

Criticize J. D. Vance's *ordo amoris* comments all you want—but please, leave Jews out of it

## **Christian responses that appeal to the gospels have misrepresented both the biblical texts and Jewish ethnocentrism.**

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Century illustration

As a Jewish professor in a Catholic theology department, I try to stay current on public conversations in the Catholic and broader Christian worlds. These usually

have little to do directly with my area of research: the Hebrew Bible in its ancient Near Eastern context, centuries before Christianity or Catholicism existed. However, they matter to my students, my colleagues, and my university—and therefore to me. So when Vice President J. D. Vance, who is Catholic, took to X and [urged](#) his followers to google *ordo amoris*, the Christian idea of the “order of love,” I paid close attention.

Vance was expanding on comments he had made earlier on Fox News, where he’d argued that, according to Christianity, people are responsible first and foremost to those near to them, such as family or citizens of their own country—not to those who are remote from them, such as strangers or citizens of other countries. This, he argued, shows that the Trump administration’s “America First” agenda has a sound Christian basis. By contrast, the notion that we should prioritize helping those remote from us is, he alleged, a leftist inversion of authentic Christianity.

This was an extraordinary invocation of a rather technical Christian idea on the most public of stages. It was also a disturbing escalation of the new administration’s Christian nationalist rhetoric. Progressive Christian theologians—and even some more conservative ones—swiftly pointed out that, actually, *ordo amoris* is not the Latin translation of “America First.” Writing in the *CENTURY*, Mac Loftin [called](#) Vance’s comments “ill-informed and odious,” a cover for racist policies. At *Church Life Journal*, published by the University of Notre Dame, Frederick Bauerschmidt and Maureen Sweeney [urged](#) that “the overall impetus of Christian love . . . ought to widen the scope of our concern to encompass even those who might seem distant or unlovable.” Most notably, Pope Francis himself sent a missive to the US Catholic bishops in which, rather unprecedentedly, he alluded to Vance, [stating](#) bluntly, “The true *ordo amoris* that must be promoted is . . . love that builds a fraternity open to all, without exception.”

I listened to these discussions the way that I always do in such situations: as an interested outsider trying to get the pulse of the community in which I work—and, in this case, to help where I could in fighting an insidious ideology. Unfortunately, I quickly realized that I wasn’t as much of an outsider as I had assumed.

Beyond formal publications and official statements such as those cited above, a different Christian critique of Vance was taking shape. Even though this incident involved a Christian politician talking about a Christian theological idea to a largely Christian audience in a Christian-majority country, the popular discourse—on

progressive social media in particular—was somehow becoming about Jews: The real problem with Vance’s concept of *ordo amoris* was that it reflected the Judaism that Jesus allegedly made it his life’s mission to reject.

For one poignant example, consider [a Facebook post](#) by Brandon Moser, aka “Pastor Brandon,” an Arizona-based progressive Christian social media personality. This post started popping up in my networks after going low-level viral. As of this writing, it has been shared on Facebook almost 40,000 times. Moser wrote,

Vance’s statement might sound like a Christian concept, but it’s actually the exact opposite of what Jesus taught. Nowhere in Scripture does Jesus command us to prioritize love based on proximity, nationality, or citizenship. In fact, He repeatedly destroys that kind of thinking.

In Luke 10, when a lawyer tries to justify who he’s required to love, Jesus responds with the Good Samaritan—a story where the hero is the very outsider Jewish society despised. The point? Love isn’t about who’s closest or most familiar—it’s about who needs it.

In Matthew 5-7, Jesus obliterates tribalism. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). No caveats. No hierarchy.

In Luke 4, Jesus stands in His hometown synagogue and reminds them that God has always shown grace to outsiders—and they try to throw Him off a cliff for it.

Vance’s “Christian concept” isn’t Christian—it’s a survivalist model. It’s what we were taught in disaster relief: start with family, then widen your circles outward. That’s practical for triage, but it’s not biblical love. Jesus doesn’t command us to rank our compassion. He commands us to love without restriction.

This isn’t a theological mistake by JD—it’s gaslighting and politically distorting scripture and the heart of Jesus. Christians are now being told that Jesus’ radical, all-encompassing love is actually a misinterpretation, and that the real Christian way is to love selectively, starting with your own tribe. That’s not the Gospel—that’s nationalism wearing a cross like a fashion accessory.

