

Article

Fulfillment, Salvation, and Mission: The Neo-Conservative Catholic Theology of Jewish–Christian Relations after *Nostra Aetate*

Yitzhak Mor 

The Department of Comparative Religion and Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Jerusalem 9190501, Israel; yitzhak.mor@mail.huji.ac.il

Abstract: The neo-conservative Catholic movement, led by prominent figures like Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Novak, played a significant role in shaping Jewish–Christian relations in the United States following the Second Vatican Council. This article analyzes their theological understanding of Jews and Judaism, which combined an adoption of the Council’s conciliatory rhetoric with a relatively narrow interpretation of its teachings. By examining their views on key concepts such as “fulfillment”, salvation, and mission, the article highlights the complexities and tensions within the neo-conservative Catholic approach to interfaith dialogue and its relation to their broader goal of promoting religion in the American public sphere.

Keywords: Jewish–Christian dialogue; Second Vatican Council; *Nostra Aetate*; neo-conservative Catholics; Richard John Neuhaus; Michael Novak; fulfillment; salvation; mission to the Jews; Holocaust and theology



Citation: Mor, Yitzhak. 2024. Fulfillment, Salvation, and Mission: The Neo-Conservative Catholic Theology of Jewish–Christian Relations after *Nostra Aetate*. *Religions* 15: 738. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15060738>

Academic Editor: William Skiles

Received: 10 May 2024

Revised: 6 June 2024

Accepted: 11 June 2024

Published: 18 June 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

The Second Vatican Council was a pivotal event in the Catholic world that ignited a debate on the extent of the Church’s adaptation (“aggiornamento”) to the modern world. A central faction, supported by Pope Benedict XVI, interpreted the Council’s directives as a “renewal within tradition” rather than a “rupture” with previous doctrine, contrasting with liberal or ultra-conservative groups who viewed the Council’s decisions as significant theological renewal or a break from tradition (D’Costa 2014; Lamb and Levering 2017). In the United States, the Council’s impact on the Catholic community was immediate, affecting various aspects of daily Catholic life. Conservative Catholics often attributed two local religious “crises”—a sharp decline in general religious devotion¹ and a severe priestly crisis within the Catholic Church²—to the Council’s influence, leading to criticism of its reception in America, usually without directly challenging the Council’s authority (Cuneo 1999).

The interpretive debate surrounding Vatican II, both globally and in the United States, also encompassed Section 4 of the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Nostra Aetate* (NA), which addressed the issue of the Jews. This document, considered a historic turning point in Jewish–Catholic relations, stated that the Jews are not deicides, that God’s covenant with the Jewish people remains valid, and encouraged Christians to establish “spiritual ties” with Jews. However, it left several crucial issues unresolved (Ben-Johanan 2022), such as the precise status of the Old Covenant, the question of salvation outside the Church, the mission to the Jews, and the impact of the Holocaust (not explicitly mentioned in the Declaration) on updating the theology regarding the Jews. In the decades following the Council, official documents and independent theologians engaged with these questions, adopting the concept of “fulfillment” to describe the relationship between the covenants, often without providing a detailed explanation of its meaning.

The Catholic Church in the United States eagerly embraced the Council's declarations regarding the Jews in the 1960s, asserting that American Catholics were well-positioned to lead the renewal of discourse with Jews in the Catholic world due to the more established relationship between the Jewish and Catholic minority communities in the United States compared to other regions (Erickson 2016). NA was perceived as a positive acknowledgment and legitimization of the already improved relations between Jews and Catholics, rather than a necessary foundation for establishing the post-Holocaust Jewish–Christian relationship. Concurrently, the concept of the “Judeo-Christian tradition” gained significant popularity in the United States in the post-Council decades, serving as a theoretical tool that helped many Americans reconcile religious tensions and view Judaism not only as the religion of a small minority but as an integral part in establishing American democracy, signifying the central role of Jews within the social and political framework in the United States (Silk 1984; Gaston 2019; Smith 2019).

Neo-conservative Catholics played a crucial role in the discussion on the place of Jews in Catholic theology. Known for their efforts to promote religious presence (primarily in its Catholic version) in the public sphere, they maintained close and ongoing relationships with conservative Jews. This article aims to describe the neo-conservative Catholic position within the broader Catholic debate on the current attitude towards Jews in light of NA and the Second Vatican Council as a whole, primarily by analyzing the writings of Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Novak, two of the movement's founders.

The close relationships and ongoing collaboration between neo-conservative Catholics and Jews often intersected with practical issues of public policy, such as economics, sexual ethics, legislation, and law. This reality rendered their theoretical engagement with Jews and Judaism highly pragmatic, serving as a justification and explanation for the nature of their general cooperation. The “practical” dimension of this dialogue compelled neo-conservative Catholics to grapple with “gaps” or “lacunae” in official Catholic theology that could not remain unresolved within the context of a substantive, real-world interfaith dialogue.

As a rule, neo-conservative Catholics did not tend to write about the theological status of Judaism and the Jews in an orderly and systematic manner. They addressed this topic mainly when reacting to current events and utilized the medium of popular articles, especially in the journal *First Things*. Naturally, dialogue within the framework of a living and active relationship between neighbors who are also political partners inherently employs less technical theological language compared to the papal documents or voluminous theological writings to which it responded. However, precisely because of its connection to current events, it may provide a broader and richer picture of the development of Catholic doctrine regarding Jews as it is applied within the framework of active and ongoing inter-religious relations.

Responding to Karma Ben-Johanan's (2022) distinction between gestures and theological discussion as different modes of action within the Jewish–Christian dialogue, Hyacinthe Destivelle (2023) argued that even the symbolic and performative dimensions of inter-church dialogue should be considered “theology in action”. He cited Pope Francis, who emphasized the close connection between “dialogue of doctrine” and “dialogue of life”. Following Francis, this article seeks to examine neo-conservative Catholic writing regarding Jews as writing which fuses the two types of dialogue, that of doctrine and that of life. The aim is to describe a “theology in action” that responds to and is influenced by current events. To achieve this, significant weight will be given to writing that occurred in response to current events within the framework of Jewish–Christian relations in the United States.

This paper's central argument is that neo-conservative Catholics situated the dialogue with Jews within the broader context of promoting the influence of religion in the American realm. Within this framework, they tended to view Jewish–Christian dialogue not as a standalone issue but as part of a broader whole. Consequently, there was a gap between

their enthusiastic rhetoric regarding the dialogue itself and a relatively conservative and narrowing interpretation of the Council's instructions regarding Jews and Judaism.

The first part of the article will review the background of the neo-conservative Catholic movement and its ambivalent stance towards the Second Vatican Council as a background for understanding its attitude towards Jews and Judaism. Subsequently, its writing regarding Jews and Judaism will be analyzed, discussing the tension between the enthusiastic adoption of the Vatican's conciliatory and inclusive rhetoric towards Jews since NA and a relatively conservative interpretation of some of the questions left open by the declaration, including the meanings of "fulfillment", salvation, and mission. This will be carried out while describing several current events within the framework of Jewish–Christian discourse in the United States. Finally, the neo-conservative Catholics' view on the impact of the Holocaust on theology regarding Jews and on the current relations with them in the United States will be analyzed.

2. Neo-Conservative Catholics and Their Attitude towards the Second Vatican Council

The neo-conservative movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s among intellectuals, primarily descendants of Eastern European Jewish immigrants, who had initially aligned with liberal or leftist ideologies but grown disillusioned with the New Left. The "New York Intellectuals", the movement's founding group, were educated at the City College of New York (CUNY) and had familiarized themselves there with Trotskyist thought and learned of Stalinism's dangers. Having come to perceive the "New Left" as a threat to "American democracy", neo-conservatives sought to preserve the liberal order and save America from moral decline, seeing themselves as saving liberalism from left-wing radicals (Dorrien 1993; Fuller 2012; Heilbrunn 2009). The movement's importance stems from its members' intellectual standing and their ideas' influence upon the Republican Party, particularly Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush.

Defining neoconservatism is a complex undertaking due to its diverse views and evolution from the 1960s to the 2000s. Scholars have approached this task by focusing on individuals (Dorrien 1993), extracting shared ideas (Gerson 1996), or emphasizing the movement's chronology (Heilbrunn 2009; Vaisse 2010). Generally, neo-conservatives emphasized traditional values, strong national defense, the promotion of democracy, and the nurturing of American interests abroad—advocating assertive foreign policy during the Cold War—while also addressing domestic issues such as free-market economics and religion in public life (Halper and Clarke 2004; Wolfson 2004).

Neo-conservatives diverged from other conservatives in their emphasis on intellectual activity, Jewish prominence, opposition to New Left antisemitism, and an embrace of modern intellectual life's "openings to the transcendent" (Weigel 1995). Their lengthy intellectual journey traversed such diverse areas as Marxist education, liberal anti-communism, civil rights support, experimentation with and rejection of radicalism, support for Israel, and a sense of betrayal by liberal allies (Gerson 1996).

Alongside its prominent Jewish membership, the movement included a number of Catholic thinkers who had likewise undergone a political shift from left to right. Over time, these Catholic neo-conservatives emerged as a distinct subgroup, sharing the movement's political and economic views while emphasizing Catholic social teaching and religion in public life. Key figures such as Michael Novak and Richard John Neuhaus argued that Catholic values were essential to democratic success and sought a more robust Catholic presence in public discourse, challenging perceived secularization (Novak 1982; Neuhaus 1984; Weigel 1995). They differed from more conservative Catholics in their less antagonistic approach to American culture's democratic and pluralistic ethos (Cuneo 1999).

Jewish and Catholic neo-conservatives established strong mutual ties, collaborating on books, journals, and polemics, and largely maintaining warm personal relationships. For example, the Jewish Midge Decter edited Peter Berger and Neuhaus's book in 1970, while her co-religionist Bill Kristol attempted to recruit Catholic neo-conservatives to the American Enterprise Institute (Kristol 2011). Decter was also a partner in the journal *First*

Things, of which Rabbi David Novak was a founding member, while Catholic neo-conservatives published in journals such as Irving Kristol and Daniel Bell's *The Public Interest* and Norman Podhoretz's *Commentary*.

Catholic neo-conservatives generally disagreed with their Jewish counterparts on the importance of religion in the public sphere. They agreed on the utility of religion, but differed on its truth value, seeing no meaning in a utilitarian (and Tocquevillian) conception of religion without belief in its truth; hence, some criticized Kristol's instrumental view, notwithstanding his fondness for religion and "sympathy for orthodoxy". This debate was reflected in issues such as abortion, with Catholics considering it murder and advocating criminalization, while Jews such as Kristol being opposed to such a drastic move, favoring instead cultural efforts to strengthen religious dimensions in both Christian and Jewish lives and thus reduce the motivation for abortions (Gerson 1996).

Despite disagreements and theological diversity, neo-conservatives, Jews and Catholics, generally avoided focusing on their religious differences. They preferred to respect each other's religion and to prioritize shared interfaith activity aimed at countering modern nihilism and the secular left (Dorrien 1993; Gerson 1996). Hence, this article's exploration of theological differences and perceptions of Judaism among Catholic neo-conservatives spotlights an exceptional scenario in which theology predominantly shaped the movement's internal dialogue.

