

origins

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The Atheistic Imagination: A Challenge for Jews, Christians and Muslims

Father Patrick J. Ryan, SJ

What can believers learn from atheists? People of faith sometimes need to see themselves as others see them, said Jesuit Father Patrick J. Ryan, who took up this question in his spring McGinley lecture at Jesuit-run Fordham University in New York. Father Ryan, the Lawrence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society at Fordham, spoke April 24 at the university's Manhattan campus and on April 25 at its main campus in the Bronx. He chose as examples the American Jewish novelist Philip

“There is in recent years something fashionable in describing oneself as an atheist. The New Atheists get advertised and reviewed in The New York Times. Theologians do not.”

Roth, Irish writer Colm Tóibín and the British Indian writer Salman Rushdie to “see what they criticize about their ancestral faith and to interrogate what people of Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith might learn from those critiques.” Roth, he said, “intends to expose the cruelty of God, the capriciousness of the world in which we live,” he said. It is a dark vision, and “glibly expressed faith needs to pause in the presence of such darkness — pause and reflect.” Tóibín, who is gay and critical of Catholicism and its teaching on sexuality, nonetheless shows an aesthetic attachment to his ancestral faith even as he expresses his alienation from it, said Father Ryan, a reminder that “it is important not to underemphasize the aesthetic as a way of knowing God and reaching out to God in faith.” Rushdie, whose novel “The Satanic Verses” famously earned him a “fatwa” from Iran’s Imam Ruhollah Khomeini and is perhaps the most profoundly atheistic of the three writers in his absolute rejection of God, offers a critique of a rigoristic view of Islam as “purely a religion of law” that has “done much to obscure the truth of God’s mercy and love so central to that religious tradition.” Before the Islamic tradition ever evolved legal traditions, said Father Ryan, “the Quran proclaimed the absolute mercy of God at the center of its message.” His text follows.

a Jewish atheist, a Christian atheist and a Muslim atheist walk into a bar. ...” A friend of mine has suggested that I begin this lecture with a joke like that but I

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Respondents to Father Patrick Ryan's McGinley lecture were Rabbi Daniel Polish, spiritual leader of Congregation Shir Chadash in Poughkeepsie, N.Y., and Amir Hussain, professor of theological studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, Calif.

Rabbi Polish argued that Philip Roth's "atheism" needs to be understood in a wider context. Jewish identity is not fully analogous to either Christian or Muslim identity. He explained:

"For both Christian and Muslim identity depends upon faith. ... And if one does not have that faith, or no longer has that faith, or abandons that faith, then one is no longer Muslim or Christian. But Jewish identity is not built along the same lines. ...

"The religion of that people is Judaism. But the identity is conferred by being part of that people or participating in that civilization. So though it is conventional to speak of Jews as a religious group analogous to Christians or Muslims, we are also what can be called an ethnic group ... an identity that is full of secular implications."

This reality puts Philip Roth in a different category from Tóibín or Rushdie, he said. "So yes, as Father Ryan notes, Roth has written forcefully against G-d, and against the religion of the Jews. But here is where it gets asymmetrical — and interesting. I would argue that from the very beginning Roth has written as a proudly self-affirming Jew, and lovingly about Jewish life — and not in any sense of former identity."

Rabbi Rosen said Roth's engagement with his Jewishness and the life of the Jewish people "runs like a bright thread" through his career.

"What I am arguing," he said, "is that from the beginning of his career issues of Jewish life never seem far from Roth's mind. Does any of this make Roth a theist? Obviously not. But it does make Roth recognizably Jewish in an important way that Jews under-

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cannot complete it. Perhaps it is sufficiently funny that one could describe atheists as either being Jewish, Christian or Muslim.

Many atheists might be happier simply to describe themselves as atheists pure and simple, without any notice given to the faith they or their ancestors once professed. There is in recent years something fashionable in describing oneself as an atheist. The New Atheists get advertised and reviewed in The New York Times. Theologians do not. On the whole I don't know whether I find the New Atheists or the New Apologists who have taken them on more tiresome.

In this evening's lecture I want to reflect on the work of three very nontiresome writers of imaginative fiction in English, all of them living, each of them distinctly reacting against the faith of his fathers — and against the faith of their mothers as well. Those three writers are the American, Philip Roth, the Irishman, Colm Tóibín, and the British Indian, Salman Rushdie.

All at one time or another have outraged their former co-religionists. I wish to examine some of the writings of each of these contemporary writers to see what they criticize about their ancestral faith and to interrogate what people of Jewish, Christian and Muslim faith might learn from those critiques. To this point, let me quote the Scottish poet Robert Burns:

O wad some Power
the giftie gie us
To see ourself as ithers see us!¹

The authors involved might question the existence of that Power, but they can still "gie us" that "giftie" themselves. Men and women of faith — Jewish, Christian and Muslim — sometimes need to "see ourself as ithers see us."

Philip Roth: Imagination Born and Bred in Newark

Philip Milton Roth was born 79 years ago in Newark, N.J. Since 1959 he has published 29

novels. Between 2006 and 2010 Roth published four short novels to which he has assigned a Greek common title: *Nemeses*, the English plural of the Greek word *nemesis*.

Nemesis in Greek mythology is the hypostasis or goddess of revenge, the fury who repays the hubris of human beings, their overweening pride. Three of these novels are excellent; about the third and shortest, *The Humbling* (2009), the less said the better.² I will comment mainly on two of the three excellent novels in this series, *Indignation* (2008) and *Nemesis* (2010), among the best ever written by Roth.

"Roth has seldom, if ever, written positively about Judaism, but these two novels prove more than eloquent in their expression of rage not only against Judaism but also against God."

In both of these novels the leading character's life is reviewed, starting from his childhood in a lower middle-class urban setting in New Jersey. Each character has a tragic flaw or makes a series of strategic mistakes that lead to his downfall. These novels are not repetitive; the accounts of how the main characters meet their respective nemeses prove relentless.

In each novel the hero (if I may use an old-fashioned term) cries out against God and the whole structure of a life based on the faith tradition of Israel. Roth has seldom, if ever, written positively about Judaism, but these two novels prove more than eloquent in their expression of rage not only against Judaism but also against God.

Indignation (2008) narrates the brief life of a young man from Newark, Marcus Messner, the son of a kosher butcher and his wife, who in 1951 escapes the increasing paranoia of his father by transferring from a local commuter college in Newark to Winesburg College

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in Ohio.³ Winesburg College, once a Baptist seminary, is by 1951 a secular college, but undergraduates are still required to attend Wednesday chapel services. This regulation, along with roommate problems and romantic complications, make coexistence with Messner's paranoiac father in Newark begin to look easy.

We learn early in the novel that Marcus is narrating the story of his life from the grave, a life story that he calls "the series of mishaps ending in my death at the age of 19."⁴ Even though his parents make their living as kosher butchers, Marcus has no use for any religious tradition, beginning with the Jewish tradition the family business serves.

The other students at Winesburg College, Jewish and gentile, are willing to get through college without confronting the system. Not Marcus: In a fiery interview with the dean of men Marcus objects to mandatory chapel: "I objected," he says, "not because I was an observant Jew but because I was an ardent atheist" (p. 80).

To sustain him through the one Wednesday chapel service he ever attends, Marcus sings to himself the communist Chinese national anthem in English translation, itself the source of the novel's title: "China's masses have met the day of danger./Indignation fills the hearts of all of our countrymen" (p. 82).

Messner, drafted into the army when his student exemption expires after his expulsion from Winesburg College over the mandatory chapel problem, dies of wounds sustained in a Chinese attack in the Korean War.

What was the nemesis of Marcus Messner? Like his father, he gradually descended into paranoia: lashing out at his family, his roommates, the regulations of the college he himself had picked out for his escape from home. The Chinese whose revolutionary indignation he sang finally undid him on what came to be called Massacre Mountain in Korea: "He'd not been encircled by so much blood since his days as a boy at the slaughterhouse, watching the ritual killing of animals in accordance with Jewish law" (p. 226).

From his place among the dead Marcus regrets all the wrong turns of his first 19 years. But still he feels, even in death, that "he couldn't believe like a child in some stupid god!" (p. 230). Marcus Messner looks backward at his life with a deep regret but without any hope of something better in the world to come. As an ardent atheist he repudiates all such hope.

The last and longest of these four relatively short recent novels of Roth has for its title the singular form of the Greek word for the whole

series: *Nemesis* (2010). The narrator, speaking in 1971, is a survivor of a 1944 polio epidemic in Newark. He and many of his schoolmates probably contracted polio from a carrier who was eventually to come down with polio himself, Eugene "Bucky" Cantor, the main character of this novel.

An elementary school gym teacher who works for the summer supervising a playground for children in a Jewish section of Newark, Cantor — deferred from service in World War II because of poor eyesight — thinks that he is waging a battle against the polio epidemic without realizing that he himself is a source of the epidemic. When he withdraws from that battle in Newark, he brings the virus with him to a summer camp in the Poconos.

Cantor's poor eyesight, much emphasized by Roth, parallels symbolically the blindness of Oedipus to the facts of his origins, even before the king of Thebes eventually tears his eyes out when he realizes he has killed his father and married his mother.

Long before Cantor realizes the horror of what he has inadvertently caused, he seethes with rage against any attempt by the Jewish community in Newark to seek refuge in God. The Kaddish, the famously objective mourner's prayer in the Jewish tradition, offers little or no consolation to mourners, insisting rather on the absolute sovereignty and holiness of God. Bucky Cantor will have none of it.

