

**Boston College**  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY CONTINUING EDUCATION  
**ENCORE EVENTS**

**Transcript of**  
**“In Quest of the Jewish Mary”**

**Presented by Mary Christine Athans, B.V.M., on February 25, 2014**

**Sister Margaret Guider, O.F.M.:**

Well, it's my pleasure to introduce you to Sister Mary Christine Athans, a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She's professor emerita at St. Paul Seminary School of Divinity of the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota, and she's currently an adjunct faculty member at Loyola University, Chicago as well the Catholic Theological Union.

She holds a Ph.D. in historical theology from the Graduate Theological Union at Berkeley, an S.T.L. from the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley and an M.A. in theology from the University of San Francisco, an M.A. in history from the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., and a B.S. in humanities from Loyola University, Chicago. So you have a lifelong learner in front of you soon.

From 1970 to 1976, she served as executive director of the North Phoenix Corporate Ministry—the acronym NPCM—a cluster of five Protestant churches, one Catholic church, and two synagogues, one Conservative and one Reform, in Phoenix, Arizona. She coordinated the interfaith activities of 25 priests, ministers, and rabbis, and the laity of the seven congregations as they worked together in education, social justice, liturgy, and communication.

During those years, she wrote her master's thesis in theology, *Two Covenants or One: The Relationship of Judaism to Christianity within the Ecumenical Movement Today*. She did this under Avery Dulles. She was the first minister in residence at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley in the spring quarter of 1975, because the NPCM was considered a model for interfaith organizations in the West. So with us this afternoon we also have an innovator.

After completing her Ph.D. at Berkeley in 1982, she received a three-year appointment at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. In 1984, she accepted a tenure-track position at St. Paul Seminary, now the School of Divinity of the University of St. Thomas, where she served for 18 years, teaching historical theology, church history, and spirituality.

In the fall of 1992, she taught at the Ecumenical Institute at Tantur in Jerusalem. She has lectured extensively, and was one of four scholars on the *A&E Biography* television production *Mary of Nazareth*, discussing the Jewishness of Mary. She has received a variety of honors and awards. In 2002, she was appointed professor emerita and returned to Chicago, as I said earlier, where she teaches at Loyola University. She has been active in the Catholic-Jewish Scholars Dialogue of the Archdiocese of Chicago, the Chicago Board of Rabbis, and the Jewish Federation, where she was chair from 2008 to 2011.

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She is the author of *The Coughlin-Fahey Connection: Father Charles E. Coughlin, Father Dennis Fahey, and Religious Anti-Semitism in the United States, 1938-1954*, *To Work for the Whole People: John Ireland's Seminary in St. Paul*, and *In Quest of the Jewish Mary: The Mother of Jesus in History, Theology and Spirituality*, published by Orbis Books, publishing date 2013, which we will have available to you at the conclusion of the lecture. She has written chapters in books, in *Reclaiming Catholicism: Treasures Old and New* and has edited two books and two journals, and has written numerous articles and reviews in scholarly and popular journals.

So this is the formal introduction of who Christine is, but you are going to be so inspired and so informed and, I think, so edified by what you are about to hear and see. So thank you all for being here. And Christine, it's a pleasure to introduce you. [applause]

### **Sister Mary Christine Athans:**

Well, thank you very much to Meg. I'm sure it was more about me than you ever wanted to know. [laughter] And I often smile when they read out all these degrees, and my response always is, well, what else did you do with nuns in the summer? You sent them to summer school. They certainly wouldn't let us stay home and play, you know. But at any rate, it is a real joy for me to be here. And I would like to thank Mark Massa and also Jim Bernauer and all of those who have cosponsored this event. A special thanks to Melinda Donovan, who made so many of the arrangements. And a joy to see some familiar faces here in the audience. Thank you too, to Meg for your lovely introduction.

As she mentioned to you, I had this extraordinary job in the 1970s, where for six years I was executive director of a group of five Protestant churches, one very large Catholic Jesuit church and two synagogues, one Conservative and one Reform. I had had the opportunity to preach in some Protestant churches and even in the Catholic Church as early as 1968, when I think sometimes you're too young to know what you're doing so you agree to do it.

And then in 1970, I received my invitation to preach my first sermon in a synagogue. Now, I have to admit that I had never even attended a synagogue Shabbat service before. I had gone to like a model Passover Seder. I had been in dialogues with rabbis, priests, and ministers, and things of that nature, but I really hadn't gone to a Friday night Shabbat. And I had at homes—prayer service—but not in a synagogue.

So that night, when I arrived—and it was a hot August night in Phoenix, Arizona—I'm in a yellow sleeveless dress, with a little white Peter Pan collar and my "nun pin," as the students call it. And I come into the synagogue, and here are all the rabbis in their black robes. And I was oblivious to the fact that, in some synagogues, women are expected to cover their arms and wear a veil or a hat when they go to *schul*. And I suddenly thought I might be more at home if I was still in one of my old black habits of a few years before.

And just before I was going to go up with the others to begin the service, this marvelous old rabbi came up and took me by the hand, and he said, "I want you to know that the last time I was in Israel, I went to the synagogue in Capernaum, where Jesus preached. And I want you to know how happy we are to have you with us tonight." And I sort of set out a whole

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sigh of relief, and I marched with the others out onto the *bema*, the area around the ark from which the service is conducted.

And I have to say that that night changed my spirituality forever, because it was the first time, as I listened to the cantor chant in Hebrew and the rabbi read from the Torah scroll, it was the first time that it dawned on me that this is how Jesus and Mary would have prayed, given the adaptations of the centuries. This is how they would have worshipped when they were on this earth. And I knew at that moment that, somehow or other, I would have to sort of get inside of Judaism if I was ever going to understand Christianity, if I was ever going to understand Judaism, certainly, and if I was ever going to understand either Jesus or Mary. And that night clearly had a huge impact, which continues to this day.

