Judaism and Catholicism: The Common Ground of Social Justice

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Abstract
This article is about the relationship between Judaism and Catholicism. Rather than proceeding on the plane of theology – comparing Catholicism and Judaism in terms of their conceptions of the divine – the author approaches the subject ‘from the ground up’, considering their convergence at the level of social action. Taking his cue from Margaret Archer, who has spoken about ‘the Church as a social movement’, he presents Judaism in a similar light, drawing on resources within Judaism that conduce towards promoting human rights and social justice. Moreover, writing as a Jewish Fellow at a Catholic Oxford college (St Benet’s Hall), he recounts certain experiences that illustrate how Jews and Catholics can come together on common ground.

Keywords
Judaism, Catholicism, slavery, social justice, human rights

Preamble
Let me say first how pleased I am that this study day is being held at St Benet’s under the auspices of the St Benet’s Institute, and how much I appreciate the time and thought that Eva has put into organising the event. ‘Catholic engagement with other religious traditions’ sums up the ecumenical spirit of the Hall; and it cuts both ways. Ever since I joined the Hall I, as a Jew, have happily engaged with the Catholic tradition. And over the past 20 years or so, I have come to appreciate certain things that I have in common with my Benedictine colleagues. One is a name: my Hebrew name, Baruch, in Latin is Benedictus. Another is that we share the same pious appreciation for the fruit of the vine (not to mention malt whisky): we see it as a blessing. (And amen to that.) The monks, moreover, are people with whom I can discuss the Tanakh – also known as The Old Testament – which is not something that can be taken for granted at every Oxford college these days.

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Furthermore, English Catholics, like Jews, are a minority, who have suffered their share of discrimination in this country. For centuries, neither Jews nor Catholics were admitted to Parliament, nor to Oxford (nor to the other place, but that’s no deprivation). This too has engendered a certain sense of camaraderie between me and the monks. But, above all, perhaps, we share a sense of antiquity: of having ‘been there, done that’. St Benedict of Nursia wrote his Regula or Rule around the middle of the 6th century – more or less when the Talmud was being edited by Rabbi Ashi and his successors at the Sura yeshiva (academy) in Babylonia. In short, the Benedictines, like the Jews, have been round the block a few times. And what I have discovered is that these are people for whom, like me, the past is present.

In Judaism, the past is continually being made present by the practice of story-telling, the roots of which go back to the very beginning. ‘In the beginning’, the opening words of the Torah, the five books of Moses, is a classic formula for a tale. (It’s like ‘Once upon a time’.) And while the Torah contains several different genres, narrative is its overall form, from the creation of light on Day 1 to the mourning for Moses on the plains of Moab in the final verses of Deuteronomy. So, following in the footsteps of Moses, let me begin with a story, a true story: the story of how I come to be here at St Benet’s (with apologies to anyone who has heard it before). It will, I promise, lead somewhere. Eventually.

The year was 1998. I had just finished a six-year stint as head of the philosophy department at Saint Xavier University, Chicago, and I was due sabbatical leave. After consulting a friend at Oxford (an Anglican priest), I wrote to St Benet’s: Did they have a vacancy for a residential Visiting Fellow for the following academic year? My enquiry was addressed to the Master, who, at the time, was Fr Henry Wansbrough. In his reply, Fr Henry thoughtfully explained what I was getting into. ‘Basically’, he wrote, ‘it is a Benedictine house, and we live as a monastic community’. He went on to say cordially that I would be ‘most welcome’ to come and live with them for my sabbatical year.

