

THE WAY OF THE GERMAN JEW

FROM THE FRENCH REVOLUTION TO THE PRESENT DAY

*By Walter Zander***

THE history of the Jews since their emancipation, which followed the period of enlightenment in the 18th century, is indissolubly connected with the development of modern secularism, a movement which has dominated Christians and Jews alike. Owing to their peculiar position, the Jews have lived through this period with a particular intensity ; they have gone from secular hope and belief in Nation and State to the despair of the present debacle. On the other hand they have experienced during the same period a religious revival in the orthodox sense, and have also taken part in movements which, though seeming to be merely materialistic, have in reality a religious character. Their history, therefore, shows in a concentrated form the main elements of a general development, and may help to elucidate the great problems which now burden western civilization.

The 18th century was characterised by a decline of ecclesiastical influence. The great religious problems, God, sin and immortality, which a century ago still roused the passions of the peoples, lost their burning vehemence and receded more and more into the background of the consciousness. The sermons of that time complain that man, far from holding wrong opinions about these problems, has lost nearly all interest in them. Religion, which for a long time had largely determined European civilisation, shifted from the centre of the heart to the periphery of the modern mind, until it finally became a private affair which did not seem to be essential any longer. A new era began. Reason claimed the dominating place hitherto occupied by faith, and the believing Christian had to give ground to the political man, the national citizen, the "citoyen."

The number of Jews living in Europe at the end of the 18th century is estimated at about 2 millions, of which 900,000 lived in Poland and Lithuania, 300,000 in Austria, 200,000 in Germany, 100,000 each in White Russia and European Turkey, 80,000 in Hungary, 50,000 in France, 40,000 each in Italy and Holland, and 15,000 in England.

Nearly everywhere the Jews were subjected to great restrictions. In Spain and Sweden they were completely excluded. The same was true for Russia proper, where the "enemies of Christ" were not admitted, and only through the division of Poland a greater number of Jews had been incorporated into White Russia. In other countries the Jew was only allowed to settle in certain places, mostly confined to Ghettos, barred from numerous occupations, subjected to special heavy taxations, and generally excluded from any participation in public and cultural life. The degree of restrictions varied, of course, in the different countries. Thus

there was comparatively great freedom in England, Holland, Livorno and Florence, while in Poland, Austria and Germany very great restrictions existed. In Switzerland, where the number of Jews was very small, marriages between poor Jews were not permitted, in order to prevent their increase, and among other severe restrictions the Jews were not allowed to live under the same roof with Christians. Even the "Editto sopra gli Ebrei" of Pope Pius VI (1775) decreed for the Jews in Rome a yellow badge, forbade them to spend the night outside the ghetto, to talk to Christians, to possess any Hebrew books except the Bible and their prayerbook, and made the Rabbis responsible for a sufficient number of Jews always being present at the missionary meetings arranged for their conversion to Christianity.

This was the world into which sounded the trumpets of the French Revolution ; and the declaration of the Rights of Man appeared to the Jews like a new revelation. Human personality seemed to receive a new dignity and sacred value, and a universal brotherhood of man was proclaimed. All these principles for a better world were to be applied without regard to creed or race, and when the Jewish problem was debated in the National Assembly, Robespierre himself demanded that "no one belonging to this group may be deprived of the sacred rights which are implied in human dignity." Thus the ideas of the time broke through the ghetto-wall, and on September 28th, 1791, the National Assembly repelling all legal restrictions against the Jews proclaimed their emancipation.

For the first time in the history of Christianity such rights were granted to the Jews without any request for their conversion. But this change did not imply so much tolerance as appeared on the surface. For Christianity itself had become a matter of secondary importance, and the centre of interest had shifted to another sphere. A new attitude was gaining command over the human soul. The National State became the supreme value in all human relationships, and the new "creed" was to show a most intolerant and exclusive character.

This soon became apparent in the National Assembly itself, when one of the most fervent advocates of Jewish emancipation, the deputy Clermont-Tonnerre, declared that to the Jews as a Nation all had to be denied, to the Jews as men, however, all had to be granted. "If, however, they declare that they do not want to become citizens, then," he exclaimed, "they shall be expelled from the country, because there must not be a nation within the Nation." Such an attitude went far beyond the old tradition, which at least had granted a ghetto-existence to those who did not share the belief of the majority.

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The new movement for liberty, therefore, was most exclusive, and from its very beginning made the emancipation dependent on a conversion in the national sphere requiring complete dedication to the ideals of the time.

