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A RADICAL OPENNESS TO JUDAISM

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A RADICAL OPENNESS TO JUDAISM

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I

FROM THE perspective of classic positions of Judaism, there is much in Harvey Cox's writings, and in those of other radical theologians, that is commendable. The puzzlement for many Jewish thinkers is that what has been regarded as normative in biblical and Rabbinic Judaism for virtually 5,000 years should suddenly in the mid-20th century emerge as a "radical" discovery among Christian theologians.

There may be a suggestion of Jewish triumphalism in such a statement; I would prefer to think that we are beginning to witness a growing expression of Jewish diaspora missiology among Christians. Did not medieval Jewish thinkers, including the incomparable Maimonides himself, consider Christians (and Moslems) who revere the Sacred Scriptures and who believe in the Divine Creator as an extension of the Jewish mission to the heathens? It is not without significance that those Christian theologians, keenly aware of the apocalyptic changes in the post-modern world, who have grown impatient with ecclesiasticisms, with the hobbling effects of Graeco-Roman dualisms and other-worldliness, are seeking to recover the original biblical and prophetic character of the church of Palestine, and inevitably are turning to the human "identity models" of Jesus himself, namely, the Jews and Judaism.

From the Jewish side, this is a bracing and yet frankly unsettling experience. For the greater part of the past 1,900 years, whenever Christians turned their attention to Judaism, it was mainly for the purpose of appropriating for the church as the "New" Israel those promises and blessings God bestowed on the "Old" Israel, leaving

behind for the Jews the Divine reproaches (viz., Eusebius who, in his *Demonstratio Evangelica*, claimed the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as early Christian "types"). The constant emphasis on the falsity of Jewish tradition by 19th century higher biblical critics (Wellhausen, Graf, Kuenen, etc.) has not encouraged Jewish security in its encounter with Christian scholarship. Nor is the meaning of Bultmann's demythologization altogether evident for Jews. The ground beneath the Jewish Yahweh is removed, and left over is an existential experience in authenticity known as Jesus, all smacking very much of second-century Marcionism, a blatantly anti-Jewish theology.

Therefore, quite possibly one of the most radical aspects for Jews of the radical theologians such as Harvey Cox is their radical openness to Judaism, to what Judaism has to say in its own terms (which might become one of their biggest problems with some classical Christians). "If we stood closer to the Old Testament — and this means closer to the spiritual descendants of Israel, the so-called 'religious' as well as the so-called 'non-religious' Jews — we would have a better locus for making up our minds theologically." Thus writes Cox in the *Christian Century* (Jan. 5, 1966), adding:

We need as our theological starting-point a Jesus who is neither the ecclesiastical nor the existentialist Jesus, but the Jewish Jesus. . . . Our Christology must begin with the Jew who makes it possible for us to share the hope of Israel, the hope for a Kingdom of Shalom. Christians, as Kristar Stendahl rightly says, are really only honorary Jews. All Jesus does for Israel's hope is to universalize it, to make it available even to us goyim. But the church has betrayed this gift. Instead of universalizing this hope, we have etherealized it. It has

become 'religious,' a fond wish for something after, beyond or above this earth, or for something within the self. In Christianity the hope of Israel has almost ceased to be a lively hope for the world.

II

COX CLEARLY understands the impact of biblical faith upon history. As he wrote in his exciting book, *The Secular City* (p. 17), "the disenchantment of nature begins with the Creation, the desacralization of politics with the Exodus; and the deconsecration of values with the Sinai Covenant, especially with its prohibition of idols." But if I have anything at all to contribute to Cox's thinking, it is that he will not fully understand his Jewish "identity model" unless he avoids a frequent Christian error; namely, that of regarding Judaism solely in its Old Testament (Jews prefer "Hebrew Scriptures") terms.

