

THE JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION: ILLUSION OR REALITY?

Is there any truth in the concept of a Judeo-Christian tradition? What needs can such a tradition serve? Dr. Robert Gordis, Professor of Bible at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York addressed these questions recently. His response to them appeared in Jewish Frontier, a Labor Zionism publication, and are reprinted here in part.

... The concept of a Judeo-Christian tradition in response to practical needs tended to be expressed in popular terms. As a result, its precise content was rarely spelled out and its implications and limits were scarcely explored. In its heyday the concept encountered little opposition, its validity being regarded as self-evident. After all, did not Jews and Christians believe in one God and did not both revere the Hebrew Scriptures or the Old Testament as the Word of God? As a result, the comfortable assumption was made, implicitly rather than explicitly to be sure, that the two partners in the Judeo-Christian tradition were agreed on important issues and where they disagreed, the issues were not important.

Of the two propositions in this working theory, the first was undoubtedly correct or at least tenable—there are substantial elements of agreement. Perhaps because they are so evident, they tend to be disregarded, in accordance with the psychological principle to which Edgar Allan Poe called attention in "The Purloined Letter," that the obvious is easily overlooked. On the other hand, the second assumption that the differences are unimportant, was highly dubious. When the inevitable reaction set in, it was not difficult for some theologians, always adept in the art of making subtle distinctions, to deny categorically the validity of the concept of a Judeo-Christian tradition and to dismiss it as a "myth," an imaginary notion concocted to serve apologetic ends or political purposes. . . .

What is needed is an effort to comprehend both the elements of identity and similarity on the one hand, and of difference and opposition on the other. The elements of agreement make possible a consensus of outlook without which a viable society

cannot be maintained. The elements of divergence create the conditions for a fruitful and stimulating dialogue on the perennial issues of God, man, and universe. . . .

That both Judaism and Christianity are rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures and share many other elements of a common background is undeniable, but even the same sources have developed far-reaching variations. Truth, Renan reminds us, lies in the nuances. Given subtle differences in emphasis and in timbre, a new individuality emerges. While the Hebrew Scriptures, to be sure, are sacred to both religions, Judaism accords primacy to the Torah over the Prophets, while Christianity stresses the Prophets. For Judaism, the Prophets are a vital commentary on the Torah, which is the fountainhead of the life of faith. For Christianity, the Law has been superseded by the New Covenant and it is the Prophets that constitute the most significant element of the Old Testament.

This difference may be sharpened still further. For classical Judaism, obedience to the Law is the unique and indispensable instrument for the fulfillment of the will of God. On the other hand, classical Christianity, in the formulation of Paul, is strongly antinomian, denying the validity and authority of the Torah. Indeed, Paul has argued that the Law served to increase the consciousness of sin and thus contributed to the sinfulness of man. . . . While Judaism regards the Law as the pathway to God, Christianity substitutes the person of Christ, belief in whom constitutes the road to salvation. No matter how much one may reduce the importance of loyalty to the Law in Judaism and stress the value of Law in Christianity, a substantial margin of difference will remain.

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Even where both traditions accept the validity of a given passage, the varying stress accorded it often becomes significant. In Judaism, the call "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One," known as the *Shema*, which precedes the commandment to love Him (*Deuteronomy* 6:4-9), holds a central place. This is the classic affirmation of the fundamental Jewish doctrine of the Unity of God. It is accordingly recited at the close of the Day of Atonement and by each Jew on his deathbed as the Confession of Faith. Jesus as a professing Jew assigned to it the same importance. According to Mark (12:28-34), he quoted the verse when answering the question as to which is the greatest commandment. The *Shema* holds no such central position in Christianity, and, in the version in Matthew (22:35-

40), Jesus' reply to the same question does not include it.

On the other hand, the Adam and Eve narrative in Genesis has served as the source for the central Christian concept of the Fall of Man, which has been elaborated with incredible depth in twenty centuries of Christian thought. In traditional Judaism, the paradise tale is of course familiar and famous, but, aside from a few minor references, it has developed no theological significance whatever. . . .

