

Pope John Paul

The papers have been full of the death of the Pope. Tributes from Jews have been flooding in. In Jewish terms, it could be argued he was the best and most pro-Jewish pope ever. He was, after all, the first pope to visit the Western Wall, to recognize the State of Israel, to visit the Synagogue in Rome (in four hundred years), and he was personally responsible for seeing that Jewish children hidden by Catholics during the war were returned to their Jewish parents.

Despite all this, I still consider Pope John 23rd to have been a greater man and leader and feel his loss far more. It was, after all, John 23rd who first insisted, against powerful opposition, on rethinking the attitude of the Church toward the Jews. He achieved the remarkable overthrow of the Church teaching that Jews were still cursed for rejecting Jesus as the Messiah. It's true the voting was pretty close, but it got through only thanks to him. And he was a progressive pope, leading the Church to greater tolerance of others within their own ranks and greater flexibility toward dogma.

It might be argued that he allowed things to go too far towards progress, in particular the trend away from Latin as the language of ceremony. But I admired his progressive agenda. Perhaps it was vicarious pleasure because I have tended to side with the conservatives in my own religious life!

But Pope John Paul rolled the clock back. He got rid of progressive bishops, replaced open-minded Cardinals with narrower, more rigid ones, and turned the Church backward on issues such as the role of women, abortion, contraception and scientific research. I do not for a minute doubt his sincerity, but I find his program unacceptable and, frankly, deplorable, particularly in objecting to contraception in AIDS-torn Africa. And he must share some responsibility for what the Catholic Church did in Rwanda.

John Paul might have helped free Poland, but did little for South America. He was a diplomat and perfectly capable of saying to both parties in a dispute what they wanted to hear (as over Palestine). He was so wedded to non-intervention that he would rather have seen Saddam Hussein continue in power.

Authoritarian leadership inevitably leads to closing gates and covering up. The reaction of the Church to child abuse is an example, and in the process it has all but bankrupted the Church in North America.

The truth is that what the Catholics do is their business. If they want their religion to return to the sort of medieval self-lacerating masochism of Mel Gibson then good luck to them. It's their religion, after all. But I cannot get worked up over religious leaders who are busy playing diplomats any more than I can over those who want to close up the shutters and return to the past.

And I would now be optimistically looking forward to a new regime if it weren't for the fact that most of the Cardinals have been appointed precisely

for their right-wing attitudes. Like any political party, those in power try to ensure their successors will follow in their footsteps. In politics, however, there are usually chances for the masses to have a say. Not in the Catholic Church—any more than in Judaism. But whereas we Jews can happily ignore rabbis we don't like, in Catholicism the pope is undisputed boss. Thank goodness we don't have popes.

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