At the funeral of the first of his playground children to die of polio, Bucky rages against God and his worshipers at that graveside, who are characterized as "praising God's almightiness, praising extravagantly, unstintingly, the very God who allowed everything, including children, to be destroyed by death."⁵

Cantor's own polio leaves him partially handicapped and deeply angry for life, and especially angry with God. He refuses to marry Marcia Steinberg, the doctor's daughter with whom he had been almost engaged, even though she wants to marry him. "Whoever she married, let them and their children be happy and enjoy good health. Let's hope their merciful God will have blessed them with all that before he sticks his shiv in their back" (p. 254).

Marcia had tried to reason with him, defending God the way God defended himself in the Book of Job: "You have no idea what God is! No one does or can!" (p. 261).⁶ The narrator, himself an atheist, catches Bucky Cantor in a certain contradiction: "You speak of God. You still believe in this God you disparage?" Bucky replies: "Yes. Somebody had to make this place" (p. 264). But Bucky has

stand what Jewish is."

"Nemesis," can be read as a profound and principled atheist manifesto, he said. "But we can also see Roth in 'Nemesis' not so much rejecting G-d as arguing with G-d, enraged at G-d, calling G-d to account for the tragedies and horrors of this world, the undeserved suffering. ... Such arguing, raging, calling G-d to account is a theme reaching back in Jewish literature all the way to the Bible. We find it in many of the psalms. And of course it is the issue at the very heart of the Book of Job. And we find this theme articulating itself afresh in so many modern Jewish writers," he said.

The theme of unconventional religiosity in Jewish writers "provides a wonderful window on the unique nature of Jewish identity," he said. "It includes the freedom to abandon G-d altogether or, at the least, to be deeply disappointed with G-d, to argue with G-d, to call G-d to the docket as the accused."

What can religious people learn from an authentically atheistic perspective? Rabbi Polish said the experience of God's absence "imposes a moral imperative on us. ... If there is no G-d, then how much is expected of us? If we cannot depend on G-d to prevent another Auschwitz, then we have to take that responsibility on ourselves. If we cannot depend on G-d to feed the hungry, then we have to do it ourselves."

When Pope Benedict XVI said nonbelievers challenge believers not to consider God their own property, as if he belonged to them, at the Vatican-sponsored interreligious pilgrimage to Assisi in 2011, he identified perhaps the greatest specifically theological lesson — spiritual humility — to be drawn from nonbelief or atheism, concluded Rabbi Polish. "They stand as reminders to us all that we know less of G-d than we would aspire to; perhaps than we pretend to," he said. "They remind us that much as we are on the journey toward

G-d, we have not arrived at the destination and we need to be more modest in the claims we make for ourselves and more forgiving of those who have less insight into the impenetrable infinite than we have achieved — or different insight. From the vantage of that modesty we can greet one another and embrace one another in peace, respect and love."

In his remarks Amir Hussain focused on the work of Salman Rushdie and his novel 'The Satanic Verses,' who he said "is one of my favorite writers ... one of the two or three greatest living writers in English."

Key to understanding Rushdie and his book, he said, is that he writes about his own multiple identities as English, Indian, born in Bombay, educated in England but now living in the United States. This theme of migration and of hybrid identity is one Hussain said he shares with Rushdie and "often wonder who I am." A further connection with Rushdie, he said, is that "our experiences of Islam are as members in a minority community. For most of our lives, we have lived in countries like India, Canada, England and America, where as Muslims we have been religious minorities."

"If there is one difference that I have with Rushdie," said Hussain, "it is his understanding and use of the word 'secular.' He seems to confuse it with the term 'atheist.'... I would argue that secularism, at least in the context of North America, does not mean the same thing as atheism. When we say that North America is secular, we do not mean that we are a society consisting mostly of atheists. We are much more religious, for example, on any measure of religiosity, than Europeans. What we mean by secular is that there is no official state religion. ... This secularism is very different, for example, from the disestablishment of religion in Europe, expressed for example as 'laïcité' in France."

no love for this Creator or for the place he created.

Bucky Cantor sees himself imaged in a campfire story told to children in the summer camp to which he had carried the polio virus. "The Indians believed that it was an evil being, shooting them with an invisible arrow, that caused certain of their diseases" (p. 271). The narrator refuses to accept Bucky's description of himself as that invisible arrow: "Don't make things worse by scapegoating yourself" (p. 272).

Easier said than done. The narrator finally accedes to Cantor's terrible sense of his own responsibility for the summer camp polio outbreak: "Maybe he was the invisible arrow" (p. 275).

The narrator refuses to end his story of Bucky Cantor on such a tragic note. The last five pages of this powerful novel evoke the narrator's lyrical memory of Bucky Cantor, before the polio outbreak, teaching his wards how to shoot a javelin. "The first javelin thrower was said to be Hercules, the great warrior and slayer of monsters, who, Mr. Cantor told us, was the giant son of the supreme God, Zeus, and the strongest man on earth" (p. 276).

But the myth of Hercules the javelin thrower narrated by Bucky Cantor possibly hints as well at other and more tragic elements in the story of that quintessential athlete, and especially his fiery death caused by the shirt stained with toxic blood that the centaur Nessus, once defeated by Hercules, had given as love magic to the jealous wife of Hercules, Deianira.⁷ The athletic heroism of Bucky Cantor — including his battle with polio among his charges — brought down on him the nemesis that destroyed the rest of his life.

The moral universe of these novels of Philip Milton Roth is Greek and tragic. He has no desire to embrace the transcendent purpose of the poet from whom he takes his middle name, attempting "to justify the ways of God to men."⁸ On the contrary, this great novelist intends to expose the cruelty of God, the capriciousness of the world in which we live. Roth's is a dark vision, imaginatively and superbly conveyed in these two recent novels. Glibly expressed faith needs to pause in the presence of this darkness — pause and reflect.

Colm Tóibín: Imagination Born and Bred in Wexford

Born 57 years ago in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, Colm Tóibín has published since 1987 at least six novels and two books of short stories as well as 11 works of collected journalism, literary criticism, a memoir as well as some poetry and pieces for the theater, with

more coming out every year. Since September 2011 he has been a professor of creative writing at the University of Manchester.

Like Philip Roth, Tóibín is a master stylist, but he has, even more than Roth, taken on the mantle of public intellectual, especially, but not exclusively, in his native Ireland. He has not been afraid to take up subjects that embroil him in controversy, including controversy with the Catholic Church.

Openly gay, Tóibín has in his nonfiction written not a few things critical of the faith of his ancestors, and especially things critical of the Catholic Church's teaching on sexuality. But is Tóibín an atheist? I am not entirely sure of the answer to that question, although it must be admitted that some of the voices captured in his fiction, especially his more recent fiction, lean in that direction.

"But is Tóibín an atheist? I am not entirely sure of the answer to that question, although it must be admitted that some of the voices captured in his fiction, especially his more recent fiction, lean in that direction."

In his earliest book of nonfiction, *Walking Along the Border* (1987), Tóibín gives an account of the journey he took in the summer of 1986, largely on foot, along the border that separates the Irish Republic from the six counties of northeastern Ireland still under British rule. At the time, the Republic of Ireland was preparing for a referendum on the article in the 1937 Irish Constitution that forbade divorce under any circumstance. At the same time, the six counties under British rule were still wracked with periodic outbreaks of violence between the Provisional Irish Republican Army, the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the occupying British forces.

Preoccupation with both of these realities dogged Tóibín on his journey. Two chapters in *Walking Along the Border* narrate contrasting visits made by Tóibín to islands with long religious histories, St. Patrick's Purgatory on Station Island in Lough Derg, County Donegal, within the Republic of Ireland, and a Hiberno-Romanesque church ruin on White Island in Lough Erne, County Fermanagh, within Northern Ireland.

The penitential pilgrimage to St. Patrick's

Purgatory demands a great deal of the pilgrim, who is to fast from midnight on the day of arrival and is only allowed tea or coffee and hard brown bread or toast while on the island. Shoes are removed immediately on disembarking, and the pilgrim remains barefooted, rain or shine, while making the many circumambulations in the stony penitential “beds” that each pilgrim must complete while on the island.

The first night is spent in sleepless common prayer, much of it involving numerous repetitions of the Our Father, the Hail Mary and the Apostles’ Creed. Participation is expected at Masses three times during the pilgrim’s stay as well as at other devotions.

Although Tóibín seems to have started off in earnest on the pilgrimage, having fasted from midnight of the day of his afternoon arrival, he began to become disenchanted as the first evening developed, especially when he discovered that he was expected to go to confession, a practice of the universal church today that owes much of its shape to the practice of purgatories like Station Island in first-millennium Ireland.

