

JACQUES MARITAIN AND THE “MYSTERY OF ISRAEL”

A PHILOSOPHER REFLECTS ON THE CHURCH AND THE JEWS

■ BY ROY SCHOEMAN

When Pope Benedict XVI visited the Jewish synagogue in Cologne, Germany, in August of 2005, just a few months into his pontificate, he was continuing the course set by his predecessor, John Paul II, in reaching out to the Jewish community. These papal gestures bear witness to a fact recognized by many scholars, Jews and Catholics alike: in the history of the Church, rarely has there been as positive and sympathetic an exploration of the mysteries surrounding the Jews and their role in salvation as in recent decades.

This new initiative was inaugurated with Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*, which stated: “The Church, therefore, cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament through the people with whom God in His inexpressible mercy concluded the Ancient Covenant. Nor can she forget that she draws sustenance from the root of that well-cultivated olive tree onto which have been grafted the wild shoots, the Gentiles... She also recalls that the Apostles, the Church's mainstay and pillars, as well as most of the early disciples who proclaimed Christ's Gospel to the world, sprang from the Jewish people.” (para. 4)

It was continued by Pope John Paul II, who said in an address to the Great Synagogue of Rome on April 13, 1986: “...the Church of Christ discovers her ‘bond’ with Judaism by ‘searching into her own mystery.’ The Jewish religion is not ‘extrinsic’ to us, but in a certain way is ‘intrinsic’ to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are our dearly beloved brothers and, in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers.”

This echoed his statement in an earlier address to the Jewish community of Mainz, Germany on November 17, 1980 (quoting



A map of the Holy Land several centuries ago from the corridor of the Vatican palace known as the “terza loggia” — the third floor — where Vatican diplomats work

the German bishops' conference): “Whoever meets Jesus Christ, meets Judaism.”

This newly sympathetic view of Judaism has brought in its wake two potential perils. One is that of veering into an erroneously favorable view of Judaism, such as the belief that Jews have no need to be evangelized (the so-called “dual-covenant theory”). Some think that Cardinal Walter Kasper, the president of the Vatican's Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, risked falling into this error when he stated that “the Church believes that Judaism, i.e., the faithful response of the Jewish people to God's irrevocable covenant, is salvific for them, because God is faithful to his promises” (from his address to the International Catholic-Jewish Liaison Committee in New York, May 1, 2001). The other

danger is of reacting against this sympathetic view with an exaggeratedly negative or even hostile view of Judaism, which may, at times, become genuine anti-Semitism.

The “mystery of Israel” and the tensions around it are not, of course, new. On the very eve of the Second World War, in 1939, one of the foremost Catholic philosophers of the 20th century, Jacques Maritain, wrote a short but deep work exploring these issues, which is worth a second look today. The following is extracted from his 1939 work *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question* (Longmans, Green and Co., New York, 1939).

Let us take up the question of the dispersion of Israel, understood in its ultimate significance. Whatever the economic, political or cultural forms which cloak the problem of the dispersion of Israel among the nations, this problem is and remains in truth a mystery, sacred in character, of which St. Paul, in the Epistle to the Romans, gives us the principal elements in his sublime summary.

According to St. Paul, we gentile Christians have been grafted onto the predestined olive tree of Israel in place of the branches which did not recognize the Messiah foretold by the prophets [cf. Rom 11:17-24]. Thus we are converts to the God of Israel who is the true God, to the Father whom Israel recognized, to the Son whom it rejected. Christianity, then, is the overflowing fullness and the supernatural realization of Judaism.

THE VOCATION OF ISRAEL

Referring to the Jews, his brothers in the flesh to whom he expected to be anathema, St. Paul had such a profound and tender love for them “who are Israelites, to whom belongeth the adoption as of children, and the glory, and the testament, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises: whose are the fathers, and of whom Christ came according to the flesh,” (Rom. 9:4) that he wrote that “if the loss of them be the reconciliation of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?” (Rom. 11:15)

“For,” continues the apostle, “I would not have you ignorant, brethren, of this mystery (lest you should be wise in your own conceits), that a blindness in part has happened in Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles come in. And so all Israel should be saved... As concerning the Gospel, indeed they are enemies for your sake: but as touching the election they are most dear for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance. For as you also in times past did not believe God, but now have obtained mercy, through their unbelief; so these also now have not believed, for your mercy, that they also may now obtain mercy. For God hath concluded all in unbelief, that He may have mercy on all.” (Rom 11:25, 26, 28-32)

Thus from the first Israel appears to us a mystery; of the same order as the mystery of the world and the mystery of the Church. Like them it is a mystery lying at the very core of redemption. And we must say that, if St. Paul be right, what is called the Jewish problem is an insoluble problem, that is, one without definitive solution until the great reconciliation foretold by the apostle, which will resemble a resurrection from among the dead.

