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## **The Relationship Between Judaism and Christianity\***

YEVGENI BARABANOV

*How would you characterise the relationship between Judaism and Christianity?*

This question is as old as Christianity itself. It was the subject of an Apostolic Council in Jerusalem in the year AD 49. The gnostic Marcion brought the debate to the fore again in the fourth decade of the second century. At that time Marcion was a member of a Christian community and very popular in Rome and further afield. He demanded a public explanation as to how Christians could even consider preserving so much as an outward connection with Judaism when the Gospels talk about the impossibility of pouring new wine into old wineskins and expecting good fruit from bad trees. He himself insisted that the Jewish Bible be rejected completely and that Jewish traditions be abolished. In his book *Antitheses* he compared passages from the Old and New Testaments to show that they were completely incompatible with one another. The deeds of the Jewish God differed strikingly from the deeds of the God of the New Testament. The God of the Jewish Bible did not conform to an understanding of a Supreme Perfect Being. He was cruel, vengeful and gripped by passion. He performed deeds which later he was forced to repent of and reproach himself with. From all this Marcion drew a far-reaching conclusion: Christianity had been perverted by the Jewish inheritance and the closest disciples of Jesus themselves had been responsible for this. Only a radical repudiation of Jewish and Jewish-Christian traditions could save it from defilement and error.

Christianity rejected not only Marcion's gnosticism but also all his anti-Jewish ideology. Marcion himself was excommunicated. At the same time work was begun on establishing the canon of holy books and since then the Christian Bible has definitively and indissolubly combined both Jewish and New Testament writings.

*Can Marcion really be considered a representative of Christian antisemitism?*

I would say pre-Christian, and not only because antisemitism is always a betrayal of and defection from Christianity. Marcion stands on the historical crossroads of anti-Judaism. On the one hand he inherited and continued the Hellenistic tradition of pagan antisemitism, which we encounter in Hellenistic Egypt and ancient Rome. On the other, he shaped his tradition into an anti-Jewish ideology within Christianity and although this ideology was condemned as a heresy it nevertheless exercised a signifi-

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cant influence over subsequent centuries. Of course this influence was more often than not oblique, hidden and suppressed, emerging as a particular type of religious consciousness. It was evident in the Middle Ages; it was evident later in harsh and unjust statements by senior authoritative church leaders and writers; and also most recently in the ideologies of the 'Union of the Russian People' and of German Nazism which opposed the 'Aryan' Christ to the 'Jewish' God. It seems that nowadays there is no longer any need to prove that antisemitism bears no relation to the New Testament or to genuine Christian tradition.

*Do you believe, then, that Christ did not annul the Old Testament?*

Absolutely. We find no annulment in the Gospels. On the contrary, Christ says that he came not to annul the Law but to fulfil it. The Greek word *pleroma* means more than the Russian *polnota*. It signifies plenitude, fulfilment and richness, the absence of voids and omissions. Christ fills the Old Testament revelation with new content. He reveals a new spiritual dimension and new perspectives. The question of eternal life to come is the least of his preoccupations. His Good News is about the coming Kingdom of God and everyone in the world is called upon to work creatively for its fulfilment. When a young man came to him and asked 'What must I do to gain eternal life?' Christ answered, 'You know the commandments: Do not kill; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; honour your father and mother; love your neighbour as you love yourself.' (Remember, these are all 'Old Testament commandments': Exodus 20:12–16; Leviticus 19:18; Deuteronomy 5:16–20.) This was not enough for the young man. 'All this I have done since my youth. What else do I lack?' Jesus looked at him and loved him (the detail is added by the gospel writer Mark) and said, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give them to the poor, then you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me' (Matthew 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–27; Luke 18:18–27). The young man rejected the call to apostlehood for he was rich and did not want to part with his possessions.

The context in which this episode with the rich young man is placed stresses that it is impossible for those burdened with wealth to enter the Kingdom of God. Wealth may become an obstacle to perfection. However, this clear and simple idea has often obscured another meaning to this gospel story, which is that in order to inherit 'eternal life' it is enough to fulfil the 'Old Testament commandments', enough to be a genuinely believing Jew, enough to be true to the Law. Christ did not change one jot or tittle of God's Law. He only said that all this is insufficient in the light of the coming Kingdom of God. Man is created not only in order to obey prohibitions and to look forward to a better life, he is also called to freedom and creativity, to participate as God's son in His work of transforming the world and fighting against evil. 'You are no longer slaves but children of God'. To be God's child is not only a gift, but a new responsibility. One must reveal in oneself new possibilities, new resources of spirituality and new paths in life.

