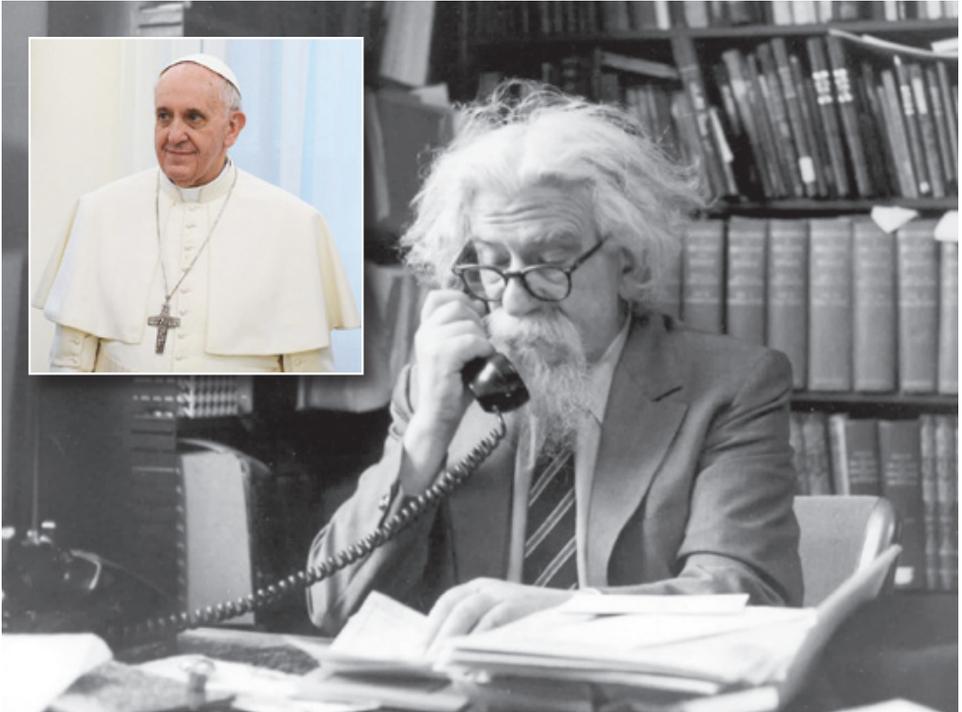


Did Rabbi Heschel Influence Pope Francis?

HAROLD KASIMOW AND JOHN MERKLE



Pope Francis (inset), Abraham Joshua Heschel; both photos, courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) is widely known to have had an immense influence on Christians, particularly through his spiritually and theologically penetrating writings that have enriched their understanding of the relationship between God and human beings. As a consequence of this, Heschel inevitably has challenged Christians to rethink traditional Christian teachings about Judaism being an outmoded religion superseded by Christianity. But this challenge has not only been a side effect of Heschel's inspiration to Christians. At times he directly challenged them to develop what he called a "new Christian understanding of Judaism"¹ and "to decide whether Christianity came to overcome, to abolish, or to continue the Jewish way of bringing the God of Abraham and His will to the Gentiles."²

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Heschel made this direct challenge in a variety of contexts, most notably at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), the defining event for Roman Catholicism in the twentieth century, where he played a prominent role in the negotiations between Jewish organizations and the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. He was the most influential Jewish delegate at the council, encouraging church leaders to condemn antisemitism, to eliminate anti-Judaism from church teachings, and to acknowledge the integrity and permanent preciousness of Judaism. By all counts his efforts were hugely successful,

Heschel inevitably has challenged Christians to rethink traditional Christian teachings about Judaism being an outmoded religion superseded by Christianity.

as the council's declaration on interfaith relations, *Nostra Aetate* (promulgated on October 28, 1965), signaled a rejection of the traditional supersessionist theology that, for most of Christian history, had marked the Church's self-understanding vis-à-vis Jews and Judaism. And not only has this change positively affected Christian-Jewish relations; it also has fostered renewal of Catholic life and theology based on, among other things, a newfound appreciation of the Hebrew Bible, the Jewishness of Jesus and his ministry, and Jewish approaches to God, covenantal life with God, the relationship of the physical and spiritual

dimensions of life, and redemption in and of this world.

