

ALEXANDER ALTMANN: IN MEMORIAM

As this issue of *Immanuel* was going to press, Alexander Altmann, one of the outstanding figures of world Judaic scholarship, died at the age of 80. Although he had lived his entire life outside of the Land of Israel — born in Hungary, his professional life was spent in Berlin, Manchester and Boston — he had a strong spiritual affinity to the Land, and particularly to the scholarly community of Jerusalem and the Hebrew University.

Altmann received his doctorate at the Friedrich-Wilhelms Universität in Berlin, and his rabbinic training at the Berlin Rabbiner-Seminar. In the 1930's, he served as rabbi of the Judische Gemeinde in Berlin and as lecturer in religious philosophy and homiletics at the Rabbiner-Seminar. During this period, he wrote a number of serious theological essays, in which he attempted to reformulate a Torah-oriented Jewish theology through dialogue with such major contemporary thinkers as Scheller, Heidegger, Barth, etc. The events of Kristallnacht forced Altmann, along with other members of his generation, to seek refuge in the Western democracies. The next two decades were spent in Manchester, England as community rabbi. Even under the pressures of his rabbinic tasks, he continued his scholarly pursuits — a tribute to his great resources of will-power, concentration and stamina. In addition to his own studies, he founded the Institute of Jewish Studies for advanced students, was instrumental in the renewal of the *Journal of Jewish Studies*, and launched a series of monographs, entitled *Scripta Judaica*, sponsored by the Oxford University Press. During the two decades spent in England, the focus of his work shifted from theology to Jewish scholarship, as the exploration and re-creation of the inner history of Judaism. As one biographer put it, "the history of philosophy is for him not the unfolding of the pure *Geist*. It is creative individuals confronting tradition and reality, whose works surrender their meaning only when viewed in their total context."¹ In 1959, he came to the United States at the invitation of Brandeis University, the then relatively young Jewish-sponsored university. He at once became a central figure in Brandeis' Judaica faculty, where he founded the Lown Institute of Advanced Judaic Studies and the series *Studies and Texts*, sponsored by the Institute in cooperation with Harvard University Press.

Altmann was an individual of broad-ranging intellectual and scholarly interests. He made outstanding contributions in three distinct fields: Judeo-Arabic philosophy; Jewish mysticism (including its pre-history in Gnosticism and Neo-Platonism); and the intellectual history of German Jewry during the period of

1. Daniel Swetschinski, "Alexander Altmann: A Portrait," in *Mystics, Philosophers and Politicians. Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann*. Ed., J. Reinharz and D Swetschinski. (Durham, N.C., 1982), pp. 3-14.

the Enlightenment. His approach combined meticulous, painstaking textual scholarship with relation to the broad cultural framework, both historical and contemporary, within which a given thinker operated. Many of his essays are in the best tradition of the comparative history of ideas or of *Motivgeschichte*, tracing ideas and motifs across barriers of time, religion, and cultures.² At times, his scholarly novellae seemed to express not only an intellectual, but an aesthetic sensibility.

If his thought is characterised by one central theme, that theme is integration. He lived, not only in the tension between the historical and the theological approach, but in that between Philosophy and Revelation. A pious, observant Jew and — in both Berlin and Manchester — a practicing rabbi, he was at the same time deeply imbued with the modern critical spirit and the philosophical method, which stresses the pursuit of truth through reason rather than revelation. Much of his life work may be seen as an attempt to resolve the tension between these two sources of truth. To again quote Swetschinski, “The relation between the two is not a simple dialectic to be resolved in a readily apparent synthesis. It derives rather from an acceptance of the tension itself, a refusal to short-circuit a multi-dialectical reality by manipulative simplification.”³ Zeev Harvey, in a eulogy for Altmann delivered in Jerusalem on the thirtieth day following his death, suggests that he saw these two traditions as closer than is generally thought. For Altmann, philosophical and religious elements were not seen as sharply demarcated from one another, but as intertwined. This, according to Harvey, is the connecting link between two central focii of Altmann’s interest: Neo-Platonism and Moses Mendelssohn. He saw both the Greek and the Hebraic spirit as rooted in the confrontation with the world of mythology and the reflective, reasoning and/or ethical consciousness. In his studies of Gnosticism, Altmann attempted to uncover some of these mythic roots, and to demonstrate how neo-Platonism, as a major religious movement of late antiquity, sprang from the combined roots of monotheism and mythology.⁴ The concept of *devekut*, which was to play such a central role in both Kabbalah and in Jewish philosophy, was in turn influenced by Neo-Platonism. The tension in the thought of a figure such as Maimonides was not a conflict *between*

2. See, for example, “The Delphic Maxim in Medieval Islam and Judaism,” in his *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Ithaca, N. Y., 1969), pp. 1-40; “The Ladder of Ascension,” *ibid.*, pp. 41-72.

3. *Op cit.* (n. 1).

4. *Isaac Israeli: A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century*. Texts translated, with comments and an analytic essay (London, 1958), with S. Stern. “Ibn Bajja on Man’s Ultimate Felicity,” in his *Studies...* (*op cit.*), pp. 73-107; “The Delphic Maxim” and “The Ladder of Ascension” (*op cit.*, n. 2).

philosophy and religion, but between spiritual-mystical and rationalistic elements *within* both the religious tradition and philosophy itself — e.g., in Neoplatonism and, according to Altmann's last paper, even in Aristotelianism.⁵ Another focus of concern for Altmann was the figure of Moses Mendelssohn, the first modern Jew. Altmann wrote a major, perhaps the definitive, intellectual biography of this central figure of the Jewish Enlightenment, as well as a series of essays in German, in which he addresses himself both to Mendelssohn's Jewish writings and to his general philosophy from an integrative perspective.⁶ The tension between religion and reason in Mendelssohn's thought was, according to Altmann, not one between Judaism and universal human culture, but a tension between the two sources of truth within both his general and his specifically Jewish writings.

In the work of Alexander Altmann, we find philosophy and religion become manifested as two (complementary) expressions of the human spirit, both striving towards truth.⁷

May his memory be a blessing.

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— J. C.

5. In an unpublished lecture delivered at Harvard University in 1987; cf. "Towards an Evaluation of Ahad Ha-Am's Life Work" [Heb.], in his *Panim shel Yahadut* (Tel-Aviv, 1983), p. 157; and, especially, "The Doctrine of Monotheism in Jewish Thought" [Heb.], *ibid.*, 82-90.

6. *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (London, 1973); *Die Trostvolle Aufklärung: Studien zur Metaphysik und politischen Theorie Moses Mendelssohns.* [FMDA. Abt. II, Bd. 3] (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1982).

7. In addition to the above-mentioned volumes, the major collection of Altmann's essays, particularly those dealing with the modern period, is *Essays in Jewish Intellectual History* (Hanover, N. H., 1981). For a full bibliography of Altmann's published writings, see *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History Presented to Alexander Altmann on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday.* Ed., S. Stein and R. Loewe. (University, Ala. & London, 1979), pp. 1-12.