

# RECENT HISTORIC EVENTS: JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATIONS

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SEVERAL DISCUSSIONS about my book on contemporary Christologies<sup>1</sup> suggested to me that I occupy an uncommon situation in the field of contemporary Jewish thought. Most of my professional colleagues are philosophers, specializing in the medieval Jewish or modern general areas. I am one of a tiny number identifying themselves as Jewish theologians and, rarer still, one with postrabbinic training in Christian theology. Standing between these two disciplines, then, I propose to undertake a comparative theological inquiry here, hoping thereby to gain insight into the distinctive faith of each tradition. Somewhat recklessly, I should like to work holistically and try to characterize the current situation in each faith by focusing on one broad theme. I can, perhaps, reduce the risk of so grandiose an enterprise by starting from a description of the Jewish situation, which I know better, and then move on to what appears to me to be its closest Christian parallel. I hope the heuristic gains of this effort compensate for its substantive shortcoming.<sup>2</sup>

## JEWISH INTERPRETATIONS

For about two decades now, Jewish religious thinkers have centered most of their attention on the theological<sup>3</sup> implications of recent historic events. Five distinct interests can be delineated. The first two, the “death of God” and the State of Israel, aroused far more participation than the three other topics I shall explicate.

The early novels of Elie Wiesel and the first group of Richard Rubenstein’s theologically revisionist articles appeared in the late 1950’s. Yet it was not until the mid-1960’s that large-scale Jewish discussion of the

<sup>1</sup> *Contemporary Christologies: A Jewish Response* (New York: Paulist, 1980).

<sup>2</sup> In many ways I see this paper as an extension of the method utilized in *Christologies* (cf. #1–9).

<sup>3</sup> When Jews can bring themselves to use this term, they do so in a sense far looser than that of Christians. Not having dogma or creed as Christians do, working instead out of the rabbinic openness to ideas and images which is structured by required action rather than by confessions of faith, Jews tend to be wary of theology lest it mean required statements or specifications of belief. Yet we have always had thinking people who, while living by this believing way, have tried to determine what it meant to them abstractly. In our time of high intellectual activity and social challenge, there has been a great deal of such thought. This matter recurs in this paper. Note, e.g., the discussion below of the people who work at what I would call Jewish theology.

meaning of the Holocaust began.<sup>4</sup> I remain convinced<sup>5</sup> that an important factor in finally legitimating this topic was the emergence of the Christian death-of-God movement then. In any case, the debate continued vigorously for about ten years and still sporadically resumes, though in rather ritualized fashion.

What moved the Jewish theoreticians was less the classic issue of theodicy than responding to the actual, awesome events under Hitler. Rubenstein's argument and title made Auschwitz the symbol for the new form of an old problem.<sup>6</sup> He, Wiesel, and Emil Fackenheim asserted that the Holocaust was unique in the history of human evil. It therefore demanded totally new responses from Jews. It was, for all its negativity, our Mt. Sinai. Wiesel insisted that its singularity took it far beyond our ability even to frame proper questions about it, much less to provide answers. Rubenstein demanded a radical rejection of the received God of Judaism, in whose place he now saw the Holy Nothing. Fackenheim, after years insisting that God's revelation (understood in Buber's contentless I-thou terms) must be the basis of modern Judaism, could no longer speak of God's presence in history. Instead, he built his Jewish commitment on the unconditional command to nurture Jewish life which came to the Jewish people from Auschwitz though no commander was discernible.<sup>7</sup> The responses to these views were based on new ways of restating the old defenses: it is good that people are free and responsible, even to be Nazis; God is finite; having some reason to have faith, we can trust in God even though we do not fully understand God.

<sup>4</sup> The Eichmann trial and Hannah Arendt's provocative thesis on the effect of Jewish co-operation with the Nazis gave the discussion initial impetus. That was under way by 1963, but it was not until 1966 that the first major Jewish gathering dealt with the issue, the then annual symposium sponsored by *Judaism*. Fackenheim, Popkin, Steiner, and Wiesel participated, and their remarks were published in *Judaism* 16 (1967) 269-84, under the telling title "Jewish Values in the Post-Holocaust Future."

<sup>5</sup> This theme has concerned me in a number of my articles and books where I have dealt with the change which has come over Jewish thought in the past two decades. With Jews anxious to protect the status they had gained as one of America's three major religions, they could never admit the widespread agnosticism of secularized Jews. Hence the Protestant death-of-God movement seemed for a time a positive liberation from the long-repressed hypocrisy of Jewish religiosity. And it is the collapse of that self-perception (of not needing religion) which has brought about the new Jewish interest in personal spirituality.

<sup>6</sup> Note the title of his book, which became the focus of this discussion: *After Auschwitz* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966).

<sup>7</sup> For a summary discussion of this material, see chapter 9, "Confronting the Holocaust," in my forthcoming book *Choices in Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: Behrman House, 1983). Most of the distinctive positions in the debate are discussed there. Note particularly the contribution of Michael Wyschogrod, who has given the most careful analysis of Fackenheim's argument, originally in "Faith and the Holocaust," *Judaism* 20 (1971) 286-94. My own argument concerning the uniqueness of the Holocaust is given at the end of the chapter noted above.

The second major discussion arose out of the Holocaust controversy as a result of the 1967 Israeli Six Day War. In the weeks prior to and during the news blackout of its first two days, the possibility of another "holocaust" loomed before world Jewry. This mood was intensified by our first experience of war by television. Those experiences were sufficient to arouse Jewish ethnic concern to levels previously unprecedented. They were then heightened by the details of an incredible victory—deliverance—and, even more miraculously, by seeing Jews enter old Jerusalem and, for the first time since the State of Israel had been established, being permitted to pray before the Temple Mount Western Wall.