Now, in the post-Vatican II period, there was a great deal of conversation about the Jewishness of Jesus. But I have to admit that, as a Sister of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I was also interested in the Jewishness of Mary. And so, in the limited time we have—and I could just keep moving on this indefinitely, but—let me just say that my book is more or less focused on five questions. I'm going to read all of them to you right now, and then we're going to take each of them briefly. And then if there will be further questions, hopefully we'll have time for some questions, and then my book will be available.

So let me just say that the questions that have focused my quest, as it were, for the Jewish Mary are, number one: Why has Mary been portrayed as so un-Jewish over the centuries? Secondly: Why are we searching for the Jewish Mary now, and not maybe years ago or even in the future? Thirdly: Has the search for the Jewish Jesus helped us to find the Jewish Mary? Fourth, and what might seem like a very unlikely question: Can the Pharisees tell us anything about Mary? And lastly: How might Mary have prayed?

Now, most of us, or many of us here do know the story—how our images of Mary have changed so radically over the centuries. Instead of a nice little Jewish . . . I have to tell this one story. One time, when our clergy were having our weekly clergy meeting—and we used to rotate every month to a different venue—and this particular time, we were in the Conservative synagogue. And our topic for discussion was Mary.

And the Protestants and the Catholics were at each other's throats. And the Protestants were saying, "You Catholics just divinize Mary. You make her more important than Jesus. She's almost like a goddess." And the Catholics are saying to the Protestants, "Your problem is, the only time you haul Mary out is on a Christmas card." And finally, one of the rabbis said, "I don't know what you're all upset about. She was a nice little Jewish girl." [laughter] And we all had a good laugh, but seriously it sort of brought us all back to a certain kind of reality.

So we have to admit that, as far as art and architecture—or mostly art but some architecture as well—is concerned, Mary is portrayed in many ways according to the particular period of time in which she lived. And so what I'm going to do now is show you a very quick PowerPoint presentation of Mary in art over the centuries. Now, I would love to go on at great length about this. I'm going to try to restrain myself.

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And so as you know, in the very early years there's . . . George Tavard, a famous scholar, believes that there really is no imagery of Mary, or even of Jesus, up until almost the fourth century. And we know that what we call the Patristic Period, the period of the Fathers of the Church, is often considered to be, well, we'll say the second through the seventh century. And so in that period of time, we begin to have images of Jesus and Mary that are much more typical of a Greek, Byzantine flavor.

This is an image of an icon actually from a church in Mistra near Sparta, Greece, where my father was born. And I think what's so fascinating . . . And first of all, Mary doesn't look like a Jewish girl. She looks like an empress, doesn't she, with all her jewels on and bedecked. And how many of you notice that, in most of the icons you see, Jesus never looks like a baby, does he? He always looks like a little man, a little God-man, almost. And so this is very, kind of foreign, in a sense to what we might want to imagine.

Also, I would just like to mention—and I haven't seen too many other icons like this—how many of you notice that the sages or, if you will, the Fathers of the Church surrounding them almost look Asian, don't they? So we talk about the Eastern Church as the Oriental Church, and it struck me for the first time how interesting that image really is.

This is an undated Greek icon. And again we have Jesus as the little man-God, if you will. And this is the famous Virgin of Vladimir, a Russian icon. And that was how Mary was portrayed in those years, part of it coming out of the fact that, at the Council of Ephesus, she was defined as *Theotokos*, the God-Bearer, the Mother of God, if you will. And so she could hardly be in a peasant garb if she was supposed to be the Mother of God—was the understanding of people in that period.

In the medieval period, we begin to have cathedrals particularly devoted to Mary. So this is the famous Notre Dame in Paris. This is the cathedral in Cologne. This is Milan—the cathedral in Milan. Another thing that was very typical in the Medieval Period was three times a day the bells would ring, the Angelus bells. And whether you were a prince or a peasant, everybody would stop and say the prayer, "The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary, and she conceived of the Holy Spirit."

And so we begin to find imagery of Mary cut in stone. This is on the façade of the cathedral in Autun in France. And poor Jesus looked like His nose is smashed in. But this is supposed to be the flight into Egypt.

This becomes very interesting. This is from Montserrat. In fact this is the famous statue at which St. Ignatius of Loyola is to have set down his sword when he committed himself to Mary after his conversion, and to Jesus.

Now, one of the things you're going to notice here is, from now on, often images of Mary have an apple. And that is supposed to represent her as the New Eve. And next we'll see another. Here's Mary again, from the Cathedral of Cologne. Again, this is a Bavarian Madonna with Child. And so throughout this, she's the queenly figure and yet, at the same time, she's supposed to be the one who, as it were, reversed the Fall.

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In the Renaissance, however, we also have another whole turn, because as you know, they've discovered anatomy. And so figures take on another whole imagery. We don't have the flat two-dimensional icons or the elongated Madonnas of the medieval period. So this is supposed to be *The Visitation* by Pontormo, and these are women of some girth, I would say. But people have bodies when we get to this period. And here's a Rembrandt. This is another Rembrandt, *The Flight into Egypt*, and I think Jesus looks like he's probably hungry on this one. [laughter] So we have this very human dimension of the Renaissance—what we call humanism—don't we?

And again, Raphael, and we have John the Baptist here. And I love this one of Michelangelo, of *St. Anne, Mary, and the Child*. I think of it as grandma, mama and the baby, you know. And Michelangelo was only 26 years old when he carved the *Pieta* out of a hunk of marble, and I just do think that is really extraordinary. If you look at the legs and you look at Jesus's arms, and Mary has a strength in her face, even though obviously sorrow. And again, here we can see the muscles. This was a whole new way to image Mary and Jesus. And then again we have the Raphael *Sistine Madonna*, and those little angels have made it onto many a coffee cup or a T-shirt, as you know. And then we have El Greco's *Madonna*.