I read his reply with a mixture of relief and anxiety. On one hand, this was the response I was hoping to get. On the other hand, how come that I got it? Probably, I thought, Fr Henry, noticing that I am at a Catholic University, has jumped to the wrong conclusion about who I am. He would not have known that I was raised in a kosher home and that I attended an Orthodox Jewish school (the Hasmonean) from the age of 5. Now, I did not want to accept his offer on false pretences, but nor did I wish to lose it. So, girding my loins, and feeling as though I were treading on eggshells, I wrote back as follows: ‘Since my own upbringing and education (until eighteen) was religious, I am accustomed to an environment that combines the academic with the devotional. However’, I continued, breaking the news as gently as I could, ‘my affiliation is not Catholic, nor even Christian, but . . .’ (pause for a deep breath) ‘Jewish. Consequently’, I confessed, ‘I suppose I will not be able to participate fully in all the rituals that are part of the life of the community at St Benet’s’. I quickly added: ‘While this does not pose a problem for me, I do see that this might not be what the Hall has in mind for a Visiting Fellow, especially one who is living on the premises’.

To this ponderous, tortuous message, I received the following response. (Bear in mind that Fr Henry is a monk of Ampleforth, a priest, editor of the New Jerusalem Bible and was, at the time, a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission.) He wrote: ‘[M]y mother was Jewish . . . I have an array of Jewish cousins, and value highly the Jewish
tradition’. He added: ‘I love all things Jewish (with certain limitations about Netanyahu). So I will be all the more delighted to have you’.

Were it not for the limitations about Netanyahu, I might not have accepted his offer. But I did. I came. And we became friends. It was in the course of that first year, at several late-night assignations in his study, that I discovered that our two traditions shared the same pious appreciation for malt whisky. (Henry wouldn’t drink anything else; certainly not mere water.) I learned also that there was more to his Jewishness than just his mother and his cousins. He was fond of saying that he and I were ‘the only two Jews in the Hall’. (Things have changed.) As I got to know him better I discovered that this was not a throwaway line – any more than his Jewishness was a throwaway identity. For Henry, his Jewish past was part of his Catholic present. But if he, a Catholic priest, is a Jew, what does that make me?

Who is a Jew? Rabbi Yohanan in the Talmud says that whoever rejects idolatry is called ‘a Jew’.1 It is a thought-provoking definition. You might think it is too wide, as it covers people who do not think of themselves as Jewish. But is it too wide or too narrow? How many of us, whatever we call ourselves, succeed in avoiding idolatry? Even God can be turned into an idol; it’s easily done. (I take this to be, in a way, the moral of the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32.) In fact, it’s hard to avoid. And if none of us avoids it, then, according to Rabbi Yohanan, no one is a Jew. As I say, it is a thought-provoking definition.

More to the point, perhaps, for the purposes of my paper, what is Judaism? A religion, you say. But I am uneasy about calling Judaism a religion. In neither the Tanakh nor the Talmud is there a Hebrew or Aramaic equivalent to the word ‘religion’.2 The Concise Oxford English Dictionary defines Judaism as ‘the monotheistic religion of the Jews, based on the Old Testament and the Talmud’. But the polysyllabic ‘monotheistic’ seems rather stilted, rather Greek, as if Judaism were an Oxford philosophical society for the advancement of the thesis that the sum total of divine beings is less than two and more than zero. In this definition, the very spirit of the definiens contradicts the definiendum. In other words, this does not sound like Judaism to me. (I’m not even sure the word ‘Judaism’ sounds like Judaism to me, but let’s put that to one side.) Then what is Judaism? It is a mosaic (pun intended): it is a collection of texts, a set of references, a sensibility, a vocabulary, stories, humour, styles of argument, symbols and rituals, history and memory, ways of thinking and approaches to life (and death). It is an atmosphere I breathe, a deep well on which I draw. And ‘God’ is a word that wells up from its depths: God, who, in the beginning, in the opening verse of Genesis, is uttered in the same breath as heaven and earth, as if these three words belong together, as if together they shatter the silence of the void, as if they were inseparable; as if everything that follows in the Torah must be seen in the light of their conjugation, which boils down to this: creator, on one hand, created, on the other.