“Praying was one thing,” Tóibín writes, “and singing hymns was fine, but telling my sins to a priest was something I hadn’t done since I was 15.”⁹ Although he considered fleeing the island immediately, Tóibín finally persisted through the whole experience, cutting corners on the penitential “beds” and other rigors of the three-day experience, but he admitted that he did take the opportunity to renew his baptismal promises, “renouncing the devil, which I was glad to do.”¹⁰

But in the long run Tóibín found himself alienated from the central intent of the rigorous pilgrimage and especially from the preaching he heard at one of the Masses, more or less subtly aimed against passage of the divorce referendum the following Thursday.¹¹

Tóibín’s experience a week later, when he traveled with a group of friends to White Island on Lough Erne, contrasted vividly with his previous weekend on Station Island. During the intervening week the electorate in the Irish Republic had rejected by a substantial majority the possibility of amendment of the prohibition on divorce in the Constitution. Famously, the opponents of the passage of the amendment had campaigned with the slogan that “a woman voting for divorce is like a turkey voting for Christmas.”¹²

Tóibín and his friends, appalled at the outcome, distracted themselves with a far from ascetical boat trip to Lough Erne. In the ruined church on the island they saw weather-worn images from the ninth through the

11th century, most of them rather dour-faced figures with croziers who seemed to Tóibín and his companions “to be joining the rest of the population, North and South, in saying ‘No.’ Their mouths on the word for eternity. ‘No, No, No.’”¹³

One solitary archaeological relic preserved in the ruins seemed to originate from pre-Christian Ireland, a female figure (possibly a fertility image), usually called a *síle-na-gig*. This *síle-na-gig* does not strike me as much more attractive to the eye than the dour-faced ecclesiastics, but in the mood of that weekend after the failed divorce referendum, Tóibín saw the “fixed grin on her face” as an invitation to an encounter with an ancient Molly Bloom: “‘Yes,’ she was saying, ‘yes, yes, yes.’”¹⁴

In an article published in 2005 by Michael Böss of the University of Aarhus in Denmark, the scholar analyzes, especially in terms of these two essays in *Walking Along the Border*, the ambiguities of Tóibín’s relationship to Ireland and to the Catholic Church. Böss put words into Tóibín’s mouth in a 1994 interview with him when he asked him “why he, as an atheist and a liberal intellectual, had not simply decided to reject religion and church.”¹⁵

Tóibín does not bite readily at the fruit offered by Böss: “Well, you see,” Tóibín replied, “one gets used to people. Many priests and many Catholic people in Ireland may still not be liberal, but they are also my neighbors, also my family. One gets fond of people, personally.”¹⁶

For a man who feels alienated from the Catholic Church, Tóibín manifests a continuing interest in the church. In a 1994 book of travel essays, *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe*, Tóibín covers, among other topics, pilgrimages to Medugorje and Santiago de Compostela as well as the 1991 visit by Blessed Pope John Paul II to Poland, and especially a deeply moving vigil of prayer and reflection led by the pope at the Marian shrine of Czestochowa. There, Tóibín notes, the pope had preached at length and “had not mentioned sex or sin. He had not hectored us. His words had been suggestive, at times poetic.”¹⁷

The most unusual essay in this collection, however, and the source of its title, is not a travel essay at all but an account of an inner journey Tóibín undertook under the direction of a psychiatrist friend who specializes in helping clients confront blocked past psychological traumas. The psychiatrist aided this process along with the use of ketamine, a drug that has effects both analgesic and anesthetic and that sometimes causes hallucinations. All too often ketamine has been

“In 1990, Rushdie became a Muslim. It’s quite clear that he has left that religious community and taken up the mantle of atheism. In describing the horrors of the massacres in Gujarat in 2002, Rushdie wrote: ‘Religion is the poison in the blood. Where religion intervenes, mere innocence is no excuse. ... So India’s problem turns out to be the world’s problem. What happened in India, happened in God’s name. The problem’s name is God.’ ...

“Here, I would argue, is perhaps for the first time a narrowness or a meanness in Rushdie’s vision. He rightly praises the fabulous work of Gabriel García Márquez but reads the Bible in a surprisingly literal fashion.

“At the University of Toronto, I had the extraordinary privilege of knowing Northrop Frye, whose last book was titled ‘The Double Vision: Language and Meaning in Religion.’ Professor Frye would remind us that when the Bible is historically accurate, it is only accidentally so.

“In the same vein, with respect to the teaching of science in Kansas, none of my Jewish friends think that the Bible, important as it is, is a very good science textbook. It is, however, much more important than history or science. It tells us about our place in the world. It gives us not facts but something much more important, truths. Or to quote from Professor Frye: ‘What “the” truth is, is not available to human beings in spiritual matters: The goal of our spiritual life is God, who is a spiritual Other, not a spiritual object, much less a conceptual object. That is why the Gospels keep reminding us how many listen and how few hear: Truths of the Gospel kind cannot be demonstrated except through personal example.’” Hussain said that with the double vision referenced in Frye’s title, “we see the spiritual and the physical world as simultaneously present. It is that imagination, not the atheistic one, which I would wish for us all.”

employed as a so-called “recreational drug.”

The psychiatrist who urged this process on Tóibín did so because he felt that the writer had never faced up to the effects the death of his schoolteacher father had had on him when he was 12 years of age. Tóibín admitted earlier that he had entertained some ambiguous feelings about his father, who was likely to become his class teacher a year or two later, had he lived.

Eventually, however, as a result of the drug-induced inner journey, Tóibín felt himself “overwhelmed by a compulsion to thank my father for life,” but he also felt that the expression of such a sentiment “sounded like the sort of thing you hear at a bad funeral service.” Finally Tóibín “wanted to bless” his father and eventually did so: “I made the sign of the cross in the air, over and over. I had no choice.”¹⁸

This inner journey of Tóibín’s “in Catholic Europe” gives the entire book its title and rightly so; it stands head and shoulders over the other chapters.

The death of the writer’s mother in September 2000, 33 years after his father passed away, has returned as a theme in several of Tóibín’s recent writings, including a brief memoir of his upbringing that was published by Penguin as an audiobook in 2011.¹⁹

The 2010 collection of short stories called *The Empty Family* opens with an exquisite story of an Irish writer teaching in Texas recollecting in 2006 the anniversary of his mother’s death six years earlier. While remembering the events of her funeral he wants to call a lover in Dublin who had come to be with him on that occasion.

“The moon hangs low over Texas,” the narrator thinks. “The moon is my mother. She is full tonight. ... I have never seen a moon so low and so full of her own deep brightness. My mother is six years dead tonight, and Ireland is six hours away and you are asleep.”²⁰

The narrator goes on to tell his absent lover that “you know that I do not believe in God. I do not care much about the mysteries of the universe, unless they come to me in words, or in music maybe, or in a set of colors, and then I entertain them merely for their beauty and only briefly.”²¹

Tóibín has been criticized by some Catholics for the aestheticism of his

attachment to Catholicism, combined with his distaste for the church’s teaching on sexuality. The online version of the British weekly the Catholic Herald, featured in September 2010 a thunderous blog headlined “Colm Tóibín wants the church to be beautiful and exotic. But she has to impart truth too.”²²

“Tóibín has been criticized by some Catholics for the aestheticism of his attachment to Catholicism, combined with his distaste for the church’s teaching on sexuality.”

Let me conclude this too brief overview of Tóibín’s imaginative struggle with faith with an account of a meeting he had in the late 1980s with a British journalist who told him that she collected rosary beads. “She had converted some into bracelets and necklaces ... but others she just kept as antiques. The problem was, she went on, that old ladies in Ireland insisted on being buried with their beads, which was a nightmare for the serious collector.”²³ Tóibín found himself in the unlikely role of defender of the faith when talking to this trivializing aesthete: “Catholicism and all its trappings, somehow, belonged to me.”²⁴

The aesthetic affection of Tóibín for the faith of his fathers and his mothers over many generations in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, remains with him, even if his Catholicism does not measure up to the standards of some bloggers for the Catholic Herald.

Salman Rushdie: Imagination Born and Bred in Bombay

Ahmad Salman Rushdie was born in Bombay of highly educated Muslim parents less than two months before the division of British India into India and Pakistan in 1947. He is distinctly a Bombay, not a Mumbai person, a British Indian rather than an Indian pure and simple, and he holds British citizenship. After his primary and early secondary schooling in India he moved to England in the 1960s where he completed his secondary schooling at the Rugby School, and from there proceeded to King’s College of the University of

Cambridge.

No “Slum Dog Millionaire,” Rushdie was dubbed a knight bachelor for services to literature by Queen Elizabeth II in 2007. But despite the great class and educational differences between Rushdie and many of his Indian Muslim contemporaries, much of his fictional output has been characterized as magical realism, and it bears a strong family resemblance to Bollywood films. He is currently university distinguished professor at Emory University in Atlanta.

Rushdie established his reputation as a writer of fiction with his second novel, winner of the Booker Prize, *Midnight’s Children* (1981), the story of a child born at the stroke of midnight on the day that India gained its independence. But it was Rushdie’s fourth novel, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), which mainly accounts for the author’s fame or infamy, depending on who is evaluating him. It brought down on his head not only a great deal of obloquy from Muslims in many parts of the world but also a *fatwa*, or legal pronouncement, calling for his death emanating from Iran’s supreme guide at the time, Imam Ruhollah Khomeini, who died a year later.

In actual fact, very few Muslims took that *fatwa* seriously, although there were enough entrepreneurial types who might have vied for the bounty promised for the assassination that the author felt it necessary to go into hiding for nearly a decade. Nowadays, however, Rushdie seems to be everywhere, as a recent article in the Fashion & Style section of The New York Times sardonically noted.²⁵

A brief outline of the novel, better known for its title than for its contents, is in order. The two main characters are Indian Muslims, neither of them in any sense devout: Gibreel Farishta, a Bollywood actor originally born with the name Ismail Najmuddin, and Saladin Chamcha, a Bombay-born entrepreneur originally named Salahuddin Chamchawala, now established in England.

The names of the two characters translate as Gabriel Angel and Saladin Spoon, the latter term in Hindi and Urdu referring in a vulgar fashion to a sycophant.²⁶ Gibreel, for his part, has spent his Bollywood career playing roles in what he calls “theologicals,”²⁷ films about the Hindu gods, the sort

of thing a devout Muslim would never do. Through such films, according to Farishta, “every god in the pantheon got his or her chance to be a star” (p. 24).

