

INTERPRETATION AND DOGMATISM

To the Editor:

The interpretation of the Law and of the Messiah lay at the heart of primitive Christianity's reflection about the person of Jesus. It was also in this area that the conflict developed, first between the Jewish leaders and Jesus, and later between the Jewish and Christian faiths. Those who believed in Jesus continued to walk in "the Way," as Christianity was first called (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22). The Jews, who did not believe in Jesus, held fast to their convictions in spite of the fact that it was an intra-Jewish movement. Why? This question can naturally be answered in a number of different ways. I will try here, if not to answer, at least to provide a few aspects of an attempt to formulate an answer.

I write this inspired by an article by Professor David Flusser ("The Jewish Christian Schism," *Immanuel* (1983) 16: 32-49; 17: 30-39). He raises there a problem that is really valid for all people, beyond the borders to which he confines himself in the article. He begins by declaring that "Christianity is in the peculiar position of being a religion which, because of its Jewish roots, is obliged to be occupied with Judaism, while a Jew can fully live his Jewish religious life without wrestling with the problems of Christianity" (16: p. 32).

This declaration is from some points of view totally correct. But it does not exclude the possibility of discussing this problem: Christianity's dependence on Judaism and Judaism's problem of having begotten a "daughter." If Christianity really succeeded in rejecting Marcionism, it presents Judaism with a problem. Has Judaism nothing corresponding to Christian Marcionism? If Judaism does not

wish to have anything to do with Christianity — which can be fully understood from an historical point of view — as Christianity once wanted to have nothing to do with Judaism, there still remains a question of fundamental importance: why did Judaism begot a *daughter-religion*? Was it really a daughter that was born with the emergence of Christianity? Flusser tackles the problem of Christianity's beginning, and reminds us that in the history of mankind new religions have come out of the old (but how often?). The old did not disappear with the beginning of the new, nor was it dependent upon the new.

This is naturally an interesting question from the point-of-view of religious phenomena. But I think that in the Judaeo-Christian context we must reflect more seriously upon our problem than merely to see it as a "natural phenomenon."

The apostolic Scriptures, including the Gospels, are strongly characterized by new interpretations of the Scriptures — never unknown in the Jewish faith. But the conflict became a fact. At the same time, we must remember that the Jewish tradition, represented by the classical rabbis, had begun a process of codification under the *tannaim* at the Academy in Javne. At the same time, the Greek-oriented Church fathers began a process of Christian interpretation. Perhaps one can say that there were tendencies to synthesize on both sides.

The Church has often accused the Jews of not understanding the revelation, while at the same time Jews have accused Christians of wrongly interpreting or changing the Old Testament Scriptures to their own advantage.

May I remind you of something that, in my opinion, is important to remember:

1. Inherent in the very power of revelation there seems to be a power that leads to new interpretations and new orientations. This can be very trying to those who pietistically desire to preserve and consolidate tradition. In the history of revelation, there has often seemed to be a certain conflict between priest and prophet; tradition and innovation; institutionalism and dynamism; Temple and Way; objectivity and experience; official position and witness; recitation and *kerygma* (proclamation). Both Jews and Christians have good cause to ponder this.

2. We cannot exclude the possibility that the Church, too, may need to allow the spirit of revelation to shine on her traditions. During the Church's centuries-old existence, it seems that the pattern of revelation that shaped the Scriptures and gave the Church its teachings became rigid in some ways. Reforms and new innovations have forced their way out, in spite of opposition, and have renewed the life of the Church. The problem is: Why must this result

in the emergence of sects? Science changes when new facts come to light or better theories are presented. Only the area of religion seems doomed to the formation of sects. We have the whole and complete truth and cannot bend an inch in our convictions! Why do scientists behave more reasonably than religious leaders?

I cannot escape the fact that, when the Church accuses the Jews of being locked into their positions and not understanding the dynamics of salvation-history or salvation-revelation, that have forced new interpretations, then the Church has good reason to examine her own history. She must ask herself if all the burnings of heretics were morally defensible and justifiable by the dynamics of its religious life.

I think that the problem raised by Flusser in the above-mentioned article should lead to serious discussion between Jews and Christians on just this subject: how shall God's people on earth manage revelation.

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Immanuel 19 (Winter 1984/85)