Let me express my thanks to Fordham University for inviting me to join you once again on the auspicious occasion of Father Ryan’s biannual McGinley lecture. Special thanks to Sister Anne-Marie Kirmse for all she has done to prepare for this evening; to Dr. Hussein for his insightful and illuminating presentation; and to Father Ryan for inviting me to be with you, for the challenging theme he has chosen, and for the multiplicity of doors he has opened up for us in his paper to explore together, and from that exploration grow in sensitivity and understanding.

Jews have recently completed the celebration of Passover, the highlight of which is the table service called the Seder. And one part of that is the recitation—usually by the youngest child present—of the four questions which begins “why is this night different from all other nights?” Father Ryan and Doctor Hussein and I have been at this conversation for a good long time now and I would begin by wondering why is this McGinley lecture different from all the others? Tonight I am grateful to finally have the opportunity to disagree with Father Ryan. All these years I have been saying I am a footnote to Father Ryan. Tonight I relish this chance to take issue with him—and it is not a simple quibble either, but something profound and perplexing that goes to the heart of Jewish identity.

I would begin by reframing the “atheism” of Philip Roth. When Father Ryan speaks of Roth, Tóibín and Rushdie, he says: “perhaps it is sufficiently funny that one could describe
atheists as being Jewish, Christian or Muslim.” Well, yes, it is incongruous to speak of Christian or Muslim atheists. But as for Jews: it is not incongruous at all. It is completely plausible. I know many Jewish atheists. And not simply in the terms that Father Ryan uses: “the faith they or their ancestors once professed.” The historian Peter Gay has written a book about Sigmund Freud called *A G-dless Jew*. G-dless, yes. But Jew nonetheless. After all that is the very reason why he had to flee the Nazis from Vienna to England. It is with some frequency that one reads or hears authors say things like, “As a Jewish atheist, I can’t say I find…[Mahmud Ahmadinejad’s] words completely reassuring.”¹ The Israeli Prime Minister, Golda Meier once said, “I believe in the Jewish people and the Jewish people believe in G-d.” Sounds like an equivocation to me…. But also a profound affirmation: “I believe in the Jewish people.” You do not believe in the Catholic Church if you are not a Christian. You do not believe in the Umma if you are not Muslim.

This underscores a reality of Jewish identity in which it is not fully analogous to either Christian or Muslim identity. For both Christian and Muslim identity depend upon faith. To be Muslim is to be faithful. As the Apostle Paul asserted, to be Christian is to have a particular faith. And if one does not have that faith, or no longer has that faith, or abandons that faith, then one is no longer Muslim or Christian. But Jewish identity is not built along the same lines. It does not stand on belief or faith. Unlike Christians or Muslims, Jews are a people—or as the great twentieth-century thinker Mordechai Kaplan advocated, a civilization. The religion of that people is Judaism. But the identity is conferred by being part of that people or participating in that civilization. So though it is conventional speak of Jews as a religious group analogous to Christians or Muslims, we are also what can be called an ethnic group. In America we are analogous to African Americans or Irish Americans. You can talk about Jews and Chinese or
Japanese—an identity that is full of secular implications, not fully religious, or exclusively religious.

And that reality opens a door on Philip Roth that puts him in a different category from Tóibín or Rushdie. So yes, as Father Ryan notes, Roth has written forcefully against G-d, and against the religion of the Jews. But here is where it gets asymmetrical—and interesting. I would argue that from the very beginning Roth has written as a proudly self-affirming Jew, and lovingly about Jewish life—and not in any sense of former identity. As one critic notes, “Roth himself has compared his repertoire to his father’s conversation: “Family, family, family, Newark, Newark, Newark, Jew, Jew, Jew.”