2.1. Richard John Neuhaus

Richard John Neuhaus, a former leader in the liberal left religious circles and the New York branch of Martin Luther King's civil rights movement, later became a founder of the neo-conservative Catholic movement. In his most well-known thesis, which is also the title of his book *The Naked Public Square* (Neuhaus 1984), he argued that the withdrawal of religion from being the basis of "the American democratic experiment" created a vacuum at the center of the public sphere, which society filled with anti-moral fashions and values. Neuhaus believed that the United States, founded on the spiritual vision of the "New Jerusalem", faced a values crisis that could degrade it to a "modern Babylon", primarily due to Protestant churches giving up their theological uniqueness for political popularity. In his 1987 book *The Catholic Moment*, Neuhaus concluded that only the Catholic Church had the theological grounding to offer a moral cure for American society, but it first needed to solve its own crisis and renew its values to establish a practical public philosophy. Neuhaus's preference for Catholic Christianity led to his personal conversion to Catholicism in September 1990. That same year, he founded the journal *First Things*, which became the main mouthpiece of the movement, after being ousted from his position at the paleoconservative Rockford Institute due to disagreements over the institute's nativist and anti-Semitic tendencies, which Neuhaus opposed (Boyagoda 2015; Linker 2006).

Over the years, Neuhaus was among the prominent critics of the Second Vatican Council's impact on the Catholic community in America. In *The Catholic Moment* (Neuhaus 1987a), he addressed the progressive-conservative debate in the Catholic world about the meaning of "aggiornamento". While admitting that the progressive camp's position is more convincing based on the Council's documents, Neuhaus attributed this to the Council fathers' overly equivocal formulation, which allowed for broad interpretations. This relatively sharp criticism, which was less prevalent after he became Catholic, expressed an attempt to distinguish between the human component and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Council. Neuhaus acknowledged that criticizing the Council's decisions on faith and morals is theologically problematic for an orthodox Roman Catholic, but argued that it is still possible to criticize the manner and form in which the Council acted and to suggest that "the Council fathers might have expressed themselves more clearly" to prevent misinterpretations. Despite this, Neuhaus determined that the Council is an event from which there is no way back, and that tradition can only live today by passing through the Council. Since the Council's authority uproots the ability to argue with its documents, the only option is to enter the interpretive debate, with the entry condition being recognition

of the Council's authority. This is because the Council's infallibility cannot be challenged "by anyone who wants to influence the interpretation of the Council", and most Catholics do not want to challenge it in any case (Neuhaus 1987a).

Neuhaus became somewhat more resolute on this issue over the years, especially after his conversion to Catholicism. Nonetheless, upon revisiting the subject in 2008, he did admit that the interpretation emphasizing discontinuity is not completely unfounded. Still, he argued for its superficiality, positing that it misses the great drama of the Council's internal theological development. In addition, he viewed the use of the terms "liberal" and "progressive" as misleading, since the enthusiastic adoption of democracy by "conservative" interpreters such as John Paul II and Benedict XVI was an unquestionably liberal step. In his opinion, the important distinction lies between those who focus on the "spirit" of the Council and those who seriously engage with the written documents it produced. The former are tempted to tell a story focusing on "sociological, psychological, and linguistic" aspects, but in doing so, they miss the authentic spirit of the Council—namely, its theology (Neuhaus 2008).

To illustrate the oversight of progressive interpreters in understanding the Council, Neuhaus turned specifically to NA and emphasized that the notion that it was written solely in response to anti-Semitism or the Holocaust misses the profound significance of the reformulation of the "unique relationship in God's universal plan of salvation between the Church and the people of Israel". In other words, Neuhaus perceived the claim of discontinuity in relation to the Council as a conceptual confusion that misguidedly focuses on a sociological description of the event (in which significant innovation can certainly be identified) while overlooking its depths; in truth, the theological significance of NA was not as an innovation but only as a reformulation of what was already accepted by the Church beforehand (Neuhaus 2008).

2.2. Michael Novak

Michael Novak, like Neuhaus, belonged in his youth to the political left and gained fame as a young reporter covering the Second Vatican Council for the Catholic liberal magazine *National Catholic Reporter*. His book *The Open Church* (Novak 1964), based on his notes from the Council, portrayed him as a supporter of the "updating" of the Church's values and their adaptation to the modern world. Later, Novak changed his political stance and became identified with the neo-conservative movement, developing a renewed appreciation for capitalism and the American entrepreneurial spirit. In his best-known book, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (Novak 1982), Novak searched for the ethical and spiritual basis underlying capitalism, which he believed could not be understood merely as an economic system but required a "spiritual core". Unlike Neuhaus, Novak argued that this core did not necessarily have to be specifically Christian; it was rather an "empty shrine" that needed to be filled with values connecting earthly reality with the transcendent. However, he concurred with the idea that this shrine was not entirely void and that Catholic Social Teaching was the religious system most closely aligned with the values of democratic capitalism, especially in the American context. Novak relied heavily on the concept of the "Judeo-Christian tradition" as a tool to explain the connection between American uniqueness and its underlying spiritual-religious traditions. He also celebrated, alongside his friends in the movement, the publication of John Paul II's 1991 encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, which they interpreted as affirming American capitalist and "laissez-faire" values while sparking a renewed debate regarding the Catholic Church's economic teaching (Novak 1998; Borghesi 2021; Whitmore 2001; Russell 2020).

Novak exemplifies a Catholic writer who underwent a complete reversal in his attitude towards the Second Vatican Council. As a young reporter, he "celebrated" the Council's innovative "spirit" and saw it as a decisive moment embodying a dramatic change in the Church's character. Decades later, Novak revisited his memories of the Council and expressed an ambivalent attitude, combining harsh self-criticism of the "manifest faults, sins, and weak minds of many of us during and after the Second Vatican Council" with

full recognition of the Council's authority and an insistence that "the Holy Spirit did preside over it and brought the world immense fruits through it". Novak believed that the era preceding the Council was "healthier" and "more faithful" than the one after it, attributing the calamity not to the Council itself but rather to the later relativistic atmosphere, which suggested that "to be a Catholic now meant to believe more or less anything one wished to believe". With regard to the Council's documents, however, Novak was less critical. When enumerating the benefits of the Council, he mentioned "the internationalization of the Roman Curia", which later allowed the election of a Polish pope, and in particular the Church's transformation towards ultimately becoming more relevant and significant in the general world (Novak 2001).

George Weigel, a central partner of Neuhaus and Novak, wrote in a similar spirit in his article on the origins of the neo-conservative Catholic movement (Weigel 1995). He posited the post-Vatican II crisis as a central motivation for the movement's formation. In his opinion, the way the Council was "received" in America was wrong and distorted, inasmuch as it was perceived as a surrender to modernity instead of a courageous confrontation with it. The permissive interpretations of the Council threw the Church's windows open to all winds. They moreover led to a demographic collapse of Catholic communities in America and the cessation of any "critical debate within many of the key organizational structures of American Catholicism". Weigel defined the crisis as a "crisis of faith" rooted "not in 'the Council' but in certain inadequate (but institutionally well-entrenched) interpretations of the Council".

Notwithstanding the reservations expressed by neo-conservative Catholics regarding the Council's equivocal wording and the overly broad interpretations given to its statements, there was at least one area in which this group enthusiastically embraced not only the Council's documents but also its "spirit". This was the attitude towards the Jews, updated (or reformulated) in the NA document, and it became a significant turning point in Jewish–Christian relations, opening the "era of reconciliation". The sharp self-criticism that Novak voiced with regard to the enthusiasm for the Council's innovative spirit in the 1960s did not include the positive attitude towards the Jews, an attitude he continued to cultivate even after shifting from left to right and venturing to criticize the implications of the Council in other areas. Neuhaus, as I will show shortly, also attributed his central motivation for interest in the Jews and the relationship with them to the "mystery" referred to by the Council in the NA document. The fact that Neuhaus specifically chose NA, and the influence of anti-Semitism on it, to demonstrate his righteousness vis à vis the general debate on the interpretation of the Council, may serve to indicate the importance that neo-conservative Catholics attached to this declaration, its interpretation, and its anchoring as a continuation of a long-standing tradition.

But how precisely did neo-conservative Catholics understand the way in which Jews and Judaism should be treated following NA? And how did their perception of Jews and Judaism fit into the more general framework of their activity regarding the restoration of religion in the American public sphere?

3. The Importance of Jewish–Christian Dialogue

The close relationship between neo-conservative Catholics and Jews extended beyond cooperation based on political interests. It existed also as an intellectual and spiritual dialogue, primarily centered around the journal *First Things*, defined in its inaugural issue as a "Jewish–Christian enterprise" (The editors 1990). Over the years, *First Things* published numerous articles by Jewish writers such as Rabbi David Novak, David Goldman, Leon Kass, Eric Cohen, Rabbi Shalom Carmy, and Hadley Arkes, who converted to Catholicism in 2010. In an article by George Weigel, he explained that engaging in Jewish–Christian dialogue is a fundamental characteristic of the neo-conservative Catholic movement, "far transcend[ing] the political conversation between Jews and Catholics that has been a chief dynamic of political neoconservatism", and encouraging them to converse in a way they "haven't been for two thousand years" (Weigel 1995). This dialogue addressed public pol-

icy issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality, as well as the theological significance of the relationship between Jews and Christians.

Scholars of the neo-conservative Catholic movement are divided on whether theology or politics was the main driving force in their worldview (Linker 2006; Appleby 1995). While refraining from expressing an opinion on the broader question of their general outlook, I will venture to argue in the following lines that, at least concerning their attitude towards Jews, theology did play a crucial role. As Todd Scribner (2015) notes in his book on the movement (as a generality, not pertaining to attitude towards Jews per se), there is “a specifically religious component to their thought that is not reducible to the purely political”; with this, he emphasizes that there are differences in approach and style among the thinkers identified with the movement on this matter. Below, I will illustrate how the way in which they understood the renewed religious call for a relationship with Jews since Vatican II became a central motivation for engaging in dialogue and also shaped the way they understood its limitations.

Neo-conservative Catholics, when referring to the close dialogue and cooperation they maintain with Jews, often employed enthusiastic rhetoric. They emphasized Christianity’s debt to Judaism and the need for contemporary Christians to engage with Jews to fulfill their spiritual destiny properly. This rhetoric frequently drew upon the language of the Second Vatican Council, along with papal documents and gestures from the following decades, particularly those of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. As mentioned earlier, neo-conservative Catholics did not routinely delve into the theological subtleties of Vatican documents regarding Jews and Judaism; rather, they typically preferred to address these matters in response to significant Christian and Jewish statements or current events relevant to their context. Thus, in the following analysis, I will first examine the more prevalent rhetoric in neo-conservative Catholic writing, which emphasized the commonalities and “continuity” between Christianity and Judaism, both in terms of their relationship and of the doctrinal attitude towards Jews before and after Vatican II. Subsequently, I will explore some important theological concepts employed to by neo-conservative Catholics when contemplating the attitude toward Jews.