The effect of those weeks on American Jewry was profound, lasting, and utterly unanticipated. Our new affluence and success in an expanding American economy had made us lukewarm to our ethnic identity and rather indifferent to the State of Israel. The frightful threat and wondrous triumph of the Six Day War made us realize how deeply Jewish we were and wanted to be, and how organically we were bound to the State of Israel. Once again, we were not alone in changing our social self-perception. The growing urban strife in America and the consequent burgeoning of ethnic consciousness in all groups undoubtedly influenced us.<sup>8</sup> And the ensuing years of international isolation for the Israelis and the rise of a new international anti-Semitism strengthened a post-Holocaust community's determination to make Jewish survival primary.

Theologically, the issue became what spiritual weight one should attach to the State of Israel. To Irving Greenberg it was, with the Holocaust, the second irresistible imperative transforming Jewish modernity into a new pluralistic traditionalism.<sup>9</sup> Fackenheim went further. He proclaimed the State of Israel the contemporary absolute of Jewish life. This followed logically on his evaluation of the Holocaust. The Commanding Voice of Auschwitz had laid an unconditional obligation upon the Jewish people to deny Hitler a posthumous victory. The State of Israel was Jewry's collective, life-affirming fulfilment of that commandment. Hence keeping it alive and flourishing was the unimpeachable, overriding Jewish responsibility.<sup>10</sup>

Opposition to this Israelocentrism faced the difficulty of communicat-

<sup>8</sup> My treatment of this material may be seen in *The Mask Jews Wear* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973) 58 ff., and see the context.

<sup>9</sup> The most easily available statement is in *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?* ed. Eva Fleischner (New York: Ktav, 1974), in his statement "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire" (31 ff.).

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., his paper "The Holocaust and the State of Israel: Their Relation," in Fleischner, *Auschwitz* 205 ff., and passim in his papers collected under the title *The Jewish Return into History* (New York: Schocken, 1978).

ing the difference between the extraordinarily important and the essential or indispensable. Specifically, the protagonists of the opposing view sought to establish that, on the biblical model, Jewish statehood must be subordinate to other beliefs, certainly in God, but also in the Jewish people itself.<sup>11</sup> Two political tangents of this discussion deserve mention. The one had to do with the right and criterion of criticizing the Israeli government. The other considered the long-term viability of Diaspora Jewry should the State of Israel disappear.

A third recent theme, notable mainly because our Orthodox writers rarely debate theology, centered about the possible eschatological implications of Old Jerusalem coming under Jewish sovereignty for the first time in nearly two thousand years. Some thinkers, taking seriously their daily prayers for God's return to Jerusalem, saw the spectacular events of 1967 as possibly the first glimmers of the messianic redemption. Other thinkers, chastened by the long, bitter Jewish experience of premature messianism, cautioned against this view, despite its special appeal in explaining our recent experience of terrible travail as "the birth pangs of the Messiah."<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, a broader segment of our community has seen the Vietnam War, Watergate, and other socially disillusioning events requiring them to rethink the old alliance between Judaism and modernity. This has a social as well as an intellectual aspect. American Jews have long considered themselves fully at home here. Some thinkers now suggest that we must revive the category of Exile. To a considerable extent, they argue, Jews are aliens in this society. They propose utilizing the term Exile not merely in its existentialist, universal connotation of alienation but in a particular Jewish fashion, in the Bible's nationalistic usage, without thereby yielding to the Zionist secular definition, which is purely political.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> My rejection of this position may be found in two articles, originally one long paper, published as "Liberal Judaism's Effort to Invalidate Relativism without Mandating Orthodoxy," *Go and Study*, ed. Samuel Fishman and Raphael Jospe (New York: Ktav, 1980), and "The Liberal Jews in Search of an 'Absolute,'" *Cross Currents* 29 (1979) 9-14.

<sup>12</sup> See the symposium "The Religious Meaning of the Six Day War," *Tradition* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1968) 5-20. A further exchange between Shubert Spero and Norman Lamm in the wake of the Egyptian-Israeli Yom Kippur War of 1973 is instructive: *Sh'ma* 4/73 (May 3, 1974) 98 ff. Also Shubert Spero, "The Religious Meaning of the State of Israel," *Forum*, 1976, no. 1, 69-82. A related discussion is found in Lawrence Kaplan's "Divine Promises—Conditional and Absolute," *Tradition* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1979) 35-43.

<sup>13</sup> The literature on this topic is too diffuse for easy citation. A good example of diverse opinions is found in *Dimensions* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1971) 5-21. One of the earliest statements of the existentialist interpretation is found in Arthur A. Cohen, *The Natural and the Supernatural Jew* (New York, Pantheon, 1962) 179 ff.

A rather more compelling question addresses the balance between the authority of American culture and Jewish tradition. If, in our new realism, our culture is less worthy of religious devotion, then our tradition newly commends itself to us. Not only does it suggest itself as the antidote for our society's ills but as an independent source of human value we have long ignored. We therefore need to be "more Jewish" in belief and practice than we have been.<sup>14</sup> The two most exciting spiritual phenomena in our community during the past decade have been the new traditionalism of liberal Jews and the ground-swell founding of *havurot*, small communities for Jewish celebration and experience.<sup>15</sup> Unexpectedly, too, Orthodoxy has emerged as an option for modern Jews desirous of living an authentic Jewish existence. Both movements have parallels in the general American turn to the right. The specific Jewish contours of our developments arise from considering the failures of America and the re-emergence of anti-Semitism against our memories of the Holocaust.

