

Christianity among Soviet Jews

Mikhail Agursky, of Jewish origin, writes frequently on the position of Jews in the USSR and allied subjects. Part of his long work on Jewish Christians in the Russian Orthodox Church during the 19th and early 20th centuries has been published in Vestnik RKhD No. 114. A new samizdat journal, Moskovskii Sbornik, containing material on Russian religious and national questions, includes in its first issue (Sept. 1974) an article by him entitled "On the Perspectives of Christianity Among the Jews" (pp. 80-87), from which the following extract (pp. 84-87) is taken.

At the present time the problem of Christianity among the Jews is acquiring a new meaning. Firstly, not only has Jewish antagonism towards Christianity begun to weaken, but a growing interest in Christianity has even started to appear. It is true that this change has become possible not through an alteration in the attitude of religious Jews to Christianity, but because the younger generation of Jews, having left purely Jewish circles and abandoned their faith, are not satisfied by the spiritual desert in which they now find themselves, and are turning their attention to Christianity.

In the second place, there is now the possibility of Jewish Christians being able to remain part of their own nation, while preserving their faith, and thus averting assimilation. This applies especially to the state of Israel, where the danger of assimilation as a result of adopting Christianity, is generally excluded.

This still leaves a number of important questions unresolved. If a conscious decision is made not to take the path of national assimilation, should one adopt, along with the Christian faith, the language and traditions of another nation? Is it worthwhile, for instance, to take up Church-Slavonic together with the Orthodox faith, when this language has long since gone out of use in Russia itself; or, to take another example, to adopt the use of Latin—a dead language—along with Catholicism? Should one adopt liturgical singing with Christianity, when this is wholly based on different national traditions? Liturgical singing is a tradition of the Orthodox nations and, in spite of its beauty and grandeur, does not correspond to Jewish national traditions and therefore will always be a psychological obstacle to many Jews.

The following questions also arise. Can modern Jewish Christians take part in Jewish services, as Christ himself did, praying in the Temple at Jerusalem, or as the first Christian community did, led by the Apostle James? And can Jewish Christians not celebrate the Eucharist in the form which was used at the Last Supper? And, in that case, should Jewish Christians have their own priests, who could celebrate the Eucharist and other Christian sacraments?

Many similar questions come to mind, which could be decided by life itself, or in any case with the blessing of the Christian Church, so that the Jewish Christian might develop in a similar way to some of the Christian sects. It is clear, however, that among Jewish Baptists or Jews of the Orthodox Christian faith, a Jewish Christian community should not come under the jurisdiction of any non-national body. It should not, for example, be subject to the Pope or some other such figure.

The point is that Jews have their own Church-Synagogue. This Jewish church has in the past opposed Christianity, but only within it can Jewish Christianity have its future. The Jewish Christian movement should not set itself up as a

separate alternative to the Synagogue. It should acknowledge the authority of the rabbinate in all questions of canonical and civil law, excepting only that which might be contrary to Christianity. This is made easier by the fact that Jewish canonical law does not, for the most part, contain anything anti-Christian.

Naturally, Jewish Christianity will not immediately evolve into its final form. Obviously, some kind of intermediate form will exist for a considerable length of time. Various conflicts are to be expected, as without such conflicts any development is impossible.

There is, however, no alternative solution. Otherwise, Jewish national existence will continue to be deformed in the future. All Jews attracted by Christianity will disperse into other nations, as before, while the Jewish nation will remain hostile to Christianity. The national existence of the Jewish people can only be restored to harmony, if all its trends are allowed to develop within it; and for the Jews, Christianity is one of its own native problems. It is enough to remember that Martin Buber also spoke about this.

In conclusion, it should also be mentioned, that the conflicts which have recently arisen within the Russian Orthodox Church because of the increased attraction of the Jewish intelligentsia to Christianity, are partly caused by the inner disorganization of the Jewish presence, as a relatively influential national group in the life of the Russian Church. Of course, everybody has the right to choose their own particular spiritual path, and if anyone feels that Russian culture is necessary to him, as the only possible environment in which he can live, he has the right to embrace it.

However, recent experience has clearly shown that such an attachment to any kind of all-embracing environment can hardly be called fruitful or organic. At present the spiritual strength of the Jewish intelligentsia turning to Christianity should be directed at its own national heritage which, in combination with the Christian faith, could develop into a strong national culture.

It must be hoped that Christians of other nationalities will understand, that in such a view of the future of Christianity among the Jews, not the smallest shadow of doubt is cast on the fact that in Christianity there should be "neither Greek, nor Jew". Concern for the future of Jewish Christianity in no way suggests that Jewish Christians should somehow separate themselves from non-Jewish Christians. Both should acknowledge full inter-Christian unity.

It would also be a mistake to think that the call for Jewish Christians to return to the Synagogue is a proposal to begin missionary work among religious Jews. Everything said above implies that Jews who fulfil the Law and the Prophets do not need to seek salvation in conversion, and that any Jew who wishes to do as his father and grandfather did before him, would fully share this hope.

The history of the Jewish people has always been based on its own Law and probably will remain so for ever. This also applies in the fullest measure to Jewish religious life, which must engender in itself the great tree of Judaeo-Christianity, the tree whose root is holy forever.

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The CSRC has recently received a large quantity of appeals from Soviet Pentecostals wishing to emigrate. Further information will soon be available.