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# JUDAISM TODAY

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There are certain ambiguities in the use of the term Judaism. It is best reserved for that system of religion that became dominant among Jews after the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70 and virtually undisputed after the failure of Bar Kochba's revolt in A.D. 135. It must be remembered, however, that this particular interpretation of the Old Testament revelation took its rise in the time of Ezra, if not earlier.

For the correct understanding of Judaism it must be grasped that it is less a theological system and more a manner of life. It is overwhelmingly concerned with what a man does, not with what he thinks, i.e. with orthopraxy rather than orthodoxy. It is tacitly assumed that one who does the right things believes the correct doctrines.

Down to the French revolution, and even later in many countries, the best a Jew could normally hope for both in Christian and Muslim countries was that he should be treated as a second-class citizen. He was encouraged and often forced to live in a compact Jewish district (ghetto) of the town; this enabled the Jewish community to exercise an irresistible pressure for conformity. The only major schism, made possible by a period of more tolerant Muslim rule, was even more rigid in its interpretation of the demands of the Law than we associate with Orthodox Judaism.

Since a Jew could always become a Christian or a Muslim, according to where he lived, there had to be certain basic beliefs which kept a man a Jew, when family and national loyalty threatened to give way. One is that there is one God and one only. This is expressed by the recitation of the *Shema*, the only binding creed that Judaism has ever known, 'Hear Israel, the LORD our God is *one* LORD' (Deut. 6: 4). This is interpreted in opposition to Christianity as an affirmation of God's absolute unity, and it separated him effectively from the Christian. The second is that this God chose Israel, i.e. the Jew, as His inalienable possession—this separated him from the Muslim. A corollary of this is that God gave Israel a binding and unchangeable *torah* at Mt. Sinai.

Though Torah has traditionally been translated Law even in the Septuagint, it means Instruction. Judaism affirms that not merely the 613 commandments, whether positive or negative, of the written Torah are binding, but also that all the deductions made by the rabbis from these basic commandments are equally so. While in theory these deductions are capable of being changed, in practice this is virtually impossible. They have been carried so far, that virtually every aspect of life, even the most private and intimate, are covered by them. Should changing social circumstances seem to free some areas of life from them, they are soon brought under rule by the same inexorable system of deduction and extension.

While Judaism has always had its rabbis, i.e. experts to whom one can turn to discover what the Torah is in any given circumstances—orthodox rabbis are not ministers of religion in the Protestant sense and still less

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priests—the study of Torah, in practice the study of the Pentateuch and of the Talmud, is the highest duty of the Jewish man. The Talmud consists of the Mishnah, a commentary on the legal portions of the Pentateuch, and of the Gemara, a commentary on the Mishnah. (The alleged Jewish predilection for money-making is mainly the result of the position into which the Jew was repeatedly forced by the surrounding Gentile world.) This stress on the study of the Torah shows that something much higher than mere legalism is involved. The keeping of the Torah is conforming to God's highest will. The reward is that which such conformity must bring with it. It must be stressed that in Judaism all Jewish men stand equal. There is no priestly caste. It is only study of the Torah which in theory gives anyone a higher standing.

This system created a community where a very much higher level of morality, social righteousness and general humanity has normally been maintained over the centuries than can be claimed for any so-called Christian society. It has been only when the rabbinical system has been faced by the exceptional and unexpected that its results have been inhumane or grotesque. No orthodox Jew would subscribe to the popular view that Judaism has created a system of unmitigated and intolerable legalism.

In addition to the honour given to God's revelation there have been two other factors which have prevented this. On the one hand, on the basis of Lev. 18: 5, the rabbis insisted that since the commandments were given that a man should *live* by them, in case of a threat to life all but three, murder, idolatry and adultery, could be ignored. This principle has also operated against all extremer interpretations of the Law in ordinary life.

The other factor has been that of mysticism. In many different ways both the sage and the ordinary man have found themselves in living touch with God. Sometimes they have followed the classical roads of mysticism, sometimes lines of speculation in the Kabbalah\* that have fascinated Christian thinkers. Perhaps mysticism's greatest contribution was in the mass movement of Hasidism, which began in the 18th century and gave a new vitality to Orthodox Judaism, when it was most expected to collapse in the modern world. In addition Judaism has always been a community religion. Even in its mysticism it has found no place for the individualism so often found in Protestantism.