Saladin Chamcha, on the other hand, had dedicated himself to business concerns in Britain; in the process he had become alienated from the father who originally sent him there to study: “I accuse him of becoming my supreme being,” Saladin declares, “so that what happened was like a loss of faith” (p. 41). Neither of these Indian Muslims seems to have any form of faith by the time they are involved in an airplane hijacking by militant Sikhs.²⁸

In the novel *Farishta* and *Chamcha* survive the plane bombing, landing unharmed on the coast of England. *Chamcha*, a British citizen, is almost immediately arrested for illegal immigration, but *Farishta*, the Indian actor, passes himself off as a Briton. In the process of their fall from the sky *Gibreel* becomes an angel and *Saladin* a devil.

Part II of the novel, the section that prompted most of the outrage in the Muslim world, is a fantastic dream of *Gibreel*'s, much of it parodying events of the Prophet Muhammad's life in Mecca, especially the early years of his experience of revelation (610-622 CE). The point of view is that of *Farishta*, a totally secularized or lapsed Muslim, whose version of the life of Muhammad owes more to the tradition of English music hall than to the Quran and the early lives of Muhammad.

To symbolize this comedic intent, the Prophet Muhammad appears in the dream sequence as “Mahound,” a name created by medieval Christian polemicists writing anti-Muslim propaganda,²⁹ and he is also described as “that businessman on the hill” (p. 94), a reference to Muhammad's meditative seclusion on Mount Hira after he had withdrawn from active mercantile life. Much of this section reminds me of the sort of thing undergraduates write when they are trying to be amusing. Muslims generally do not find this novel funny.

One incident in Muhammad's life, much satirized in *Farishta*'s Bollywood dream sequence, provides the title for the entire novel. Muhammad had struggled for nearly a decade to purify Mecca and its sacred shrine, the Kaaba, from the rampant polytheism enshrined there. That polytheism was intimately

connected with the role of Mecca as an entrepôt for Arabs of every variety and even some non-Arabs; everyone was welcome to exchange goods in Mecca, and the central shrine of that town welcomed the religious imagery connected with each of the communities who came there to trade.

“In actual fact, very few Muslims took that ‘fatwa’ seriously, although there were enough entrepreneurial types who might have vied for the bounty promised for the assassination that the author felt it necessary to go into hiding for nearly a decade. Nowadays, however, Rushdie seems to be everywhere.”

At one point of his Meccan preaching career, Muhammad seems to have received a revelation indicating that at least three goddesses, the so-called “daughters of Allah” (al-Lat, al-'Uzza and Manat), prominent in certain locales of strategic importance, might be venerated by Muslims on a subordinate level. The temptation to give subordinate divine status to these goddesses soon passed, and Muhammad recognized the spuriousness of the verses he had supposedly received from God; these repudiated verses are called “the satanic verses.”³⁰

Rushdie's *Mahound* sounds very like a Bombay entrepreneur when he tells his closest disciples that he has been “offered a deal” (p.107) by the faithless leadership of *Jahilia*, the novel's name for pre-Islamic Mecca.³¹ *Mahound*'s closest disciples discourage any compromise on monotheism, urging *Mahound* to consult with the angel *Gibreel*, the interlocutor of God.

But in *Farishta*'s dream he himself is the angel *Gibreel*, and none too happy about his position: “Mahound comes to me for revelation, asking me to choose between monotheist and henotheist alternatives, and I'm just some idiot actor” (p. 111).

Rushdie's *Mahound* finally makes the compromise on grounds somewhat parallel to the prophet Muhammad's long opposition to the destruction of unwanted female infants in pre-Islamic Mecca: “In the old days he wanted to protect the baby daughters of *Jahilia*; why shouldn't he take the daughters of Allah under his wing as well?” (p. 121).

Finally, however, Rushdie's *Mahound*, like the historical Muhammad, repudiates the satanic verses and, persecuted by the Meccan elite, migrates from *Jahilia* to *Yathrib*, the oasis later renamed *Medina*. *Gibreel*, however, is left to suffer the wrath of the three spurned daughters of Allah, harpies none too happy about their demotion: “They fall upon him from the night sky ... flapping around his head, clawing at his eyes, biting, whipping him with their hair, their wings” (pp. 128-129). In their revenge the demoted goddesses resemble some of the women who have bedeviled the life of *Gibreel Farishta*.

Much more could be said about the atheism of the main characters in *The Satanic Verses*, but it must also be added that their atheism reflects that of the author. In a 1999 article in the British daily *The Guardian*, Rushdie wrote one of a series of letters to the 6 billionth human being estimated to have been born in October of that year. The letter suggests that no room for faith of any sort should be given.

“As human knowledge has grown,” Rushdie writes, “it has also become plain that every religious story ever told about how we got here is quite simply wrong. This, finally, is what all religions have in common. They didn't get it right.” Later on he asserts that “religion, even at its most sophisticated, essentially infantilizes our ethical selves by setting infallible moral Arbiters and irredeemably immoral Tempters above us: the eternal parents, good and bad, light and dark, of the supernatural realm.”³²

In a 2002 interview with *Irshad Manji*, a believing Canadian Muslim of very liberal opinions, currently director of the Moral Courage Project at New York University, Rushdie admits that “I'm not a person of religious belief” and that “I have the religion of a flea.” When *Manji* went on to ask him if he found “anything redeeming about religious faith,” he admitted that “I can see it being valuable to other people, like a consolation

in difficulty. For myself,” he continued, “I don’t feel the urge. There’s no hole in me that it needs to fill.”³³

There is not much room for dialogue with an atheist who says things like that, and, alas, it must be admitted that Rushdie is not alone today in this absolute rejection of God. The flashy colors of Bollywood seem to bring him no intimations of the transcendent.

Reflections From the Deck Of a Sinking Ship

We have just passed the centenary of the sinking of the Titanic. Were I to find myself on the deck of a sinking ship with either Roth, Tóibín or Rushdie, what (briefly) could I say that I have learned from them? I would like them to say more, but the ship has struck an iceberg and we are beginning to sink. Furthermore, what (again, very briefly) would I like to say to them? The end is near and I have to be more succinct than this topic deserves.

“Orthodox Jews sometimes seem less than totally familiar with the prophetic tradition and its presentation of a passionate God who suffers for and with his people.”

First of all, what have I learned from the bleak vision in the late novels of Philip Roth? You can see Philip Roth on YouTube telling an interviewer that “when the whole world doesn’t believe in God, it will be a great place.”³⁴ The God in whom Marcus Messner puts no faith, the God whom Bucky Cantor simply despises, seems a very exalted Sovereign of the Universe, the God praised in the Kaddish.

Roth quotes that great mourners’ prayer in part in *Nemesis*: “May His great Name be blessed forever and ever. Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, ... mighty, upraised, and lauded be the Name of the Holy One, ... Blessed is He.”³⁵

For Bucky Cantor, listening to the recitation of the Kaddish at a child’s burial, it would be better to worship the sun as a god: “Better to sanctify and placate the unrefracted rays of Great Father

Sun than to submit to a supreme being for whatever atrocious crime it pleases him to perpetrate.”³⁶

The majesty of God — most commonly symbolized in the Jewish tradition by God’s unutterable name — can leave the mourner feeling bereft. Not a few Holocaust survivors have claimed that they can no longer put their faith in God in the wake of Auschwitz. But is infinitely exalted majesty the only presentation of God in the tradition of ancient Israel that continues down to the present day in Judaism?

Orthodox Jews sometimes seem less than totally familiar with the prophetic tradition and its presentation of a passionate God³⁷ who suffers for and with his people. Hosea portrays God as a husband taking pity on his faithless spouse, the Northern Kingdom called in this context Ephraim:

I have had a change of heart,
All My tenderness is stirred.
I will not act on My wrath,
Will not turn to destroy Ephraim.
For I am God, not man,
The Holy One in your midst;
I will not come in fury (Hos 11:8-9).

The extrabiblical Jewish tradition depicts God suffering with Israel in its vicissitudes; it even goes so far as to portray God’s sympathy with the Egyptians drowned at the time of Exodus. In two different tractates of the Babylonian Talmud God is said to have rebuked angels who wished to sing the divine praises on that occasion: “My handiwork [the Egyptians] is drowning in the seas; would you utter song before me?”³⁸ A passionate God, pitying both Israelites and Egyptians, still has no ultimately satisfying answers for those who suffer, but perhaps that passionate God can evoke some spark of compassion for God in us as well.

I must move on to Colm Tóibín, who has (happily) managed to get up on deck from steerage. I must admit to Tóibín that his aesthetic feeling for Catholic Christianity, or for Christian faith more generally, needs no defense, in my opinion. Even that anonymous narrator in a recent short story who says that he did “not believe in God” and did “not care much about the mysteries of the universe, unless they come to me in words, or in music maybe, or in a set of

colours”³⁹ leaves the door of faith, aesthetically perceived, slightly ajar.

