



The Elijah Institute

## **THE WISDOM OF PENITENCE, PRAISE, AND ASKING QUESTIONS**

### **Inner Resources for Growth-by-Repentance in the Christian Faith**

#### **Religions Crossing Borders: Surprises, Anxieties**

Standing here in the Holy City to speak to you, I see in my mind's eye Marc Chagall's White Crucifixion in the Art Institute of Chicago. In that remarkable painting, finished well before the Shoa and its horrors, the crucified Christ is encompassed by scenes from East European pogroms—Jews harassed, hunted down, driven out of town, synagogues on fire, Torah-scrolls desecrated. I can only guess what sense Jewish eyes make of this; surely, this must be the world upside down? The cross, the immemorial sign and symbol of persecution, is here the emblem of God's compassion with the suffering Jews. However, in any case, Chagall's painting turns the tables on us, Christians. Here, Jesus is not the victim of Jewish rejection, as he is portrayed even in the gospels; rather, naked and forlorn, he is on the Jewish side—the victims' side; his covering is the tallith, worn by Jews at prayer. He has become the exemplar of the suffering Jews on their endless way through the desert of the nations, with only the Living God to abandon themselves to. The Exodus all over again, painted by a Ukrainian Jew in the nineteen-thirties, when the worst was yet to come for the Jews in Europe.

Is Jesus Christ really scorned by Christians? In Chagall's painting the answer to this question is all the plainer for being wordless: yes, those who acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as God's Messiah and their Savior do disavow him in the persons of the Jews they persecute as a matter of habit—i.e., systemically. But how can this be? Another Jew, Zvi Kolitz, in his famous short story Yossel Rakover Speaks to God, not only asks the question but also very explicitly answers it: in the figure of Yossel Rakover, about to die with the words of the dying Jesus on his lips, Jesus Christ is rejected by those who actively inflict violence on the Jews, but more insidiously, by the self-absorbed, apathetic Christians who by their silence become accomplices to that violence.

A change of scene. What comes to my mind is Chaim Potok's novel 'My Name is Asher Lev' the story of the Jewish painter whose Brooklyn Crucifixion gets him estranged from his Ladover Hasidic community, albeit with the tacit blessing of its mysterious rabbi. I can also hear the voice of Hans-Georg Gadamer, born a full century ago and still asking questions raised by the future. Of late, he has been saying that now even he knows about himself "how often I have been wrong." But then again, he recently has also raised a theme that he had always treated with agnostic (if respectful) silence, namely, the great religions' common responsibility. They must keep their differences from deteriorating into violence; only thus will they succeed in doing justice to the Mystery beyond all of our horizons. In Gadamer's eyes, this is the hermeneutical challenge par excellence in our day. In saying this, is he repenting of his long silence on the subject of religion? Is he a prophet speaking up with a voice he has long heard inside? Is he both? Who knows? But does it matter?

Yet another scene. Once again I see our Holy Father Pope John Paul II at prayer in Assisi, flanked by so many other people of the Spirit in positions of prophetic opportunity and responsibility in the religions. But on the rebound, I hear the panic-stricken laments, begun by fellow Catholics less than twenty-four hours after the prayer at Assisi and still heard as well as disseminated in print today, declaring that Pope John Paul II is a near-heretic misleading the whole world about the truths of the Catholic faith, that we Catholics are now being told to eat the bitter fruits of the apostasy authorized by *Nostra Aetate*, the second Vatican Council's decree on the Catholic Church's relations with the non-Christian religions, and even that the recent earthquake at Assisi simply must be considered divine punishment for the iniquity committed there.