Neuhaus published several books over the years focusing on Jews and their status as a religious minority in “secularized” American society, including *Jews in Unsecular America* (Neuhaus 1987b) and *The Chosen People in an Almost Chosen Nation* (Neuhaus 2002b). However, the book that in all likelihood reflects his most personal attitude towards the issue is *Believing Today: Jew and Christian in Conversation* (Klenicki and Neuhaus 1989), which comprises an edited record of his conversations with Rabbi Leon Klenicki of Argentina. In the book, Neuhaus revealed that his initial attitude towards Jews as a boy was shaped by his traditional Lutheran education, growing up in a small town in which Jews were perceived as “Jews of the Old Testament” and were blamed for killing Jesus. It was only after being exposed to Jews in person in college that Neuhaus began to take a serious interest in relations with them. Later, he was greatly influenced by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, with whom he worked closely in his struggles for human rights, as well as Rabbi David Novak. Both made Neuhaus feel “forced to recognize the importance of pondering the mystery of Living Judaism, the continuation of Judaism after Christ, along the lines explored by Saint Paul in Romans 9 through 11” (Klenicki and Neuhaus 1989). This directly echoes the formulations of NA, which states that the Church remembers the connections with “Abraham’s stock” when searching her own mystery. Neuhaus also tried to decipher the “mystery” of Judaism over the years, mainly through an ongoing conversation with Jews, which he perceived not as a luxury but as a duty and religious destiny:

“It has become ever more clear to me that, far from being an optional concern of a few Christians who are interested in that sort of thing, the question of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity holds momentous import for a proper biblical understanding of the Christian reality itself” (Klenicki and Neuhaus 1989).

The attitude towards the Jews as a theological mystery removes the conversation with them from the realm of mere curiosity or love of humanity to stand instead at the profound core

of the Church. Neuhaus and Klenicki argued that the primary goal of their book was to convince the reader that Jewish–Christian dialogue should be of equal importance to both sides; it was not a “hobbyhorse for people who happen to be interested in that sort of thing”, but a spiritual destiny realized primarily by “becoming more fully Christian and more fully Jewish”.

In emphasizing the “continuity” of the obligation for dialogue Neuhaus made use of the concept of Marcionism, or what he defined as “neo-Marcionism”. In his opinion, the internal discussion in the Christian world regarding the relationship with Jews is a modern recurrence of the polemic with the heresy of Marcion, a second-century figure who tried to characterize Christianity as an entirely new religion detached from its Jewish roots. Neuhaus admitted that while the number of Christians accepting Marcion’s teaching as literal remained insignificant, “there are many Christians for whom Jews and Judaism properly belong to the past”. For these Christians, “the continuing existence of living Judaism is an embarrassing anachronism” (Neuhaus 2002b). In this, Neuhaus followed in the footsteps of several important Catholic thinkers such as Jacques Maritain, Jean-Marie Lustiger, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Henri de Lubac, who had also underscored the heretical nature of Marcion who had sought to separate Christianity from its organic Jewish roots. The contempt inherent in this Marcionian type of approach toward Judaism has served throughout history as the basis for anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic attitudes (Ben-Johanan 2022). Hence, a presentation of Marcion (and his ilk) as heretics also served to distance modern anti-Semitism from the core of Christian theology. The Lutheran biblical scholar Adolf von Harnack, who lionized Marcion, famously came under attack from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who thereby sought to warn against the danger in modern biblical research that aims to detach the interpretation of Scripture from Catholic tradition (Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) 2001). For his part, Neuhaus made a freer and more flexible use of the concept. He also identified a neo-Marcionistic trend among Orthodox Jews who view Christianity as a completely separate and detached religion from Judaism (Neuhaus 2002b).

By using the figure of Marcion, Neuhaus linked two types of “continuities”: the continuity between Judaism and Christianity, and the internal continuity within Christian doctrine regarding Judaism. Thus, the emergence of the interpretation of the relationship to the Old Covenant, which was addressed within the framework of NA, becomes doubly “continuous” in comparison to other documents of the Council.

As for Michael Novak, he wrote several times about the need for Christianity and individual Christians to engage with a thriving and dynamic Judaism. Like Neuhaus, he emphasized that this need is a religious one, without which Christians would not be able to understand their religion or properly realize their faith. To explain the importance of this connection, Novak listed a lengthy series of spiritual elements essential for Christians that he believed were previously based in Judaism:

“A reverence for the Scriptures; a sense of the sacred; respect for the law; humility before the transcendent; the cherishing of the human capacity for reflection and choice; the sharp taste of the existing (as distinct from non-existing), and of being (as opposed to nonbeing), and therefore of the blessed contingency of this created world; the practice of compassion; the ideal of friendship with God and of ‘walking with God’; the habit of prayer; and a sense of the presence of God during the activities of every day” (Novak 1993).

The depth of the common ground between the religions and of Christianity’s debt to Judaism, as reflected in this list, led Novak to go as far as to argue that to be a Christian is “in a very subtle sense to be a Jew” (Novak 1993).

Novak tended to approach the discussion of the connections between the two religions primarily through the rather American terminology of the “Judeo-Christian tradition”. As he understood it, this terminology called for a search for areas of overlap between the Christian and Jewish religious traditions and the identification of the historical

contexts in which these traditions operated together. For him, this rhetoric represented the claim that the essential connections between the religions are also relevant to the future.

For example, in *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (Novak 1982), Novak endeavored to pinpoint the Jewish parallels to several Christian doctrines that, in his opinion, form the basis of a capitalist society. In this, he differed from many other thinkers who used the term “Judeo-Christian tradition” without referring to its specific contents or even clarifying its precise meaning (Marty 1986). For instance, he explained the doctrine of “competition” as the perception that man is always in a struggle, both external and internal, in which he is required to vanquish evil and weakness of character and choose good. He based this on the element of choice central to the stories of many biblical figures, noting King David as a representative example of someone who was constantly engaged in an internal struggle of desires. Another example is the doctrine of “incarnation”, which, in his opinion, teaches about the limitations of reality and opposes economic utopianism. Though this doctrine is distinctly Christian, Novak finds a parallel in Jewish history, in the Jewish suffering in the twentieth century. In his opinion, the horrors of the death camps “have given Jews a profound instinct of realism, a readiness for the worst”, and this understanding has significant worth in establishing a social value system on which a free market without illusions may be based. “Illusionlessness is a high form of Christian and Jewish consciousness”, he wrote (Novak 1982). In this, Novak followed in the footsteps of Jacques Maritain and his famous comparison between the Final Solution and the crucifixion, while marking the Nazis as enemies of Christianity (Ben-Johanan 2022). However, Novak went a step further and used this comparison not only to talk about the Holocaust itself but to draw economic conclusions from the “Judeo-Christian tradition”.

As someone primarily focused on contemporary American society, Novak added another layer connecting the qualities and values of the Jewish tradition to American heritage, as well. Within this framework, he developed the argument that American democracy rests on Jewish roots, especially in his book *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding* (Novak 2002), in which he analyzed the centrality of Jewish ideas in the thinking of the Founding Fathers and the latter’s use of Hebrew terms in speeches and ceremonies they held in a Hebraist style. In his opinion, a significant wing of the American republic “drew its power from the Hebraic vision of the Bible”. The book, which was praised by his Jewish neo-conservative friends, allowed him to argue that the current use of Jewish ideas in the American public sphere is not a foreign externalization but stems from the key role they played in establishing the foundations for American democracy from its inception.

These examples, as well as Neuhaus’s insistence on viewing the position seeking to disconnect Christianity from contemporary Judaism as heresy, represent the typically enthusiastic rhetoric of neo-conservative Catholics regarding Judaism and their personal relationship with Jews in the American sphere. As Neuhaus noted, this rhetoric is greatly influenced by the formulations and motivations of NA, which called for creating such “spiritual ties”.

However, alongside this rhetoric, one can also find concern about the deterioration of dialogue into cultural relativism, as occurred in other cases, deriving from an overly broad interpretation of Vatican II. In order to plumb the exact nature of the dialogue and its boundaries in the eyes of neo-conservative Catholics, one must understand how they interpreted several central theological concepts in Jewish–Christian discourse. When searching for such detailed theological references, we usually discover them either in the form of a response to principled church statements such as *Dominus Iesus* (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) 2000) or to the Jewish statement *Dabru Emet* (Dabru Emet 2000), or alternatively within the framework of a discussion of current events that have implications for the dialogue. I will now analyze the treatment by neo-conservative Catholics of several such concepts in theory and practice.

4. Fulfillment

Scholars of the history of Jewish–Christian relations are divided regarding the exact nature of the Christian attitude towards the covenant with the Jews before Vatican II. A common approach in the scholarship has identified “replacement theology” as the central doctrine in the Christian tradition, positing that God abandoned his covenant with the Jews and replaced it with a covenant with the disciples of Jesus. These scholars sometimes term this approach “supersessionism” (Donaldson 2016; Levine 2022), though others point out that “supersessionism” is a modern and “political” term unfamiliar to the Church (Azar 2016). In any case, one of the starting points of the Jewish–Catholic dialogue in the twentieth century was the recognition that “replacement theology” or “supersessionism” represented a prevalent Christian perspective that the NA document sought to challenge and discourage in order to foster more positive relations between the two religions.

However, the question remains: what is the current and theologically correct model for understanding the proper relationship between the two covenants? It is important to acknowledge that full acceptance of the validity of the Old Covenant poses challenges for Christian believers. The process of overcoming many aspects of ancient Judaism, such as its national character and adherence to practical commandments, was central to shaping the most basic core of Christian identity. The attempt of Vatican II to revalidate the status of the Old Covenant implicitly threatened the validity of the New Covenant, creating a need for a conceptual tool that would allow for the coexistence of both covenants without diminishing the significance of either one.

Since the Council and up to the present day, the primary concept that has served this role is the theology of “fulfillment”. The term originates in the New Testament, in Jesus’ claim, “I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matthew 5:17). However, it is absent from the NA declaration and no significant use was made of the terminology until approximately a decade after the Council. It appears in 1974 within the framework of the first document issued by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ) under the title *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate* (n. 4). There, it receives a mention in a brief paragraph noting that within the framework of biblical interpretation the relationship between the covenants ought to be defined as one of continuity, without however detracting from the original elements in Christianity. This is to be achieved through “fulfillment”: “We believe that those promises were fulfilled with the first coming of Christ. But it is none the less true that we still await their perfect fulfillment in his glorious return at the end of time” (Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ) 1974).