Undoubtedly Christian faith also entails stringent moral demands, but it is important not to underemphasize the aesthetic as a way of knowing God and reaching out to God in faith. The late Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar famously meditated on four transcendentals, four overarching ways of characterizing being in general. “That which is truly true,” Von Balthasar writes, “is also truly good and beautiful and one. A being appears, it has an epiphany: in that it is beautiful and makes us marvel.”⁴⁰

Pope Benedict XVI, a man with a deep and abiding appreciation for music and the arts more generally, in a 2011 allocution meditated in this vein:

“Perhaps it has happened to you at one time or another — before a sculpture, a painting, a few verses of poetry or a piece of music — to have experienced a deep emotion, a sense of joy, to have perceived clearly, that is, that before you stood not only matter — a piece of marble or bronze, a painted canvas, an ensemble of letters or a combination of sounds — but something far greater, something that ‘speaks,’ something capable of touching the heart, of communicating a message, of elevating the soul.”⁴¹

There are many ways of recognizing the divine in a sublunary setting, and not every one of those ways is purely logical, in a mathematical understanding of logic, or purely rational, in a rationalistic understanding of reason. Blaise Pascal understood this very well when he wrote in his *Pensées* that “*Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point.*”⁴² That is a notoriously difficult sentence to translate, but I offer this possibility: “The heart has its own types of reasoning that rationality can never understand.” Colm Tóibín can readily understand what Von Balthasar, Pope Benedict and Blaise Pascal intend.

The waters are rising to the main deck and I must get on to Salman Rushdie. I have to admit to him that he makes some very good points in his conversation with Irshad Manji, maintaining that all too many Muslims in modern times have fallen under the rigoristic sway of Wahhabi-Deobandi-Salafi *madrasas* in south Asia, the Middle East and parts of Africa. Even in the state-supported

Muslim schools of England, according to Rushdie, an atmosphere prevails which “in a way denies the reality of the world outside the school.”⁴³

What I have characterized as the Wahhabi-Deobandi-Salafi version of Islam originated in the 18th-century Arabian Peninsula and south Asia as a reaction, at least in part, to Ottoman and Mughal decline and European colonial invasion. The rigoristic vision of Islam as purely a religion of law with no room in it for elements of the Sufi or mystical tradition has done much to obscure the truth of God’s mercy and love so central to that religious tradition.

“To connect the mercy of God with feminine characteristics is to understand God’s perfection as including all that is most tender in created reality, including the generative and loving characteristics of mothers.”

Before the Islamic tradition ever evolved legal traditions, the Quran proclaimed the absolute mercy of God at the center of its message. The *basmala*, the invocation “In the name of God, the Compassionate and Merciful One,” begins every *sura* of the Quran but one and precedes many activities in the Muslim world. That invocation gives us a key to what Islam can really say to people on a sinking ship.

Both of the words pointing to God in the *basmala*, *al-Rahman* and *al-Rahim*, which I have translated as “compassionate” and “merciful,” derive from the same triconsonantal root in Arabic, *R-H-M*. The former, *al-Rahman*, seems to have been a name for the supreme God presiding over a hierarchy of lesser gods in pre-Islamic south and central Arabia.⁴⁴ Consequently, *al-Rahman* (“compassionate”) as a term can only be used for God, but *al-Rahim* (“merciful”) can also be used to describe human beings.

The root of both words connotes tenderness and points imagistically to the womb (*rahim* or *rihm*). Although some Arabs of the pre-Islamic period lived in

societies characterized by matrilineal descent and affinity groups,⁴⁵ patrilineal social patterns prevailed, especially after the rise of Islam. To connect the mercy of God with feminine characteristics is to understand God’s perfection as including all that is most tender in created reality, including the generative and loving characteristics of mothers.

A famous *hadith* or quotation attributed to Muhammad narrates that he restrained a companion from engaging in battle precisely because his mother was still alive. That companion would not attain heaven by a martyr’s death but by filial devotion to his mother: “Then stay with her and look after her needs. Your heaven lies under her feet.”⁴⁶ My great *shaykhah* in the ways of Islamic mysticism, the late Annemarie Schimmel, used that very quotation from Muhammad on the memorial card for her mother when that good Lutheran woman went to her eternal reward.

The orchestra is playing “Nearer My God to Thee,” the violin players’ feet are getting wet and it is time to dive into the waves. There is much more that I would like to say on this topic, but I will leave the rest to my respondents.

Notes

- 1 “To a Louse” (1785) in *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, ed. J. Logie Robertson (London: Oxford University Press, 1904, 1936), p.139.
- 2 Critics have not been kind. For example, Kathryn Harrison writes in *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*: “A lazy work, *The Humbling* lacks its author’s genius — all that would help us, as it has so many times before, to forgive him his prejudices and blind spots.” (New York ed.: Nov. 15, 2009, BR11.)
- 3 Winesburg College is a fictitious institution. But there is a real Winesburg, Ohio, which gives its name to Sherwood Anderson’s *lection of short stories* with this title.
- 4 Philip Roth, *Indignation* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), p. 54. All further references to the text of this novel will be given in parentheses in the text.
- 5 Philip Roth, *Nemesis* (Boston/New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2010), p. 74. All further references to the text of this novel will be given in parentheses in the text.
- 6 See Job, Chaps. 38 and 39.
- 7 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* IX.
- 8 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Bk. 1, l. 76.
- 9 Colm Tóibín, *Walking Along the Border* (London: Queen Anne Press, 1987), p. 43.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 44.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 48. It was eventually amended with a very slight majority of votes in a 1995 referendum and went into effect in 1996.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 Michael Böss, “Belonging Without Belonging”: Colm Tóibín’s Dialogue With the Past,” *Estudios Irlandeses*, No. 0 (2005), p. 23.
- 16 Tóibín as quoted, *ibid.*
- 17 Colm Tóibín, *The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), p. 74.

- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 137.
- 19 Colm Tóibín, *A Guest at the Feast: A Memoir* (Penguin Press audiobook, 2011).
- 20 Colm Tóibín, “One Minus One,” in *The Empty Family* (London and New York: Viking, 2010), p. 1.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 22 Francis Phillips in www.CatholicHerald.co.uk (Sept. 9, 2010).
- 23 *The Sign of the Cross*, p. 250.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 Laura M. Holson, “From Exile to Everywhere,” *The New York Times* (March 23, 2012).
- 26 This explains why Gibreel (“Giboo”) so often refers to Saladin (“Salad”) as “Spoon-O.”
- 27 Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses: A Novel* (New York: Viking, 1977; repr. New York: Random House, 2008), p. 16. All further references to the text of this novel will be given in parentheses in the text.
- 28 The incident referred to, but with changed details, was an Air India Flight taking the Montreal-London-New Delhi route on June 23, 1985; the plane was blown up in Irish airspace and resulted in the death of all 329 people on board. The hijackers were Sikh militants based in Canada.
- 29 G.K. Chesterton uses this name for Muhammad in his decidedly Eurocentric poem, “Lepanto” (1915): “Mahound is in his paradise above the evening star.”
- 30 The abrogation (*naskh*) of these verses in the Quran and the substitution of other verses I have described in an earlier McGinley lecture as an example of divine critique and revision, and therefore prophetic critique and revision: “The Prophetic Faith and the Critique of Tradition: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Perspectives,” Annual Fall McGinley Lecture, (Fall 2010; published in booklet form by Fordham University), pp. 13-14.
- 31 “Ignorance” in Arabic, particularly applicable to pre-Islamic ignorance or paganism.
- 32 Salman Rushdie, “Imagine No Heaven” (Oct. 15, 1999), available online at www.guardian.co.uk.
- 33 “Interview conducted by Irshad: Salman Rushdie” (Sept. 20, 2002) available at www.irshadmanji.com.
- 34 See, for this clip, among other places, www.atheist-media.com (Oct. 26, 2002).
- 35 *Nemesis*, 76.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 75.
- 37 See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York/ Evanston: Harper & Row, 1962), especially Chapt. 12: “The Pathos of God.”
- 38 See *Tractate Sanhedrin* 39B and also *Tractate Megillah* 10B.
- 39 See Note 19 above.
- 40 Hans Urs von Balthasar, “A Résumé of My Thought,” tr. Kelly Hamilton, available at www.ignatiusinsight.com.
- 41 Pope Benedict XVI, “On Beauty as a Way to God,” (Aug. 31, 2011) available at www.zenit.org.
- 42 Blaise Pascal, *Pensees* 4.277 (1669).
- 43 See interview with Irshad Manji cited above in Note 32.
- 44 See B. Carra de Vaux and Louis Gardet, “Basmala,” *The Encyclopedia of Islam: New Edition* [EI 2] (London: Brill, 1960): I: 1084b-1085a.
- 45 See W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), pp. 378-388. See also W. Montgomery Watt, “Women in the Earliest Islam,” *Studia Missionalia* 40 (1991), pp. 162-173.
- 46 This *hadith* of the Prophet can be found in Ahmad al-Nas’i (d. 303 A.H./916 C.E.), *Sunan al-Sughra*. ■

Ad Limina Address to U.S. Bishops on Catholic Education

Benedict XVI

Providing young people with a sound education in the faith constitutes the “most urgent internal challenge” facing the Catholic community in the United States, Pope Benedict XVI told a group of U.S. bishops at the Vatican May 5. The pope acknowledged efforts being made to preserve “the great patrimony” of America’s Catholic elementary and high schools, which he said remain “an essential resource for the new evangelization” and ought be better appreciated and more generously supported, before turning his attention to Catholic colleges and universities. Speaking to bishops from Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Wyoming making their periodic “ad limina” visits to the Vatican to report on the state of their dioceses, he noted a growing recognition among Catholic colleges and universities of the need to reaffirm their distinctive Catholic identity but added that much remains to be done, particularly in complying with the canonical requirement that teachers of theological disciplines hold a “mandatum.” The importance of this requirement “becomes all the more evident when we consider the confusion created by instances of apparent dissidence between some representatives of Catholic institutions and the church’s pastoral leadership: Such discord harms the church’s witness and, as experience has shown, can easily be exploited to compromise her authority and her freedom,” the pope continued. The question of Catholic identity means more than merely teaching about religion or providing chaplains, he said. Students newly away from the family, school and community support systems that previously sustained their faith need new and effective networks of support as well as teachers who inspire them with their “evident love of Christ, their witness of sound devotion and their commitment to that ‘sapientia Christiana’ which integrates faith and life, intellectual passion and reverence for the splendor of truth

both human and devine.” He said cultivating a genuinely Catholic intellectual culture involves a renewal of apologetics and an emphasis on Catholic distinctiveness but must be ultimately aimed at “proclaiming the truth of Christ and stimulating greater dialogue and cooperation in building a society ever more solidly grounded in an authentic humanism inspired by the Gospel and faithful to the highest values of America’s civic and cultural heritage.” The pope spoke in English. His speech follows, copyright ©2012 by Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

I greet all of you with affection in the Lord and I offer you my prayerful good wishes for a grace-filled pilgrimage *ad limina apostolorum*. In the course of our meetings I have been reflecting with you and your brother bishops on the intellectual and cultural challenges of the new evangelization in the context of contemporary American society.

