



Leo Baeck's Criticism of Martin Luther and its Purpose in a Search for Jewish Identity

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Rabbi Walter Homolka, principal of the Abraham Geiger College at the University of Potsdam, Germany, examines how Leo Baeck's analysis of Luther relates to his basic distinction between "romantic" and "classical" types of religion, and discusses Baeck's significance for the current Jewish-Christian dialogue.

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Liberal Judaism and Protestant Liberal Thought

During the first decades of the Second Empire (1870-1914), an unprecedented relationship emerged within political liberalism based on its strong influences from liberal Protestantism on the one side¹ and from liberal Jewish society on the other. Liberal Jews and liberal Protestants seemed to share a common set of values as well as similar political goals.

Liberal Jewish theology - with spokesmen like Joseph Eschelbacher, Moritz Lazarus, Moritz Güdemann, Ludwig Geiger and Leo Baeck to name but a few - and liberal Protestant theology - represented by Ernst Troeltsch, Albert Ritschl, Martin Rade and Adolf von Harnack, among others - were both concerned with finding solutions to questions each of them raised in the same way. In searching for answers, they found themselves on common ground.

Both groups stressed the neo-Kantian ideal of human beings enabled by ethics to subject all life to an *a priori* system of principles. It can be said that liberal Protestantism and liberal Judaism tried in the same way to reinterpret religious traditions on the basis of modern rationality. And both attempted to purify their faith of irrational components.²

One decisive incongruence continued to separate liberal Jewish theology and liberal Protestant theology: the assertion by Christian theology that Christianity is superior to Judaism and the hypothesis that Judaism must have been quite a decadent faith even prior to Jesus.

The lectures of Adolf von Harnack on the "Essence of Christianity" (*Wesen des Christentums*), published in 1900, may be seen in this light; Judaism seems to be characterized as an initial and antiquated stage of religion that gave way to Christianity.

It is hardly surprising that Harnack's lectures drew heavy criticism from Jewish scholars, orthodox and liberal alike, immediately after their successful publication. One of the first Jewish reactions, however, came from Leo Baeck, who published a review of Harnack's book in the "*Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*"³ in 1901. Using overt polemics Baeck tries to draw a sketch of the essence of Judaism by criticizing Christianity as presented by Harnack.

What are the main points of Baeck's criticism of Harnack's "Essence of Christianity"? Firstly, he decries the lack of appreciation for Jewish scholarship and literature. This, he criticizes, leads to a

misinterpretation of Judaism in the time of Jesus. Secondly, Baeck demonstrates the apologetic intention of Harnack's book: to present Christianity in a most intriguing and positive light.

It is remarkable that it is through his argument with this liberal Protestant that Leo Baeck became known to a larger public. Harnack's book "Essence of Christianity" (*Wesen des Christentums*) inspired Baeck to write his "*Wesen des Judentums*" (Essence of Judaism). Four years' work went into its publication, and it offers a much more elaborate answer to Harnack's theories than his review did before. A second expanded edition of "*Wesen des Judentums*" followed in 1922, becoming the authoritative guide for subsequent editions.

Although neither Harnack nor Christianity is mentioned explicitly anywhere in the book, Baeck's intention is clear: "Essence of Judaism" is the apologetic answer to Harnack's "Essence of Christianity."

Baeck confronts Harnack's description of Judaism with the image of an "intellectually orientated" (*geistig*) Jewish faith defined by ethics and which is genuinely universal; the corresponding piety emphasizes good deeds and trust. The essence of Judaism, according to Baeck, lies in the ethical monotheism of the prophets.

The struggle against Harnack's theses may well be seen as the starting point of Baeck's interest in Christianity, which would remain his continuing concern. From that point, Baeck's interest in Christianity as the counterpart to Jewish theology is present throughout all of his works. Baeck's body of writings contains more than thirty titles on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Seventeen of them were published in the Weimar Republic, five of the most important works even during the Third Reich.⁴ One may say that the work of Leo Baeck is characterized by a permanent discussion with Christianity, even in most difficult times like the Third Reich.

Leo Baeck's Model of Polarity

One general methodological approach to criticizing Christianity is present in all of Baeck's works. He perpetually develops a polarized model that sets "classical" and "romantic" religion in opposition to one another; the same holds true for their corresponding elements of "mystery" (*Geheimnis*) and "commandment" (*Gebot*), i.e. "mystics" and "ethics". An analysis of this polarity as determined by these criteria provides a prism through which to compare the Judaism and Christianity as religions.

Speaking of Christianity, Baeck identifies and distinguishes two main streams of tradition: Paul, Augustine and Martin Luther represent the element of mystery; Jesus, Pelagius and Calvin are identified with the element of commandment. "Classical religion" (i.e. Judaism) is readily described as a perfect balance between mystery and commandment; Christianity is predominantly shaped by St. Paul and Luther and therefore described as "romantic religion" per se.

Are there any sources of contemporary thought that might shed light on the origin of Baeck's model? The terms "mystery" and "commandment" should really be seen in the context of the renaissance of mysticism in the 1920s and the ongoing scholarly interest in mystics. Furthermore, we can assert an influence by the debate on natural law (*Naturrechtsdebatte*) and its impact on the development of social ethics in post-enlightenment times. This debate was of special interest for Protestant scholars and undoubtedly had some resonance in a Judaism heavily influenced by Hegelian and Neo-Kantian thought.

Leo Baeck's Exposition of the Teachings of Martin Luther

Baeck develops his typology by concentrating on the theology of Martin Luther and its Pauline

sources. It is striking that Baeck is mainly interested in two issues within Luther's theology: the question of *liberum* or *servum arbitrium*, i.e. whether human beings possess a free or a bound will, and the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms.

