



JESUS WAS A JEW

Although, from the perspective of conservative evangelicalism, this article reflects a shallow ecumenicity as well as other unacceptable nuances, nevertheless it is remarkable for its honesty and clarity concerning an unsavory heritage that historic Christianity has upheld over the past two millennia. – *Barry E. Horner*

LEADER ARTICLE

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THE message and vision of Easter must surely be that the triumph of the Resurrection is a universal truth, not a sectarian one, to be experienced and shared by all mankind. The Christian, in embracing mankind, must necessarily start with the Jews. There is unfinished business here; a legacy to be unwound; old, old wounds. Jesus was a Jew. The Christian Church was started by Jews. The Bible, written by Jews, provides all Christians with their basic knowledge of God, without which they would be deprived of the elementary theology and morality common to both persuasions.

Yet, in rehearsing the story of Easter, the Christian can hardly avoid stumbling on the kernel of Christian antisemitism which, for all the other social causes and manifestations of that prejudice, must remain the single most durable driving force over all those years.

Antisemitism may have predated Christianity, but its main roots lie in the heart of Christian Europe. It is alienably linked to the rise and dominance of Christendom, though it started as a family quarrel between sects in the Roman Empire.

It was the existence of Jewish communities throughout the Empire which helped the spread of early Christianity, though tensions between converts and the unconverted led to something akin to a Jewish civil war in the first few hundred years of Christianity. The Talmud singled out Christians for special obloquy, while the teachings of St. Paul set out to wean the

Christian Church away from Jewish particularism so that instead of remaining as small Jewish sects, arguing with other Orthodox Jews, it inspired to embrace the whole world with its message.

However, even later it was the Christians who remained insecure enough to feel that the legitimacy of their belief in Christ could only be established by a mass conversion of the Jews. The arguments intensified, with the Bible used by both sides to demonstrate or deny their prophetic fulfillments. Jewish communities initially held privileges under the law, denied to Christians. There was much bitterness and the theological basis for Christian anti-Judaism was reinforced with secular hatred.

When the Empire embraced the Church the apologies ceased and vengeance took over. The Christian Church spoke as a master over the Jews and the theological argument acquired a harsher edge of power and law. Christian leaders even tried to eliminate the Jewishness in the image of Jesus. The fury and the zealotry of Christian intolerance took over and the Church militant went about its business, so that for centuries anti-Judaism was basically religious and was led by the clergy, while the Jews retired to their ghettos.

As Christendom expanded the Jews followed in its wake though they remained spectators of the process of nation forming. They were never participants. The social order was Christian; the Jews were not. Thus they were anti-social. By the very fact that they denied the divinity of Christ they

placed themselves as enemies of the social order.

Even after the emancipation of the nineteenth century, and the secularization of Europe, there remained a latent antisemitism in Christianity, based on the presumption that somehow the Jews had erred and had to pay the consequence, symbolized by the image of the Wandering Jew in a state of permanently imposed penance. Apart from providing some implicit justification for the appalling persecution which Christians had inflicted on Jews it also encouraged a presumption of superiority, almost amounting to an exclusiveness designed to outgun the Jews' own sense of superiority and exclusiveness. This was fuelled throughout the centuries by a barely conscious Christian assumption that all Jews were somehow responsible for the death of Jesus and that they were still, in some way, collectively guilty because they continued not to appreciate the Christian message.

After twenty centuries enough is surely enough. And what has Christendom to show for those twenty centuries which could remotely justify the presumption that the state of professed Christianity is a superior one? Disraeli said that Christianity was completed Judaism. That is what it may have aspired to be, but if only it had achieved more of its aspirations. The record of organized Christendom entitles no Christian to presume that his Church is any more complete in its spirituality than the rabbinical approach theoretically left behind, in the wrong, twenty centuries ago.

Christians today can no longer justify clinging obstinately to a one sided credo when they look back on centuries of schism, and a history which, in practice, has mocked the Gospel of neighborly love. At Easter we are reminded of suffering, death and resurrection. The image is of renewal. Each individual, each society, each cycle of history must endure its own crisis on the way to redemption. Here surely we are only

a stone's throw from the message of the Passover—liberation from captivity, the escape from Egypt, an age-old renewal celebrated annually by Jews this week while Christians prepare for Easter.

The events of last year in Lebanon threaten to extinguish some early glimmerings of a kind of historic reconciliation between Christians and Jews based obviously not only on respect for their differences, but on a shared God and a common tradition. The Lebanese war must not be allowed to abort this movement. The full ramifications of Zionism, as a purely political force, do not have to be embraced by Christians for them nevertheless to recognize that the existence of a Jewish state—controversial though its origin may have been is now a necessary part of almost every Jew's self-perception.

In the days of the Diaspora, before the emancipation brought Jews out of their ghettos, it was the religion—the Law—which bound them together. Today there is no uniform structure or code. Jewish differences, between Reform and Orthodox traditions, for instance, are as schismatic as the Christian variety; and perhaps a majority subscribes to no explicit religious tradition at all. So it is now the Jewish state which is a more central fact to their self-definition than any other fact they hold in common. If that is undeniable, it should also, in every Christian mind, be a source of comfort that the agony of the Holocaust was followed by its own kind of resurrection after which the image of the Wandering Jew had no further relevance.

It was the Bishop of Birmingham in his recent attack on Christian anti-Semitism who said, 'The Jews are not to be judged for remaining as Jews; and indeed their experience of suffering down the ages brings them very close to the central mystery of our faith, the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ.' But no church, he added, had yet adequately repudiated its antisemitic history.

The message of this Easter must surely be one of hope that this can be achieved. There are many signs that Christians are rediscovering the Jewish roots of their faith. The spirit of renewal within Christian Churches is alive at all levels. There is a hum of desire to overcome the unmentionable fact—on both sides—that Jesus was a Jew. It is echoed among Jews themselves, rediscovering Jesus after the enmities of the Diaspora. Since the State of Israel was founded more works on Jesus have been published by Jews than during the previous twenty centuries. Thus Jesus, the Jew, may become a symbol of some ultimate unity in the quest for truth between Christian and Jew, just as he is between Christian and Christian.

The roots of anti-Semitism, as of all prejudices, are irrational, and cannot be countered rationally. Although an American Jew, writing in a recent symposium on anti-Semitism, suggested that many Jews prefer to define their Jewishness in reaction to the insults and injuries imposed upon them from without rather than as a response to the internal claims of their tradition, anti-Semitism is basically a Gentile sickness. It has more to do with Christendom than with its modern undoctrinal manifestations as part of the struggle for power in the

Middle East. Of course Zionism is both a consequence and a cause of European antisemitism. There is, however, no unbroken chain between the social hostilities aroused by perceived Jewish exclusiveness in any particular society, and the kind of paranoid antisemitism which resulted in the Holocaust.

The essence of the modern relationship between Christians and Jews must surely be based on a recognition that neither of them can claim moral superiority. Yet is it not time for the Christian Churches to be more explicit in their repudiation of their past history of antisemitism? It is not a question of forgiving 'the Jews' for deicide. That would imply some monstrous collective guilt; and could only spring from an inner sense among Christians that, over the centuries, they have been just as guilty of rejecting Christ as any of his Jewish contemporaries were. It is a question of recognizing the massive gift with which Jewry has endowed the Christian world, and of rejoicing in it. That too would be a resurrection.

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