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by David P. Goldman

Eighty years ago, the German-Jewish theologian Franz Rosenzweig contended that Christianity cannot succeed in the absence of Jews. Not merely the written Hebrew Bible, but the presence of the living Jewish people, "convert the inner pagan" inside each Christian. Christians hate Jews, he added, precisely because they depend on them. Rosenzweig’s argument overlaps with traditional Catholic doctrine, which states that the Jewish people must be protected as "witnesses." Christianity, that is, needs the Jews as "witnesses" to the revelations of the Hebrew Bible, the foundation of Christianity’s own authority. Rosenzweig’s insight into the Jewish-Christian relationship is unique and in some ways disturbing. I shall try to call attention to some less comforting sides of Rosenzweig’s view.

Seldom has intellectual seed fallen on more hostile ground. So-called Aryan Christianity as preached by Houston Stewart Chamberlain then stood at a cusp of popularity. Rosenzweig’s death in 1929 may have been a mercy. His work overflows with optimism regarding Christian-Jewish relations (although it might be argued that his critique of these relations also could support quite pessimistic conclusions). The events of the quarter-century following the publication of Rosenzweig’s thesis appeared to support the diametrically opposite conclusion, namely, that Christians could carry on being Christians while attempting to exterminate the whole of the Jewish people. Experience seems to tell us that Nazism intensified rather than departed from longstanding Christian anti-Semitism. This view continues to draw support, most recently in Daniel Goldhagen’s book, *Hitler’s Willing Executioners*.

To show that this is a childish outburst rather than a reasoned argument, it is only necessary to ask the following question: If Christianity really sought the elimination of the Jews, why did it wait 1,600 years between the conversion of Constantine and the Second World War to begin? As Jacob Neusner observes, Judaism survived in the Christian world not only because Jews chose to remain Jewish, but also because Christianity chose to permit it to survive. Christians began many a war of extermination against their own heretics while leaving Jews in peace. St. Thomas Aquinas insisted that Jews were not to be attacked at the same time that he defended the bloody extirpation of heretics in Provence.[1] The religious wars of the 17th century wiped out more than half the German-speaking population of Europe, but left the Jews in peace.

Not the tyranny of Christianity, but rather its weakness, threatens the Jewish people today. At the cusp of the new millennium, the Catholic Church is returning to the Hebrew Bible, upon its Jewish roots, as a wellspring of its own continuity. Although major news media gave considerable attention to Pope John Paul II’s October 31, 1997 statement on anti-Semitism, no newspaper quoted the Pontiff’s dictum regarding God’s covenant with the Jewish people:

The fact of divine election is at the origin of this small people situated between the great pagan empires whose brilliant culture overshadowed them. This people was gathered together and led by God, the Creator of heaven and earth. Thus its existence is not a mere fact of nature or culture, in the sense that through culture man displays the resources of his own nature. It is a supernatural fact. This people perseveres in spite of everything because they are the people of the Covenant, and despite human infidelities, the Lord is faithful to his Covenant.

All the *chutzpah* of secular Jews seems petulant in the face of the Pope's magnification of the Jewish people. Christian leaders of numerous denominations, to be sure, have affirmed their belief that the covenant between God and the Jewish people remains valid, including a formal declaration by the German Evangelical Church in 1980. The Holy See's declaration has a special importance, not only because Catholicism is the largest Christian confession, but because it also is the reference point against which other confessions define themselves. Few Jews doubt that John Paul II is a good man, and that his conciliatory remarks towards Jews come from a sincere heart. Reconciliation after the Holocaust weighs on the Pope's conscience, as does the unwarranted persecution of Jan Hus and the trial of Galileo. It is well and good for all humankind to show warmth and tolerance for others of different faiths. The Jews inevitably will ask, though, "What's in it for him?" Common interest, after all, is better surety for neighborly relations than mere sentiment. Perhaps the answer is that the Church has come to agree with Rosenzweig: Christianity needs the Jews.

It is easy for Jews to hate the Catholic Church for its passivity in the face of Nazism, and hard to think about turning an erstwhile adversary into an ally. The trouble is that most Jews are quite unsure what it means to be Jewish, let alone whether they want to be Jewish in the first place. By Jewish, I mean in this context what Rabbi Jacob Neusner means, namely the people chosen to witness the Torah (revelation), as opposed to ethnic identity.