Whatever divides us as Catholics and Jews, I think I am right in saying that, notwithstanding the doctrine of the trinity, this binary is common ground. But what does the creator require of the created? This brings me (you will be relieved to hear) to the subject of my paper – admittedly in a roundabout way, but that’s what comes of following in Moses’ footsteps.
A social movement

The theme of my paper is inspired by the title of the Richard Harries lecture that Margaret Archer gave at Christ Church in May 2016 to the Oxford branch of the Council of Christians and Jews. Margaret was a founder member of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, and in 2014 Pope Francis appointed her President of the Academy, a post she held until her retirement last year. The title of Margaret’s lecture was ‘Human Trafficking: The Church as a Social Movement’. I was asked to give a response and so I offered a Jewish point of view. Not the Jewish point of view, for there is no such thing. No one speaks for Judaism (though each and every Jew thinks they do!). But the point of view I offered was not mine alone. It belongs to a current that flows through Judaism down the centuries from antiquity to the present day. And it sprung to mind when I saw the flyer for Margaret’s lecture. ‘The Church as a Social Movement’: this is just how, in a certain mood, I think of Judaism: Judaism as a social movement, a movement inspired by the words that Moses addresses to the Children of Israel when, lost in the wilderness, they look to him to point a direction: ‘Justice, justice shall you pursue’ (Deut. 16:20). These words resound down the ages and, like the blast of the shofar or ram’s horn, remind the Jewish people who they are.

Seen this way, Judaism is not so much an identity you claim as a claim made on you. It is a demand that you can never quite meet. If I have learned anything from my sojourn at St Benet’s it is this: Catholics suffer from the same sense of guilt – of falling short, of never being quite good enough – as we Jews do. Perhaps, this explains why we share some of the same neuroses (and why we are so appreciative of the fruit of the vine).

In her lecture, Margaret showed us a slide of the brief note that Francis gave her in his own hand, saying what he thought the Pontifical Academy under her direction should address: ‘human trafficking and modern slavery’. Now, we might distinguish between ancient and modern forms of slavery, classifying human trafficking as modern, but it is as ancient as the book of Genesis and the story of Joseph being sold by his brothers to the passing band of Midianite or Ishmaelite traders for 20 pieces of silver (Gen. 37:28). Although it is true that the brothers’ motives were not purely commercial, the Midianites were simply plying their trade: they bought Joseph as a commodity and sold him to Potiphar when they got to Egypt. In this respect, the biblical story of the human trafficking of Joseph is a prototype for what is happening today on a scale that, as Margaret informed us, is vast and expanding.

Moreover, although Joseph did rather well for himself, rising to become one of ‘the great and the good’ – if not the greatest and the goodest – in the court of Pharaoh, the episode described in Genesis 37, ultimately leads to the enslavement of the Children of Israel, even if that comes about many generations later. So, whether modern or ancient, slavery is slavery and human trafficking is a link in the iron chain.

For Judaism, the enslavement of the people in Egypt and their liberation under Moses is not just one story among others: it is the founding narrative of the people, a narrative that is repeated at sabbath services throughout the year and which is the focal point of the festival of Pesach (Passover). I used to belong to the New North London Synagogue, and one Pesach the rabbi, Jonathan Wittenberg, sent the congregation an email message that included the following words (words that I used as an epigraph for my book Being Jewish and Doing Justice):
What is most important is not the story of the ten plagues, or the defeat of Egypt. What is so moving, what so much matters, is that the Torah should have chosen to locate our origins as a people here, in the struggle of the persecuted slave, in the anguish of the stranger and the disenfranchised, in order that we should know and remember for ever after the importance of justice, liberty and equality. Henceforth this memory of slavery and suffering is the moral touchstone of all Jewish values.\(^5\)

‘Our origins as a people’: I take these origins to be not just chronological but ethical, and therefore transcending the passage of time. The ‘memory of slavery’, translated into values that translate into action: this is where Judaism perpetually begins. The story that Judaism tells about the origins of the Jewish people, a tale of slavery and liberation: this constitutes it as a social movement, a movement for justice.

