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SOME PRESENT-DAY TENDENCIES IN JEWISH THOUGHT

EPOCH-MAKING events are taking place in Jewry. While many in the older generation still cling to the forms of the past, young, vigorous and adventurous Jews are forsaking the broken cisterns, which no longer furnish them living water, and are turning to "other gods", in various cults, Freemasonry, Theosophy, Christian Science, and even Confucianism and Hinduism. Whence come these changes? The younger generation, educated with American youth in the secondary schools and colleges of this country, has been profoundly influenced by the same rationalism, the same secular, even anti-religious, spirit of science as it is frequently taught, the same irreligious psychology, which have undermined the faith of thousands brought up in Christian homes. Futhermore, the younger generation feels that the Judaism it has known is a religion of external trivialities, having neither practical bearing nor authority for life in a so-called scientific age. Lastly, the steady stream of orthodoxy which flowed into American Jewry from Russia was cut off by the World War; for in its aftermath came the practical cessation of immigration from that country. In Russia itself the ascendancy of Lenin and the rise of communism with its concomitant atheism dealt a devastating blow to the synagogue by weaning thousands of Jews from the faith of their fathers. With the breaking down of the old tradition came a changing attitude toward Christ, and it is this which we purpose to examine. But we believe an understanding of the present can best be achieved by first turning our attention to its roots in the past.

I

FORCES THAT HAVE MOULDED THE JEW IN THE PAST

Christians well realize that the causes of the present blindness of Israel lie in the remote past. When the High Priest smote the Saviour on the cheek and the Jews spoke those

fateful words, "His blood be upon us and upon our children", their national fate was sealed for centuries. The destruction of the Temple and of the Holy City under Titus in A.D. 70 left to the Jew in the flickering embers of that awful conflagration only the hope of restoration. During the following nineteen centuries of exile Jews were subjected to the fiercest persecution in the so-called Christian countries, which in many cases endeavoured to exterminate the race. In a sermon delivered on Easter Sunday, 1935, in the Free Synagogue in New York, Rabbi Stephen S. Wise declared that Jesus was a Jew immortal whose teachings the Christian world has disobeyed, thus "crucifying the Jewish people for 1,900 years". In another sermon he said that the persecution of the Jews through many sad and Christless centuries constituted a denial and repudiation of Christianity. Since the destruction of Israel was not in the plan of God, the Jew successfully withstood his enemies, but in the terrific struggle for survival he took on certain characteristics, such as tenacity, aggressiveness, and adroitness for which he can hardly be blamed. The French lawyer, Bernard Lazare, renowned for his defence of Dreyfus, fittingly describes this:

"For ages and ages the Jew has been demoralized by the Christian. It is the Christian who made him into a merchant and a usurer. It is the Christian who sought out the Jew to transact business for the growth of his cities, for the increase of his capital, for his own exploitations. He himself avoided all risks, since on the day of reckoning he threw the Jew to the angry mob and confiscated the Jew's possessions. He swallowed the whole profit. Next he drove the Jew out or had him massacred until it suited his purpose to have him come back."¹

Rabbi Abraham I. Feldman of Hartford, Connecticut, in a radio address delivered April 2nd, 1938, declared what we hear Jews telling us daily, when we present the claims of Christ to them:

"Speaking as a Jew, I ask you to believe me when I say that I know what the Cross has meant to believers through the centuries. I know that the simple and the learned, the grieving and the rejoicing, the toiling and the driven, behold in the Cross of Christ the symbol of a love that is sacrificial, the sign of a hope that is redeeming, the token of an inner peace which the world could neither give nor take away. But I want you to know also, that to the Jew the Cross of Christ represents no such sacrificial love, no such redeeming hope, no such token of inner peace. To the Jew, the Cross is the symbol of persecution, of oppression, of discrimination, of the pyre and the gibbet. It is by the sign of that Cross of Peace that hundreds of Jewish communities were annihilated, thousands of Jews were slaughtered, millions of Jews robbed of life and happiness, by those who failed to grasp the significance for Christians of that drama of which the Lenten Season is the monitor and Easter Day the culmination."

¹ *Anti-semitism, Its History and Causes*, translated, from the French, The International Library Publishing Co., New York, 1903, p. 286.