In official documents published later, until 2015, “fulfillment” is usually described as a future occurrence or as an “extremely complex” matter that will only be fully revealed at the end of days (Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC) 2001). This indicates a tendency in the Vatican to postpone dealing with the precise meaning of the term, leaving it to future generations (Cunningham 2017), reminiscent of NA’s postponement to the end of days of the question of the precise manner in which God is to be worshipped and classifying the status of the covenant with the Jews as a “mystery”. Ratzinger, who dealt extensively with the subject, sought to shed light on the meaning of the term in his book *Many Religions—One Covenant* (Ratzinger 2011). He employed the concept of “fulfillment” to emphasize the continuity between the old and new covenants, explaining that for Christians this continuity is not a simple, linear one but rather an expansion and intensification of the Old Covenant through universalization. Within this framework, the Old Covenant is “renewed”, “transformed”, and “brought to its deepest meaning”, suggesting a significant addition not inherently present in the Old Covenant. While Ratzinger explicitly acknowledged the problem, some contend that his use of terminology such as “superseded” in certain respects when referring to the Sinai covenant may be perceived as supersessionist. According to Moyaert and Pollefeyt (2010), this indicates that “fulfillment thinking remains kindred to replacement thinking”.

The concept of fulfillment exemplifies the tension between innovation and continuity in post-conciliar Catholic thought. The Council's "spirit", which encouraged practical change concerning the Jews, found the concept of "fulfillment" useful in the context of renewed relations, as it was more nuanced and open to interpretation compared to "replacement". However, the conservative tendency to interpret the Council "continuously" and align it with previous theological thought led prominent Catholic theologians to interpret the term narrowly, bringing it closer to the old "replacement theology".

In their writings on this concept, neo-conservative Catholics often employed the terminology of "fulfillment" when tension arose between suggesting a positive and ongoing role for Judaism and the notion of continuity, with its implication that Christianity, as the fulfilling religion, is necessarily superior to Judaism, the fulfilled one.

As a veteran interpreter of Vatican II, Neuhaus was aware of the tension surrounding the concept of "fulfillment". In his writing on the subject, he acted in two seemingly contradictory directions—on the one hand, he emphasized the origin of Christianity in Judaism and the common ground between the religions, while on the other hand, he sharpened the differences between them, and ostensibly presented a more complex approach regarding the place of the Jews in the plan of salvation. One article in which he dealt with the subject more broadly than usual was entitled "Salvation is from the Jews", which is Jesus' answer to the Samaritan woman (John 4:22). Neuhaus argued that this verse is underrepresented in Jewish–Christian relations. The reason he gives is that many interpretive approaches in the Christian world, from Augustine to the twentieth century, interpreted the verse allegorically and turned a blind eye to its literal meaning—due to the difficulty of ascribing to Judaism a real role in current events and in the future program of salvation. In his opinion, one should indeed take the words literally and internalize that the Jews not only represent the "starting point" of the process of salvation but also share with the Christians the "destination"; that is, they are active living partners in the world's progress towards its repair. This fateful partnership requires treating Judaism and Christianity not as two different religions but as "differences within the one tradition of witness to the God of Israel and his one plan of salvation". Therefore, it is not possible to separate the process of salvation as promoted by God from its bearers in the world: the Jews. Neuhaus also mocked Protestant attempts to define the "essence" of Christianity philosophically. He determined that "Christianity is not defined by an essence but by the man of the cross". The crucified one was a Jew, and therefore "Through Jesus the Jew, we Christians are anchored in history". Without a firm grip on its Jewish roots, Christianity faces the danger of degenerating into paganism. Therefore, Jewish–Christian dialogue is a religious and moral destiny of the highest order for believing Christians. Neuhaus believed that this was also the intention of the drafters of the NA declaration, and that this is the message implied by Paul's words in the Epistle to the Romans (Neuhaus 2001).

For Neuhaus, the term "fulfillment" primarily means "extension" through universalization. He drew on Franz Rosenzweig's claim that Christianity is "Judaism for Gentiles", suggesting that while Judaism remains good for the Jewish people, Gentiles require a different version. Neuhaus believed that removing Judaism's particularistic components allowed its dissemination to the Gentiles, thus "extending" it. This understanding led him to both praise and criticize the rabbinical declaration *Dabru Emet*: the former for emphasizing the commonality between the religions and legitimizing Christianity's role in spreading monotheism, and the latter for nonetheless rejecting the statement that Christianity is not an "extension of Judaism". For Neuhaus, "fulfillment" meant that Christianity fulfills the Jewish message by expanding its audience and universalizing it, while simultaneously upgrading and purifying Judaism's message.

5. The Boundaries of Dialogue

The neo-conservative Catholics' understanding of the importance of Jewish–Christian dialogue, rooted in the unique connection between the religions and Christianity's "fulfillment" in Judaism, led them to emphasize its spiritual significance for Christians while also

delineating its limits according to their interpretation of the concept of “fulfillment”. Their primary focus was on situating the dialogue within the broader, more pressing project of combating secularization and strengthening Christianity’s influence in the American public sphere. Perceiving the dialogue with Jews as a component of this framework, the neo-conservative Catholics sought to sharpen the demarcation lines between the religions, define the dialogue’s relevant target audience, ensure its equitable conduct, and properly prioritize it within their spiritual order.

First, they took great care to distinguish between the conciliatory rhetoric arising from the “spirit” of the NA declaration and the actual content of the declaration. They believed that the conciliatory terminology regarding Jews and the clear rejection of supersessionism could be mistaken for a pluralistic worldview blurring the differences between the religions. Given that the starting point for the dialogue is a spiritual one, it should be understood as part of the act of fulfillment that began in Jesus’ time and continues into the present. Within this framework, Neuhaus was cautious not to “slip” into the terminology of “replacement”. He nevertheless insisted that neither the esteem and respect in which Christians hold Judaism, nor their struggle against supersessionist perceptions, make the two religions equal:

“With respect to Judaism, Christians today are exhorted to reject every form of supersessionism, and so we should. To supersede means to nullify, to void, to make obsolete, to displace. The end of supersessionism, however, cannot and must not mean the end of the argument between Christians and Jews. We cannot settle into the comfortable interreligious politesse of mutual respect for positions deemed to be equally true. Christ and his Church do not supersede Judaism but they do continue and fulfill the story of which we are both part” (Neuhaus 2001).

For Michael Novak, the main point of contention between the religions, beyond their many areas of overlap, lies in the answer to the question of “who Jesus is and what he signifies” (Novak 1993). In this sense, Judaism “fulfills” Christianity by providing a better understanding of the essence of God. Similarly, Neuhaus emphasized that Christians must not refrain from proclaiming that “Jesus is Lord”, even if this claim creates friction within the dialogue and some might prefer to avoid it for that reason:

“...to say that Jesus is Lord is necessarily to say that no one else and nothing else is lord. This has been and always will be ‘controversial,’ and is thought outrageously offensive in a culture whose highest truth is tolerance, with tolerance understood to mean that all truths are equal, which is another way of saying there is no truth” (Neuhaus 2000).

In other words, the recognition of divine truths is necessary even in a society that sanctifies tolerance. It is part of the understanding of the dialogue as having religious significance, in light of the call of NA and other church documents. The act of burying such a claim cannot save the dialogue, since transforming dialogue into a secular interaction undermines the very *raison d’être* of its existence.

Another consequence of the spiritual mission of the dialogue was the claim that the participants in the dialogue should be carefully selected. Over the years, neo-conservative Catholics preferred to maintain contact with observant Jews, or at least conservatives who attach importance to religion in the public sphere. Neuhaus asserted that only those who properly preserve their ancient heritage can be a useful source of influence for Christians:

“The only Jew that it is rewarding to be in dialogue with is a Jew who is emphatically Jewish. And, of course, the obverse is equally the case. Otherwise we are only playing a game of ‘let’s pretend’” (Klenicki and Neuhaus 1989).

Here, Neuhaus explicitly expressed a sentiment on which the official Catholic establishment—though in agreement with him—hesitated to openly take a stance: a preference for observant Jews over those who are not (Marienberg 2008). Mirroring this, George Weigel encouraged the Jewish side of the dialogue to maintain contact primarily with Christians committed to Catholic doctrine:

“Jews might learn that the most doctrinally serious Christianity is the Christianity with which they can engage in dialogue, not the Christianity Lite that too often accommodates itself to the secular and skeptical *Zeitgeist*” (Weigel 1995).

Simply put, only contact with Catholics committed to tradition will be of value to Jews. The Catholic tradition viewing the connection with Jews positively is stable and continuous, and resistant to the “*zeitgeist*” that may lead other Christians to adopt anti-Jewish positions.

The perception that there is no spiritual value in dialogue with secular Jews found another active expression in Neuhaus. He was a sharp critic of the prevalent Jewish position in the United States—a liberal stance sanctifying the separation of religion and state—which he termed “The Separationist Faith”. He consistently emphasized that several well-known organizations in the United States promoting the separation of religion and state are led by Jews. Neuhaus frequently engaged in debates with liberal Jews on issues of religion and state, strongly criticizing their secularism (which he viewed as a deviation from their tradition) and the legitimacy of their significant influence relative to their proportion in the population. Neuhaus’ sharp disapprobation, coupled with his declared aversion to political correctness, led to accusations of antisemitism, which he vehemently rejected (Neuhaus 1993, 1995, 1996b; Linker 2006). I will expand on his polemic with secular Jews in the final part of this article, dealing with the impact of the Holocaust on the dialogue.

Another problem identified by neo-conservative Catholics within the Jewish–Christian dialogue was its inherent “asymmetry”. That is, Jews can, in principle, reflect upon their religion without engaging with Christianity, while Christians cannot, since Christianity originated in events relating to an ancient Jewish community and since Christ was, of course, Jewish. Neuhaus and Novak differed in their approach to this asymmetry, especially in the degree of criticism they expressed regarding the relatively little Jewish engagement with the other religion versus the intensive engagement of many Christians.

Neuhaus, following John Pawlikowski, decried this asymmetry within Jewish–Christian dialogue. Pawlikowski had argued that, notwithstanding valid reasons for Jewish “ignorance” about Christianity, this situation must change. Neuhaus agreed that Jews should seriously engage with Christianity and its sources, formulate clear documents on their attitude towards Christianity, and be exposed to Christian criticism, just as Christians have been doing towards Jews since NA. Neuhaus also criticized Rabbi Irving Greenberg, an influential leader in fostering Jewish–Christian understanding, for justifying the asymmetry by stating that “Jews owe nothing to Christianity”, arguing that this statement did not advance the deeper engagement Greenberg claimed to favor (Neuhaus 1991).

In contrast to Neuhaus, Novak generally accepted the asymmetry in interfaith relations as a natural and inevitable fact. He argued that the fundamental disagreement between Christians, who believe that “Christianity adds to and goes beyond Judaism”, and Jews, who simply believe Christians to be in error about Jesus’ divinity, makes engaging in metaphors about the exact relationships between the religions pointless. Instead, Novak suggested focusing on “overlapping commonalities”, such as opposition to the idolatry of totalitarianism and “liberal secularism that tries to lock Judaism and Christianity out of the light of public life”, as well as discussing morality through concepts like “natural law” and the “Noahide laws”.³ However, even Michael Novak urged his Jewish friends to consider that historical research points to significant “discontinuities” between pre-Christian Judaism and modern Judaism, suggesting that Jews should also carefully scrutinize their own continuity with ancient Judaism when criticizing Christianity for deviating from it (Novak 2008). We find Neuhaus alluding to a similar claim when he writes that rabbinic Judaism and the Church are “two competing versions of the history of Israel” (Neuhaus 2005).

