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Developing Theologies of Encounter: Eva Fleischner, *Fratelli Tutti*, and the Unfolding Legacy of *Nostra Aetate*

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In October 2020, while the world struggled with death, illness, and profound loneliness because of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pope Francis issued his third papal encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, an appeal to the whole human family to build friendships and increase human connections. Pope Francis called for all people of good will to create and sustain cultures of encounter grounded in the dignity of each person and realized through practices of dialogue. Religious leaders interested in advancing Pope Francis’s cooperative vision for our divided world should develop theologies that center dialogue with the whole human family. While doing this sacred thinking, theologians from across traditions must grapple with how their own interreligious encounters and friendships shape their theologies. Eva Fleischner, a trailblazing Roman Catholic theologian and scholar-practitioner of interreligious dialogue and Holocaust studies, remains an indispensable guide for these kinds of theological projects. When considering the interreligious human family, religious difference, and theologies of mission, Fleischner centered interreligious encounters and dialogues as crucial to Christian theological method.¹

¹ In gratitude and friendship, I thank Carol Rittner and John Roth for the invitation to write this essay and for the chance to delve deeply into the work of Eva Fleischner. I also am grateful to Mary Boys for providing me with insights about Fleischner early on in my research. The Women’s Consultation on Constructive Theology at the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA) provided me with the opportunity to present a draft of this chapter at the Society’s annual meeting in June 2022, and arranged for formal responses from Elena Procario-Foley and Ruth Abusch-Magder. To have such generous and insightful feedback from Jewish and Christian colleagues at CTSA greatly improved my thinking. And finally, at ICJS (Institute for Islamic Jewish Christian Studies) the Jewish scholar Benjamin Sax has been a dialogue partner for nearly twenty years, and my scholarship is always the better for his insights and generosity.
As evident in this reprint of her 1975 book, which originated as a Marquette University dissertation, Fleischner anticipated that a positive embrace of religious pluralism required Christians to engage in a radical theological reorientation to religious difference. Just ten years after *Nostra Aetate*, Fleischner argued that religious pluralism is "part of the very stuff of salvation," and that practitioners of other religions are not best engaged as religiously flawed or deficient. Instead she recast her religiously diverse world as having divine value and saw interreligious encounters as opportunities for theological learning and spiritual growth, and even as part of God’s plan for salvation.

Eva Fleischner—along with her Vatican II, post-Holocaust contemporaries—asked tough theological questions of Catholic tradition and developed interreligious friendships along the way. Both the horrors of the Holocaust and her new friendships transformed her orientation to the theological task. As Pope Francis calls theologians to build theologies of encounter that are grounded in relationships of difference, Fleischner’s work and method can provide the theological scaffolding for such projects. Importantly, Fleischner began her theological journey through her interreligious friendships and conversations—her theological method and practice started with interreligious encounter. Fleischner rightly demanded that Catholic theologians going forward should do the same. She wanted Christian theologians, Catholics in particular, to develop interreligious friendships and pursue theological questions in a manner accountable to these interreligious relationships.

For Fleischner, the Christian encounter with religious diversity began with reimagining Christian mission. Fleischner understood the enormity of such a project, especially in the wake of the Holocaust. If the religious diversity of humanity is part of the very stuff of salvation, then, Fleischner dared to ask, what follows from a Christian commitment to seeing Judaism, and other religions, as possessing truth, goodness, and the divine?

*Fratelli Tutti* and a Theological Question for Our Times

*Fratelli Tutti* is the first major papal document to arise from an interreligious friendship and to embrace both *de facto* religious pluralism as the context for Catholic theological reflection, and dialogue as the primary theological response

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2. Fleischner wrote, "Is religious pluralism part of the very stuff of salvation? An affirmative answer . . . does not necessarily negate Christianity’s mission, but it does imply and require a different view of that mission than has been customary. We Christians will still go out to others—not ‘to bring them the truth’ but to share with them something that is precious to us, while we will receive, in turn, something of their wealth. Such an approach maintains the uniqueness of Christianity but not its superiority or absolutist claim to truth" (*Judaism in German Christian Theology Since 1945: Christianity and Israel Considered in Terms of Mission*, 191 [145]).
to our religiously diverse world.3 This encyclical developed out of an interreligious dialogue and growing friendship between Pope Francis and Grand Imam of Al-Azhar Ahmed al-Tayyeb. In 2019, Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmed al-Tayyeb issued a joint statement entitled Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together (hereafter, HF) which “is a document that invites all persons who have faith in God and faith in human fraternity to unite and work together so that it may serve as a guide for future generations to advance a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters.”4 The framework is one of mutuality, respect, dialogue, and cooperation on shared concerns and problems. This dialogical work is not done only in a secularized humanitarian framework, but it is grounded in a shared sense of divine purpose. Human cooperation that promotes love, human flourishing, and care for creation is doing God’s will. Thus interreligious encounters that aim towards reciprocity in both knowledge and cooperation must be encouraged, and Catholics are called to actively seek out such opportunities.

While Fratelli Tutti was born of Christian-Muslim dialogue, Pope Francis does not limit his appeal to these two religious communities. Instead, he calls for universal cooperation among all men and women of good will. As HF states: “In the name of God . . . Al-Azhar al-Sharif and the Muslims of the East and West, together with the Catholic Church and the Catholics of the East and West, declare the adoption of a culture of dialogue as the path; mutual cooperation as the code of conduct; reciprocal understanding as the method and standard.”5 With this renewed focus on human connections and interreligious friendships, Pope Francis invites Catholic scholars and leaders to develop theologies of encounter to support dialogue, cooperation, and reciprocal understanding among all peoples.

Eva Fleischner died on July 6, 2020, just a few months before Pope Francis issued Fratelli Tutti and thus did not get the chance to directly lend her support to Pope Francis’s theological vision and ambition, but Fleischner’s work indicates that she would have responded positively to his call. She anticipated such projects as a continuation of the work of Vatican II and would have seen Fratelli Tutti as an invitation to continue pursuing where her own theological questions might lead the church.