The influence Heschel had on *Nostra Aetate* has been widely recognized, as has the fact that his writings have become inspirational reading for countless Christians. But what is perhaps Heschel's most far-reaching, albeit indirect, influence on Christians and Christianity has not previously been noted – i.e., that some of his signature theological ideas appear to have influenced the thinking of the most influential Christian of the early twenty-first century, Pope Francis himself, and that through the pope's teaching these ideas are now reaching a much wider audience than ever before.

We found that Francis has a strong affinity for a number of Heschel's core ideas.

Pope Francis never met Rabbi Heschel, and although he is known to own a number of books by Heschel, it is not clear to what extent he has studied Heschel's thought. Nonetheless, it seems that his thinking may have been influenced by Heschel. A few connections between the men point in this direction. Take, for example, the testimony of Rabbi Abraham Skorka of Argentina, one of Pope Francis' closest friends. Rabbi Skorka accompanied Francis on his papal visit to the Holy Land last May, and in 2010 they co-authored the book *On Heaven and Earth*. About the conversations that became that book, Rabbi Skorka, who has claimed Rabbi Heschel as a "formative spiritual guide," said

that the spirit of Heschel guided their dialogues.³ “We can affirm without any doubt that Heschel’s spirit is present in the book we wrote together and in all of our dialogues,” Rabbi Skorka explained, “and surely in Pope Francis’ attitudes as head of the Catholic Church.”⁴

God dwells within us, yet God must awaken us to the divine indwelling.

An earlier connection exists through Rabbi Marshall T. Meyer (1930-1993), one of Rabbi Heschel’s most devoted students, who became the most influential rabbi in Argentina while the future Pope Francis served as the provincial superior of the Jesuits there and then as rector of the Jesuit university and seminary in San Miguel, outside Buenos Aires. Rabbi Meyer inspired not only Jews but also Christians. He was passionate about spreading Heschel’s approach to Judaism and said he felt that Heschel had “accompanied him during his 25 years in Argentina.”⁵

In light of these connections, we decided to probe what Pope Francis has said and written about topics central to the religious worldview of Rabbi Heschel. We found that Francis has a strong affinity for a number of Heschel’s core ideas.

GOD’S SEARCH FOR US

One of Rabbi Heschel’s greatest and most influential books is *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (1955). Like other books of his, it has been translated into Spanish and

is widely read not only in Argentina’s Jewish community but also by many Argentine Catholics, especially members of the clergy. The title expresses what is perhaps Heschel’s most distinctive or signature idea: it is not so much we who seek God, but God who seeks us.

“This is the core of all biblical thoughts,” explains Heschel: God is not a being detached from man to be sought after, but a power that seeks, pursues and calls upon man. . . . Israel’s religion originated in the initiative of God rather than in the efforts of man.”⁶ By this he does not mean that God does not know where we are and is looking for us. Note what he writes: “God is not a being detached from man.” For Heschel,

Although the Jewish people are chosen for a special type of witness, every human being, created in the image of God, is meant to be “a witness for God,”

God is always present to us. But because we are not always, or perhaps even usually, present to God, Heschel suggests that God must “reach out” to us (from around us and from within us) to elicit our presence, our responsiveness. We dwell within the sphere of God’s presence, yet God must strive to get us to appreciate that presence. God dwells within us, yet God must awaken us to the divine indwelling.

This idea that God searches for us, an idea that Heschel emphasized throughout his adult life, is one that

Pope Francis also advances. In his very first entry in chapter one of his book with Rabbi Skorka, Francis states: “I would say that one encounters God walking, moving, seeking Him and allowing oneself be sought by Him.

“God is to be found in many hearts all over the world, not limited to one nation or to one people, to one religion.”

They are two paths that meet. On the one hand, there is our path that seeks Him, driven by that instinct that flows from the heart; and after, when we have encountered each other, we realize that He was the one who had been searching for us from the start.”⁷ Francis repeated this idea in an interview with Antonio Spadaro, SJ: “We must let God search and encounter us,” he said. “God is always first and makes the first move.”⁸

GOD’S PRESENCE IN ALL PEOPLE AND IN DIVERSE RELIGIONS

At the core of Heschel’s Judaism is faith in the one God whose search for human beings has received a response from the Jewish people who, by living in a covenant with God, have accepted the challenge of giving witness to God. But just as the biblical and rabbinic authors reminded the people that their being chosen to give this witness to God did not imply either their superiority in relation to other peoples or an exclusive relationship with God, Heschel points out that it does not imply that the Jewish people are the only vehicle of God’s revelation.