“All too often, it seems, Catholic schools and colleges have failed to challenge students to reappropriate their faith as part of the exciting intellectual discoveries which mark the experience of higher education.”

In the present talk, I wish to address the question of religious education and the faith formation of the next generation of Catholics in your country.

Before all else, I would acknowledge the great progress that has been made in recent years in improving catechesis, reviewing texts and bringing them into conformity with the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Important efforts are also being made to preserve the great patrimony of America’s Catholic elementary and high schools, which have been deeply affected by changing demographics and increased costs, while at the same time ensuring that the education they provide remains within the reach of all families, whatever their financial status.

As has often been mentioned in our meetings, these schools remain an

essential resource for the new evangelization, and the significant contribution that they make to American society as a whole ought to be better appreciated and more generously supported.

On the level of higher education, many of you have pointed to a growing recognition on the part of Catholic colleges and universities of the need to reaffirm their distinctive identity in fidelity to their founding ideals and the church’s mission in service of the Gospel. Yet much remains to be done, especially in such basic areas as compliance with the mandate laid down in Canon 812 for those who teach theological disciplines.

The importance of this canonical norm as a tangible expression of ecclesial communion and solidarity in the church’s educational apostolate becomes all the more evident when we consider the confusion created by instances of apparent dissidence between some representatives of Catholic institutions and the church’s pastoral leadership: Such discord harms the church’s witness and, as experience has shown, can easily be exploited to compromise her authority and her freedom.

It is no exaggeration to say that providing young people with a sound education in the faith represents the most urgent internal challenge facing the Catholic community in your country. The deposit of faith is a priceless treasure which each generation must pass on to the next by winning hearts to Jesus Christ and shaping minds in the knowledge, understanding and love of his church.

It is gratifying to realize that in our day too the Christian vision, presented in its breadth and integrity, proves immensely appealing to the imagination, idealism and aspirations of the young, who have a right to encounter the faith in all its beauty, its intellectual richness and its radical demands.

Here I would simply propose several points which I trust will prove helpful for your discernment in meeting this challenge.

First, as we know, the essential task of authentic education at every level is not simply that of passing on knowledge, essential as this is, but also of shaping hearts. There is a constant need to balance intellectual rigor in com-

municating effectively, attractively and integrally the richness of the church's faith with forming the young in the love of God, the praxis of the Christian moral and sacramental life, and, not least, the cultivation of personal and liturgical prayer.

“Faith’s recognition of the essential unity of all knowledge provides a bulwark against the alienation and fragmentation which occur when the use of reason is detached from the pursuit of truth and virtue; in this sense, Catholic institutions have a specific role to play in helping to overcome the crisis of universities today.”

It follows that the question of Catholic identity, not least at the university level, entails much more than the teaching of religion or the mere presence of a chaplaincy on campus. All too often, it seems, Catholic schools and colleges have failed to challenge students to reappropriate their faith as part of the exciting intellectual discoveries which mark the experience of higher education. The fact that so many new students find themselves dissociated from the family, school and community support systems that previously facilitated the transmission of the faith should continually spur Catholic institutions of learning to create new and effective networks of support.

In every aspect of their education, students need to be encouraged to articulate a vision of the harmony of faith and reason capable of guiding a lifelong pursuit of knowledge and virtue. As ever, an essential role in this process is played by teachers who inspire others by their evident love of Christ, their witness of sound devotion and their commitment to that *sapientia Christiana* which integrates faith and life, intellectual passion and reverence for the splendor of truth both human and divine.

In effect, faith by its very nature

demands a constant and all-embracing conversion to the fullness of truth revealed in Christ. He is the creative Logos, in whom all things were made and in whom all reality “holds together” (Col 1:17); he is the new Adam who reveals the ultimate truth about man and the world in which we live.

In a period of great cultural change and societal displacement not unlike our own, Augustine pointed to this intrinsic connection between faith and the human intellectual enterprise by appealing to Plato, who held, he says, that “to love wisdom is to love God” (cf. *De Civitate Dei*, VIII, 8). The Christian commitment to learning, which gave birth to the medieval universities, was based upon this conviction that the one God, as the source of all truth and goodness, is likewise the source of the intellect’s passionate desire to know and the will’s yearning for fulfilment in love.

Only in this light can we appreciate the distinctive contribution of Catholic education, which engages in a “*diakonia* of truth” inspired by an intellectual charity which knows that leading others to the truth is ultimately an act of love (cf. address to Catholic educators, Washington, April 17, 2008). Faith’s recognition of the essential unity of all knowledge provides a bulwark against the alienation and fragmentation which occur when the use of reason is detached from the pursuit of truth and virtue; in this sense, Catholic institutions have a specific role to play in helping to overcome the crisis of universities today.

Firmly grounded in this vision of the intrinsic interplay of faith, reason and the pursuit of human excellence, every Christian intellectual and all the church’s educational institutions must be convinced, and desirous of convincing others, that no aspect of reality remains alien to, or untouched by, the mystery of the redemption and the risen Lord’s dominion over all creation.

During my pastoral visit to the United States, I spoke of the need for the church in America to cultivate “a mind-set, an intellectual culture which is genuinely Catholic” (cf. homily at Nationals Stadium, Washington, April 17, 2008). Taking up this task certainly involves a renewal of apologetics and an emphasis on Catholic distinctiveness; ultimately, however, it must be aimed at proclaiming the liberating

truth of Christ and stimulating greater dialogue and cooperation in building a society ever more solidly grounded in an authentic humanism inspired by the Gospel and faithful to the highest values of America’s civic and cultural heritage. At the present moment of your nation’s history, this is the challenge and opportunity awaiting the entire Catholic community, and it is one which the church’s educational institutions should be the first to acknowledge and embrace.

In concluding these brief reflections, I wish to express once more my gratitude and that of the whole church for the generous commitment, often accompanied by personal sacrifice, shown by so many teachers and administrators who work in the vast network of Catholic schools in your country. To you, dear brothers, and to all the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care, I cordially impart my apostolic blessing as a pledge of wisdom, joy and peace in the risen Lord. ■

The Catholic Understanding of Ecumenism

Father Ronald G. Roberson, CSP

What is the Catholic vision of ecumenism? It’s all about mission, said Paulist Father Ronald G. Roberson, associate director of the U.S. bishops’ ecumenical secretariat. “It’s not about uniformity. It’s not about unquestioning submission to authority for its own sake. ... The more divided Christians are, the weaker our witness. The more united we are, the stronger our witness. It is these things that really lie at the heart of the Catholic understanding of ecumenism today,” he said. In early May Father Roberson presented a brief overview of the Catholic understanding of ecumenism to a meeting in Chicago of members of the Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, tracing its development from Pope Pius XI’s 1928 warning about the dangers of associating with other Christians to the Second Vatican Council’s historic decree

on ecumenism and the many international and national dialogues that have resulted from it. "These conversations have made enormous headway in clearing away the debris of misunderstanding and caricatures of one another that grew up between us over the centuries, and some extremely important theological agreements have been reached," he said. He noted the strong support recent popes have given this ecumenical engagement, including Pope Benedict XVI, who in his first papal speech said that rebuilding the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers was "his primary task." It is clear, he said, that "for Catholics, ecumenism ... is absolutely central to the Christian life, both in terms of the church becoming who she is and terms of the church's mission." Father Roberson's text follows.

It is well known that the Catholic Church was a little slow getting involved in the ecumenical movement. Pope Pius XI even issued an encyclical in 1928 called *Mortalium Animos* in which he criticized the movement and warned Catholics about the dangers of associating with other Christians. In fact, he wrote: "It is clear that the Apostolic See cannot on any terms take part in their assemblies nor is it in any way lawful for Catholics either to support or to work for such enterprises; for if they do so they will be giving countenance to a false Christianity, quite alien to the one church of Christ."

But alongside this official position, a number of Catholic theologians were working quietly in the background to change attitudes toward ecumenism. To this was added the personal experience of Archbishop Angelo Roncalli who, before he was elected Pope John XXIII in 1958, had positive experiences with other Christians when he served as Vatican representative to Turkey, Bulgaria and Greece. As a result, he became a passionate advocate of Christian unity. And when he decided to convoke the Second Vatican Council, he insisted that it focus on Christian divisions and try to find ways to overcome them.

