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KNOWLEDGE OF JUDAISM AND SPIRITAN SPIRITUALITY*

by Roger Le Déaut, cssp.

The publication of the *Commentary on St John* and the recent thesis of Fr Cahill on the sources of Fr. Libermann's spirituality justify, it would seem, the presentation, in this issue of *Spiritan Papers*, of more general considerations on the importance of Judaism: for the understanding of Christianity, in the first place, and more concretely, for the understanding of our particular vocation in a congregation founded by a Jew.

Libermann was a Jew and always remained so. This way of putting it may be found shocking. But it reproduces textually what the "Notes for a correct presentation of Jews and of Judaism in the preaching and catechetics of the Catholic Church" say of Jesus himself¹. Here we are already stirring up a hornet's nest! The subject of relations between Judaism and the Church always arouses passionate reactions. But it cannot be evaded; it is truly essential for the Christian. We are here faced with a mystery of the history of salvation, and Paul himself, running short of explanations, takes refuge in the praise of God's unfathomable Wisdom (Rom. 11,33).

I would like only to suggest here some points for reflection and a few directions in research on what Judaism should represent for us. After a few more general considerations, we shall pick out certain aspects that should interest us more particularly as Christians and as Spiritans.

* These pages take up again in substance some reflections developed at Rome on the occasion of a meeting with the students of Chevilly (28 Oct. 1984), at the time of the beatification of Fr Brottier. Rewritten in Jerusalem (March 1986), they are more than ever topical.

¹ Rome, 24 June 1985. Cf. *Doc. Cath.* 1985, n. 1900, 733-738. This important text may serve to complete the sketch offered here.

A. HOW JUDAISM IS TO BE DEFINED

The documents of the Holy See, in line with the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II (1965), repeat that the essential condition for dialogue is to know "the essential features (by which) the Jews define themselves in their lived religious reality" (cf. *Doc. Cath.* 1985, 733).

1. It is before everything else the famous trinity: one God, one people, one land. A people forming one whole from Abraham to the coming of the Messiah, having kept during the whole of its history a fierce loyalty to the only God and a link with the land promised to the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 15,18). Christians, with the Apocalypse, see at the end of history a *heavenly* Jerusalem; Jews think of an *earthly* Jerusalem, dwelling place of God (of the *Shekinah* = Presence). In spite of all the difficulties, these fundamental religious notions cannot be ignored for historical or political reasons.

The formation of a new type of Judaism (called "rabbinical") after the destruction of the Temple in 70, should not make us forget that this latter continues the Israel of that Bible which is common to us all. This solidarity means that a Jew remains so always. If he becomes a Christian, he simply recognizes that the destiny of his people is fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, Israel's Messiah. Jews remark readily that for their own definition they have no need of Christianity; whereas the latter, on the other hand, has need of Judaism for its existence and self-understanding.

2. The Jews see their mission as consisting in complete *faithfulness* to the Torah (unfortunately translated by *Law*), and in a life which "hallows the Name", by conformity to all the wishes of the Lord. "Sanctification of the Name" is even the traditional expression for referring to martyrdom, and the first request of the Pater is to be found in the most ancient Jewish prayers. The presence of God dwells in the whole of creation and sacralizes all the actions of life; the will of God makes demands on the believer all the time and everywhere. It is in this spirit that one can best understand the importance that religious Jews attach to *kashrut* (rules concerning food). Instead of smiling at this scrupulous faithfulness, the Christian should respect the profound motives for it, and remember that

the New Testament also insists on the observance of commandments (cf. I John 5,2-3). Fr Dubois mentioned recently that "this faithfulness of Israel remains as a permanent and demanding model for our own response to God's call"².

Jewish religion has too often been caricatured, forgetting that its traditional piety finds its nourishment above all in the Bible, one of the essential sources of Christian prayer. Many judge Judaism on some gems taken from the immense rabbinical literature, above all from the Talmud (made up of the reports of academic discussions). It is as if Christianity were to be explained on the sole basis of works on moral and canon law of long ago. Jewish mysticism is also too little known, as well as important trends, like the Hassidic movement³.