Fifth, our most recent issue has come out of our everyday experience in these years. Not long ago many writers were saying that our entire Jewish way of life must now be rebuilt around the Holocaust. With most of us day by day finding normality the basic condition of our lives, that older view seems faulty. Frightful disasters occur and dreadful horrors are still regularly perpetrated. We must never be blind to the hells about us or to the potential of their occurrence. But our lives are very far from a recapitulation of Auschwitz or even greatly illuminated by its uniqueness. Even God, who in Rubenstein's formulation was absent to us—"we live in a time of the Death of God"—, has reappeared in the living search of at least a minority of the Jewish community.<sup>16</sup>

This transition can most readily be seen in the thought of Irving Greenberg, who has devoted himself wholeheartedly to the intellectual and communal tasks imposed by the Holocaust. In his earliest writing it was not clear whether he seriously dissented from Wiesel, Rubenstein, and Fackenheim, that Auschwitz had taken the place of Sinai for us. Before long he not only gave it equal rank but began speaking of moment-faiths and the continuing place of God in our lives.<sup>17</sup> Most recently he has given further prominence to Jewish continuity, though with the radical revisions required by living in a post-Holocaust age.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> On the new traditionalism, see chapter 10, "A Theology of Modern Orthodoxy," in my forthcoming *Choices* (n. 7 above).

<sup>15</sup> Eugene B. Borowitz, "The Changing Forms of Jewish Spirituality," *America* 140 (1979) 346-50.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Notice the section on "Moment Faiths" in the paper cited in n. 9 above.

<sup>18</sup> So in a number of presently unpublished papers, including one delivered at a meeting in June 1981, "The Transformation of the Covenant."

It seems to me that abstract, academic themes dominate contemporary Christian theology, save for liberation theology (of which more later). By contrast, Jewish thinking overwhelmingly centers on living social questions prompted by recent historical events. In theological language, my Jewish colleagues are asking, "What is God saying in what has happened to us?" To be sure, we do not hear that question articulated in those words. Jews retain a certain traditional reticence about speaking directly of God. Surely, too, some of our thinkers remain so sensitive to the agnostic Jewish environment in which they grew up and continue to move that they habitually bracket out the God-question, preferring instead to speak about the Jewish people or Jewish duty. Nonetheless, our debates involve more than ethnic interests or social concerns. They inevitably reach down to our ultimate convictions about Jewish responsibility. In the typical selectivity of a secular generation, we tune out the most important frequencies of our "signals of transcendence."

Before asking how Christian theologians approach recent events, I think it important to test and thereby try to strengthen the comprehensive hypothesis I have sought to establish. Let us inquire to what extent historic events are a long-term or only a recent Jewish religious interest. The evidence from biblical-Talmudic Judaism is unambiguous. One might even argue that this religious concern with history is as unique to Hebrew tradition as is monotheism. The prophets and rabbis regularly sought God's hand in the major historic occurrences of their time. While the theophany at Mt. Sinai may ground and limit Jewish life, the Bible spends comparatively little time on what transpired there and devotes itself in great detail to what happened in later centuries when Jews sought to live by the Torah. Though the rabbis restrict where revelation may be found,<sup>19</sup> they quite organically react to the destruction of the Temple or to rulers such as Hadrian by indicating what God is teaching the Jewish people through these calamities.

This pattern of interpreting the triumphs and trials of Jewish history as the operation of God's justice continued until Jewish modernity. Characteristically, it now surfaces among us only in the speeches of one or another of our European-oriented *yeshivah* heads, that is, the leaders of that part of our community which has resolutely refused to modernize. For the rest of us, as early as the nineteenth century, modernization meant secularization, substituting a scientific world view for a religious one. Those modernized Jews who maintained some effective belief in God quickly gave up the old mechanistic, Deuteronomic reading of

<sup>19</sup> Note how limited and how ambivalent their relation is to the *bat kol*, their closest counterpart to the biblical spirit of God: article "Bat Kol," *Encyclopedia Judaica* 4, 324.

history. The modern concepts of God made history almost entirely the domain of social forces and human moral decision, not God's direct action.<sup>20</sup>

This modern demythologization of history is of some importance for our theme. Consider, for example, the response of Jewry to the "Holocaust" of its time, the 1903 Kishinev massacre. Jews world-wide could not imagine such an act occurring among civilized people, and the conscience of much of Western civilization motivated almost universal protest. Despite the pain, the modernists did not try to explain this tragedy in terms of theological verities they had long given up. Rather, the outrage was blamed, variously, on a failure of conscience and reason, a cynical governmental diversion of the masses, a capitalist plot against the proletariat, or a result of the Jews not being expected to stand up in self-defense. Rubenstein's charge, half a century later, that the Holocaust made it impossible to believe in the old God of history may have applied to the Jewish traditionalists who still affirmed Deuteronomic justice in history. (Factually, some recent data disputes this charge.<sup>21</sup>) However, this interpretation of the death of God simply did not apply to the mass of modernized Jews. They had secularized long before the Holocaust and were largely atheistic or agnostic. Those who had liberal concepts of God knew nothing of a God who was "the ultimate omnipotent actor in history."<sup>22</sup>

If so, did secularization mean the end of the classic Jewish perception of history as a continuing scene of God's self-manifestation? A surface examination of liberal Jewish theologies in the early decades of this century bears out that surmise. Hermann Cohen, whose neo-Kantian, philosophic reinterpretation of Judaism set the standard and problematic of most of the succeeding thinkers, described Judaism in terms of its central, that is, its regulative "idea," ethical monotheism. His younger German compatriot Leo Baeck yoked religious consciousness to the master's rationalism and spoke of "the essence" of Judaism. Both notions derived from German idealism, in which the empirical is radically subordinated to the rational—as good as dissolving history into concept.

I wish to argue that, on a deeper level, this seeming ahistoricalism is itself their response to what God was doing in their history. Their idealistic Judaism arose, though they do not remind us of it, as a means of coping theologically with Jewish Emancipation. The political and

<sup>20</sup> *Ideas of Jewish History*, ed. Michael A. Meyer (New York: Behrman, 1974) xii, and note the tone of all the historians mentioned from Heinrich Graetz on.

