

JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

MODERN JEWISH THINKERS AND CHRISTIANITY

by

Dr. Geoffrey Wigoder*

The invidious situation of the Jews over the centuries precluded, for the most part, sober assessments of Christianity. Pronouncements tended to be scurrilous or apologetic. Very occasionally there were exceptional situations but the overall atmosphere was not conducive to mutual understanding and respect. The Jew, for his part, was content to be left alone and not bothered with alien theological challenge, and this tradition remains strong among large segments of Jewry today, not least in the State of Israel. When Franz Rosenzweig once was asked, "What do Jews think about Jesus?" he replied, "They don't". This is a hard truth for the Christian to grasp. He by the very nature of his faith is deeply involved in Jewish tradition and he cannot easily comprehend the extraneity of Christianity to the Jewish tradition.

It is only in modern times that free speech has been possible for Jews to any extent. Emancipation broke a long silence but it could not totally eradicate the long trauma of Jewish experience at the hands of Christians, forced – not entirely unwillingly – into introspection and introversion.

When the Jew was allowed out of his ghetto in Western and Central Europe he had to stand up to the challenge of Christianity face to face. Not surprisingly the first reaction was polemic – an extension of apologetics in many ways. But now the angle had to be changed. Christianity had to be reckoned with as a temptation rather than a threat. However, Jews now discovered what Christianity was all about in an atmosphere of free enquiry and could subject it to analysis free of artificial pressures. The pressure in fact was to demonstrate to the Emancipated Jew the superiority of Judaism in contemporary categories. As a result, even the most enlightened Jewish thinkers of the nineteenth century were still largely concerned with polemic, albeit of a refined nature, attacking Christian ideology. For example, the German thinkers Samuel Hirsch, Salomon Formstecher and Salomon Stein-

* Address given to the Jerusalem Rainbow Group, 5 November 1975. The material concerning modern Jewish thinkers is largely drawn from *Christianity through Jewish Eyes* by Walter Jacob, Hebrew Union College Press / Ktav, \$ 12.50.

heim all three sought to show how Judaism towered over Christianity. To them Christianity had an honoured but lesser place and Judaism was superior all round. In particular they attacked what they discerned as pagan elements in Christianity, among which they numbered transubstantiation, the cult of relics and elevation to sainthood, while Steinheim feels that pagan elements are encouraged by the doctrines of the Trinity and original sin "which destroy man's freedom and God's justice". Isaac Mayer Wise in America criticised Christianity for its treatment of the Law because in the final analysis Law is needed: Christianity, he contended, merely developed a different law – the Roman Talmud, the Constantinople Talmud and the Protestant Talmud. Failing to discover a hint of Christianity in the Books of Moses, the prophets or the psalms, he summarised: "The New Testament is the fulfilment of the Old only by the grace of the Church and the bookbinder".

The polemics were inevitable but from our point of view it is important to note a new element – an understanding, even an appreciation – often grudging – of a Christian contribution to civilisation. It is Christianity which from its position of power has disseminated monotheism and Jewish-style ethic to the world. For all its failings, it has – according to these thinkers – prepared the world for the ultimate triumph of the parent (and purer) religion.

The seed for the development of greater understanding was sown at the end of the eighteenth century by Moses Mendelssohn. Already he complained that quarrels between Judaism and Christianity merely lead to the general weakening of religion. He wrote:

"It is unbecoming for one of us openly to defy the other and thereby furnish diversion to the idle, scandal to the simple and malicious exultation to the revilers of truth and virtue. Were we to analyse our aggregate stock of knowledge, we certainly shall concur in so many important truths that I venture to say few individuals of one and the same religious persuasion would more harmonise in thinking. A point here and there on which perhaps we still divide might be adjourned for some ages longer, without detriment to the welfare of the human race. What a world of bliss we would live in did all men adopt the true principles which the best among the Christians and the best among the Jews have in common."