The national exclusiveness became more obvious still under Napoleon, who, in order to lay the foundations for the Jewish status, summoned in 1806 more than a hundred of the most representative Jews to the so-called Assembly of Notables. The opening session was fixed for a Sabbath morning, as if it should be made quite clear that in future religion was only secondary to the State. And when the assembly - after some internal discussions - accepted the date of the invitation, the principle was established.

The Emperor's commissioner in his opening address made the solemn declaration : "Sa Majesté veut que vous soyez Français," and the assembly replied : "Today the Jews are no longer a nation since they have the privilege of being integrated into the structure of the Grande Nation in which they see their political redemption." Thus in France national secularism was accepted as the basis of emancipation, and this example was to have far-reaching influences everywhere.

In Germany, Jewish emancipation was initiated by the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, who, born in 1729, began as a boy to read German books, which in those days was strictly forbidden by the Jewish authorities. Mendelssohn, who became a friend of Kant and the great poet Lessing, took an active part in the movement for enlightenment in Germany, and his writings were imbued by the highest moral principles.

It is quite significant that his first publication was a letter to a certain Michaelis, a professor of theology, who, reviewing a play of Lessing's, had expressed doubts as to whether the presentation of an honourable Jew on the stage could be true to reality. If such was the state of mind among prominent Christians, it is understandable that in enlightened circles, and particularly at the Prussian Court of Frederick the Great, it was considered somewhat of a recommendation to be an atheist ; and when Mendelssohn applied to the king for permission to domicile in Berlin, an admirer of his philosophy, the French Marquis d'Argens, thought it appropriate to support this application with the characteristic words : "A philosopher who is a bad Catholic implores a philosopher who is a bad Protestant to grant a privilege to a philosopher who is a bad Jew."

Mendelssohn himself remained devoted to rationalistic religiosity, promoted mutual understanding between Christians and Jews, translated large parts of the Bible into German, wrote a commentary on the Torah and, although his writings in the beginning were violently attacked by Jewish orthodoxy, mainly in Poland, he exerted very great influence on German Jewry for a long time.

These tendencies, however, became political reality only after the Napoleonic armies had brought the ideas of the French revolution all over Europe. The first step to a Jewish emancipation was made in Prussia in 1812, and approximately at the same time in other German countries. It is touching to see from old diaries of Jewish families the burning hope with which the Jews of those days greeted their liberation. They felt for the first time that they were part of the German community, and they longed to dedicate themselves to their fatherland. When after Napoleon's retreat from Russia the wars of liberation flared up in Europe, the Jews implored the governments for the right to join the army, and many of them took an active part in the campaigns.

During the period of restoration which followed the conclusion of the Holy Alliance in 1815, the ideas of the French revolution receded, and under the influence of romanticism were transformed into national movements. All over Europe a longing for national unity awakened, which became characteristic of the whole century, and as its most significant results brought about the unification in Germany and Italy.

The Jews, liberated from the restrictions of the past, threw themselves with all their heart into many spheres of life which up till then had been closed to them. They tried to absorb the western civilisation with intensity and speed, and soon many of them began to play a leading role in its further development.

Religious life continued to play a secondary part in Europe, and politics, social problems and economics dominated the general interest. The National State more and more replaced the religious communities and claimed to be the exclusive way to earthly happiness. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Jews defended most passionately their right to belong to the national community upon which their emancipation depended. "Where," exclaimed Gabriel Riesser, one of the leading German Jews in 1830, "is the other State to which we owe loyalty? Where is the other fatherland which calls us for its defence? To charge us with the reproach that our fathers have immigrated centuries or a thousand years ago, is as inhuman as senseless. We are not immigrants but natives, and therefore we have no claim to a home elsewhere. We are either Germans or homeless."

And Ferdinand Lassalle, one of the founders of the German Labour movement, wrote in 1859 : "With us it is no longer of any importance to be a Jew. For with us in Germany, in France and in England this is merely a religion and not a nationality." These were the ideas in which the Jews believed, and Der Verein Deutscher Staatsbürger Jüdischen Gladdens, the most important organization of the German Jews, proclaimed as its programme in 1893 : "We German citizens of Jewish faith stand firmly on the basis of German nationality. We have no other connections with the Jews of other countries than have the German Protestants

and Catholics with Protestants and Catholics abroad.” These words for the great majority of German Jews till 1933 expressed their political creed, and many relied upon this declaration as on a Magna Carta. The principle itself was in accordance with the general ideas of the time, and the situation was similar in most countries of West and Central Europe.