We should never forget, when we consider Orthodox Judaism, that it has to a great extent been moulded by the unrelenting pressure of Christianity. This has shown itself especially in four directions. The unity and nature of God have been so exaggerated that most Jews can express them only by negatives, i.e. they can say only what God is not. The Torah has been magnified until the language used of it is comparable to the Christian's language about Christ. The tendency to underrate the reality and universality of sin has been greatly increased; one result is that there is very little desire for the reintroduction of sacrifice. Finally, probably the

\*Kabbalah, i.e. Tradition, was the name given to the mystic doctrines and systems that grew up in the 12th and 13th centuries claiming to be based on much older mystic tradition. Since it remained standard for most later mystic thought, the term is used to represent traditional, 'main-line' Jewish mysticism. Its chief literary expression is the Zohar, c. A.D. 1300.

majority of the orthodox now look for a Messianic period rather than for a personal Messiah.

The critical test for Orthodox Judaism came with the freeing of the Jew from his ghettos and the granting to him of full citizen rights. For some this began with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution; for others especially for some from parts of North Africa and the Yemen, it came only with their transportation to the State of Israel. In the vast majority of cases this meant that orthodox Jews had to face in the span of a single life the stresses and strains Christianity was able to adapt itself to through a number of centuries. The main modern enemy of Orthodoxy, however, has been persecution. The pogroms under the Czars, from 1880 onwards, uprooted well over a million Russian Jews to throw them into the American melting pot. The highest proportion of the victims in the Nazi extermination camps were orthodox Jews.

Orthodox Judaism still exists. It can be found in the Williamsburg district of New York, in a part of Detroit and a few other American cities, in the Stamford Hill area of London and Cheetham Hill in Manchester, and above all in Mea Shearim and surrounding districts of Jerusalem and in Bnei Braq in Greater Tel-Aviv as well as in the many yeshivas that have sprung up in Jerusalem. But even in Israel Orthodoxy persists mainly by withdrawing itself from the world of reality, by opting out from modern values.

Already very many of those who fled from Russia under the Czars to North America, Britain and Palestine had abandoned their orthodoxy, and, it may be, their religion, because they had found that it offered no answer to the material need and anguish through which they were passing. In exactly the same way the survivors of Hitler's concentration camps found for the most part that the God of tradition was meaningless in the setting of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. For at least ninety per cent of Israel's youth rabbinic rules and regulations seem irrelevant to the needs of the young state. It should not be forgotten that the official motivation for the maintenance by law of various traditional Jewish practices in Israel is merely that they are national customs.

That which commonly calls itself Orthodoxy today is essentially a compromise, which appears on two levels. In Britain the more rigid one is represented mainly by the Federation of Synagogues, mostly smaller and less fashionable, the laxer by the United Synagogue, which appoints the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth, and embraces much of the wealth and prestige of the Jewish community. In the United States the distinction is made more explicit, for the name Orthodox is reserved for the former group, while the latter is called Conservative. The use of this latter term does in fact make it easier for those using it to go further in their compromise.

It is insufficiently realized that the corrosion of Orthodoxy has gone much further in the realm of the spirit than in that of practice. The true Orthodox may be compared with the extreme Christian Fundamentalists. They not only accept the literal truth of the Bible but also its traditional interpretation. They believe not only that the Law of Moses was given in its present form at Sinai, but also that its rabbinic interpretation, i.e. the

oral law, in essence at least, started there also.

The bitter controversy in the United Synagogue a few years ago that centred round Rabbi Louis Jacobs had nothing to do with his orthodoxy, so far as his practice was concerned. He accepted the rabbinic law as binding and carried it out in a way that gave scandal to none. But he maintained that not all the written Law and certainly most of the traditional interpretation of it did not go back to Moses. As a result of the controversy he became a rabbi of an independent synagogue, the orthodoxy of which cannot be impugned, yet he is regarded by the majority of his fellow rabbis as holding views subversive of true Judaism. For all that, his views are held by ninety per cent of educated orthodox Jews everywhere, even by a majority of the rabbis among them, though they will not acknowledge the fact. This is another way of saying that for most of the orthodox the Divine imperative in the Torah has been undermined. Instead it is becoming something which belongs to the essence of being a Jew.

