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## **The Jews and Christianity\***

FR ALEKSANDR MEN'

*What do you see as the reason for the recent influx of Jews, mostly from the intelligentsia, into the Russian Orthodox Church?*

I do not have any statistics to hand, even if any should exist. It is obvious to me that these conversions are the result of a search for the highest spiritual values. It must not be forgotten that the Russian intelligentsia first began to seek a faith a long time ago, before the revolution, and that there were several Jews among those who contributed towards this 'religious renaissance', for example, the philosopher S. L. Frank, the critic M. Gershenzon, the literary and social activist I. Fundaminsky. The Christianisation of Jews today is assisted by the fact that it is not directly connected with the question of nationality. Before the revolution a baptised Jew automatically became a 'Russian'; nowadays this is not the case. 'Jewish by nationality' and 'Jewish by faith' are no longer synonymous. A Jewish Christian not only does not stop being a Jew, he even begins to understand in a deeper way the spiritual vocation of his nation.

*How do you understand this vocation?*

For someone who believes in the Holy Scriptures this is undoubtedly a vocation concerned with religious mission. This does not mean that Jews are more religious than other peoples, but they will always be dedicated to God because it was through them that the Revelation was given and the Incarnation achieved. This was implied by the words spoken on Sinai: 'You will be a royal priesthood and a holy nation.' 'Holy' ('*kodesh*') here means dedicated to God. When a Jew betrays this dedication he betrays himself and easily finds himself in the power of dark forces. Being chosen is a great and terrible responsibility.

*What difficulties (both objective and subjective) do Jews newly converted to Russian Orthodoxy experience?*

They may not have enough links with Russian national culture, which permeates the traditions of Russian Orthodoxy, although many baptised Jews, myself included, value highly the spiritual treasure of Russian culture: Sergi of Radonezh, Serafim of Sarov, Tikhon Zadonsky, Russian icons, Russian classical literature and the vanguard

\*This interview with A. Shoikhet first appeared in the *samizdat* journal *Yevrei v SSSR*, no. 11, 1975, and was reprinted in the West in *Vestnik RKhD*, no. 117, 1976, pp. 112–17.

of Russian religious thought. Antisemitism may be a hindrance: unfortunately it has not been eliminated in some Orthodox circles.

*Have you experienced antisemitism yourself?*

Thankfully, no. In a quarter of a century of service to the Church, including 17 years as an ordained priest, I have not experienced it personally, although I am aware that several of my colleagues are not free of antisemitic attitudes. From my parishioners, who have always known of my Jewish origins, I have experienced only love and kindness.

*What is your attitude to the Russian Orthodox cults of SS Gavriil and Yevstrati who were 'martyred by the Jews'? Is this not one obstacle faced by Jewish Christians who wish to remain within the Russian Orthodox Church?*

The Orthodox Church has never supported ritual slander of the Jews in any official resolution. During the Beilis trial prominent Orthodox theologians such as the Hebrew scholar Professor Troitsky firmly refuted these fabrications. I hope that these saints will be decanonised. The Russian Orthodox Church knows how to do this.

*Could not the severe attacks on Jews in Christian church services also be a hindrance?*

These texts are remnants from medieval times. The Catholic Church has already cut them out. I hope that when the time for reviewing the Orthodox liturgical texts arrives our church will cut them out too.

*Some Jewish Christians who do not wish to renounce their Jewish roots continue to combine Christian observances with Jewish rituals (the Sabbath, the Passover and so on). Is this not dual faith and does it not lead to contradiction, and violating an individual's religious integrity?*

Where is the contradiction? Every Christian nation has not only religious holidays but also national festivals sanctified by the church – for example, commemorations of miraculous liberations from enemy invasions. So why should Jewish Christians not celebrate, say, Hanukkah, the day of the Maccabean victory? The Russian Church honours the memory of the Maccabean martyrs (14 August new style). In the early church, when most members were Jews, many Christians believed that baptism should be preceded by the acceptance of Judaism. In the year 51 a council decided that Jewish rites, such as circumcision or the Sabbath, were not obligatory for Gentile Christians but retained their former significance for Jewish Christians. The decisions of this apostolic council have not been repealed – indeed, how could the words of the apostles be repealed? I cannot comment in detail about the situation today. It is again a question for a council to resolve.

*Other Jewish Christians strive to merge fully with the Russian Orthodox Church, but bearing the strongly national character of this church in mind, does such a step not lead to assimilation through religion?*

Assimilation can also happen without Christianisation; and becoming a Christian certainly does not mean renouncing one's nation. When Christianity brings a Jew from unbelief to belief it brings him back to the Bible – that is, to the traditions of his

ancestors. But if a baptised Jew wants to think of himself as a Russian, that is his own business. There must be no question of forcing anyone to do anything. Whatever happens a Christian Jew is related by blood to the prophets, the apostles, the Virgin Mary and Christ himself. This is a great honour and a mark of his dual responsibility as both a member of the Church and a member of the People of God.

