

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND JUDAIC THOUGHT: SIMILARITIES AND DISSIMILARITIES

It is not my intention to give a survey of the today's Jewish-Christian dialogue. I would rather present some features of Jewish—especially Rabbinic—theology that brings us into contact with some centers of difficulty and of hope between Christianity and the Jewish people.

THE STRONG JEWISH IDENTITY

“World history is Jewish History. World history is our history. We carry it all within us. Only what we carry within ourselves is world history.”¹ With these great sentences did Franz Rosenzweig in the 1920s of this century express his Jewish identity. This Jewish Identity can justly rely on the Holy Scriptures. It is repeatedly stated in the Book of Isaiah that the Holy City of Jerusalem is a symbol, a sign of the Jewish people and its history as well as the history of all peoples. Jerusalem is to be the model, the focal point and the aim of all of God's initiatives for judgment and for the salvation of Israel and humankind (Isa 2:1-5; 49:14-26; 60, etc.).

Jews therefore often feel they are a pillar of the world. They have the conviction, that the world would perish if the Jewish people no longer existed. That puts us before the well-known obstacle, which often throws Christian enthusiasts of the Jewish-Christian encounter back into near desperation. The Christian partners in this encounter must repeatedly experience the Jewish partners' sudden declaration that, due to Jewish convictions, they are not able to embark on theological discourse with Christians and that they would only be interested in the elimination of anti-Semitism and the recognition of the state of Israel. Why these continual retreats of the Jewish partner? There are many topics which can be discussed among Jews and Christians. We can discuss Abraham, Moses, the Torah, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Halakhah, original sin, and so on. But there are also many topics which are blocked off because Christians don't know what they can reasonably demand of Jews. The Christians' continual pronouncing of the Holy Tetragrammaton, the belittling of the Holocaust, and the negation of the state of Israel cannot be suffered by Jews. The Jewish religion is a strong religion; it has efficient myths. It embraces the whole personality. The Jewish people is the oldest people—no other people has such a continuity as the Jewish

¹Franz Rosenzweig, *Zweistromland, Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken*, Collected Works 3 (Dordrecht, 1984) 539.

people. It has in the course of its history learned to pursue its way in distance from the way of other peoples and their religions. Why then should this people suddenly search theological coalitions with its former enemies? There is hardly a reason for that!

The Church partly shows the same features of self-absorption. The Jewish partners also experience obstructions and frustrations, because Christians frequently utter supersessionist ideas. As members of a church we claim to have an identity similar to the Jewish people. "The Church is a sign and a tool for the most intimate union with God and for the unity of all mankind," states the Second Vatican Council.² Thus, also the Church and every living Church member claims to bear the history of the world.

Are Christians and Jews, therefore, condemned for all times to stand in the way of each other as did the brothers Cain and Abel up to the point of fratricide? This is the opinion of those who speak of anti-Semitism as an essential trait of Christianity.

Contrary to this view, many of today's theologians, according to Vatican II (*Nostra Aetate*, 4) and other statements of various churches, support the opinion that only together with the Jewish people can the Church be the place for God's salvation of the world. Christianity, meanwhile, has become accustomed to the fact that Jesus was a Jew, that the Church is connected with Judaism, and that we must accept differences in beliefs. However, this does not nearly remove all the causes of conflict between Judaism and Christianity. This becomes painfully obvious again and again in connection with the modern Jewish-Christian encounter.

This exposé is an attempt to balance the similarities and dissimilarities between the Church and the Jewish people. Where, on the part of the Christians, are false and exaggerated hopes concerning the Jews entertained? What are the causes of the sudden backpedalling on the part of our Jewish partners? Which frustrations could we spare ourselves in future dialogue with the Jews? All answers are bound to remain incomplete. They are only a part of the whole truth. But they could perhaps become an incentive to struggle on until, increasingly, the whole truth between Judaism and Christianity becomes reality.

RELIGION, PEOPLE, HISTORY

Again and again, tabulations are drawn up from which it supposedly becomes evident in what ways Judaism and Christianity are in agreement with each other and in what ways they differ.³ For many reasons, however, it is not possible just to enumerate the similarities and dissimilarities between Judaism

²*Lumen Gentium*, introduction.

