

# Clearing the Way for Dialogue

*The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, by Arthur A. Cohen. Harper & Row. 222 pp. \$7.50

by Monika Hellwig

This book is a collection of loosely related articles written over a period of some fourteen years, including contributions to this journal. With the exception of one or two footnotes, they offer no evidence of having been updated. This is most unfortunate; what we have here is not so much a book as notes and materials for a book that might have been written. It is to be hoped that this book will still be written, because the articles contain crucially important suggestions for Judeo-Christian dialogue. There are interpretations that should be documented and tested against the available evidence, and there are proposals that should be systematically elaborated within a theological framework.

The title theme of the book is important. It makes the accusation that the phrase "Judeo-Christian tradition" has been swept uncritically into common American vocabulary, where it obscures issues rather than helping to solve them. We share common sources and common symbols, but as a matter of historical fact we have not shared a common tradition. Cohen refers to the idea of Judeo-Christian tradition, therefore, as a myth, using a rather broad sense of this word. It is a reinterpretation of reality in the light of what we would like it to be, projected not into the future but into a story about the past. In this sense, he finds the whole idea harmful.

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This is surely an important insight. It sheds light on the misunderstanding by American Christians of Jewish attitudes toward many matters, including the State of Israel. If we assume that we have shared a common tradition, we may well be puzzled by Jewish refusals to apply a "separation of church and state" doctrine to Israel, and we may be incredulously indignant at the suggestion that Jews have never abandoned the claim to Israel on national-religious grounds. There is a rather common Christian assumption that we know what Jews think on most issues of practical political import. The Yellow Pages of our telephone directories in many cities list "Churches, Hebrew." In some cases they have the grace to add "(see Synagogues)." However, the implication is fairly clear: Synagogue is to Jew as Church is to Christian, and it is all a matter of denomination. Will Herberg notwithstanding, Cohen is right in pointing out that this obscures important issues in quite dangerous ways. As a prelude to dialogue it is self-defeating.

In relation to this central accusation, Part II of the volume (about sixty pages) consists mainly of reviews and critiques of past endeavors at ecumenism which Cohen judges to have failed. Had this material been used as a source for relevant illustrations of his main theses, it would have been valuable. As it stands, it should have been omitted; those of us interested in this field would have paid the publisher's outrageous price for a slimmer volume. The section addresses itself more particularly to efforts by the Catholic Church, but leaves the essays intact without making reference to Vatican II or subsequent developments, except in a casual footnote.

Particularly unjustifiable is the chapter on John M. Oesterreicher

as editor of *The Bridge*. Too much here is taken out of context. Publication did not in fact stop after the third volume (as stated in a footnote). There has been a constant development, a revolutionary development in fact, both in Oesterreicher's own thinking and in his scope for initiative under Catholic auspices. His earlier work simply cannot be judged in the context of today's thinking without doing violence to history and destroying the basis for the kind of dialogue that Cohen is in fact advocating. To put the record straight for those who have not been following Catholic-Jewish relations closely for the past twenty years, it should be said that Oesterreicher emerged as a voice in the wilderness at a time when the Catholic position was very closed and almost monolithic, and that it was by dint of not moving too far too fast that he was able to influence the structure as a whole, contributing in no small way to what was accomplished at and after Vatican II.

However, the positive side of Cohen's title theme is also important. A Judeo-Christian tradition is not something that we can take for granted out of the past, but something to be worked for in the future. The brief introduction, and some sections of Part I and Part III of the volume, give excellent suggestions and insights here, which are left just half-developed. Basically, Cohen locates the key distinction between the two traditions in their eschatology, and sees this as the point of encounter and the program for an effective dialogue.