Whilst thus strong forces of the continental Jews endeavoured to integrate into the national communities amongst which they lived, there began in the second half of the 19th century a movement which-finding no satisfaction in the attempts at assimilation-aimed at a revival of Jewish national life and a restoration of a Jewish national State. The longing for Palestine had never disappeared from the Jewish heart, and the old wish “Next year in Jerusalem” was still repeated every year. When now national communities were uniting themselves in various parts of the Continent, the ancient longing for a reunion of the Jewish people transformed itself into a political aim. Moses Hess was the first who, under the influence of the Italian movement for national unity, proclaimed in his Rome and Jerusalem (1862): “Judaism is before all a nationality”; but at this time his single voice remained unheard.

In the East of Europe, where the ideas of enlightenment had gained only a limited influence, and the emancipation of the Jews had made only slow progress, assimilation was not far developed. From here in 1882 Leon Pinsker demanded the transformation of the “Jewish shadow-existence into a living nationality.” The Jewish people,” he wrote, “are everywhere present and nowhere at home. Thus the Jew is for the living dead, for the natives an alien, for the possessing a beggar, for the poor an exploiter and millionaire, for the patriot homeless.” And he went on sadly : “Our fatherland-the foreign countries, our solidarity-the general hostility, our weapon - humility, our strength-flight, and our future - the next day.” These ideas led among Russian Jews to the movement *Chowewe Zion*, *Lovers of Zion*, and to the establishment of several Jewish settlements in the Holy Land.

But the lightning spark was ignited only in 1894. When the Viennese Journalist Theodor Herzl, during the Dreyfus affair in Paris-the city where the rights of Man had been declared-heard the streets resound with the cry “Mort au Juifs,” his whole conception of life, which up till then had been based on the ideas of national emancipation, collapsed, and he arrived at the conviction that the Jewish question could only be solved by the creation of a National Jewish State. “We are a people,” he exclaimed, “the enemy makes us into one, even if we do not want it. We have tried everywhere honestly to submerge into the national communities of the peoples who surround us, endeavouring to preserve only the faith of our fathers. It is not permitted to us. In vain we are loyal, and in some places we display excessive patriotism. In our fatherlands in which we have lived already for centuries, we are insulted as aliens.”

The Zionist movement, founded and led by Herzl, soon attracted those who despaired of the possibility of a national assimilation, or were wearied by the necessity of forming their life according to other people’s example. The hope of taking up the severed threads of Jewish history, and to return after an unprecedented wandering of 2000 years in order to live their own life on their own ground fascinated the minds of many Jews, particularly in the countries of persecution. Moreover, the return to Palestine opened the way for a re-stratification of the Jewish masses and to the revival of the Hebrew language and Jewish thought.

The cultural side was particularly stressed by Achad Haam, of Odessa. He proclaimed that political Zionism was by no means enough, and that a complete renaissance of the Jewish man was needed. Mass emigration to Palestine to him was less important than the restoration of a cultural centre which could imbue the whole diaspora with new inner strength. “The national centre,” he said, “must be a refuge not for Jewry, but for Judaism. The influence of this centre on all points of the periphery will produce a rejuvenescence of the national spirit and a restrengthening of fellowship in all Jewish hearts.” And his follower Leon Simon in his *Studies in Jewish Nationalism* (1920) expressed the hope that such a national centre would create a revival of everything “that pertains to the domain of the spirit-ideas and emotions, beliefs and aspirations, principles and prejudices, intellectual, moral and psychological characteristics, together with their expression in conduct and worship, in literature and art.”

Political and cultural aims united themselves in the Zionist movement, and the *chalutz*, i.e., the pioneer who cultivates the desert, combining heavy manual work with an intellectual and cultural life, became the ideal of a new generation.

Until Hitler came to power the relationship between the two leading Jewish groups, the adherents of assimilation and of Zionism, was unfortunately very unsatisfactory. There was open hostility between both parties, and each-in the opinion of its opponent-endangered the very foundations of Jewish existence. In reality, however, both groups are related much more nearly to each other than is generally recognised, and one can well describe their hostility as a tragic war between brothers, both being twin children of the 19th century.

Both movements are fundamentally secular. For both the dominating factor is political, and both see the way for the Jewish problem in Nation and State. Although they most vehemently disagree as to which nation and which State should be the basis of Jewish existence, they fully agree about the basic principle that nation and State represent the exclusive way to the solution of the problem.

But their identity is much deeper still. Both, in full accord with the ideas of their time, are based on the conception that man as such is the ultimate measure of all things. Neither of them has at its centre a spiritual content, religious or moral, which reaches beyond the merely national element. Both, therefore, remain in the world of matter and do not enter the world of values. Both suggest an adaptation to human groups, but neither asks for a dedication to a spiritual or moral principle, which far beyond all questions of nationality should constitute the fundamental law of human conduct. This holds good also for the "cultural Zionism," because even here the national basis remains the decisive factor, and the cultural values have much similarity to the "volklichen Kulturen" which play such an important part in modern thought.