³In April 1993, the international news agency KIPA publicized an article by the New Testament authority Otto Knoch on the mutualities and differences between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. Of necessity, the article leads to various paradoxical situations.

and Christianity and to compare them with each other in tables. The so-called "Communist Rabbi" Moses Hess (1812–1875) once said that were Judaism to be regarded and evaluated in the same rationalistic-dogmatic manner as Christianity, it would be stamped as a "superfluous *doppelgänger*" doomed to a speedy disappearance.⁴ In the perception of Moses Hess and many Jews of all epochs, Judaism has never been merely a *religion*, but always also a *people*. In the course of history, the Jews have interested themselves more in their own national history than in the history of others. Whenever they have directed their view outwards, they have inquired about the "peoples of the world" and their ethics, not about the religions of the world. When they have, perforce, looked at the religions of the world, then they have almost invariably placed more importance upon Muslims than upon Christians, although they were more influenced by Christians. Up to the middle of the seventeenth century, the Muslims were regarded as the Sons of Noah, that is, as religious people who took care to adhere to the six human prohibitions—idolatry, blasphemy, murder, adultery, robbery, and eating the flesh of a living animal—and who took pains in administering a judiciary system based on religious motives. With some exceptions, Christians were thought to be idolaters because of the doctrine of the Trinity.⁵ Only towards the middle of the seventeenth century did Rabbi Jacob Emden of Altona argue effectively against this negative view about Christianity. "He asserted that Judaism and Christianity were fundamentally similar religions of revelation and that Christianity and Islam were God's chosen instruments to eradicate idolatry and disseminate belief. Christians, thus, were qualified as sons of Noah. Although the view of Rabbi Jacob Emden was innovative, his argument rested exclusively on internal categories."⁶ In accordance with the general negative opinions about Christianity, it was only in recent and modern times that from the Jewish side, comprehensive efforts in a hermeneutics of Christianity were embarked upon: by Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), Herrmann Cohen (1842–1918), Martin Buber (1878–1965), Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), Leo Baeck (1873–1956), and some modern Jewish philosophers and theologians.

If Jews are asked today what in their innermost feelings separates them from Christianity, many of them still reply: Anti-Semitism! It is the central threat to the Jewish people. Today's Jews are hardly to be dissuaded from the conviction that anti-Semitism is *substantially* connected with Christian teaching and preaching. Jews of late antiquity, the middle ages, and modern times regarded Christianity, above all, as an anti-Jewish power. Only rarely have they inquired into Church dogma and religious services and practices.

⁴Moses Hess, *Rom und Jerusalem: Die letzte Nationalitätenfrage* (Leipzig, 1899) 38.

⁵Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance. Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (New York, 1969); David Novak, *The Image of the Non-Jew in Judaism* (Toronto, 1983).

⁶David Sorkin, *Jews, the Enlightenment, and Religious Toleration—Some Reflections*, Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook 37 (1992) 3-16, esp. 15.

As a people gravely injured by anti-Semitism, the Jewish people tend rather towards *segregation* than unification. The traditions of segregation reach far back into biblical times. The earliest text is found in Numbers 23:9: "Lo, a people dwelling alone and not reckoning itself among the nations!" Impressed even stronger upon the Jewish consciousness is Esther 3:8-9, which deals with anti-Semitism, indeed, even with the danger of the extermination of the Jewish people. Here, Haman, the enemy of the Jews, says to the Persian King:

There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people; they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not for the king's profit to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business that they may be put into the king's treasuries.

It is not our task as Christians to draw the Jewish people to our side. However, it is a matter of recognizing the special characteristics of this folk and to help it so that it can fulfil its singular destiny among the peoples. We already know from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament that the people of Israel will be assembled again (see Ezek 37:15-28), and that by the end of days the peoples of the world will gather around the entire Israel (Apoc 7). The Church is the ingathering movement from the peoples and in among the peoples.

THE MERGING OF GOD AND OF ISRAEL

In Isaiah 7:14 the birth of a king is mentioned who would be far better than the unbelieving King Ahaz. His mother would name him *Immanuel*, "God is with us." In Matthew 1:18-25, this verse is applied to Jesus. He personifies the characteristics of "God with us." The newborn child would therefore receive the name of Jesus (God brings salvation).

