

ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH IN FACE OF GOD

(A PROTESTANT POINT OF VIEW)

by

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In spite of all changes which Protestantism embodied compared with the Catholic Church, no basic change had occurred in its position towards Judaism. In the very beginning of the Reformation period there were high expectations of a change, both among Jews and Christians. Some Jews, i. a. Rabbi Eliezer Halevi of Jerusalem¹ interpreted the Reformation as a movement in the direction of the acceptance of the Torah of Israel by the Gentiles. And in the same vein the young Luther (in his treatise of 1532, "That Jesus was born a Jew") thought that the time was near for the Jews to accept the Gospel and to be incorporated in the Church. The greater was the disenchantment when these high expectations did not come true. Disappointed by the stubbornness of the Jews who continued to reject Christ, Luther wrote his violently anti-Jewish treatise, "Concerning the Jews and their Lies", which became in subsequent centuries a dangerous instrument of antisemitism. Also the Jewish expectations with regard to the Reformation were short-lived.

Luther saw first of all the discontinuity between Israel and the Church, and strongly emphasised the contrast between the Law and the Gospel. In the Calvinistic Reformation there existed a more moderated attitude towards the Jews than in the Lutheran tradition, mainly because of a basic tenet of Calvin's theology which stressed the continuity between Israel and the Church. For Calvin, Jesus Christ had not concluded a new covenant which replaced the old, but he had renewed the one, eternal covenant, so that members of the Church could live under God's covenant with Abraham. Therefore Calvin shows a more positive appreciation of the Law than does Luther. Although there were no doubts in Calvinistic circles that the Church had taken over the prerogatives of the Jews within the Covenant after their rejection of Christ, negative feelings towards the Jews were tempered by the belief that the Jews were not rejected by God, but remained "God's beloved

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¹ cf. the highly interesting study by Prof. Hayyim Hillel Ben-Sasson: The Reformation in Contemporary Jewish Eyes. The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Proceedings, Vol. IV, 12 (Preprint), Jerusalem 1970, pp. 239-326.

for the sake of their forefathers" (Romans 11:28). Hence the relative tolerance towards the Jews in the Calvinistic Netherlands and Cromwell's permission for the Jews to return to England.

It is, however, clear that in the Churches of the Reformation the traditional theological position towards the Jewish people had not essentially been changed. Here also Judaism was conceived as an anachronism, as a phenomenon that had outlived its time, and was bound either to disappear or to merge in the Church. As, however, the Jewish people continued to exist as a separate entity outside the Church, it was either subjected to the Church's hate or to her love, to the stick or to the carrot. This ambivalence is one of the basic features in the Church's relationship to the Jews. As regards the element of hate, the sad truth is that without the centuries-long "teaching of contempt" from the side of the Church, the Holocaust possibly could not have occurred. Luther's "love" towards the Jewish people, as expressed in his earlier writings, and the limited tolerance towards the Jews in the Netherlands were theologically motivated by the hope of the Jews' conversion to the Church. That such a "love" could easily turn to hate is clearly demonstrated by Luther. A peculiar variation of "love for Jews" is found among fundamentalist Protestant circles who take a very positive stance towards the State of Israel. They see in the Restoration of Israel a necessary stage in the Divine Salvation Plan: the second coming of Christ will be preceded, according to them, by the ingathering of the Jewish People in the Land of Israel, and subsequently the Jews will recognise Jesus as Messiah and the last hindrance to the ultimate redemption of the world will disappear. This sympathetic attitude towards the restoration of Israel is thus closely linked with and conditioned by the expectation that the Jewish people will accept Jesus as Messiah.