Baeck presents the reader with an image of Lutheranism that is deeply influenced by the Prussian Protestant state church (*Staatskirche*), and the Jewish perception of this alliance of Protestant Church and State. The description of Luther's theology is in many respects a critical one; Baeck's critique is also frequently marked by one-sidedness and prejudice. In the following description I intend to give a structured outline of Baeck's understanding of Martin Luther's thoughts - focusing on the constitution of the Individual before God. It must be kept in mind that Luther did not present a systematic theology in the ordinary sense; there is also no doubt that my summary will in itself bear an interpretation of what I think that Baeck understood when he refers to Luther's words. In any case, I shall try to remain faithful to Baeck's wording in order to make my reconstruction as accurate as possible.

The Individual and Original Sin

According to Baeck's interpretation of Luther's views, original sin is the determining force and the unyielding definition of humankind. Sin is not in any person, but rather the person is within original sin. Neither the individual nor humanity as a whole caused original sin, nor do they have the ability to remove it. Mortals are at the mercy of original sin. Because sin is so integral to the nature of humankind, only an act beyond this realm of nature - that is, a miracle - can eliminate sin. Thus, sin is overcome through God's grace, through a redeemer.⁵ In this interpretation, however, it seems to Baeck that the individual is condemned to a totally passive role. In this way, religion becomes redemption from the will and liberation from the deed.⁶

Commandment and Grace

It is somewhat awkward that Baeck refers to Matthew 5:18 and Gal. 3:24 in attempting to explain the Pauline understanding of the law. Before redemption, the Biblical law remained basically valid. In Christ, redemption has finally taken place. Therefore, to postulate any further obligatory nature of the law would undermine this salvatory act.⁷ By denying law any essential significance, Baeck sees Paul and Luther as doing more than just opposing it as ceremonial; "Whoever expects the good from the fulfillment of the commandments and duties, still lives under the yoke of the law."⁸

Previously, darkness was all that surrounded the spirit; now divine grace guarantees to show the light that guides humankind to its prescribed goal: to become perfected individuals.⁹ Those who judge themselves as just will find themselves on the path leading away from justice. To Baeck's mind Luther expresses it as follows: one mustn't "befoul oneself" with the law.¹⁰

The law is surpassed by faith in Jesus Christ as the Redeemer and of no real value anymore in the process of gaining redemption.¹¹ For Baeck, this means the rejection of individual moral freedom and the ability to actively embrace the good.

Righteousness Solely on the Basis of Faith

Christian righteousness flows from faith in the son of God - *Justitia christiana est fiducia in Filium Dei*.¹² It is not the same as righteous action¹³ because Christ fulfilled the law for humankind.¹⁴ And the Gospel is a doctrine which does not rely on observance of the law: "4"¹⁵ Baeck draws the conclusion that like Paul, Luther supported both the notion of unconditional original sin¹⁶ and the totality of divine grace¹⁷, corresponding to a complete passivity on the part of humanity.¹⁸ The individual cannot find God, God has to find him, Baeck says.¹⁹ Placing all emphasis on salvation, Luther seems to deny any value of deeds and human action. There is no room left, Baeck claims,

for individual moral action and the ability to shape the world.²⁰

Salvation by faith is also determined right from the outset²¹ so that morality lacks any religious purpose. Baeck cites Luther: "I live as I live; that does not make the doctrine false. We must not consider and judge the life, but the doctrine. Even if the life is not so pure, the doctrine can remain pure nevertheless, and one can be content with the life."²²

"By faith alone" could only possibly mean the following for Luther: without action, even anti-action: "You do not owe it to God to do anything except believe and profess. In all other matters he releases you and leaves you free to do as you please without any danger of conscience."²³

This reads as though the more sin there is, the more opportunity for God's divine grace to prove its strength. In this context Baeck sees Luther's famous recommendation to Melanchthon of "*fortiter pecca*" (sin bravely) in 1521. To Baeck this appears to be by no means ironic, but, on the contrary, deeply imbued with Pauline doctrine.²⁴

We may question here whether or not Luther's concept is really identical with Paul's. Christian Luther studies have been successfully endeavoring for decades to present us with a considerably more differentiated picture of the two thinkers. However, Baeck's fervor may again be a product of the highly structured way in which he juxtaposes classical and romantic elements within religions. In any case, Luther himself did in other places offer explanations about action, for example in his "*Sermon von den guten Werken*." Truly, humankind's only viable action in its relationship to God can be faith. This faith, however, constitutes the freedom to act in whatever way is required.

It is thus quite important to note the priority of conscience within the acquired state of faith. In some respects Baeck and Luther may not even be so far apart in their approach to everyday moral behavior as it would seem at first glance. Strictly speaking, the dividing line really emerges when the question of redemption arises: whether or not God had to send Jesus Christ as the driving force of humankind's salvation, and whether or not the old path of biblical commandment could retain its validity. This question is at the heart of Judaism's identity crisis since Paul. Baeck enters the Jewish-Christian battlefield armed with Enlightenment ideas when he focuses on the value and priority of moral action based on an individual free will.

Free Will

To Baeck it is obvious: the faith of the lame as they await healing is no expression of deep conviction and of certainty. Baeck points out that in his view true insight works *within* the individual, rather than being brought into existence *by* the individual.²⁵ And, as there is no active choice for faith and healing in Christianity, there is no choice concerning the will, for the will of the individual is always the will to sin.²⁶ The human being can do nothing but sin.²⁷ There is no allowance for a gradual approach to the truth. The flow of grace alone gives the individual the sum of knowledge and total insight.²⁸ So, romantic religion really asks for the sacrifice of the intellect. In Luther's words: "In all who have faith in Christ reason shall be killed; else faith does not govern them; for reason fights against faith."²⁹ With this, knowledge must make itself subordinate to faith: *credo quia absurdum* - I believe because it is absurd.

At the instant of receiving faith, the individual is like a mere tool in the hands of a higher power.³⁰ Life is heteronomy, and at the same time, the omniscient and the blind face each other irreconcilably.

