaders of American Jewry".<sup>10</sup>

For those who would read the Holocaust as a proof-text for the non-existence of God or, at best, as evidence for the uninvolved god of the philosophers (the so-called 'Unmoved Mover'), Heschel would present a counter-argument. In *God in Search of Man*, he acknowledges the basic question posed by the Holocaust: "Where was God?" – seeing it as impossible to meditate on God's compassion and *not* ask this question. But he then reconfigures the question, asking: "Where was man?" What, he asks, *have we done to make such crimes possible? What are we doing to make such crimes impossible?*<sup>11</sup> Drawing on the prophetic literature, the book of Job and the Psalms, Heschel refuses to indict God for the crimes of humanity and the dereliction of human responsibility. It is not that God is silent; it is that He has been silenced. Taken from a Divine perspective, it is *we* who are responsible for God's exile.<sup>12</sup>

Yet another aspect that characterised Heschel's response to the Holocaust was his refusal to see a relationship between Auschwitz and Israel. To view Israel as an atonement, to seek an 'answer' to Auschwitz was tantamount to blasphemy. "He did not place the *Shoah* – our century's major catastrophe – as a source of Jewish energy, as did many post-war thinkers. Heschel's theology represents a passionate alternative to a Judaism redeemed by the Holocaust and the State of Israel. It implies that Jewish survival does not require us to see ourselves, even triumphally, as victims".<sup>13</sup>

*Nostra Aetate*

When Pope John XXIII<sup>14</sup> announced that there was to be a Second Vatican Council, there was no indication that the Catholic Church's relationship with the Jewish people would be on the agenda. Yet, just one week after John XXIII established a Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity (SPCU), he received a visit from the Franco-Jewish historian, Jules Isaac, which would act as catalyst for Jewish-Christian dialogue and result in chapter IV of the document, *Nostra Aetate*. Motivated by personal and historical concerns, Isaac had made it his mission to plumb the depths of the Christian scriptures and early Christian theology in order to demonstrate that both could be implicated in anti-semitism. His pivotal work, *The Teaching of Contempt*, would not only assert that it was possible to establish a link but also – and of crucial importance in the fostering of future dialogue – that *anti-Semitism is expressly anti-Christian*. On this basis, Isaac would go on to argue that it was possible to extract all that was anti-Judaic from Christianity without “sacrificing all that was authentic to Christianity”.<sup>15</sup> There were, he said, three negative strands which had been perpetrated by the Church through the ages and which urgently required attention. These were, firstly, the evaluation of Judaism at the time of Jesus as degenerate; secondly, fixing the guilt on Jews for the crucifixion; and finally the conclusion that Jews had been punished by virtue of their dispersion and suffering.<sup>16</sup> While acknowledging that anti-Judaism had pre-dated Christianity in the Graeco-Roman world, Isaac could find no evidence to suggest that its impact had

a corollary with the catalogue of verbal invective and physical violence exacted on the Jewish people by Christian anti-Judaic sentiment.

For Heschel and Merton, the wording of chapter IV of *Nostra Aetate* would become a dominant theme in their ongoing dialogue. Representing the American Jewish Committee and “wanting to foster a new Christian understanding of Judaism”<sup>17</sup>, Heschel was committed to seeing through the reversal of centuries’ old oppression and violence exercised against Jews by Christians. He had named three provisos: namely, to refute the charge of ‘deicide’, then the affirmation of the ‘permanent preciousness of the Jews’, and finally the refutation of any mention of conversion. But the document was riddled with difficulties and, at one stage, looked set to be derailed by factors which ran from the exegetical to the political.<sup>18</sup> From a positive reading of the first draft, subsequent versions were to suffer from being worked over so that the original spirit and content of the schema was in danger of being lost. When the second text was presented, Heschel was “profoundly injured” by the appearance of a line which expressed the Church’s *desire and expectation* of “the union of the Church with the Jewish people”.<sup>19</sup> In response, Heschel sent a statement to the Vatican in which he poured scorn over the stated aim of the draft document, namely, that “reciprocal understanding and appreciation, [may] be attained by theological study and fraternal discussion”. Seeing the draft more as an occasion of *spiritual fratricide*, he gave vent to his anger, bewilderment and hurt by stating, “I am

ready to go to Auschwitz any time, if faced with the alternative of conversion or death”. Letters to Merton and a personal visit to Gethsemani by Heschel resulted in Merton’s intervention in the form of a heartfelt plea to Cardinal Bea. The fourth and final version of the document, though lacking the strength of content of the first draft, omits the desire for the conversion of the Jewish people, as well as the charge of deicide, and acknowledges the divine election of Israel with whom Christians share a “common patrimony”. The final text was approved by Pope Paul VI in October 1965.<sup>20</sup>