And now pre-Vatican II, what happens as we move particularly into the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, even 20<sup>th</sup> century, is we begin to have this emphasis on the superiority of the Nordic people. And so whether it's Wagner or whatever . . . we can't get into all of this now, but we know that this is also a period where anti-Semitism almost takes over and replaces anti-Judaism as a major element in people's thinking. So our Marys no longer are dark haired. We have all these blonde-haired, blue-eyed Marys that start coming into our imagery.

Here's another one, *Star of the Morning*. And this is a poem that many people of my vintage, who went to a Catholic grade school or high school and remember those statues of Mary that would be on pedestals in the classroom, recall. And if any of you remember this—we're not going to say the whole thing, but how many people remember this? "Lovely lady dressed in blue, teach me how to pray. God was just your little boy, tell me what to say." OK? We could go on.

There was even a song, I think, although I don't ever recall the song. So this became part of the culture of people, among Catholics, at that time. *Immaculate Mary*, devotion to the *Mary Immaculate*. This is *Our Lady of the Way*, *Madonna Della Strada*. The chapel at Loyola University, Chicago, which is my alma mater, is named *Madonna Della Strada*. And my theology was, well, if I fell in a ditch, maybe Mary would help me out. But at any rate, that is an icon—actually that's in, I believe in the Jesuit church in Rome.

Devotion to the *Sorrowful Mother* became very popular during World War II, where women were losing sons at war. And this is *Our Lady of Fatima*, which was, you know, we were supposed to pray to Mary that the Russians would be converted away from communism. This was the definition of the *Assumption* in the 1950s.

And now Vatican II and after is very interesting, because if we had these, if you will, more sentimental items before Vatican II. After Vatican II, we begin to have a different image. We begin to have an emphasis on the cosmic Mary—"Queen the Universe"—another cosmic

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Mary. Line drawings: so Mary with Jesus as the Lamb of God, Mary who's supposed to be with the anchor, which symbolizes hope, Mary with the bread of Our Lady of the Eucharist.

And we also begin to move into the more ethnic depictions of Mary. And so here we have, I believe, a Chinese version of Mary and the Child. This is a Native American, Hispanic. And then we also begin to start seeing these wood carvings. And this again, another image of Mary, I think quite amazing, with the child at her breast. So you can see the contrast between the pre-Vatican II and the post-Vatican II depictions of Mary.

OK, so the question then that I started out by asking: Why has Mary been portrayed as so un-Jewish? Part of it is because every culture has tried in some way to describe Mary in terms of how they looked at the world and how they looked at the universe. Now, I also have to throw in a couple or quick comments, which are foundational but which we can't go into in great detail now.

We know that anti-Judaism, which was rampant, if you will, throughout the early Church, the Medieval Period and thereafter, was this hatred of Jews because they did not accept Jesus as the Messiah, because they so-called "killed Christ" and things of that nature. And that became an image in people's minds that, you know, if anti-Judaism was bad, then how could Jesus and Mary be Jewish? Secondly, anti-Semitism, which is more, I believe it to be against Jews for racial reasons and doesn't really blossom or even take on a name until the 1870s. It's really a misnomer, but is to be against Jews more for racial reasons.

Now some Protestant scholars particularly developed what they called the "criterion of dissimilarity." Now, that sounds a little complicated, but let me just put it in terms as simply as we can deal with right now. And that is, they said anything that Jesus had in common with the culture, religion or whatever of his time really didn't count, because it doesn't show his uniqueness. Well, we know from psychologists that that is simply not the case, don't we? I mean we are the persons we are because we grew up with the particular ethnic background we have. I'm half Greek and half Irish, and I appreciate both sides of that.

We also know sometimes it depends. Are we a misunderstood middle child or are we the eldest or are we the youngest or did we go to kindergarten or did we take ballet or, I mean all these little elements in one's life do impact who we are, the culture we grow up with and the religion that we have. And to suggest that those could just be set aside, it just does not make sense. But as late as the 1960s, a famous scholar like Norman Perrin at the University of Chicago was still teaching this as a possible interpretation.

Now, a couple of things happen in the 1940s that I think we should just briefly mention. One is, for those of you who have studied Catholic theology, you know that there was this phenomenon known in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as the Modernism Crisis. And the Modernism Crisis was a period of time in which Catholics who were forbidden, if you will, to use modern biblical methods to interpret Scripture, or modern philosophical methods as well, and so therefore many Catholic Scripture scholars were not even . . . I mean they had to go underground, per se, if they were going to do any of this interpretation.

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Now what happens, as we know, is that in 1943, with "*Divino Afflante Spiritu*," an encyclical of Pope Pius XII, he said that Catholic scholars could indeed use modern historical critical methods for biblical interpretation. So this was like a very liberating experience. In addition to that, not too many years right after that, we have the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. And as you probably know, nice little shepherd boy goes into a cave and throws some rocks in, and hears a bunch of plinks, and goes in and finds these old scrolls and discovers that some of them, one of them, I believe, is the oldest complete Isaiah scroll in existence. This was just phenomenal that this could even be discovered at this time. We should also remember that the 1940s was the decade of World War II and the Holocaust.

But what we begin to find as we move into the fifties and sixties is Catholic, Protestant and Jewish scholars start to work together, particularly with things like the Dead Sea Scrolls and the *Nag Hammadi* documents. And you know what they discovered? In addition to the fact that they could work together, they even liked each other sometimes. And they decided, hey, we need to do more of this and we need to find out what we can learn from each other. And we'll talk about that in just a minute. What I would like to say, however, is it is a sense of which, why are we searching for the Jewish Mary now? Because I believe, in addition to the opening up of biblical studies and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and things of that kind, we had this experience called Vatican II.