Cohen defines eschatology as the interpretation of "that moment at which the phenomenal world — the world of time and space, nature and history — comes to an end." This definition makes his thesis unnecessarily complicated. For his purposes, eschatology would be better defined as theo-

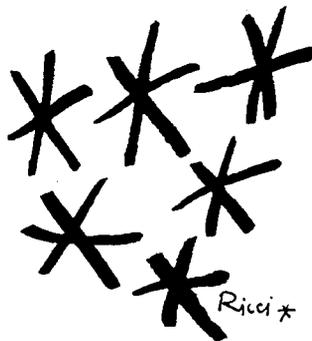
logical discussion concerning the goal or purpose of the world and of human life within it. This is certainly what he is discussing, and it involves the world of politics and economic and social life in an immediate and radical way. If Christians and Jews see one another's traditions as characteristically different and complementary here, then there is an effective basis for dialogue. In this case there is a common and important concern, there is a common basis, and there is really something to learn and something to communicate on both sides. Such a dialogue can make a difference, can broaden horizons, change perspectives, and influence the pattern of society and public affairs. To the extent that it functions this way, Jewish-Christian dialogue can build a Jewish-Christian tradition not by fusion or confusion of the two elements but precisely in the dynamic of their difference and complementarity.

The general suggestion which Cohen makes seems to be more important than his sketch for carrying it out. Acknowledging an inner dialectic in Jewish eschatology, he gives as its overall characteristic that God's judgment and redemption are within history and not upon it — so that the consummation of history is itself historical, so that "there is no judgment beyond history other than the disclosures of revelation to history." From this he draws the conclusion that Judaism always feels the exigence to explain to itself the defeats of history.

In contrast to this, he sees Christian doctrine as having introduced "a caesura" into history and as therefore having to explain why history goes on after the "end of history" has come. In the following pages, Cohen claims to give a critique of eschatology in the Christian scriptures and in the history of Christian thought. The only critical scholarship he cites in the scripture section is Bultmann's essay on history and eschatology.

This leaves the section rather weak; he assumes rather more information about the personal attitudes of the historical Jesus than most New Testament scholars would be willing to grant, and he presents the doctrinal development of the apostolic community as though it could be traced clearly when much is in fact conjecture (though he does indeed follow the best conjectures on the whole).

His pursuit of eschatology through Christian history is philosophical rather than theological. There is probably much to be said for this but, to give a balanced picture of Christian attitudes, the theology would have to be traced as well. On the contemporary scene, he really only hints at what



he thinks would be profitable to study. He projects here, and returns frequently to in the essays, the idea that Christianity must come to focus on unrealized eschatology and on concern with justice in history, adding the reflection that Jews patiently await the return of Christendom to the Synagogue, as they await "the coming of the messianic herald of the end." As a Jew, he sees Christianity essentially involved in the realization of the messianic fulfillment, and seems to leave open the future possibility of Jesus yet becoming messiah.

One wonders how far he is speaking for the Jewish community at this point. It is true that he could call witnesses from Jewish tradition as venerable as Yehudah Halevi of the early twelfth cen-

tury, if he would state his case rather circumspectly, but he does not in fact give any authorities.

From the Christian side, his provocative interpretation needs careful elaboration. He seldom cites Christian theologians and his assessment of Christian theological positions is overly conservative. If he is aware of the Moltmann-Pannenberg "theology of hope" explosion, he has not taken it into account. Yet this is really the point at which he must meet Christian theologians if he would press his thesis, for this is where Christian theologians are being brought face to face with the demanding questions about the world of politics, poverty, war, race, environmental pollution, population planning, and so forth.

Moreover, further acquaintance with current attempts at reformulating systematic theology and analyzing its symbol systems would, as a matter of fact, enable Cohen to put the Christian theologian much more neatly on the spot with his "return to the synagogue" challenge. He could well have borrowed Karl Rahner's phrase to ask to what extent Christians even now should admit to being "anonymous Jews," and he certainly should have exerted a far stronger exigence on Christian theologians to give a viable contemporary account of their claim of salvation in Jesus as the Christ.

Clearly, there has not been enough Jewish writing of this type directed to Christian readers. Arthur Cohen has opened some extremely urgent and relevant discussions, but he has gone into print without doing much of the necessary homework. This homework is immense, and it would be embarrassing to try to name Christian theologians with a comparable knowledge of Judaism. That being acknowledged, one may still hope that someone with more patience for the tedious aspects of scholarship will take up Cohen's claims and proposals and pursue them at length.