5. HF is a jointly issued statement that aims to “not remain at the level of words . . . I have sought to make this reflection an invitation to dialogue among all people of good will” (Fratelli Tutti §6).
Fleischner is an essential Catholic theologian and scholar-practitioner of interreligious encounter, who grounded her theological questions in an affirmation of de facto religious pluralism as a part of God’s plan for salvation. This theological starting point is not an innovation nor an aberration within Catholic tradition, but rather is the continued unfolding of Nostra Aetate’s theological legacy. In many ways, Fleischner’s 1975 renunciation of dogmatic triumphalism is prophetically aligned with Pope Francis’s 2020 appeal.

Fleischner identified revision of mission as an essential theological project within Catholic and Protestant Christianity to prevent the horrors of the Holocaust from happening again. Importantly, Fleischner began this theological project of examining mission after developing meaningful interreligious friendships with Jews. Her Catholic theology was transformed because of these interreligious encounters. Specifically, Fleischner firmly rejected theologies infused with toxic domination and dogmatic triumphalism towards Jews and all religious others. Fleischner asserted that Christians need to rethink beliefs and practices grounded in dogmatic triumphalism and domination, beginning with mission. Fleischner believed, in particular, that Catholic theological methods needed to shift. Catholic theologians could and should be transformed by their own interreligious encounters. This way of doing theology—in conversation with religious “others”—was new Catholic theological terrain that opened up after Vatican II. Eva Fleischner was a first-generation, Vatican II-inspired, relational, interreligious theologian—and we can learn so much not only from what she wrote but also from how she pursued theological questions.

Interreligious Dialogue and Theological Method

What happens to the theology of Christian and, in particular, Catholic theologians who have close interreligious friendships and value interreligious dialogue as key to their theological method? Specifically, what happens to the beliefs of the Catholic laity who befriend neighbors of different faiths? Nearly sixty years after Vatican II, answers to these questions are emerging. Catholic theologians and religious leaders have been engaging in interreligious dialogue at the highest levels of scholarly expertise and clerical leadership. At the same time, the Catholic laity regularly dialogues with neighbors in the world. With Fratelli Tutti, Pope Francis builds upon this important legacy of Vatican II, prioritizing dialogues that create and sustain cultures of encounter. He does so by revitalizing the four-fold framework
for dialogue put forward by the Vatican in 1991, inviting not only Catholics but all people of good will to engage in this sacred task.6

Pope Francis emphasizes the dialogue of life and the dialogue of action as critical to creating sustainable theologies of encounter. Pope Francis invites all members of the human family to seek out common causes and engage in creative collaborations to solve shared problems. The COVID-19 pandemic reminded the whole human family of our fragility and our interconnectedness. In the wake of this global trauma, those who care about the theological legacy of Nostra Aetate can see the continued urgency of this work to build resilient interreligious friendships. As the pandemic so forcefully reminded us—lives are at stake if we don’t.

Eva Fleischner’s 1970s theological project began in response to the murder of over six million Jews, including members of her extended family.7 While primarily a survey of German Christian theologians, Fleischner centerd her exploration on the question of Christian mission—a question her Jewish interlocutors understood as urgent and essential for Christians to address in light of the horrors of the Holocaust. Fleischner understood that theological anti-Judaism and racial antisemitism had deformed and distorted her own Christian capacity to listen to Jews. In her life and career, she centered a practice of deep listening and developed meaningful friendships with Dudley Weinberg, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Irving Greenberg, Zalman Schachter, and Michael Wyschogrod.8 As a result of these interreligious friendships, Fleischner was able to acknowledge Jews as full human and spiritual

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7. Eva Fleischner’s father grew up in an assimilated Austrian Jewish home and converted to Catholicism. Thus, according to Nazi laws, Eva and her younger brother were considered Jewish enough to be at risk. The threats of Nazi antisemitism prompted Eva’s parents to send their children abroad and to leave Vienna. While I don’t know how Eva Fleischner related to her Jewish extended family or what her own sense of Jewishness may have been, the facts of her biography undoubtedly played some part in her intellectual and theological pursuits. On these points, see Carol Rittner and John K. Roth, eds., The Memory of Goodness: Eva Fleischner and Her Contributions to Holocaust Studies (Greensburg, PA: Seton Hill University, 2022), 4–5, 175–76.

being, as religious others who brought theological gifts Fleischner sought to receive. She listened, and she learned, and she began to ask theological questions of her own tradition, questions that were the result of her interreligious relationships and her present-day concerns immediately after the Holocaust and Vatican II.

Fleischner’s theological method, and her friendships with prominent Jewish religious thinkers, may appear to be primarily *dialogues of theological exchange*. However, these friendships began as *dialogues of action* and *dialogues of life*; they are examples of a post-Holocaust response from both Christians and Jews to develop real interreligious friendships. In reflecting on her intellectual and spiritual journey at Marquette University during the time of her doctoral studies, Fleischner talks about first discovering the history of theological anti-Judaism in class and in texts—reading Martin Luther, the church fathers, and then Jean-François Steiner and Elie Wiesel. “It was at this crucial moment in my journey that, blessedly, I came into contact for the first time with a living Judaism, with Jews—modern American Jews—whose faith deeply informed their lives. . . . No longer could I consider Christians the exclusive witnesses to God in the world.” For Fleischner, the *dialogue of action* was addressing antisemitism in all its forms, and the *dialogue of life* was happening when she joined Jewish friends for Shabbat.

