

FAITHFULNESS TO THE ROOTS AND COMMITMENT TOWARD THE FUTURE: A JEWISH VIEW

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As this is our last working session, I feel not a little honored by having been called upon to perform, together with my colleague from Boston, the closing of the circle. For we have indeed come around full circle, if only because the title of this closing session is practically identical to that of our symposium as a whole. No matter what subtitles we gave to our different sessions, they all revolved around the same basic problem. May I add that I am particularly pleased to be a speaker at this session, since I was the first Israeli and Hebrew University professor to have the privilege of lecturing at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Athens. This was many years ago, when the then Rector of the University, and the then Dean of the Faculty of Theology, my late lamented friend Nikos Nissiotis, invited me to lecture. So I do not feel an academic stranger in Athens.

Having had a chance to look at the text of my Boston colleague, I think that I can safely leave the summing up to him and try to be brief. Our discussions have been moving in a kind of limbo between the academic and the dialogical. At the opening session the word "academic" was emphasized, as if to exorcise the specter of dialogue. Without detracting from the academic quality of our conversations, I very strongly feel that we were actually engaged in dialogue — an honest, in fact at times painfully honest, dialogue between Jews and speakers identifying with the Greek Orthodox tradition. I very deliberately do not say the Orthodox Church, since no one here can speak on behalf of the Church. But the non-Jewish participants spoke as Christians identifying with the

Orthodox tradition. We have been pulling no punches and in this respect I feel that this was the first meeting of its kind, significantly different from the earlier encounters to which reference has been made. I know that "dialogue" is a problematic word. Very often it was served as a euphemism for polemic and disputation. I sense a polemical note also when reading Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew*. At our meeting, however, I felt that even when we became disputatious, the underlying intention was dialogical. This is something to be grateful for.

We all seem to agree that there are plenty of stereotypes and misconceptions, especially in the matter of antisemitism, which require a major cleaning operation. We certainly have not finished the job, although I think we have made a good start. Let me give one example. One participant opined that a possible cause of antisemitism was the fact that the Jews were so well off in comparison with the rest of the population. To me that seemed a very characteristic Russian-Pravoslav stereotype. I can never open a book on Jewish history without being impressed by the fact that compared to the relative middle-classness of the Jewries of Central and Western Europe, the Jews of Eastern Europe belonged (with a few exceptions) to the most miserably poor part of the population. Here you have two deeply entrenched stereotypes: the one voiced by a speaker here, the other derived by me from my study of East European Jewry. And of course, nobody will admit that he is thinking in stereotypes. Everybody is convinced that he expresses historical truth. I do not intend to enlarge on the subject since ours is not a history seminar. I merely wanted to provide an illustration.

My other point is the feeling that our encounters are marked by a significant lack of symmetry, which we should see very clearly if we want our discussions to be fruitful. I am not referring here primarily to the question of numbers and to the fact that in most places Jews are a minority living in the midst of a vast Christian (or Muslim) majority, but to an aspect which seems to me significant precisely because the "academic" nature of our meeting has been emphasized so much. When Christians speak theologically about Judaism, their Judaism commonly ends with the end of the Hebrew Bible. (I am using this term rather than "Old Testament" which already implies a Christian perspective.) Post-biblical Judaism is viewed as a strange, aberrant and/or fossilized phenomenon. I was, therefore, very grateful to Prof. Borovoy who, in his various interventions, took care to mention also the Talmud, the Midrash, the Kabbalah. This expressed a welcome sensitivity to Judaism as a living and dynamic religious phenomenon.

The asymmetry is particularly disturbing in academic contexts. Take, for instance, one of the most important and vital periods in the history of Judaism. This is the period between the return of the exiles from

Babylon under Ezra and Nehemiah, and the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. We call it the "Second Temple Period" which saw the crystallization of most of the biblical writings, the composition of the apocryphal books, the development of various sects and trends in Judaism (Jewish Hellenism, Sadducees, Essenes, Qumran Covenanters, Pharisees), the beginnings of Jewish mysticism, the growth of the traditions which subsequently culminated in rabbinic Judaism, etc. This dynamic and vital period is known in Christian academic studies as the "intertestamentary period." What this term really says is that the Old Testament period was of great, and the New Testament period of even greater, significance, but that between these two there is a big black hole, the "intertestamentary period." Here we have a case not only of asymmetry but of a theological perspective becoming an academic stereotype.