*Practising Jews would hardly agree with you that baptism can lead a Jew back to the traditions of his fathers. They see Jewish Christians as absolute renegades, whereas a Jewish atheist is nonetheless a Jew in their eyes.*

I find such a point of view quite unacceptable although I understand where it comes from. It is a prejudice that has survived from a time when, as I have already said, baptism always meant assimilation. As a matter of fact, a Jewish Christian and a practising Jew are linked not only by a shared national origin, but by faith in one God, faith in the Holy Scriptures and a common religious ethic. Jewish atheists have nothing in common with Judaism other than blood. Even if they emphasise their nationality, they are behaving no differently from Jewish Christians, as I have discussed earlier.

*Finally, there is a third group of newly baptised Jews who find a way out of these difficulties by rejecting any nationality – Jewish or Russian – and becoming Catholics instead, believing this path to be most in accordance with the spirit behind the teachings of Jesus Christ. What do you think about this? It is a well known fact that many Russians have followed this path (Chaadayev, Pecherin, Lunin and others).*

It seems to me that whatever one may think about becoming a Catholic in Russia it certainly deprives one of the possibility of regular participation in church life. You cannot travel every Sunday to the Baltic States, where most of the Catholic churches are. It is true that Western churches are in some ways closer to the spirit of Judaism – energetic, active, practical – but the Eastern Church has much in common with it too. Generally speaking, though, Jewish Christians, like Christians of any nationality, must focus not on confrontation between churches but on the one Universal Church of the future.

*Recently there were plans to create a Jewish Christian Church with services in Hebrew. Is this a real possibility?*

There are several churches of this kind in Israel. The community is called after St James, the brother of the Lord, the first bishop of Jerusalem. Services are held in Hebrew and are close in style to the synagogue services. The community comes under Catholic jurisdiction. What prospects it has is hard for me to judge. Judaism, strictly speaking, was never monolithic and there were different movements within it; so Jews can regard the community of St James as such a movement.

*Should this church, in your opinion, be under the jurisdiction of one of the universal churches, or should it become a completely autocephalous entity such as the Armenian Church?*

Of course I cannot foresee exactly what place the Jewish Church will occupy amongst the other churches. I am convinced only that it must have apostolic succes-

sion. It would not be right for it to act autonomously in this respect. While Jewish Christians are few in number, therefore, they must come under the jurisdiction of one of the apostolic churches. Their relationship with each other, and with the Jewish Christians of various Protestant denominations in Israel, could be determined by a National Council of Jewish Christians in Israel (like the National Council of Churches in America), as an integrating ecumenical organisation embracing all of Jewish Christianity. In time, these communities could unite into an autocephalous Jewish Church.

*Should the Jewish Christian Church copy the structure of the established Christian denominations? Which of the Jewish motifs and rituals that have been dropped by other churches would it be possible, do you think, for it to introduce into its services? I have in mind, in particular, synagogue chants and prayers and the festival days of prophets and patriarchs which the church has relegated to the background.*

This is not such an important question and must be decided by the Jewish Church itself. Many Jewish prayers fully correspond to the spirit of Christianity and they would probably want to include them. But it is up to them. Styles of singing are different in every national church. There is no conformity here. Even the Catholics have not tried for it.

*Do you think there is any prospect of dialogue between the Russian Orthodox Church and the leaders of the Jewish community in the USSR? What role can Orthodox Christian Jews, who have their origins in both branches of the 'religion of Abraham', play in this ecumenical encounter?*

In the Soviet Union there are already contacts between the Russian Church and the synagogue, in the context of the struggle for peace. There is nothing more I can say about this. However, the community of St James or similar organisations will probably be able to play their part in any future dialogue between Christians and Jews.

*The Christian Church gave itself the title 'New Israel', thus indicating that henceforth it alone was 'chosen' for the 'promise' and that the Jewish nation had been rejected by God. How do you view this?*

In origin Israel was not a nation but a religious community, and it continues to perceive itself as a 'church' rather than a race. Christianity moved the borders of this 'church' to include every nation, thus fulfilling the expectations of the prophets. In answer to the question as to whether from then on Israel was rejected, I can only quote the Apostle Paul: 'Did God really reject his people? No, indeed. He did not reject his people whom he knew from the first.' Even while noting the enmity shown by the majority of Jews towards Christ, the apostle said that nevertheless 'inasmuch as they were chosen they are beloved of God, for the gifts and calling of God are unchangeable.' Although with the coming of Christ every nation became a child of God, Israel as a people, as the apostle tells us, kept its 'chosen' quality and remains the firstborn son.

*What do you think about the revival of Russian chauvinism in unofficial Orthodox circles (the journals Veche, Moskovsky sbornik, Zemlya)?*

Any kind of chauvinism always sickens me, be it Russian, Jewish or Chinese, and it

is especially disgraceful when it comes from Christians. As regards the antisemitism of those Orthodox who call themselves *pochvenniki*, it is an old story. There is no period in history when people have been willing to talk about their own guilt; they have always looked for scapegoats. But these people invoke Orthodoxy in vain. Christianity teaches us not only to love our own people and country, but to relate in love to everyone, regardless of their faith or nationality. In any case the cultures of Russia, Europe, Israel and most other countries have been built upon the basis of synthesis, and chauvinism ignores and undermines the living and creative roots of these cultures.

(Translated from the Russian by Emma Watkins.)