The "spiritual descendants of Israel" with whom Mr. Cox seeks closer relations, and the traditions of Judaism they embody (or even deny) are much more decisively the consequences of post-biblical thought and experience than of the "Old Testament" itself. The content of the revelation at Sinai, the meaning of the Covenant that bound Israel to a transcendent Lord of the universe, the commitment to the social justice of the Prophets and to the messianic hope became operable in the lives of the Jewish people by virtue of what happened to them through the agency of the Pharisees and the Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud, who lived and served long after the close of the canon of the Scriptures. If there be a "secret" to the continuity of the Jewish idea, and if there is an explanation of the "gritty historicity" of Judaism and its marked engagement with this world (*olam ha-zeh*), these are to be found not solely in the "Old Testament" but in the creative genius of the Rabbis who forged the instruments of Jewish survival and spiritual renewal — the *halachah* and the *mitzvos*.

Halachah, erroneously translated in the Septuagint as *nomos*, law, connoting some-

thing external and rigid, concretized the value-concepts of Rabbinic Judaism — holiness, community, justice, righteousness — into a dynamic pattern of personal and corporate behavior, thus endowing otherwise commonplace actions or situations or events with spiritual significance. Through the *mitzvah*, the performance of the moral, ethical, or religious deed, the Rabbis disciplined Jews to express in daily behavior their relationship to God and their love of neighbor.

It was Rabbinic Judaism that incorporated into Jewish life the primacy of compassion and ethical responsibility. In a characteristic interpretation of the "hidden meaning" of Scriptures, the Rabbis asserted in a *midrash*, "The Bible states (Proverbs 29:4) that an *Isb Terumot* — a man of many gifts — may destroy the world. This refers to a wise man, learned in the Halachah, Midrash, and Aggadah. However, when an orphan or a widow appears before him to obtain justice, he responds, 'I am occupied with my studies. I have no time.' 'About such a man,' says the Lord, 'I consider him as if he had destroyed the world.'"

"Religion without mitzvos," Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel has written, "is an experience without the power of expression, a sense of mystery without the power of sanctity, a question without an answer."

In elaborating the foregoing, I am not presuming to suggest to Cox, or to other Christian friends, that they must become Jews, even necessarily honorary Jews, in order to achieve salvation, including the secular kind. As a friend in court who wishes to support the general outlines of the position that Cox is taking, I am urging that the critical issue, in my judgment, for Christians today is less the reformulation of theologies, which in the last analysis is more propositional thinking, than it is the challenge of creating a disciplined witness, and the techniques for making that discipline work among the communities of Christian believers. Perhaps the subject for Christian education, which is the subject of


this symposium, is indeed the question of a Christian *halachah* and Christian *mitzvos*.

III

ON THE ISSUE of pluralism which Cox raises, an oblique but I hope salient comment: to the Jewish observer, the present panorama of Christendom presents some strange contradictions. While growing centers of Catholic and Protestant thinkers are seeking to recover the origins of Christianity in the *sitz im leben* of Judaism, almost simultaneously some Christian ecumenists on an institutional level appear to be moving in a somewhat opposite direction. Ecumenism as a Christological phenomenon obviously has every right to work out its destiny and ecclesiastical problems without the interference of any who do not share the presuppositions of the Christian participants. But is there not a question to be raised about such strong centripetal tendencies toward what can only be seen from the outside as pan-Christian exclu-

sivism, replacing a former Roman Catholic or Protestant denominational exclusivism that prevailed for so long and represented such a serious challenge to pluralism? Markus Barth, in his brilliant article in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* (Fall 1965) states the point from the inside more bluntly than I would ever dare to:

In communion with Jews, Christians will always be recipients rather than givers. *Goiim* need Jews to receive every possible help against slipping back into Gentile ways. For this reason Jews have to be beseeched to participate in innumerable attempts made by Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox, to recover now the unity of God's people on earth. If Jews were excluded from the respective encounters, discussions and decisions, the unity reached might well resemble a pagan symposium, but hardly the unity of God's one people gathered from all the nations, on the mountain of the Lord. Christians cannot help but beg the Jews to join the ecumenical movement, not for the sake of a super church, but for the search of true service to the one true God.



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