<sup>21</sup> Reeve Robert Brenner, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors* (New York: Free Press, 1980) 222 ff.

<sup>22</sup> Eugene B. Borowitz, "God and Man in Judaism Today," *Judaism* 13 (1974) 298–308.

social enfranchisement of the Jews in the general society was not one event but, by their time, a century-long process. While most Jews enthusiastically accepted their new human equality, many doubted they could adopt a way of life determined by their society and yet remain authentically Jewish. The decades of experiment in worship, observance, and rationalization finally reached maturity in the thought of Hermann Cohen. If the University of Marburg philosopher did not discuss his system as a response to Emancipation, it was only because he took that move for granted even as he exemplified its benefits. Note that his philosophy of Judaism elevates Judaism's eternal idea against the books tradition says were given at Sinai. He thus validates the authority of contemporary reason in Judaism, making rational relevance the criterion of Jewish authenticity. Baeck employed a similar strategy to reach similar goals. He only expanded the dimensions of the immediate experience which Jews would now make sovereign.<sup>23</sup>

As the twentieth century moved on, the succeeding philosophers became more historically self-conscious. Our other great rationalistic system-builder, Mordecai Kaplan, is a good case in point. Kaplan justifies his radicalism by pointing to the reinterpretations brought on by the prior major turning points in Jewish history, the Exile and the destruction of the Second Temple. He argues that the Emancipation is another of these, requiring us to rethink and reshape Judaism stringently to our democratic social situation. Since our cultural ethos is scientific, Kaplan reconstructs Jewish institutional life, practices, values, and ideas in naturalistic terms. In this system, American naturalism replaces German philosophic idealism but the function of reason remains the same: to establish the emancipated Jew as the master of the Jewish past, though also its beneficiary. This, once again, is a philosophy of the "revelation" given by historic events.<sup>24</sup>

A decade earlier in Germany, Martin Buber had reached his unique insight about the reality and authority of genuine interpersonal encounter. In this nonrationalist "system," history has renewed importance. The homogenized chronology of rationalism now is accompanied by the personalistic experience that some moments are far richer in meaning than others. By this theory Buber reached the same goal as the rationalists: he had acknowledged the revelatory authority of the Emancipation and met it by giving the present encounter hegemony over tradition.

At the same time, Buber had provided modernized Jews with a non-Orthodox understanding of how God might be speaking in contemporary events. Israel, the people, can today, as in the past, encounter God, this

<sup>23</sup> For a fuller discussion, see chaps. 2 and 3 in *Choices* (n. 7 above).

<sup>24</sup> He is treated in chap. 4 of *Choices*.



time in the wilderness of contemporary history. Buber responded to events in his lifetime from this perspective. Zionism was to be the modern counterpart of the ancient Hebrews' corporate relationship with God; the *kibbutz* was the noble Jewish effort to live community in full dimension; the Israeli need to reach out and make common cause with the Arabs was the test of Zionism's Jewishness; though Eichmann was guilty of the most heinous crimes against the Jewish people, Buber argued that it did not befit our character to take his life. The Holocaust so troubled him that he rethought his theory of evil, acknowledging now the terrifying biblical truth that, on occasion, God withdraws from us, "hiding His face."<sup>25</sup>

The other two distinctive system-makers of this century, Franz Rosenzweig and Abraham Heschel, would seem the exceptions to my hypothesis. Since I believe I can somewhat mitigate the refutation by way of Heschel, I shall speak first about him, though Rosenzweig wrote nearly half a century earlier.

Heschel interpreted Judaism as a religion centered on time rather than space.<sup>26</sup> But he did not initiate the contemporary Jewish theological interest in historic events. Before 1967, the opposite was actually the case. In his system, which was fully elaborated prior to that fateful year, contemporary history has no role, except perhaps as secularizing villain. I read Heschel's work as a religionist's protest against the desanctification of the world and, in particular, against the liberal secularization of Jewish faith. In quite classic fashion, therefore, Heschel made the recovery of revelation the goal of his apologetics. He thereby returned Sinai and the prophets to their authoritative place and made the rabbis their legitimate interpreters. In his Judaism contemporary history was only another arena for the application of these eternal truths. At that stage his attitude to recent history merely involved him in reversing the liberal Jewish manner of accommodating to modernity, though he retained its ethical thrust.

The return of Old Jerusalem to Jewish sovereignty changed that. Heschel's book *Israel, An Echo of Eternity* movingly describes what this place, Jerusalem, means to him as a Jew, and therefore what this event of return means to Judaism.<sup>27</sup> Intriguingly for so traditionalistic a thinker, he makes no messianic argument. Rather, he limits himself to the theological significance of geography. He provides a phenomenology of standing on the sites which constitute some of the people of Israel's

<sup>25</sup> The best analysis of this material remains Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber, The Life of Dialogue* (New York: Harper, 1960). For the early and late stages of Buber's thought on evil, see chaps. 15 and 16.

<sup>26</sup> *The Sabbath* (New York: Abelard Schuman, 1952).

<sup>27</sup> *Israel: An Echo of Eternity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969).

most sacred symbols. Thus, though Heschel's thought was based on the classic tenet that ancient revelation determined contemporary Judaism, he too was religiously overcome by a modern event.

We cannot say the same for Rosenzweig, though it must quickly be noted that he died in 1929 after a meteoric intellectual career, in the last few years of which he was incapacitated by an almost total paralysis.<sup>28</sup> Like Heschel, he saw revelation as the heart of Judaism, though Rosenzweig posited a nonverbal, "contentless" (by classic Jewish standards) encounter with God.<sup>29</sup> As a result, Rosenzweig too had no significant doctrine of the Jewish people and, alone of all twentieth-century Jewish thinkers, turned his back on contemporary events (though accepting the Emancipation).<sup>30</sup> He made history a Christian domain, with authentic Jews already participating in eternity by living the Torah. They thus had no religious interest in what passes for history.