In our day, what is befalling us? Let us go back to the other end of the spectrum. This August, right here in Jerusalem, the Elijah School for the Study of Wisdom in World Religions will feature an international team of professors and students, to raise the following question: Is it conceivable for persons or even communities to be members of more than one great religion? Thus, could I, a committed Jesuit priest, be a Jew or a Hindu as well, recognizably, in a meaningful sense of those designations? The teaching team will consist of a Baptist Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Buddhist, a dean of a religious studies department at a North American university, an orthodox Jew, and a Jesuit priest, a Roman Catholic by both default and choice, not to mention election. Something else. Recently, we have witnessed the publication of *Hindu Wisdom for All God's Children*, written by a Jesuit priest; could this be a promise of a new harvest of Peace? Some more facts. After centuries of oblivion, the

writings of the sixteenth-century Dominican priest and bishop Bartolomé de las Casas (1474-1566) are being read again; they are the single most poignant indictment of the Spanish Conquista in what is now Northern Latin America. They decry the soldiers' and missionaries' tactic of demonizing the native Americans' deities and rituals in order to create pretexts for destroying the culture and seizing the people's lands. Two years ago, a Jesuit friend who has lived, learned, and taught theology in Indonesia for almost fifty years, told me that the Portuguese, "who have never bothered to do anything for the indigenous people they colonized except bring them the faith," are loved to this day by the natives everywhere, at least in the coastal areas they colonized, East Timor being one example. Hard to believe. But could it be true, at least to a degree? And to that degree, could it tell us something today?

I could go on and on, especially in this City, still as pregnant with the Promise of Final Justice and Peace as it has been the scene of perpetual injustice and war, starting (arguably) with King David's capture of Zion, the Jebusite stronghold which became the City of David, whose third millennium I helped commemorate at the Shalom Hartman Institute about ten years ago, on my first visit to Jerusalem.

What is happening to us, I suggest, is that the great religions are at last beginning to find it within themselves not only to affect other great religions, that has happened a lot, often with a vengeance, but also (and especially) to let themselves be affected by them. Are the mixed-up fortunes of past history really turning into today's moral agenda? Is fated encounter at last occasioning human encounter? And will this encounter beget Peace or War? My answer is provisional. It may lead to Peace, if only we can stop living our religions politically and instead, let ourselves be fed at the wellsprings of repentance within each of our religions. Why repentance? Because it is the only way to create something new and gracious out of our centuries-old history of blaming and meting out punishment to each other. What I will discuss with you, then, is the following question. What are the inner resources for repentance in the Christian faith I find myself privileged to profess?

## **Universalism**

In a prophetic essay, Karl Rahner explained years ago that the Catholic Church is now empirically catholic i.e., universal, for the first time in history. It had always been universal by virtue of the Creed ("I believe in the Church, One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic"), but now there actually are Catholics everywhere, along with their catechists, nuns, deacons, priests, even bishops. This is a fact of elemental religious significance, and I

wish to explain that it represents not a Catholic success, but a new Christian (and thus, Catholic) responsibility, one of whose critical elements is voluntary repentance. Empirical universalism is here, and here to stay. So must repentance be. Why? Let me start with a few thoughts on universalism.

All the great religions are universalistic. One way or another, they have a world view; the universe is their horizon. Jews and Christians start their Scriptures with a God who creates "the heavens and the earth"; they know of eternal Wisdom, Word from the beginning, pre-existent Torah dwelling with God's human children, which will bring humanity and the universe home to God, Holy, Faithful, and Just. Hindus know of the Lord Vishnu and his consubstantial Consort Sri, the Unity from which and to which flows all that lives and dies, in a perpetual quest for a Universal Self-Knowledge and Liberation (moksa). Buddhists know of the Nirvana, the Lightsome Nothing-of-any-Kind-in-Particular beyond all change and beyond all the passion change has caused, is causing, and will cause. China knows of the Tao, the unchartable Road that invisibly maps all charts and roads, the everyday ones we think we know as much as the ones we do not know, or do not know yet. Muslims worship Allah Who is no less Merciful for being Great, and Who will judge the whole world accordingly: in Majesty and Mercy. And even the "little," "local" religions, those of the tribes, the clans, the nomads, the marginals, are "great": for they, too, have their broad horizons and their intimations of a Transcendent Mystery that bears and carries and steers and judges all of us and the whole world as well.

