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“WALK IN THE SHOES OF THE SEMITE”

Donald S. Nesti,
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*What did it mean
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a Muslim, and a
Christian?*

In 1960, I entered my first Scripture class as a student of Francis X. Malinowski, C.S.Sp., at Ferndale, our senior seminary. In the bibliography that he gave us for the course, he included a book by Dom Celestin Charlier entitled, *“The Christian Approach to the Bible.”* One of the most important things that I learned both from that book and from Francis Malinowski is that, in order to understand the Scriptures, you have to “walk in the shoes of the Semite.”

Over the years this dictum has become more and more meaningful to me. This was especially true when I traveled to Israel as a member of an inter-religious tour group sponsored by the Anti-Defamation League. On that trip we toured the holy sites of Nazareth, Tiberius and the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum, the Mount of the Beatitudes, Caesarea, and the Holy City, Jerusalem. We also visited secular sites like Tel Aviv, the Golan Heights, and Haifa. One of the most moving experiences was the visit to the *Yad Vashem*, Israel’s Holocaust Museum. As we traveled, we were constantly challenged to look at all of our experiences through the eyes of Jews, Muslims, and Christians (of various denominations). Our dialogue took place on various levels: political, social, economic, military, cultural, and religious. But the most profound dialogue that I experienced occurred in the moments when we shared prayer and our appreciation of the Holy Places: the Western Wall of the Temple, the Dome of the Rock, the Holy Sepulcher Church, the Via Crucis, the Church of Gethsemane, the Ecce Homo Church, and Shabbat worship in the synagogue.

As I walked the streets of Old Jerusalem and observed the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Quarters of the city, I reflected on the challenge of hearing what God was trying to say. What did it mean to walk the streets of Jerusalem as a Jew, a Muslim, and a Christian? How did each perceive the realities that they shared?

While on the trip, Father Libermann was especially present to me. As I passed the Jerusalem headquarters of “Jews for Jesus,” I wondered what he would say to them or, for that matter, to the Orthodox Jewish community. In a sense I was entering his world, the world of the Jew-Christian. The word that kept coming to mind was “compenetrate,” the term that Benedict XVI uses in his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, when speaking of how the Old and the New Testaments are related.¹ Compenetration indicates

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the sharing of the same reality and life. In this case it indicates that, despite their differences, they share and enter into the same God of Mystery. They are rooted in an essential continuity in the midst of that which is discontinuous. For me, Libermann understood this compenetration in a way that most of us cannot. Even though he does not often refer to his Jewishness, it is impossible for me to conceive that his Semitic origins and deep understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures and their Talmudic interpretation did not remain with him as he prayed the Psalms, the Canticles of the Old and New Testaments, and read St. Paul and St. John.

In my reflections on his brief description of his conversion, I have grown in appreciation of how he must have experienced the compenetration of the two Testaments and understood their continuity and discontinuity. He says:

It was an extremely painful moment for me. The sight of that profound solitude, of that room where a simple attic-window gave some light, the thought of being so far from my family, from my acquaintances, from my country – all this plunged me into deep sadness; my heart felt oppressed by the deepest melancholy.

It was then that I remembered the God of my fathers and threw myself on my knees, begging him to enlighten me on the true religion. I prayed that if the belief of Christians was true he would let me know it, and if it was false he would keep me far from it at once.

The Lord, who is near to those who call on him from the bottom of their hearts, heard my prayer. Immediately, I was enlightened, I saw the truth, and the faith penetrated my mind and heart.²

In this brief account, Libermann seeks to describe the indescribable. He uses words to capture experience, to express feelings and mood related to the deepest dialogue where encounter takes place between the person and God. In profound melancholy, which goes beyond sadness, he groans, pleads, and begs to hear and see with the heart what reason or ritual could not provide. “*From the bottom of their hearts*” simply means at the deepest level of affectivity, where Eros moves the one seeking to fall passionately in love with God (Benedict XVI and Lonergan). But who is he allowing to love him and with whom is he falling in love?

He is a Jew, whose only God is Yahweh; a Jew who prayed the Great Shema daily and seven times in synagogue on the Sabbath. This is the Jew whose father told him and his siblings repeatedly,

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God was always present in his actions in creation and history.

when they were at home or out and about, lying down or standing, that “Yahweh our God is the one, the only Yahweh.” This is the Jew who kissed the mezuzah each time he left and entered his home. This is the Jew whose psyche, emotions, and moods were immersed in the transcendent God who has no equal. At the moment of his revelation/conversion experience, he prays to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to whom he cries out in his agony desiring to “see his face,” as Moses and Elijah had done (Exodus 33:18 and 1 Kings 19:9ff). Was it possible that this God, who is so Other and beyond human conception, could be so near? Libermann’s answer is simply yes. It is the Lord of Hosts, the only Yahweh, who hears the cry of the poor. He hears those who call on him from the bottom of their hearts in worship and who love Yahweh their God with all their heart, with all their soul, and with all their strength (Deut. 6:5).