Fleischner recounts a poignant story of relational interreligious theology in practice—grounded in encounter. First, she was deeply moved by Abraham Joshua Heschel’s telling of a conversation he had with Catholic theologian Gustave Weigel on the eve of his death. In his seminal essay “No Religion Is an Island,” Heschel wrote:

Gustave Weigel spent the last evening of his life in my study at the Jewish Theological Seminary. We opened our hearts to one another in prayer and contrition and spoke of our own deficiencies, failures, hopes. At one moment I posed the question: Is it really the will of God that there be no more Judaism in the world? Would it really be the triumph of God if the scrolls of the Torah would no more be taken out of the Ark and the Torah no more read in the Synagogue, our ancient Hebrew prayers in which Jesus himself worshipped no more recited, the Passover Seder no more celebrated in our lives, the law of Moses no more observed in our homes? Would it really be *ad Majorem Dei gloriam* to have a world without Jews?  

Fleischner was so moved by learning of this encounter that she wanted to know Weigel’s reply. More than a decade after Abraham Joshua Heschel’s death, she

reached out to his widow Sylvia Heschel and spent a Sunday afternoon with her. Fleischner tells us about that afternoon conversation:

So the two of us sat there wondering and talking, and soon we were joined by the Heschel’s daughter, Susannah, and a friend, who were visiting that Sunday. We read the whole passage aloud, slowly. And suddenly the answer emerged, quite clearly. “We opened our hearts to one another in prayer and contrition and spoke of our deficiencies, failures and hopes.” That was how their discussion began: in prayer and contrition. How could Fr. Weigel’s response to what followed have been anything but a profound affirmation of Judaism as a living religion worthy of continuation? The four of us, as we sat in the Heschels’ living room that sunny Sunday afternoon, felt in agreement, reassured and at peace.11

Having been moved and intrigued by an interreligious dialogue on the page, Fleischner sought out her own interreligious encounter with Sylvia and Susannah Heschel. Fleischner explains: “I know how I would have responded to them [Heschel’s questions]: the survival of Judaism and the Jewish people is ad Majorem Dei gloria, to the greater glory of God! I believe more and more Christians nowadays share this view. Those of us who do must rethink how we understand our Christian faith in relation to Judaism. This necessarily requires our reformulating traditional Christological doctrines. Our efforts to reinterpret the meaning of Christ are in continuity with a process that engaged the early church.”12

As a Catholic scholar-practitioner of interreligious dialogue in the twenty-first century, I agree with both Eva Fleischner’s conclusion and her methods. Rather than viewing religious difference as an obstacle, Fleischner saw it as an opportunity for mutual learning and spiritual growth. Her words were prescient. She saw both the theological and epistemic tension between dialogue and mission, foretelling the battles since Vatican II between Catholic thinkers about these two terms. To what extent mission will be reimagined, including the roles that dialogue and ongoing encounter with difference will have in that process, is an ongoing struggle.

In her 1975 book, Fleischner sketched a possible Catholic future in which Christian mission was truly reshaped: becoming not exclusively a project of proclamation, but rather speaking paired with listening. And importantly, Fleischner asserted that theologies of mission must welcome the fact that Christians themselves can and should be changed through interreligious encounter. For Fleischner, mission

12. Fleischner, “Encountering Anew the Living God—in a Living People, 184. I discussed this episode with Susannah Heschel, who affirmed the encounter between her, her mother, and Eva Fleischner.
must be reimagined through a dialogical lens, and theologies of mission must be accountable not only to Christian tradition but also to interreligious friendships grounded in mutuality and respect.

After listening to her Jewish friends, Fleischner returned to Christian tradition to evaluate the state of mission theology. She made several important claims: she rejected supersessionism and dogmatic triumphalism, and she was suspicious of absolutist claims to truth. Instead, Fleischner reclaimed the theological possibilities of “dogmatic pluralism,” as practiced in the early Christian church, as the bedrock for a new understanding of mission that affirmed the value of religious diversity. She envisioned dogmas and beliefs in conversation; she understood the uncertainty of such a prospect but nevertheless was committed to it. Eva Fleischner was building the scaffolding of a Catholic theology of encounter.

In what follows, I will examine in greater detail a few features of Fleischner’s theological scaffolding. Specifically I will explore (1) her call to reimagine the concept of mission, (2) her rejection of supersessionism and dogmatic triumphalism, and (3) her embrace of dogmatic pluralism. To better understand how important and distinct Fleischner’s views are, I will also contrast her outlook with the arguments of Catholic theologians who disagree with Fleischner.

**Judenmission: The Beginning for Fleischner and the Church**

Thirty years after the end of World War II, and ten years after the Second Vatican Council and *Nostra Aetate*, Jewish-Christian relations emerged as an important field of theological study and practice, with substantive developments across a variety of disciplines. In these potent early days, Fleischner saw on the horizon the

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13. Fleischner begins to develop “the principle of dogmatic pluralism” (*Judaism in German Christian Theology Since 1945*, 183, [135]) when exploring how Christological conversations can occur in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Here, when Fleischner uses the term *dogmatic*, she is not referring to a dictatorial attitude but to church teachings. Her phrase *dogmatic pluralism* calls for theological and epistemic humility, asserting that Catholics should hold that no doctrinal formulation can ever adequately contain the fullness of divine revelation. While Fleischner does not develop this idea further, the possibilities of “dogmatic pluralism” that she identified should be further explored.

14. The fields of church history, theology, and ethics have been profoundly reshaped by the Holocaust and Christian-Jewish relations and through efforts to identify and dismantle anti-Judaism and antisemitism within Christian tradition. For such efforts, see the works of Mary Boys, Ellen Chatty, Phil Cunningham, Alice Eckardt, Roy Eckardt, Eugene Fisher, John Oesterreicher, John Pawlikowski, Carol Rittner, John Roth, Franklin Sherman, and Paul van Buren, among others. These scholars have helped to unpack the contemporary theological implications of such things as the “teaching of contempt,” the “parting of the ways,” and the “Jewishness” of Jesus, Mary, the apostles and early church as well as the “Jewishness” of the New Testament. Importantly, these scholars have done this work in dialogue with Jewish colleagues and friends.
possibilities of repentance, reform, and renewal by the Roman Catholic Church and potentially within Christianity more broadly. Fleischner did not want dialogue and encounter between Christians and Jews to be superficial, merely an “appearance of words and good will” in the wake of the Shoah and the new scholarly insights that followed. In addition to explicitly rejecting the deicide charge—that Jews had killed Jesus—and other teachings of contempt towards the Jewish people, Fleischner saw the importance of rejecting Judenmission as the ultimate goal of Christian-Jewish encounter. She instead embraced dialogue as the preferred relationship. But importantly, Fleischner did not stop with Judenmission; instead, she names the reformation and reformulation of mission more broadly as an important goal of post-Holocaust Catholic theology. And for Fleischner, this immense theological project could not be done by Catholics alone, but rather by Catholics in dialogue with others.