You can hear an authentic Jewish voice in Roth from his very first public success, the collection of short stories called Goodbye, Columbus. Yes, there were Jewish organizations which condemned the book and railed against Roth—and rabbis who must have needed something to preach about. But actually it included very touching and affirming pictures of even Jewish faith, stories like “Eli the Fanatic” or “Defender of the Faith.” I commend these to you. And even the title story, which so offended delicate Jewish sensitivities with its depiction of the crassness of a Jewish family and the garishness of the wedding that they produced, seems to me to have an authentic Jewish pedigree. I see it not as a rejection of Jewish life but a condemnation, very much in the tradition of the Biblical prophets, of the way some Jews were living their lives. In the Middle Ages, rabbis regularly issued what were called Sumptuary laws saying, in effect, “Jews, your celebrations are getting too ostentatious and lavish. Dial the materialism back.” I understand Goodbye, Columbus as part of that illustrious lineage.

The profound engagement with his Jewishness and the life of the Jewish people runs like a bright thread through Roth’s career. We catch sight of this Jewish engagement in his
remarkable novel *The Ghost Writer*, written in 1979, the first of that series of books about his fictional alter-ego, Nathan Zuckerman. Here he focusses in on issues of what it means to be a Jew—especially in the wake of the Shoah/Holocaust, the obligations of a Jewish author, and what it means to be part of the community, all of which he does through an extended meditation on a fictional (or is it in Zuckerman’s mind, not-at-all fictional) encounter with Anne Frank, miraculously surviving the holocaust and living in the home of an esteemed Jewish writer.

Roth’s intense engagement with Jewish life is reflected in his recurrent attention to the State of Israel—farcically in *Portnoy’s Complaint* (upon which I shall not elaborate). More seriously in *Counterlife* (1986) in which he either does or does not move to Israel. And even more profoundly in his nineteenth novel, *Operation Shylock*, which is devoted to engagement with a range of pressing Jewish issues: the persistence of anti-Semitism; and above all the meaning of Israel to Jews. It is a work that is redolent with Zionist commitment and an openhearted embrace of Roth’s Jewish identity. Still more recently in 2004 Roth wrote *The Plot against America*—a counter-history in which he imagines an America in which Charles Lindberg, a notorious anti-Semite, is elected president and puts into effect all manner of anti-Semitic programs. He dwells on how this affects the narrator of the story, a young boy living in Newark—named Philip Roth. We can hear that same concern with the potential for the eruption of anti-Semitism in Newark as well in *Nemesis*.

What I am arguing is that from the beginning of his career, issues of Jewish life never seem far from Roth’s mind. Does any of this make Roth a theist? Obviously not. But it does make Roth recognizably Jewish in an important way that Jews understand what Jewish is.

As for *Nemesis* itself, I agree that we can read it as a profound and principled atheist manifesto. But we can also see Roth in *Nemesis* not so much rejecting G-d as arguing with G-d,
enraged at G-d, calling G-d to account for the tragedies and horrors of this world, the undeserved suffering. Remember that the book is set in Jewish 1944—a time when a million and a half Jewish children perished—in “camps.” Such arguing, raging, calling G-d to account is a theme reaching back in Jewish literature all the way to the Bible. We find it in many of the Psalms. And of course it is the issue at the very heart of the Book of Job. And we find this theme articulating itself afresh in so many modern Jewish writers.

You can read Roth as an atheist. You can read him as a powerful accuser of G-d. Either way I would put Roth in a context. The case of Roth may seem anomalous to Christian eyes. Yet his perspective is not exclusive or unique to him. Rather, he is a member of a notable fraternity. This blend of attachment to the people and distance from G-d—even alienation from G-d—can be found in so many profoundly Jewish writers. Toward the beginning of his compelling autobiographical novel Night, Elie Wiesel describes his arrival at Auschwitz:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed. Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever. Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.”³
An affirmation of faith in G-d? Perhaps the opposite. But a deeply Jewish assertion of disbelief.
If we are to call this atheism, we must acknowledge that that same atheism is to be found in the
writing of numerous poets who wrote in Yiddish, the language of the Jews of Eastern Europe—
poets who I think of as the modern descendants of the authors of the Psalms even if their poetry
“celebrates” an absence in the place where the earlier Psalmists found the throne of G-d—poets
who seek to call G-d to account for what happens in the world.