In his introduction to Johan M. Snoek's study on the Church's attitude towards the Jews during Hitler's rule, Dr. Uriel Tal has made the observation that the Christian concern for the fate of the Jews even in the days of the Holocaust was unavoidably accompanied by an interest in their salvation, but this salvation was conceived by the Christians in terms that were unacceptable to the Jew as long as he wished to adhere to Judaism as a religion, a people and an unfulfilled eschatology. The Church would not acknowledge Judaism as a religion in its own right and on its own terms, but insisted that a Jew who became a Christian was merely fulfilling his predestined role; such a Jew did not leave his faith, he returned to his true faith. There were certainly among Christians people who acknowledged the Jewish right of freedom of conscience and religion, but this was done on general humanitarian or moral grounds.² The challenge inherent in Tal's

² Uriel Tal, Introduction to: Johan M. Snoek, *The Grey Book* – a collection of protests against anti-semitism and the persecution of Jews issued by non-Roman Catholic Churches and Church leaders during Hitler's rule, Assen (Holland), 1969, pp. xx - xxiv.

conclusion lies in the assumption that Christians as *Christians*, when they base themselves on Christian-theological considerations, are not able to give room for the Jews to exist in their own right and on their own terms. Would not this mean that the inevitable conclusion must be that Christianity is in principle a threat to Judaism and that therefore a weak and watered-down Christianity is better for the Jews than a robust and convinced Christianity?

This is a very penetrating question. Are Christians able to recognise not only humanistically but also religiously the right of the Jew to exist, on his own terms? In other words: have Jews and Christians any other choice than to be at constant strife with each other in an everlasting "struggle over the heritage"? For it seems that Jews and Christians start from two contradictory, mutually exclusive positions, both of which are claimed to be the true understanding of God. The crucial issue between Judaism and Christianity is here the Christian claim that God became man. "For Israel, God *cannot* be man or become man. For the Church, God *can* be man and he *does* become flesh. Here is a deep gulf: for Judaism God's holiness and power, so to speak, forbid him to be man; for Christianity God's holiness and power, so to speak, enable him to be man."³ Two different understandings of God are here at stake, Which understanding of God is the true one? If the Jewish understanding of God is the true one, the Christians are idolaters; if the Christian understanding is the true one, then the Jews are blind and unfaithful and did not pay attention to God's gracious visitation to them. Who shall decide? Or is our language perhaps wrong? Can we speak of "understanding of God"? Is God not beyond any understanding? Perhaps we must not speak in static terms like "understanding of God" but tell a story, in the way Franz Rosenzweig called for a "method of story-telling" when dealing with God's revelation.⁴ How does the story run? Like this: God was in search of man, and he found Abraham and the people of Israel, who responded to his call from generation to generation and this response took the form of the faith and way of life of Israel in its development throughout the generations in trial and error, and God continued his search for man: through a son of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, brought up in the faith of Israel, he extended his search to men and women outside the limits of the People of Israel, and it so happened that the response to this extended search of God for man took the form of a different community, with a different faith and a different way of life, which was not incorporated in the People of Israel; this new community tried hard to disinherit this people from God's promises and to absorb it into itself, but despite all

³ A. Roy Eckardt, *Elder and Younger Brothers - The Encounter of Jews and Christians*, New York, 1967, p. 159 (n.).

⁴ Franz Rosenzweig, *Das neue Denken*, in: *Kleinere Schriften*, Berlin 1937, p. 383.

compelling Christian doctrine, the People of Israel and the Church of Jesus Christ continued to exist side by side until this day, each in their own awareness of faithfulness to God who has gone in search of man. So is the story. We do not know why it happened like this. But after all that the Jewish people went through, we cannot believe that all this is without Divine purpose, but have the feeling of standing before a mystery.

Out of his own self-understanding a Jew or a Christian can apparently find no convincing way to reconcile his own tradition with the other's; that is to say, neither one can make room for the other in his own system of belief and practice. A Jew can only recognise a Gentile Christian as a son of Noah but not as a son of Abraham, and for a Christian it seems very difficult to admit that there could be salvation outside Christ. For the concrete system of belief and practice of either one is basically a crystallisation of the way he and his community has authentically experienced God's search for man.

The only thing that a Jew or a Christian can do is to meet the other and to tell the other of what he authentically experiences as God's call to himself and his community, but also of his gropings and doubts in following up this call of God. And all this without any desire to impose on the other or to win over the other to enter into his tradition, because both trust that God is in search of man and draws man to himself in the way that He – and not man, whether Jew or Christian – wants or sees fit. Such an attitude requires a maximum of humbleness and faith in God, instead of faith in oneself or boasting of one's own tradition. It means that we consider ourselves and our theology small in face of God who is in search of man. Only in this way can Jews and Christians accept each other religiously on their own terms and in their own authenticity.

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