Throughout the ages a strict prohibition on reading the New Testament has kept the Jew in dense ignorance of Christ. In addition, the slanderous sayings about Christ in the older editions of the Talmud by rabbis, whose authority none dared to question until recent years, made the Jews despise and reject the Nazarene in the fifty or more generations that have passed since the Jerusalem mob so flippantly chose a robber rather than the Son of God. No rays of light from the Sun of Righteousness pierced the impenetrable fog by which an impotent and often corrupt church obstructed the vision of Jewry. In a recent sermon Rabbi Wise declared: "Christendom has hidden the face of Christ from us." Little wonder that the centuries saw an apparently impregnable wall rising against the gospel.

Whenever here and there a Jew accepted Christ, he was, and in many quarters still is, considered by his people a traitor to both the nation and the God of the Fathers, while Christians consider him as a curio. Often he is not wanted in the church. The eminent professor Charles Singer of the University of London says in his pamphlet, *The Christian Opposed to the Jews* :

"No question of the character of Jesus, which the educated Jew respects and understands too in a special way, can enter into this question. It is the conduct of the organized Christian Churches which is the point at issue."

Flinging a charge of indifference to the plight of many Hebrew-Christians into the face of the Church, he goes on to say:

"Over and above all these things, Jews are completely astounded by the action, or rather want of action, of the Christian Churches toward the victims of 'racial' persecution, who, while of Jewish origin, adhere to the Christian faith. Tens of thousands, nay, hundreds of thousands, of these 'Non-Aryans' have been brought up in the Christian faith, and know nothing of any other. Hardly any help has been forthcoming for them from Christian sources, and the overwhelming proportion of their relief—spiritual, as well as material—has been left to the benevolence of the terribly overburdened Jewish groups in various countries outside Germany. When Jews find themselves compelled, in mere humanity, to succour their Christian brethren, victims of persecution by those who are still nominally Christian, it is clear that not only can they not regard the profession of Christianity with favour, but they cannot treat it even with seriousness."

II

THE SPIRITUAL BANKRUPTCY OF THE JEW

Jewish history since the rejection of Christ has shown the truthfulness of His words, "For without Me ye can do nothing". The glory of the Talmud is largely of the past. This fortress,

which the rabbis deemed indestructible, is losing more and more of its power. It is safe to say that to-day the Old Testament is not found in most Jewish homes, to say nothing of its being read. While Judaism is idealized, and while we are told that there is nothing in Christianity which it does not already contain, it is lacking in power and spiritual vitality. When his idea of God became hazy and vague, the Jew lost his consciousness of sin. And with that has disappeared any sense of the need of atonement and of a saviour. To the majority of modern Jews the Day of Atonement is a kind of memorial day on which they call to mind the age-old religious tradition of their fathers; as a time when their personal sin finds atonement, that fellowship with a holy God may be unbroken, there is no thought. According to Rabbi Wise, in New York City's population of over 2,000,000 Jews, not more than 50,000 attend the synagogue. Twenty years ago Ralph Philip Boas, a Jewish teacher, poignantly described the sad spiritual condition in Jewry. What was true then is doubly true to-day.

"The sad result is that in prosperity the Jewish self-consciousness ceases to be religious and becomes merely racial. The elements that add something of dignity, grace and spiritual power to even the most sordid congregation of ghetto Jews disappear. And with the reverence of the traditional synagogue service has departed the discipline which strengthened the lives of the faithful. The minute regulations of the dietary laws, the diversity of the ancient formulas of worship, the tortuous and crabbed study of Talmudic lore, had this advantage: they stiffened the backbone and strengthened the faculties of a race which might otherwise have been crushed under the heaviest burden that a race has ever borne. But the discipline of the ancient law has departed. Spacious synagogues stand empty. Having outlived poverty and persecution, the well-to-do Jew is left in a state of good-natured and satisfied religious apathy. The Jew has always prided himself on his common sense; his common sense now does him the ill turn of banishing whatever mysticism Judaism may once have had. And without mysticism there can be no genuine religious enthusiasm; it takes more to see God than the ability to distinguish between profit and loss."¹

Rabbi Stephen S. Wise thus laments the spiritual impotence of both orthodox and reform Judaism:

"The agony of Israel is that we bear ourselves for the most part as if there were nothing to safeguard, nothing more to cherish, nothing left to preserve, and as if there were to be no future—this the end. Religion! Are we not becoming its destroyers rather than its guardians? There is something which calls itself religion current in certain smug circles of Jewish life here and in other lands. For the most part it is nothing more than a poor pulseless imitation or simulation of a decorously unvital mysticism. And save for this there is little, if any, so-called religion in the household of Israel—orthodox being almost as dead as reform."