In the shadow of the Holocaust, Fleischner was a trailblazing, relational, interreligious theologian, developing an innovative theological method of encounter: she began her work in prayer and community, prioritizing dialogue and encounter with Jews and Christians alike; she reckoned with the Christian history of anti-Judaism; she clearly renounced proselytization; and she understood the tension between mission and dialogue within Christian theology to be an essential theological project going forward for all Christian theologians. But what did Fleischner mean by dialogue? How has the term dialogue been defined and used by Catholics after Nostra Aetate? How has defining and prioritizing dialogue impacted a Catholic theology of mission? What does prioritizing a dialogical orientation in interreligious encounters require of Catholics according to Eva Fleischner?

First and foremost, dialogue cannot be a newly packaged, subtle form of mission aimed at conversion. Jewish dialogue partners urged Catholics to demonstrate their

15. Fleischner’s rejection of Judenmission entailed revising and deepening what dialogue means and requires. She resisted dialogue as “a new and subtle form of Judenmission.” If Judenmission governs dialogue, she argued, “Christians may open themselves to Jews only in order to assimilate them. In order to save their own faith from destruction, they must destroy another’s faith. . . . Opening oneself to others and coming to know them, welcoming them, will of its very nature lead Christians to relinquish their security. Dialogue asks of them the willingness to let themselves be challenged to the very depths of their certitudes and convictions—to incur the risk of relativizing their own vision of the truth. . . . Substituting the word dialogue for the word mission is no mere change in vocabulary. It is the expression of a radical change in outlook. Dialogue between Christian and Jew, far from being a matter of good will—if it is only that, it betrays the other and oneself; it is an evasion of the truth and hides the issues at stake—is a confrontation which involves a risk. It can take place only if one is willing to renounce all desire of power over others and manipulation of them, including the desire to convert them. It presupposes accepting the Jew as one who is different—more, as one who is the bearer of a truth which is not that of the church, a truth which the church may even stand in need of. Dialogue is based on the premise that the Jew has something to give the church” (Fleischner, Judaism in German Christian Theology Since 1945, 167 [116-17]).
good faith commitment to a new era of Jewish-Christian relations by seriously rethinking a theology of mission. When presented with the opportunity to discuss this issue during Vatican II, Jewish communal representatives were clear: for them, the goal of any Jewish-Christian encounter should not be conversion. Rather, in the wake of the Holocaust, as these leaders argued, the church needed to recognize that Christian mission was, in the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a form of "spiritual fratricide." In its issue of September 11, 1964, *Time* quoted Heschel directly on this matter: "As I have repeatedly stated to leading personalities of the Vatican, I am ready to go to Auschwitz any time, if faced with the alternative of conversion or death." If in the Second Vatican Council the Catholic Church rejected the Holocaust and repented of the teachings of contempt that laid the spiritual groundwork for Jewish murder, Jews like Heschel were clear that Christian mission itself must also be radically reimagined.¹⁶

Fleischner responded to her Jewish dialogue partners by exploring and critiquing Christian theologies of mission within the post-Holocaust German context in order to uproot seeds of genocidal violence. Fleischner identified the dogmatic triumphalism undergirding mission as particularly harmful. For Fleischner, a full commitment to dialogue required participants to relinquish claims to power and dominance, both epistemic and theological, over their dialogue partners. For Fleischner, dialogue was an open encounter that entailed radical risk. Also, in a pre-Vatican II understanding of mission, the Catholic Church taught that engagement with religious others was oriented toward the transformation of the missionized. The movement was one-way—from unbaptized to baptized, from unsaved to saved. The church gave, and the Jews (and others) received. The church proclaimed, and the Jews (and others) listened.¹⁷ This one-way approach created a theological environment where dialogue, as Fleischner understood it, was impossible. As Fleischner argued, dialogue required a recognition that the dialogue partner had something unique to give Christians and Christianity. Not only was Jewish theological insight a unique gift, but such a gift was also not within the ambit of the church prior to the Jewish-Christian encounter.¹⁸ To recognize Jews as bearers of truths and gifts for a church in need


¹⁷. This theological approach to Jewish-Christian encounter is made visible in church architecture—one is reminded of *Synagoga*, an anti-Jewish trope in Christian art which depicts Judaism as a blinded woman, who cannot see the truth of Christianity, in contrast to *Ekklesia*, who is depicted as a resplendent monarch.

¹⁸. "The church rejects nothing true and holy" (*Nostra Aetate* §2): this part of *Nostra Aetate* still gives full epistemic and theological certitude to the church and does not create an opening for the church to learn a truly "new" truth from a religious other which it did not already possess. In Fleischner's redefinition of mission through the lens of dialogue, such epistemic and theological certainty is put down in favor of an openness to learning and growth around theological and religious truths.
required a deep exploration of the church’s readiness to receive theological gifts, whether they come from Judaism or from another religious or spiritual tradition. Receiving such theological gifts will be transformational in unforeseen ways: in fact, it might demand of the recipient a radical change. Fleischner argued that mission should be understood in this theological context, and, as such, required serious rethinking after *Nostra Aetate*.