This element of compromise created by the modern world has triumphed openly in the movement known normally as Liberal Judaism in Britain and as Reform Judaism in America. Here the Torah, though respected, has been replaced by the teaching of the Prophets. In other words the movement can legitimately be compared with Liberal Christianity. Like the latter it cannot easily be described and is capable of taking on a wide variety of expressions. Generally speaking any traditional observance to which no valid ethical meaning can be attached is abandoned, unless, indeed, it is retained as a national custom. Here the concept of a Messiah as a person yet to come has been completely dropped, while it has only been dimmed in the orthodox camp. Probably over half America's Jewry belongs to the Reform movement, though a number will attend more liberal Conservative synagogues as a matter of convenience. Indeed, the frontier between Reform and Conservative and Conservative and Orthodox is very blurred. In Britain the Liberal movement has made much less progress.

In Israel the Reform Synagogue is regarded as public enemy No. 1 by Orthodoxy. It knows that the small number of Hebrew Christians presents no great danger at the moment, but it realizes that Reform could conceivably capture the uncommitted majority of the people. The plain fact is that the majority there have no definable religious faith, as is also the case elsewhere.

The proportion of avowed Jewish atheists, Marxists, secularists and humanists is probably everywhere lower than in the comparable Gentile society. Even where there is no faith at all, a Jew is likely to be a synagogue member, for it serves as a form of club and is a help to maintaining his Jewish identity. In Israel, where these motives play no part, synagogue membership is very low. Religious faith has in fact been in large measure replaced by the sense of peoplehood. Especially since the Six-Day War of 1967 the State of Israel has become an emotional and almost mystical necessity for the majority of Jews living outside it. It would be only a minor exaggeration to suggest that the concept of peoplehood is the main feature of Judaism today. Certainly it is the only bond that links the hundred per cent observers of the Torah, its compromising adherents of all grades, and

the nationalists, humanists and Marxists that form the other fringe of Jewry.

We need not be surprised at this. Only the way that Christendom and Islam treated Jewry down the centuries has obscured from us that this sense of peoplehood has always been an essential element in Judaism. Because for so long the Jew was allowed to exist as Jew only on the basis of his religion, it was assumed that it was merely religion that made a Jew. In fact the election of Israel as a people has been at all times the basic fact in the religious self-consciousness of most Jews. When the Zionist movement began, it was attacked with equal bitterness by the Liberals and the Orthodox. The former rejected it, because it introduced nationalistic particularism into what they proclaimed as a purely spiritual religion. The latter would have nothing to do with it, because its leaders either rejected the demands of the Torah or let them sit very lightly on them. There were also those who insisted that a return to the Land of Israel depended on a Divine action through the Messiah. Today it is only a very small section on either wing that maintains its old antagonism.

The response of the Jewish masses to the call of Zionism has always been one of its most striking features. At the same time the reaction of the typical modern Jew to the call of Zionism has been, like his response to the claims of the Torah, ambivalent. He has been prepared to make very great sacrifices for the cause, but where he has not been driven to Israel by persecution, he has shrunk from the irrevocable step of settling in the land. His sense of peoplehood, of chosenness, has never conflicted with his knowledge of his essential oneness with his fellow men.

Judaism looks for a new earth in which righteousness will dwell. Hence, both at Qumran and among the Pharisees and the Zealots, and equally today with both Orthodox and Liberal, the person of the Messiah has always taken second place to the new age he was to introduce. This helps to explain why many of the Messianic pretenders were able to gain massive support. After the debacle of the last major Messianic claimant in the middle of the seventeenth century, Sabbatai Zvi, the average Jew has either grown dubious about the possibility of a personal Messiah or has grown indifferent to the whole subject. But that has not meant any diminution in the hope for a Messianic age, even where the term is not used.

At all times Judaism has seen man co-operating in the coming of this age; this is one of the marked features of the Qumran writings. Hence a man's keeping of the Law is never a purely individual matter. The large-scale benefactions by well-to-do Jews, not merely to Jewish but also to general charities and even to organisations like the Salvation Army, are made with the hope of raising the well-being of men in general. One of the great forces behind Zionism has been its vision of creating a new type of society spear-headed by the kibbutz, the communal colony. Though the kibbutz is primarily a child of Marxist theory, the fact that there is a small but growing number of Orthodox ones shows that it involves ideals that are entirely compatible with true religion. This preoccupation with a practical building up of the kingdom of God—perhaps Utopia is a better word, for religion need not feature in it—explains why the majority of Jews are on the left in politics, but very few support the Communist

regimes of today, even though many have been influenced by Marxism.