Rosenzweig's thought clearly counts against my argument concerning the centrality of history to modern as to ancient Jewish theology. If he is correct, the concerns of my generation are an accident of our situation but not Jewishly essential. I think it fair to rejoin that this aspect of Rosenzweig's thought has been an embarrassment to those who would follow him. On the issue of eternity, not the moment, he has been almost totally rejected by the Jewish community on the basis of its lived experience. Any theory that would render the Holocaust and the State of Israel peripheral to being a Jew cannot be right. I suggest that Rosenzweig came to his extreme stand because of his heavy polemic agenda against the opposing views of Judaism, the Orthodox, the liberal, and the Zionist. This caused him to emphasize God and contentless revelation to the detriment of the folk and human aspects of Judaism. Consequently, the philosophical idealism which Rosenzweig was seeking to escape managed to reassert itself and frustrate the protoexistentialism he had creatively initiated to take its place.

Let me sum up my Jewish case by adducing one further piece of evidence. With the exception of Buber, the great system-builders give almost no attention to the Mt. Sinai experience. The rationalists as good as dissolve it into mind and conscience. Heschel assimilates it to his general theory of revelation as sym-pathos, despite his commitment to

<sup>28</sup> Nahum N. Glatzer, *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (New York: Schocken, 1953) 108 ff.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 285, where the theory is succinctly put. Its critical consequences are spelled out in the correspondence with Buber, reproduced in Franz Rosenzweig, *On Jewish Learning* (New York: Schocken, 1955) 109 ff.

<sup>30</sup> See my discussion on "The Problem of the Form of a Jewish Theology," *Hebrew Union College Annual* (Cinn.) 40-41 (1969-70) 391-408, where I discuss the similarity of structural form in Heschel and Rosenzweig.

Sinai's uniqueness. Rosenzweig, describing revelation as love, speaks of Sinai only symbolically. Buber, applying the I-thou relationship to the national level, searches the Exodus account with intriguing personalistic openness.<sup>31</sup> But having devoted one chapter of one work to the topic, he does not return to it. Thus the Jewish concern for history in these thinkers is not attention to a unique occurrence in the past but to the events of their time.

It may well be countered that this is so because the thinkers I have analyzed, except Heschel, are liberal Jews. If only Orthodoxy can be Judaism, my argument again fails. But I see no useful way of debating the issue of what constitutes authentic Judaism. I would only point out how Orthodoxy itself has changed as a result of events. Particularly notable is its about-face toward Zionism. What was almost a complete rejection of this irreligiosity when modern secular Zionism arose, has now become almost total support, mainly enthusiastic but partially grudging. This transformation was not the result of a changed philosophy of history but of a realistic response to what happened. Moreover, I cannot here treat any Orthodox Jewish philosopher because there are no twentieth-century systematic expositions of traditional Jewish faith comparable to those of the liberals. The least that can be said of my hypothesis, then, is that it characterizes such Jewish theology as we have. I gladly acknowledge that I am speaking about liberal Judaism. I must add that the systems I have described raise to the level of academic reflection the beliefs of the overwhelming majority of concerned American Jews.

#### CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATIONS

In turning now to contemporary Christian theology, let me identify a methodological problem. The differing Christian attitude toward recent events I perceive is not totally distinct from that of the Jewish theoreticians. Polemicists prefer to draw battlelines sharply. They force a decisive choice—and then the advocate is tempted to delineate the two stands so as to make the decision well-nigh irresistible. I think no false sense of ecumenism secretly makes me see only indistinct lines of dissimilarity between us. Even in disagreement the positions partially overlap. Living in the same culture, brought ever more closely into contact by democracy, media, and travel, utilizing the same repertoire of civilization symbol-structures, we are bound to be alike. That does not rule out genuine, fundamental opposition, but it explains why seeking to discern where our disagreements begin and leave off is a most subtle and often frustrating task.

<sup>31</sup> For Rosenzweig, the material in n. 29 above is apt. For Buber, see his *Moses* (Oxford: East and West Library, 1946) 110 ff.

To some extent, the greatest similarity in dealing with recent events may be seen in the attitudes of some evangelical Christians and Orthodox Jewish thinkers. Both can discern in the happenings around them signs that the eschaton is breaking in. I do not know how much weight to attach to the different historical valences they consider meaningful. The Christian thinkers work with the negative aspects of events and resonate with vibrations of the power of the Antichrist. Because of Jerusalem, the Jews are overwhelmed by a positive indication the Messiah may be nigh.

Even in this convergence I detect somewhat contrary evaluations of the pre-Messianic history in which we stand. The evangelicals seem to me to esteem the Second Coming and its salvation so highly that present events are, by comparison, of small significance. Accepting the Christ and remaining steadfast in one's faith, while devotedly awaiting, even anticipating, his speedy return are the religiously desirable virtues. Obviously, these will affect one's everyday life. But the time frame radically distinguishes between the value of this era and that which was when Jesus walked this earth and that which will be when he returns.

Jews, for all their commitment to the coming of the Messiah, are less eschatologically oriented. God's Torah directs them to the here-and-now, not to the life of world-to-come, though it awaits them. Their sense of the Messiah remains so human that figures as ordinary as Bar Kochba and Sabbetai Zevi could be taken for the Shoot of Jesse. Though the great eschatological drama of resurrection, judgment, and eternal life ensues in due course, the advent of the Messiah will occur in profane, not transformed, history. I suggest, then, that even on the right we can distinguish between the faiths on this theme. With some hesitation, I find here what I see more clearly elsewhere: the Jewish thinkers can be deeply moved by *specific* happenings, while the Christian theologians seek to read the signs of the times *in general*.

