

## JEWISH CHRISTIAN RELATIONS PAST AND PRESENT

ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

### FORMS OF PSEUDO-RELIGION IN THE GERMAN *KULTURBEREICH* PRIOR TO THE HOLOCAUST

by

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#### *A universal crisis of man*

The actual Holocaust – the mass annihilation of European Jewry which started approximately in spring 1941 or perhaps with the invasion of Soviet Russia, was officially proclaimed at the Wannsee Conference of 20 January 1942, and continued throughout the Second World War – took place not in Germany proper but mainly in Eastern Europe. Nor was the Holocaust carried out by Germans only; Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, Balts, Russians, Roumanians, etc., etc. also actively participated. On the other hand, the ideology which was to motivate and justify the Nazi plan of the conquest of Eastern Europe in general, and in particular the Holocaust, including its entire framework of scientific planning and administrative implementation, was German proper, germinating in the civilisation of the German *Kulturbereich*. Therefore any attempt at understanding, or at least studying, the Holocaust (for surely we lack the necessary ontological tools for its understanding) has to differentiate between these two historical realms of civilisation: the German *Kulturbereich* (including Austria and some other parts of Central Europe and the Balkans) which supplied the entire framework for the Holocaust, and the Eastern European area which was not, 'or less, exposed to Nazi ideology and policy. This means that the actual part played by Eastern Europe may be looked upon either as the result of traditional antisemitism, racial and religious prejudice, or in terms of projections of psychological need-dispositions, or, as some would have it, as the result of situations created by a belated process of industrialisation. German participation, however, to which we shall limit ourselves here, cannot be reduced to the antisemitic factor only, be its motivations religious, political, psychological or socio-economic.

The rich and detailed archival documentation which is at our disposal nowadays, including the Nuremberg trials and the Eichmann trial, has shown

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that not all the leaders of the Nazi regime were motivated solely or primarily by antisemitism. This applies even to some of the commanders of the SS, among them Adolf Eichmann and Rudolf Höss the commander of Auschwitz. Moreover, the entire framework which made the Holocaust possible, including i. a. the ideology justifying the conquest of Europe and the destruction of all *überstaatliche* powers such as Roman Catholicism and “Marxian Bolshevism” (powers which, according to the Nazi ideology, were symbolised and actually embodied by the Jew), and the doctrine of dissociation of the whole web of ideology, science, technology and administration from moral criteria, was not simply another aspect of antisemitism. It was a universal crisis of man, his religion, his culture and the forms of his thought and action which brought about a total “devaluation of values”, a nihilism which Nietzsche had predicted with deep agony and much pain: “dass die obersten Werte sich entwerten – es fehlt die Antwort auf das ‘Warum?’”. This crisis was rooted not in the *Kultur* but in the *Kulturpessimismus* of the 19th century, as Fritz Stern correctly pointed out. It was a crisis that culminated not in civilisation but – as Dietrich Eckardt, Hitler’s teacher, proclaimed – in the Nazi revolution against the civilisation of the 20th century. It was this devaluation of values rather than their realisation which paved the way towards the Holocaust. Therefore the Holocaust should be studied not as a chapter in the history of the Jew only, but rather as a chapter in the history of civilisation which is reflected in the history of Jews and of Judaism.

### *Pseudo-religion*

Among the universal crises that were reflected in the Holocaust, or perhaps that resulted in the Holocaust, let us limit ourselves to one aspect only: the replacement of religion by a pseudo-religion (*Ersatzreligion*) or – in terms of a structural analysis and of an analysis of forms – the Reversal of Meanings. In the Third Reich, as in the entire tradition of the *Kulturpessimismus* from the middle of the 19th century on, concepts of religion were not simply invalidated, nor were the socio-institutional functions served by them such as those cohesive factors that hold together the social structure and ensure its functioning. The Nazis retained these concepts and their functions as a legitimate part of their racial theory and, after depriving them of their authentic religio-theological content, turned them into political expedients to be used in their attack against humanism and religion.

The theological concepts of God, redemption, sin and revelation were now used as anthropological and political concepts. God became man, but not in the theological New Testament sense of the incarnation of the Word: “and the Word became Flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14), or in accordance with Paul’s understanding of the incarnation of God in Christ in whom “the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). In the new

conception, God becomes man in a political sense, as a member of the Aryan race whose highest representative on earth is the Führer. Communication with the Führer became Communion. This transfiguration took place through public mass-meetings which were staged and celebrated as sacred cults as well as by means of education, indoctrination and inculcation of discipline. As a result, a personal identification with the Führer was made possible in terms of the Father of the State, the Son of the Race and the Spirit of the *Volk* (*Volksgeist*).

This change in the essential meaning of the concepts of God and Man was effected, from the standpoint of cognition, by converting the relative into the absolute and from the standpoint of theology, by transferring the Pauline conception (Eph. 4:24; Col. 3:10) from the level of metaphysics and eschatology to that of nationality and statehood. This radical change from metaphysics to the realm of the physical was articulated in the form of a return to the worship of life and power, of sun, mountains, rivers and forests, as the National Socialist *Studentenbund* proclaimed in 1934, quoting early 19th century romanticism: "Germanic soil . . . the promised land, the kingdom of priests and the holy *Volk* . . .". Nazi mythology exalted man, the old pagan Adam, *das Urmenschliche im Ur-Germanen*, as the spiritual Man, as the Son of God in whom the German becomes transformed into "a new creation" (cf. Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17) by overcoming death, meaning by overcoming Christianity, western civilisation and their origin: the Jew.

