

By the mid-1530s, Henry's bishops in the Church of England were split over various theological issues. He chose "repeatedly to gather bishops and theologians together and to cajole and to persuade them to reach an agreement on the principles of true religion," Bernard says. Inevitably, this meant compromise, ambiguity, and even contradiction—which Henry "skillfully used . . . to advance" his own complicated religious convictions on such matters as freeing departed souls from purgatory.

Cromwell, whose own theological beliefs are hard to discern, says Bernard, was "immensely useful" to Henry. But by 1540, his reputation as a radical Protestant had made him a liability, especially since the king was considering an alliance with Catholic France or the Holy Roman Empire. So Cromwell was dismissed, and executed as a heretic and a traitor. But this, Bernard writes, did not usher in "any sustained conservative inquisition," or end Henry's determined quest for "a middle way."

Confronting the Void

It is not only unbelievers who confront the problem of meaninglessness, Michael Novak, author of *The Experience of Nothingness* (rev. ed., 1998), points out in *Society* (Jan.–Feb. 1999).

*It is an oddity that those who seek God become quite familiar with the experience of nothingness. It isn't new to them. They have, in a way, more to say about it than the innocent atheist, who seems surprised by the night and sometimes (like the poet Dylan Thomas) rages, rages against it, and sometimes (like Bertrand Russell in *Mysticism and Logic*) marches around it with empty boasts of defiance. Nothingness is familiar terrain traversed in great inner pain. . . .*

The prophets, saints, and mystics who have shaped our moral traditions—essentially Jewish and Christian or, as we say, "Western"—were quite well experienced in nothingness, meaninglessness, emptiness. They did not build up our moral sense upon illusions, but upon every experience of irrationality, terror, oppression, lack of faith, and emptiness of heart that any human is likely to face.

A Repenting Church

"Jews and Catholics: Beyond Apologies" by David Novak, in *First Things* (Jan. 1999), 156 Fifth Ave., Ste. 400, New York, N.Y. 10010.

When the Vatican issued a statement on the Holocaust last year, many American Jewish leaders criticized it as a whitewash. Although the Vatican condemned the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, and even spoke of "the sinful behavior" of certain members of the church, it stopped short of an official apology. Novak, a professor of Jewish studies at the University of Toronto, argues that the Jewish response "reflects a misunderstanding not only of Catholic theology but of Jewish theology as well." The Catholic Church is undertaking something "more prolonged and more painful than any mere apology."

The most criticized part of the Vatican's

statement was a quotation from Pope John Paul II: "In the Christian world—I do not say on the part of the church as such—erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability have circulated for too long, engendering feelings of hostility toward this people." The critics objected to the pope's apparent exclusion of the church as an institution worthy of criticism.

When a Catholic says "the church," Novak argues, there are two possible meanings. In both cases, an "apology" would be inappropriate. At one level, the church is "a collection of fallible human beings." But

individual Catholics who took no part in the Nazi atrocities have nothing to apologize for, and individual Catholics who did take part have no one to apologize to, since the murdered “are hardly in a position to absolve anyone.”

At another level (as when the pope says “the church as such”), Novak observes, a Catholic understands “the church” to refer to its magisterium, or teaching authority. Catholics see that “as expressing God’s will beginning with Scripture and extending into the ongoing development of church doctrine.” Since the magisterium is the highest authority on what is true or false, right or wrong, it cannot be in error—and the church, understood in this sense, therefore cannot apologize for being in error.

That claim may seem arrogant to many outside the fold, Novak notes, but Jews should be able to understand it, since “on this score, Judaism is no different. . . . The Jewish tradition presents itself as the greatest revelation of God’s truth that can be known in the world. That is why we call ourselves ‘the chosen people.’”

In religious traditions such as Judaism and Catholicism, he says, the criticism must

come from within, through reinterpretation of past teachings. While the magisterium cannot err, church teachings can be improperly formulated, leading to, in the pope’s words, “erroneous and unjust interpretations”—and requiring reinterpretation. That is what John Paul II and the Vatican have been doing.

Indeed, Novak writes, they have been doing more: engaging in what the Vatican statement called “an act of repentance,” adding, in parentheses, *teshuvah*, the Hebrew word for repentance. For Catholicism, as for Judaism, Novak observes, “the relationship with God is primarily a communal affair, not merely a relationship between an individual person and God.” So, while there is no *moral* collective responsibility, “there still is an *existential* sense of collective sorrow and shame when other members of the community—even those as estranged from the community as the Nazis were—commit sins, especially sins having great public consequences.”

“To expect an apology rather than *teshuvah*,” Novak concludes, “is to call for something quite cheap when there is the possibility of something much more precious.”

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

The New Riddle of the Universe

A Survey of Recent Articles

Astronomers have long known that the universe is expanding, and, until now, they assumed that gravity was slowing the enlargement down. But recent observations of distant exploding stars have shown that instead the expansion may be *accelerating*—and this has cosmologists scratching their heads in wonder. Writing in *Scientific American* (Jan. 1999), a half-dozen astronomers and cosmologists ponder the astonishing development.

Craig J. Hogan, Robert P. Kirshner, and Nicholas B. Suntzeff, astronomers at the University of Washington, Harvard University, and Cerro Tololo Inter-American Observatory in La Serena, Chile, respectively, belong to one of the two teams that have tracked a few score of the supernovae (exploding stars), in

galaxies hundreds of millions of light-years away. Such blasts occur when a dead star becomes a natural thermonuclear bomb; these took place four to seven billion years ago. The big surprise was that the supernovae were “fainter than expected,” and therefore farther away, the astronomers say. Though the difference in brightness was slight—only 25 percent less than forecast—it was “enough to call longstanding cosmological theories into question.”

“Taken at face value,” the three astronomers write, “our observations appear to require that expansion [of the universe] is actually accelerating with time.” But that cannot happen if the cosmos is made up exclusively of normal matter, because “gravity must steadily slow the expansion.” It could happen, however, if all the empty space in the uni-