In 2020, fifty-five years after *Nostra Aetate*, Pope Francis issued *Fratelli Tutti*, calling upon the church and the world to create a new culture of encounter and dialogue centered on fostering friendship, pursuing justice, and caring for creation. Forty-five years after Fleischner wrote to make epistemic and theological room for the term *dialogue* within Catholicism, and Christianity more broadly, Pope Francis assumed that his 2020 audience affirms the import of dialogue, as well as has some familiarity with the expansive and varied practices captured within the term.19

But is Pope Francis’s assumption warranted? Do Catholics and other Christians understand, embrace, and affirm a culture of encounter and dialogue? Despite all of the good work done by church leadership and professional theologians since *Nostra Aetate* to highlight the value of dialogue, the record of Christian acceptance of dialogue—as Pope Francis understands it—is mixed at best.

This ambiguous reception is why Eva Fleischner’s work is so important. A deep engagement with her life and thought can help Catholics better answer Pope Francis’s call to dialogue. Central to Fleischner’s project is her commitment to seeing the dynamic relationship between Christian-Jewish dialogue and Christian dialogue with other religions. Fleischner prioritized the Catholic-Jewish relationship, but she did not understand it as a *sui generis* (one-of-a-kind and unique) form of Catholic-interreligious dialogue and encounter. Rather, she saw the Christian-Jewish relationship as a fruitful space where a new form of Catholic self-understanding, one that is post-supersessionist, might be possible and is the necessary first step. Fleischner believed such a project had global implications: with prayerful repentance, humility, and openness to interreligious encounter, Fleischner believed a renewed Catholicism free of the sinful framework of Christian supremacy was possible.

Fleischner did not minimize the place of Christian truth claims within interreligious dialogue, nor did she deny the import of specifically Christological truth claims to the Jewish-Christian encounter. Rather, Fleischner made a subtler

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19. Pope Francis wrote: “Approaching, speaking, listening, looking at, coming to know and understand one another, and to find common ground: all these things are summed up in the one word ‘dialogue.’ If we want to encounter and help one another, we have to dialogue. There is no need for me to stress the benefits of dialogue. I have only to think of what our world would be like without the patient dialogue of the many generous persons who keep families and communities together. Unlike disagreement and conflict, persistent and courageous dialogue does not make headlines, but quietly helps the world to live much better than we imagine” (*Fratelli Tutti* §198).
move. Namely, Fleischner balanced epistemic and theological truth claims with relational, human encounters—making space for her own sincere commitments as well as the commitments of her interreligious partners. This relational approach to theology makes her an indispensable thinker to explore when considering Pope Francis’s invitation to create hearts open to the whole world.20

Divergent Paths: Developments and Setbacks in Theologies of Encounter

Fleischner celebrated interreligious dialogue as a valid, rich, and necessary resource for Catholic theological reflection, which required rethinking the Christian conception of mission. She explained that Jewish-Christian dialogue is the vitally important first step for Christians into this project, but she recognized that the scope of the work was far larger. Fleischner argued that there was a deep connection between Jewish-Christian relations and other interreligious dialogues that involve Christians. For Fleischner, Jewish-Christian dialogue was the necessary first step for Christians into interreligious engagement—not only because of Christianity’s origins within Judaism but also because of the Holocaust.

Fleischner’s early insights on mission and interreligious dialogue did not garner much support within the church.21 To this day, deep disagreements remain among Catholic thinkers and leaders on the theological value of interreligious dialogue, the status of ongoing mission, and the uniqueness of the Jewish-Christian encounter. The Catholic Church is not monolithic, thus exploring intra-Catholic difference about mission and interreligious dialogue provides insight about the church’s ongoing journey and illuminates how Fleischner fits within a broader post-Vatican II Catholic context.

20. “If the conviction that all human beings are brothers and sisters is not to remain an abstract idea but to find concrete embodiment, then numerous related issues emerge, forcing us to see things in a new light and to develop new responses.” (Fratelli Tutti §128).

21. This is not to say that Fleischner’s thinking was actively rejected by the church or her fellow Catholic theologians. Rather, I think the lack of attention to her work highlights that at the time Fleischner was a newly-minted PhD, just starting her academic career and not well known, and she did not seek notoriety. Additionally, while in her Marquette University dissertation Fleischner sketched out provocative theological questions that emerged from her historical survey of German theology, she did not follow up this sketch with a systematic theology, nor did she become a bellicose champion for revising theologies of mission. Rather, I’ve learned from friends and colleagues, that she was a more affable, compassionate force advocating for change where she could. She remained affiliated with the Grail, an international ecumenical women’s movement with Catholic roots; she focused on teaching at Montclair State; and she pursued relational interreligious theology projects in Holocaust studies, such as the historic 1974 international symposium on the Holocaust held at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. Her leadership in that symposium led to her editing *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era? Reflections on the Holocaust* (New York: Ktav, 1977). Containing key presentations from the symposium, this volume remains significant in the field of Holocaust studies, including post-Holocaust relations between Jews and Christians. Highlighting Fleischner’s prescient theological insights—as this present volume does—attempts to familiarize more people with her wisdom and her work.
As I turn to the status of significant Catholic statements and teaching authorities, a prefatory note about factors to keep in mind will be helpful. The Catholic Church is a dynamic institution with many different levels of influence and participation. Particularly when exploring contested topics—like change in theologies of mission—different Catholics may advocate different positions, and with different levels of authority and influence behind them. Teachings of church councils, papal encyclicals, papal comments/utterances, national conferences of bishops, individual bishops and individual theologians all have important roles to play in the Catholic Church, but each speaks with different levels of teaching authority.