Yes, no human soul, and few if any human cultures, are without a taste for the Infinite, and thus, no world religion is without universalism. Wonderful. Entrancing. And so, the place where we can fall prey to great illusions. Let us see.

### **The Bewitchment of False Universalism**

It is the height of irony that the cultural movement which first got interested in the world religions, namely, the early Enlightenment, not only put tolerance at the top of its agenda, but also ended up drawing the worst conclusion from the religions' existence. How so? In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Western Europe and North America saw the rise of a new type of faith in God, now known as Deism. It was residually Christian in that it did not altogether drop either the Bible or Jesus. Still, disgusted with the religious wars of the recent past and enchanted by a largely implicit Platonism, it viewed worship and doctrine as root causes of hypocrisy and violence and wrote them off; instead, it put its faith in ethics. Accordingly, in Deism, sincerity and reasonableness became

humanity's chief religious virtues, and the Living God became distant: on principle, God ceased to be the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of Moses and the prophets, God the Father of Jesus Christ, and Allah Great and Merciful—the latter probably unbeknownst to most Muslims at the time Deism developed.

The first victims of Deist Enlightenment were the educated Jews, especially in the German-speaking countries. In *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum* (1783), Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86) agreed that the truths of Judaism are none other than those which God has taught to all rational beings "by fact and idea"; hence, practices enjoined by the written Torah are a matter not of truth but (like all things in "organized religion") of optional acceptance of special, non-universalist traditions.

On the rebound as it were, the new, enlightened cultural arbiters of the West decided they had now at last understood what religion really was, namely, humanity's natural religiosity, pure, unspoilt, and thus, universal as well as tolerant on principle. Accordingly, Jews were considered "wise" people and nothing else—Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81) wrote *Nathan der Weise* to show just that. In fact, all the religions of India, Japan, China, "Turkey" (i.e., the world of Islam), and Ethiopia (not to mention all the noble savages that the enlightened thought they were seeing all over the world) were deemed fascinating as well as pure—far purer, in fact, than unenlightened European Christianity and ditto Judaism, both of which were largely mired in the darkness of custom and credulity, since they had mistaken worship and doctrine for something they were certainly not, namely, integral to religion. I leave it to my Muslim friends to tell us if they agree that the Deist depiction of their religious observances as a matter of custom rather than reality is a compliment. Somehow I doubt it. Somehow, too, I doubt that Christian theologians like John Hick (who was shaped by Vedanta neo-Hinduism, whose literature is entirely in English) and Paul Knitter have done us an enduring service. For in the real world, filled with resentment as it is, we cannot expect a peaceful future except if we agree to settle our accounts with the past first. But I am running ahead of myself.

### **Universalism and the Modern Study of the Religions**

That all human beings and cultures live by a native, undeniable sense of Transcendence is one thing. But I wish to argue that the idealization of human religiosity as the common umbrella of principled tolerance, under which all actual religions can feel equally at home, amounts to a huge exercise in overlooking and forgetting, one of *laissez-faire* Western devising. Let me start

with a few quick arguments. I am an educated Christian believer, thank heavens; but precisely my education must teach me that I must be wary of thought-systems that authorize me to make positive truth statements about things I have never studied, matters I know just enough about to realize I do not really know about them at all. In my case, an example would be Hinduism. Let me put this in more general terms. It is clearly sound to distinguish between humanity's common, innate orientation to the Infinite on the one hand and the particular cults, codes, and creeds of the "positive" religions on the other. But it is equally clearly unsound to separate the two, and then to proceed to idealize the religious impulse at the expense of the great religious traditions. Idealizing the former is implicitly to declare the religions' distinctive traits of no religious (or, for that matter, human) significance.