Moser's overall argument here is the same as that of the writers and public figures that I mentioned above—an argument with which, to reiterate, I myself emphatically agree: Vance's comments are just a way to make reprehensible right-wing nationalism sound theologically virtuous. Moreover, Moser echoes both Loftin and the pope in underscoring the parable of the Good Samaritan as an important rebuke to Vance's misreading.

Where Moser's post differs, however, is in how explicitly he sets up the contrast between true and false "orders of love" as being, more fundamentally, a contrast between Christianity and Judaism. In the first and third of his New Testament examples, he emphasizes the Jewishness of Jesus' opposition, reminding his readers that Samaritans were "the very outsider[s] Jewish society despised" and that the dispute in Luke 4 takes place in a synagogue. In the second example, Matthew 5-7 (the Sermon on the Mount), his reference to "tribalism" is less direct—though it is still Jewish-coded in this context. As a whole, it sure sounds like the takeaway here is that Jesus' primary religious and political contribution was rebuking the narrowness of Jewish ethnocentrism—and that Vance represents a regression to that narrowness. In other words, Vance's view "isn't Christian" because it's . . . Jewish.

It would be one thing if Moser's engagement with Jews and Judaism were anomalous. However, quite the opposite is the case: Moser's post is entirely consistent with the overall progressive American Christian social media ecosystems. It matches antisemitic motifs in probably dozens of critiques of Vance that I have seen or heard in those environments over the past month: Vance as a Pharisee, Vance as an exponent of law over mercy, and so on. Additional examples, with varying degrees of directness, may be found in [this Substack article](#) by John Pavlovitz, [this post on X](#) from Zach Lambert, [this op-ed in the Santa Fe New Mexican](#), and [the comments in this Reddit thread](#). Indeed, I mentioned Moser's post to numerous colleagues who work in Jewish-Christian dialogue, and the response was less indignant outrage than exhausted resignation. They all reported encountering such ideas with similar frequency.

There are two main problems with this critique of Vance. The first is that it misconstrues the biblical texts just as badly as Vance himself misconstrues *ordo amoris*. Let's consider the three that Moser cites—though, again, this isn't about him specifically. All of these passages have, to one extent or another, been features of this discourse.

Contrary to what virtually every Christian will tell you offhand, the parable of the Good Samaritan never says that the target of its critique is Jewish ethnocentrism. Indeed, the counterpoints to the Samaritan hero are not just run-of-the-mill Jews. They're members of the priestly classes specifically (Luke 10:31-32). If anything, the story seems less preoccupied with general insider/outsider status than with specific questions of clerical hierarchy—something that other ancient Jewish writers also grappled with critically. Moreover, progressive Christians who invoke this parable as a model of ethnic openness often conveniently omit that elsewhere, Jesus instructs his disciples, “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt. 10:5-6).

The situation is even clearer in the Sermon on the Mount. It's absolutely true that Jesus enjoins his listeners to love their enemies. However, does this really amount to a progressive message of openness? Consider that earlier in the sermon, Jesus declares,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:17-20)

The overall message of the Sermon on the Mount is certainly radical—but in the sense of radical religious sectarianism, not radical inclusivity. Jesus is narrowing, not widening, the circle of salvation. Indeed, when we situate this passage within the context of broader Jewish polemic at the time, his famous condemnation of Pharisaic “hypocrisy” seems more like an allegation that the Pharisees are too lenient, not too strict!

Finally, Jesus does face violent rejection by Jews in his hometown synagogue. However, to say that they rejected him solely because of his message of openness is highly misleading. Jesus preaches this message while claiming to be the fulfillment of one of Isaiah's messianic oracles and the heir to the prophetic tradition of Elijah

and Elisha. Read in context, it seems to be Jesus's chutzpah of claiming to rebuke the Jews *as a prophet*, not just the substance of the rebuke itself, that incites their rage.

The second major problem with criticizing Vance in terms of Judaism is that it misrepresents Jewish ethnocentrism. To be clear, a certain degree of ethnocentrism, in the form of "chosenness," has indeed been a core idea of Judaism since antiquity and remains so in traditional Judaism today. However, Jews' understanding of themselves as God's chosen people does not automatically entail a supremacist privileging of insiders over outsiders. The actual sources suggest a concept deeply different from the kind of bigoted exclusivism that Vance and the broader MAGA movement espouse.