With regard to the ideas taken over from Judaism, there were elements which Christianity accepted; but many which it modified; others which it discarded or overlooked; and still others which it reinterpreted or replaced entirely. Such Christian doctrines as the Fall of Man, Original Sin, the superiority of asceticism, and vicarious atonement are, it is true, slightly adumbrated in Judaism, and some few passages may be adduced to support them from Jewish sources. But the student who is truly at home in Judaism recognizes that they are not in the mainstream of the tradition, being secondary in character. In addition, there were, of course, many basic dogmas which became uniquely characteristic of the Christian faith, such as the Virgin Birth, the Incarnation, and the Passion, which have no counterpart in Judaism, and which added immeasurably to the individuality of Christianity.

On the other hand, Judaism retained and developed various insights of its own. These are to be found less often in abstract formulations of creed than in the context of legal practice and institutional forms. Throughout its history, the Law has been the life of Judaism, interpreted and developed in the pages of Scripture, the discussions of the Talmud, the formulation of the Codes, and the decisions of the *responsa*, a process of growth and development still going on today.

It has been one of the great merits of Christianity to focus attention upon the fate of the individual and the means available to him for his salvation. This is not to deny the existence of a deep and ongoing interest in the needs and problems of society. Conversely in Judaism, while the individual soul has certainly never been lost sight of, the genius of the tradition has placed the destiny of the group, be it the family, the nation, or the human race, at the center of its concern. . . .

The ethics of Jesus as transmitted in the New Testament are, to be sure, frequently invoked as an ideal. But it is abundantly clear that their concern is basically with the individual and is motivated by imminent eschatology, by a vivid conviction that the social and political order is about to be destroyed

by the miraculous intervention of God. It follows that such burning issues as foreign domination, poverty and wealth, slavery and the status of women, are not of genuine concern to the man who seeks to achieve salvation before the Divine Cataclysm sweeps the world away.

When this expectation failed to materialize the Church no less than the Synagogue, needed a viable system of ethics for a perdurable society of normal men. The need is no less vital today when the accepted standards of morality, individual and collective, seem to be crumbling before one's eyes. The quest for a source and inspiration for an ethical outlook for twentieth-century man is to be sought more in the concrete laws of the Pentateuch, the idealistic aspirations of the Prophets and the realistic insights of the Hebrew Wisdom writers, than in the New Testament. What cannot be stressed too strongly, however, is that when Christians turn to the Hebrew Scriptures, they are not going out of the bounds of their own tradition, but are utilizing the resources of the Judeo-Christian heritage, which has been theirs for two millenia.

The most fundamental difference of all remains to be stated. Christianity regards itself as the heir of Old Testament Judaism, and legatees generally inherit only after the death of the testator. It is needless to add that the Jewish religion has never agreed that it is moribund and therefore in need of an heir. On the contrary, it has continued to maintain its existence, and, though its two daughter-religions are considerably more numerous and powerful, it has never surrendered its conviction that Judaism would some day be the universal faith. . . .

• Recently, one of the most distinguished spokesmen for Orthodox Judaism denied that there is any validity to the concept of a Judeo-Christian religious tradition. His presentation bears unmistakable signs of having been evoked by a concern lest the disappearance or the attenuation of the older and less numerous faith be exacted as the price for goodwill and social peace in a Christian world. . . .

Has not our brief discussion of some of the significant differences between the two components of the Judeo-Christian heritage demonstrated the truth of this position? We think not. The evidence we have adduced is true, but it is only one side of the coin. The differences are real, but so are the elements of similarity or identity. Both aspects must be reckoned with in determining the truth or the falsity of the concept of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

The warmth with which the concept of a Judeo-

Christian tradition has been affirmed and denied testifies to the fact that the emotions, and not merely the intellects of men are involved. But much of the controversy derives from the failure to consider some basic principles which must be reckoned with, if we seek light and not merely heat on the issue:

A. A religious tradition is more than a body of theological doctrines, be they regarded as dogmas of salvation, or as articles of belief. Tradition includes an entire pattern of life, a complex structure of thought and emotion, of shared experiences and common aspirations.