Assimilation, therefore, as well as Zionism-to a large extent-are parts of the universal movement towards nationalism, which in its last consequence has led to national self-adoration, and has made the State the idol of our time.

Besides these national tendencies there have been, however, movements which, not satisfied with politics, aimed at a religious revival. Within Zionism Martin Buber saw that the problem which had to be faced was religious, and he did much to revive the chassidism, a passionate mystical movement which flourished amongst the poorest Jews in Eastern Europe during the 18th century. Their conception of life was very different from secular thinking, and is strikingly expressed in a prophecy which the head of the Chassidim in White Russia made during Napoleon's march to Moscow. "If Bonaparte gains the victory," he declared, "then the wealth of the Jews will increase and their political position will be raised, but their hearts will deviate from God ; if on the other hand our Czar Alexander is victorious, the poverty of Israel will grow and their position will be lowered, but the Jewish hearts will be nearer to our Father in heaven." The contact with chassidism made a deep impression on various sections of the Jewish youth in Germany, and led to a movement of neo-chassidism.

At the same time two other leading personalities in continental Jewry found their way from the entanglements of secularism to religious Judaism, and their conversions, which had two different starting points, are most significant. The Austrian publicist Nathan Birnbaum, who began his activities in full accordance with political Zionism, left the Zionist party in 1898, and proclaiming that "Israel comes before Zion," devoted himself at first to the fight for Jewish cultural autonomy. After the first world war, however, he no longer found satisfaction in cultural activities, and he dedicated himself entirely to the strictest orthodoxy. His books *Gottesvolk, Vom Freigeist zum Gläubigen, and Um die Ewigkeit*, give an account of this conversion.

A similar development was that of Franz Rosenzweig, who, in full possession of the German philosophical culture,

turned to Jewish orthodoxy and went, to use his own words, "from the periphery to the centre." Zionism could give him no satisfaction, and he spoke of Zionists as "Palestinian citizens of Palestinian faith." He longed for a restoration of religious reality. His main work *Der Stern der Erlösung* (1921) gave a new vision of the three stages : Creation, Revelation and Redemption; and his correspondence with Eugen Rosenstock is an interesting contribution to the problem of Judaism and Christianity. His own life showed how the spirit can overcome very great bodily weakness. For the last seven years of his short life he was lame, confined to bed and dumb. He could not write, but he could only indicate the letters with his finger when he began, together with his friend Martin Buber, to make his famous new translation of the Bible into German. It was under such conditions that he continued until his last day to take an active part in Jewish life ; and the comprehensive collection of his letters has greatly influenced many of the younger generation.

The greatest religious personality of German Jewry during the 19th century was Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch. He saw from the very beginning the weakness of the secular development. Already in 1839 he contrasted in his *Nineteen Letters on Judaism* the temporal tendencies to "possession and enjoyment" with the ideas of service, and with the eternal task of Israel to subject every action to the sanctification of the whole life. For him it was clear that emancipation which had dazzled so many could not be an end in itself for the Jew. He welcomed it provided that it would be a first step "towards the recognition of God as the only Lord and Father." But he insisted that Israel should accept it only as an occasion to double its efforts for the fulfilment of its spiritual task. "The whole emancipation," he wrote, "should only be a matter of subordinate interest to the Jews. Sooner or later peoples will choose between right and wrong, humanity and barbarism. And the first expression of a living recognition of God will lead everywhere to the emancipation of all who are suppressed, including the Jews. To us another aim has been assigned, the fulfilment of which is given in our hands, namely the purification of ourselves." Samson Raphael Hirsch became the founder of the neo-orthodoxy, and although orthodoxy was only professed by a minority in Germany, it preserved the traditions of the religious life.

In this connection it seems appropriate to make mention of modern Socialism ; for although Socialism proudly claims to be atheistic, and to have overcome the beliefs of times which have passed, its intrinsic conception of social justice for everybody goes far beyond merely national ideals, and Berdyaev in his *Religion of Communism* has shown the religious and messianic character of Marxism. In a wider sense Marxism therefore must be realised as a part of the modern religious movements, and it is generally known that many Jews have taken part in its development.

