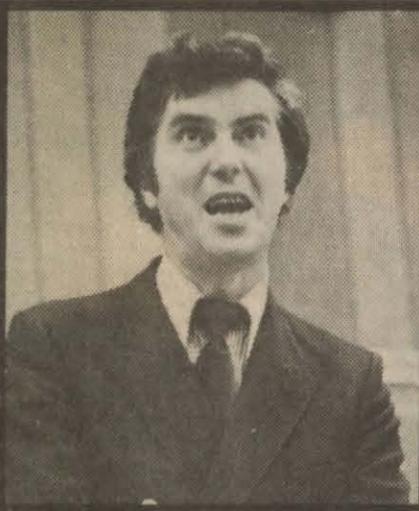


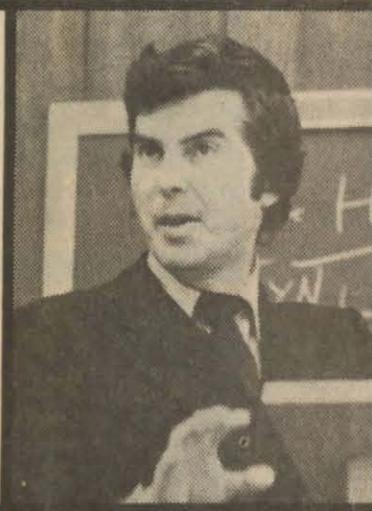


# Rabbi in a Catholic Seminary



The New York Times/Joyce Dopkeen

Rabbi Asher Finkel lecturing students on the New Testament at Maryknoll seminary in Ossining.



By ALINE BENJAMIN

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Every Thursday a dapper, youthful-looking man strides across Maryknoll's extensive campus and into his classroom at the seminary. His students address him as "Rabbi."

Asher Finkel is perhaps the first rabbi to serve on the faculty of a Roman Catholic seminary in the United States. His specialty is the New Testament.

Why is a Jew teaching the New Testament at Maryknoll? There are two answers: There is a growing ecumenical spirit at the seminary, and Dr. Finkel

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"He sets the history of biblical things slowly, like a plane taxiing to take off," said Mr. Feldmeier, "Then, who he's up and away, and you go with him."

According to the Rev. William McCarthy, a professor of historical theology at Maryknoll, "the key to the rabbi's popularity is that he combines great intelligence with reverence."

Father McCarthy met Rabbi Finkel in 1968 at a summer institute of Jewish studies at Marymount College in Tarrytown. The priest suggested his appointment to Maryknoll's faculty. The appointment was made in 1970, and Rabbi Finkel has been at Maryknoll since.

If genealogy and geography have anything to do with it, Rabbi Finkel's choice of vocation was preordained. His grandfather, his grandfather and his father were all rabbis, and he was born

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Why is a Jew teaching the New Testament at Maryknoll? There are two answers: There is a growing ecumenical spirit at the seminary, and Dr. Finkel has a provocative approach to Bible studies.

The 43-year-old rabbi offers four courses: "The Gospel of Mark," "Psalms," "The Teachings of Jesus and Biblical Interpretation" and "The Religious Experience." His aim in all four is to teach the New Testament in a Jewish religious context.

"Dynamics" is Dr. Finkel's favorite word. "The Bible as literature is O.K.," he says, "because there are so many interesting characters. But a literary approach has no dynamics."

He says he feels that his way of interpreting the New Testament recovers—perhaps replays—the experiences it records.

For example, winding up his course on the gospel of Mark, he speaks of the Passion narrative and the evidence in the Gospels of Jewish beneficence during the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus. He does not end his courses with a lecture on Christmas, but he has this to say of the Christian holy day:

"Christmas was not one of the Church's earliest festivals, and its date wasn't fixed until centuries after biblical times. It is possible that Jesus was actually born in the spring, at the time of the Jewish Passover.

"Certainly Christmas derives from the ancient European celebration of the winter solstice and has some basis in Hanukkah, the Jewish celebration of the rededication of the Temple. The ways Jews relate to the body of Jesus and Christians to the body of Jesus have a similar meaning in experiencing God's presence in their midst. In both traditions it is a period of celebrating the spiritual meaning of the event."

Recently in a lecture for his course on "The Teachings of Jesus," Rabbi Finkel discussed the Last Supper in the light of the Jewish Passover. He was suggesting to his class, which a nun in attendance described as "a mixed bag," that it try to recapture the Jewish climate in which Jesus grew up. By doing so, he said, the class might understand how dynamic, or ever-evolving, church tradition is.

Among some 30 students attending the lecture were the Rev. Kevin O'Rourke, a priest for the last 18 years, on leave from the Mill Hill Mission outside London, and Russ Feldmeier, a second-year

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If genealogy and geography have anything to do with it, Rabbi Finkel's choice of vocation was preordained. His great-grandfather, his grandfather and his father were all rabbis, and he was born in Jerusalem. When he broke with family tradition, it was to turn to teaching. At Maryknoll, they say he represents the New Testament definition of a rabbi: that of teacher.

Dr. Finkel was brought to this country in 1947, when he was 12½ years old. He entered Yeshiva University at 16. There he met and became the protégé of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, an eminent Jewish theologian with whom Menahem Begin conferred during his state visit to Washington. Dr. Soloveitchik inspired his young student to explore such fields as the New Testament.

For a short time after his ordination in 1958, Rabbi Finkel had a congregation in Englewood, N.J. But a restless need to study and to teach soon took him first to the University of London and then to the Sorbonne.

In 1960 he was approached by Prof. Otto Michel of the Institute of Jewish Studies at Germany's Tübingen University. If, in three months at the university, he could master German, would he join the staff? Rabbi Finkel met the challenge and feels he played a part in changing Tübingen's pre-World War II conversionist attitude toward biblical studies.

"I felt the Germans under Hitler weren't Christians," he said. "They had no true biblical consciousness."

He says he is proud of his teaching at Tübingen because he feels it will influence the thinking of future German theologians.

Rabbi Finkel stayed in Germany until 1966, earning his doctorate in philosophy and comparative studies of religion while there. Back in the United States, his standing as an original interpreter of the Bible grew: He taught at Brown and New York Universities and at Amherst College, winning an award along the way from the American Jewish Committee for his continuing ecumenical efforts.

In 1973 he was appointed a full professor at Seton Hall University.

The rabbi is married and lives in Manhattan with his wife and 2½-year-old son.

"I hope that in the future one of my Catholic students at Maryknoll will end up teaching the Talmud in a Jewish seminary," he said. "I think of teaching as a sacred duty."