B. Religion cannot be isolated from culture, of which it is an indispensable element. Religion influences the other segments of culture and in turn is influenced by them.

C. A living tradition is never monolithic, but will always contain currents and cross-currents, even strongly antagonistic tendencies within itself, which nevertheless are authentic components of the tradition. Of this truth, the recent history of Roman Catholicism has forcefully reminded us.

D. Even when genuine divergences exist between Judaism and Christianity, in many instances the contrast is often not total, but one of emphasis and relative importance. An element which is dominant in one tradition nearly always exists in the other, albeit in secondary form. Thus, aspects of minor significance may, as a result of new insights or new conditions, gain in importance. Even in dormant form, these elements constitute a resource available for use when the need arises.

E. Finally, given the common origin and the abundance of similar elements in both traditions, it is clear that new insights and changing historical circumstances can serve to bring the traditions even closer. Consider the most central area of theological conflict—the claim of classical Christianity to be the sole avenue of salvation through the faith of Jesus as the Savior and the counter-insistence of Judaism on the election of Israel, and the eternal validity of the Mosaic Revelation. Neither doctrine has been abandoned, but a change of emphasis and mood has undoubtedly taken place. We have witnessed how the Catholic doctrine, *Nulla salus extra Ecclesiam*, “No salvation outside the Church,” has been interpreted in recent years far more broadly than in the past. Contemporary Catholic thinkers include within the concept of the Church all men and women of good will and character who seek to live in accordance with their consciences. . . .

In Judaism, the concept of the election of Israel has remained central in the belief of most groups—Orthodoxy, Conservatism, and Reform. Only Recon-

structionism has officially surrendered the doctrine. Yet, even within the upholders of the traditional viewpoint there has been a growing emphasis upon the doctrine as an ethical imperative for Jews, a call to *noblesse oblige*, rather than as an instrument of exclusion of non-Jews. . . .

As the more liberal views toward those outside their respective groups gain increasing adherence both in Christianity and in Judaism, one more link is forged in the chain of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which was explicit, even if not fully expressed for centuries. . . .

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We may now restate our basic thesis. The concept of a Judeo-Christian tradition is no myth. While each component has its own individuality, both in content and in emphasis, there are fundamental elements they hold in common. . . .

As America and the Western world confront the challenges of the second half of the 20th century, they possess a spiritual resource of incalculable power in the Judeo-Christian tradition which, together with the Greco-Roman heritage, has laid the foundations of Western civilization. The two elements in the tradition, as we have seen, have differed in greater or lesser degree with regard to many elements of their worldview and their way of life. But they have always been at one in their allegiance to the concept of the Fatherhood of God and its all-important corollary, the Brotherhood of Man and his inalienable dignity and right to justice and freedom as a being created in the Divine image. For Judaism and Christianity, the great commandments are the Decalogue, the Golden Rule, the injunction to love God with all one's heart and the prophetic formulation of man's duty as “doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.” (*Ex.* 20:1-17; *Deut* 5:6-18; *Lev.* 19:18; *Micah* 6:8.) If these be overly familiar quotations, it is only because the Judeo-Christian tradition has not been altogether without effect. These are the platitudes without which men cannot live. . . .

Today, the Biblical heritage that Judaism and Christianity hold in common, deepened by the shared experiences of nineteen centuries of struggle, defeat and aspiration, constitute an inexhaustible fountain of guidance, inspiration and courage for modern men. If men are today more clearly aware of the truth of the concept of the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is because they are moved by a greater sense of urgency than ever before in meeting the massive problems of modern life both at home and abroad.