



In Appreciation of Irving Greenberg

James Carroll

I am among that legion of Christians who have been brought to new levels of awareness about Jewish experience and belief, as well as about my own Christian faith, through the life's work of Rabbi Irving Greenberg. I first encountered him in the early 1970s when, as a young Catholic priest, I was in the audience to hear him speak of the Holocaust at a major Jewish-Christian symposium in New York. I had already begun the journey toward a fuller Christian reckoning with the relationship between that historic crime and the Christian failure to effectively oppose it, but Rabbi Greenberg helped me confront the deeper question—how the sorry tradition of Christian contempt for Jews set the groundwork for the *Shoah*.

This volume is replete with essays that put on full display what has made Rabbi Greenberg one of the most effective dialogue partners the Christian community could ever hope to have. His conviction that God acts in history led him early on to the profoundly brave decision to pursue his own reckoning with the Holocaust, in partnership with Christians. That, in turn, led him to develop a stinging critique of Christian theology and tradition—one that included a firm acknowledgment that the Christian “teaching of contempt” has its origins in the church's own most sacred Scripture. But his partnership with Christians also resulted in his prophetic appreciation of the sacred values enshrined in the tradition that calls Jesus “Lord.” Rabbi Greenberg set out to do nothing less than develop a Jewish theology of Christianity, an impulse that, whatever it has meant within the Jewish community (and it is not for me, as a Christian, to say), has had a profound impact on the thinking of Christians.

FOR THE SAKE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

One of Rabbi Greenberg's most distinctive proposals, and one of his bravest, is that Jesus might properly be considered a "failed" messiah, or, as more recently articulated, an "unfinished" messiah. As his reflections on the history of this idea make clear in this book, the notion has been received with reservations or outright rejection by both Jews and Christians. Yet, speaking for myself, the invitation to think of Jesus in this way has been formative. Christian triumphalism—the conviction that the Church is *the* locus of God's full and complete revelation—is based on a grave act of forgetfulness. We Christians believe that the Messiah has come in Jesus Christ, but a less emphasized tenet of the faith holds that God's Kingdom is not full and complete until the Messiah comes *again*. The neglected idea of the Second Coming suggests that the work of Jesus—the revelation entrusted to the church—remains radically incomplete. Because that is so, the church must stand humbly before all that it is not yet, all that it does not know, all that remains hidden in the mystery of God's purpose for creation. The church is not in *possession* of the truth, but is on pilgrimage *toward* it. The humility that comes from such knowledge is the precondition of authentic Christian respect for Judaism, and for other religions. Rabbi Greenberg's provocative use of the word "failed," or "unfinished," is offensive only if his contrasting of both notions with "false" is ignored. Here is one small instance of his creative challenge to Jews and Christians alike, as I take it, that the time has come to think in new ways, for the sake of what he calls "a new encounter."

And the break in time that makes this challenge so, of course, is the Holocaust. Holocaust deniers have it that the horror did not take place; but Holocaust minimizers strike a more dangerous note, because to many, theirs is a more acceptable argument. They want the Holocaust removed from the consciousness of the West as a primal point of moral reflection, as if the *Shoah* were just one of many equivalent catastrophes. It takes nothing away from the suffering undergone by other peoples at various times and places to understand what was particularly evil about the Holocaust. Rabbi Greenberg's great contribution has been to insist, and insist again, that the genocidal Nazi assault on the Jewish people, *as* the Jewish people, stands as a defining epiphany. Speaking as a Christian, that has been especially so in my tradition. The slow, uneven confrontation with the facts of the Holocaust, and what led to it in the heart of Christian Europe, has been the foundation of the post-World War II renewal of Christian theology and practice. In my own Roman Catholic tradition, this renewal has at its core the Second Vatican Council and the church's subsequent efforts to rid itself of all forms of contempt for Jews and Judaism. That precious process—well begun, but far from complete—would not be occurring without the steadfast and brave witness of numerous Jewish figures. One thinks of the histo-

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rian Jules Isaacs and Rabbis Abraham Joshua Heschel, Marc H. Tanenbaum—and Irving Greenberg.

It is not for me to define what the Jewish-Christian dialogue has meant for Judaism, but, speaking as one whose faith has been transformed by it, this encounter has meant everything to the Christian Church. We see the main elements of this transformation boldly laid out in the preoccupations of Rabbi Greenberg's work. What does it mean to say that God suffers, and how is this notion Jewish as well as Christian? Can divine election involve, in Rabbi Greenberg's ingenious phrase, "multiple choice?" How to move beyond tolerance to a mutual affirmation of the other's self-understanding? How to move beyond pluralism, as he puts it, to partnership?

Rabbi Greenberg's unwavering devotion to the State of Israel, and his readiness to see its establishment—and its security—as a profound marker in history, puts a clear challenge to the old Christian need to imagine Jews offering witness through statelessness. The State of Israel, too, is a crucial subject of this interfaith encounter, but that presupposes the full Christian affirmation, at last, of Jews at home in Israel. Rabbi Greenberg embodies a proper insistence on this, as a witness and teacher.

This book is a record of, and a testimony to, the Jewish-Christian dialogue. It gives the world the compelling voice of one of its pioneers, whose testimony shows that criticism and self-criticism can work together, enabling the growth, even in ancient rivals, of trust and, perhaps, love. That this project of mutual study, learning, respect, and finally partnership came after—or even out of—the Holocaust is an unprecedented sign of hope, pointing not just to an ongoing reconciliation of Christians and Jews, but—as Rabbi Greenberg, with the usual reach of his large heart and open mind, insists—"to better future understanding between the nations and religions of the earth as well."

James Carroll is the author of ten novels; the memoir An American Requiem, which won the National Book Award; and of Constantine's Sword, which won the National Jewish Book Award in history. His latest book, Crusade, is drawn from his antiwar columns in the Boston Globe.