These were the ideas which dominated German Jewry when in 1933 the catastrophe began. It is too early now to describe all the changes which have taken place, but some main features seem already clear :-

- (a) National assimilation has suffered a severe shock, and is not likely to be tried again on the same lines. A new emancipation will have to be based on a firmer foundation. It will probably be either religious or at least Socialist.
- (b) Zionism, which in the first years of the persecution gave hope to many, including even those who had previously opposed it, is now in a critical condition. Like all movements which are mainly determined by national ideals it has not been able to solve satisfactorily the problem of-"the neighbour," and Arab opposition has grown to dangerous proportions.
- (c) Socialist tendencies were weak in Germany during the first years of Hitler's Government, and it is not likely that Jewish thought developed to any extent in this direction. Now since Russia is in the war, and the fate of Europe largely depends on her arms, it can be assumed that most of the suppressed peoples, particularly in Eastern and Central Europe, including those in the ghettos, fix their hopes on a liberation by the Russian armies ; in the case of victory a great extension of Russian influence is therefore very probable.
- (d) Religious life among the Jews has undoubtedly deepened since Hitler came to power, and this development has continued ever since all the synagogues were burnt down. "Since the burning of the synagogues," reads a letter of a Jewish scholar, "we have tried to shift our concentration more and more inwards, and to make it independent even of the destruction of universities and prayer-houses" ; and a young refugee boy who had been very far from religious belief wrote : "the houses of God must burn, so that man shall begin again to think of God."

When with the boycott against the Jews the persecution began, when all Jewish activities were brought to a standstill, and the star of David, together with the inscription "Jew", was painted on the windowpane of every Jewish shop, everybody felt that something had broken which up till then had been essential to the Jewish existence. Most will have thought that it was their relationship to Germany which had been destroyed, and this undoubtedly was the intention of those who had initiated the action. But some felt that a deeper change had taken place, and that that day meant a farewell, not to the German people but to a century of secular thinking which had hoped to find its fulfilment in nation and State.

They realised that this farewell at the same time could become the beginning of a new era of religious life. They saw that the suffering which was inflicted on the Jews could

be taken, without hatred or bitterness, as a way to purification, and that suffering can create a greater strength than all the Nazi attempts at "Strength through Joy." They learned again the meaning of martyrdom, and Otto Hirsch, who for years had directed the central organisations of German Jewry gave an immortal example when he, foreseeing the fate that awaited him, refused to leave Germany and died in a concentration camp. So for them the 53rd chapter Isaiah, which, according to the Jewish tradition refers to the Jewish people itself, had become again a reality, and the centre of Jewish life had once more shifted to the scenes of persecutions and martyrdom. This was in strange accordance with Franz Rosenzweig, who had once predicted that inner strength would come to the Jews not so much from Palestine but from the Dispersion. "For only the dispersion will force the Jews to hold fast to the aim which is to become homeless as regards all temporal things, to go on wandering even there" (in Palestine).

Hitler, when he forced the Jews to call themselves Israel, undoubtedly intended this as a mark of disgrace, but the religious Jew took it as a name of honour, for he knew well that it was one of the greatest hours when it was said : "Your name shall be Jacob no longer but Israel; for you have striven with God and man and won." (Gen. XXXII. 28).

Jewish and Christian problems at the present time are intimately interwoven. Whether the immediate future will develop on religious lines we do not know. But one thing is certain. A religious revival cannot be separated from the solution of the great problems which have led to secularism. Political ideals would never have aroused passions in the 18th century, and the "citoyen" would never have become the ideal of the French revolution, if religious life had been strong enough to solve the political and social problems of that time; and "tovarich," the comrade of the Russian revolution would never have become the ideal of millions if the Christians in Russia had not failed so utterly to create a real brotherhood. "Communism," says Berdyaev, "should have a very special significance to Christians, for it is a reminder and denouncement of an unfulfilled duty to the fact that the Christian ideal has not been achieved." It would be dangerous if we failed to recognise how great a lead secularism has won in many spheres.

The man whose life is centred in true religion can persevere even when subjected to great injustice and misery, but he, on his part, will not inflict any suffering upon others. He will on the contrary attempt to form all his relationships according to his spiritual vision, and the clearer his vision, the greater will be his responsibility.

Jewish history in this respect is of a twofold interest. The Jews have survived, because in the greatest persecutions they have always turned back to their spiritual roots, and according to the word, that God is near to the broken heart, have derived new strength from their deepest humiliation.

On the other hand their religion demands practical action in every sphere of life ; it demands, as Maritain says, “earthly activation” ; and already the great social reform of the Jubilee (Leviticus XXV. 8-10), which was to be renewed every fifty years, was an outcome of the Day of Atonement, and was based on the purification of the heart. Patience regarding our own suffering and burning zeal to abolish the suffering of our neighbour complement each other.

Judaism and Christianity are faced today with the task of reintegrating daily life into religion, and in doing so both will have to find a solution for the problems of their own relationship.

* www.thetablet.co.uk