The contours of difference emerge more readily when I read less orthodox thinkers. The most dramatic confrontation with contemporary history would seem to occur in the European praxis theologians like Moltmann and Metz, and the South American liberationists. In the late 1960's I would have described the European movement as a response to the student revolution and the prospect of great social change. But for more than a decade now, no particular occurrence—the Polish worker's revolt, for example—has had anywhere near similar impact. And Hispanic liberation theology likewise seems far more socially than historically oriented.

Something also must be said now about the power of events to reshape theology. For the Jews, the Emancipation, the Holocaust, the State of Israel, the gaining of Old Jerusalem, and, potentially, other happenings

can cause fundamental revisions in our thought. These events changed the thinkers' teaching concerning God and Torah and, most markedly, their doctrines of the people of Israel. I do not see historical incidents impinging as strongly on Christian thinkers. Recent experiences may transform Christian witness and the tone of Christian existence, as in recent years, but I do not see events causing so fundamental a rethinking of faith among Christians as among Jews. Somewhat less hesitantly now, I would identify the Christian concern as responding to the culture generally, while the Jews have reacted more directly to specific historic occurrences.

Perhaps I can go a step further. The socially-oriented Christian theologians seem to me to be answering the Marxists' legitimate criticism of the society and the church. The leftists co-opted and perverted the church's social ethics. Now that the ethical duplicity of the secular critics is plain, the church can reclaim its social values, challenge the Marxists for their institutional failure, and, by co-opting the Marxist social analysis, renew its mandate of stewardship. My ethical admiration for that stance does not change my judgment about our diversity in theologically confronting our time.

Somewhat similar attitudes emerge in two lesser themes of Christian writing. One is the continuing effort to create a theology of culture. While this activity seems less lively to me in recent years than it did in the exciting days of H. Richard Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, little similar work surfaces among Jews. Far less predictable is the outcome of contemporary Christian thinkers' engagement with Asian religions, now freshly seen as dialogue partners rather than as objects of missionary zeal. I read this as a broadening of contemporary Christian theology's cultural horizon from barely beyond the West to include the whole globe. Accompanying it has been an enlarged sense of the equality of humankind and the universality of genuine spirituality. This poses a new challenge to Christian as to other faiths' particularity. But these activities fit in well with my earlier speculations about the central orientation of Christian thought.

Even clearer insight is yielded by a retrospective look at the Protestant death-of-God agitation of the mid-1960's. The four theoreticians who formulated the issues under discussion then, Paul Van Buren, Thomas J. J. Altizer, Gabriel Vahanian, and William Hamilton, based their positions, different as they were, on cultural considerations. Altizer's cyclical view of opposing spiritual epochs, based vaguely on Mircea Eliade's view of religion, yielded a negative judgment about Western civilization and contemporary religion. Van Buren called for demythologizing the Son to conform to the philosophic temper of the times.

Vahanian and Hamilton examined immediate religious experience and found it empty. In our culture, they proclaimed, God was dead. Not until Richard Rubenstein's writing came to their attention did it occur to them to argue that an event in their lifetime, the Holocaust, was an immediate refutation of the existence of a good and omnipotent God. And the Nazi experience never did play much of a role in their subsequent discussion.

In the near twenty years since those days, some Christian thinkers have acknowledged that, at the least, this event requires some reconsideration of theologies formulated before evil like the Holocaust could be imagined. Roy Eckardt, Franklin Littell, John Pawlikowski, and others have tried to rethink their Christianity in terms of this human and Jewish horror. Paul Van Buren has gone even further and now has begun to study what it might mean to think rigorously of Christianity as an offshoot of Jewish religious experience. Such Christian theologians are doing very much what Jews have done, but I shall not further consider their work. I cannot tell to what extent they are responding to what happened or to the challenge of Jewish colleagues for whom attention to this matter is a condition of dialogue. How such an event might find a proper place in Christian thought remains unclear to me. My doubts arise from the fact that the overwhelming majority of Christian theologians do not yet consider the Holocaust a sufficiently significant event to merit much attention in their thinking.

I have come across only two Christian thinkers who have responded to historic events somewhat as Jews have. Karl Rahner has pondered the theological implications of the declining world influence of Christianity and its potential fall to a minority impulse in Western civilization. To Jews, long accustomed to Christian apologists arguing that the success of Christianity demonstrates its truth, the change in Christian power over the past two decades has been striking. Rahner resolutely rejects all such temporal criteria of worth as contrary to the kenotic traditions of the church. To the contrary, Christianity most authentically fulfils its mission as a servant church. It may now well be required by God to become a church in diaspora, serving in the humility befitting a relatively powerless, scattered institution. But that will only confirm, not contradict, its central truth.

Rahner's effort here is comparable to the reconsideration forced on Jewish thinkers by the Emancipation drastically changing their social status. But where their experience could compel them to rethink radically the nature of their Jewishness, Rahner's reaction to this apparently substantial historical shift barely impinges upon his central understanding of Christianity. The notion of a church in diaspora is only hinted at in his comprehensive volume *Foundations of Christian Faith*.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> New York: Seabury, 1978.

