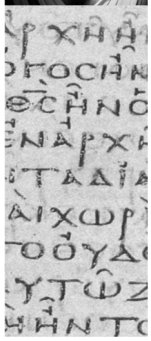

André Chouraqui: The Interfaith Pioneer No One Has Heard Of

Murray Watson
Bat Kol Tri-Diocesan Gathering, Winnipeg – February 1, 2025

Natân André Chouraqui (1917-2007): a man of incredible accomplishments and contributions on so many different levels, in so many fields … and yet hardly anyone today knows who he is or what he did

A figure whose death was mourned globally, by leaders like Shimon Peres and Nicolas Sarkozy

My (almost accidental!) discovery of Chouraqui's multi-volume Biblical translation and commentary in a Jerusalem library as a student at the École Biblique in 2001

My rediscovery of Chouraqui—and especially his translation of the Gospels—as the foundation of my doctoral research at Trinity College, Dublin

Chouraqui's background: descendant of Sephardic Jews who had fled Spain in 1391 to settle in North Africa (today's Algeria)

Arabic was his first language, followed by Hebrew/Aramaic, and French

"Trois langues, trois textes sacrés, trois religions, trois cultures trottaient en permanence dans ma tête" … Three languages, three sacred texts, three religions, three cultures were constantly swirling around in my head

André gradual abandonment of Judaism, in his journey through the French secular school system, including his undergraduate years at the Sorbonne in Paris

The shock of the rise of Hitler and the Nazis; Chouraqui's desire to rediscover his Jewish faith: "If Hitler wanted to kill me for being Jewish, I wanted to be sure that, before I died, I at least understood what being Jewish meant" – enrolled in the Rabbinical Seminary in Paris, until it was closed with the arrival of the Nazis

Chouraqui in the French Underground, and his renewed friendship with his colleague Albert Camus (later one of the great Existentialist philosophers) – André's input into what would eventually become Camus' classic, "The Plague"

In the Underground, André encounters the distinguished French Jewish historian Jules Isaac who, in hiding, is working on a book explaining to Christians why many of their ideas about Jews are actually mistaken – the beginning of a long, fruitful friendship and collaboration

In the late 1940s, Isaac begins the first "Amitiés judéo-chrétiennes" (Jewish-Christian Friendship Associations), and Chouraqui is one of his close collaborators and protégés

Our gathering here this weekend as a direct result of the work of those first interfaith organizations in France, almost 80 years ago

André becomes a social commentator and political activist, and begins a new career as a translator of Biblical and religious texts – his translations gain him wide praise – despite encouragement to do so, he decides NOT to pursue a translation of the entire Bible

Chouraqui works with the Alliance Israélite Universelle as a travelling ambassador for the French Jewish community – he works alongside Dr. René Cassin (one of the principal authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for which he would receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1968)

1958: André and his wife Annette make Aliyah (=settle in Israel), and André quickly becomes involved in Israeli political life, including a friendship with Israeli Prime Minister David Ben Gurion, and a place in Ben Gurion's cabinet. Ben Gurion invites André to be part of a circle of Biblical scholars who meet regularly in Ben Gurion's home to teach him.

André continues his work with Christian and Muslim communities

1965: Chouraqui is a guest of Pope Paul VI in Rome on the day "Nostra Aetate" is finally voted on and approved. That night, his friend Teddy Kollek invites him to join Kollek on a ticket for mayor/deputy mayor of Jerusalem. They win, and André serves as deputy mayor from 1965 to 1973, through both the 1967 and 1973 wars fought by Israel

1973: Exhausted after a bruising political career, Chouraqui decides to return to his "bucket list" project: his own translation of the Bible into French – he draws upon ideas that have been maturing his mind for years, including his desire to translate the New Testament as well (a scandalous idea in the eyes of some Jews, and very surprising to many Christians)

Mid-1970s: publication of the first edition of "La Bible Chouraqui," which becomes an instant best-seller because of its non-traditional way of translating – Chouraqui is invited to the Vatican to present it to the Pope, and receives numerous honourary doctorates and awards for his work

Mid-1980s: Chouraqui publishes a deluxe 10-volume coffee-table edition of his Bible translation, called "L'Univers de la Bible," filled with photographs and detailed commentary and explanation of his translation

1990: Chouraqui completes his "Abrahamic project" by translating the Qur'an into French, becoming probably the only person in history to personally translate the holy books of all three of the Abrahamic religions

Chouraqui's emphasis, in his Gospel translation, on the fundamental Jewishness of Jesus, and of the New Testament

Chouraqui was not was not oblivious to the damage misdirected religion could cause-and yet he remained convinced that, fundamentally, at the heart of each of them, Judaism, Christianity and Islam were faiths that were directed to the highest values of humanity, which promoted compassion and love, prayer and generosity, peace and harmony

André's remarkable behind-the-scenes "shuttle diplomacy," to lay the foundations for the 1979 Camp David Peace Accords between Egypt and Israel – the historic episode with his Israeli passport in Morocco

Chouraqui understood what the Islamic scholar Ibn Rushd (known in the West as Averroes) had said back in the 12th century: "Ignorance leads to fear, fear leads to hate, and hate leads to violence" … and he wanted to offer the antidote to that ignorance, fear, hate, and violence

Some of the touching and powerful tributes to Chouraqui's work at the time of his death in 2007

2021: Jerusalem honours Chouraqui by naming a city square in his honour

We must make the decision: whether we will surrender to the vision of Samuel Huntington, who wrote about an inevitable "clash of civilizations," characterized by fear, conflict, polarization and hatred—or the vision of André Chouraqui, in which God's children, in all their diversity, will find ways to come together in peace and dignity, in respect and wonderment, for a mutual enrichment that inspires and unites, and in the end, offers hope to our troubled world