The most crucial point to note in understanding the neo-conservative Catholics’ perception of interfaith dialogue, which was not often explicitly expressed, is that since the dialogue has a spiritual purpose, it is not valuable in itself but must serve more important spiritual values—or at least not contradict them. Neuhaus hinted at this when he argued

that the dialogue is not a “hobbyhorse” but part of the realization of religiosity for both Jews and Christians. His struggle against the secular–liberal approach prevalent among American Jews, which entailed a use of the harshest expressions, can be seen as a position that prioritizes the resolute struggle for religion in the public sphere, even when it may hurt Jewish feelings and undermine the project of interfaith cooperation.

Case Study—Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ”

To illustrate how this position is expressed in practice and not just in theory, I want to briefly describe the reaction of Neuhaus and Novak to the widespread public criticism that arose in the United States following the screening of Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* in 2004. This criticism related both to the great violence in the film and to the anti-Semitic motifs that appear in it. A combined committee of the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) and the Department for Interreligious Relations of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) issued a joint statement of condemnation, pointing to the damage caused to the Church’s attempted prevention of anti-Semitism since the Second Vatican Council (Pawlikowski 2004; Fredriksen 2004). Additionally, although ostensibly the film was based in the New Testament account, Gibson was accused of relying heavily on the visions of the 18th-century German nun Anne Catherine Emmerich, which contained blatant anti-Semitic motifs (Corley and Webb 2006).

In contrast to the vigorous protests against the film, crossing lines of religion and political affiliation, both Novak and Neuhaus expressed great enthusiasm. Neuhaus, who was invited to one of the early screenings, wrote about it:

“It is a gross understatement to say that it is an extraordinary film. It is certainly the best cinematic treatment of the passion or, indeed, of any biblical subject that I have ever seen. I strongly urge everybody to see it. (No, of course I don’t get a cut.)” (Neuhaus 2004a).

Neuhaus opposed claims that the film *The Passion of the Christ* was anti-Semitic, admitting that “uneducated viewers” might conclude that “the Jews killed Jesus”, but arguing that the same impression could be derived from reading the Gospels. He believed that the public polemic surrounding the film stemmed from a prevalent Christian avoidance of presenting the essentials of their faith truthfully, out of fear of offending Jews. In his opinion, the Church’s step towards the Jews at the Second Vatican Council was not intended to blur the truth that rejecting Jesus’ message was a mistake and a sin, and one should not be misled by the conciliatory tone of NA, which itself acknowledges Jewish responsibility for Jesus’ death (Neuhaus 2004a).

Even more enthusiastic was Novak, describing *The Passion of the Christ* as a powerful spiritual experience and praising Gibson’s directorial talent and faithfulness to the biblical text. Regarding claims of anti-Semitism, Novak echoed Neuhaus’s argument that the film portrays an internal Jewish polemic and noted that Gibson even omitted some New Testament passages considered relatively offensive to Jews. However, Novak was more restrained than Neuhaus in that he acknowledged the Jewish experience, displaying empathy for the difficulty Jews may have had in watching the film and admitting its possible negative implications, though he attributed these to misinterpretations. Novak argued that the film could have a positive impact by illustrating the horror of human suffering and claimed that during the screening, he was “led to consciousness” of the “sin of Christians against Jews”—the misguided nature of blaming Jews as “Christ-killers” (Novak and Holman 2004; Novak 2003).

Beyond the debate about the film’s content, however, what is relevant to our discussion is the dialogue that materialized concerning the importance of Jewish–Christian relations in the face of a public phenomenon perceived by Neuhaus and Novak as having spiritual significance. Rabbi David Berger of Yeshiva University, a well-known figure in the world of Jewish–Christian discourse, raised this issue, of the film’s impact on the dialogue. While acknowledging that the film represented an exciting spiritual experience for many Catholics, and that Jews and Christians have been “seeing different movies”, Berger

argued that Christians should become aware of the damage perpetrated by the film in its brushing aside of the long history of persecution against Jews, and of the significance of presenting the scriptures in a dramatic way to a large audience. Berger emphasized that the film, and especially the broad Catholic enthusiasm for it, greatly undermined the confidence that had been painstakingly built within the framework of Jewish–Catholic relations (Berger 2004).

Neuhaus responded aggressively to this relatively restrained warning, arguing that there were more important issues on the table for Christians than their relations with Jews. He maintained that Christians watch the film “to witness and enter into the suffering and death of their Lord, not to check out its conformity to episcopal statements on Jewish–Christian relations”. Even Christians like himself, who are completely committed to Jewish–Christian dialogue, “had Jesus, not Jews, on their mind” when watching the film. Neuhaus expressed “shock” at learning that “many Jews have nothing but fear and loathing” for the Christian religion and, by extension, for Christians. He linked the criticism of the film (though it also came from conservative and religious Jews) to his general criticism of the liberal tendencies of American Jews, and accused many Jews of believing in “the teaching of contempt” towards Christians, in a role reversal apparently hinting at Jules Isaac’s (1964) concept regarding Christian anti-Judaism (Neuhaus 2004b).

This case effectively illustrates the perception that the importance of Jewish–Christian dialogue depends largely on its spiritual benefit. When adherence to preserving the dialogue interferes with the presence of faith in the public sphere, the dialogue loses its significance. Consequently, Christians who watch the film are entitled to focus on its spiritual meaning for them, even if it does not conform to the civilities accepted within the framework of interfaith dialogue.

6. Salvation and Mission

The question of salvation and religious conversion remains a central issue in Jewish–Christian relations. NA’s assertion as to the continued validity of the covenant with the Jews led some to conclude that Jews can attain salvation through their own covenant (Pawlikowski 2012; D’Costa 2012). However, the Second Vatican Council did not explicitly reject the basic Catholic principle of *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Church). Even the Council’s *Lumen Gentium* Dogmatic Constitution, which recognized the possibility of salvation for those belonging to non-Catholic Christian communities or without “explicit knowledge of God”, attributed this to the redeeming power of Jesus, rather than to belief in a non-Christian religion. While Judaism was granted a special status in the divine plan of salvation, the Council made no clear statement regarding the salvation of individual Jews (Ruokanen 2016).

An important event within this discourse was the publication in 2000 of the document *Dominus Iesus* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, then headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. The document reaffirmed the traditional claim that “there is no salvation outside the Church”, albeit without explicit reference to Judaism. While it contained recognition that members of other religions may attain salvation, this could only be through the redeeming power of Christ, and in any case, “objectively speaking”, they are “in a gravely deficient situation in comparison with those who, in the Church, have the fullness of the means of salvation” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) 2000). The document was perceived by many as a reversal of the progress made in the Vatican’s attitude towards Judaism, and was received with displeasure by liberal Catholics and of course by many Jews. Consequently, a significant controversy arose in the United States, in which the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) took part, becoming increasingly entangled in the course of publishing several amendments to their position on the matter. This action stemmed from a desire to preserve, on the one hand, the delicate fabric of relations with Jews in the United States and, on the other, to remain faithful to traditional Church teaching (Ben-Johanan 2022).

The question of salvation outside the Church is closely related to the issue of mission. It can be argued that the claim of any religion as to the higher truth value of its covenant with God implies, ipso facto, a call for religious conversion. Therefore, if individual Jews cannot attain salvation without recognizing Christ, this provides just cause to expose them, out of concern for their welfare, to the goodness of the Christian religion and convince them to convert. Recognizing the completeness or superiority of a particular religion immediately raises the question for individuals who acknowledge this superiority: why not convert to the more righteous religion? This is especially relevant to Judaism and Christianity, as Christianity necessarily recognizes a certain truth value in Judaism.

Despite several discussions held over the years between Catholic scholars, such as the famous one between Gavin D'Costa (2012) and John Pawlikowski (2012), no agreement has been reached regarding the Catholic theological position on the conversion of Jews. The position that negates the motivation for conversion is generally perceived as more progressive, seeking to adopt the "spirit" of the Council and interpret it broadly. In contrast, the position advocating the ongoing motivation for the conversion of Jews is generally seen as one that seeks to read the Council's documents in light of traditional doctrine.

The impact of this issue on Jewish–Christian dialogue has been of great significance, because mission—often perceived through Christian eyes as an action of goodwill—has traditionally been perceived in the Jewish world as a most painful offense and a central obstacle in the framework of strengthening contemporary relations between Jews and Christians. A famous expression of this is that of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, responding in 1964 to a draft of NA that contained a hope for the Christianization of the Jews. He wrote in the *New York Times* that he was "ready to go to Auschwitz any time, if faced with the alternative of conversion or death" (Ben-Johanan 2022).

The neo-conservative Catholics adopted a consistent stance on the issues of salvation and mission, interpreting the teachings of the Second Vatican Council narrowly. Despite their awareness of the sensitivity of the issue within the framework of relations with their Jewish interlocutors, they did not refrain from presenting their approach unambiguously, albeit with differences in style and varying degrees of sensitivity. Neuhaus, in response to *Dominus Iesus* and the criticism leveled against it, argued that the accusations were exaggerated and that the document merely presented a "clear and renewed formulation of traditional Catholic teaching". He believed that the key message regarding redemption from within the Church had already been embedded in John Paul II's encyclicals, *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) and *Ut Unum Sint* (1995). Neuhaus considered the affirmation of the superiority of Jesus to be a belief relevant to all the world's inhabitants and a necessary principle for understanding the Christian faith. He viewed attacks on this "highest truth" as part of the relativism plaguing modern culture to such a degree that any claim to a unique truth is immediately deemed "offensive". While invested in dialogue with Jews, Neuhaus was sensitive to what he perceived as a tension between tolerance and truth. He reiterated the position expressed in *Lumen Gentium* and *Dominus Iesus* that salvation is possible even for those who have not heard of Jesus, but only by the power of the Christian Messiah, emphasizing that Judaism was no exception in this (Neuhaus 2000).

The significance of this position was, in his view, that the motivation for the conversion of Jews—at least on a personal level, even if not in an institutionalized or coercive manner—still exists. Moreover, he saw in the conversion of a Jew to Christianity the highest realization of the "fulfillment" of Judaism in Christianity, thereby taking a further step beyond the accepted understanding of the term, which usually referred to fulfillment as a relationship between religions in general. Neuhaus also gave the concept meaning on the individual level—namely, that religious conversion is self-fulfillment:

"There is no avoiding the much-vexed question of whether this means that Jews should enter into the further fulfillment of the salvation story by becoming Christians. Christians cannot, out of a desire to be polite, answer that question in the negative" (Neuhaus 2001).