Salvation to a State of Grace through Word and Sacrament

Following out Baeck's line of thought, it is quite logical that happiness or grace is posited as the

epitome of a fulfilled Christian life, the rhyme and reason of being. This state of grace clearly comes from divine grace and not as a result of moral action. Faith that does not require the completion of any tasks set by God refers back to the self and therefore becomes a yearning for bliss.³¹ The individual asks selfishly if, when, and how redemption will be granted. This leads to a "sentimental brooding about sinfulness,"³² as often seems typical of Protestantism, making it, Baeck writes, a doctrine of the salvation of the self. The sacraments offer this self-assurance, creating the individual's state of grace.³³ Bread, wine and holy water become supernatural substances through which faith flows and the individual is transformed, purified and renewed.³⁴ On the other hand, Baeck cites the Reformer Kaspar Schwenckfeld, who reproaches Luther, saying that he "will not let anybody become blessed without an external thing."³⁵

In Baeck's eyes baptism and Holy Communion are not just symbols for Luther, but rather supernatural realities. And the same is the case with the word of God. This word does not merely mean something; it is significant and effective in itself and solely by being preached. "That you should hear and receive the word is not by your strength, but by the grace of God which makes the gospel bear fruit in you that you may have faith in it."³⁶

As the constitution of faith, the word descends upon humanity; and without any action on their part, human beings are brought to accept it. Through word and sacrament, they are taken and placed within the realm of salvation, no longer asking what tasks they are to do, but whether redemption has already been granted.

Baeck's View of the Constitution of the Individual before God

As shown above, Luther's teachings about the individual's constitution before God are viewed by Baeck as a state of passivity, as mere waiting for God's grace. This stands in direct opposition to Baeck's understanding of human responsibility and his concept of life. According to Baeck, the meaning of life consists of two spiritual experiences that are joined together in Judaism: the mystery and the commandment.³⁷ Through the mystery, the individual is shown the deeper reality hidden below the surface of one's life and becomes aware that he was created and brought into being – i.e. conscious of an undetectable and, at the same time, protective power. He experiences that which embraces him and all things. He experiences, in the words of the ancient metaphor in the Blessing of Moses, "the arms of eternity."³⁸

While the mystery raises the question of the meaning of life, the commandment raises the question of its goal. The commandment is the unconditional demand that challenges a human being³⁹ Pressuring, victorious, absolute and independent, the commandment passes from generation to generation on into the future.⁴⁰ It is grounded in the being, the eternal, the unfathomable, and it appears to humanity as that which blesses, is creative and is fertile.⁴¹ "The realm of the commandment is a realm of revelation and as such a realm of grace."⁴²

It is Baeck's firm belief that both mystery and commandment come from the one God and neither can exist without the other. Without the certainty of God's existence as a mystery, there can be a moral structure consisting of teachings of wisdom and counsels of reason, but the unchangeable and categorical nature of the commandment would remain unfathomable for humanity.⁴³ The mystery and the experience of faith is that which gives birth to a religion. It may be the beginning of religion but it is not the whole story, just as birth is not the entirety one's life.⁴⁴

Faith and freedom in Judaism, according to Baeck, need the tension between the poles of mystery and commandment, for the infinite appears in the finite, and whatever is finite bears witness to the infinite.⁴⁵ Such a relationship between mysticism and ethics is not one of conflict, but represents a necessary combination on the way to God. For Baeck the goal of life is righteousness before God:

through work and achievement, through the fulfillment of one's duty and the struggle for the commandment. Rather than creating a clear conscience, religion should constantly unsettle and challenge it. Only then can it really be religion. It must be able and determined to offer resistance to every power possible, in the name of defending the eternal.⁴⁶

To Baeck, the religious consciousness is molded by the experience of closeness to God, not by a special status relative to God enjoyed by some individuals on the basis of divine grace.⁴⁷ Human beings live in humility before God, in full knowledge of their absolute dependence and with a reverence for an ethically superior that demands and directs,⁴⁸ that speaks and requires a reply - man's decision - and that brings them joy.⁴⁹

According to Baeck, human life exists in the tension between desire and duty. "Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" is a phrase that has acquired in Judaism the character of a religious confession.⁵⁰ Faith does not turn away from the world. It does not await salvation from the world and its days. On the contrary, it is faith in the world and the certainty that all possible opposites will be reconciled. It is redemption not from the world, but in the world. This world should be sanctified and therefore raised up to the Kingdom of God. The Holy and the Profane are therefore inseparably joined. In essence, there is no mundane life; nothing is the mere world, God is in everything.⁵¹ He permeates the whole of life. All future is a future of the commandments - a future in which they are realized and fulfilled,⁵² that thrives through the path they take, not through miracles, myth or fate. In the days of the Messianic age, the spirit of God will live unchallenged in the hearts of humanity. At that time all commandments and obligations will cease to exist, for duty will have become part of the innermost nature of the individual. God's will shall become our own and in that sense, our will shall become one with the divine will.⁵³

Religion and State

The Lutheran State Church

To understand Baeck's critical views on Luther's teaching of the "Two Kingdoms" and the "Kingdom of God," we must first make a short survey of the Lutheran church in Prussia as experienced by Baeck. Leo Baeck sees the "police state making all decisions for the people" as developing directly from Lutheranism. Coining the term, Baeck says it has become the "Prussian religion," combining an inflexible sense of authority and subject with a Christian world view. In this constellation ethics are relegated solely to the private sphere.⁵⁴

With its church state and state church, the ruling sovereign of the state being at the same time the *summus episcopus* (highest bishop) of the Protestant church, Lutheranism had a decisive influence in Prussia and represented a conservative, one is even tempted to call it "destructive" power. Contemporary opposition to this development was the driving force behind the Enlightenment and Kantian philosophy.⁵⁵ Through such a connection to the state, Lutheranism declined to represent a universal message, missing its chance to become a world religion. The idea of the kingdom of God took on a secondary role to the confessional state.

Baeck refers quite simplistically to Ernst Troeltsch's term "Christian society" as the goal of Protestant efforts, which had actually been used far earlier by F.J. Stahl and the conservative "*Kreuzzeitung*."⁵⁶ However, with the church being taken over by the state, what began as a protest took on a rather non-Protestant end.