What a path of thorns and blood had still to be trodden before this challenge was taken up in seriousness. However, we do begin to find expressions of greater understanding. "We admire these children of ours", wrote the Italian thinker Elijah Benamozegh. "Christianity and Islam are the northern and southern missions of Judaism to the pagan world", contended Formstecher, while Wise spoke of Christianity's moral strength and ethical insights.

The seeds took a long time to sprout. Jews in Western Europe were still feeling their way: those of Eastern Europe were still ghetto-ised. The

Church took no action to mitigate antisemitism, missionary activities continued apace. The environment was cold. Each viewed the other in terms of rivalry, not partnership.

It is only when we move into the twentieth century that we see the harbingers of the breakthrough. The German philosopher Hermann Cohen felt that Christianity has contributed to the advance of mankind through its emphasis on the ideal man. He sensed a deep relation between Judaism and Christianity – especially in its Protestant manifestations with their emphasis on the believing individual. Jews should assist the process of idealisation as part of the Jewish mission. Incidentally, throughout the post-Emancipation period, Jewish thinkers finding an affinity with Christianity discovered it particularly in Protestantism. The main thrust of the entire development of which we are speaking occurred in Protestant environments – especially in Germany, which in any case was the focus of modern Jewish philosophical thinking until the Holocaust. The vast masses in Eastern Europe were outside these developments.

A word should be said about Claude Montefiore in England who was far-reaching in his sympathetic attitude to Christianity. He felt that, despite its shortcomings, much of the New Testament should be acceptable to Judaism and in some ways even represented an advance. His views provoked a famous essay by the Zionist ideologist, Achad Ha'am, who contended that any compromise between Judaism and Christianity is impossible and that the gospels could only be introduced into a Judaism which has lost its own true spirit and is nothing but a corpse.

A major step forward was the growing scholarly interest by Jews in the life and times of Jesus and Paul. A number of Jewish thinkers now began to devote considerable attention to the founders of Christianity – with Paul generally, but not always, cast in the role of the villain who had detracted from the essentially Jewish message of Jesus. Church history was depicted by Leo Baeck, among others, as a struggle between the Jewish element and the Pauline element. Jesus was described by Buber as “my big brother” and some Jewish scholars created Jesus in their own image: to Montefiore he was a Liberal Jew, to Klausner he was a Revisionist. In any case, the Jewishness of the gospels was increasingly stressed.

The seminal figures in the evolution of modern Jewish attitudes to Christianity are Rosenzweig and Buber. It was Rosenzweig who made the first major attempt to construct a new relationship without polemic, seeing Christianity as one possible way to the truth. He said that in facing each other, Judaism and Christianity must ask for understanding not change. He suggested that truth may appear to man in the Jewish way and in the Christian way, and that in our world there are two truths which in a mysterious way stand united before God. Meanwhile neither religion must attempt to follow the path of the other. Buber similarly felt that we can acknow-

ledge as a mystery that which someone else confesses as the reality of his faith though it opposes our own knowledge. This implied the reality of Christianity as a path to God and the demand that Christianity recognise Judaism as a path to God.

But with all our recognition of a common purpose, we must not blur the differences. We are here to understand each other but at the same time it would be hypocritical to conceal our reservations. Baeck characterised as a major fault of Christianity its letting the individual feel he was the finished man, and thought that the romantic nature of Christianity led to the adoration of saints rather than individual striving for sainthood. Buber stressed that his approach involved the rejection of the Christian claim to a monopoly on the path of salvation. To him, it was justification by faith which separates Christianity from Judaism. He was also concerned at the difficulty of a discussion between a church which does not recognise the mission of Israel and an Israel which is conscious of its mission. How can the mysteries stand side by side? he asked. That is God's mystery, he answered.

Like Buber, we can class our differences as a mystery. We will continue to believe that our way is the way to the truth but the great innovation is the concomitant belief that the other – or other ways – concerning which we will continue to have our reservations, can also culminate in the truth. This insight was remarkably and perceptibly hinted at by the ancient rabbis in their famous dictum that the righteous of all nations have a place in the world to come, which in Christian terminology approximates to achieving salvation.