Early 2000s: Reflections on Covenant and Mission

In August 2002, Reflections on Covenant and Mission was jointly published by the Bishops Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the National Council of Synagogues.22 In this statement, some of America’s leading Catholic bishops embraced the radical shift to Catholic “positive regard for post-biblical/rabbinic Judaism” after Vatican II.23 The bishops aligned their affirmation of Judaism by further developing a comment that had been made by Pope John Paul II, namely, that the Jewish people participate in a divine covenant that was never revoked by God.24

Responding to a request from their Jewish friends to reject the Catholic mission to convert Jews, the bishops needed to reconsider this mission not only in terms of policy and practice but also in regard to covenantal theology. Catholic thinkers increasingly understood rabbinic Judaism as a theologically worthwhile movement, not only because of the fact that Jesus, Mary, Paul, and the Apostles were all Jews.25

22. Leading these groundbreaking efforts was Rabbi Joel Zaiman and Archbishop William H. Keeler—both based in Baltimore, Maryland. Rabbi Zaiman was a founder of the Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies (ICJS), served as the Jewish scholar on the staff of ICJS, and remained a supporter and trustee of ICJS until his death in 2019. I am fortunate to count Rabbi Zaiman as a mentor, particularly as I took on increased leadership at ICJS. Archbishop Keeler was also a friend of ICJS, although I did not know him personally.

23. Consultation of the National Council of Synagogues and delegates of the USCCB Bishops Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, Reflections on Covenant and Mission (August 12, 2002).

24. See John Paul II’s Address to the Representatives of the Jewish Community in Mainz, West Germany, November 17, 1980.

25. Nostra Aetate §4: “The church keeps ever in mind the words of the apostle [Paul] about his kinsmen: ‘theirs is the sonship and the glory and the covenants and the law and the worship and the promises: theirs are the fathers and from them is the Christ according to the flesh’ (Rom. 9:4–5), the Son of the Virgin Mary. She also recalls that the apostles, the church’s main-stay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ’s gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.” Acknowledging and embracing Jesus’s Jewishness and the Jewishness of the early church have been a large part of the scholarly focus for Jewish-Christian relations since Vatican II.
Inspired by *Nostra Aetate* and Pope John Paul II, some Catholic theologians went further and began to assert that Jews continue to participate today in an ongoing covenant with God.

In light of these theological developments, the USCCB began to reevaluate the current Christian mission to Jews. In 2002, it asserted that the "evangelizing task no longer includes the wish to absorb the Jewish faith into Christianity and so end the distinctive witness of Jews to God in human history."26 That the American Catholic bishops had turned away from an institutional mission to the Jews (Judenmission in Fleischner’s terms) made headlines across the country and around the world.27 No longer would there be a formal effort seeking conversion via baptism for the Jewish community. Encounters with the Jewish community would now require a different ultimate goal.

But what was (and is) that goal? What happens to Catholic theology when Judenmission is no longer the aim of Jewish-Christian encounter? Fleischner’s answer was dialogue—and with ongoing dialogue, the possibility of receiving theological gifts from Jewish interlocutors. The American bishops did not offer such a clear answer. Rather, they asserted a both/and compromise—asserting that Jews “already dwell in a saving covenant with God” alongside the claim “the Catholic church must always evangelize and will always witness.” Nor did they discuss what Fleischner termed *Heidenmission*, how Catholics should engage with other religious communities.28 Fleischner, though, already offered a response: Catholic theology needed to rethink the category of mission in its entirety—addressing Judenmission and Heidenmission as interconnected theological issues.


Much was written in the popular press about *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* and the Catholic bishops’ pivot away from seeking conversion for Jews. Unsurprisingly, the responses included pushback from other Catholic leaders around this very point. Cardinal Avery Dulles, for instance, argued that *Reflections on Covenant and Mission* was incorrect. In *America* magazine, he offered a three-point rebuttal. First, he challenged the standing of the USCCB’s Bishops Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs to make such a bold theological statement revising centuries of church teaching, arguing that this small American subcommittee lacked the authority to issue new church teaching. Second, Dulles made a scriptural argument. Grounding his interpretation in pre-Vatican II hermeneutics, he offered a reading of New Testament texts in support of continued mission to the Jews. His reading, however, ignored the rich scholarly resources on the New Testament developed by scholars of Jewish-Christian relations. Finally, Dulles appealed to papal authority, presenting his understanding of papal statements to assert that full mission to Jews, and to the whole world, remained intact and urgent for the Catholic Church.

While disagreements about the Catholic Church’s institutional mission to the Jews drove this 2002 debate, the potential for more expansive implications around the Catholic Church’s mission to convert the entire world (Heidenmission, in Fleischner’s scholarship) seems to loom over the entire affair. While the American bishops were silent on the matter, Dulles voiced the broader implications—changing church teaching on mission to the Jews invites a further conversation on changes to mission more broadly.

Where Dulles rejects both theological innovations around mission (affirming the continuance of both Judenmission and Heidenmission), the American bishops’ silence on Heidenmission suggests a compromise position (reject Judenmission but affirm Heidenmission) on the grounds of the “unique” relationship between Christianity and Judaism. Interestingly, Fleischner and Dulles agree on one point. Both believe that Catholic teaching on mission must be holistic in its scope, so that positions taken about Christian-Jewish encounter affect the positions taken regarding other Christian interreligious encounters. But the difference between Fleischner and Dulles is as decisive as it is obvious. Whereas Fleischner urged Catholics to rethink mission entirely, Dulles wanted to maintain older Christian traditions about mission, including those that made it imperative for the Catholic Church to missionize Jews.

After the debates of 2002, what has happened to the question of Judenmission (mission to the Jews) and Heidenmission (mission to the world)? Several scholars

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and leaders in the Catholic Church have emphasized that the Christian-Jewish relationship as *sui generis*, one-of-a-kind and unique, with the implication that Catholic theological shifts made in response to Christian-Jewish relations do not necessarily impact other Catholic interreligious encounters. This fence-building has made it possible for Catholic practitioners of Christian-Jewish relations to be bolder in imagining what is possible within the Catholic-Jewish relationship, while at the same time more cautious about arguing for the broader theological implications that innovations in Catholic-Jewish relations invite. This position gained greater ground from the Vatican in 2015. The problem, however, is that privileging Christian-Jewish relationships produces timidity in probing this outlook’s implications for Christian relations with other religious traditions.