¹ *The Problem of American Judaism*, Atlantic Monthly, January, 1917.

III

SINGS OF A NEW DAWN

The Apostle Paul definitely predicts a new dawn for Israel—" . . . blindness in part has befallen Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in, and so all Israel shall be saved " (Rom. xi. 25-26). The first rosy flush of this dawn is already with us. At no time in history have so many books been written about Christ by Jews as in recent years.¹ The appearance of Professor Klausner's work in the Hebrew was phenomenal, especially since the author is a master of both English and German. He devotes the entire first chapter to prove that the few references to Jesus in the older editions of the Talmud were inspired by " vituperation and polemic against the founder of a hated party " rather than by any unbiased seeking for truth.² Since the publication of that work, prominent Jews in all walks of life have raised their voices in the defence and even the reclamation of the Nazarene. We shall let a few of these protagonists speak for themselves.

(1) Franz Werfel, renowned author:

" I as a Jew look to the salvation of the world to come from a revival of a pure and real Christianity."

(2) Dr. Chaim Zhitlowsky, author and journalist:

" The Jewish legend about Jesus is the most shameless and the most damnable desecration of everything that should be regarded as sacred and dear to humanity."

(3) A. Glantz, journalist:

" The attitude of modern Jews to the personality of Jesus has long since changed from what it was. There is hardly a modern Jewish poet of any importance who has not sung the praises of the Carpenter of Nazareth."

¹ The following bibliography is illustrative but in no sense complete.

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² Opus cit., p. 18.

(4) Jacob Schiff, banker:

"We Jews honour and revere Jesus of Nazareth as we do our own prophets."

(5) Dr. Max Nordau, Zionist leader, Riga, Latvia:

"Jesus is the soul of our soul, flesh of our flesh. Who then could think of excluding Him from the people of Israel?"

(6) Gustave Lazlo, author:

"The movement for the recognition of Christ by the Jews is not a phantasy arising from the brain of the author of *Spires, Bells and Dreams*. It is a fact . . . In the hearts and minds of many men, ordinary men like myself, traders, men of affairs, the fact that Christ is the only leader who can take us anywhere worth going to is coming to new recognition."¹

In a recent article the gifted author John Cournos made a number of thought-provoking statements, of which we quote a few:

"They—the rabbis—have been saying nice things about Christ from their own and Christian pulpits, and some of them doubtless have patted themselves on the back for this token of their liberal opinion. But that is not enough. The only reasonable and logical thing they can do is to establish the most perfect Jew and the most perfect man among the fully acknowledged hierarchy of their prophets, their 'sons of God'. Why not acknowledge him together with these others? The rabbis should frankly and openly affirm: 'Christ is our own, our very own, flesh of our flesh, and bone of our bone, and he came not 'to destroy the law, or the prophets . . . but to fulfil'. He is our prophet, our greatest prophet, the keystone of our ultimate faith. . . . In stating these views, views for which in Uriel Acosta's day I should have been subjected to the public indignity of 'forty stripes save one' and afterwards trampled upon by gathered crowds, I do not yield my place as a Jew. On the contrary, I affirm it. . . . Intelligent Jews to whom I have spoken of my mad notion have, contrary to my expectations, agreed to the logic of the proposal I have outlined. And I recall the words spoken to me by a living world-famous Jewish novelist: 'We Jews must come to terms with Christianity. It is the only way out for us! Did he not fear crucifixion by his own for so audacious a thought? Nor, indeed, do I anticipate friendly comments on the heresy to which I have given expression. There is too much stiffnecked intellect in the Jewish fibre to-day. Pride and intellect corrupt; only faith gives life.'"²

Not only distinguished laymen, but also rabbis, many of them in places of prominence, are urging a new view of Jesus. Within the scope of this paper it is impossible to state all of what rabbis have said about Christ in recent years, but the following will suffice to prove that the spirit of God is beginning to move the hearts of many leaders in Jewry.

In a sermon delivered at Temple Israel, St. Louis, Mo., on Good Friday, April 3rd, 1931, Rabbi Ferdinand M. Isserman gave six reasons why Jesus belongs to the synagogue:

¹ *Spires, Bells and Dreams*, p. 180.