*A Dialogue of Difference?*

In his analysis of Thomas Merton’s efforts to engage in Jewish-Christian dialogue, Karl Planck accused Merton of ‘hyper-empathy’.<sup>21</sup> By this, Planck meant that Merton’s capacity to feel the pain of the other was so acutely realised that difference was in danger of being ‘eclipsed’. “Merton intends no harm in pursuing Jewish relations; on the contrary, he desires to diminish suffering and affirm kinship,” surmises Planck. But such engagement fails on several counts: not only does Merton displace Jewish difference by “wanting to make Jewish anguish his own”, he appears to possess only limited frames of reference with which to pursue dialogue. These Planck identifies as a preoccupation with the Holocaust and certain ‘romantic’ perceptions of Judaism primarily derived from biblical antecedents.<sup>22</sup> He senses in Merton what he terms a “troubling ambiguity”, a measure of which is borne out in his attempts to grapple with the Holocaust. Both his prose and poetry seem,

according to Planck, to be written almost exclusively from the perspective of anti-semitic Nazism. There are also problematic aspects to be found in the Merton-Heschel correspondence over the wording of the various drafts of chapter IV of *Nostra Aetate*. At one point in the proceedings, when it appeared as though Heschel’s position was in danger of being rejected by the Council, Merton expressed his incredulity over the development and, at the same time, affirmed his unity with Heschel. To this end in a letter dated 9th September 1964, he wrote:

*This much I will say: my latent ambitions to be a true Jew under my Catholic skin will surely be realized if I continue to go through experiences like this, being spiritually slapped in the face by these blind and complacent people of whom I am nevertheless a “collaborator”.*

For Planck, this kind of response was a prime example of an approach to Judaism which had serious implications for personal identity and for Christian self-understanding.<sup>23</sup>

Though Planck’s critique is not without foundation, there is a sense in which it fails to address some fundamental points. Writing from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, Planck does not allow for the fact that Jewish-Christian dialogue has gathered significant pace since the 1960s. Moreover, in his concern for Merton’s “troubling ambiguity”, there is a corresponding lack of due attention to seeking out its roots. Why should Merton have displayed such apparent contradictions in his efforts to engage in dialogue? In *Contemplation in a*



*World of Action*, Merton gives an indication of what he finds himself up against when he explores what it means to have been born at a time which rendered him a contemporary of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam and American racial violence: "These were things about which I was not consulted. Yet they are also events in which, whether I like it or not, I am deeply and personally involved. The 'world' is a complex of responsibilities and options ..."<sup>24</sup>

Planck's unease at Merton's prose and poetic attempts to come to some understanding of the Holocaust are also worthy of analysis. If Merton is guilty of dedicating pages of prose to a searching analysis of the insane-sanity of an Adolf Eichmann, or writing poetry such as *Chant to be used in processions around a site with furnaces* (described by some as an 'anti-poem'), it could be argued that he embodies the unenviable stance of one whose awakening consciousness to his 'true' self with a stake in the world was confronted with a reality he hadn't reckoned on. No longer able to withdraw into the unworldly Catholic monk persona he had adopted for the decades since his entry into the religious life, he was forced to examine all aspects of a world that can give rise to the unspeakable. This is underscored by Furlong who, in her biography of Merton, charts his "growing involvement with the sin and suffering of the world in sharp contrast with those early years at Gethsemani in which he had seen his task as one of total detachment from the world".<sup>25</sup> Though there is substance to Planck's case that Jewish-Christian dialogue, in

order to be authentic, must be grounded in a strong sense of identity and mutual respect for the otherness of the 'other', I believe that such dialogue should also seek to establish where people are when they embark on the journey. Only thus can individuals be helped to move on to a place where empathy does not displace boundaries.