How many American Jews would agree with the Pope's statement that the survival of the Jewish people until the present day is a "supernatural fact?" A rather small Jewish minority believes that Jewish survival depends on religion rather than culture or ethnicity. The men and women who founded the State of Israel eschewed religion even as they resurrected the language of the Bible. A minority of American Jews belongs to synagogues. And of Jews who attend synagogue, how many concur with John Paul II that our survival is the result of divine assistance? After nearly two millennia during which Jews fought Christianity in general and the Church in particular to defend the dignity of our faith, the Pope has greater faith in the Covenant than do most Jews.

In his October 31 remarks, the Pope characterized the *Shoah* as "the wave of persecutions inspired by a pagan anti-Semitism, which in essence is equivalent to an anti-Christianity." Some Jewish critics complain that separating Christian antisemitism from Nazism takes the Church off the hook. Not the Church, but Jewish observers first essayed this view, notably including Freud. Writing his last book in London after his 1938 escape from Nazi-occupied Vienna, the atheist Freud reported:

...Strangely enough, just the institution of the Catholic Church has put up a sturdy resistance against the danger to culture. The Catholic Church, which so far has been the implacable enemy of all freedom of thought and has resolutely opposed any idea of this world being governed by advance towards the recognition of truth![2]

Freud explains:

We must not forget that all the peoples who now excel in the practice of antisemitism became Christians only in relatively recent times, sometimes forced to it by bloody compulsion. One might say they are all 'badly christened;' under the thin veneer of Christianity they have remained what their ancestors were, barbarically polytheistic. They have not yet overcome their grudge against

the new religion which was forced on them, and they have projected it on to the source from which Christianity came to them. The facts that the Gospels tells a story which is enacted among Jews, and in truth treats only of Jews, has facilitated such a projection. The hatred for Judaism is at bottom hatred for Christianity, and it is not surprising that in the German National Socialist revolution this close connection of the two monotheistic religions finds such clear expression in the hostile treatment of both.[3]

Freud did not invent this idea. The German-Jewish poet and critic Heinrich Heine had described German Christianity this way a century earlier.[4] Rosenzweig's gaze penetrates deeper. He observes that Christians, as opposed to "badly christened" crypto-pagans, resent their dependence upon the living existence of the Jewish people. Christianity, according to Rosenzweig, stands in continuous danger of falling back into paganism, and

...it is the Old Testament which enables Christianity to withstand this its own danger, and the Old Testament only because it is more than a mere book. A mere book would easily fall victim to the arts of allegorical exegesis. Had the Jews of the Old Testament disappeared from the earth like Christ, they would now denote the idea of the People, and Zion the idea of the Center of the World, just as Christ denotes the idea of Man. But the stalwart, undeniable vitality of the Jewish people, attested in the very hatred of the Jews, resists such "idealizing." Whether Christ is more than idea -- no Christian can know it. But that Israel is more than idea, that he knows, that he sees. For we live. We are eternal, not as an idea may be eternal: if we are eternal, it is in full reality. For the Christian we are thus the really indubitable. The pastor who was asked for the proof of Christianity by Frederick the Great argued conclusively when he answered: "Your majesty, the Jews!" The Christians can have no doubts about us. Our existence stands surety for their truth.[5]

When Christians slip back into the paganism whence they came, however, they are likely to hate Jews for quite a different reason, as Freud emphasized: the Jews embody what they resent in Christianity itself. Exemplary is Friedrich Nietzsche's foam-flecked diatribe against the Jews for foisting Christianity upon the world:

From the tree trunk of Jewish vengeance and hatred – the deepest and sublimest hatred in human history, since it gave birth to ideals and a new set of values – grew a branch that was equally unique: a new love, the deepest and sublimest of loves... But let no one surmise that this love represented a denial of the thirst for vengeance, that it contravened the Jewish hatred. Exactly the opposite is true. Love grew out of the hatred as the tree's crown, spreading triumphantly in the purest sunlight... Jesus of Nazareth, the gospel of love made flesh, the "redeemer," who brought blessing and victory to the poor, the sick, the sinners – what was he but temptation in its most sinister and roundabout form, bringing men by a roundabout way to precisely those Jewish values and renovations of this ideal? Has not Israel, precisely by the detour of this "redeemer," this seeming antagonist and destroyer of Israel, reached the final goal of its sublime vindictiveness? Was it not a necessary feature of a truly brilliant politics of vengeance, a far-sighted, subterranean, slowly and carefully planned vengeance, that Israel had to deny its true instrument publicly and nail him to the cross like a mortal enemy, so that "the whole world" (meaning all the enemies of Israel) might naively swallow the bait?... What could equal in debilitating narcotic power the symbol of the "holy cross," the ghastly paradox of a crucified god, the unspeakably cruel mystery of God's self-crucifixion for the benefit of mankind?[6]