It is as if the new spiritual state in which a Christian find himself explodes the ancient way of understanding God. The Christian stands before an unveiled and largely uncharted path leading to an imitation of God's perfection. His life is a constant search which is imbued with a dynamic enabling him to surmount obstacles on the way. For him the 'holy' and the 'unholy' are not static concepts; there are no frontiers or boundaries, for all creation is called to be blessed and to be holy. This is what makes Christianity different from even the most highly developed monotheistic religions. It was because of this that the Apostle Paul could say

Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own, based on law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. ... Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

*Historically, though, Christianity would seem to have developed in a different way from that described by the Apostle Paul.*

Of course, being called to perfection is not the same as being perfect. Unfortunately there is a good deal in the history of Christianity that can be described not so much in terms of monotheism or the laws delivered on Sinai but rather in terms of the crudest paganism. It is to such paganism that religious xenophobia can be attributed, as well as a sense of one's own superiority and, of course, so-called 'Christian' antisemitism.

*In other words, you believe that Christianity is historically and forever bound up with the Jewish religious tradition?*

It is quite true that Christianity and Judaism do not contradict one another, but are both part of God's single plan of salvation for man and the world. This does not mean that they are the same. Not at all. However, the relationship between them cannot and must not be presented in terms of dominance and subordination, truth and falsehood, good and evil. ... Strictly speaking no new relationship has so far developed between them, but I am convinced that the establishment of a worthy relationship between Judaism and Christianity, built on mutual understanding and respect, is the creative task for our times. Only mutual recognition of historical sins will overcome them and create the conditions necessary for genuine dialogue. Such dialogue is needed above all by Christians as it can lead to a deepening of faith and to renewal. Catholic initiatives following on from the Second Vatican Council deserve special attention here. I am thinking not only of the official communiqué by the French or American bishops affirming their loyalty to the declaration *Nostra aetate*, but also of Jewish-Christian cooperation over research into the Old Testament, rabbinism and ancient liturgical practices, research which has required a reassessment of many ideas about the sources of the New Testament and has revealed affinities between the two faiths at a deeper level. The call from the Jewish side to begin working out 'a Jewish theology of Christianity and a Christian theology of Judaism' also deserves attention. Unfortunately Orthodox Christians have contributed almost nothing to this. A small group of Jewish Christians is the only exception.

*Who are these Jewish Christians?*

I mean the small number of Jews both here and in other countries who in accepting Christianity did not break off their links with Jewish tradition – indeed, sometimes found them for the first time. After baptism they have had a keener sense of a reli-

gious responsibility for the fate of their people and their faith. They recognise their conversion to Christianity as a call to the establishment of genuine dialogue. However, it would be inaccurate to call Jewish Christianity, which originated within Russian Orthodoxy, a 'movement'. It is only a timid attempt to make sense of a great historical conflict, to strive to eliminate age-old prejudices and to find real bases for a fruitful and mutual exchange of spiritual riches. I repeat, it is still not so much a movement as a way of thinking.

In Russian Christianity today 'rootedness' (*'pochvennichestvo'*) is a reaction to atheism and the secularisation of ideals. It is also a protest against the dilution and destruction of the centuries-old traditions of Russian culture. The soil which is calling us to return to it today is Russian Orthodoxy, the idea of the Russian nation, patriotism and the heritage of our fathers. I would define this frame of mind as religious nationalism. There are two tendencies or spiritual orientations in contemporary Russian 'rootedness' which merge together but also exist separately. The first is connected with an agonising sense of loss of historical memory and with a feeling of personal responsibility for the fate of religion and national culture. The other is an attempt to construct a nationalist ideology as an effective alternative to the existing state of affairs. If the moral and religious pathos of the first orientation evokes only sympathy, then the second usually meets with suspicion and mistrust. It is actually very difficult to believe that the multiple problems facing our society could be solved by means of Russian nationalism.

I will not discuss the political ideas of those who espouse 'rootedness' – it would lead us away from the point – but I will just say a few words about the religious, Christian, aspect of the movement. The main point to make is that the merging of the two concepts 'Christianity' and 'nationalism' already represents a huge problem which, in my opinion, 'rootedness' has not yet solved either theoretically or practically.