Quite rightly, therefore, historians of religion have concluded that world religions must be studied in their particular manifestations if they are to be understood. Yet even here a caution is pertinent: the religions must be studied not "neutrally" or "objectively" (as if they were mere folklore or social construction) but sympathetically i.e., precisely as the distinctive traditions that enable the many members of actual religious communities to live in awe, docility, self-awareness, and intellectual integrity in the face of the Great Unknown Present in the Cosmos, and closer to home, somehow Present here and now, with, among, and in us. Here if anywhere, "God is in the details."

This is where a supreme hermeneutical challenge meets us, at two levels of increasing ontological intensity.

### **False Universalism, Enlightened Irresponsibility**

First off, the hermeneutical task involved in the study of the religions is in and of itself daunting. Friedrich Schleiermacher intuited this when just over two centuries ago he wrote that in "those despised positive religions . . . everything proves to be real, vigorous and definite; there every single intuition has its definite consistency, and a connection, all its own, with the rest; there every feeling has its own sphere and its particular reference. There you will find every modification of religiosity somewhere, as well as every state of feeling to which only religion can transport a person; there you will find every part of religion cultivated somewhere, and each of its effects achieved somewhere; there all common institutions and every individual expression are proof of the high value placed on religion, even to the point of forgetting everything else. There the holy zeal with which religion is observed, shared, and enjoyed, and the childlike desire with which new revelations of heavenly powers are anticipated, are your guarantee that not a single one of

religion's elements, which it was possible in any way to perceive from this standpoint, has been overlooked, and that not a single one of its moments has vanished without leaving a monument behind."

So, understanding a religion other than one's own from within its own amazingly coherent world is a huge interpretive undertaking. Let me remember here with admiration the late Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000), a Christian missionary who came to love the Muslim subculture of India, and so came to understand it deeply. His works evidence both the blessings inherent in the task and its difficulty. For great blessings are indeed attached to understanding religions different from one's own, and the great philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer has made it his life's work to explain how and why. Only by attempting to understand the unfamiliar "other" (Gadamer has shown) can we, familiar with ourselves but always to a degree prejudiced as well, come to refreshingly authentic self-discovery; painstaking discovery of the other is the royal road to self-awareness. And self-awareness—«Know Thyself»—purified by long-suffering has a way of turning us into serene and fair judges in all things human. Please allow me to transpose this into the language of the Christian Creed. Only the one who comes down "for our sake and for the sake of our salvation" and is "crucified under Pontius Pilate" can be trusted to "come in glory to do justice to the living and the dead."

So far so good. We must turn to the second level. Schleiermacher is aware that religions often appear in "the form of a servant"; not only do they bear the marks of their limitations in time and space; they also bear the multifarious marks of their adherents' human poverty. The religions, he implies, are not above criticism. But, so Schleiermacher goes on, if we are to criticize them correctly, we must make thoughtful efforts to interpret them as they deserve to be interpreted, namely, in light of what he calls the reverential feeling of absolute dependence on the Deity. This is what I just referred to as "humanity's common, innate orientation to the Infinite."

Now this is exactly where Deism has let us down, miserably. It has reduced religiosity to a merely human attribute and thus left the Infinite to its own devices; in doing so, it has made a major theological error. But what concerns me at this point is something else: Deism's proposal for an enlightened religiosity is a big error of human judgment. The Enlightened Few, basking in their enlightenment, and preaching a gospel of simplicity, sincerity, rationality, and tolerant optimism, took their leave of reality. They did not dignify us, common humanity all over the world, with any informed interest in our diverse ways of being human; even more importantly, by declaring us natively pure,

they tacitly disavowed any association with failure, evil, and sin, ours and (presumably) their own. By thus treating humanity's history of violence and discrimination *en bagatelle*, the Enlightenment did all of us a gross injustice in the very act of paying all of us a compliment: at first blush, what it told us about our original "pure" humanity was flattering, but the naiveté hidden in the compliment was misleading to the point of sin. For by calling us unspoiled children, the Enlightenment and its aftermath came to wash its hands of moral responsibility and encouraged all of us to do the same. Schleiermacher did not make that mistake. He recognized "the human form" as "the form of a slave" when he saw it; dare I presume he saw it in Jesus to start with?