In other words, since Christianity is considered a more complete and refined version of Judaism, a Jew who “becomes a Christian” not only advances further towards salvation than by remaining within the framework of Judaism, but thereby actually realizes their Jewishness more fully. The politeness required for dialogue cannot obscure this fact. Neuhaus did not detail how to resolve the tension between the Christian need for Jews mentioned above and the aspiration for their conversion. To mitigate this tension within interfaith dialogue, he adopted an approach common among some conservative theologians, who respected dialogue with Jews by postponing the question and distinguishing between the dialogue as it is “now” and what is “not yet”, apparently referring to the anticipated future Christianization of Jews. On this point, Neuhaus relied on John Paul II’s assertion that clarity would come in the future, thus acknowledging the mission’s importance without harming current dialogue.

Turning now to Novak, he also addressed religious conversion, agreeing with Neuhaus in principle but using more refined formulations that respected Jewish sensitivities. He recognized the inherent link between the claim as to Christianity’s superiority over Judaism and the positive view of conversion. Novak argued that if a Jew recognizes that “Judaism does point beyond itself and into Christianity”, he is consequently “superseded by Christianity”, and also that a Christian who does not believe that Christianity significantly adds to Judaism should question why they are not becoming a Jew. However, Novak acknowledged the sensitivity of many Jews, noting that the communal and familial experience of a convert from Judaism to Christianity may differ from their internal experience. Internally, a convert may feel a sense of completion of their Judaism through Christianity, but communally, conversion is often perceived as a personal, familial, and communal offense, and as an endorsement of supersessionist replacement theology. Therefore, Novak admitted that figures like Edith Stein, who converted from Judaism to Christianity, cannot serve as proper models for interfaith relations. He did not offer a solution to the conflict but simply highlighted it, focusing on areas of common agreement and the need to increase “sympathy” between Jewish and Catholic communities, even in areas of disagreement (Novak 2008).

Case Study—The Mortara Affair

The discussion on the subject of mission usually remained in the theoretical realm. However, an article published in *First Things* in 2018 sparked a storm and brought the issue of mission back to the surface. Although this event occurred after the deaths of Neuhaus and Novak, it is worthwhile to examine it due to what it revealed about the attitude towards mission among their successors in the movement.

The article, written by Father Romanus Cessario of the Dominican Order, was titled “Non Possumus”, a phrase used by Pope Pius IX to justify the forcible removal of Edgardo Mortara from his Jewish parents’ home in 1858, after he had been secretly baptized by his Christian nanny. The Pope justified the “kidnapping” on the grounds that the secret baptism made Mortara a Christian, an irreversible step (Kertzer 1998). Cessario passionately defended the Pope’s decision by analyzing the meaning of the sacrament of baptism. He explained that the Pope’s insistence stemmed from “piety, not stubbornness”, and that the violation of the nuclear family’s integrity was a necessary religious sacrifice. Cessario argued that his revisiting of the issue in 2018 was unrelated to Jewish–Christian relations but was about strengthening the absolute commitment to divine rulings that override human tendencies such as loyalty to family and community. He added that Jews should understand the Pope’s motives, especially in an era marked by the intensifying of “the secularist denial of those higher loyalties [which are honored by Judaism and Christianity alike] that threatens both synagogue and Church” (Cessario 2018).

The article, with its blunt style, sparked immediate uproar and drew sharp criticism from both Christians and Jews. The Jewish magazine *Forward* reported, “Catholic Magazine Justifies Kidnapping, Converting Jewish Baby” (Pink 2021). The Archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles Chaput, condemned the article, stating it harmed the Church’s efforts over

sixty years “to heal such wounds and repent of past intolerance toward the Jewish community” (Chaput 2018). The Catholic magazine *National Catholic Reporter* called for Cessario’s immediate dismissal from any Catholic position (Winters 2018). Within Jewish–Catholic interfaith discourse in the United States, the article was seen as a gross violation of the delicate relationship between the communities and a reminder that the Church had not rid itself of its missionary tendency.

In response to the uproar, Rusty Reno, the current editor of *First Things*, published a text combining an apology with a justification for the publication, explaining that it should not harm Jewish–Christian relations. He declared the journal’s deep commitment to the Jewish–Christian partnership and condemned Pope Pius IX’s act. However, he explained that the publication was allowed to provoke thought about our standing before “the power” of God’s absolute laws “that we cannot redirect or reshape as we wish”. Reno mentioned his personal difficulty as someone married to a Jewish woman and raising his children as Jews, “going to church alone”, and his inability, as a Catholic, to properly educate his children in Jewish life ceremonies. He concluded with a comparison, which further angered some readers, between himself and Mortara’s parents: “In a certain sense, God kidnapped my children” (Reno 2018).⁴

Many saw Cessario and Reno’s focus on obedience to God’s commandments as an evasion of the fact that the journal chose to publish an article on the conversion of a Jew and its implications for dialogue. However, in my opinion the two different framings of the discussion connect well, as they continue the pattern of thought described above, whereby claims about the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old and the reluctance to give up the aspiration for the conversion of Jews to Christianity remain alive within Catholic theology regarding Jews. Madigan (2018) noted that for Mortara’s Jewish family, opposition to handing over the child to a Christian education represent not a surrender to human will in the face of God’s commandment but, quite to the contrary, adherence to the Jewish version of God’s commandments. The discussion can be framed as dealing with the relationship between man and God only if one ignores that the Jewish God’s commandment is different from, and equally important to, the commandment of that same deity as Christians understand it.

In a discussion in the conservative Jewish journal *Mosaic* (many of whose writers are friends with the neo-conservative Catholics), Natan Shields (2018) argued that Cessario’s article represents an intensification of radical and integralist tendencies within the Catholic world in recent years that found expression in *First Things*, to the point of reflecting a retreat from Vatican II’s goal of adapting the Catholic Church to modernity. He suggested that, after having symbolized materiality and particularity in the Middle Ages, the figure of the Jew has come once again in the modern era to symbolize what Christianity fears—this time, modernity and liberalism. In response, Jon D. Levenson (2018) argued that it is incorrect to define *First Things* as anti-liberal or anti-Jewish, noting with regard to the latter that it regularly publishes a column by an Orthodox rabbi (Shalom Carmy). He suggested that Neuhaus’s sensitivity to Jewish criticisms of Christianity (as I have demonstrated above in relation to the case of *The Passion of the Christ*) was combined, in this case, with a strong desire to fight progressive trends and an inability to recognize profound changes within Catholicism. The change in Catholic rhetoric following Vatican II regarding Jews and “speaking positively about the Torah, the chosenness of Israel, and even about the ongoing Jewish messianic expectation” was as important as the change in supersessionist theology. However, conservative Catholics sometimes prefer to see these developments “as nothing more than restatements of the old teaching in a new situation” and thereby adopt an approach that is “more Catholic than the pope”.

I agree with Levenson that the publication of Cessario’s article is not surprising, given the context presented. Although its style and conclusions deviated somewhat from Neuhaus’s past line, the basic message aligns with Neuhaus’s position that dialogue with Jews is a fulfillment of a religious obligation for Christians and therefore should be subordinate to the overall obligations of a believing Christian. The act of Pius IX, while hurtful in

form, represented both the overcoming of human tendencies to fulfill a divine commandment and a rejection of the Jewish interpretation of God's commandment (a Jew cannot become a Christian) in favor of adopting the Christian interpretation (baptism is valid and irreversible). Similarly to the other case I have presented here, that of Gibson's film, this case represents the gap that sometimes arises between the adoption of the conciliatory and reconciling motivation of NA (expressed in rhetoric emphasizing Christianity's debt to Judaism) and the insistence that some basic elements in Jewish–Christian relations—such as the superiority of Christianity, salvation through Christ, and the importance of mission—remain unchanged post-Vatican II.

7. The Holocaust

As mentioned earlier, a defining event in the formation of the neo-conservative Catholic movement was its separation from the paleo-conservative stream due to anti-Semitic tendencies in the latter. Since then, neo-conservative Catholics have frequently addressed anti-Semitism and the Holocaust, positioning themselves as philosemites and leaders in combating anti-Semitism within the Christian-conservative sphere in America. However, they have faced accusations of employing offensive rhetoric towards Jews and trivializing the Holocaust for political purposes (Linker 2006). A notable example is the “End of Democracy” controversy of 1992, in which an editorial in *First Things* implied a comparison between the American regime and the Nazi regime in the context of legal rulings favoring euthanasia, sparking outrage among conservative Catholics and Jews, including prominent conservative Jewish figures such as Norman Podhoretz and Gertrude Himmelfarb (Boyagoda 2015). Another instance highlighting the lack of consensus regarding the identification of anti-Semitism in the public sphere is Neuhaus and Novak's aforementioned enthusiastic support for *The Passion of the Christ*. Given the limited scope of this article, I will not delve here into their entire worldview on anti-Semitism and its definitions. Instead, I will focus on their understanding of the interrelationships between the Holocaust and Christian theology concerning Jews, the Holocaust's impact on NA, and the current dialogue with Jews in America.

Neo-conservative Catholics generally opposed two prevalent claims regarding the Catholic Church and the Holocaust. The first asserts that the roots of modern anti-Semitism are embedded in pre-conciliar Catholic theology. American theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether is particularly well-known for advocating this position. She identified a direct link between ancient Christian theology and the Holocaust, arguing that Christian Jew-hatred is not a later interpretation but is inherent in the scriptures themselves and directly connected to the development of modern anti-Semitism (Ruether 1996). Liberal Catholic thinkers such as John Pawlikowski and Eugene Fisher challenged this thesis, emphasizing anti-Judaism's existence prior to the advent of Christianity and interpreting instances of harsh anti-Jewish language in some of the scriptures as being, in fact, internal Jewish community disputes (Feldman 2001).

The second claim is that the Catholic Church, and especially Pope Pius XII, did not do enough to prevent the destruction of European Jewry. In this context, the studies of Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners* (Goldhagen 1997) and *A Moral Reckoning* (Goldhagen 2003), are prominent. There, he examines the role of ordinary Germans in the extermination machine and argues that the Catholic Church in Germany contributed practically to this extermination.

NA, as is well known, did not mention the Holocaust. However, in 1998, the CRRJ issued the statement *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*. The authors of the document sought to deal directly with the question of the “relation between the Nazi persecution and the attitudes down the centuries of Christians towards the Jews”. They admitted, following John Paul II, that the “balance” of relations between Jews and Christians “over two thousand years has been negative”. Acts of pogrom and massacre of Jews are attributed to “certain interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people as a whole” that “have been totally and definitively rejected by the Second Vatican Council”. The let-

ter condemns the actions of many Christians who held these interpretations. However, as far as the question of Nazi doctrine being influenced by Christian theology is concerned, the authors of the letter emphasize that there was no such connection. They define the theology of the Nazis as “neo-pagan” and argue that the anti-Semitic ideology of the Nazi regime “had its roots outside of Christianity and, in pursuing its aims, it did not hesitate to oppose the Church and persecute her members also” ([Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews \(CRRJ\) 1998](#)).