According to Heschel, God is, or may be, revealed through each and every human being. “The human is the disclosure of the divine,” he said in his inaugural lecture, titled “No Religion Is an Island,” as visiting professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1965. “To meet a human being is an opportunity to sense the image of God, the *presence* of God.”⁹ Although the Jewish people are chosen for a special type of witness, every human being, created in the image of God, is meant to be “*a witness for God*,” he said elsewhere.¹⁰ Pope Francis sounded very much like Heschel in the interview he did with Anthony Spadaro, SJ: “God is in every person’s life. You can, you must try to seek God in every human life.”¹¹

In Heschel’s view, religions may be considered valid to the extent that they foster awareness of God’s love and also love for God and God’s creatures.

While it is a traditional Jewish teaching that every person, created in the image of God, may somehow reveal the presence of God, Heschel goes beyond this in suggesting that Judaism is not the only religion of divine revelation. Speaking specifically about different religious traditions, Heschel insists that divine revelation reaches the human spirit “in a variety of ways, in a multiplicity of languages”¹² and that “God is to be found in many hearts all over the world, not limited to one nation or to one people, to one religion.”¹³

Pope Francis shows spiritual affinity to Heschel when he writes the following: “God makes Himself felt in the heart of each person. He also respects the culture of all people. Each nation picks up that vision of God and translates it in accordance with the culture, and elaborates, purifies and gives it a system.”¹⁴

In Heschel’s view, religions may be considered valid to the extent that they foster awareness of God’s love and also love for God and God’s creatures. Even non-monotheistic religions may be considered valid to the extent that they foster love for human beings, which, for Heschel, “is a way of worshiping God, a way of loving God.”¹⁵ Regardless of their theologies, of whether or not they have a monotheistic understanding of ultimate

reality, all religions that cultivate such love are, in Heschel’s view, valid and vital ways of serving God.

In his lecture at Union, Heschel expressed his belief that “diversity of religions is the will God.”¹⁶ So far, Pope Francis has not spoken explicitly on this issue, so it is uncertain if he would go as far as Heschel on this. In his apostolic exhortation “The Joy of the Gospel,” however, Francis seems to offer something in the same spirit as Heschel when he writes: “The same Spirit everywhere brings forth various forms of practical wisdom which help people to bear suffering and to live in greater peace and harmony. As Christians, we can also benefit from these treasures built up over many centuries, which can help us better to live our own beliefs.”¹⁷

Heart; original art, Lonnie Hanzon



THE FAILURE OF RELIGION

For Heschel, God may be present in and through diverse religions, yet these same religions often fail to manifest God. Here is the opening paragraph of *God In Search of Man*:

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid. When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor

*of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion speaks only in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion – its message becomes meaningless.*¹⁸

To this summary of Heschel's countless critiques of religion, Pope Francis would surely say "Amen." As a parallel to Heschel's criticism of faith being "replaced by creed" and how "the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past," Francis' has warned that "faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies" in those who long for "an exaggerated doctrinal 'security,' those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists."¹⁹ Like Heschel, Francis wants faith to be a "living fountain" rather than an "heirloom." The pope puts it this way: "If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. Tradition and memory of the past must help us to have the courage to open up new areas to God."²⁰

for both men the voice of religion, while necessarily involving prophetic criticism, is ultimately meant to be "the voice of compassion."

Francis also shares Heschel's criticism of religion when it "only speaks in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion." The pope has repeatedly warned against clericalism, for example. "The risk that we must

avoid is priests and bishops falling into clericalism, which is a distortion of religion," he explained in his dialogue with Rabbi Skorka. "When a priest leads a diocese or a parish, he has to listen to his community, to make mature decisions and lead the community accordingly. In contrast, when the priest imposes himself, when in some way he says 'I am the boss here,' he falls into clericalism."²¹

Since becoming pope, Francis has denounced clericalism with even greater force. In a closed-door meeting with religious superiors in November 2013, later reported by *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Francis called clericalism "one of the worst evils."²² This is reminiscent of Heschel's claim at the convention of the American Medical Association in 1964 that striving for personal success, when it becomes an object of "supreme and exclusive concern," is both "pernicious and demonic."²³ And the pope's warning to newly appointed bishops in September 2013, that careerism is "a form of cancer" sounds just like Heschel's remark in his A.M.A. address: "According to my own medical theory, more people die of success than of cancer."²⁴

Rabbi Heschel did not shy away from making harsh criticisms – not of specific people but of what many people do and pursue. Neither does Pope Francis shy away from making such criticisms. But for both men the voice of religion, while necessarily involving prophetic criticism, is ultimately meant to be "the voice of compassion." And for both the rabbi and the pope, interreligious dialogue is urgently needed

for people of different traditions to develop that voice and to recognize it in each other.