Between Israel and the world, as between the Church and the world, there is a suprahuman relation. It is only by considering this triad that one can grasp even an enigmatic idea of the mystery of Israel. It seems to me that we have here as our sole guiding thread a sort of inverted analogy with the Church.

We realize that the Church is not a mere administrative organization dispensing religion. According to its own teaching about itself, it is a mysterious body in which living bonds, in order to accomplish a divine task, unite souls with one another, and with God. The Church is the mystical body of Christ.

Indeed, Jewish thought is itself aware that in a quite differ-

ent sense and in its own way, Israel is a *corpus mysticum*, a mystical body. The bond which unifies Israel is not simply the bond of flesh and blood, or that of an ethico-historical community. A sacred and suprahistorical bond, it is one of promise and yearning rather than of possession. In the eyes of a Christian who remembers that the promises of God are irrevocable and without repentance, Israel continues its sacred mission but in the darkness of the world, preferred, on so unforgettable an occasion, to the darkness of God.

Israel, like the Church, is in the world and not of the world. But since the day when, because its leaders chose the world, it stumbled, it is bound to the world, prisoner and victim of that world which it loves, but of which it is not, shall not be, and never can be. Thus is the mystery of Israel understood from a Christian viewpoint.

The communion of this mystical body is the communion of mundane hope. Israel passionately hopes, waits, yearns for the coming of God on earth, the kingdom of God here below. With an eternal will, a supernatural and non-rational will, it desires justice in time, in nature, and in the city of man.

So, like the world and its history, Israel and its action in the world are ambivalent realities; because the longing for the absolute in the world can take all forms, some good, others evil. Hence the fact that, in the astonishing complexity of the forms it assumes, simultaneously pregnant with good and evil, there will always be found something to glorify and something to degrade Israel.

It is not a question of deciding whether you find Jews attractive or repulsive; that is a matter of temperament. The most curious fact, moreover, is that many anti-Semites declare that they have only praise for Jews they have known personally, but nevertheless feel hatred for the Jews as a sacred obligation. Which is one way, among others, of paying tribute to the mystery of Israel we are considering.

But what, then, is that vocation of Israel which persists in darkness, and of which we were just speaking? First of all, there is its vocation as a witness to the Scriptures. But more, while the Church is assigned the labor of supernatural and supratemporal redemption of the world, Israel, we believe, is assigned, on the plane and within the limits of secular history, a task of earthly activation of the mass of the world. Israel, which is not of the world, is to be found at the very heart of the world's structure, stimulating it, exasperating it, moving it. Like an alien body, like an activating ferment injected into the mass, it gives the world no peace, it bars slumber, it teaches the world to be discontented and restless as long as the world has not God, it stimulates the movement of history.

THE SPIRITUAL ESSENCE OF ANTI-SEMITISM

It seems to me that these considerations explain something of the spiritual essence of anti-Semitism.

The diverse specific causes which the observer may assign to anti-Semitism, all the way from the feeling of hate for the foreigner natural to any social group, down to religious hatreds — alas! that these two words may be coupled — and to the manifold inconveniences produced by some waves of immigration, mask an underlying spring of hatred deeper down. If the world hates the Jews, it is because the world clearly senses that they will always be outsiders in a supernatural sense, it is

ANALYSIS

because the world detests their passion for the absolute and the unbearable stimulus which it inflicts. It is the vocation of Israel which the world execrates.

To be hated by the world is their glory, as it is also the glory of Christians who live by faith. But Christians know that the Messiah has already conquered the world.

Thus hatred of Jews and hatred of Christians spring from a common source, from the same recalcitrance of the world, which desires to be wounded neither with the wounds of Adam nor with the wounds of the Savior, neither by the goad of Israel for its movement in time, nor by the cross of Jesus for eternal life. We are good enough as we are, says the world, we have no need of grace or transfiguration, we ourselves will accomplish our own happiness in our own nature. This is neither Christian hope in a helping God, nor Jewish hope for a God on earth. It is the hope of animal life and its power, deep and, in a sense, sacred, demonic, when it masters the human being who thinks himself deceived by the emissaries of the absolute.... The mystical life of the world itself aims to blossom heroically, as it were; every mystical body constituted apart from the world must be rejected as such....

JEWIS AND CHRISTIANS

Have I succeeded in giving some idea of the pathos of the situation of the Jewish people? In explaining how, often despite itself, and while manifesting, sometimes in contrasting forms, a materialistic messianism which is the dark face of its vocation to the absolute, but manifesting also admirable ardor, intelligence and dynamism, the Jewish people bears witness to the

divine in human history? Thence come the conflicts and the tension which, under all sorts of masks, necessarily prevail between Israel and the nations.