² *An Epistle to the Jews*, The Atlantic Monthly, December, 1937.

1. He lived as a Jew.
2. He died as a Jew.
3. His religion was the religion of His people, the religion of the synagogue.
4. His criticism of His people was Jewish and in line with the prophetic tradition.
5. He glorified Jewish history.
6. His influence on civilization has been moral and spiritual, in keeping with the Jewish genius.

He then went on to say:

"Even if the mobs begin to howl and clamour against us, even if the tide of hatred were to rise, even if pogroms and massacres were to be re-enacted, even if the Christian world should continue to heap its injustice upon the people of Jesus, I would yet plead with my people, because of their religious and moral passions and because of their distinctive spiritual genius, not to yield to prejudice or to passion but calmly to essay the Jewishness and the glory of Jesus, and to recognize Him as a noble product of the religious culture of Israel."

Rabbi Solomon B. Freehof pays the following beautiful tribute to Christianity:

"To a world drugged by the flesh, blinded by pleasure, Christianity, if it can find its voice, will always have a message to proclaim. And it will always find the strength to proclaim it. It has inner resources of power. Its energy cannot be calculated. The faith which converted Paul and Augustine, Francis and Luther, may convert any one at any time. Christianity may yet manifest its explosive power, awaken a flesh-sodden age to the joys of the spirit, and make it willing to count the world well lost if it can only regain its soul."¹

Again he says:

"No Moslem ever sings, 'Mohammed, lover of my soul', nor does any Jew say of Moses, the Teacher, 'I need thee every hour'."²

At a Good-Will meeting the late Rabbi Enelow declared:

"I have believed for many years that the day must come when the name of Jesus would serve to draw Jew and Christian closer together. Time was when Jesus formed a wall of separation between them; but it is illogical, unreasonable to expect such a condition of estrangement to continue. For no matter how much men might differ in their construction of the character and purpose of Jesus, one thing they cannot deny, if they have any historic sense at all—namely, that Jesus was a Jew."³

At no time were Jews more eager to listen to the claims of Christ than now. After our Sunday service recently, a group gathered in front of our mission building and talked about Christ until midnight. I could feel that they were interested in Jesus—unconsciously perhaps, even admired Him—and yet some tragic destiny made them deny Him. They know that

¹ *Stormers of Heaven*, pp. 66, 67.

² *Idem*.

³ *American Hebrew and Jewish Tribune*, February 9, 1934.

they cannot have Christ without the cross—suffering and persecution. Each year I find the open-air work more thrilling. Jews are listening to the gospel with rapt attention; they are hungry for the bread of life.

IV

THE CHALLENGE TO THE CHURCH

Since the Jew very seldom discriminates between nominal and born-again Christians, the life of Christians can either repel or attract Jews to Christ. The missionary cause among God's ancient people has been greatly hindered because few Jews come in contact with devoted, missionary-minded Christians, while they all know of the evil Christians have done through the centuries and are doing to-day to the Jews. Together with others, John Cournos well observes in his recent book that the Christless acts of Christians have shaped the Jewish policy toward Christ and that "a truly practising Christianity might have at almost any time caused Judaism to melt away as the snow melts away under the warm sun."¹ Indeed, whenever thoughtful Jews, eager to find the truth, come in contact with consecrated Christians, the impact of the Christ-centred life produces a revolutionary change in their thinking. By far the greater number of Hebrew-Christians were drawn to Christ through the silent witness of the lives of earnest Christians. Professor Kohnstamm of the University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, attributes his original interest in Christ to several of his professors, who, although famous scientists, were nevertheless devout Christians. In the account of his conversion he pays the following tribute to these teachers:

"But at this early stage in my philosophical thinking there appeared a person who, in his quiet way, exercised a profound influence upon me. He presented a rather extraordinary riddle in my matter-of-fact and rather superficial mental world. My classmates related that this man, who was our chemistry teacher, strange as it seemed, went regularly to church on Sundays. We could not interpret this behaviour as due to a lack of modern scientific knowledge; for his clear-cut objective and splendid instruction in chemistry were evidence of his sound scientific knowledge. The only alternative explanation of this strange behaviour was that it emanated from some inexplicable external motives, and this explanation just did not fit. None of us could deny the fact that everything he did was prompted by the greatest sincerity and earnestness. . . . Just as my teacher in chemistry in the high school had become a problem to me, so it was now the case with my university professor,

¹ *An Open Letter to Jews and Christians*, Oxford University Press, London and New York, 1938. pp. 74, 150.