Similarly, the theological concepts of sin and redemption were transferred to a legal category of administrative regulations demanding outer conformity and inner obedience. The traditional conception of sin and redemption, common to all currents of Christian thought, held that man's redemption, and hence his eschatological existence, depends on his faith: "The righteousness of God has been manifested . . . through faith in Jesus Christ; since all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God they are justified by grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:22-24). In the totalitarian Nazi regime the concepts of sin and redemption were used by the State or the Party as means to convert man into a loyal subject whose allegiance is assured by his constant fear not only of violating some concrete ordinance or governmental decree, but of simply deviating from the official ideology. The Christian belief that man could be saved through faith in the forgiveness of Jesus who died for his sins "so that the sinful body might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved in sin" (Rom. 6:6) was transferred from the theological to the secular, political plane. Even the comforting assurance of the believer that his sins shall be forgiven and that he shall be found worthy of the purifying influences of grace could now be gained only by the individual's complete identification with the State, the Party and the superior Aryan race.

One of the typical documents is the following lecture by Professor Alfred Baeumler, delivered to a group of N. S. D. A. P. leaders, apparently a short time after the law *zur Sicherung der Deutschen Evangelischen Kirche* of 24 September 1935 had been published. The original manuscript, as found in the collection of unpublished documents put at my disposal by the late historian, Eleonore Sterling, does not include the references to the biblical sources. They are included here between brackets, with some additional remarks, in order to point out those sections in which the transformation of theology into political mythology has explicitly and systematically taken place.

“Once . . . it had pleased God to choose the race of Israel as a people unto himself. With it he set up a covenant. This, however, was done by way of preparation and as a sign for that new covenant which was to be ratified in Christ. ‘Behold the days shall come, saith the Lord, and I will make a new Covenant . . . I will give my law in their bowels, and I will write it in their heart’ (Jer. 31:31-34). Christ instituted this new Covenant in his blood (cf. 1 Cor. 11:25) by calling together a people made up of Jew and Gentile, making them one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit (cf. Eph. 2:11-22). The time has arrived to conclude this process of salvation by way of a dialectical negation. The blood is now our blood, pure and racial; the people, once of flesh, then out of a combination of water and the Spirit (cf. John 3:5-6) is now the new chosen race, a royal priesthood to be called to rule over the world . . . You who in times of Jews and Christians were called to be a Holy People yet remained chained to your Old Testamental impurity . . . are now no longer the People of God (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9-10) but the Race.

“The Reich our life (cf. Col. 3:4 – instead of ‘Christ our life’), and our soil and blood (instead of ‘creation itself’) will be delivered from its slavery to corruption, meaning from its impurity, its Jewishness, into the freedom of the glory of the sons of our Führer (instead of the ‘sons of God’ – cf. Rom. 8:21). We are the redemption of the world, sent forth into the world as the light of the world and the salt of the earth . . . (cf. Mt. 5:13-16).

“The uniqueness of the Aryan race is the manifestation of the Volk-Spirit; since this spirit is from and for the *Volk*, precisely by virtue of its elitist essence ‘it cannot be given to everyone for profit’ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:7). These charismatic gifts are uniquely Aryan, and it is enough to look at the Jew – at his history of suffering (*Leidensgeschichte*), the Jew who is the very embodiment of moral decay physical perversion, spiritual petrification and aesthetical degeneration – in order to realise that only the counter-Jew, the anti-Jew, is the

one on whom the charisma of world leadership, of life, power and destiny has been bestowed ...”.

### *Reversal of meanings*

At this point let us try to check the applicability of this analysis to the study of religio-historical aspects of the Holocaust. The Holocaust as such remains, at least in our days, incomprehensible; yet forms of thought and action which paved the way towards the Holocaust may perhaps become, if not understood, explicable. We have limited ourselves to one of these forms, one which we have suggested calling the reversal of meanings, or transformation, or transfiguration. Values that had previously, in monotheism and consequently in western civilisation, been regarded as relative now became absolute; and values that had formerly been considered absolute, and were incorporated in the web of religious life by means of sacraments, metaphors or allegories, now became relative. Phenomena with an imminent historical essence were lifted to a meta-historical place. Means were converted to ends, and ends were endowed with absolute authority insofar as they sanctified the means. Freedom was interpreted not as a freedom for, but as a release from, the scrutiny of reason, the restraint of logic or the restrictive form of personal responsibility. Consequently man (the Adam) – and his arche-type the Jew – was transfigured from a subject created in the image of God and endowed with inalienable rights, into an object deprived of his divine image and natural status.

It is this process of transformation which became symbolised by the Jew. The Jew was not annihilated for what he was, but for what he represented. He stood for the pre-transformation, for all that was about to be transformed by the Nazi revolution. Yet in this revolution not only that which was symbolised was to be transformed; the symbol itself underwent a total reversal of meaning and of structural function. The symbol itself was divested of its quality of standing for someone beyond, or of standing for “the Beyond”, pointing to it, substituting for it, covering what can never be uncovered and disclosing something about that which in itself is to remain concealed. The symbol instead of representing that which cannot be entirely present now became identical with its own actuating source. The Führer no longer symbolised the general will, the essence of the nation, the idea of holiness; he himself became the general will, the essence, the idea of holiness.

By the same process of transfiguration, the Jew no longer symbolised anti-Nazism; he was the incarnation, the embodiment of anti-Nazism – hence he himself had to be annihilated, not symbolically but rather physically.

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