Nietzsche had no racial bias against Jews, and ridiculed Christian antisemitism, which he despised along with everything else Christian. For this reason, some critics reject the widely-held belief that he prepared the way for Nazism. These critics, to be sure, believe that antisemitism is a Christian affair. If the most vicious anti-Jewish impulses stem not from Christianity but from paganism, however, Nietzsche's diatribe against Judaism appears in a far more sinister light.

Nietzsche preached and the Nazis undertook a pagan revolt against Christianity. The Allied victory

in the Second World War defeated these dark forces but did not destroy them.

Rosenzweig's great work, *The Star of Redemption*, was written on army post-cards at a German anti-aircraft battery in Serbia during 1916, and his thoughts turned to the pagan fault-lines of Christian Europe. The residual pagan within each Christian must have a god who also is human, he wrote, and that god must look like him. But this leads to a predicament, in which a blond-haired and blue-eyed Christ confronts a brown-haired, brown-eyed Christ, indeed, as many Saviors as there are races of man. Christianity placated the heathen by transmuting Judaism's God into an earthly being with whom heathens might identify, but at the cost of failing to covert the inner pagan inside each Christian. The long-term consequences of such a compromise seemed clear enough in 1916.

The *Shoah* might not have surprised Rosenzweig. He writes of the pagan character of Europe with deep foreboding. "The love of the peoples for their own ethnicity is sweet and grave with the presentiment of death," he wrote. Just as individuals fear their own death, every people knows that one day the hills, valleys and rivers it inhabits will be the home of another people, and that its language and customs will be interred in books. To postpone this day of inevitable passing, the sons of each people will fight to the death against invaders, until the time comes when the invader kills off its sons and takes its land. Europe's second Thirty Years' War from 1914 to 1944 was the apotheosis of pagan nationalism, as the peoples of Europe responded to the presentiment of their own doom by fits of conquest or defeatism.

But what would Rosenzweig have made of today's Europeans, who appear to have willed themselves out of existence? Europe's fertility rate stands barely at half of replacement level. The exceptions, namely Ireland and Poland, prove the rule. Having failed at paganism, Europe does not want to be Christian, either, and so wants to be nothing at all. It no longer cares about its various ethnic cultures, which already have been relegated to the archives, preferring American commercial culture instead. The proportion of Europe's population either attending church services or professing religious faith has declined to insignificant proportions. Whether European Christianity will die out because there no longer are Christians, or simply because there no longer are Europeans, we shall learn in the fullness of time.

Josef Cardinal Ratzinger, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation of the Faith, worries profoundly about resurgent paganism. He warns,

A new search for myths can be seen everywhere, a retrocession past what is Christian, into the old mythologies... In this effort to conjure up pre-Christian myths, in the circumstance, that one no longer searches within Christianity itself – which appears both too rational and too used up – there is, above all, a retreat from the demands of Christianity, and an attempt to have the greatest religious feeling while giving the least of one's self.[7]

His prescription for the Church has numerous elements, to be sure, but one of the most prominent of these is a renewed emphasis upon the Hebrew Bible. "The star points to Jerusalem; it is extinguished, and rises again in the Word of God, in the Holy Scripture of Israel," Ratzinger writes.[8] He adds:

...Since the second century, there have arisen movements again and again within Christianity that wanted to reject the Old Testament or at least reduce its significance. Even if that never was the official teaching of the Church, a certain deprecation of the Old Testament has been quite widespread in Christianity... In modern times, Chriewinns abandoned the allegorical interpretation by which the Church fathers christianized the Old Testament, a new kind of remoteness has arisen with respect to this book; we must learn anew how to read it correctly.[9]

Can it be that Ratzinger has accepted Franz Rosenzweig's thesis: Christianity needs the living

Jewish people, not merely Jewish scripture? It is late for Christianity. Ratzinger is prepared for the worst:

Perhaps we have to abandon the idea of the popular Church. Possibly, we stand before a new epoch of Church history with quite different conditions, in which Christianity will stand under the sign of the mustard seed, in small and apparently insignificant groups, which nonetheless oppose evil intensively and bring the Good into the world.[10]

Christianity, Ratzinger says, may place demands on its adherents which are too great to bear in the modern world. We are not a business, he insists, that decides strategy on the basis of receipts; we offer a service and place in the hands of God.[11] Perhaps the inner antagonisms that bedeviled Christianity from the Third Century onward cannot be contained in the modern world. Perhaps Ratzinger's vision of a shrunken Church reduced to a small nucleus of believers will come to pass.