Now, in the Second Vatican Council we have a couple of documents I want to mention briefly. One is called "*Lumen Gentium*," the "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church." There was a very enormous controversy among the bishops as to whether there should be a separate document on Mary coming out of Vatican II or whether she should be incorporated into the document on the Church. And the idea that she should be part of the Church won by a very, very small margin, but it was the first time that people said, "As marvelous and remarkable as Mary is, she too was redeemed, she too is part of the Church."

The other document was called "*Nostra Aetate*," and as you may know, it's actually called the "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions." But the most important element in that is article four, the statement on the Jews. And both of these caused people to start opening up and looking in a new way at how Mary might be viewed.

Now I have to take one little back-step here if I can, because I don't think we'll appreciate how radically different it was to start looking at Mary this new way unless we look at a little bit more of how she was viewed in a period just prior to that, and why what's sometimes called Second-Wave Feminism begins to really pick up on some of these themes. OK?

Now, after World War I, the U.S. bishops came up with a document on Mary in which they referred to her as the "perfect woman." And in many ways, we would look to her as a perfect woman of sorts; certainly somebody to be admired, this woman who so fascinated God that he wanted to make her his mother. On the other hand, when you taught this, particularly to young women in high schools and colleges, this perfect woman was not always as, shall we say, accepted, because there were times when she was so perfect that it was just kind of discouraging.

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How many of you know that sometimes there's somebody in a classroom who is so perfect you can't stand them? They get everything right. They never have a wrong answer to anything. And so the result of the situation is you kind of hope there is some way you can relate to them as another human being. Well, in some ways, that's kind of how Mary became for some people.

Now my religious order never did this, but—or at least in my presence, but—I have to say I have heard this from other situations, and that is some good nun would say to a group of high school girls, “Well, if Mary didn't chew gum, you shouldn't chew gum.” [laughter] Or “If Mary didn't wear shorts, you shouldn't wear shorts.” You know? And I just have to say I remember, in high school and college, Mary was a real drag on your social life. [laughter] She really, I mean you could no more image Mary in shorts on a beautiful, balmy summer night in the back of a convertible going off to a beer party. Mary just wouldn't do that. But if Mary didn't do it, well, maybe you shouldn't do it, right?

And so Mary—I'm projecting here probably—but for some people, it became almost a love-hate relationship with Mary, because as I said before, she was this remarkable woman that you loved, and yet she did not seem as if you could imitate her. And then, on top of it, she was both Virgin and Mother. Now it was pretty hard to put all that together, and so the result of the situation was Mary became, for many feminists especially, this person that they could never relate to.

However, in the 1960s, we begin to have something that's called Second Wave Feminism. And at this particular period of time, I believe that with the conjunction of a new understanding and appreciation of the Jews, of seeing Mary as part of the Church, that people start to have a new understanding and appreciation.

Now, I belonged to a group; I was one of the founding mothers of a group called Feminists in Faith, up in St. Paul/Minneapolis. And we were Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish women, and not too long after that, Muslim women joined us. We were all women who had, what shall we say, a very deep appreciation of our own religious traditions, and often were very involved, either as Protestant ministers, Catholic sisters, women rabbis, whatever. And yet, at the same time, we were often concerned about how the women in our religious institutions were being appreciated and understood. And so the result of this situation was that we had this challenge.

Now, what we began to understand . . . So the result of the situation was—and I don't know how many were aware of this, I wasn't until not too many years ago—Mary is mentioned more in the Koran than she is in the New Testament. And so suddenly we had Muslim and Christian women who were coming together to try to understand a nice Jewish girl, a good Jewish, observant Jewish woman. Do you see what I'm getting . . . So Mary becomes this link for many people, at this particular time, a link and an appreciation of how she can be known and how she might be somebody we can relate to.

Now, the third question I asked was: Has the search for the Jewish Jesus helped us to find the Jewish Mary? Again, some of you in here may remember the post-Vatican II period, where the big question was: Will the real Jesus please stand up? And it was like, for the first time, people are beginning to appreciate the fact that Jesus was a Jew. And not only



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that, but so many scholars begin to return Jesus to his historical context. And most of all, I think, they discovered the *Mishnah*, which is the foundational document of the *Talmud*, whose oral tradition really, it goes back to the first century and more or less, give or take, parallels the writing of the Gospels.

This was a real amazement to many people, because the Mishnah, and in fact the whole Talmud, had not been allowed in Christian circles for years. And its ability to help people interpret the Scripture—the New Testament, the Gospels, if you will—was a real eye-opener for many people. And again, one of my rabbis from Phoenix was great at saying, you know, “If Jesus came back to Phoenix, Arizona, he wouldn’t go to any of your churches. He’d come to my synagogue.” And so again it was a new appreciation.

But to explain my kind of back-door approach to finding the Jewish Jesus and the Jewish Mary, I must confess that, for years I’ve been fascinated by the Pharisees. And I discovered a new understanding of the Pharisees early on in the writings of Jacob Neusner and Ellis Rivkin in the seventies, and then scholars such as Eugene Fisher, John Polakowski, Anthony Saldarini, Shaye Cohen, and others have all tried to open up new aspects of that study.

I was amazed to learn that, despite the harsh language about the Pharisees in the Gospels, Jesus had more in common with them than he did with any other group of his time. And as you know, in the first century, there were many groups within Judaism: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, Christians. And it was even acknowledged as such that the Pharisees were closer to Jesus, in some of the Vatican documents.

Now, what intrigued me were the similarities between Jesus and the Pharisees. I’m just going to read out a list, because we could spend a great deal of time on any one of them, but first of all their acceptance of the oral Torah; secondly, an emphasis on *mitzvah*, doing the good deed, living out the Law; thirdly, referring to their teachers as *rabbi*; fourth, praying in the synagogue; fifth, table fellowship; sixth, referring to God as *Abba*; and lastly, belief in the resurrection of the body.