It is difficult for those who have lived their whole lives as Christians to understand the drama and intensity of his revelatory/conversion experience. This is a man raised in a radical monotheistic faith, begging Yahweh to enlighten him about “*the true religion*” and praying to know “*if the belief of Christians was true.*”

He prays to the one God, not in terms of speculative problems whose solution is to be sought in metaphysics, but rather to know better the living God who creates, teaches, saves, and gives life. In these moments of struggle he moves from the God who is totally Other and yet has freely chosen to enter the contingent and transient human history of a people. But he is also praying to the “*Lord, who is near to those who call on him from the bottom of their hearts.*”³

Yes, he would have to believe in Jesus as the Christ, but what is more dramatic is that he would have to accept that the High God, the Lord of Hosts, Yahweh, the transcendent God, is Trinity. Once he had accepted that revelation, his entire spirituality rested in the Triune God. This belief would not be cast in the limited scholastic philosophical categories of the Trinity *ad intra*. From that moment, his focus would still be on the one transcendent God of mystery, but in the experience of the one God as revealed through divine action in the history of salvation, or what theologians now refer to as the ‘Economic Trinity.’ He was a Jew who had a sense of God creating, God leading his people in their Exodus, God speaking through the Prophets, and God hearing the cry of the poor. God was always present in his actions in creation and history. Yahweh was, in a sense, tangible in the practical experiences of his people. Libermann’s was an experience of the one God manifested as Creator, Redeemer, and

DONALD S. NESTI, C.S.SP. Sanctifier. As a Jew, his focus was on the Mystery of the One, and as a Christian on Three Persons. His rooting was Trinitarian.

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If this were not so, why would he dedicate both the Congregation of the Holy Heart of Mary, which he founded, and then the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, as its eleventh Superior General, to the Holy Trinity? ⁴ It is the Triune God that is the foundation of the life of these Congregations. The life of the Congregation, both in its community and ministerial dimensions, was to reflect the life of God who is *communio*. As the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, it would place particular emphasis on God's ongoing transformative power and action as Spirit, but it is in the life of *communion*, both within its vowed life and in its ministry to the poor, that the oneness of the Triune God would be most understood by a world that awaits the Good News that God is love.

Only in this way can Libermann's statement, "*God is all and man is nothing*," be understood without misinterpretation. It is to the one God, transcendent beyond all human concepts, that he refers and in whom he situates the human person's true and appropriate dignity.

This phrase often falls heavy on the ears of people today who have so little sense of their worth and dignity. But to this Semite, God, who is all, is the Creator and we are the work of his hands. To him creaturehood, and the total dependency that it implies, is the root of human dignity. It was enough for Libermann to say that he was God's creation in and through which God's splendor shines. Libermann is a descendant of the people of the Exodus, led by the Lord of Hosts whose power and might manifest themselves repeatedly in defense of a defenseless people. This is the transcendent God who continues to manifest himself and "*enlighten [him] on the true religion*" and let him know that what was "old" was penetrating the "new," while the "new" was penetrating the "old." The one God is Emmanuel, God-with-us (Is. 7:14; 8:8; Matt. 1:23; Rev. 21:1-4). The essence of the Christian faith was the full manifestation of the transcendent God-who-is-love in the Incarnate Word. Is it any wonder that he would choose to write his meditation on the Gospel of John rather than on one of the Synoptic Gospels? In John, he finds a companion Semite Jew immersed in the compenetration of the Testaments, where the truth of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Jesus Christ is spoken as the transcendent-imminent God's last Word. The Word that was in the beginning became flesh.

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As he became more and more immersed in the Christian Scriptures, I can imagine the feelings that he must have experienced when reading Revelation 21:1-4 in light of his conversion:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride dressed for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, 'Look, here God lives among human beings. He will make his home among them; they will be his people, and he will be their God, God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness or pain. The world of the past has gone.'

He was being called beyond the penumbra of his little attic room to walk as a Semitic Christian in the dark light of faith.

His conversion was Abrahamic. He was definitively leaving “family, acquaintances, and country” to follow in faith. A quotation from Karl Rahner seems to capture some of what his experience would be in the years that lay ahead: “*Why have you kindled in me the flame of faith, this dark light which lures us out of the bright security of our little huts into your night?*” (Encounters with Silence). He was being called beyond the penumbra of his little attic room to walk as a Semitic Christian in the dark light of faith.

Even though various assertions are made concerning whether or not there is anything Jewish in Libermann’s approach to life in the Spirit (cf. Coulon, Cahill, Kelly⁵), I find it inconceivable to think that he did not live the compenetration of the two Testaments on a daily basis all of his life. The one book that he kept on his desk till the end of his life was the Bible in Hebrew.

In the Church’s liturgical cycle, both as contained in the Divine Office and in the celebration of the daily Eucharist, he prayed the Psalms and the Canticles of the Old Testament, and he read the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament both as a Jew and a Christian. To a great extent, one can only hypothesize why he did not make explicit reference to the knowledge he had acquired in his Rabbinic and Talmudic studies to enhance his theological reflections.