Many of the biblical foundations of Jewish chosenness directly militate against supremacist interpretations. For example, in Deuteronomy, Moses clarifies that while Israel has a special obligation to worship God, other nations are perfectly permitted to worship their own gods (Deut. 4:19–20). He insists, of course, that those nations' gods are false—but still, Israel should mind their own business and let the other nations do their thing. In another passage, the prophet Amos thunderously affirms Israel's special status, only then to clarify that it is precisely because of that special status that God holds them to such exacting standards—and punishes them accordingly (Amos 3:2). Chosenness is as much a responsibility as a privilege.

Postbiblical Judaism developed these nuances. The Mishnah (ca. 200), the foundational compendium of rabbinic law and teaching, says that the reason God created humanity from a single person was to disqualify any claim to inherent superiority. Maimonides (12th century), the most important Jewish philosopher, states that righteous non-Jews are not excluded from salvation simply because they aren't Jewish. Down to today, when observant Jews perform various commandments, we recite a blessing that identifies those commandments—not some sort of ethnic essence—as the way that God has "sanctified" (that is, distinguished) us.

Now, I will readily admit that Jewish chosenness is vulnerable to supremacist distortions. This is attested in some mystical traditions that see Jewish souls as inherently superior to their non-Jewish counterparts. Today, such thinking is sometimes active in the modern state of Israel, where it is especially dangerous because Jews are the majority. That said, when the whole tradition is taken into account, these positions aren't what dominate. The prevailing concept of Jewish

chosenness emphasizes both the special connection that Jews have with each other *and* the broader commitments that Jews have to all human beings.

Moreover, I would also emphasize that Christian critiques of Jewish ethnocentrism don't offer foolproof protection against supremacism. On the contrary, such critiques are, paradoxically, also vulnerable to chauvinistic abuses. For example, progressive Christians fondly tout Paul's declaration that "there is no longer Jew or Greek" as a slogan of inclusiveness. What they all too often neglect is that Paul doesn't say, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, for all human beings are equal." Rather, he says, "There is no longer Jew or Greek . . . for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Paul doesn't erase insider/outsider distinctions. Instead, he redraws the lines: what places you inside or outside is not your ethnicity but your faith in Christ. If you don't have faith in Christ, you're on the outside—and unlike Jewish chosenness, this framework doesn't present an option for outsiders to do their own thing. Small wonder, then, that some of the worst Christian atrocities, such as forced proselytizing amid colonization, have been committed in the name of Pauline "inclusiveness."

All told, this is where we find ourselves: popular progressive Christian critiques of Vance's cynical and cruel deployment of *ordo amoris* are frequently identifying Vance's position with Judaism—in a manner that misrepresents not only Judaism itself but also the very New Testament texts that they are using to mount the critique. In my view, there is only one explanation for this: many progressive Christians are just as deeply entrenched in the legacy of Christian antisemitism as are their right-wing Christian opponents. The difference is that, unlike some right-wingers, the progressives claim to have repudiated all such bigotries. Accordingly, it's very hard for them to imagine even the possibility that certain ways of invoking Christian scripture to support a progressive vision of justice might be antisemitic. But as Jesus would say: they testify against themselves.

It's difficult to overstate how damaging this phenomenon is to efforts to organize meaningful interreligious resistance to the second Trump administration's callous attacks on democracy, vulnerable populations, and basic human decency. Jews who oppose Trump are desperate to join with Christians in this urgent work—but we simply cannot do so, at least not without serious spiritual harm, when the predominant Christian rhetoric in these spaces construes our own religion as the embodiment of what we are meant to be fighting against. Progressive Christians would never require any other religious minority to pay such a price for solidarity.

Why should Jews alone be expected to bite this bullet?

I'm not asking progressive Christians to abandon their fight for justice. Nor am I asking them to refrain from grounding that fight in their own scriptures. All I'm asking them is this: while fighting that good fight, think closely about what those scriptures say, because all too many of them are implicated in some rather noxious claims about another religious community—mine.

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth,” Jesus warns. “I have not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). Progressive Christians are right to want to reclaim that sword from those who, like J. D. Vance, would use it against the vulnerable and the innocent. But a sword is a sword—even in the hands of those with the best of intentions. Progressive Christians should wield it with care.