I happen to be teaching Christian theology at my university. I would consider it sinning against all academic standards if I were to stop my presentation of Christianity with the Apocalypse of Saint John. I have to continue to the Cappadocian Fathers and to Saint John of Damascus. Yes, and I even give seminars on Palamas and Hesychasm. And students who have also studied Jewish mysticism are asked to compare the kabbalistic doctrine of the uncreated divine lights (*sefirot*) with the *energeia* of hesychast theology. During these seminars I cannot help wondering how many of my counterparts at Christian faculties were doing the analogous thing with regard to Judaism. Obviously this asymmetry cannot be overcome in one day. But an awareness of it could be the beginning of change.

"Roots" is one of the key words of our conference, and of this session in particular. "Roots" is a relatively modern slogan, and most of you have read the book or seen the film which launched the term on its current career. Traditional religious discourse rarely, if ever, spoke of "roots," but used the terms "history" and "memory." Both of these are notoriously selective, and selection always means emphasis as well as deliberate suppression. It is both *anamnesis* and *amnesia*. This selection is already made by the vehicles that convey to us history and memory: Scripture and liturgy. Both narrate, celebrate and highlight certain events, endowing them with the desired significance. Also the Bible, with all due respect, is not a historical textbook. If I want to study the history of the biblical period I go to other books. The Bible teaches us not history but what in history should be significant, important and decisive for us.

This leads us to another question. Do Jews reading the Hebrew Bible and Christians reading the Old Testament really read the same book? Only the other day I was given a book by a Spanish colleague entitled

La biblia judia e la biblia cristiana. I am borrowing his title to make my point. A Christian, as distinct from a purely scholarly and philological, reading must be Christocentric, and as a Jewish teacher I must see to it that my fellow Jews understand this. But I also demand from my Christian friends that they understand that a Jewish reading of the Bible cannot possibly contain any reference to Christ, not because the Jews are stubborn or blind but because their religious and theological perspective is legitimately different. To regard the Jews simply as a community of people who reject Christ is rather like defining Christians as a bunch of people whose main concern is to reject the Prophet Mohammed or defining Hindus as people who reject Buddha. Mohammed and the Buddha are not on the agenda of most Christians (with the exception of theologians specializing in interreligious dialogue). Christology is not on the agenda of Judaism. And yet we realize that our undoubtedly problematic relationship is of a very special kind, and unlike the relation with and between other religious traditions. That, in fact, is the reason why we are here.

History is something remembered, and sometimes discovered and reconstructed by research. But very often it is also invented. As a sociologist I am particularly interested in this phenomenon of inventing history, as it is usually ideologically motivated and serves the purpose of manipulating historical memory for contemporary purposes. The counterpart of inventing history is, as I said before, the suppression of certain chapters of history. Jews, who played a considerable role in the Bolshevik Revolution (and the historian has to ask why?) were later the victims of Stalinist-communist antisemitism. Was this a peculiar Stalinist aberration or was it a straight continuation of pre-communist, Tsarist and Pravoslav antisemitism? The great pogroms did not take place under a communist regime. And Pravoslav antisemitism has its Byzantine parent. It is enough to think of the Byzantine Christian law codes, whether Justinian or Theodosius. Here in Greece, things have been different in recent times, not because theology has changed, but because after the Ottoman conquest both Jews and Christians found themselves in the position of *dhimmi* minorities. I do not wish to be too dogmatic on this point. I am merely reflecting, in the hope that this reflection will be our program for future thinking.

There are chapters in the theological tradition that make difficult reading. Saint John Chrysostom is undoubtedly one of the greatest figures of the Orthodox Church. And I am enough of a historian to understand the closeness of Judaism and Christianity at the time, in a way which made the latter consider the former as an immediate threat and danger and hence rendered violent rejection inevitable. But this does not change the fact that in my role, not of historian but of a Jew seeking

fraternal relations with his Christian neighbor, I find the reading of Saint John Chrysostom a very painful exercise.