Jewish thinkers such as Rosenzweig and Buber were ahead of Christian thinkers in their gropings towards this new mutual understanding. It needed the trauma of the Holocaust to shock large parts of the Christian world into the realisation that the Churches had been responsible for teachings and policies that were essentially anti-religious. The Jews, in their turn, went over to the attack and stressed Christian historic guilt in the extermination, notably in the writings of Jules Isaac, and the theme has been developed in subsequent writings. The German-English Reform rabbi, Ignaz Maybaum, understood the message of the Crucifixion as that somebody had to die that others may live, and thus the modern Jew collectively – as the single Jew many centuries ago – must mount the Cross, i. e., undergo persecution and death in order to arouse the conscience of the gentile world. Richard Rubenstein calls on the Jew to renounce his mythic self-image as a chosen people as a consequence of Auschwitz, but he is concerned that whatever the Jews may do, the Christians remain tied to that myth, for without it Jesus is not the climax of revelation. Christians must demythologise their image of the Jew which involves renouncing claims for Jesus as the promised Christ coming out of the body of historic Israel. Emil Fackenheim criticises Christians for being unable to face up to their responsibility

for the Holocaust and for not understanding Jewish survival and existence, for seeing a fossil, not a living religion. Hence most of them find it difficult to recognise Israel as a living state. Many more instances could be cited. But it is significant that nevertheless all these thinkers, each in his own way, see the potential strengthening of Jewish-Christian bonds in the modern world. To Fackenheim, both Judaism and Christianity must expose themselves to the secular world – that is where the action is – and this common struggle will be the supreme link.¹

There are, of course, divisive elements which must be faced. On the Christian side, one of the most difficult is missionising. Rosenzweig said that as Jew he could view Christianity impartially since no missionary thoughts were involved but Christianity always had to stop its understanding of Judaism at the point where its essential missionary impulse became dominant. In the past couple of decades sophisticated Christian thought has been grappling with the issues involved and although only a minority is sophisticated, major modifications have been made in many Churches. However, the missionary goal remains a major barrier and is especially suspect in Orthodox Jewish circles,

On the Jewish side, issues connected with nationalism complicate the Christian connection. Rosenzweig pointed out that it was the Jewish national mystique which led it to abandon its missionary effort and induced a natural tolerance. Even Rosenzweig, who was not sympathetic to modern Jewish nationalism, stressed that the sense of nationhood remains a natural part of Judaism. Although aspects of nationalism trouble current Jewish-Christian relations the world over, it is we in Israel who must be the focus in this crucial issue. Without justifying all manifestations of Jewish nationalism (some of which can pose threats to Judaism itself), it is its essence which is the crux, and this involves the very nature of Judaism. The failure to comprehend this was the big blow in interfaith relations in 1967 and in 1973.

With so many divisive factors, what have we got going for us? The truth is that we are being brought closer together initially by negative developments – the same ones postulated by Mendelssohn almost two centuries ago. We are being brought together not only by the post-Holocaust situation but also by what is being called the post-Christian situation. For the first time, Christianity finds itself on the defensive antithesis of dialogue. Reconciliation should be linked with dignity – as Baeck said, without dignity there are no noble relations and no real relations. Genuine reconciliation can only emerge from real and profound understanding. It is impossible under conditions of uncertain friendship and the genuineness will only be apparent when the chips are down, under crisis conditions. As Rabbi Jacob

¹ For the post-Holocaust thinkers, see *Jewish Philosophers*: edited Steven T. Katz (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 205 ff.

suggests in the book cited at the outset, meaningful encounters today can perhaps best develop in the manner of Rosenzweig and his friends - in close intimate discussions characterised by frankness and deep friendship. True dialogue requires a level of understanding at which no subject is considered too sacred - or too sensitive - for study and discussion. This well describes the objects of the Rainbow Group in Jerusalem and a number of other encounters whose potential impact is far greater than their actual scope, and whose still small voice is making an impact on the interfaith encounter.

Dr. Geoffrey Wigoder is editor-in-chief of the Encyclopedia Judaica