Dr. van der Waals, one of the greatest scientists in the world, who was later a Nobel prize winner. I came into close personal touch with him. He was a man whose objectivity and deep humility were only surpassed by the great sincerity of his whole being. This man, too, how could I explain it, was a witness, even if usually a silent one, for that same Christianity which I had believed I could ignore as a message long since outgrown and of no further significance."¹

What is the main objection Jews offer to the acceptance of Christ? In twelve years of working among both educated and uneducated—university graduate and ghetto peddler—we have found that the greatest obstacle is not so much theological as the conduct of Christians. We cannot well deny that anti-Semitism has invaded even the hearts of many otherwise devoted Christians, both laymen and clergy. But always the presentation of the gospel to the Jew will be confronted with the insistent fact that "What you are speaks so loud I cannot hear what you say".

Rabbi Alexander Lyons of the Eighth Avenue Temple in Brooklyn, preaching on April 24th, 1938, in the Plymouth Congregational Church of the Pilgrims, in Brooklyn, N.Y. declared:

"With deep regard for the faith of my Christian brothers I raise the question, 'Has Christ risen?' I should accept Christ's resurrection if righteousness the world over were on the march, and a fraternal fellowship, inspired by sympathy, mutual consideration and helpfulness, gladdened the globe with the dawning of a new day of opportunity, encouragement and inspiration for every aspiring child of God. . . . The Resurrection is too extensively a mere theological interpretation with little if any effect upon the conduct of its believers. As I see that important belief in Christian conviction, I am pained by its lack of proper significance."

In the preparation of a thesis, Miss Frances Mecca, a graduate of the Biblical Seminary, sent a number of letters to Jewish rabbis, asking, among other things, their main objections toward accepting Christ. We shall quote one of the answers received:

"As for the reclamation of Him as a Jewish teacher and leader, I believe the answer to that query rests not with my people but with Christians. Jews will never reclaim Jesus because Christians suggest it or expect it or even because they ought to do so. Only one influence or force in the world will ever move Jews to reclaim Jesus as their very own (and He is their own), namely, the true, devout, brotherly practice of Christianity . . . how could I to-day ask my people to reclaim Jesus as teacher and leader when the ever-present and increasingly ominous fact of their lives, is, that whatever Jesus may have been and taught, whatever the sacrificial character of His death—in His name infinite woe and hurt are inflicted upon His people. The adoption of Jesus as teacher and leader by the Jewish people must be preceded, perhaps, for a thousand years, by the adoption of the teachings of Jesus as the rule and law of the Christian life."

¹ *My Way to the Church of Christ*, Jewish Missionary Magazine, New York, N.Y. May, 1938.

In the light of this, what is the duty of every born-again Christian? Is it not to combat anti-Semitism and to show the fruits of the Christian life in every-day contact with Jews? Surely it is time to recall the solemn words of our Lord "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. v. 16). ". . . Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matt. xxv. 40). The greatest kindness one can show any man, including the Jew, is to tell him the good news of salvation. Throughout this dispensation of grace it has been the duty of the Christian Church to include the Jew in its missionary programme. While "and also to the Greek" has been remembered, all too frequently "to the Jew first" has been forgotten, but in spite of the neglect of the Church,—as the great apostle to the Gentiles predicted,—there has always been a remnant among Israel, who recognized and served the Messiah. However, of any widespread change of attitude toward Christ there has been no sign until our own time. Always across the hills of Judah there has been darkness, gross darkness. But to-day if we ask, "Watchman, what of the night?" we shall hear the long-awaited "The morning cometh". For centuries those who loved Israel have laboured and prayed for her salvation, in the sure faith that in God's own good time the veil would be lifted, but they were privileged to see no softening of the Jewish heart towards the Messiah. But it has been given to our generation to witness the "early rosy-fingered" dawn shooting streaks of light through the murky clouds, and we know that the morning cannot be far behind.

When the victory is almost within sight, shall we slacken our pace? Rather let us take heart and redouble our efforts. Let us give more, work more, pray more, and above all, live more Christlike lives, that through us, as through a prism, Israel may see reflected some faint rays of the Messiah's glory.

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