I already mentioned that one of the chief vehicles in the transmission of memory and significances is the liturgy. Liturgy selects out of the mass of historical material that which should be remembered — every year, or every day, or every Sunday. In the central act of Christian worship the decisive words are “do this in memory of me.” The liturgy itself emphasizes that it is an exercise, a very realistic exercise, of memory. I do not wish to indulge here in legalistic hairsplitting and distinguish between the nucleus of the liturgy and later accretions and hymns. These distinctions are certainly irrelevant to the participating faithful, and probably to the celebrating priest too.

I do not intend to quote too many texts, but I want to remind you of certain passages in the Office of the Holy Sufferings on the “Great Friday” (Good Friday in Western languages). I am thinking of the first, third (“Jews sought to kill You”), sixth (“On this day Jews nailed to the cross Him...”), eighth and ninth antiphon (“repay them according to their deserts”). The whole Jewish people is reproached and rejected in the tenth, eleventh (“they were not satisfied with their treachery but spit at you their mockery”) and twelfth antiphon. A *troparion* following the sixth reading of the Gospel explicitly calls the Jews “deicides” (*theoktonoi*): “the swarm of deicides, the lawless nation of the Jews furiously shouting at Pilate ‘crucify the innocent Christ.’”

It is certainly not my business to suggest what Orthodox Christians should do with these hymns. How do you go about explaining these texts or preparing the faithful for the Office by means of proper *catechesis* or commentaries? I would be betraying the task laid upon me by the organizers of this conference if, with false politeness, I did not mention these facts. And facts are stubborn things. The problem is not so much mine, because it is not my form of worship. But I think it should bother those whose my form of worship it is.

Let me give two Jewish examples of what I mean by the selectivity of liturgy and its way of transmitting memory. There is even the commemoration of something which we never witnessed, since none of us was present at the creation of the world. Yet we are bidden on the Sabbath day to remember it. To remember what? To remember that we are not self-made and that the world, no matter what its history and evolution through geological ages, is in its deepest essence God’s creation. Secondly, Easter and, at about the same time, the Jewish Passover commemorate historical events. The Exodus from Egypt, signifying the transition from slavery to the freedom of the children of God, is in fact commemorated every day. But the Passover celebration is especially impressive and solemn, and I am mentioning it here because it illus-

trates what I said about selectivity. Ignoring the detailed account of the Exodus as given in the Bible, with Moses, God's prophet and messenger, as the chief protagonist, the Passover night liturgy does not mention the name of Moses even once. On this particular occasion the liturgy evidently wants to emphasize the action of God and avoids whatever might distract from the emphasis on the particular message it wishes to convey.

One of the traditions we share, because inherited from the biblical prophets, is that of self-criticism. But criticizing oneself and criticizing others are two very different things. Here I wish to draw attention to an important factor that has bedeviled Jewish-Christian relations, and I am doing so at the risk of appearing to criticize Christianity. The prophetic criticism of Israel's failings and shortcomings has been adopted by Christian polemics, but in a hostile manner. An original auto-criticism has been perverted into a hetero-criticism. Instead of saying, "Let us admire the Jews for their honesty. They did not sweep their sinfulness under the carpet but on the contrary, even canonized the painful prophetic criticism as part of their holy Scriptures so that it should always be present to their minds," these Jewish texts are quoted with the implication, "See what an awfully corrupt and sinful bunch these Jews are: God himself says so."

In conclusion, I would take up a point raised by Rabbi Norman Solomon, though I would define it somewhat differently. Rabbi Solomon reminded us that there were three and not two partners in the conversation: Jews, Christians and modernity. To me, the cultural situation called "modernity" or even "post-modernity" is so much a matter of course that I only see two partners: the Christians and Jews of post-modernity. And here, under the heading of "Continuity and Renewal," we have not only to learn from each other but also to learn to think together. What is the meaning of "our Father which art in heaven" when space technology has changed our cosmology? What does "creation" mean in an age after Darwin? What does "sacred community" mean after Durkheim, Marx and Weber? What does belief in Scripture as the Word of God mean after Spinoza and Wellhausen? I could prolong this list indefinitely, but I don't think this is necessary. When Jews and Christians meet as brothers in the modern situation, which is not only a cultural and intellectual situation, but a world blighted by war, hatred, cruelty, genocide, hunger, poverty and technological threats of our own making to the existence of this earth, their common concern and their shared problem is: Where do we go, together, from here?

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