Heschel, by contrast, appears to have shared none of Merton's perceived sense of inadequacy in his engagement with Jewish-Christian dialogue. Coming at it from the perspective of one whose personal identity was unshakably rooted in his Judaism, he had no difficulty in addressing the other as 'other'. Nor was there any sign of tentativeness in expressing aspects of Jewish-Christian dialogue which he found personally troublesome. Heschel was outspoken in his criticism of a Church that for almost 2,000 years had sought to understand itself as the antithesis to Judaism. When an interviewer made reference to the 'Old' Testament, Heschel rebuked him for being so condescending. At one point, he stated that an over-emphasis on Christology was "theologically problematic" for Jews. Viewing dialogue on this topic as fruitless, he suggested that "a rule for Roman Catholics and Protestants would be not to discuss the supremacy of the Bishop of Rome and the papacy... And a rule for Christians and Jews would be not to discuss Christology".<sup>26</sup> Heschel also voiced his disagreement with a reading of the Bible that derived from Hellenistic philosophical thought rather than biblical Hebraic thought: the effect of this had been disastrous, promoting a view of a sterile, static God who is the

polar opposite of the God of the Bible.<sup>27</sup> To read these and other such comments as suggesting that he in any way devalued Christians, however, is to miss the point. For Heschel, dialogue – *all* dialogue – demanded candour. Denouncing any form of bigotry as 'blasphemous', Heschel had learned the value of all human life from the Scriptures.

### **Social Ethical Action**

Around the time of his 'epiphany' on a street corner in downtown Louisville when he came to the sudden realisation of his deep connectedness with all human beings, Merton began to understand that what in ancient monastic jargon was referred to as *contemptus mundi* was in fact not a choice but the evasion of choice. In the years that followed, he began to take a renewed interest in affairs of the world, making up for lost time by reading voraciously and carrying on a voluminous correspondence with religious leaders, heads of state, peace activists, and civil rights leaders throughout the world. In common with Heschel, he was committed to speaking out against the evils of his era – from the proliferation of nuclear weapons to the war raging in Vietnam to racial and religious bigotry. Writing on what many saw as the 'inevitability' of nuclear war, he hit out at what he called a 'programme of dehumanisation' which had been perpetrated, for whatever reason, by the powers-that-be. As with the details that emerged from the Eichmann trial concerning the businesslike 'normality' displayed by Hitler's key players, so with those who were involved in the 'business' of nuclear warfare. "What is needed,"

wrote Merton, "is a transformation in people's attitude to life, so that to destroy becomes impossibly repugnant ... A much deeper reciprocity is needed, a dialogue between opposites, a social justice *within* societies so that the deep causes of war can be attacked at the root."<sup>28</sup>

While Merton, as a Trappist, vowed to a life of enclosure, addressed people primarily in writing, Heschel was able to exercise greater freedom. Imbued with a prophetic consciousness, Heschel lived out his Jewish belief in the relevance of deeds and stated, "Even to God we ascribe the deed. To imitate God is in deeds... What is a sacred deed? An encounter with the divine; a way of living in friendship with God; a flash of holiness in the darkness of profanity".<sup>29</sup> What may be termed Heschel's 'sacred humanism' was based on a theology that sees humanity as 'the holy of holies', since human beings are made in the image of God. "The human is not a synthesis of weakness and corruption but a disclosure of the divine, and all men are one in God's care for man".<sup>30</sup> Such was Heschel's involvement with the human condition that he campaigned tirelessly, speaking out in the interests of the young, the plight of the elderly in a society that often devalued them, the vulnerability of the sick and the need for the development of pastoral skills on the part of doctors. He spoke against the Vietnam war and racial and religious bigotry ("racial or religious bigotry must be realised for what it is: satanism, blasphemy"). Like Merton, Heschel's contact with other religiously-minded social activists was impressive. His daughter, Professor

Susannah Heschel, records his deep friendship with Martin Luther King. Arm in arm, Heschel accompanied King on the long march to Selma, Alabama.

While both Merton and Heschel became courageous spokesmen for so many of the ills besetting humankind, they were not without their critics. Merton's activities on the peace front came to the attention of the Abbot General of the Cistercians and resulted in a ban. No longer permitted to voice his objections over nuclear weapons and the evils of war, he described himself in a journal entry as a 'political prisoner' of Gethsemani. Disbarred from speaking out publicly inevitably caused him to re-visit the questions the Eichmann trial had raised regarding the tension between obedience and the exercise of conscience in the service of a greater good. Heschel was also to suffer as a result of his activities. His political outspokenness over the Vietnam war as a 'moral outrage', his public stand against Richard Nixon and his dialogue with Christian leaders led to his being ostracised by some Jewish leaders and rabbinic colleagues.