This movement begins with Moses, who gives the liberated people a code of ethics that lays peculiar emphasis on ‘the stranger’ (ger). ‘You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt’ (Exod. 23.9). But, of course, the Israelites were not mere strangers in Egypt; they were not tourists who had come to the sunny River Nile resort for the holiday of a lifetime. They were not visiting the pyramids; they were building them, under the lash of the taskmaster’s whip. When Moses says ‘you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt’, he means: you know the feelings of the slave, having yourselves been slaves in the land of Egypt. And this was no throwaway line. According to a source cited in the Talmud, the Torah repeats the commandment ‘not to oppress a stranger’ (or words to similar effect) between 36 and 46 times, depending on how you count.\(^6\) In other words, Moses does not merely bring the people out from slavery, as though slavery were something they could discard and leave behind; he builds a people on the foundation of their slavery, the ‘memory of slavery’ (as Rabbi Wittenberg put it). Their past is carried forward into their present – and into ours.

Judaism is the original anti-slavery movement. When we Jews forget where we come from, when we forget that our ‘origins as a people’ lie here, ‘in the struggle of the persecuted slave, in the anguish of the stranger and the disenfranchised’ (to quote Rabbi Wittenberg again), then we forget who we are. And when we fail to pursue justice, then we cease to be ourselves. These are the thoughts that sprung to mind when I read the title of Margaret’s lecture.

### Human dignity and human rights

A year earlier, the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences devoted its 20th plenary session to the subject of human trafficking. The Proceedings, published in 2016, were introduced by a short address by Pope Francis. The Academy, said Francis, ‘engaged in important activities in defence of human dignity and freedom in our day’.\(^7\) In ‘Where Does Human Dignity Come From?’, his contribution to the volume, Archbishop Roland Minnerath of Dijon invoked ‘the post-war philosophy of human rights’ and the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).\(^8\) He wrote: ‘The main development of the concept of dignity is to be found in the conciliar constitution Gaudium et spes. Here
it becomes clear that the Church endorses human rights as flowing from human nature and dignity. I take it, then, that there is in Catholic thought a highway that leads from sources in scripture (and elsewhere) to the language of rights as it is spoken in the UDHR. It is not for me to develop this argument further or to pronounce on Catholic social teaching. I leave it to others – those who speak from within Catholicism – to do so. I simply take it as given, for the purposes of this article, that the language of human rights and the pursuit of social justice are an integral part of that teaching. My business here is with Judaism and its route to the same commitments. As I set out the Jewish case, I shall try to elucidate ‘the post-war philosophy of human rights’ (to use Archbishop Minnerath’s phrase), so as to explain how it comes about that Judaism and Catholicism meet on this common ground.

When I speak of the language of rights I do not mean rights that the law giveth and the law taketh away: entitlements that vary from time to time or from one jurisdiction to another. I mean fundamental rights, rights that we regard as universal and inalienable because they belong to us purely by virtue of our being human: human rights. The language of human rights transcends the language of law: laws come and go, whereas human rights constitute an enduring standard by which to evaluate the rights that are either granted or withheld in law. They are (to borrow a term that Thoreau uses in Walden) a ‘higher law’. So, one way of saying what is wrong about human trafficking – and with a legal system that fails to tackle it adequately – is to say that it is a violation of human rights, which are, in a sense, above the law. But when is a right a human right? What makes a right into a universal principle? What (to put it another way) is ‘the post-war philosophy of human rights’?

The perspective that I am about to present owes a lot to the author of the book A Magna Carta for All Humanity: Homing in on Human Rights, published by Routledge in 2015. The author was one of the architects of the Human Rights Act, which incorporated the European Convention on Human Rights into UK law. I follow her lead, partly because I find her interpretation persuasive, but also because she is my younger sister, Francesca Klug, and younger sisters are always right: that is another universal principle.