Baeck sees the period following the First World War as a turning point of Protestantism. The revolution of 1918 was an unexpected shock for the Protestant church.⁵⁷ Not only did the alliance with the state fall apart, the Protestant church was forced to come to an agreement with the

democratic or even revolutionary powers of the new democracy. The Protestant church lost its state support and at the same time, a living piece of its certainty and ideals. ⁵⁸

The State as the purpose of history (Hegel), Baeck claims, never represented a doctrine of faith or a justification. ⁵⁹ Following the collapse of the old meaning of the State, ⁶⁰ it seemed to Baeck that Protestantism needed not only a new means of support, but also new content. But how did this connection between throne and altar develop? Leo Baeck sees the roots in Luther's teachings of two kingdoms.

On Luther's "Two Kingdoms": The Individual between Church and State

The teaching of the "two kingdoms" is one of the most important and at the same time one of the most disputed aspects of Lutheran theology. Its importance derives from focusing on the basic distinction of law and gospel. This, however, fosters a tendency to isolate spheres that actually belong together and, by this, isolating political life from ethical norms. ⁶¹ It is my intention to give a short introduction to the doctrine of the "two kingdoms" and then focus on Baeck's interpretation.

In a classical sense, Augustine had already divided the living sphere of human beings into two realms. Through birth, the individual is placed into the world of the mundane, the "*civitas terrana*," a world determined by calculation, counting and weighing. The unfathomable grace of God is the sole vehicle for individuals to enter the "*civitas die*," the sphere of God. But only the few are chosen; the masses, the "*massa perditionis*," are condemned to eternal death. The human being is relegated in this view to the earthly sphere, and only through the passive fact of being chosen can the individual be lifted beyond this sphere by God's hand. The two kingdoms stand in opposition and only the miracle of divine election can raise an individual from the lower to the higher realm. ⁶² Baeck sees Luther as directly dependent on Augustine. In his view Luther appears to be primarily Augustine's student and successor. ⁶³ Luther even, so he assumes, intensifies the teachings of the individual's total dependence on the mercy of God "*sicut cadaver*": the individual must await the grace of God passively, like a corpse. As election lies outside the realm of human decision and freedom and the individual is condemned on the basis of original sin until touched by God's grace, the human community must therefore be based on social constraints. According to Baeck, there is neither motivation ⁶⁴ nor even the opportunity for free, independent moral action.

Baeck cites a well-known quotation from the Middle Ages: "*homo est animal bipes quod vult cogi*" - the individual is a two-legged being that needs to be subjected to force. ⁶⁵ This world of the lost and the rejected can be ruled only by violence. Even on the basis of its own assumptions, Lutheranism was, to Baeck's mind, never in the position of creating a system of ethics founded on religion. ⁶⁶ For Baeck, Luther's secular world is the place for morality. As the "*custos utriusque tabulae*," ⁶⁷ the ruling sovereign had within his disciplinary powers the responsibility to enforce matters of morality. In this way the individual was assigned to two spheres. On the one hand was the "spiritual individual" who had faith, and on the other hand was the "civil individual" who kept the commandments. Baeck saw this division as the inherent religious and ethical weakness of Luther's doctrine. Morality is that which the authorities demand. Moral demands are thus no longer commandments or categorical imperatives, but mere directions: either decrees of the constituted authorities or "counsels of the conscience" of those who have heard a call. The doctrine of morality becomes a doctrine of individual cases, and the study or science of it approximates jurisprudence and becomes a matter of interpretation and legality. ⁶⁸

But that is not all. Luther established his church with the assistance of the secular rulers, and it became more and more based on the authority and the protection of the State. ⁶⁹ A visible Church and State are joined in Lutheranism. ⁷⁰ This sort of religion cannot exist without the State, for the authority of the State and of the Church lie in the same hands. The ruling sovereign is at the same

time the head of the Church. As such, the State is granted absolute rule.⁷¹ "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers," for they reign by authority of God's commandment.⁷²

Luther appears in Baeck's characterization to be filled with a deep pessimism regarding the world in its sinful state.⁷³ This corresponds to an inflexible and fatalistic sense of subservience, of subordination of social classes as a divine institution. The human being must be resigned to accepting the life and work circumstances he or she is born into. One is not allowed to tamper with the rigid barriers of caste and guild. Dependence and class as willed by God represent strict Lutheran thought.⁷⁴ The motivation for social progress is lacking, and work and cultural life are devalued.⁷⁵ The principle of being "complete" discourages any advancement.

Baeck denounces Luther's lack of optimism as the most significant evil in his interpretation of the individual's role between State and Church. If the Messiah has already come and salvation has already been granted, then any hope for the future loses its meaning to a large degree and any urge to shape and better the world lacks a goal.⁷⁶

The "Kingdom of God" according to Leo Baeck

In view of the Lutheran State-Church alliance, Leo Baeck poses what he considers the highest questions of truth and freedom: does religion assist in achieving a "clear conscience" by making a pact with all forms of power, even evil ones, for the sake of the demands of present? Or is religion capable of resisting and determined to resist for the sake of eternity?⁷⁷

Baeck refers to the two realms and says that they do not oppose each other, but are intertwined, for "the one realm should penetrate the other, influencing and determining it."⁷⁸ The higher realm continually enters the lower one in the form of the commandment to touch humankind. The commandment includes goodness, devotion, selflessness, faith and reconciliation. "Being chosen" does not involve passivity, of being chosen by divine grace, but rather an active acceptance of God's call: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. For mine is the whole earth."⁷⁹

This depicts the freedom of the individual very clearly. Each person has the ability to seize or to abandon the chance to be chosen, according to his or her own will. The commandment grasps individuals in the earthly realm and assists them in lifting themselves to the higher one. Both worlds are connected to each other, as expressed in the second section of the *Amidah* prayer: "[...] to order the world through the Kingdom of the Almighty." The kingdom of God, therefore, enters the earthly realm, so that the realm to come can begin for the people in the here and now. The dawn of the future starts in the present. Each individual must make his or her way to the higher realm, however, wherever he or she is at that moment. Deutero-Isaiah appeals for this in his call "Clear the way!"⁸⁰

All action should be taken for the sake of God and not the State. Absolute independence of religion from the State is to Baeck's mind extremely significant. The Lutheran Reformation, however, placed religion in the hands of the State.⁸¹ It is not difficult to note that in the context of the Weimar Republic Baeck's view is concentrated on conservative Lutheranism with its mentality of perseverance and grievance over the abdication of the monarchic system. The full picture emerges only when one includes cultural Protestantism, which must be considered as a notable minority within the Protestant spectrum of the Weimar Republic in terms of influence on the German church up until now.