### Conclusion

Upon meeting Heschel for the first time, Merton had written in his journal, "He knows God!" Similarly, of Merton, Abraham Heschel once remarked: "I recognise... the presence of holiness. I see it; I sense it; I feel it." In his conviction that each had much to learn from the 'other', he gave as one example the Jewish belief in the integrity of *mitzvah* or sacred deeds which ensured that theology could never be divorced from the human

situation. He felt that the most important way that Jews and Christians could carry out dialogue was in terms of concrete action, working together to address the evils of the age, most especially those of indifference and nihilism. Asked once by a member of his faculty why he bothered with Jewish-Christian dialogue, Heschel replied: "It is to help one another share insights and learning. More than ever before we need one another's help."

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Edward Kaplan, *Holiness in Words: Abraham Joshua Heschel's Poetics of Piety*, SUNY Press, NY, 1996, p.8
- <sup>2</sup> Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea*, Harper Collins, London, 1997, p.363
- <sup>3</sup> Later, his understanding would be altered by advances in Catholic biblical scholarship (cf. *Dei Verbum*, Documents of the Second Vatican Council) and through his dialogue with Heschel. Merton used Heschel's *magnum opus*, *The Prophets* as a textbook for his students at Gethsemani. In 1966, he was invited by Heschel to contribute an article on the Bible for a book commissioned by *Life* magazine. The book never materialised but the article was published posthumously and entitled, *Opening the Bible*.
- <sup>4</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, NY, 1972, p.245
- <sup>5</sup> George Steiner, *Fifty Years On*, a lecture given at the Faculty of Divinity, University of Cambridge.
- <sup>6</sup> These would later be published in a book entitled, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.
- <sup>7</sup> Merton's unease over religious structures of authority and obedience was prompted by

the admission that Eichmann, having practised a form of obedience that was both 'blind' and 'corpse-like', revealed that his behaviour – especially towards the end – was informed by a self-imposed mandate that ran along the lines of whether or not the Führer would approve if he were to witness Eichmann's actions.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Mandala Books, London, 1980, p.145

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, p.116

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Harper & Row, NY, 1955, p.369

<sup>12</sup> Kaplan, p.122

<sup>13</sup> Kaplan, p.10

<sup>14</sup> To all intents and purposes a strategic choice by the Council of Cardinals – who, as a 'safe pair of hands' was not expected to do anything controversial between his election and death.

<sup>15</sup> Chazan, p.36

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Heschel risked the approbation of Jewish leaders in America when he set out to the Vatican in an attempt to alter the articles in *Nostra Aetate* which were concerned with the Church's mission to the Jews, especially that which touched upon the desire for their conversion.

<sup>18</sup> Arab concerns over possible recognition of the State of Israel by the Catholic Church were included in the political agenda. Exegetically, there was the concern that though liturgies could be adapted, the content of Scripture could not be subjected to similar treatment.

<sup>19</sup> The wording of the version of the schema Heschel found most 'profoundly injurious' in terms of conversion read: "the Church expects in unshakeable faith and with ardent desire... the union of the Jewish people with the Church". In a letter to Merton, Heschel wrote that "a message that regards the Jew as a candidate for conversion and proclaims that the destiny of Judaism is to disappear will be abhorred by the Jews all over the

world." (Hidden Ground of Love, 14<sup>th</sup> July 1964)

<sup>20</sup> Though *Nostra Aetate* was flawed, it represented a foundation on which crucial declarations, documents and actions were built, most notably, during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II.

<sup>21</sup> The text of Planck's discussion of Merton ("The Eclipse of Difference") is included in *Merton & Judaism: Holiness in Words*, Beatrice Bruteau (ed), Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Planck, p.78

<sup>23</sup> Heschel's response in a letter dated 18<sup>th</sup> September 1964, is worth noting. "Your letter," he says, "moved me deeply... at a difficult time." (Merton-Heschel Correspondence, *Merton & Judaism*, p.226).

<sup>24</sup> Merton, p.145

<sup>25</sup> Monica Furlong, *Merton: A Biography*, London: SPCK, 1995 (revised edition), p.252

<sup>26</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur, Spiritual Audacity*, p.300.

This viewpoint, though salient, has been superseded by dialogues such as that between Karl Rahner and Pinchas Lapide which is a positive example of the inroads made in Jewish-Christian relations since the 1960s.

<sup>27</sup> Heschel viewed God as the *Most Moved Mover*.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Merton (ed), *Breakthrough to Peace*, New Directions, NY, 1963.

<sup>29</sup> Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p.357

<sup>30</sup> Kaplan, p.79