### *What is this problem?*

Christianity asserts a completely new, supernational community. It calls upon all nations to overcome their natural tendency to erect barriers and cut themselves off in the name of a higher spiritual unity – the unity of the people of God. This is why the Apostle Paul said that in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew. However, this does not mean that national identity is to disappear completely in Christianity. No, it simply moves to the background to make way for that new life to which every Christian is called. This is the reason why St John Chrysostom could say that Christ has made people near and far into one body, so that someone living in Rome can consider Indians as his relatives. Maksim the Confessor expressed the same idea:

All deep divisions of race, nation, language, custom, work, knowledge, calling, wealth are reconciled by the church in the Spirit. The church impresses the image of the Divine upon them. They receive from the church a simple indestructible nature, a nature which is not affected by the multiple and profound differences which distinguish people from one another.

It would be wrong to think that all this is the sphere of a 'special' kind of 'mystery' or 'blessing' which is therefore somehow optional. All Christians are called to the task of shedding new light on all the blind cosmic forces and overcoming all barriers and divisions. What is most alarming in Russian 'rootedness' is the excessive growth

of nationalism in the face of Christian universalism. I have met Russian patriots who deny that not only Catholics and Protestants, but even Orthodox Bulgarians, are Christians. And this is the context in which we are to begin a dialogue with Judaism! An unshakeable conviction that the borders of truth coincide exactly with the borders of one's own particular denomination and nation cannot unite, it can only divide. This is not Christianity, but paganism with its graven images and idol worshippers.

*Do you think that every nation, or any nation, embodies an 'idea' which is worked out in history under the guidance of God?*

If you mean nations that have been 'chosen by God', then traditionally Israel is the only one that falls into that category: according to the Apostle Paul, to Israel 'belong the sonship, the glory, the covenant, the giving of the law, the worship and promises' (Romans 9:14). God has not rejected this nation. Even the most extreme materialist must feel disconcerted by the astonishing fact of the rebirth of Israel. Throughout its history the Jewish nation has been scattered and cannot therefore be defined as a nation in the 'classical' sense of the word. Is it a community of territory and clear ethnic homogeneity? Is it a community of language, religion, culture? The answer to all these is no. And yet it is a community in that its members share a historical consciousness of a single destiny. 'Single destiny' is predominantly a religious category which retains inexhaustible mystery and significance even after the most painstaking rational analysis. More and more Christians today are beginning to perceive the historical mystery of the choosing of the Jewish nation in a genuinely religious way.

When it comes to 'Christian nations', there is no basis for applying the epithet 'chosen by God' to any of them. The main reason is that no racial, national, political or other 'natural' principles of social life have had any role in shaping Christianity. Christianity is exclusively personalist; the only community of people which it affirms is the church in which believers live a special life of freedom and love. But even the church is not the Kingdom of God – it is only the way to it. The state, politics and the nation are even further away from the social personalism of Christianity: in no way can they constitute the Kingdom of God. But all Christians are called to the task of realising the Kingdom of God by overcoming stagnation and evil. All the 'historical successes' of Christianity – great empires in their triumphant power – are therefore only partial successes, distorted by un-Christian elements. This does not mean, of course, that Christians must submit to the prince of this world and not work to bring about the truth of God's Kingdom. On the contrary, it is awareness of this truth on the part of a nation that constitutes the 'idea' of that nation. This 'idea' is not something simply 'given', something which simply falls from heaven, but a creative task, a duty.

*What is your own attitude towards antisemitism?*

I think I have already expressed my attitude clearly enough. Antisemitism is historical Christianity's greatest disgrace. It not only humiliates Christ and the Mother of God, it not only shows contempt towards one's fellow man as made in the image of God, it also reveals weakness and a lack of spiritual gifts; it is a symbol of religious and moral degeneration. Antisemitism always signifies de-Christianisation and dehumanisation, a reversion to paganism and to base instincts. All antisemitic myths about the worldwide Jewish conspiracy, about the Elders of Zion, about 'Jews and Masons' are generated at the lowest levels of conscience and culture. These myths

degrade not those against whom they are directed, but those who spread them.

Whenever the 'Jewish question' becomes acute this is usually a worrying symptom of disease in the consciousness of a nation state, of disease affecting the nation itself. Even though the nation in question may appear to be powerful it is always suffering from weakness and uncertainty. I do not deny the existence of the 'Jewish question', but I do not propose to discuss it in detail here. I just want to emphasise the point that it is not so much a question about the Jews as about the nation and state in which it arises. The search for a hidden enemy, thirst for compensation and aggravated xenophobia are more often than not the symptoms of a complex of inferiority, repression, lack of freedom and spiritual decline.

(Translated from the Russian by Emma Watkins.)