The sages of the Talmud tend in the same direction as the New Testament. In bHag 14b, Immanuel is called *Immanu-Shekhinah*, "Shekhinah with us." By Shekhinah there is meant the *praesentia Dei specialis* in the midst of the People of Israel.⁷ Thus, the Rabbis have replaced the name of God/El by Shekhinah. By this they wanted to say that the God of Israel is descended completely to the Jewish people, that God dwells with this people as Shekhinah, feels with them, loves them boundlessly, and also suffers their pain. After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem the Rabbinic communities were able to spread their own conceptions of God. In their view God is not primarily the omnipotent ruler, but the intimately related lover, friend, and partner of the chosen people. In many ways the Rabbis expressed their conviction that God identifies himself wholly

⁷Hanspeter Ernst, "Die Shekhina in rabbinischen Gleichnissen," diss. Luzern 1993; Michael E. Lodahl, *Shekhinah/Spirit, Divine Presence in Jewish and Christian Religion* (New York, 1992).

with the Jewish people and that the Jewish people is bound closely to God. At the beginning of our century this Rabbinic conviction was stated by J. Abelson as follows:

Perhaps the finest and most poetic expressions of Divine Immanence to be found everywhere in the pages of Rabbinic literature, are those which speak of God's ever-constant presence in the midst of Israel. . . . So close was the bond riveting Israel to God and vice versa, so fully merged God in Israel, so complete was the oneness of God and Israel, that in redeeming Israel, God redeemed Himself. Israel was part of God, and God was part of Israel.⁸

A verse which fits this is found in MekhY to Exodus 12:41:

Whenever the Jewish people were oppressed, then the Shekhinah—if one may speak so boldly—was oppressed with them. . . . And when, by the end of days, the Israelites will return from exile, then the Shekhinah, too, will return from exile with them.

Judaism and Christianity bear witness to the descended God of Israel each in their own way. In Rabbinic literature, the dwelling of God in the midst of the Jewish people is celebrated in the highest tones: God and the Jewish people together form a community of fate. Together, they have an exclusive love relationship based on loyalty. When Israel suffers, God suffers too.⁹ In the New Testament, a similar basic mood prevails in connection with Jesus Christ who is identified as the love of God in human form (Col 2:9).

Probably the God dwelling near to, and in the midst of the people became a matter of competition between Judaism and Christianity as early as Talmudic times (at the latest from the fourth century after Christ). Who is loved more by God, the Jews or the Christians? Who is nearer to God, the Jews or the Christians? Paul accentuates the love and nearness of God through Christ:

If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be the Lord both of the dead and of the living. (Rom 14:7-8)

Thus, through Christ, God as brother and Lord reaches into the life, suffering, and death of humankind. In different accentuations, Judaism and Christianity center above all on the God who accepts and is near to humankind. Because God is at the same time a distant, almighty, unattainable, and unrecognizable God, the believing Jew and the believing Christian also recognize that God himself too is life, yes, that God himself is the life that flows in love into creatures.

⁸J. Abelson, *The Immanence of God in Rabbinical Literature* (London, 1912) 83.128.

⁹The theology of love and the descent is particularly beautifully articulated in the rabbinic parables. *Die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen: Texte, Translations, Commentary*, 2 vols., ed. Clemens Thoma and Simon Lauer (Bern, 1986-1991).

This devout belief that God through love is transformed from a distant God to a near God is probably the only criterion for an understanding of the mystery of the triune God. The "structure" of God is the same. God is both distant *and* near, elevated *and* linked with mankind according to both the Jewish and the Christian religious faith. In the Creed of the nearness of God lies the most important similarity between the Jewish and the Christian belief. This nearness, on the other hand, provokes sharp distancing. Our near God has only the "structure" in common with your near God, but not the person. Thus a thin iron wall is erected between the same Father's children!

With their supersessionism Christians have attempted to discredit the Jews as antiquated worshippers of God. But also on the Jewish side can tendencies of rivalry be discerned. Already the Jews of late antiquity were not prepared to concede a privileged relationship with God to the peoples of the world. We alone are in the covenant, this is our surest identity! In bBer 7a, Exodus 33:12-16 is mentioned. These five Bible verses deal with a confidential dialogue between God and Moses in the Tent of Meeting. Moses entreats God to lead his people into the land of Canaan. This people absolutely requires a *special* divine guidance, otherwise it would not be able to manage. God promises this special guidance to Moses. For the rabbinical interpreters verse 16 is of special significance:

"How shall it be known that I have found favor in thy sight, I and thy people? Is it not in thy going with us, so that we are distinct, I and thy people, from all other people that are on the face of the earth." From this, Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Yochanan deduce that Moses made three important requests to God:

Three things did Moses ask of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Lord granted them to him: He asked that the Shekhinah rest over Israel, and God granted it to him. He asked that the Shekhinah not rest over the other people of the world, and God granted it to him. He asked that God show him his ways, and God granted it to him.