A far more direct investigation of the meaning of historical events in Christianity may be found in Wolfhart Pannenberg's *Human Nature, Election and History*.<sup>33</sup> Pannenberg's interest in history is well known, since he contended in *Jesus—God and Man* that an academic historical approach to the evidence available validates the factual occurrence of Jesus' resurrection. In the last three of these lectures he probes the meaning of historic events since the Christ. He deplores those tendencies in Christianity, from Augustine through Luther and beyond, to separate the true domain of Christian existence from the commonplace realm of sociopolitical affairs. This led, after the collapse of the medieval effort to establish a proper Christendom, to the secular modern state, where religion is reduced to a private activity. Pannenberg calls for a proper recognition of the social dimension of Christianity. He emphasizes the importance of the "people of God" motif in the New Testament and Christian belief, holding it to be more important even than the notion of church, but, in any case, equally significant a doctrine as that of individual salvation.<sup>34</sup>

I was particularly curious to see what he made of this as he applied it to our time. Permit me to explain my special interest. In my paper on contemporary Christologies, I had excoriated Pannenberg for his religious anti-Semitism. He had continued the old Christian-Protestant-Lutheran charge that with the crucifixion the religion of the Jews died. I was outraged that he, a post-Holocaust theologian, in Germany of all countries, seemed to have no consciousness of the social consequences of centuries of such teaching. The anti-Semitism of Christian theology had made it possible for secularists to transform "Judaism is dead" into "Jews should be killed." While reworking this material into book form, I learned that in a work of the early 1970's Pannenberg had modified his earlier view. He then described his prior statement as "the resupposition of a view widespread in German Protestantism, that the religion of the Law and the Jewish religion are identical."<sup>35</sup> But when Richard John Neuhaus kindly brought us together to discuss this matter, Pannenberg could not understand why I should assess his thought in terms of the previous German generation's actions, which, plainly enough, he considered totally reprehensible. I therefore was particularly interested in what he might say about recent historic events.

In his final lecture Pannenberg devotes one long paragraph to the meaning of the two World Wars, which he discusses in terms of modern nationalism. Because it has been secularized, nationalism has been affected for evil as well as for good, as has the other chief organizing

<sup>33</sup> Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, e.g., 100–101, 106–7.

<sup>35</sup> See the Foreword to his *The Apostle's Creed in the Light of Today's Questions* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972).

principle secularism utilized, liberalism. (Both nationalism and liberalism have Judeo-Christian origins, he argues.) The evil effects on nationalism have been most pronounced, leading to World War I's orgy of European self-destruction and an end to Europe's world domination. Worse, "It meant that the divine vocation that was perceived earlier in experiences of national chosenness, had been forfeited by nationalistic self-glorification." He then continues:

That judgment became definitive with World War II. Among the hardest hit was the German nation. The single most serious reason for that in theological as well as in historical terms may have been the persecution and attempted annihilation of the Jewish people. This attempt disclosed to the world the radical nature of that nationalism. The German case demonstrated in a particularly decisive way the dangerous potential of nationalism, but it is uncertain whether the general significance of that experience has yet been properly understood in the contemporary world.<sup>36</sup>

The ethical import of this passage is admirable. But it leaves a Jewish reader troubled. Events can apparently teach a Christian theologian something about nationalism, in this case particularly about German nationalism, though here that instance is sublimated to the world's problem with it. Events do not, in this instance, cause the theologian to take a hard look at his own religious tradition. Surely, that such an evil made itself manifest in the birthplace of Protestant Christianity and still one of its most important intellectual centers, is not a trivial matter. How could a nation with such a vigorous church life, Catholic as well as Protestant, have become so demonic? Should there not be a thorough critique and rethinking of the intellectual factors in the church which made this possible?

If we follow the Talmudic dictum of judging others by looking only at the scale of merit,<sup>37</sup> we may say that Pannenberg's lectures, for all that they do not say so explicitly, are a judgment on and a reconstruction of Christian theology. While Pannenberg does not discuss Christian theological anti-Semitism here, he does isolate and correct the basic error he sees in prior interpretations of Christianity: it was too individualistically oriented and now needs to take more direct responsibility for the nation in which it functions. If that is the proper understanding, Pannenberg is one of the few Christian thinkers I have encountered who have allowed their basic faith to be modified by recent events.

Can we now provide some reasons for the dissimilar interests of contemporary Jewish and Christian theologians?

Let us say the simplest yet most important thing first: we do not know

<sup>36</sup> *Human Nature* 104-5.

<sup>37</sup> Pirke Avot 1.6.



when or where or why God acts. All religions know moments highly charged with meaning and long stretches when memory must take the place of revelation. Who is to say that perhaps in recent years God chose to act toward the Jews with a directness and significance God did not in the same period manifest to Christians? In other centuries one might have made the same observation the other way around. Let us therefore proceed with great humility. We may be seeking to fathom matters which radically exceed our depth of penetration. But let that not keep us from seeking to explore that which mind and soul make available to us.

In this spirit of tentativeness, two sociological caveats ought to be introduced. To begin with, the distinctive Jewish theological concerns may reflect the situation of those who do it rather than Judaism's essential faith. Most Jews writing in this area are not professional theologians. Their agenda is not set by a well-established guild and they are not centrally concerned with the academic challenges one's seminary or university colleagues may raise. Even those of our writers who are academics work in disciplines other than Jewish theology. As a result, we are far more likely to attend to the realities faced by our community than to the abstract issues made significant by generations of learned, abstract, academic debate.

Second, our community is small, conscious of being a tiny minority everywhere but in the State of Israel and sensitive to the perils to its survival. We magnify every trauma, and having recently undergone previously unimaginable pain—even in terms of the long, anguished history of Jewish suffering—we have been humanly and spiritually changed. But we have also been overwhelmed by several unbelievable triumphs in our time. We can, therefore, often find ourselves quite confused as to how such extremes as we have known can testify to one ultimate reality.

By these familial Jewish standards we find it almost incomprehensible, for example, that when the Christian Lebanese were under severe assault by their Moslem Lebanese brothers and their Syrian allies, there was no Western Christian outcry. Perhaps the vastness of Christianity simply gives a different scale to any individual event. Thus, for all Rahner's genuine humility, he can know that even a diminished church will contain some hundreds of millions of remaining believers. That should surely keep it alive until the Spirit manifests itself again in the church's social status. We do not have this numeric assurance. Nonetheless, Jews may well ask what God is saying to them in keeping them so few and so imperiled. However, with this question about the theology of Jewish sociology, we have moved on to the more important level of our analysis.