The poet Jacob Glatstien writing in the dark wake of the Holocaust suggests that with the
death of his own family—and millions of other Jews—G-d died as well:

Without Jews there is no Jewish G-d…
The light is fading in your shabby tent
The Jewish hour is guttering
Jewish G-d
You are almost gone

He sounds the same theme in is mordant poem “Dead Men Don’t Praise G-d”:

At Sinai we received the Torah
At Lublin we gave it back
Dead men don’t praise G-d
The Torah was given to the Living

We hear this same distancing from the G-d of tradition expressed more subtly in the poetry of the
contemporary Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai. By the way, Amichai is not the name he was given
when he was born in Germany. It is the name he gave himself when he moved to Israel. It means
“my people lives.” His dismissal of religion is not frontal like Glatstein but wry and oblique:
The air above Jerusalem is filled with prayers and dreams
Like the air above cities with heavy industry
Hard to breathe

His impatience with things of the spirit is reflected in a prose piece called “Tourists”:

Once I sat on the stairs at the gates of David’s tower and put two heavy baskets next to me. A crowd of tourists stood there around their guide and I served as their orientation point. “You see that man with the baskets? A bit to the right of his head, there’s an arch from the Roman period. A bit to the right of his head.” “But he moves, he moves!” I said to myself. Redemption will come only when they are told: You see the arch from the Roman period? Never mind: but next to it, a bit to the left and lower sits a man who bought fruit and vegetables for his home.

I have dwelt on this theme of unconventional religiosity in Jewish writers at such length because it provides a wonderful window on the unique nature of Jewish identity which tracks Christian and Muslim identity in some respects but is not completely analogous. It includes the freedom to abandon G-d altogether, or, at the least, to be deeply disappointed with G-d, to argue with G-d, to call G-d to the docket as the accused.

All that said, the question posed by Father Ryan is a significant one: what can religious people learn from an authentically atheistic perspective? My first reflex is to recall the story of the social scientist, the late Daniel Bell. He said that at his Bar Mitzvah he told the Rabbi, “I’ve found the truth. I don’t believe in G-d. I’m joining the Young People’s Socialist League.” Bell says the rabbi looked at him and said, “Kid, you don’t believe in G-d. Tell me, do you think G-d cares?” But I recognize that Father Ryan’s question demands a more serious answer than that.
The absence of G-d imposes a moral imperative on us. A story is told of the great leader of a twentieth-century Orthodox Jewish community of Europe, a man called the Chafetz Chayim (“One who desires life” Psalm 34:13). One time he was teaching that there was a purpose for everything in G-d’s world. One of his students challenged him: “What is the purpose of atheism?” The Chafetz Chayim replied, “Atheism teaches that when you see someone in need, you cannot just walk by and say G-d will take care of him.” In The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevsky has one of his characters exclaim, “If G-d is dead, then everything is permitted!” I think a more challenging corollary would be: “If there is no G-d, then how much is expected of us?” If we cannot depend on G-d to prevent another Auschwitz, then we have to take that responsibility on ourselves. If we cannot depend on G-d to feed the hungry, then we have to do it ourselves.

And then there is the specifically theological lesson. In October of last year Pope Benedict convened an interreligious pilgrimage to Assisi to which he invited representatives of the entire gamut of faith traditions—including unbelievers. In the address he delivered to the pilgrims he spoke explicitly about unbelief in ways that I found astounding to hear from a pope. Pope Benedict spoke of people whom he described as “people to whom the gift of faith has not been given.”

And he said of them: “they…challenge the followers of religions not to consider G-d as their own property, as if he belonged to them…” Indeed this may be the greatest gift we receive from those of no faith, the gift of spiritual humility. They stand as reminders to us all that we know less of G-d than we would aspire to; perhaps than we pretend to. They remind us that much as we are on the journey toward G-d we have not arrived at the destination and we need to be more modest in the claims we make for ourselves and more forgiving of those who have less
insight into the impenetrable infinite than we have achieved—or different insight. From the vantage of that modesty we can greet one another and embrace one another in peace, respect and love.
NOTES