Thus God journeys with Israel through the desert. The other peoples have no part in the community between God and Israel. They receive no attention from the part of this God who is near to Israel. Moses entreats God that the Shekhinah not be active within any other people (and within no other religion). In other parts, the peoples of the world are accused of being jealous of the privilege of Israel and therefore of attempting to sow uncertainty among the people of Israel and to lead them astray. In the parable of the loyal enduring wife, EkhaR 3:7 (II 51a), the peoples of the world say to the Jews: "Your God hides his countenance from you and he removes his Shekhinah from you. Never again will he return to you!" The Jews, however, according to the parable, do not allow themselves to be confused. On the contrary, they daily attend the synagogue in order to hear the message of the loyalty of God. They remain separated from the nations in order not to deviate from their God. And they wait for God. He will reward the Jewish people at the end of time for their loyal wait.

FORGIVENESS OF SINS—SIGNS OF THE CHOSENNESS

The issue of the forgiving God received prominence in Judaism from an early stage—presumably right from the beginning—as a primary religious question. Again, and again, God forgives Israel its sins and this is the most definite proof of the special chosenness of Israel above all other nations. In the second century, the Shemone Ezre (Amidah), praises the merciful God “who provides many possibilities for forgiveness” (6th blessing). In the parable of the victor in the court action, PesK 27:2, the Lulav, which is waved during the Festival of Sukkoth, is designated as the banner of victory of the Jews over the peoples of the world.¹⁰ God justifies the Israelites during the time of the high holy days (from the New Year, through Yom Kippur, to the festival of Sukkoth) before the angels and the peoples of the earth. In the face of the protests of the angels and, above all, of the peoples of the world, he forgives them all their sins. This forgiveness occurs with great ease despite Israel’s many sins. In the parable of the chaff in the hair, BerR 65:11, a bald person encounters a very hairy person. The bald one is Jacob/Israel, the hairy one is Esau/Edom, representing the peoples of the world. When leaves in a storm are blown on the head of the bald person, he merely has to brush his hand over it and the dirt is immediately gone. With the hairy person, however, all the dirt remains caught in the hair; he cannot become clean. The deduction is:

Thus does the transgressor Esau soil himself throughout the year with sin and has nothing with which to cleanse himself. Jacob, however, also soils himself throughout the year with sins but he has the Yom Kippur with which to cleanse himself.

The analogous Jewish formula appears long before the *homo simul justus et peccator* of Martin Luther. In the context of the parable of the chaff in the hair it is formulated that Jacob/Israel is “beyond reproach in his sins” (*be’awônôt-tam*).

In the question concerning sin and its remission, striking similarities again between Judaism and Christianity are found. Forgiveness, beyond any doubt, is the sure sign of the chosenness. It occurs openly (see Lk 15:11-32, parable of the lost son). It concerns the whole person. He remains a sinner but is nevertheless righteous. In questions of sins and their remission, Christians of all confessions think in the same way as the Jewish people. In Christianity Christ becomes the Yom Kippur. However, here the dissimilarity becomes evident again from the very center of the similarity.

¹⁰Thoma/Lauer, eds., *Die Gleichnisse der Rabbinen*, 299-301.

FROM CREATION TO COMPLETION

In Rabbinic times the question arose as to why the Torah did not begin with the description of the Exodus from Egypt (Ex 12) (BerR 1:10). The first letter of the Bible—according to the answer—is a *bêt* (*bereschît*). The word *berakhah*, “blessing,” also begins with a *bêt*. The whole world is characterized by God’s blessing (thus also Raschi on Genesis 1:1). In Judaism of the Middle Ages and modern times, this answer has inspired many impulses to further answers. The world created by God is good. The Jewish people have a task within the world and for the world. The person steeped in Jewish tradition must be able to tolerate the world and the non-Jewish people. According to ShirR 4:8, the community of the Jews is dependent upon the “families of the nations” in order to assemble for their own ingathering from among all the peoples. Because of its worldliness, the Jewish people has at all times also radiated tolerance, even tolerance towards atheism and towards strange customs and peoples.