Some people get their bearing with human rights by turning the clock back 300 years or so to the European Enlightenment. It is true that the struggle against oppression in that period was formative for the language of human rights today. But today’s struggles for justice are different. It is not the 18th century but the 20th, especially the war-torn first half, that sets the scene for the post-war human rights movement. When the UDHR was proclaimed by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948, barely three years had passed since World War II had ended and the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust had registered with a world in a state of shock. The Preamble recalls ‘barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind’. The Nazis excluded certain groups from the circle of humanity. The language of human rights does the opposite: it is thoroughly inclusive and it asserts a collective identity in which we all share. This is reflected in the phrase ‘all members of the human family’ in the opening sentence of the Preamble. Each right set out in the Declaration should be read in this light: humankind as a family, not as isolated individuals demanding their due. For, although it is true that a human right is a claim that every person is entitled to make, the engine driving the movement is not personal
entitlement. Article 1 puts it this way: ‘All human beings . . . should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood’ (or siblinghood, as we might say today). In other words, first and foremost comes mutual care – or at least mutual respect: respect for one another, for fellow ‘members of the human family’. I am tempted to say that ultimately it is this respect that puts the R in UDHR: it is the universal declaration of human respect.

But what is the basis of this respect? The answer found in the UDHR is contained in the following phrase: the ‘dignity and worth of the human person’ (to quote again from the Preamble). Furthermore, this is not something you can gain or lose; the opening sentence calls this dignity inherent. This idea – the inherent dignity of every member of the human family – could almost be lifted from Genesis chapter 1. In the Genesis account, grandma Eve and grandpa Adam, ancestors of the entire ‘human family’, are created b’tselem elohim, in the image of God (Gen. 1:27). From which the rabbis in the Talmud derive the principle of kevod habriyot (‘honour of the created’) or kevod ha-adom (honour of humanity’); that is to say, the honour that is inherent in being created human. Or, in idiomatic English: ‘human dignity’. This principle, kevod habriyot, assumes that the same quality imparted to Adam and Eve – the quality of being made in the image of God – is automatically passed on to all their descendants. In other words, human dignity is precisely inherent.

In one of his discourses on the Torah, Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, who was Rosh (head) of the renowned Mirrer Yeshiva in Jerusalem from 1965 to 1979, emphasised ‘the overwhelming importance’ of the principle of kevod habriyot. ‘The dignity of every person’, he averred, ‘is sacred’. Moreover, the ‘importance’ of human dignity is, he said, ‘overriding’. That is to say, ‘Rabbinic enactments and various scriptural prohibitions are set aside when they conflict with human respect and dignity’. And then he took an extra step, a crucial one: ‘The concept of kevod habriyot does not, however, stop at refraining from insulting or degrading one’s fellow human being. One is also obligated to enhance and magnify the prestige and honor of one’s fellow’.11 The extra step that Rabbi Shmulevitz takes is the step that leads to activism and the idea of Judaism that I am emphasising here: Judaism as a movement for social justice.

Given that the principle of human dignity is so central, this idea could also be put this way: Judaism as a humanising movement. Which suggests one possible answer to the question I posed earlier: What does the creator require of the created? There is a current of thought within Judaism that sees creation as unfinished. The celebrated Modern Orthodox Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik saw humankind as ‘a partner of the Almighty in the act of creation’. He called this ‘the central idea in the halakhic consciousness’, the consciousness of a person who lives according to the practices of traditional Judaism.12 But what is it about creation that is unfinished? There are many answers to this question in Jewish tradition. The one I am inclined to give, based on the premise that we are created ‘in the image of God’, is this: it’s us: we human beings: we are the unfinished business of creation. So, what the creator requires of the created – of us – is this: finish the job: become what you were created to be: yourselves. We are ourselves when we act with the human dignity implanted within us. And we act with that dignity when we treat others with dignity.
It is in this light that I interpret the story in the Talmud about the man who threw down the gauntlet to Hillel the Elder. A man approached Rabbi Hillel and said he would become a Jew if he (Hillel) could teach the whole of the Torah while he (the man) stood on one leg.\textsuperscript{13} Hillel did not bat an eyelid. He replied: ‘What is hateful to you, do not do to others’. ‘This’, he added, ‘is the whole of the Torah. The rest is commentary’\textsuperscript{14} With the principle of \textit{kevod habriyot} in mind, it seems to me that the underlying meaning of Hillel’s reply is this: Treat others with the same human dignity with which they should treat you. If this is the whole of the Torah, then justice is everyone’s business. And our lives should be the commentary.