2015: The Gifts and the Calling

In 2015, the Vatican Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews issued: “The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50th Anniversary of “Nostra aetate” (No. 4) (hereafter *Gifts and Calling*). Coming from the Vatican, and on the milestone fiftieth anniversary for *Nostra Aetate*, this document was much anticipated and celebrated by those committed to Jewish-Christian relations. Church leaders, however, were careful to temper the weight of its arrival by limiting the document’s scope and standing.\(^{30}\) For the purpose of charting how Fleischner’s ambitious call to theologically rethink mission holistically has fared since 1975, two aspects *Gifts and Calling* should be underscored. First, the document affirmed that the Catholic Church has ceased an institutional mission to the Jewish community. Second, it asserted that the Jewish-Christian encounter was *sui generis* within Catholic practice and teaching.

These two pronouncements were deeply interrelated. Fifty years after *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church was bold and explicit in its rejection of Judenmission precisely because it had built a theological fence around the Jewish-Catholic relationship. In contrast, years earlier Fleischner held that suspending Judenmission, while very important, was insufficient. For Fleischner, the Catholic Church’s resistance to the theological project of rethinking mission and rejecting dogmatic triumphalism more broadly would indicate that lessons from the Holocaust had not been fully learned.

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30. As the preface to *Gifts and Calling* indicates, “The text is not a magisterial document or doctrinal teaching of the Catholic Church, but is a reflection prepared by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews on current theological questions that have developed since the Second Vatican Council. It is intended to be a starting point for further theological thought with a view to enriching and intensifying the theological dimension of Jewish-Catholic dialogue.”
Ahead of its time, Fleischner's penetrating theological insight in her early book highlighted this point. If Christians cease and desist from missionizing Jews, which definitely should be done, then Christians should also revise not only their posture about missionizing the adherents of other religious traditions but also how they understand their own claims about the truth of Christianity. Her position on these concerns is suggestive more than detailed, but the relevant passages from her *Judaism in German Christian Theology Since 1945* merit quotation at length:

Is it possible to go further? . . . To give greater urgency to this question, is it necessary for the church to go further in an age of religious pluralism? It would seem that this question is posed for Christianity by its encounter with other great religious traditions—not only Judaism, but Islam and Eastern religions also. This experience challenges the view that it is Christianity's mission to convert the world to Christ, draw all people into the church—or to extend the church to all persons—and hasten Christ's return through missionary efforts. Can the world's widespread and growing religious pluralism be interpreted not as a threat and obstacle—or a temporary and undesirable necessity—but as bearing within itself a positive religious meaning? To put the issue more bluntly, can we still affirm that God intends, through the church, to bring everybody to one faith? Do other traditions have their own unique contributions to make to humankind's religious quest? Is religious pluralism part of the very stuff of salvation?

An affirmative answer to these questions does not necessarily negate Christianity's mission, but it does imply and require a different view of that mission than has been customary. We Christians will still go out to others—not "to bring them the truth" but to share with them something that is precious to us, while we will receive, in turn, something of their wealth. Such an approach maintains the uniqueness of Christianity, but not its superiority or absolutist claim to truth. It accepts the fact that no one tradition can hold all of revealed truth or lay claim to be the only and full revelation. For God encompasses and is greater than the whole of humanity's religious quest. "My ways are not your ways, and my thoughts are not your thoughts" (Is. 55:8–9).

The Living God is accessible in different ways and reaches us through different channels. If certain historical events have universal significance, as both Christians and Jews believe, why should not these archetypal experiences be available to all persons, through their own history and traditions of faith?

At this point, let us revisit a fundamental premise in this study: namely, that the church's relationship to Israel is a test, a touchstone, for its wider relationship to the world. The church's dialogue with Israel is important for its own life, because the church shares much with Israel regarding faith and tradition. How should Christians interpret and embody what the church received from and still shares
with Israel? Over the centuries, Christian responses to that question have often ruptured relations between the church and Israel. As this study shows, steps toward reconciliation with Jews have taken place in Christian theology since 1945. Those steps suggest that as we Christians respect Israel’s uniqueness and its differences from the church, as well as Israel’s similarity and relatedness to our tradition, we have to acknowledge and encounter all non-Christians in ways that challenge Christianity’s absolutist claims to truth and its traditional concept of unity through sameness. Instead, the church’s ongoing relationship with Israel suggests the possibility that the depth and richness of humanity are revealed in diversity and difference at least as much as through what is held in common (191–92 [144–46]).

As Fleischner’s analysis emphasizes, ceasing Judenmission is necessary but insufficient to root out the dogmatic triumphalism that she identified as inherently problematic within Christian theology. In fact, making Jews the exception, exempting them from Christian missionizing, proves the rule—Christians continue to cling to theological supremacy. The ultimate aim of Catholic encounters with interreligious others remains conversion. The Catholic Church’s desire to maintain mission-focused encounters—with a Jewish exception—raises the very real possibility that even the current “Jewish exception” to the Christian missionary rule could be rescinded or abandoned, particularly as the horrors of the Holocaust move further into the historical past.

Meanwhile, the sui generis status of Jews within the eyes of the Catholic Church as articulated in Gifts and Calling comes at a tremendous price—namely, (1) the diminishment of Catholics’ viewing Judaism as a unique and independent tradition and (2) the marginalization of Jewish-Christian relations in interreligious dialogue. First, Gifts and Calling declares that the Jewish-Christian encounter is not “properly understood” by Catholics as an inter-religious dialogue but rather as an intra-religious dialogue. This statement is troubling. While Christians and Jews certainly share much religiously that had previously been denied or forgotten by most Christians, Jews and Christians remain distinct and distinctive communities that are religiously different—with different worship, beliefs, and scriptural interpretations.