Representatives such as Otto Baumgarten, Martin Rade or Hermann Mulert welcomed the revolution of 1918 and the emerging Weimar Republic as an opportunity for the church to liberate

itself from the alienating alliance with the state. The theological and ecclesiastical consequences gave a chance for redirection towards the actual goals of Protestantism.

Leo Baeck: Representative of Jewish Theology?

Leo Baeck's picture of Judaism comes, on the one hand, from the spirit of rabbinical tradition and, on the other hand, from the patterns of thought of his time. It is particularly conspicuous how often Baeck uses the terminology of Immanuel Kant in the continuation of Jewish neo-Kantianism.⁸² He speaks of "moral action" (*sittliches Handeln*),⁸³ of "heteronomy" (*Heteronomie*),⁸⁴ of striving for "bliss" (*Glückseligkeit*) as an antithesis to "morality" (*Sittlichkeit*),⁸⁵ and of "advice for the conscience" (*Gewissensratschläge*),⁸⁶ the "commandments of practical reason" (*Gebote der praktischen Vernunft*)⁸⁷ and the "categorical imperative" (*kategorischer Imperativ*).⁸⁸

All in all, Jewish neo-Kantianism seems to conflict with the thought and background of the Christian Reformation. Beyond that, the aforementioned arguments and examples show how rarely Baeck touches the reality of Reformation thought, which is much more complex and dialectical. Nor does Baeck seem sensitive to the inherent tensions within Luther's terminology. This also raises the question as to what extent Baeck's reasoning is referring to Jewish tradition, though he must first be cleared of the accusation that he argues simply in the philosophical manner of the Enlightenment. Rather one could say that he uses this system of contemporary thought and its terminology in order to present his Jewish standpoint.

Leo Baeck's Assumptions about Luther

Leo Baeck presents a picture of Lutheran theology from a Jewish perspective that appears quite intriguing, especially for the Jewish intelligentsia he was trying to convince. Nevertheless, I have indicated before that one might well be right to ask if Baeck was capable of presenting Martin Luther's intentions fairly and even whether this was what he wanted. One has to keep in mind that Baeck was not really interested in Luther himself or in the historical situation facing Luther when he developed his ideas. Luther appears as merely a part of the dispute with Christianity in the post-Enlightenment environment, when historico-critical questioning shattered the basis of Bible and tradition as well as the old concept of a Christian occident.

Therefore, this representation of Christianity is more a sign of deliberate and schematic polemics than the attempt to give the opposing view due credit through differentiated presentation.⁸⁹ Elucidating the contrast between Judaism and Christianity by ascribing them respectively, as classical or romantic religion is typical: Baeck obviously uses contemporary German philosophical schemes.

Any objective analysis cannot avoid the insight that Baeck's polarized model of mystery and commandment probably works much better within the traditions of one single faith than in the comparison of two different ones. Baeck's polarizing construction makes it difficult to fairly evaluate the developments and schools of thought in Christianity as well as Judaism. There is room to argue whether or not this was Baeck's intention. There seem to be clear indications of an intended and conscious one-sidedness of ideas and positions for the sake of apologetics and critique.⁹⁰ The separation of influences on the church - the Jewish-biblical tradition on the one side and Hellenistic influences on the other - appears to be especially questionable. Baeck's equation: "Gnosticism is Christianity without Judaism and, in that sense, pure Christianity"⁹¹ is openly polemical. The church may not always have liked the various influences united in its tradition. Yet however devastating Christian scholarly judgment might have been, its inheritance from Judaism was rarely disputed and was even acknowledged as its root by Paul.⁹² Baeck's theory of "Judaism in the Church" becomes even more problematic when he tries to distil this Jewish foundation from Christianity in

order to create an "objective" image of it.

Baeck's attempts to include Jesus and the Gospels in this Jewish foundation are also striking, yet highly questionable as further examination of the history of Christian theology in order to extract Jewish influences on the one hand and genuine Christian (i.e. non-Jewish) influences on the other. Baeck defines two paths in the Christian history of religion, namely, a Jewish one reaching from Jesus via Pelagius and Duns Scotus to Calvin, and a Christian one starting with Paul and leading to Augustine and Luther. However, any proper perception of Christianity must understand it as a mix of various influences, just as Judaism is. Baeck's course division suggests that he was less interested in the theological questions of his time than in presenting a highly stylized view of Christianity and Judaism.

But what was Baeck's motivation for simplification on one side and for extraction of a "Jewish strand" from within Christian theology on the other? If we consider the discussion with Harnack, we might see Baeck's motivation: he turned against an early historical Bible criticism that was not very concerned whether or not to eliminate text passages in the Old Testament that seemed to be "unchristian." And Baeck opposed Christian ignorance, which despicably rejects of Judaism by deeming it a faith of the past, and declares Christianity to be the "absolute religion." Baeck issues the explicit polemical warning⁹³ not to underestimate the vitality and freshness of the Jewish faith.

Leo Baeck and Martin Luther in Conflict

Baeck's polemic emerges from two analytical methods: first, everything he values in Christianity is carefully extracted and then attributed to Judaism.⁹⁴ In this way, Jesus and the Gospel, as opposed to Paul, can suddenly end up in the "Jewish camp." Baeck uses this principle all the way through when dealing with the Church tradition. It culminates in the development of his polarized model: the Pauline-romantic and the Jewish-classical religion. At this point, the portrayal of Judaism as well as Christianity becomes ahistorical, with Baeck fully accepting this.