Neo-conservative Catholics adhered unswervingly to this position, vehemently opposing any suggestion of the Church’s theological contribution to anti-Semitism or historical role in the Holocaust. Goldhagen’s studies on the Church’s actions during the Holocaust were met with scathing criticism in the pages of *First Things*. Neuhaus contended that Goldhagen’s claims were “anti-Catholic” and that his stance “denies rational access to the Holocaust”, thereby divorcing the Holocaust from its historical reality. According to Neuhaus, this position inadvertently made Goldhagen an ally of “Holocaust revisionists and deniers”, regardless of his original intentions ([Neuhaus 2003, 1996a](#)). In the May 1998 issue of *First Things*, the document *We Remember* was published in its entirety. While acknowledging that the document was not above criticism, Neuhaus objected to the “self-righteous carping” found in the *New York Times* and the critiques from “some other, mainly Jewish, critics” ([Neuhaus 1998](#)). This stance is reminiscent of his criticism of the secular-liberal approach common among American Jews. As will be demonstrated shortly, there was a strong correlation between his criticism of secularization and the ongoing debate surrounding the Holocaust.

The impact of the Holocaust on the Council was a sensitive issue, in part because it directly related to the question of continuity between the Council’s instructions and the Catholic tradition of the past. Acknowledging that the horrors of the Holocaust had led to a theological change could be interpreted as admitting that external events can influence teachings of divine origin. However, Neuhaus’s position on this issue was more nuanced than his resolute defense of the Church’s own behavior during the Holocaust period. In 2001, he recognized the positive impact of the Holocaust on the development of Jewish–Christian relations, conceding that the thriving and ongoing dialogue between Jews and Catholics, particularly in America, is a “new thing” in world history. He stated that “neither Christians nor Jews would have seen this new thing or have acted upon it were it not for the unspeakable tragedy of the Holocaust” ([Neuhaus 2001](#)). Conversely, a few years later, he wrote that the updating of the attitude towards Jews in the Second Vatican Council “is hardly a public relations fix under the pressure of post-Holocaust guilt. It is, rather, a profound reflection on how, as the Church more deeply explores her nature, she discovers the inextricable link with the people of Israel”, clearly alluding to the wording of the NA declaration itself ([Neuhaus 2007](#)).

It seems that, from his perspective, a distinction should be made between the external historical influences exerted by the shock of the Holocaust on the motivations of the Council participants and its substantial impact on the theological contents themselves. Such a division is highly consistent with his general ambivalence regarding Vatican II. As previously discussed, he criticized the Council fathers for their error in formulating the Council documents in too equivocal a manner while still recognizing the authority of the Council itself due to the Holy Spirit that presided over it. Regarding the Holocaust, it seems that he was willing to admit a human influence as driving positive organizational and personal processes in the Church, yet rebuffed the claim that the same might have had an internal influence on the development of theology itself.

The discussions about pre-conciliar Christian theology concerning Jews and the actions of the Catholic Church during the Holocaust, respectively, may seem like two separate ones. However, for Neuhaus and other neo-conservative Catholics, these two topics were inherently entwined. To argue that no significant theological change in relation to Jews occurred at Vatican II, one must demonstrate that such a change was unnecessary. This involves asserting that the Christian attitude toward Jews was positive from the outset

and that both ancient and modern anti-Semitism stemmed from erroneous interpretations of Christian doctrine, rather than from the doctrine itself. In other words, maintaining the position that Vatican II did not introduce a major shift in theological thinking about Jews requires portraying the Church's historical stance as consistently positive throughout the generations.

Neuhaus's positions were directly connected to his attitude towards contemporary Jewish Holocaust consciousness in America. He criticized the centrality of Holocaust memory in the prevailing self-perception of the American Jewish community and blamed it for their mistaken assumption of a correlation between an increased presence of Christianity in the public sphere and a state of insecurity for Jews. The centrality of Holocaust memory in Jewish identity had, he opined, caused Jews to be overly sensitive about their place in society and to needlessly experience a deep anxiety.

To illustrate this point, Neuhaus described his participation in a prestigious gala evening held in New York in honor of the chairman of an important Jewish organization. In stark contrast to the event's prestige and festive atmosphere, video clips were interspersed throughout showing "walking skeletons" from Auschwitz and Dachau. Neuhaus experienced an intense feeling of surrealism stemming from the disparity between the secure and established state of American Jewry and the sense of being "on the precipice of the abyss, of Auschwitz happening again" (Neuhaus 2002a).

Neuhaus argued that for many American Jews, the *de facto* religion is "remembering the Holocaust". However, he believed it was difficult to reconcile the Jewish desire to be an integral part of American society with the constant feeling that "they" who can "do it again" are lurking. Moreover, he contended that this American Jewish anxiety, combined with the secular liberalism of most American Jews, led them to oppose a greater presence of religion in the public sphere out of concern for their personal well-being (since public religion was seen as synonymous with the erosion of personal freedoms).

Neuhaus believed that this principled opposition to the strengthening of Christianity only served to bolster anti-Semitism in America. This is because, in his opinion, a sizeable segment of the American population actually desires America to become more Christian, and since Jewish influence tends to far exceed the proportion of Jews in the population, sometimes quite prominently so, it is perceived as an attempt by a small minority to forcefully influence the majority—hence arousing singular antagonism. Such feelings, which he considered legitimate in themselves, could quickly deteriorate into dangerous anti-Semitic accusations against Jews, propelling them to adopt an even more liberal approach. Neuhaus warned of a vicious circle being created here: Jewish liberalism arouses anti-Semitism, which in turn pushes the Jews to latch on to an even more liberal position in the belief that this will protect them from further anti-Semitism, and so on. This pattern is fueled by the Jews' assumption that their personal security as a religious minority in America depends on the country being secular and pluralistic.

In other words, Neuhaus held that Jews should acknowledge the fundamental difference between modern anti-Semitism and traditional Catholic theology, even prior to Vatican II. In his view, Jews need to recognize this distinction and consequently reduce their anxiety about America becoming more Christian since this anxiety leads Jews to prefer secularization in the public sphere as a means to ensure their personal security. Neuhaus maintained that the claim that Catholic theology regarding Jews was positive from ancient times is directly related to the interpretation of Vatican II and the future state of Jewish–Christian dialogue in America. In other words, he asserted that a proper understanding of the Church's historical stance towards Jews is crucial for fostering positive interfaith relations and reducing Jewish apprehension about the role of Christianity in American society.

8. Conclusions

The neo-conservative Catholics' approach to Jewish–Christian relations reveals a complex interplay between their commitment to the transformative spirit of NA and their conservative interpretation of its theological implications. While embracing the conciliatory

rhetoric of the Council and engaging in ongoing dialogue with Jews, they maintain a principled stance on key issues such as fulfillment, salvation, and mission that often aligns with pre-conciliar perspectives. This tension reflects their broader goal of promoting the influence of religion, particularly Catholicism, in the American public sphere.

The neo-conservative Catholics' insistence on the continuity of Catholic theology from ancient times, through Vatican II, to the present day in terms of its approach to Jews, regardless of the Council's significant shifts in tone and emphasis, leads them to attribute the perceived negative influence of Catholic theology on the Holocaust, along with Jewish security concerns in America, to erroneous interpretations rather than inherent flaws in Church teachings. The neo-conservative Catholics' narrowing approach to the Council's documents on Jews within the dialogue, exemplified by their views on Christianity's "fulfillment" of Judaism, the impossibility of salvation outside the Church, and the value of Jewish conversion, often strains interfaith relations.

These theological positions directly impact neo-conservative Catholics' engagement with Jews on contentious issues, as demonstrated in their reactions to Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, the Mortara case, and the secularity of the majority of American Jewry. In these instances, they prioritize the public expression of Christian authenticity and the promotion of religion in society, even at the cost of alienating Jewish dialogue partners. This manifests in a tension between their conciliatory rhetoric and a theological conservatism that can undermine trust and goodwill.

Ultimately, the neo-conservative Catholics' approach to Jewish-Christian relations highlights the ongoing challenges of post-Vatican II interfaith dialogue. While their commitment to engaging with Jews is commendable, their struggle to fully embrace the Council's transformative vision and their willingness to subordinate interfaith sensitivities to broader religious and political goals reveal the complexities of forging genuine understanding and cooperation between faith communities. As both Catholics and Jews continue to navigate the uncharted waters of the post-conciliar era, the neo-conservative Catholic perspective serves as a reminder that the path to reconciliation is seldom straightforward, requiring a delicate balance between preserving tradition and adapting to the demands of the present.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: The author expresses sincere gratitude to his advisors and teachers, Karma Ben-Johanan, Eli Lederhendler, and Yonatan Moss, for their invaluable guidance and support throughout the research and writing process. Special thanks to Guy Alaluf, Noam Oren and Maayane Soumagnac for their encouragement and insightful input. The author also acknowledges the support provided by the Jack, Joseph and Morton Mandel School for Advanced Studies in the Humanities through the Rotenstreich Fellowship, the Center for the Study of Christianity at the Hebrew University, and the Center for the Study of the United States (CSUS) in Partnership with the Fulbright Program at Tel-Aviv University.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ The percentage of Americans who stated that religion was "very important" to them plummeted from 75 percent in 1952 to 70 percent in 1965 and down again to 52 percent in 1978, and the percentage of those who believed that religion could solve the "problems of the time" declined from 81 percent in 1957 to 62 percent in 1974. The weekly attendance rate at churches dropped from 49 percent in 1958 to 42 percent in 1969. Among twenty-somethings, the change was twice as intense compared to the older age groups (Putnam and Campbell 2012).
- ² In the thirty years following the council, ordinations for the priesthood declined by about 50 percent. Only 60 percent of clergy members who left the priesthood due to retirement, aging, or death were replaced with new ones. In 1967, 22 percent of nuns were under the age of thirty, compared to only one percent thirty years later. The percentage of nuns over the age of sixty also changed during that period from 20 percent to over 51 percent (Allitt 2003; Cuneo 1999).

- ³ Natural law theories are very central in neo-conservative Catholic thought on issues of morality, law, and jurisprudence. They also have significant implications for the relations of this group with members of other religions, which I will not be able to review in this article. For writing on this, see for example [García \(2017\)](#), [Heilbrunn \(1996\)](#), and [Levering \(2010\)](#).
- ⁴ Reno converted from Anglican Christianity to Catholicism after marrying a Jewish woman who became more and more religious. He was interviewed several times on this subject and presented his marriage as a model for Jewish–Catholic relations at the family level ([Oppenheimer 2017](#)).