The Pharisees, as opposed to the Sadducees, believed that the holiness of the Temple extended beyond the priests to the Jewish people, and therefore it was the privilege of the people, not just the priests, to obey all 613 commandments. Now, I find this fascinating, because what many Christians interpret as legalism—you know, the Pharisees needing to obey every little law that came along—was actually a kind of egalitarianism. Pharisees believed it was the right of the people to obey even minute prescriptions of the law, not just the priests. We might call it in terms today, “the priesthood of the laity.”

And also there was a sort of theological underpinning of all of this, which might be described as interiority of Covenant. They believed in a kind of intimacy with God: God’s individual love for each human being so great that it would not even end with death. They prayed to God, *Avinu shebashamayim*, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” And I would just mention that, in the Yom Kippur service, the prayer, *Avinu Malkeinui*, “Our Father, our King,” a beautiful, beautiful prayer.

Now, we need to remember that Paul, of course, who wrote most of the Epistles, was himself a Pharisee and admits to being a Pharisee, doesn’t he, of the Tribe of Benjamin.

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And he goes on at great length. So then, we have this question of how much of his Pharisaic background did he bring into Christianity?

And I'd like to move on here briefly to this question: Can the Pharisees tell us anything about Mary? Now, as early as 1982, a scholar called Bernadette Brooten wrote a book called *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*. And she offers a fresh interpretation of archeological evidence. She concludes that women played significant leadership roles in the synagogue throughout the Middle East as early as 27 B.C.E., and therefore the past. People said, "Well, if a woman's name was on some stone that was found in the remnants of a synagogue in the ancient world, well, her husband must have been the rabbi." But today there are questions about, no, did these women have leadership roles in their own right?

There's an Israeli feminist scholar at Hebrew University who extensively explores the role of women in Second Temple Judaism, and her name is Tal Ilan. She reminds us that women who were followers of Jesus and Paul, and what I refer to as the Early Christian Movement because there really wasn't even a church throughout this early period, they were indeed Jewish women who lived and prayed as observant Jews.

Now, one afternoon in the library at Loyola University in Chicago, I found the smoking gun. Actually earlier, Tal Ilan had said she didn't think there was any evidence that you could prove that there were women in the Pharisees. But in this essay in a book called *On the Cutting Edge: The Study of Women in Biblical Worlds*, she wrote an essay called "Paul and Pharisee Women." And she claims that there is evidence that women were members of the Pharisee movement and participated in the activities of Pharisee Temple fellowships called *havuroth*.

Now, time does not permit any discussion of the intricate linguistic and rabbinic analysis by which she supports her assertion. However, she not only analyzes a statement from a rabbinic document called *Tosefta Demai*, but then she compares it to a passage in First Corinthians on mixed marriages. And she believes that, because of Paul's background as a Pharisee, that he accepted certain practices and then carried them over into his teaching as a follower of Jesus.

Now, I am not suggesting that Jesus, Mary, James, John, Mary Magdalene, or anybody else was a card-carrying Pharisee. But I am suggesting that if Jesus and Mary were closer to the Pharisees than they were to any other group, then it's very possible that we can learn from some of these practices how they might have lived, how they might have prayed, what their lives would have been like in more depth.

And that's the last question I want to talk about: how might Mary have prayed? Too often, Christians have forgotten that Mary is a faithful, prayerful, observant Jewish woman. Although she was very possibly illiterate, she probably knew portions of the Torah, especially the Psalms, by heart. I think we can presume that she would have known the watchword of the Jewish faith, *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One."

She would probably have begun each meal with a blessing not dissimilar to what Jews say even today when they sit down to break bread and a meal: *Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu*

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*melech ha'olam, hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz*: "Blessed are you, Lord Our God, Ruler of the universe, who has given us the bread from the earth."

Luke tells us that upon meeting her cousin Elizabeth, she poured forth a prayer of joy, a prayer sometimes called a *kaddish*, a prayer of praise hallowing God's name, similar to what we find in the Cantic of Hannah. Mary and Joseph would have participated in the rites of Jewish ritual purification because we talk about them presenting Jesus in the Temple. Mary would have gone to the *mikvah*, or the ritual bath, with the other women for monthly purification. Joseph and Jesus, when he was of age, and Mary—although women were not always required—would have fasted and prayed all day on Yom Kippur, according to Leviticus 16.

A Jewish view of life is very holistic. In Judaism, there is a *bracha*, or a blessing, for absolutely everything. And according to Jewish scholar David Flusser, Mary is a certain link between Jesus and the Jewish people. Now, there is a genre of rabbinic literature known as *midrash*, which includes asking, searching, enquiring, interpreting. It's not simply biblical exegesis, but it's an effort to make sense of a biblical text, often by elaboration or development. Now some scholars see certain elements in the Christian Scriptures, such as the Infancy Narratives, as Christian *midrash*, or the parables as Christian *midrash*.

In conclusion, I would like to share a *midrash* with you. Now I have, over the years, ever since the first time I preached in that synagogue, learned many prayers in Hebrew. And I've learned to sing. I would fast and pray all day on Yom Kippur. One year, I would go to the Reform synagogue for Rosh Hashanah and the Conservative for Yom Kippur, and the next year I'd reverse it. This was when I was in Phoenix. And they used to say I was either the "Temple nun" or the "synagogue sister," depending on whether I was in the Reform or the Conservative congregation. It was just a joy for me to participate in so many ways.

Now one of my all-time favorite Hebrew prayers is a prayer called the *Shehecheyanu*. And it goes, *Baruch atah Adonai Elohenu melek ha'olam shehecheyanu vekiymanu vehigi'anu lazman hazeh*. And what it means is, "Blessed are You, O Lord Our God, Ruler of the universe, who has given us life and sustained us and brought us to this moment."