On the other hand, parallel phenomena in both religions are viewed positively in Judaism and negatively in Christianity. For example, grace in Judaism joins happily with the positive term of commandment. In Christian terms, however, grace becomes the very epitome of passivity and egocentricity. All this makes the conclusion likely that Baeck had only limited access to the complex and perhaps somewhat unsystematic world of Luther's thinking. And we also have reason to believe that a thorough understanding was not at the center of his endeavor. Nevertheless, Baeck recognized the key points of Luther's teaching.

Leo Baeck: a founding father of Jewish-Christian dialogue

Baeck had a special relationship to the Jewish-Christian dialogue throughout his life. In a certain sense, he was its spiritual precursor. To Baeck, Jewish-Christian cooperation meant mutual respect of the differences and not an empty, meaningless balancing out of the centuries of sacred traditions. Yet the mild-mannered man, so often open to compromise, nevertheless had no patience with attempts at defamation or misrepresentation of his faith.

On the other hand, his portrayal of Christianity was not always free of theoretical construction and displayed no lack of polemic.

He viewed the Church as the successor to ancient Greco-Roman civilization, characterized by its ideal of beauty and harmony. Everything there was designed to be perfect, complete and in tune with each other. Whether in Greek art or in philosophy, the perfection and the balance of things right up to the harmony of the kingdoms is its most compelling characteristic.

This civilization lacked a dynamic element, however, a restlessness and dissatisfaction with the world as it is. The forward-pressing messianic moment, the prophetic protest against the imperfection and unjust order of the world was absent.

For this reason, a hideous contempt for humanity, brutality, terror and slavery could exist in Greece and Rome, side by side with the admirable achievements of beauty, the mind, technology and culture. This was not considered as contradictory and posed no serious problem. Prophetic criticism was absent, as well as a sense of ethical absoluteness, of the sanctity of each human life, and beyond that, of nature in general. An Amos, an Isaiah or a Jeremiah could not have existed there.

Baeck is most critical of Lutheranism. The "Doctrine of the two Kingdoms", which divided the sphere of human beings into that which belonged to the State and that which belonged to God, is here taken to an extreme. In Baeck's account, the Lutheran Church abdicated all responsibility for the worldly state of the people and left it to State authorities. Morality became so removed from religion that individuals seemed to be guaranteed a clear conscience concerning worldly affairs. What did matters of the world have to do with the individual anyway?

These tendencies led in Baeck's view to an authoritarian state and the silent acceptance of National Socialism by many. A police state allowing no room for individual decisions developed directly from Lutheranism, Baeck admonishes. The Nazi State was the logical consequence of such a misguided theological evolution.

On the other hand, Baeck was one of the Jewish intellectuals who enthusiastically supported the "reclaiming of Jesus" into Judaism. In 1938, at the height of National Socialism, he published his book on the Gospel as a document of the history of the Jewish faith, "*Das Evangelium als Urkunde der jüdischen Glaubensgeschichte*." He showed that Jesus led his entire life as an exemplary Jew who would never have considered founding a new religion, not to speak of being worshipped as God.

Baeck described Jesus as follows:

We see a man [...] before us whose entire being demonstrates Jewish character, every aspect so clearly and characteristically revealing the purity and goodness of Judaism; he was a man who, such as he was, could only have developed out of the firm roots of Judaism, and he could only win over his students and followers, such as they were, out of these roots; he was a man who could move through his life and to his death only here, in this Jewish realm - a Jew among Jews.⁹⁵

Baeck described the cornerstones of a true Jewish-Christian dialogue in his lecture on "Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" as:

[...] the knowledge and the acceptance of the differences and similarities of religions; in order to understand those, one has to be aware of one's own religious identity. In this sense, his contribution to the development of Jewish-Christian understanding cannot be overestimated.⁹⁶

It is this insight into the value of identity that can serve as an important inheritance for today.

Notes

1. For the development of Liberalism and the influences of liberal Protestant theology see: Uriel Tal. *Liberal Protestantism and the Jews in the Second Reich 1870-1914*. In: *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 26, 1964, pp. 23-41.