The task of the Jews in the world can best be explained by the term *tiqqûn ha-’ôlam* (restoration of the world). In the Mishna (e.g., mGit 4:3; mShevi 10:3-4), the necessity of Halachic reforms is expressed. The fruits of these reforms will only show gradually. In the Kabbalah of the Middle Ages and in modern Hasidism, the *tiqqûn ha-’ôlam* became a central key word for all attempts at the improvement and salvation of Israel and the world. In this connection, the Jewish mystics stressed that the process of the salvation of Israel and the world can only be achieved by means of a persistent cooperation between God and human persons. According to the Lurianic Kabbalah, the Jewish people act as co-redeemers of the cosmos. This would mean that the people are God’s and the world’s Messiah. The Jewish people then replaces the Adam who was intended to carry out the *tiqqûn ha-’ôlam* and who instead strayed into sin.

According to many Jews, the question of the Messiah, which is a clear point of distinction between Judaism and the Church, should be seen in connection with the *tiqqûn ha-’ôlam*. The world is to be redeemed, to be saved and led back to the original unity and completion in God. This is a gradual process which will not be carried out by God alone. Man is God’s partner. In conjunction with God, he is the *go’el ha-’ôlam*, the savior of the world. We shall probably not succeed in persuading a Jewish person that the person of Christ would satisfy the Jewish concept of *tiqqûn*. Too much emotion against Jesus and his worshippers has already been generated within Judaism. But in this connection we can remind ourselves that the redemption of the world by Jesus was only the laying of “the cornerstone.” Man must build and “be built, like living stones, into a house filled with spirit” (1 Pet 2:5). It is essentially the same task as the Jews have with their *tiqqûn ha-’ôlam*! Therefore the Jewish concepts of *tiqqûn* can have retroactive effects upon our own beliefs. We do not have to announce Christ to the Jews since the Jewish people are on the path to the kingdom of God just as we are.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The belief in a God who is allied to the fate and aim of Israel, of humankind, and the world, is the most significant similarity between the Jewish and the Christian peoples. According to an ever-repeated formula, "The Israelites unceasingly proclaim the Holy One, blessed be He, as king, and thus they proclaim the unity of the Godly Name" (*mamlikhîn lehaqb'h bekol yôm tamîd umeyyachedîm shemô*, MTeh 1:21; zu Ps 1:5). The fact that God's kingdom will come to pass and that, through this, God himself will come to his completion is also partially the meaning of the message of the New Testament (1 Cor 15:20-28). As a result of the Shoah, the consciousness of the interdependence between God and humankind when dealing with the completion of the world has become even stronger. Inspired by the thinking of Martin Buber, Stephen T. Katz, among others, draws the following consequences on the horrors of the Shoah:

God needs man, as man needs God. God's power and our freedom are both essential to Judaism's deepest self understanding. . . . These are the twin foci of the Jewish *Weltanschauung*.¹¹

Alan F. Segal speaks not only of inner Jewish "twin foci"; beyond this, he views Judaism and Christianity as twins. In this way he obtains a small approach to Jesus and to the doctrine of the Christian Messiah: Jesus was an exemplary "teacher of wisdom."¹²

Only the most important similarities and dissimilarities between Judaism and Christianity have been mentioned in this essay and have been placed into their historical and theological context. It has been shown that not only with regard to the similarities but also to the dissimilarities, there exists a basis for new Jewish-Christian thought and approaches which permit cause for great hope for theology, for preaching, for the future of the Church, and for humankind. However, this hope can only be realized if different conditions on both sides are fulfilled, especially the following.

First, non-Jewish peoples have to take note of the fact that the Jews are a people of memories. They do not forget those who have done them an injustice. Among anti-Jewish perpetrators of evil, many Christians of all centuries can be counted. Second, both Jews and Christians "have to risk a full life of knowledge of the other and . . . not [be] allowed to die behind their fears and prejudices."¹³

¹¹Stephen T. Katz, *Post-Holocaust Dialogues. Critical Studies in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York, 1983) 222.

¹²Alan F. Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 68. Also, Haim G. Perelmuter, *Siblings: Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity at Their Beginnings* (New York, 1989) expresses similar ideas.

¹³So Maulana Farid Esack, "Social, Religious, and Political Dimensions of Prejudice—Reflections of a Muslim," *European Judaism* 26 (1993) 3-8; quotation on 6.

All must realize that believers are "partners" (Quran Sure 49:10). As partners we all find ourselves on the way to the kingdom of God, despite a sinful history behind us.

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