References

- Allitt, Patrick. 2003. *Religion in America since 1945: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Appleby, R. Scott. 1995. The Triumph of Americanism: Common Ground for US Catholics in the Twentieth Century. In *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*. Edited by Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 37–62.
- Azar, Michael G. 2016. Origen, Scripture, and the Imprecision of Supersessionism. *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 10: 157–72. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Ben-Johanan, Karma. 2022. *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Berger, David. 2004. Jews, Christians, and The Passion. *Commentary Magazine*, May. Available online: <https://www.commentary.org/articles/david-berger/jews-christians-and-the-passion/> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Borghesi, Massimo. 2021. *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press.
- Boyagoda, Randy. 2015. *Richard John Neuhaus: A Life in the Public Square*. New York: Image.
- Cessario, Romanus. 2018. Non Possumus. *First Things*, February.
- Chaput, Charles J. 2018. The Mortara Affair, Redux. *Jewish Review of Books*, January 29. Available online: <https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/articles/2979/mortara-affair-redux/> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ). 1974. Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate (n. 4). Available online: <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crre/documenti-della-commissione/en3.html> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ). 1998. We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah. Available online: <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crre/documenti-della-commissione/en1.html> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). 2000. *Dominus Iesus*. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Corley, Kathleen E., and Robert L. Webb. 2006. *Jesus and Mel Gibson's the Passion of the Christ: The Film, the Gospels, and the Claims of History*. London and New York: Continuum Books.
- Cuneo, Michael W. 1999. *The Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism*. Baltimore: JHU Press.
- Cunningham, Philip A. 2017. Gifts and Calling: Coming to Terms with Jews as Covenantal Partners. *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 12: 1–18. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- D'Costa, Gavin. 2012. What Does the Catholic Church Teach about Mission to the Jewish People? *Theological Studies* 73: 590–613. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- D'Costa, Gavin. 2014. *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dabru Emet. 2000. A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity. *First Things*, November.
- Destivelle, Hyacinthe. 2023. Review of Chapter 3, 'John Paul II and Christian-Jewish Reconciliation'. Karma Ben-Johanan's *Jacob's Younger Brother: Christian-Jewish Relations after Vatican II*. *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations* 18: 1–5. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Donaldson, Terence L. 2016. Supersessionism and Early Christian Self-Definition. *Journal of the Jesus Movement in Its Jewish Setting* 3: 1–32.
- Dorrien, Gary J. 1993. *The Neoconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Ericksen, Robert P. 2016. Jews and «God the Father» after Auschwitz: American Responses to Nostra Aetate. *Kirchliche Zeitgeschichte* 29: 323–36. [\[CrossRef\]](#)
- Feldman, Egal. 2001. *Catholics and Jews in Twentieth-Century America*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Fredriksen, Paula. 2004. Responsibility for Gibson's Passion of Christ. *Responsive Community* 14: 59–63.
- Fuller, Adam L. 2012. *Taking the Fight to the Enemy: Neoconservatism and the Age of Ideology*. Lexington Books.
- García, Alexander González. 2017. Natural Law and Human Rights: Catholic Proposal towards a Common Base of Interreligious Dialogue. *Advocatus* 29: 147–56.
- Gaston, K. Healan. 2019. *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gerson, Mark. 1996. *The Neoconservative Vision: From the Cold War to the Culture Wars*. Lanham: Madison Books.
- Goldhagen, Daniel Jonah. 1997. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Vintage Books.

- Goldhagen, Daniel Jonah. 2003. *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and Its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Halper, Stefan, and Jonathan Clarke. 2004. *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heilbrunn, Jacob. 1996. Neocon v. Thecon. *New Republic* 215: 20–24.
- Heilbrunn, Jacob. 2009. *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Isaac, Jules. 1964. *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Kertzer, David I. 1998. *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Klenicki, Leon, and Richard John Neuhaus. 1989. *Believing Today: Jew and Christian in Conversation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Kristol, Irving. 2011. *The Neoconservative Persuasion: Selected Essays, 1942–2009*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lamb, Matthew L., and Matthew Levering. 2017. *The Reception of Vatican II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levenson, Jon D. 2018. Comparing (and Contrasting) Catholic and Jewish Reactions to the Modern Liberal Order. *Mosaic*, March 12. Available online: <https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/history-ideas/2018/03/comparing-and-contrasting-catholic-and-jewish-reactions-to-the-modern-liberal-order/> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Levering, Matthew. 2010. *Jewish-Christian Dialogue and the Life of Wisdom: Engagements with the Theology of David Novak*. London and New York: Continuum.
- Levine, Amy-Jill. 2022. Supersessionism: Admit and Address Rather than Debate or Deny. *Religions* 13: 155. [CrossRef]
- Linker, Damon. 2006. *The Theocons: Secular America under Siege*. New York: Doubleday.
- Madigan, Kevin J. 2018. We Cannot Accept This. *Commonweal Magazine*, January 25. Available online: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/we-cannot-accept> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Marienberg, Evyatar. 2008. The Papacy and the Jews in the Age of Modernization and Secularism (האפיפיורות והיהודים בעידן המודרניזציה (ההחילו). In *New Jewish Time: Jewish Culture in a Secular Age—An Encyclopedic View* (זמן יהודי חדש: מבט ---חילוני---מבט: תרבות יהודית בעידן חילוני---מבט: זמן יהודי חדש) 18–20). Jerusalem: Keter. (In Hebrew)
- Marty, Martin E. 1986. A Judeo-Christian Looks at the Judeo-Christian Tradition. *The Christian Century* 103: 858–60.
- Moyaert, Marianne, and Didier Pollefeyt. 2010. Israel and the Church: Fulfillment beyond Supersessionism? In *Never Revoked: Nostra Aetate as Ongoing Challenge for Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, Louvain Theological and Pastoral Monographs. Edited by Marianne Moyaert and Didier Pollefeyt. Louvain: Peeters, pp. 159–83.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 1984. *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 1987a. *The Catholic Moment: The Paradox of the Church in the Postmodern World*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 1991. All You Needed to Know You Didn't Learn in Sunday School. *First Things*, February.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 1993. The Ruling 'We' of the American Jewish Congress. *First Things*, February.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 1995. Anti-Semitism and Our Common Future. *First Things*, June.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 1996a. Daniel Goldhagen's Holocaust. *First Things*, August.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 1996b. While We're at It. *First Things*, March.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 1998. And Now for Something Not Very Different: Real Virtuality. *First Things*, May.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 2000. To Say Jesus Is Lord. *First Things*, November.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 2001. Salvation Is from the Jews. *First Things*, November.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 2002a. Whatever You Do, Don't Mention the Jews. *First Things*, May.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 2003. Sexual and Related Disorders. *First Things*, March.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 2004a. Communion & Communio. *First Things*, August.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 2004b. In the Aftermath of Scandal. *First Things*, February.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 2005. Why the Jews Did or Did Not Reject Jesus. *First Things*, February.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 2007. Christ Killers, Dumbed-Down, Translations, and How, Conservatives Got That Way. *First Things*, February 5.
- Neuhaus, Richard John. 2008. What Really Happened at Vatican II. *First Things*, October.
- Neuhaus, Richard John, ed. 1987b. *Jews in Unsecular America: Essays*. New York: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Neuhaus, Richard John, ed. 2002b. *The Chosen People in an Almost Chosen Nation: Jews and Judaism in America*. Grand Rapids and Cambridge: W.B. Eerdmans.
- Novak, Michael. 1964. *The Open Church*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Novak, Michael. 1982. *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Novak, Michael. 1993. Maritain and the Jews. *First Things*, January.
- Novak, Michael. 1998. The Judeo-Christian Foundation of Human Dignity, Personal Liberty, and the Concept of the Person. *Journal of Markets & Morality*, October.
- Novak, Michael. 2001. Reconsidering Vatican II. *Crisis*, October 20, p. 31.
- Novak, Michael. 2002. *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding*. San Francisco: Encounter Books.
- Novak, Michael. 2003. Mel Gibson's Passion Play. *The Weekly Standard*, August 25.
- Novak, Michael. 2008. The Asymmetrical Relation: Novak and Novak. In *John Paul II and the Jewish People: A Jewish-Christian Dialogue*. Edited by David G. Dalin and Matthew Levering. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, Sheed & Ward.

- Novak, Michael, and Daniel Holman. 2004. Pain, Power, Passion. *American Enterprise Institute—AEI*, February 25. Available online: <https://www.aei.org/articles/pain-power-passion/> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Oppenheimer, Mark. 2017. When a Jew and a Catholic Marry. *America Magazine*, August 24. Available online: <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/08/24/when-jew-and-catholic-marry> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Pawlikowski, John T. 2004. Christian Anti-Semitism: Past History, Present Challenges: Reflections in Light of Mel Gibson's The Passion of the Christ. *Journal of Religion & Film* 8: 4.
- Pawlikowski, John T. 2012. A Catholic Response to Gavin D'costa. *Theological Studies* 73: 629–40. [CrossRef]
- Pink, Aiden. 2021. First Things Justifies Kidnapping Jewish Baby Mortara. *The Forward*. Available online: <https://forward.com/fast-forward/391967/catholic-magazine-justifies-kidnapping-converting-jewish-baby/> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC). 2001. The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible. Available online: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/pcb_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020212_popolo-ebraico_en.html#PREFACE (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Putnam, Robert D., and David E. Campbell. 2012. *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. 2011. *Many Religions, One Covenant: Israel, the Church and the World*. Translated by Henry Taylor. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, Originally published as *Die Vielfalt der Religionen und der eine Bund*. Hagen: Verlag Urfeld, 1998.
- Reno, R. R. 2018. Judaism, Christianity, and First Things. *First Things*, January 12. Available online: <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2018/01/judaism-christianity-and-first-things> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1996. *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers.
- Ruokanen, Miikka. 2016. *The Catholic Doctrine of Non-Christian Religions: According to the Second Vatican Council*. Leiden: Brill.
- Russell, Jesse. 2020. The Catholic Neoconservative Misreading of John Paul II's Centesimus Annus Revisited. *Political Theology* 21: 172–91. [CrossRef]
- Scribner, Todd. 2015. *A Partisan Church: American Catholicism and the Rise of Neo-Conservative Catholics*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Shields, Nathan. 2018. The Church's Once-Notorious Seizure of a Jewish Child Is Back. Why? *Mosaic*, March 5. Available online: <https://mosaicmagazine.com/essay/history-ideas/2018/03/the-churchs-once-notorious-seizure-of-a-jewish-child-is-back-why/> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Silk, Mark. 1984. Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America. *American Quarterly* 36: 65–85. [CrossRef]
- Smith, Robert O. 2019. Disintegrating the Hyphen: The 'Judeo-Christian Tradition' and the Christian Colonization of Judaism. *ReOrient* 5: 73–91. [CrossRef]
- Vaisse, Justin. 2010. *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weigel, George. 1995. The Neo-Conservative Difference: A Proposal for the Renewal of Church and Society. In *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America*. Edited by Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp. 138–62.
- Whitmore, Todd David. 2001. John Paul, II, Michael Novak, and the Differences between Them. *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 21: 215–32. [CrossRef]
- Winters, Michael Sean. 2018. Fr. Cessario's Edgardo Mortara Essay Is Inexcusable. *National Catholic Reporter*, January 19. Available online: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/distinctly-catholic/fr-cessarios-edgardo-mortara-essay-inexcusable> (accessed on 6 May 2024).
- Wolfson, Adam. 2004. Conservatives and Neoconservatives. *Public Interest* 154: 32–48. Available online: https://www.nationalaffairs.com/public_interest/detail/conservatives-and-neoconservatives/ (accessed on 6 May 2024).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.