Now I have to say that, about a dozen years ago I made a 36-day retreat out at the Jesuit retreat house out in California called El Retiro near Palo Alto. And most of my friends thought I could never keep quiet that long. [laughter] But I managed to do that. And I have to say it was very inspiring. Now I don't know if you're aware of it, but St. Ignatius of Loyola—certainly the founder of the Society of Jesus and for whom this institution has basic tradition holds—St. Ignatius has this methodology, if you will. And what he wants you, when you are meditating, particularly on the life of Jesus, to put yourself into the scene in some way, shape, or form. And so in that way, you can kind of imbibe a certain of the spirit of whatever it is that's happening.

And I was in the Second Week, as it's called, of the Spiritual Exercises. I decided that I would contemplate the Birth of Jesus. And in doing that, I would be the innkeeper's wife. And I figured, in that way I could be accessible to Mary and help her with the birth of the child and all this sort of thing. So this became a beautiful meditation in my own mind. And then at one point, after the baby is born, the shepherds come along and they hear the baby

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crying, so they ask if they can come in. And then there's this sort of ethereal music that's in the background. And the innkeeper and his wife sort of look like proud grandparents. And eventually, the shepherds leave and the angels evaporate, and the innkeeper and his wife go in.

And I have this vision of Mary and Joseph sort of snuggling down in the straw with this newborn baby between them. And in my mind's eye I said, *what might Mary possibly have said to Joseph at that time?* And all I could think of was, maybe she said, "Joseph, do you think we should say a *Shehecheyanu*?" And together they would pray, "*Baruch atah Adonai Elohenu melekh ha'olam shehecheyanu vekiymanu vehigi'anu lazman hazeh*" – "Blessed are You, O Lord Our God, Ruler of the universe, who has given us life and sustained us and brought us to this very special moment."

Well, I shared this reflection a couple years ago with an Orthodox rabbi friend, and he said to me, "But that's right. If you have a girl, you say a different prayer, but if you have a boy, you say a *Shehecheyanu*. Now," he said, "I can't prove it goes back to the first century, but it's very old." And I later discovered that it was indeed referenced in the *Mishnah*.

And so I have to say that, throughout this whole experience in my own life, I feel that too often we have—how do we say this—we have imposed our prayers on Mary instead of asking how Mary herself might have prayed. And I would just mention this. I don't know whether there's a cartoon, if you will, or an actual picture, but I'll never forget this one

image of Mary at the time of the annunciation, waiting for the angel to come and tell her she's supposed to be the mother of Jesus or invite her. And while this is going on, she's saying the rosary. [laughter] Well, as most of you know, the rosary doesn't even come into existence until the Medieval Period.

So what have we done to Mary? We have made her into our image. And for this reason, it seems to me we have to continue our quest for meditating on Scripture, exploring the role of women in Second Temple Judaism, learning more about Jewish prayer and ritual in Mary's time, and hopefully we can come to know better this Jewish woman who can be a source of strength and courage for women and men, I believe, in this millennium.

This is an image of what I sort of think of as Mary might have looked like, a Jewish Mary. It's by a Dutch artist named Rien Poortvliet. It's from a book called *He Was One of Us*, and I think the thoughtful look in her eye, maybe even a sense of troubled uncertainty, maybe a little fear—all of this kind of contributes to how might Mary have reacted.

So what I would like to do at this point is I'm going to sneak over to this little table here, and I'm going to ask you to either focus on this sketch or close your eyes. And I would just like to read . . . This is kind of an abbreviated form of the First Meditation in the last chapter of the book, on the Annunciation and the Visitation, of how possibly Mary might have reflected on her experiences as a young girl when she was being invited by the angel to be the Mother of the Son of God. So if you will just let me move ahead over here, and I hope that's . . .

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When I was about 14 years old, I was living with my extended family in the small village of Nazareth in the Galilee during the Roman occupation. I was grateful to be with family and friends, and kept busy carrying out household tasks. I was betrothed to a wonderful young man named Joseph, a carpenter. He was such a good person and eager to prepare a home for us. It promised to be a happy marriage.

One day, I encountered a very powerful invitation from a mysterious figure. I must have looked frightened. And at first, I was afraid. This extraordinary being was enshrined in light, appeared to be from heaven and said, "Do not be afraid, Mary." I remembered the words of the prophet Isaiah, "Say to those who are frightened, be strong, fear not. Here is your God. He comes to save you." The apparition seemed very gentle, kind and comforting. I came to believe it was of God.

Then I heard an extraordinary statement: "Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you shall name him Jesus." I could hardly believe it. I had not had sexual relations with Joseph. How could it be? So I did a very Jewish thing. I asked questions. I was young, but I was not naïve. I asked the heavenly creature, "How can this be, since I have had no relations with a man?" The apparition replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the Child to be born will be holy. He will be called Son of God."

I felt a little like Jeremiah. I wanted to complain to God that I was too young, only a child. How could I take on such responsibility? But at the same time, I felt overwhelmed by love. Somehow, deep inside, I felt engulfed in a call so strong that I could not turn away, could not not say yes. It was as if I had a new inner knowledge of God in the intimacy of my heart. I knew God was calling me, inviting me to belong to him in a way I could never have imagined. How could I not say yes?

The only clue I received from the heavenly creature was about my dear cousin, Elizabeth. She was much older than I, and sad that she had never had a child, but I learned she was also pregnant and in her sixth month, because nothing is impossible with God. I was so happy for her. Although I was concerned as to how Joseph would understand all of this, I wanted to be the servant of the Lord and to trust always in God's love. I accepted God's invitation to be the Mother of the Son of God.

Elizabeth had always been a special person in my life. I knew she would need me. I convinced my family and Joseph that I should go to her. I could join a caravan from Galilee to Jerusalem. Zachariah could meet me there and take me to their hillside village of Ein Karem to help Elizabeth prepare for the baby. Finally, they agreed. At first, I was lonely on the trip. I recall that Esther, who was a great leader of our people, had been frightened and lonely too. She had prayed, "My Lord, our King, You alone are God. Help me who am alone and have no help but You, for I am taking my life in my hand."

