

THE JEWISH QUESTION (in its inmost nature) IS A RELIGIOUS ONE

By Walter Zander

THERE are few problems more complicated by contradictory facts and the passions of friend and foe than the Jewish question; and yet few problems need a more careful study and a balanced judgment.

As things have developed the Jewish question actually has become one of the issues of the war. Not only because Hitler has vowed the extermination of Jewry - and everywhere where the German armies have conquered he is cruelly executing his plan - but also for spiritual reasons. For the persecutions of the Jews have been indissolubly connected with an attack on the fundamental principles of religion; and Martin Borman, the successor of Hess as leader of the Nazi party, has only recently justified the persecution of the Churches with remarkable bluntness by the very fact that "the teachings of Christianity in their essential points have been taken over from Judaism."

Strangers Everywhere

The issue, therefore, goes far beyond the Jewish question itself; and when in 1933 the Nazis demanded the abolition, of the Old Testament, Cardinal Faulhaber rallied the Catholic population of Munich by a series of sermons under the motto: "Verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law."

To judge fairly the political and spiritual forces which have dominated Jewry in recent years one must keep in mind that the Jews have been wandering over the earth for centuries, and even today find themselves in a most abnormal condition of great dispersion.

It is difficult to imagine what a moral effort is needed to lead one's life without a fatherland, based only on the principles of the Spirit, being a stranger everywhere and without the benevolent influence which the human heart derives from an age-long uninterrupted tradition in one's own country.

To find a way out of this situation modern Jewry has developed nearly everywhere, with fullest moral and spiritual dedication, two fundamental conceptions.

Hope of a Haven

One group aims at the full integration of the Jews in the nations amongst which they live. Maintaining only their religion, they endeavour to assimilate themselves to the surrounding peoples and to merge in them. This movement, which has been particularly strong in Central Europe and the

Western world, began about 150 years ago, when the walls of the ghettos were torn down during the period of enlightenment.

One must remember the restrictions under which the Jews had lived up till then - their stratification even today reflects to a certain extent their age-long exclusion from agriculture and handicraft in many countries - in order to understand the intensity with which they threw themselves into Western civilisation; and many of them have made outstanding contributions to its further development.

But more essential than this extension of activities was the hope to find at last by integration a haven after their wandering and persecution. The best among them longed to undertake the moral responsibilities of their citizenship. Many excelled in social service and tens of thousands full-heartedly gave their life fighting as soldiers for their respective fatherlands.

Reunion in Palestine

The other group, whilst maintaining loyalty to the countries of their domicile, aims at a final reunion of the Jewish people - wholly or at least partially - in Palestine.

This movement of Zionism has its roots in the ancient longing of the Jew to return one day to the country where his ancestors had made their greatest contribution to history, and which always had remained most intimately connected with his religious thought.

As a political movement it started at the end of the nineteenth century and it has always been particularly strong in the eastern part of Europe.

The hope of taking up again the severed threads of Jewish history, of rebuilding their nation and of educating their children under normal conditions, of ending the unnatural stratification by return to a normal life and of reviving for daily use Hebrew, the holy language, gave inspiration to many; and when in the last war the Balfour Declaration proclaimed the establishment of a Jewish National Home in Palestine, a great immigration movement began towards the Holy Land.

Life as God Meant It

During the twenty years between the two world wars fundamental changes have taken place there. The Jewish population, which in 1918 amounted to 55,000, increased to about 500,000, out of which 100,000 live on the land in various agricultural settlements.

Agriculture has been widely developed; land which had been unarable for centuries has been drained, and important industries have been founded. Tel-Aviv, a large town with an entirely Jewish population of 170,000, has been built up, and on the Mount Scopus above Jerusalem a Hebrew University has been opened.

But the greatest achievement is a new generation of young Jews, devoted to the hardest manual work, full of vitality and hope and prepared for every sacrifice for their homeland. This new generation can best be described in the following words of a Christian writer:-

“To be among these was a religious experience. They live in great simplicity, with love for the land they are tending and love for one another. They combine hard manual work and great simplicity of living with a high level of culture, and they are happy and full of hope. Is not this life as God meant it to be lived?”

Arab Fears

Palestine, however, was not an empty country when the Jewish re-immigration began. The number of Arabs living there in 1918 amounted to 600,000 and since then has increased to more than 900,000. Although it is beyond doubt that in a material sense the Arabs have prospered as the result of the Jewish immigration, their resistance to it has become increasingly stronger.

Not only do the Arabs fear that they may ultimately be dominated by the Jew, but they also see in the Jewish immigrant, notwithstanding his Eastern origin, the spearhead of the West; and the conflict for them has become part of the great colonial struggle between West and East. National and cultural tensions, therefore, have led repeatedly to bloody riots, the last of which, encouraged by the Axis Powers, lasted nearly three years and ended only when the present war broke out.

This tension had as one of its consequences a most unnatural hampering of the Jewish war-effort in Palestine. For whilst the Palestinian Jews together with Zionists all over the world, and particularly in America, demanded the right to form a Jewish Army in order to fight like every other nation in their own name and under their own flag in defence of their national soil, the British authorities could not see their way to satisfying this demand.

It was obviously feared that the creation of a Jewish army would have serious repercussions in the Arab world; and thus the Palestinian Jews, to the great disappointment of most Zionists, are fighting anonymously within the British units, and only a few among the general public know how gallantly they have fought in Crete, Tobruk and Libya.

Between the Loyalties

Both Assimilationists and Zionists are greatly influenced by the modern trend, which since the secularisation of the West has been directed towards the National State. But in both movements elements can be found which are characteristic of Jewish religiosity. There are some assimilationists who accept the dispersion of the Jews as part of the divine plan, and therefore attach particular importance to their religious responsibility. And there are Zionists who, not satisfied by the secular Jewish state, aim at a deeper religious community.

If one considers the abnormal situation of the Jews and the difficulties arising out of it, one will not be surprised to find some Jews who have not been able to dedicate themselves fully to any of these ideals, and are “between the loyalties.” Wherever one finds a lack of community spirit be it in Jews or Gentiles it is an urgent task to reintegrate such elements into social loyalty and religious responsibility.

There are, on the other hand, Jewish groups who, unnoticed by the world, live up to very high religious traditions. Where, as in Central and Eastern Europe, they have become the victims of brutal persecution, they have revived the traditions of the martyrs, endeavouring to transform their suffering into a spiritual victory and it may well be that they in their humiliation and suffering are making a particular contribution to the rebirth of the world.

However manifold the Jewish question appears to be in the political, racial, economic and cultural spheres, its innermost nature - to my mind - is religious. As Maritain says, “Israel is a *corpus mysticum*, a mystical body comparable with the Church.” It is a religious community of common hope. The inner forces of the Jew have always been rooted in the religious sphere, and it is there that he will have to find the fundamental spiritual principles for the solution of the Jewish problem.