All of this is mere prolegomena to the decisive, world-historical question: is the decline of Christianity good for the Jews? Franz Rosenzweig would have uttered a thunderous, "No!" He argued that Christianity needed the Jews. It follows that if Christianity decays into its constituent pagan elements, what will remain will not need the Jews.

Sadly, a majority of Jews well might answer in the affirmative. Jews have provided a generous share of the shock troops for liberal secularism during the past two centuries. The old regime shut us up in ghettos, humiliated us, and occasionally murdered us. We were witnesses for Christianity, but witnesses held in an unpleasant sort of protective custody at best, thrown to the bloodthirsty mob at worst. It was the French Revolution that tore down the ghetto walls and opened the doors of European society to the Jews.

A contrary view, articulated by neo-conservative Jewish critics, holds that a new "Great Awakening" of religious belief will revive Christianity, and that it is self-defeating for American Jews to oppose it.

If, as conservative writers argue, today's "multiculturalism" represents a new religion hostile to the previous Christian monoculture, it is grossly incongruous for Jews to promote multiculturalism. Freud learned better. The "new" religion of multiculturalism is nothing more than the old "polytheistic barbarism," and its consequences for the Jews have become a matter of record in this century.

Anti-Semitism corrupted the "multicultural" movement from its first origins. If a poll were taken among American Jews regarding the comparative merits of Catholicism and the "universal myth" propounded by the late Joseph Campbell, a majority doubtless would disapprove of Catholic theology, and a majority probably would approve of Campbell. Yet Campbell, whose promotion of pagan mythology helped prepare the intellectual climate for today's multiculturalism, was an antisemite. This was widely known during his lifetime by his colleagues at Sarah Lawrence, and exposed in Brendan Gill's 1989 famous expose in "The New York Review of Books" after Campbell's death. Although this information circulated widely, Campbell remains hugely popular among American Jews, who dismiss his dislike of Jews as a fortuitous aberration. Campbell's antisemitism, however, stems directly from his notion of universality: he bristled with annoyance at the Jews' claim to special status, of being a people with a unique *history*, exempt from Campbell's putative universal myth.

Whether Christianity can reverse the process of disintegration remains to be seen. Prophecy is long since gone from Israel. We do not know whether Christianity is part of God's plan of salvation for humankind, as Rosenzweig (as well as the late A. J. Heschel) believed, or whether it is an amalgam of Jewish and pagan elements too unstable to endure. What we do know is that Christian individuals, the present Pope and his circle among them, feel themselves inspired by the same

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God of *chesed* who revealed Himself to Abraham. If Christianity breaks down, history warns us, the Jewish element – which makes Christianity a benign force in the world – will disappear, and the pagan elements will predominate. Less than any other people on earth should the Jews wish to see polytheistic barbarism return. It is not within our power to foresee, much less to determine, the fate of Christendom. What the Christian world – our world – requires of us is that we stand witness to the God of Israel rather than exercise our *chutzpah*.

Notes

1. See Michael Novak, "Aquinas and the Heretics," *First Things* 58 (December 1995): 32-38
2. Siegmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (Alfred Knopf: New York 1939), p. 84.
3. Freud, p. 144-145.
4. See Heinrich Heine, *Beitraege zur deutschen Ideologie* (Ullstein: Frankfurt 1971), p. 22.
5. Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William Hallo (University of Notre Dame Press: London 1985), p. 415.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and The Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (Doubleday: New York 1956), pp. 168-169.
7. Ratzinger, *Salz der Erde,* p. 250.
8. Ibid., pp. 262-263.
9. Ibid, pp. 263-264.
10. Ibid, p. 17.
11. Ibid. p. 16.

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See also: Rüdiger Lux: Franz Rosenzweig 1886-1929

For a complete listing of primary and secondary literature for Franz Rosenzweig see L. Anckaert and B. Casper, eds. *Franz Rosenzweig : A Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (Instrumenta Theologica 7. Leuven: Bibliotheek van de Faculteit der Godgeleerdheid van de K.U. Leuven, 1990).