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As I traveled along, I came to realize that my willingness to say yes to God's plan was grounded in my deep conviction of the faithfulness of God. I had prayed the *Shema* twice each day and sometimes more, since I was old enough to do so. *Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad*: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One." I always continued with a Scripture passage I love so well, *V'ahavta et Adonai Elohecha*: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these words with which I charge you this day. You shall teach them diligently to your children and recite them when you stay at home and when you are away."

As I recited the words on my journey, I knew I would indeed teach those very words to my son. A child is growing within me, and it is all very mysterious. But I want to share that love with the whole world. For some unexplainable reason, I have been chosen by God for a special mission, and I know only one thing: I can trust him to the end.

To see Zachariah waiting for me in Jerusalem was reassuring. He took me up the hillside burgeoning with spring flowers to Elizabeth in Ein Karem. When I saw her radiant face and open arms, I ran to her, buried my head in her warm bosom and wept. There was so much joy and fear pent up together inside of me these last weeks. She was almost like a Mother-God who enfolded me in her arms. Elizabeth, now six months pregnant, experienced a child in her womb leaping for joy. It was as if our two children were speaking to each other. Then Elizabeth said, "Blessed is the fruit of your womb." It was the confirmation I needed to realize that this child I would bring into the world was indeed a Holy One of God.

How does one spill out the joy and the gratitude that is in one's heart with such an extraordinary realization? I remembered Hannah, who in a moment of joy poured forth her *kaddish*: "My heart exalts in the Lord. My strength is exalted in my God." The *kaddish* sometimes concludes with a prayer for peace, *Oseh shalom bimromav. Hu ya'aseh shalom aleynu. Ve'al kol yisrael. Ve'imru Amen*: "May the Lord give strength to his people. May the Lord bless his people with peace."

I asked God for peace for my people. And for the whole world, I asked God for peace in my heart as well. In the months ahead, that prayer song echoed in my heart: [singing] *Oseh shalom bimromav. Hu ya'aseh shalom aleynu. Ve'al kol yisrael. Ve'imru. Vei'mru. Amen. Ya'aseh shalom. Ya'aseh shalom. Shalom aleynu. Ve'al kol yisrael.*

Now, I have to share with you a few more sketches from this Dutch artist, which I think you might enjoy. This is his image of The Visitation, the elderly Elizabeth welcoming the young Mary. My interpretation is Elizabeth is probably saying *mazel tov*. This is a very pregnant Mary on a donkey heading for Bethlehem. I have never been pregnant, but I can't even imagine riding on a donkey, much less being nine months pregnant, all the way from Galilee to Jerusalem.

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Mary and Joseph in the stable; the shepherds coming to see the new baby. I love Mary up in the corner, nursing the child, Joseph playing with him; Jesus up in the right-hand corner with the little dog, having a good time; Jesus in the bottom corner with his *kippah* on; Mary when she finally finds Jesus in the Temple when he ran away at the age of 12 [laughter] and she was very clearly not very happy with him. And John the Baptist saying to Jesus, "No, it's not up to me to baptize you." Jesus being taken down from the Cross.

This is called Our Lady of Zion, and I think a very powerful image because here's Mary with a Star of David, and we know that, if you had one Jewish grandparent, you would get sent to the ovens during World War II, and certainly Mary and Jesus would both have been marked off for that.

And this is just an image that a friend of mine actually did of Mary with many of the people, if you will, where she becomes a (inaudible). This probably is more an image of Mary, Mother of the Church, but Mary in a little bit more of a Jewish motif than we sometimes see her.

So I just have to say I appreciate very much your attention, and I don't even want to look at my watch for fear I've gone over time. But I do hope that, in some way, this maybe has given you a little bit of a different insight into how we might interpret Mary. And I don't know if we have time for a few questions. We do? OK. [applause] Thank you very much.

Now, if I can't answer the questions, maybe somebody else in the room can, so I'd look forward to any comments or questions you might have. Comments welcome. Yes?

**Participant:** Rabbi David Zaslow has written a book recently called *Jesus Christ: First-Century Rabbi*. And it's interesting because he makes some of the same points about Jesus being very much like the Pharisees, and in fact that some of the critique sounds like the critiques of an insider; some of the critiques he had of the Pharisees sound like the critiques of an insider in fact.

**Sr. Athans:** Yes. Absolutely. One of the ways I sometimes describe it is, for instance, I think most—whether we'd like to remember it or not, there was a presidential election in 2012. And how many of you remember the Republican primaries, where we had Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum and Rick Perry and a variety of other Republican candidates saying vicious things about each other, right? In fact, in some ways much worse than the dialogue that went on between Romney and Obama. And I think sometimes there is that experience, isn't there, of we can be more critical of our own. And so one interpretation is that Jesus's criticism of the Pharisee . . .

The other thing that we have to keep in mind is that the Gospels, with the possible exception of Mark, were not actually written until after the fall of Jerusalem. And I think most scholars would say that, with the fall of the Temple, the Sadducees were sort of out of a job, because they were the priestly class. The Essenes and the Zealots seemed to have faded a bit into different groups. So the two contenders for how Judaism was going to be lived on in the future after the year 70, really were, as it were, the Pharisees, who become known as the rabbis, and the Christians.

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And so a great deal of the contention in the Gospels—and Matthew and Luke were probably written in the eighties and John in nineties or after—a great deal of the anger that we read about the Pharisees in the Gospels especially, I think, is part of competition. And I think we need to remember that.

The other thing though, I think is always—and I don't know if it bothered you the way this bothered me over the years—is that, have you noticed how we'll talk about the Jews, especially in the Gospel of John? The Jews killed Jesus. And, well, you know, Jesus, Mary, Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene; they were all Jews, right?