Fleischner contended that it is precisely in exploring the radical differences between the Jewish and Christian communities, and in seeing that exploration of difference as theologically fruitful, perhaps even salvific, that Christians stretch themselves. This impulse to absorb the Jewish community within the orbit of Christianity is a lingering form of theological supremacy and supersessionism, which remains strong within Catholicism fifty years after Nostra Aetate. It is an extractive impulse of Christians to take from Judaism what Christianity wants, to receive these gifts and truths not from a distinctly different and valid religion but rather as gifts and truths that Christians already owned.
Second, in making the Jewish-Christian dialogue *sui generis,* *Gifts and Calling* diminishes the ramifications of this dialogue and segregates its teachings and learnings from other interreligious conversations. Such isolation is cause for substantive concern. As the Catholic scholar John Pawlikowski asserts:

It is necessary to critique *Gifts and Calling* for an overly exclusive approach to the Christian-Jewish relationship. This has the effect of isolating Christian-Jewish relations from any positive impact on other interreligious dialogues and tends to reduce their impact to the North Atlantic region. A number of prominent Catholic scholars working in the wider interreligious dialogue, such as John Borelli, formerly of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and now at Georgetown University, have expressed discomfort with the effort evident in *Gifts and Calling* to separate the Christian-Jewish dialogue from the remainder of the interreligious scene. The end result of this separation has been to see Judaism frequently omitted from programming on interreligious relations. If such a hard line is maintained by proponents of Catholic-Jewish dialogue, it will lead to further marginalization of the Christian-Jewish dialogue at a time when the church is becoming more and more global. In my view such marginalization will prevent the Christian-Jewish dialogue from playing a constructive role in the wider interreligious dialogue.\(^{31}\)

Pawlikowski recognized that *Gifts and Calling* "does acknowledge the impact of first century Judaism on the teachings of Jesus and the initial Christian communities." But, he demurred, "it does not draw out the full implications of that influence for Christian self-identity today."\(^{32}\) In 1975, Fleischner clearly saw the necessary implications for Christian-identity of a substantive Jewish-Christian dialogue, particularly around the topic of mission. While *Gifts and Calling*’s stated commitment to the Catholic Church’s practice of suspending the institutional mission to the Jewish community is significant, it fails to meet Fleischner’s standards. Nonetheless, to have such a statement come from the Vatican is momentous in the history of Christian-Jewish relations. But once again, this movement towards exploring a new understanding of Judenmission within Catholic theology was met with strong objections.

Specifically, Gavin D’Costa’s 2014 book *Vatican II: Catholic Doctrines on Jews and Muslims* (published on the eve of *Nostra Aetate*’s fiftieth anniversary and prior to *Gifts and Calling*) forcefully argues that there has been dramatic overreach in the theological interpretation of *Nostra Aetate.* According to D’Costa, how Catholics


understand and engage Jews and Muslims did change with the Second Vatican Council, but, in his view, it was a modest shift from understanding them previously as "heretics" to now understanding them as "invincibly ignorant." Importantly for D'Costa, neither Jews nor Muslims can be understood to be saved without Christianity. Hence, active institutional missions to convert all those who are not within the Catholic Church remain intact. Like Cardinal Avery Dulles, Gavin D'Costa responded to important post-Vatican II shifts regarding Jewish-Christian relations, and interreligious dialogue more broadly, by arguing for the continued centrality of mission as the ultimate goal for interreligious encounters.

D'Costa agrees with Eva Fleischner's insight—a reframing of mission to the Jewish community necessitates a reframing of mission overall within Catholic thought. But Fleischner and D'Costa would disagree deeply about whether such a theological project was not only possible but also permissible and desirable. Contrary to D'Costa, Fleischner insisted that reimagining a Christian theology of mission to Jews and mission to others is necessary and imperative. Early on, Eva Fleischner knew and understood how radical a theological change this would be for the Catholic Church and for Christianity worldwide. But especially in the wake of the Holocaust, the sins of Christian supremacy demanded nothing less than bold theological change.

Conclusion

In *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis calls for everyone to build cultures of encounter. For Catholic theologians and practitioners of interreligious dialogue, that call includes developing theologies of encounter that build upon the unfolding legacy of *Nostra Aetate*. Eva Fleischner is a foundational thinker and an indispensable resource for such efforts, not only in her choice of topics but importantly in her theological method.

In 1975, Fleischner correctly identified mission—both Judenmission and Heidenmission—as an intensely contentious arena of Christian theology. She identified and rejected the dogmatic triumphalism inherent within Christian theologies of mission. Instead of theological absolutism, she defended dogmatic pluralism, reclaiming the practices of the early church as a resource for contemporary theological method. Fleischner regarded religious pluralism as "part of the very stuff of salvation." Her broad theological vision of religious pluralism as a space for rich theological possibilities began with the insight that revised Christian theologies of Judaism are a crucial foundation for all Christians who want to better engage religious pluralism. "The church's relationship to the Jewish people," said Fleischner, "is in some

33. Fleischner, *Judaism in German Christian Theology Since 1945*, 191 [145].
way a test, a touchstone, for its relationship to other world religions. Its encounter with Jews and Judaism presents a direct challenge to any absolutist claim to truth."34

To develop theologies of encounter, Christian theologians should incorporate interreligious relationships into their theological method. Regarding her theological method, Fleischner did just this—she practiced theology in relationship. In particular, she found her theological voice through encounters and friendships with Jews. She was a scholar-practitioner of the _dialogue of life_ who made her theology accountable not only to the church but also to her interreligious friendships. Fleischner set her theological agenda in response to the urgent needs of the day—she was a practitioner of the _dialogue of action_, focusing her talents and energies on the ongoing harms of antisemitism in the wake of the Holocaust. As a result, Fleischner was also a practitioner of the _dialogue of theological exchange_. Early in her career, and persistently throughout it, Fleischner issued urgent calls to interrogate Christian theologies of mission and the dogmatic triumphalism that undergirded them. While wrestling with and learning from her theology, it is important to remember Eva Fleischner’s deeply relational theological method. She centered human encounters and cultivated listening as a theological practice.