THE URGENCY OF INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

In Rabbi Heschel's view, one of the principal reasons for the failure of religion is the inflation of its importance, treating a given religion as if it were itself divine rather than a human response to the divine. "Religion is a means, not the end," writes Heschel. "It becomes idolatrous when regarded as an end in itself."²⁵ To assume that there is only one valid way of responding to God is – precisely by absolutizing that way – to equate a religious means with the divine end. About this Heschel is emphatic: "To equate religion and God is idolatry."²⁶

For Heschel, genuine monotheistic faith demands an attitude of openness to the validity of various religions precisely because it is opposed to absolutizing, that is deifying, anything other than God, including a cherished tradition that fosters faith in God. "We must not regard any human institution or object as being an end in itself," writes Heschel. "A temple that comes to mean more than a reminder of the living God is an abomination." So, contrary to what many people seem to assume, true monotheistic faith means that we must not make our faith the object of our faith. "There is great merit . . . in our having no absolute faith in our faith," explains Heschel.²⁸ "Human faith is never final, never an arrival, but rather

an endless pilgrimage, a being on the way."²⁹ Therefore, he asserts emphatically: "To rely on our faith would be idol-worship. We have only the right to rely on God."³⁰

one of the principal reasons for the failure of religion is the inflation of its importance, treating a given religion as if it were itself divine rather than a human response to the divine

While Pope Francis has not gone so far as to suggest that reliance on our faith may be a form of idolatry, he has spoken of how faith can be transformed into ideology, which for him is tantamount to idolatry. "The faith passes, so to speak, through a distiller and becomes ideology," Francis said in one of his homilies, and when this happens to the faith of a Christian, he or she becomes "a disciple of ideology." Because "ideologies are rigid, always," and because Christian ideology is "rigid, moralistic, ethical, but without kindness," the pope called this Christian ideology a "serious illness."³¹

For both Heschel and Francis, it is clear that pride and arrogance are at the root of idolatrous and ideological approaches to religion and that the key to genuine religious faith is humility. "A major factor in our religious predicament is due to self-righteousness," Heschel said in his Union lecture. "Religion is often guilty of the sin of pride and presumption. . . . But humility is the beginning and end

of religious thinking, the secret test of faith.” Speaking about religious ministers, Francis made the same point in his dialogue with Rabbi Skorka: “Humility is what gives assurance that the Lord is there. When someone is self-sufficient, when he has all the answers to every question, it is proof that God is not with him. Self-sufficiency is evident in every false prophet.”³³

“Human faith is never final, never an arrival, but rather an endless pilgrimage, a being on the way.”

Self-sufficiency is also a mark of a false understanding of religion. “The religions of the world are no more self-sufficient, no more independent, no more isolated than individuals or nations,” said Heschel. “*No religion is an island.* We are all involved with one another. Spiritual betrayal on the part of one of us affects the faith of all of us. Views adopted in one community

have an impact on other communities. Today religious isolationism is a myth.”³⁴ Claiming that “nihilism” is “worldwide in extent and influence,” Heschel

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emphasized the urgency of interfaith dialogue and cooperation: “We must choose between interfaith and inter-nihilism. Cynicism is not parochial. Should religions insist upon the illusion of complete isolation? Should we refuse to be on speaking terms with one another and hope for each other’s failure? Or should we pray for each other’s health, and help one another in preserving one’s respective legacy, in preserving a common legacy?”³⁵

Peace Council in Dialogue, Chiapas, Mexico; photo, Cetta Kenney



Pope Francis takes a similar position. In an address to civic and religious leaders in Brazil in July 2013, Francis emphasized the need for dialogue “in a spirit of openness and without prejudice.” He said: “Only in this way can understanding grow between cultures and religions, mutual esteem without needless preconceptions, in a climate that is respectful of the rights of everyone. Today, either we take the risk of dialogue, we risk the culture of encounter, or we all fall; this is the path that will bear fruit.”³⁶