This cutting down of the stature of the Messiah, even where he is expected, and the stress on human activity help to explain why the concept of the resurrection of the dead plays little real role in Judaism. Though it finds its place in the daily services of the Synagogue and in Maimonides' Thirteen Articles of Faith, it plays a vital role only for a few—hence the impact of the gas-chambers on world Jewry has been the greater. Another reason for this is the lack of integrated theology in Jerusalem. The religious know that the Bible knows nothing of the immortal soul that fares very well when it is freed from the fetters of the body. At the same time that knowledge has been made virtually valueless by the general Jewish acceptance of Christian concepts of the soul, which the Church early accepted from Greek philosophy.\*

From all that has been said it should be easy to recognize that Judaism in all its forms tends to put its stress quite otherwise than does New Testament Christianity. The difference becomes even more obvious when the comparison is made with traditional orthodox Church development, with its strong infusion of Greek thought. Hence it is not surprising that the traditional lines of Christian approach to the Jew have been far from effective, and where they have succeeded, it has been mainly among those Jews who had become more or less assimilated to their Gentile surroundings, or who, for one reason or another, had become dissatisfied with Judaism.

The almost intuitive expectation of the average Christian and church that the convert will simply assimilate completely and disappear in his new surroundings offends the strong feeling of peoplehood that dominates a majority of Jews. In many cases it renders him incapable of even listening intelligently to the would-be missionary.

The over-stress in conservative Protestantism on the individual and on individual salvation has a similar effect. The would-be convert expects to find a far more real community life in the church than he had in the synagogue, and its lack can have a seriously discouraging effect.

Our concept of Christendom, with the use of infant baptism just as the Jew practises circumcision, makes it very difficult for the Jew in non-Muslim lands not to equate Gentile and Christian. He is therefore strongly repelled by the wide spread of antisemitism, even among many church members, and by so many forms of racial discrimination, especially in South Africa and the United States. The same effect is also achieved by the attitude of many conservative Christians who consider that since the solution of the world's social problems must await the return of Christ, there is nothing they can or should do about them.

When it comes to Jewish worship or charity, normally all that matters

\*Traditional Christian theology regards man as composed of body and soul, the latter being immortal and capable of adequate existence on its own. Whether it should be distinguished from spirit is a matter of controversy. The Old Testament doctrine is that man is *nephesh*, i.e. soul, which comes into being by the meeting of body and spirit ('the breath of life', Gen. 2: 7). When spirit and body separate at death, the soul, though apparently retaining its identity, becomes unable to function in any way, until a body is restored to it in resurrection. There is nothing in the New Testament which is a denial of the Old Testament concept, though the redeemed are conscious of Christ's presence.

is whether a man is a Jew or not. No further questions need be asked. Hence the bitter denominational differences between Christians form a major stumbling-block. The Jew's lack of theological interests makes it the harder for him to understand the underlying reasons. Very often a Jew has turned from the decisive step of committal to Christ, when he discovered that he was expected to make a denominational decision as well. It may be added that the frequently met idea that the Jew, once he has become interested in Jesus, is 'naturally' drawn to some particular theology and church system is not borne out by statistics.

The undeniably tritheistic, not trinitarian, language of much popular worship, hymnody and preaching is also a great obstacle, which many Jews have never been able to surmount. The accepted method of approaching a Jew with stress on the Messianic prophecies and the need for sacrifice for sins is normally fated to be abortive. Even if the hearer is interested in prophecy, and the normal Jew is not, the Messianic concept is for him something widely different; the concept of Jesus as Messiah appeals to him as little as it did to the majority of His contemporaries. As for the forgiveness of sins, the Synagogue has so played down the whole concept of sin over the centuries that only in rare cases does one find the soul longing to know that it can find complete forgiveness.

If the Church is to make a real impact on the Synagogue, the Christian on the Jew, there must be the willingness to recognise certain unpalatable truths. The Synagogue has sometimes had a truer understanding of the Biblical revelation than has the Gentile Church, especially in its more popular manifestations. The official Church has consistently libelled and calumniated the Jew and Judaism, and has then acted as though the calumnies were true. In its own life the Church has all too seldom demonstrated to the Jew what the life of the people of God should be. On the positive side the Jew must be faced with all the possibilities of the Holy Spirit's working through individuals and the local church. Nothing short of this will move the Jew to jealousy (Rom. 11: 11, 14).

Further information on the subject and bibliographies will be found in the articles on Judaism in *The New Bible Dictionary* and in Baker's *Dictionary of Theology*.

(See also Mr. Ellison's longer works on this subject: *Christian Approach to the Jew* (Utd. Socy. for Christian Literature or Lutterworth) and *Understanding a Jew* (Olive Press, 16 Lincoln's Inn Fields, London, WC2)—*Ed.*)