But when he read the *Benedictus*, the *Magnificat*, or the Letter to the Hebrews, how could he not do so as a Jewish-Christian? His education would have provided him with a richness of understanding and insight that most of us have acquired only since the renewal of Scriptural studies that began before the Second Vatican Council and continue to expand and flourish to this day.

DONALD S. NESTI, C.S.SP. Imagine him praying with the community either at the Novitiate of La Neuville, in Notre-Dame-du-Gard, or the chapel in rue Lhomond. He prays as a Jew-Christian. The words fall from his lips:

*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
for he has visited his people, he has set them free,
and he has established for us a saving power in the house
of his servant David, just as he proclaimed, by the mouth
of his holy prophets from ancient times... (Luke 1:67ff)*

One wonders what must have been in his mind and heart as he heard the words which he had prayed daily being sung during his ultimate Passover to God on February 2, 1852:

*My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior...*

*He has pulled down princes from their thrones and raised
high the lowly. (chanted at the moment he breathed his
last)*

*He has come to the help of Israel his servant, mindful of
his faithful love –
according to the promise he made to our ancestors –
of his mercy to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.
(Luke 1:46ff)*

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Francis Mary Paul Libermann reveled in the truth spoken by Benedict XVI in his encyclical. He knew both intellectually and experientially on a daily basis how the divine and human had compenetrated in the Person of the Incarnate Word, who embodies both the transcendence and imminence of God in God's healing encounter with the world. It is a compenetration not merely of two Testaments; it is the very compenetration of divine and human love, the ultimate form of inculturation, and the incarnation of the transforming Spirit of God. In Christ, the God of relationship, whose essence is creative, restorative, and transformative, is fully revealed.

The practical Jew, who did not succumb to Greek *theoria*, kept both feet on the ground as he journeyed through life with fervor, charity, and sacrifice, to make sure that all people could share what he had inherited from his ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus Christ. His sense of the one God, the Lord and Giver of Life, is a relational God who can only be grasped through his

substantial modes of relating to us in every aspect of our practical existence. He shapes and reshapes life through his love-action of creating, healing, and transforming humankind. This God is known by what he has done, is doing, and will continue to do. This sense of the acting God who creates, heals, and transforms by *hesed* and *emet*, “faithful love” and “grace and truth” (cf. John 1:14), is the foundation of Libermann’s call to love God and others with practicality in the context of everyday life – especially in regard to the “widow, the orphan, and the stranger,” the weakest. It is the same practicality evidenced not only in his Provisional Rule of 1840, but also in the Rule of 1849, which is the product of his hand.

It demands an intense asceticism of dialogue and discernment in the practical circumstances of everyday life.

To walk in the steps of this Semite is to seek to love God with all one’s heart, all one’s soul, and all one’s strength, the way that Jesus loved the world. With him as the full model of divine love, the bar is set very high. It demands an intense asceticism of dialogue and discernment in the practical circumstances of everyday life. He is forever cautioning those whom he counsels in their life in the Spirit to beware of illusions, the principal of which is to forget the worship of the transcendent God in spirit and truth. We must “set no bounds to [our] love, just as [our] heavenly Father sets none to his” (Matt. 5:48). Is it any wonder that one of Libermann’s favorite Scripture texts was, “in him we live and move and have our being”? - words, interestingly enough, spoken by Paul as he sought to bring the Good News of the one God revealed in Jesus Christ to pagans who knew nothing of the living God.

It has been helpful for me over the years to walk in the shoes of the Semite. I am grateful to Francis Malinowski for having challenged me to do so and for having pointed me on the right path. I am also grateful for what I have learned from Jewish brothers and sisters through inter-religious dialogue and to Benedict XVI who, more clearly than any other Pope, has shown how the two Testaments compenetrates each other. All of these have helped me come closer to our own Semite co-founder in understanding that “*God is all and man is nothing.*”

Footnotes

¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, December 25, 2005, no. 12.

² Alphonse Gilbert, *You have laid your hand on me...*, Rome, Italy: Spiritan Research and Animation Centre, June 1983, pp. 8-9.

³ Cf. Deut. 4:7: “And indeed, what great nation has its gods as near as Yahweh our God is to us whenever we call to him?”

⁴ Hoch, Jean-Paul, C.S.Sp., *Letter from the Superior General*, addressed to the members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, Pentecost, 2006.

DONALD S. NESTI, C.S.SP. ⁵Paul Coulon and Paule Brasseur, eds., *Libermann 1802-1852. Une pensée et une mystique missionnaires*, Paris, 1988 ; Michael Cahill, *Francis Libermann's commentary on the Gospel of St. John: an investigation of the rabbinical and French School influences*, Dublin, 1987; Bernard Kelly, *Life began at forty: the second conversion of Francis Libermann CSSp*, (2nd ed.), Dublin, 2005.