For both Heschel and Francis, inter-religious dialogue is not simply an option but an obligation, because it “is a necessary condition for peace in the world,” as Francis writes.³⁷ Reflecting on the Arab-Israeli conflict, Heschel puts it bluntly: “The choice is to love together or to perish together.”³⁸ And beyond peaceful co-existence, interreligious dialogue also yields spiritual enrichment for those engaged in it. Believing it presumptuous for anyone to think that his or her religion is exclusively true and fruitful, Heschel said in his Union lecture that “the purpose of religious communication among human beings of different commitments is mutual enrichment.”³⁹ The future pope echoed this sentiment in an interview published in 2010, when he explained that we can build a true community only recognizing the value of others and “celebrating the diversity that is enriching for us all.”⁴⁰

Pope Francis has inspired countless people of diverse religions and of no religion to seek a path and find a way toward spiritual enrichment. Perhaps

through him some of the signature insights of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel are reaching far more people than Heschel could have ever imagined.

NOTES

¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “From Mission to Dialogue,” *Conservative Judaism* (Spring 1967), p. 9.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Jewish Notion of God and Christian Renewal,” in *Renewal of Religious Thought*, vo. 1 of *Theology of Renewal*, ed. L. K. Shook (New York: Herder and herder, 1968), p. 111.

³ Abraham Skorka in an email message to Alexander Even-Chen, June 16, 2013.

⁴ Abraham Skorka in an email message to Harold Kasimow, October 24, 2014.

⁵ Marshall T. Meyer in a letter to Harold Kasimow, June 24, 1987.

⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1955), p. 198.

⁷ Jorge Mario Bergoglio and Abraham Skorka, *On Heaven and Earth*, trans. Alejandro Bermudez and Howard Goodman (New York: Random House, 2013), p. 2; originally published as *Sobre el cielo y la tierra*, ed. Diego F. Rosemberg (Random House Mondadori, 2010).

⁸ Pope Francis in “A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis,” Interview by Antonio Spadaro, S.J., *America* (Sept. 30, 2013), 32. This interview is republished in the book *A Big Heart Open to God: A Conversation with Pope Francis*, Interview by Antonio Spadaro, SJ (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013) and the statement referenced here is on p. 49.

- ⁹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, “No Religion Is an Island,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* (January 1966), 121; reprinted in Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, ed. Susannah Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1996), p. 238.
- ¹⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1966), p. 164.
- ¹¹ Pope Francis in *America* (Sept. 30, 2013), p. 32; *A Big Heart Open to God*, p. 50.
- ¹² “No Religion Is an Island,” p. 127; *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 244.
- ¹³ “A Conversation with Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel, transcript of “The Eternal Light Program, presented by the National Broadcasting Co., Feb. 4, 1973, p. 13; reprinted in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 398.
- ¹⁴ *On Heaven and Earth*, p. 19.
- ¹⁵ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1967), p. 212.
- ¹⁶ “No Religion Is an Island,” 126; *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 244.
- ¹⁷ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2013), par. 254; p. 122; trans. of *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).
- ¹⁸ *God In Search of Man*, p. 3.
- ¹⁹ Pope Francis in *America* (Sept. 30, 2013), p.32; *A Big Heart Open to God*, p. 50.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ *On Heaven and Earth*, p. 138.
- ²² Pope Francis in an address on Nov. 29, 2013, at the Vatican to 120 supervisors of religious orders.
- ²³ *The Insecurity of Freedom*, p. 34.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ “No Religion Is an Island,” p. 126; *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 243.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*
- ²⁷ *God In Search of Man*, p. 415.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 401.
- ²⁹ “No Religion Is an Island,” p. 128; *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 245.
- ³⁰ *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 174.
- ³¹ “No Religion Is an Island,” pp. 127-128; *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 245.
- ³² *On Heaven and Earth*, p. 33.
- ³³ “No Religion Is an Island,” p. 119; *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 237.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ Pope Francis in an address to leading members of Brazilian society on July 27, 2013 (during the week of World Youth Day) in Rio de Janeiro.
- ³⁶ *The Joy of the Gospel*, par. 250; p. 120.
- ³⁷ *Israel: An Echo of Eternity*, p. 168.
- ³⁸ “No Religion Is an Island,” p. 125; *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 243.
- ³⁹ Jorge Bergoglio in Francesca Ambrogetti and Sergio Rubin, *Pope Francis: His Life in His Own Words*, trans. Laura Dail Literary Agency, Inc. (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 2013), p. 234; originally published as *El Jesuita: Conversaciones con Jorge Bergoglio* (Buenos Aires, 2010).