2. cf. *ibid.*, pp. 35-36.
3. *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, vol. 45, 1901, pp. 97-120.
4. Theodore Wiener. *The Writings of Leo Baeck*. In: *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore*, vol. 1.3, 1954; see also Robert Raphael Geis. *Versuche des Verstehens. Dokumente jüdisch-christlicher Begegnung aus den Jahren 1918-1933*. Theologische Bücherei, 33. München: Kaiser, 1966, p. 50.
5. Leo Baeck. *Romantic Religion*. In: *Judaism and Christianity. Essays*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1958, pp. 243f.
6. Leo Baeck. *Aus drei Jahrtausenden. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen und Abhandlungen zur Geschichte des jüdischen Glaubens*. Tübingen: Mohr, p. 123.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 205.
8. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 249.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 206, 210.
10. *Ibid.* p. 242, quoted from *Dr. Martin Luther's sämtliche Werke*. Erlangen: Heyder, 1826ff, henceforth cited in this manner: "Erl."; *Dr. Martin Luther's Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Weimarer Ausgabe*. Weimar: Böhlau, 1883ff, here vol. 17 I, p. 111, henceforth cited in this manner: WA 17 I, p. 111: "Also das ein rein hertz haben nicht allein heisse nichts unreins gedencken, sondern wenn durch Gottes wort das gewissen erleucht und sicher wird, das sichs nicht besuddelt am gesetz. Also das ein Christen wisse, das yhm nicht schadet, ob er es halte odder nicht, und thuet wol, das sonst verboten ist, odder lessit, das sonst geboten ist, ist yhm keins suende, Denn er kan keine thun, weil das hertz reine ist."
11. WA 40 I, p. 672: "Quare credentibus in Christum tota lex abrogata est."
12. WA 40 I, p. 366: "Christiana iustitia coram deo est credere in filium. Sic Abraham in semen. vel fides est fiducia cordis per Christum in Deum." Baeck quotes from Erl. I, p. 334: "[...] christianam justitiam proprie ac diserte sic definire, quod sit fiducia in filium Dei, seu fiducia cordis per Christum in Deum."
13. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 84.
14. WA 1, p. 105.
15. Erl-Irmischer II, p. 113. However in WA 40 I, p. 141: "Ideo Evangelium solum revelat filium Dei. Est ergo doctrina vel cognitio in qua nulla penitus lex est."
16. Leo Baeck. *Judentum in der Kirche*. In: *Aus drei Jahrtausenden*, p. 134; 12. WA 42, p. 106.
17. WA 24, p. 244. "Es mus von hymel und allein aus gnaden komen, das Gott durch die verheissung des Euangelions das hertz trifft, das es fuelet und muesse sagen, das es vor nye bedacht odder ynn synn genomen habe, das yhm solche gnade solt widderfaren."
18. WA 6, p. 530; WA 2, p. 420; cf. Leo Baeck. *Epochen der jüdischen Geschichte*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1974, p. 119. "Recte ergo dixi, oportere ergo hominem de suis operibus diffidere et velut paralyticum remissis manibus et pedibus gratiam operum artificem implorare."
19. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 204.
20. Leo Baeck. *Wege im Judentum. Aufsätze und Reden*. Berlin: Schocken, 1933, p. 385.
21. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, pp. 203f., cf. p. 85; WA 24, p.18: "Denn ein solch mensch mus allen dingen gestorben seyn, dem guten und bösen, dem tod und leben, der hell und dem hymel und von hertzen bekennen, das er aus eygnen krefft nichts vermag."; *Die Deutsche Bibel. D. Martin Luthers Werke. Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Weimarer Ausgabe*, vol. 9. Weimar: Böhlau, 1955, p. 23, henceforth cited in this manner "DB, p. 23": "Zu Rom. 9-11": "Ieret er von der ewigen Versehung Gottes, Daher es ursprünglich fleusset, wer gleuben, oder nicht gleuben sol, von suenden los, oder nicht los werden kann. Damit es je gar aus unsern henden genomen, und alleine in Gottes hand gestellet sey, das wir frum werden."
22. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 252; WA 24, p. 607 (falsely cited by Baeck as p. 606).
23. WA 12, p. 131; cf. WA 17 I, p. 111.
24. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 252.
25. WA 10 I 2, p. 29: "Darumb lerne hie auß dem Evangelio, wie es tzugehet, wenn gott

ansehet uns frum tzu machen, und wilchs der anfang sey, frum tzu werden. Es ist keyn ander anfang, denn das deyn konig tzu dyr kome und fahe ynn dyr an [...]"

26. However, cf. Kant's "You can because you ought to" in Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 254.
27. WA 10 I2, p. 29: "[...] du kanst nichts denn sundigen, thu wie du wilt. [...] und must sundigen, wo du alleyn wirckst auß freyem willen."
28. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 205.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 207 (quoted from Erlangen edition); see WA 47, p. 328.
30. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 208.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 285 f.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 278.
33. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 225.
34. WA 6, p. 538: "Sicut enim verbum dei potens erst, dum sonat, etiam impii cor immutare, quod non minus est surdum et incapax quam ullus parvulus, ita per orationem Ecclesiae offerentis et credentis, cui omnia possibilis sunt, et parvulus fide infusa mutatur, mundatur et renovatur." (falsely cited by Baeck as p. 539).
35. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 226.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 22; see Erl. 10 (2), 12.
37. Leo Baeck. *Geheimnis und Gebot*. In: *Wege im Judentum. Aufsätze und Reden*. Berlin: Schocken, 1933, pp. 33–48; henceforth cited according to the English translation *Mystery and Commandment*. In: *Judaism and Christianity. Essays by Leo Baeck*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1958, pp. 171-85.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 171.
39. Leo Baeck. *Zwischen Wittenberg und Rom*. In: *Wege im Judentum. Aufsätze und Reden*. Berlin: Schocken, 1933, pp. 270-87, here p. 280.
40. Baeck, *Mystery and Commandment*, p. 178 f.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 179.
42. Leo Baeck. *Dieses Volk. Jüdische Existenz*. 2 vol. Frankfurt/Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1955-1957, here vol. 1, p. 103.
43. Baeck, *Wege im Judentum*, p. 280.
44. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 210.
45. Baeck, *Mystery and Commandment*, p. 175.
46. Baeck, *Zwischen Wittenberg und Rom*, p. 287.
47. Leo Baeck. *The Essence of Judaism*. 6th edn. London: Macmillan, 1936, pp. 44f.
48. Baeck, *Wege im Judentum*, p. 34.
49. Baeck, *Dieses Volk*, vol. 1, p. 57.
50. Baeck, *The Essence of Judaism*, p. 45.
51. Baeck, *Mystery and Commandment*, p. 292.
52. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 120.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
54. Baeck, *Wege im Judentum*, p. 386.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 384.
56. Leo Baeck. *Volksreligion und Weltreligion*. In: *Wege im Judentum. Aufsätze und Reden*. Berlin: Schocken, 1933, pp. 195-207, here p. 204. See also Richard Rothe's works in the second half of the nineteenth century.
57. See Hans-Walter Krumwiede. *Evangelische Kirche und Theologie in der Weimarer Republik*. Grundtexte zur Kirchen- und Theologiegeschichte, 2. Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1990, p. 10.
58. Baeck, *Wege im Judentum*, p. 271.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 271f.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 383.
61. A complete discussion of the teaching of the "two kingdoms" is given in *Reich Gottes und Welt: Die Lehre Luthers von den zwei Reichen*. Heinz-Horst Schrey (ed.). Wege der Forschung, 107, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969, p. IX.
62. Leo Baeck. *Epochen der jüdischen Geschichte*, pp. 118f.