It is an illusion to believe that such tension can completely vanish.... The sole road is to accept the state of tension and to face it in each specific case, not with hatred, but with that concrete intelligence which love demands from each, so that one may come to an early understanding with one's adversary while traveling together, and in the consciousness that "all have sinned and need the glory of God," *omnes quidem peccaverunt, et egent gloria Dei*. "The history of the Jews," said Leon Bloy, "thwarts the history of the human race as a dike thwarts the flood, to raise its level."

On the spiritual plane, the drama of love between Israel and its God, if we are to believe St. Paul, will reach a denouement only with the reconciliation of the Synagogue and the Church....

If we now turn more particularly toward the Christians, it appears that, being themselves grafted onto the olive tree of Israel, they must look on the men involved in the Jewish tragedy with a brotherly eye and, as the apostle Paul teaches them, not without trembling for themselves. It is certainly possible for Christians to be anti-Semites, since one observes the phenomenon frequently enough. But it is possible for them only when they obey the spirit of the world rather than the spirit of Christianity.

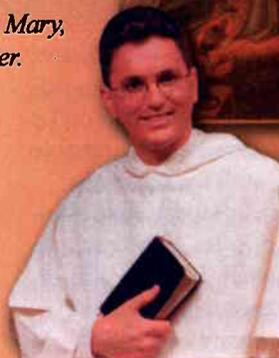
Among careless or partisan writers many historic confusions arise from the fact of the commingling in medieval civilization of the affairs of the Church and the affairs of a secular common-

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wealth religiously organized, where mundane interests and both the good and evil of human social life were steeped in religion.

If one makes the proper distinctions, one can see that, in a temporal civilization where the regime of the ghetto — not to speak of the drama of the Marranos and the Spanish Inquisition — lent itself to the worst anti-Semitic passions and excesses, the Church itself and as such, was not responsible for the excesses, even if some of its ministers were. It is well enough known that the Popes repeatedly defended the Jews, notably against the absurd charge of ritual murder, and that all in all the Jews were generally less unhappy and less badly treated in the Papal States than elsewhere....

Today anti-Semitism is no longer one of those accidental blemishes of a secular Christendom in which evil was mixed with the good. It contaminates Christians like an error of the spirit. I recall to the reader's mind that in a document of the Holy Office dated September 5, 1928, the Catholic Church has explicitly condemned this error of anti-Semitism. ...It is well known that Pope Pius XI spoke out vigorously against the racist campaign and racist measures inaugurated by the Italian government in imitation of the German government.... The following passages of a discourse pronounced in September 1938, before the directors of the Belgian Catholic Radio Agency, are also to be noted. Commenting upon the words of the Canon of the Mass *sacrificium Patriarchae nostri Abrahae*, the sacrifice of our father Abraham, the Pope said, "Notice that Abraham is called our Patriarch, our ancestor. Anti-Semitism is incompatible with the thought and sublime reality expressed in this text. It is a movement in which we Christians can have no part whatsoever.... Anti-Semitism is unacceptable. Spiritually we are Semites."

Spiritually we are Semites. No stronger word has been spoken by a Christian against anti-Semitism, and this Christian is the successor of the apostle Peter.

As for its moral characterization from the Catholic view-

point, anti-Semitism, if it spreads among those calling themselves disciples of Jesus Christ, seems to be a pathological phenomenon which indicates a deterioration of Christian conscience when it becomes incapable of accepting its own historic responsibilities and of remaining existentially faithful to the high exigencies of Christian truth.

Instead of recognizing the trials and shocks of history as the visitations of God, and instead of assuming those burdens of justice and charity demanded by that fact, it turns aside to substitute phantoms relating to an entire race, phantoms which derive a certain consistency from various real or fancied pretexts. And in giving free rein to feelings of hate which it believes justified by religion, it seeks for itself a sort of alibi.

It is no little matter, however, for a Christian to hate or to despise or to wish to treat degradingly the race from which sprung his God and the Immaculate Mother of his God.

That is why the bitter zeal of anti-Semitism always turns in the end into a bitter zeal against Christianity itself.

"Imagine," wrote Leon Bloy, "that people about you were to speak continually of your father and your mother with the greatest contempt, and to have for them only insults or outrageous sarcasm. What would be your sentiments? Well, that is exactly what is happening to Our Lord Jesus Christ.

"We forget, or rather we do not wish to know, that as a man Our Lord was a Jew, the epitome par excellence of the Jewish nature, the Lion of Judah; that His Mother was a Jewess, the flower of the Jewish race; that the apostles were Jews, along with all the prophets; finally, that our whole liturgy is based on Jewish books. How, then, express the enormity of the outrage and the blasphemy involved in vilifying the Jewish race?"●

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