I wish to suggest that the differing responses of Jewish and Christian

theologians to recent historic events is largely due to their different paradigms of religious reality. For Jews, that is the Covenant with the people of Israel begun at Mt. Sinai; for Christians, it is the New Covenant made through the life and death of Jesus the Christ and carried on through the church. If we contrast these two religions to Asian faiths, the many similarities between Judaism and Christianity quickly stand out. The structure and content of the relationships with God clearly show a "family resemblance."

Yet there remain major differences between them. For our purposes, let me point to the rather diverse balance each faith gives to God's role and to that of God's human partner in the covenants. I believe we will find this theological divergence determinative of the phenomenon to which I have been calling attention.

In Judaism God initially fulfils the Covenant promises to the patriarchs by expanding Jacob's family to a populous nation, by taking them out of Egypt, giving them the Torah, and setting them as a people on their own Land. The act of receiving the Law-and-Teaching climaxes the early relationship and sets the conditions of all that is to follow. But it includes a commitment to the everyday history which will come after Sinai, in which God's care will regularly make itself felt. Then, too, the people of Israel, though utterly subordinate to their King/Lord/Creator/Only-God-of-the-universe, are active agents in the Covenant-making process. More, by assenting to being yoked to this God, they agree to bear the personal and corporate responsibility of living out God's Torah in history. By rabbinic times and the emergence of the doctrine of the Oral as well as the Written Law-and-Teaching, the rabbis become the effective shapers of the continuing meaning of Torah. They then richly endow the ordinary Jew with duties to sanctify life as perhaps only priests had thought of doing in prior times.

With secularization, modern Jewish thinkers transformed the ancient notion of the Covenant. Under the impact of science, God's providence was reinterpreted as less active, while the formerly limited role of human agency in the Covenant was extended almost to the point of dominance. As I analyze it, this transition did not negate the old covenantal faith that God was continually involved in the people of Israel's efforts to live by Torah. Thus, despite modernization, Jews could remain open to the possibility that contemporary history might be revelatory. To put this in the less tortured language of a simpler age, they could still ask what God was saying to them in their history.

It seems to me that Christianity's New Covenant does not as easily provide for such a modernized religious interest in recent events. What is involved, I am suggesting, is a sense of time which, for all its similarity to Judaism, here exposes its difference.

At the heart of the New Covenant lies God's utterly gracious and incomparable generosity in sending the Son and thereby assuming personal responsibility for atoning for human sinfulness. God's act-of-love in the Christ is so extraordinary that God's action cannot have the same sort of continuity in Christian lives that God's partnership has after God's gift of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. To be sure, when the Parousia comes, all that was promised and foreshadowed in the life of the Christ will be gloriously fulfilled in ways beyond our imagining. In the interim God does not, of course, forsake the newly-called-forth people of God. The Holy Spirit is with them, acting in their lives, their institutions, and their history. But I am suggesting that the interim work of the Spirit, though real and powerful, is of a different order than that of the God who gives a Teaching rather than a person of the triune Godhead. For the God of the Sinaitic Covenant remains personally involved with those who, alone in all the world, seek to live by God's Torah.

To better understand the differentiating thrust which will influence contemporary Christian theologians who seek to modernize the classic doctrine of the Holy Spirit, we must first seek what the traditional notion of the New Covenant makes of the role of the human partner. To Jewish eyes, Christianity's overwhelming sense of God's graciousness renders human beings in the New Covenant more thoroughly subordinated and passive in relation to God than are the Hebrews of the Covenant of Sinai. To be sure, there are major differences here between Catholic and Protestant teaching. Yet, in terms of the Jewish religious self-perception, Christianity as a whole seems to create a rather different balance between God and humankind. Christianity does call on us to open our hearts to faith and be ready to receive God's truth. In various interpretations it stresses the importance of the church and the life of sacraments as crucial to salvation. Yet, as Jews view it, in classic Christianity the balance is radically weighted toward God's side by the utterly unparalleled act-of-love God once did. Moreover, it should be noted that Christian salvation is primarily directed to the individual by God, though in varying interpretations the group, that is, the church, plays a role in it. Hence what happens to individual Christians is likely to have more significance to them than what happens to their community. Thus, Rahner appears to be predominantly occupied with the individual human being and God, and only secondarily with the church. By contrast, when Pannenberg needs models for his newly-socialized Christianity, he draws them almost entirely from Hebrew Scripture.

The modernization of the New Covenant pioneered the radical activation of the human role and the de-emphasis on God's providence which is typical of liberal religion. What happens to the Holy Spirit in this, and where it is now seen to operate, I am speculating, keeps contemporary

theologians from envisioning recent events as "revelatory." This is not to argue that events can never play such a role in Christianity. In a previous time, when Providence was strongly activist, the Holy Spirit might be seen in happenings as varied as the Crusades or the Reformation. Today, with our scientific view of existence making the Holy Spirit less likely to be seen as objectively active, historic events retreat in importance for Christians. Rather, with salvation understood in primarily personal terms and religion now conceived of largely in experiential terms, the Holy Spirit is more likely to be seen acting in the inner life of individuals than in the occurrences which befall the church as a whole or some significant part of it. But I have now strained my thesis to its limit. In extenuation, I ask you to remember my intention: I have been trying to clarify why what seems so obviously critical to one faith, Judaism, has not been so to another faith, Christianity, though both lived through the same history.

At least we can say that this investigation illustrates again the notion that we are apt to perceive about us that which our perspective on reality permits us to see. Perhaps in the clash of all the other factors which affect our perception, understanding our theological lenses does not explain very much. But if it helps enable once contentious religions to understand and live better with one another despite their differences, that will be accomplishment enough.