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Dear Steven

I was happy to make your acquaintance at the recent Shakespeare conference in Stratford. Also to have your book with your signature. Last week I returned home to Japan, and your book was my companion on the plane. Since my return I have sent you my book on Biblical Themes in Shakespeare, which you should have received by now.

First, I want to tell you how insightful I have found your book: it has so much light to throw both on Shakespeare and on the Bible - as I find is mostly the case when the two great books are seen together. It is so sad that Shakespeare scholars deprive themselves of such insights by resolutely keeping the two books in separate compartments of the mind.

Secondly, I want to absolve Mary Tudor of blame in the burning of Tyndale. She may have burnt all too many "heretics", but she had already learnt that lesson from her terrible father, who was in fact responsible for Tyndale's death at the stake. It was at Henry's command that Tyndale suffered in the Low Countries in 1536, as any encyclopedia will tell you.

Thirdly, I want to reassure you that Christians do not usually hate Jews, in spite of all that is said nowadays - chiefly by journalists who know no better - to the contrary. I myself have been a Catholic for 74 years, and a Catholic priest for 40 years, and in all that time I have never once been incited to hatred of the Jews - but rather to forgiveness. Jesus himself prayed for those who were responsible for his death, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do."

No doubt, as we read in the Gospels, the Jewish leaders of the time were responsible for the arresting and crucifying of Jesus, but I have always been led to regard Pontius Pilate as the man chiefly responsible. And so we say in the Creed, not "suffered under the high priest Caiaphas" but "suffered under Pontius Pilate"; and, as we read in Matthew, it was the Jews who are said to have called down a curse on themselves and their children, not any Christians.

No doubt, in the course of the centuries many Christians have been responsible for persecuting the Jews, but I wonder in how many cases it was for revenge on those who killed Christ: rather it was because of false rumours about Jews killing and eating Christian children (as in Chaucer), or because of Jewish money-lending practices (as in MV). It is more usual for Christians to beat their own breasts for having put Christ to death, as St Paul says of all who receive Christ in the eucharist in the wrong frame of mind (I Cor. 11:27).

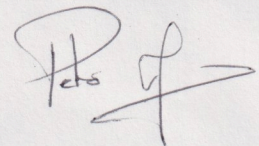
One point about "Paul's project of taking possession of the Hebrew Bible", or the colonization of the old book by new Christians (p.123). It wasn't Paul's project to begin with, but the idea of Christ's Gospel from the beginning, that all the prophecy of the Old Testament was to be fulfilled in the New. Jesus is always saying, and acting, "that the scriptures may be fulfilled"; and so the first of the evangelists St Matthew, already in his first "Hebrew" or Aramaic Gospel, is always showing by adducing texts from those scriptures how they are fulfilled in Christ - that Jesus is indeed the Christ, the Messiah. After all, Jesus himself, Paul, Matthew and all the first disciples were no less Jews than those who opposed Jesus and put him to death. But the Bible that was taken over by the early Christians was not so much the Hebrew Bible as the Greek Septuagint, which provided them with a convenient point of departure for the Greek New Testament.

Then, a little point about hallowe'en as "the day of the dead". That is how it has come to be celebrated especially in America and Scotland, with its roots rather in the pagan than the Christian past. Literally, it means the eve of All Hallows, or the feast of All Saints on November 1, which is followed by All Souls on November 2 (a comparatively recent feast). Every great feast in the Christian liturgy begins with its eve or vigil, according to the old Jewish custom recorded in Genesis I, regarding the evening and the morning as forming one day.

These are, however, all minor points which pale into insignificance beside your greater merits in Shakespeare and the Bible. Still, on the whole it seems to me you make Shakespeare more of a sceptic, or even cynic, than he really was. My own view of him is of a deeply religious man, with a passion for traditional ways; and this is what makes him so critical of his contemporary world, geared as it was to force people to conform, if but outwardly, to a new religion. But this is a very minority view, which is still looked down upon by Shakespeare scholars, not least by those who organized the conference.

With my best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Peter Milward', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Peter Milward SJ