63. Leo Baeck. *Judentum in der Kirche*, p. 133: "die katholische Kirche dagegen 'kam doch immer wieder zu einem dulddenden Einvernehmen mit einer Art von Semi-Pelagianismus.'"
64. Baeck, *Wege im Judentum*, p. 385.
65. Baeck, *Epochen der jüdischen Geschichte*, p. 120.
66. Baeck, *Aus drei Jahrtausenden*, pp. 135f.
67. An expression used by Melancthon, cf. Baeck, *Wege im Judentum*, p. 386 and *Dieses Volk*, vol. 1, p. 103.
68. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, pp. 267f.
69. Baeck, *Wege im Judentum*, pp. 384f.
70. Leo Baeck. Helfer und Lehrer. Über Mittelalter und neue Zeit. In: *Wege im Judentum*. Aufsätze und Reden. Berlin: Schocken, 1933, pp. 401-22, here p. 403.
71. Baeck, *Aus drei Jahrtausenden*, p. 136.
72. Leo Baeck. *Spinozas erste Einwirkungen auf Deutschland*. Inaugural Dissertation an der Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Berlin. Berlin: Mayer & Müller, 1895, p. 8; and Baeck, *Romantic Religion* pp. 213f. This is almost a quote from Romans 13:1.
73. Baeck, *Wege im Judentum*, p. 387.
74. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 213; and Baeck, *Wege im Judentum*, p. 385.
75. Only the rejection of monastic idleness moved Luther to show some esteem for secular work.
76. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, pp. 285 f.; and Baeck, *Aus drei Jahrtausenden*, p. 136.
77. Baeck, *Wege im Judentum*, p. 287.
78. Baeck, *Epochen der jüdischen Geschichte*, pp. 119 ff. See more closely Luther's idea of "Königsherrschaft Christi" (Christ as King of both heavenly and earthly spheres); Ernst Wolf. *Die Königsherrschaft Christi und der Staat*. In: Werner Schmauch and Ernst Wolf. *Königsherrschaft Christi. Der Christ im Staat, Theologische Existenz heute*. Neue Serie, 64. München, 1958 pp. 20-61.
79. Ex. 19:5.
80. Isa. 40:3; Baeck, *Epochen der jüdischen Geschichte*, p. 124.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
82. For another example of Jewish-Kantian synthesis see Friedrich W. Niewöhner. *Isaac Breuer und Kant: Ein Beitrag zum Thema 'Kant und das Judentum'*. In: *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*, vol. 17, 1975, pp. 142-50 and 19.2, 1977, pp. 172-85.
83. Immanuel Kant. *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. Karl Vorländer (ed.). Reprint of 1924. Hamburg: Meiner, 1974, § 29 Allgemeine Anmerkung.
84. Immanuel Kant. *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. Reprint of the 3rd edition. Leipzig: Meiner, 1947, 2. Abschnitt; also *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. Karl Vorländer (ed.). Reprint of the 9th edition. Leipzig: Meiner, 1951, 1. Teil, 1. Buch, 1. Hauptstück, § 8, Lehrsatz IV.
85. Immanuel Kant. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Raymund Schmidt (ed.). Reprint of the 1st and 2nd edition. Hamburg: Meiner, 1971, Methodenlehre, 2. Hauptstück, 2. Absatz, also *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 1. Teil, 1. Buch, 1. Hauptstück, § 8, Anmerkung II and *ibid.*, 1. Teil, 2. Buch, 2. Hauptstück, V, also *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, Vorrede zu 1. Aufl., 1. Anmerkung and *ibid.*, 1. Stück, Allgemeine Anmerkungen, 2. Anmerkung, also *Metaphysik der Sitten*. Karl Vorländer (ed.). Reprint of the 4th edition. Leipzig: Meiner, 1945, Einleitung II.
86. Kant. *Metaphysik der Sitten*, Tugendlehre, Einleitung XII b.
87. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 1. Teil, 1. Buch, 1. Hauptstück, § 7 and *ibid.*, 1. Teil, 1. Buch, 1. Hauptstück, § 7, Anmerkung.
88. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 1. Teil, 1. Buch, 1. Hauptstück, § 1, also *ibid.*, 1. Teil, 1. Buch, 1. Hauptstück, § 7; also *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 1. und 2. Abschnitt.
89. On Baeck's limited approach to Christianity see Reinhold Mayer. *Christentum und Judentum in der Schau Leo Baecks*. Studia Delitzschiana, 6. Stuttgart, 1961, pp. 44-9.

90. Mayer, *Christentum und Judentum*, pp. 48-9.
91. Baeck, *Romantic Religion*, p. 250.
92. Rom. 11:18.
93. Walter Jacob entitled his essay on Leo Baeck "Modern Polemic." In his view, Baeck represents the contemporary prototype of this genre. Walter Jacob. *Christianity through Jewish Eyes: The Quest for Common Ground*. Cincinnati: 1974, pp. 137-161, notes: pp. 261-263.
94. Mayer, *Christentum und Judentum*, p. 87.
95. Albert H. Friedlander. *Leo Baeck*, p. 123: "Einen Mann sehen wir [...] vor uns, der in allen den Linien und Zeichen seines Wesens das jüdische Gepräge aufzeigt, in ihnen so eigen und so klar das Reine und Gute des Judentums offenbart, einen Mann, der als der, welcher er war, nur aus dem Boden des Judentums hervorwachsen konnte und nur aus diesem Boden hervor seine Schüler und Anhänger, so wie sie waren, erwerben konnte, einen Mann, der hier allein, in diesem jüdischen Bereiche [...] durch sein Leben und in seinen Tod gehen konnte - ein Jude unter Juden."
96. Leo Baeck. *Judentum, Christentum und Islam*. Rede gehalten von Ehren-Großpräsident Dr. Leo Baeck anlässlich der Studientagung der Districts-Loge Kontinental-Europa XIX in Bruxelles, 22. April 1956; here p. 4.

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