And so this idea that the bad ones were Jews but the good ones weren't, that really actually, I mean there's a great deal of contention these days on whether we should refer to them as Jewish Christians or Christian Jews, but in that early period, all of the Christians were still Jews, weren't they? And they would go to the synagogue, oftentimes in prayer to the Temple when it still existed, but then come home and celebrate their meal, which they believed was Eucharist in that some way, shape or form. And so that's how we have to keep that in mind, I think; t least that's one way to look at it.

Yes, back there?

**Participant:** Could you just say a little bit about what the Koran has to say about Mary?

**Sr. Athans:** Pardon me?

**Participant:** You said that there was more written about Mary in the Koran. Could you just share a little bit about that?

**Sr. Athans:** It would be a very little bit. [laughter] Actually, maybe there's somebody else who could say even more about that. There are certain segments in the Koran, particularly on the Annunciation, actually two different variations. One, I believe, the angel comes to Mary at a well or something. Does anybody else remember this piece? And so it really doesn't go into great depth, I would say, but there are segments where Mary is clearly referred to.

And they do . . . I believe there is an appreciation for her virginity and that this was going to be a special birth. But actually, she's seen along with the other special women in Islam, and certainly revered, but I don't believe there is as much certainly as her being present at the death or even the finding in the Temple or some of those kinds of things. But I must confess that one of my next challenges is going to be to read more about Mary in the Koran. Thank you, though, for reminding me.

Yes, did you have a question? No? Yes, back over here? Oh, there are two questions over here.

**Participant:** Hi. This is going a little off beyond what you spoke about today, but I was reading a book on Jewish mysticism, and it said that the medieval mystical rabbis were influenced by the pseudo-worship of Mary in their conception of Shahina, or the feminine presence of God on Earth. Can you speak about that a little bit, or?



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**Sr. Athans:** I do refer to that in my book, actually, and there is a wonderful rabbi right here in Boston, Arthur Green, who I believe is the dean at Hebrew . . .

**Participant:** He's at Hebrew College.

**Sr. Athans:** Hebrew College, right, and he was a professor of mine in Berkeley when he was out there one year on sabbatical. And he does a very interesting study about how he believes that devotion to Mary, particularly the writings of St. Bernard and others, created this image of Mary as this, I won't say a goddess figure, but certainly this extraordinary feminine figure in Christianity, and that, on the head of that, many of the rabbis in the following century or around that particular time tended to emphasize more the feminization of the *shekinah*, the presence of God, and that there is a definite connection there. And this article is remarkable, I might add. He just has this depth of appreciation of both Christian sources as well as Jewish sources that's kind of overwhelming, and I really did come to appreciate that.

And what he's trying to say in his own way, I think—and he does say it very clearly—that we often think of the negative or we think only Judaism gave something to Christianity, but perhaps we need to stand back and see, perhaps in some ways, Christianity also made a contribution to Judaism and that Mary became one of those figures.

Now, if I could put a little different spin on that . . . and I don't want to . . . See, these people up here, I'm losing you maybe . . . You know, it's very interesting because I mentioned earlier that the Protestants tend not to emphasize Mary or appreciate Mary. And one of my Protestant women minister friends said to me some years ago about Mary, with a twinkle in her eye, "Well, at least you Catholics have one woman who's important in your Church." And so there was kind of this sense of, at what point do we have an appreciation of this feminine dimension, whether it's in the godhead or whether it's in a person such as Mary in either the Koran or the New Testament, or how does that creep in and affect our appreciation? So I don't know if that answers your question, but yes.

Thank you. And yes?

**Participant:** Yeah. On the age of Mary, 13 is the earliest, but wouldn't there be an age range, 13 to 17? After all, she was marrying Joseph, a much older man. And have you any ideas how old you think he is?

**Sr. Athans:** I'm not sure I get your question clearly.

**Participant:** Oh, I'm asking about the age of Mary when she gave birth.

**Sr. Athans:** Oh, the age of Mary?

**Participant:** And like Bonaventure says, 15, and you got a range of 13 to 17, and you got to remember she married a much older man. And I wish you could speculate on that. But I think Mary . . . Every year they went down to Elizabeth's house for Passover, and they probably stayed a few weeks, and she learned a lot from them as she grew up. I would say she knew the Bible inside out, and that, as Elizabeth would get up and sing psalms, Mary would quite inevitably get up herself and do it, you know?

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**Sr. Athans:** Well, it's very interesting. A lot of the things, and especially for those of you who are Catholics in the room here, a lot of the things that we grew up with as being traditional ideas really aren't in the Gospels, are they? They're in a document called the *Protoevangelium of James*, which was probably second to third century. And it's certainly the document which suggests that, after Mary leaves the Temple, which she would do after her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday—we will say when she got her period and was considered a woman and needed to leave—that to protect her virginity, a marriage was arranged with Joseph, who was a widower with other children. That's kind of the flavor, isn't it, that was given to how we were to understand all those brothers and sisters too.

And so the result of the situation is, that became part of . . . I mean even, for instance, a feast like the Presentation of Our Lady. Technically it's not in the Scripture, is it? But it became part of tradition. And tradition is important. But tradition can also be adapted and varied.

So Joseph's age we really don't know. That is one interpretation—that he was much older than she was. But we really aren't sure about that. And so we're all going to find out a lot, aren't we, eventually? [laughter]

But I had a Protestant minister friend who used to say we should all have a healthy agnosticism about many of these big questions. There should be a drawer in the theological file that says "wait and see," you know? So I would have to say that. But it could have been; but again, it's not something that's definitive. Right.

**Melinda Brown Donovan:** Thank you, Sister Christine. [applause]

**Sr. Athans:** OK.

**Melinda Brown Donovan:** You've certainly brought us closer to the Jewishness of Mary and Jesus, and also inspired deeper learning and deeper prayer, and we thank you for that.