### **Blaming? Forgetting? Repenting?**

All this raises a big theological issue. Let me begin by giving you fair warning: this issue cannot be raised without embarrassment, and embarrassment is just that: embarrassing. Here, around the Mediterranean basin, embarrassment has long been one of the worst crimes against humanity: loss of face, *brutta figura*. "Thou shalt not embarrass" is treated as a near-divine commandment, one (let me quickly add) far from unknown in other parts of the world. One of the characteristics of Pope John Paul II's indubitable courage has been: to fear neither embarrassment nor human judgment. Chagall did the same by portraying Jesus as the associate of the persecuted Jews; even while criticized by many Jews, he also presented the traditional Christian self-understanding with a major embarrassment, by suggesting that Christians could, or should, recognize the suffering Jesus in suffering Jewry.

So, can we Christians tolerate the embarrassment of being faced with the sins of a culture which we played a principal part in shaping? Can Jews here in Israel do it? Can Muslims, Hindus, Taoists, Buddhists? Or are we all doomed to at once remind all those who embarrass us by challenging us how wrong they are, or in any case, that they are at most only partially correct—something that typically applies to most of us?

Accordingly, can (or should) we Catholics see the suffering Jesus in the victims of the Crusades, many of them simple Muslims whose religion was defamed in the interest of a Holy War, a Christian one this time? Can we see Jesus in Jan Hus, burned at the stake on grounds that had far more to do with city-dwellers' anti-peasant affect than with God? Can we see him in Galileo, testy for sure, but silenced, imprisoned, and discredited for trying to understand what he had observed? Can we see him in wild souls like Giordano Bruno and Girolamo Savonarola and Michele Sozzini and Menocchio the miller, a bit of an influential



village particularist bullied by the Inquisition in Northern Italy in the late sixteenth century, all of them burned at the stake? Do we really owe it to ourselves to resort first of all to history or apologetics, never mind disciplining protesters or making examples of them or casting aspersions on them, so as to at least partly excuse ourselves, by explaining that those things were due to "emergency situations" or "different times"?

Let me tighten my question. Pascal wrote that "Jésus sera en agonie jusqu'à la fin du monde: il ne faut pas dormir pendant ce temps-là." Can we Christians—Orthodox, Catholics, and Protestants learn how to anticipate, as a matter of normal expectation, that we are apt to see in our world the suffering Jesus first of all, i.e., before anything else, and thus, before we get to profess the clarity of our consciences or defend our reputation? Can we become more interested in corrections ventured and charges brought by others than in self-maintenance and self-assertion? Do we have a habitually open ear the cries of the poor? Can we suspend our habits of insisting on being judges in our own case and determining the precise extent of our mistakes before we listen to others? Or will we let ourselves and our exploits be called into question only after we have come up with answers that show our mistakes are "not so bad as they are made to seem"? And are we ready to suffer embarrassment at least partly deserved? And if so, does this require of us Catholics and all other Christians, first, a change of imagination, and then, too, a reinterpretation of the Christian doctrine about the person of Jesus and his ministry of showing understanding for "the ignorant and the wayward"? Will we actively undertake such a reinterpretation in the light of our past relationships with Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, with honest dissenters in the Catholic Church, with pioneers in scholarship and science? I could go on. So, I take it, could you.

### **Praise and Repentance**

I am afraid I have become more homiletic than you can be fairly expected to tolerate. In fact, the human frailty present even in such colossal communities as the Catholic Church or indeed, the Christian world, may make it hard for them, too, to tolerate what I am proposing. So let me end by suggesting more articulately exactly where in our own Tradition we Christians can go to repentance school.