One of the documents that came out of Vatican II was the Decree on Ecumenism, known by its Latin title *Unitatis Redintegratio*. It was finalized on Nov. 21, 1964, with the firm support of the whole body of bishops, who approved it

with a vote of 2,137 to 11. This decree represented an extraordinary about-face in Catholic attitudes toward ecumenism.

The Decree on Ecumenism begins with praise for the modern ecumenical movement and notes approvingly that in these days all Christians, "though in different ways, long for the one visible church of God, a church truly universal and set forth into the world that the world may be converted to the Gospel."

The decree also laments the fact that many divisions among Christians have taken place over the centuries. Often enough, the document says, "both sides were to blame." It goes on to say that in spite of our divisions, Christians are still united by virtue of our baptism and that therefore we are in a real if imperfect communion with one another.

"Ecumenism demands the 'continual reformation' of the pilgrim church as it moves through history and the continual personal conversion of every Catholic."

It also says that the one church of Christ extends beyond the visible Catholic Church because outside of it there exist "elements and endowments which together build up and give life to the church itself." It uses strong words to describe our state of division, saying that this "openly contradicts the will of Christ, scandalizes the world and damages ... the proclamation of the Gospel."

Unitatis Redintegratio also deals with the practice of ecumenism. It says clearly that everybody in the church must be involved, clergy and laity alike. Ecumenism demands the "continual reformation" of the pilgrim church as it moves through history and the continual personal conversion of every Catholic. Indeed, the document says, the "very soul of the ecumenical movement is the change of heart and holiness of life." It also talks about the need to understand each other's traditions, the importance of ecumenical meetings and dialogues, and the value of giving common witness, especially with regard to social issues.

In the years that followed the council, the Vatican became engaged in a

series of international dialogues with various churches, including Anglicans, Lutherans, Reformed churches, Methodists, Disciples of Christ, Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, the World Baptist Alliance, and certain groups of Pentecostals and evangelicals.

These conversations have made enormous headway in clearing away the debris of misunderstanding and caricatures of one another that grew up between us over the centuries, and some extremely important theological agreements have been reached.

This whole process of ecumenical engagement has been strongly supported by recent popes, including John Paul II during his 26-year pontificate. In his 1995 encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, he examined the progress of the dialogues, gave thanks to God for their many steps forward and listed the many fruits of these dialogues, which he describes as a mutual exchange of gifts. Among these fruits he mentioned a renewed sense of brotherhood among Christians, a greater sense of solidarity in the service of humanity, convergence in liturgical matters and the increased possibility for sacramental sharing, which he described as "a source of joy."

But perhaps most important, Pope John Paul reaffirmed the contents of the Decree on Ecumenism and even said that the promotion of unity is "the way of the church." He wrote that "this unity, which the Lord has bestowed on his church and in which he wishes to embrace all people, is not something added on but stands at the very heart of Christ's mission. Nor is it some secondary attribute of the community of his disciples. Rather, it belongs to the very essence of this community."

Pope Benedict XVI has committed himself to following this same ecumenical path. On the day after his election, on April 20, 2005, when the new pope addressed the cardinals in the Sistine Chapel, he said that rebuilding the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers was "his primary task." In fact, he said that in the end, each and every Christian must come before Christ, "the supreme Judge of every living person, and render an account to him of all we have done or have failed to do to further the great good of the full and visible unity of all his disciples."

So, from all of this it is clear that for Catholics, ecumenism — the building up of the visible unity of Christians — is

absolutely central to the Christian life, both in terms of the church becoming who she is and in terms of the church's mission.

Back in 2007, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued a document titled "Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church." It posed five questions on the nature of the church and responded to each of them. And it's quite interesting that in their response to the fourth question, after saying that there is something lacking in churches or ecclesial communities that are not in full communion with Rome, it goes on to say that "on the other hand, because of the division between Christians, the fullness of universality, which is proper to the church governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him, is not fully realized in history."

In other words, the Catholic Church as it exists in the world today is incomplete; the church cannot be fully itself as long as these divisions remain. So, as far as the Catholic Church is concerned, other Christians are family; we feel their absence and the pain of not being able to share with them fully in the Christian life.

This is the background to the development of ecumenical relations in the United States in recent decades. Since the Vatican Council, the Holy See has encouraged the establishment of national dialogues to parallel the international ones. And I think it's fair to say that these national dialogues have been the most productive here in the United States, in part because of the substantial presence of so many qualified representatives of all the major Christian traditions on our soil. There have been a number of instances where ecumenical work done in the United States has been taken up later by the international dialogues and contributed in a significant way to progress at that level. Another aspect of this overall ecumenical engagement has been the possibility of participating in national ecumenical structures.

Indeed, in the years immediately after Vatican II, there was a high level of cooperation between the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (now the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops) and the National Council of Churches. In fact, in 1969 a joint study committee was set up to examine the possibility of Catholic membership in the NCC.

It issued a report in December 1971 that recommended membership. In the end, however, this proposal was never acted upon. (It should be noted that the Catholic bishops never voted against the proposal nor was it ever discussed at any of their plenary meetings.)

There were two main reasons for this lack of action: 1) both organizations were focused on other priorities during the tumultuous 1970s, and 2) issues around the relative size of the Catholic Church in relation to other NCC members.

"The Catholic Church as it exists in the world today is incomplete; the church cannot be fully itself as long as these divisions remain. So, as far as the Catholic Church is concerned, other Christians are family; we feel their absence and the pain of not being able to share with them fully in the Christian life."

As Father John Hotchkin (executive director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs at the USCCB from 1971 until his death in 2001) wrote in a 1994 report about the 1971 proposal, "The Roman Catholic Church membership in the U.S. is about equivalent to the combined membership of the present NCC members. When one is as large as 32 together, there is an inescapable artificiality about speaking of that one becoming simply the 33rd member. Getting the elephant to step into the boat without capsizing it is a major organizational challenge as well as a challenge to our ecumenical imaginations."

Nevertheless, the U.S. Catholic bishops have had a generally cooperative relationship with the NCC over the years, most notably in Faith and Order.

In principle, the Vatican encourages Catholic participation in ecumenical structures of this type. This was laid out clearly in the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity's 1993 "Directory for the Application of

Principles and Norms on Ecumenism." It says that this kind of ecumenical cooperation among the various churches and ecclesial communities "can help them to overcome the barriers to full communion and at the same time to put together their resources for building Christian life and service and the common witness that it gives, in view of the mission they share."

In his address at the plenary meeting of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity in 2001, Cardinal Walter Kasper addressed the usefulness of such structures and called for new institutional forms and structures appropriate to the contemporary situation:

"This can be undertaken in particular through councils of churches on the regional and national level. They do not constitute a superchurch, and they require none of the churches to abandon their own self-understanding. Responsibility for the ecumenical journey ultimately remains with the churches themselves. But they are an important instrument and a forum for cooperation between the churches and instrument for the promotion of unity."

In view of the fact that by 2000 the NCC represented only about one-third of the Christians in the U.S. and was facing organizational and financial challenges, there was an increasing awareness of the need for something new, a new ecumenical structure that would include a much broader range of Christian churches. In September 2001 Cardinal William Keeler hosted a meeting of church leaders in Baltimore that called for the formation of a new ecumenical forum that would eventually become known as Christian Churches Together in the USA. To a large extent this grew out of a felt need to find new ways for Christians to speak with a single voice on some of the major issues facing our society today.

In a June 2004 letter to the BCEIA chairman, Cardinal Kasper commented on the value of Catholic participation in CCT: He said one advantage would be to provide a forum for greater contact with evangelical and Pentecostal Christians. He added:

"The purpose of CCTUSA, 'To enable churches and national Christian organizations to grow closer together in Christ in order to strengthen our Christian wit-

ness in the world,' is good, especially in light of the broad range of Christian families and organizations which, it is hoped, will be involved in it. But as we know, even if not mentioned in the draft text, this purpose cannot replace the deeper goal of full communion in the one apostolic faith, sacramental life and common ministry (hierarchical communion) as the primary goal intended by the Catholic Church in its ecumenical work. In this sense, the CCTUSA is an interim process, even though it is a fresh and creative initiative to broaden the ecumenical table."

"These national dialogues have been the most productive here in the United States, in part because of the substantial presence of so many qualified representatives of all the major Christian traditions on our soil."

In November 2004, the Catholic bishops of the United States voted with an overwhelming majority — about two-thirds — to participate in CCT. So when CCT officially came into existence in 2006, one of the five "families" of churches that had been set up to guarantee diversified representation on the steering committee was reserved to the USCCB. The other families are Orthodox, historical Protestant, African American and evangelical/Pentecostal.

CCT has been meeting annually in plenary session, and the steering committee meets twice a year apart from the plenary. The BCEIA chairman has been serving as the Catholic president of CCT.

So far CCT, which is still a very young organization with minimal staff, has been focusing on issues where there is a good possibility of reaching consensus among the participants. Its first major focus was on poverty in our country, and it issued a common statement on this topic at the plenary in Pasadena, Calif., in February 2007.

It has also looked closely at evangelization, and at the continuing reality of racism in our churches, especially at the two most recent plenary meetings. The

group hopes to issue a formal "response" to Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* on its 50th anniversary on April 16, 2013.