Coda

I opened with an anecdote involving Fr Henry. I shall close with another. As you know, Fr Henry was well aware that I was Jewish before I even stepped across the threshold of the Hall. The other monks soon sussed me out. But the undergraduates, who were the bulk of the members, had no idea. (We had no graduates in those days.) Not until I, as it were, came out of the closet. It happened like this. One evening after Vespers, about 10 minutes prior to the ringing of the dinner bell, there was a soft knock on my door. It was Fr Henry. He said he was dining out that evening, as was the chaplain, and he wondered: Would I be so kind as to preside at dinner in the Hall in his absence? One does not turn down a request from one’s Master. But I hesitated, as it meant saying Grace before and after the meal. In my usual convoluted way, I explained that I could not bring myself to make the customary reference to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Henry, like Hillel, did not bat an eyelid. ‘Why not say the Jewish form of Grace?’ he suggested briskly. So, I did. Picture the scene: the long table extending the length of the refectory; the members of the Hall, almost all of them Catholic, lining both sides, each standing behind his chair (and I do mean \textit{his}: we had no women in those days either), listening respectfully while I recited \textit{Hamotzi}, the Jewish blessing over bread, first in Hebrew and then in English. When I finished, they all said ‘Amen’ – and promptly crossed themselves.

Feeling like Woody Allen caught in the glare of the headlights, I froze. ‘What have I done?’ I thought, fearing that inadvertently I had gone over to the other side. The ghosts of rabbis past, especially the ones who had taught me Torah and Talmud at school, seemed to be looking grimly over my shoulder, as if I had committed a grave sin. Had I forgotten who I was?

But I hadn’t. Once my panic had subsided, this is how I saw it: Although everyone round that table was united at that moment in a single ritual, there was a distinction within it, a space that permitted \textit{me} to remain on \textit{my} side of the identity line and \textit{the others} to stay put on \textit{theirs}. There was no compromise, not on either side. On one hand, I did not trespass on their Christian faith by reciting \textit{Hamotzi}, and they, on the other hand, did not appropriate my Jewish benediction by making the sign of the cross. No one forgot who they were. What happened was this: our paths converged. Judaism and Catholicism met around the common table of St Benet’s. In the world at large, they meet on the common ground of social justice.

And, because Hashem moves in mysterious ways, they also meet in the uncommon person of Fr Henry.
Notes

1. BT Megilla 13a.
2. Medieval Jewish thinkers adopted the word *dat* (‘law’), derived from a Persian word found in late passages in the Bible, to denote religion in the abstract (Rabbi Dr Louis Jacobs, *The Jewish Religion: A companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995, pp. 418–9)).
3. This section and the next are adapted from my talk ‘Judaism as a Social Movement’, given as a response to Margaret Archer, 17 May 2016.
4. ‘Margaret Archer’. In: *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Margaret_Archer
5. Epigraph in Brian Klug, *Being Jewish and Doing Justice: Bringing Argument to Life* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2011).
6. Norman Solomon, ed., *The Talmud: A Selection* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 472.
7. Margaret S. Archer and Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, eds., ‘Human Trafficking: Issues Beyond Criminalization’ (The Proceedings of the 20th Plenary Session, 17–21 April 2015. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), p. 5.
8. Archer and Sorondo, ‘Human Trafficking’, p. 38.
9. Archer and Sorondo, ‘Human Trafficking’, p. 43. *Gaudium et spes* (‘Joy and hope’) was one of the four constitutions resulting from Vatican II.
10. ‘Higher Laws’ is the title of one of the chapters in *Walden*.
11. Rabbi Chaim Shmulevitz, *Reb Chaim’s Discourses* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, 1989), pp. 240–3.
12. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man* (Jerusalem: Sefer ve Sefel Publishing, 2005), p. 99.
13. BT Shabbat 31a.
14. Hillel goes on to say, ‘Now, go study!’