Saint Augustine puts it quite tersely: *confessio* and *confiteor* mean "praising God" and "accusing ourselves;" the two are but two sides of one and the same coin. And we have his Confessions to prove it: they are the longest prayer of praise and thanksgiving to God in Christian history as well as the

longest act of penitence for a sinful past life, a life which, being incomplete, is apt to continue to be plagued by sin.

Augustine, original as he may be, is not the one who discovered what I just said. He found this habit of praise and penitence in the Bible, and specifically in the Book of Psalms. "It is not surprising that the Confessions, suffused as they are with a dramatic sense of God's interventions in Augustine's life, are studded with the language of the Psalms." In ever so many Psalms, laments about one's own weakness and sin, professions of innocence in God's presence, indignation about the lack of fairness and justice in the world, denunciation of violent and cunning enemies all around, complaints about God's apparent indifference to the just, and more than anything else, consternation at the prospect of losing one's life are being shamelessly uttered, with a passion; yet, in the very act of being uttered they become the very stuff of praise and thanksgiving offered to God, "the Lord, Mighty, Merciful and Gracious, Longsuffering and Abundant in Love and Truth, keeping faith with thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty." The knowledge and acknowledgment of God and the profession of unworthiness are inseparable, witness Moses and Elijah.

### **Faith and Asking Questions**

For Christians, faith in God through Jesus Christ is inseparable from what we call Jesus' Resurrection. We are a habitually disconsolate humanity, often caught in failure and sin; yet like Adam and Eve, rather than appearing shamefaced before the Living One, we try to abscond in the underbrush and cover our nakedness in front of each other. But no cover-up will do; what we need is not a palliative but the truth: an image of the very snake that has bitten us, lifted up on high, a monument to our lostness for all of us gaze on; or we need Jesus, trotted out by Pilate as the witness—bringing up the rear of a large cloud of witnesses to both our humanity and our inhumanity, all of them Jewish—to be lifted up on high and impaled. Only that kind of encounter with wounded humanity will ready us for the revelation by God (and by God alone) as "the Faithful and True Witness" and "the Just and Holy One." He enables us to glory again, in God, in the world, in each other and thus in ourselves. Glorifying and glorifying and dignifying—in practice, how are they done? Let me end with a hint.

Smack at the midpoint of Mark's gospel we have the scene of the recognition of Jesus, by Simon Peter, as God's Anointed One, the Messiah. The recognition happens in response not to a teaching proposed by Jesus but to a question he asks: "But you, who do you think I am?" In other words, to get his identity

established, Jesus delivers himself up to others, fallible others, frail and sinful; they are liable to misinterpret him. In fact, Simon Peter at once does just that: he explains to Jesus that suffering and dying are the last thing he has in mind for the Messiah, and Jesus at once turns his back on him and tells him to get lost: "Go away, Satan." So Jesus shows who he is by opening himself to others by means of a question; implicitly, however, he lives not on the strength of the human judgment he requests but by virtue of God's assurance. In that assurance, he can also afford to live like the lamb led to the slaughter, confident that God is the God of Life. He can afford to lose his own life, for he is all trust in the Living God.

I once had a curious dream. Jesus and Gautama the Buddha actually met and spoke with each other. Neither had any answers to give; both had only questions to ask. Unsurprisingly, in my dream, Jesus ended up asking more questions than even the Buddha could answer. But both Jesus and the Buddha began by asking questions, one of the other, trying to understand each other's wisdom and folly, disappointments and pains, fulfillments and joys. Thus, dignifying each other by questioning, probing, and searching, they were giving glory to the One to whom Glory is due, now and always and forever.

So today I am proposing a waking dream. Can we abandon ourselves into each other's hands, only to end up finding ourselves in the hands not of enemies but of lasting friends? Two things I know we will need. First, the fortitude of those who bravely stay awake in the dark. And besides, endless patience inspired by compassion, of the curious, questioning kind.