When CCT came into existence, it became the fourth ecumenical structure in our country, the others being the National Council of Churches, Churches Uniting in Christ (made up of mainline Protestant churches) and the National Association of Evangelicals. In view of the substantial overlapping of membership in these groups, especially the first three, a Christian unity summit took place at the invitation of Cardinal Keeler at St. Mary's Seminary in Baltimore last January. It brought together 27 heads of communion and ecumenical officers from a wide range of Christian traditions from around the country to discuss the present state of ecumenism in the United States and the extent to which these four ecumenical structures best serve our current needs.

There was no consensus about altering these structures at present, but there was also a commitment to meet again in a year's time to continue to re-evaluate those structures as we move into the future. One can see in these discussions a desire to look at new possibilities to further the visible unity of Christians in the United States.

Catholics should welcome these developments because we have always insisted on the importance of the visible unity of Christians. For us, it isn't enough simply to get along, to cooperate when we can and otherwise go happily in different directions. Above all, for Catholics unity is crucially important for the sake of evangelization, for the sake of fulfilling Christ's command to go out and baptize all nations.

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed his followers might be one, with one shepherd and one sheepfold, "so that the world may believe." In the Catholic vision, visible unity of Christians with one vigilant shepherd at the center is not about power. It's not about uniformity. It's not about unquestioning submission to authority for its own sake. For Catholics, visible unity is all about mission. The more divided Christians are, the weaker our witness. The more united we are, the stronger our witness. It is these things that really lie at the heart of the Catholic understanding of ecumenism today. ■

Protect the Poor, Promote the Common Good

Bishop Stephen E. Blaire

As the House of Representatives prepared to vote on a reconciliation package for the 2013 federal budget, Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., asked members to "do no harm" by ensuring that all policies meet the moral criteria established by the U.S. Catholic bishops to create "a circle of protection around programs that serve poor and vulnerable people and communities." Members should evaluate every budget decision "by whether it protects or threatens human life and dignity"; by how it affects those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty; and whether it promotes the common good of all, including workers and families struggling in difficult economic times, he wrote in a May 8 letter sent on behalf of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development. Blaire heads the committee. His letter voiced strong opposition to proposals to exclude children of immigrant families from the child tax credit; eliminate an estimated 2 million families from a federal food assistance program while cutting the benefits of all others; and eliminate a social services block grant program. Legislators must make difficult decisions in difficult economic times, but "deficit-reduction and fiscal responsibility efforts must protect and not undermine the needs of poor and vulnerable people. The proposed cuts to programs in the budget reconciliation fail this basic moral test," the letter concluded. The text of the letter follows.

As you vote on a reconciliation package for the fiscal year 2013 budget, I would like to affirm the principle contained in the committee report that the "budget starts with the proposition that the first Congress must do no harm." In this light, I urge you to ensure all policies meet the moral criteria established by the Catholic bishops of the United States to create a circle of protection around programs that serve poor and

vulnerable people and communities:

1. Every budget decision should be assessed by whether it protects or threatens human life and dignity.

2. A central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects the lives and dignity of “the least of these” (Mt 25). The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty, should come first.

3. Government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in dignity in difficult economic times.

A just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons; it requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly.

I reiterate our strong opposition to an unfair proposal that would alter the child tax credit to exclude children of hardworking immigrant families. The bishops’ conference has long supported the child tax credit because it is pro-work, pro-family and one of the most effective anti-poverty programs in our nation. Denying the credit to children of working-poor immigrant families — the large majority of whom are American citizens — would hurt vulnerable kids, increase poverty and would not advance the common good.

The Supplemental Nutrition

Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps), provides vital food security to families during tough economic times. It is estimated that cuts proposed in this bill would deny assistance to 2 million families and cut the benefit for everyone else. No poor family that receives food assistance would be unaffected, constituting a direct threat to their human dignity. If savings in agricultural programs need to be achieved, subsidies and direct payments can be reduced and targeted to small and moderate-sized farms.

“A just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons; it requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly.”

The social services block grant is an important source of funding for programs throughout the country that serve vulnerable members of our communities — the homeless, the elderly,

people with disabilities, children living in poverty and abuse victims. We should prioritize programs that serve “the least of these,” not eliminate them.

The Catholic bishops of the United States recognize the serious deficits our country faces, and we acknowledge that Congress must make difficult decisions about how to allocate burdens and sacrifices and balance resources and needs. However, deficit-reduction and fiscal responsibility efforts must protect and not undermine the needs of poor and vulnerable people. The proposed cuts to programs in the budget reconciliation fail this basic moral test.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states it is the proper role of government to “make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family and so on” (No. 1908). Poor and vulnerable people do not have powerful lobbyists to advocate their interests, but they have the most compelling needs.

As you pursue responsible deficit reduction, the Catholic bishops join other faith leaders and people of good will urging you to protect the lives and dignity of poor and vulnerable families by putting a circle of protection around these essential programs and to refrain from cutting programs that serve them. ■

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June 1-3

National Solidarity Conference:
 "Haiti: One Table, Many Partners."
 Sponsors: Catholic Relief Services and
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 The Catholic University of America.
 Washington, D.C. <http://onetable.crs.org>

June 3-6

Annual Catholic Health Assembly.
 Sponsor: Catholic Health Association.
 Theme: "Leadership for Healing: The
 Business of Health Care, the Faithfulness
 of Ministry." Philadelphia Downtown
 Marriott. Philadelphia, Pa.
www.chausa.org

June 7-10

Catholic Theological Society of
 America Annual Convention. Theme:
 "Sacrament/s and the Global Church."
 Hyatt Regency St. Louis. St. Louis, Mo.
www.ctsa-online.org

*June 10-13

Joint Conference: "Intercultural
 Competency: Multicultural Assessment,
 Treatment and Understanding These
 Dynamics in Formation." Sponsors: St.
 Charles Borromeo Seminary and St.
 John Vianney Center. Marriott West,
 Philadelphia, Pa. www.sjvcenter.org

*June 13-15

Joint Conference: "A Necessary
 Conversation: A Gathering of Experts;
 Intercultural Competency." Sponsors: St.
 Charles Borromeo Seminary and St. John
 Vianney Center. St. Charles Borromeo
 Seminary. Wynnewood, Pa.
www.sjvcenter.org

*June 11-14

Association of U.S. Catholic Priests
 Inaugural Assembly. Theme: "Keeping
 Alive the Vision and Passion of Vatican
 II." St. Leo University. St. Leo, Fla.
www.uscatholicpriests.org

*June 13-15

International Eucharistic Congress.
 Sponsors: Pontifical Committee for
 International Eucharistic Congresses
 and Irish Catholic Bishops Conference.
 Theme: "The Eucharist: Communion
 With Christ and With One Another."
 Dublin, Ireland. www.iec2012.ie

*signifies new entry

On File

The Obama administration has issued guidelines for how federally funded faith-based programs should be administered, ranging from explanations of what is considered "explicitly religious" activity to how organizations can preserve their religious identities while using federal funds. The guidelines say that faith organizations are not required to remove crucifixes, icons and other religious material from rooms where federally funded services are provided, and when clients request it, they should be referred to a nonfaith-based organization if one is available. The guidelines say Alcoholics Anonymous programs are considered "explicitly religious" and therefore ineligible to participate. Employees of most federally funded programs must remain neutral regarding religion but are free to express their faith, including by prayer, they say. Possible exceptions are programs that fund some work of prison chaplains. The guidelines say an organization's religious character may neither favor nor count against its application for funding.

Delegates attending the United Methodist Church's General Conference in Tampa voted May 3 against changing the wording in the church's book of laws and doctrines that says homosexual acts are "incompatible with Christian teaching." After much debate, delegates also defeated a proposal stating that church mem-

bers agree that they disagree about homosexuality. Homosexual church members pleaded to be recognized for their "sacred worth" while those who disagreed said changing the church's stance would cause confusion and a departure from traditional doctrine. The United Methodist Church has about 12 million members worldwide and 8 million members in the United States. The General Conference is its top policymaking body and meets every four years.

Vatican Council II's teaching, particularly on Judaism and other religions, is rooted in traditional Christian theology and the Bible, and the Catholic Church should not offer concessions to those who do not accept it, said an Israeli-born Franciscan who serves as a judge on a top Vatican court. Msgr. David Jaeger, a Roman Rota judge, described as worrying "a tendency ... to look leniently upon stray groups that are marginal but well-publicized who denounce the doctrine of the council," including the church's relationship to non-Christian religions. Msgr. Jaeger, who grew up in a Jewish family, spoke during a May 3-5 conference at Rome's Holy Cross University. "While often presented as if it were absolutely new," he said, *Nostra Aetate* "perfectly corresponds to the most ancient intuitions of Christian theology" when it affirms "there can be, and in particular cases, are elements of truth and holiness" in other religions.

Jewish atheism refers to the atheism of people who are ethnically and (at least to some extent) culturally Jewish. Because Jewish identity is ethnoreligious (i.e., it encompasses ethnic as well as religious components), the term "Jewish atheism" does not inherently entail a contradiction. Based on Jewish law's emphasis on matrilineal descent, even religiously conservative Orthodox Jewish authorities would accept an atheist born to a Jewish mother as fully Jewish. A 2011 study found that half of all So do Jews and Christians to each other, and every other community in the world: secular or religious. I am not a supremacist nor apologist. Now back to the question: What do Muslims think about ex-atheists?Â Three answers in the least ! Jews would be welcoming an atheist â€œ revertingâ€ to their own faith, Christians be doing the same and so is the case with Muslims. It would have been a more stunning question to ask (What would a Muslim be thinking of an atheist who reverts back to Judaism or Christianity, but never for Islam? Same applies to the rest of monotheist religions with an atheist reverting back but never to any of them.