3. The Jews believe in the permanence of *election*. It is a truism. But Christians have always been led to contest this privilege, understood in a narrow and exclusive sense, while in fact it represents the first stage in the initiative for the universal salvation of men (Gen. 12,3). Israel keeps its place in the Father's house (like the older son in the parable of the prodigal son) and continues to play a (mysterious) role in the history of salvation. God has never withdrawn his love for Israel nor gone back on his promises (reread Rom. 9-11). John Paul II recalled this permanent reality of the Jewish people, in front of the representatives of the Jewish community at Mayence (17 November 1980), using a phrase of great theological significance: "... the People of God of the Old Testament, *which has never been revoked*" (cf. Doc. Cath., 1985, 733).

This people remains *elected* ("Say rather standing for the second ballot", the Jew Tristan Bernard used to reply!). And it is in this people that we are so, through Jesus (cf. Rom. 11,16-18). If a great number did not recognize him as the Christ-Messiah, "the result of their false step has been to bring the Gentiles salvation" (v. 11). The mission outside Israel is presented in the New Testament as brought about by the refusal of the Jews (acts 13,46), in which Paul recognizes an element of the divine plan.

² *Etudes*, February 1986, 237.

³ Cf. the works of A. Heschel. On the Hassidic Jews, there exists a work by the Alsatian Jew, A. Mendel, in the series "Vies quotidiennes".

4. Judaism is the only religion that puts itself forward as bearer of a Revelation destined for all men (and Christianity understands itself in relation to this mission)⁴. It is also essentially witness to the transcendence, as well as to the extraordinary nearness of God. The Bible bears witness to this, but also the Jewish tradition as a whole. The *Shekinah* never abandons the chosen people and, in a certain way, participates in all its trials. Here we find a kind of rough outline of the Incarnation; it is the same idea that passes from the level of image to that of reality. A Christian who believes in Providence must feel himself questioned in his faith by a tragedy like that of the Holocaust which has marked the whole of Judaism forever and from which all the theological implications have not yet been finally brought out. It is true that up to the present the Christian theology of Judaism has been above all negative.

These considerations already introduce us to the following point.

B. OUR INTEREST IN JUDAISM AS CHRISTIANS⁵

Once the permanence of Judaism and its unity in the course of a very long history are recognized, it would be easy to draw up a long list of motives according to which a knowledge of Judaism is indispensable for the understanding of Christianity in its origins, its development, and its religious content. Here are just a few perspectives.

1. *Unique relations exist between the two religions*, "linked at the very level of their own identity" (John Paul II, 6 March 1982), having in common a considerable patrimony (*Nostra Aetate*). It is sufficient to think of all that we owe to Judaism: the person of Christ (subject to the Law, because born of a Jewish woman: Gal. 4,4), the revelation of the Old Testament, the Apostles and the first disciples. The Church is inserted into a current whose source is to be found far

⁴ "A light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Lk. 2,32). But, in the homilies on 2 February, little comment is made on what follows: "and for glory to thy people Israel".

⁵ "Before being good religious, be good Christians" (Mgr. Le Roy).

upstream, in creation (cf. the Credo). The New Testament is in great part an interpretation of the life and words of Jesus of Nazareth, in the light of the announcements of the Old Testament which they fulfill (cf. the multiple quotations in all the books of the New Testament). We are not only "spiritually semites" (Pius XI), but more precisely Jews. For Christianity was born of that type of Judaism of the first century (Palestinian and Hellenistic) which was heir to a long experience of God and to a stormy history. To go back to our Jewish roots it to give our faith resonance and depth by putting it in tune with that of the primitive Church.

The concepts of the Jewish Bible have become part of our theology. The history of the chosen people since Abraham ("our father": cf. the Roman Canon and a fine book by Fr Lécuyer which carries this title) is our prehistory. The liturgical use made of the Old Testament shows it. The Book of Psalms forms liturgical prayer par excellence. All that we still share with the Judaism of today. The first covenant carries the new one, as the Prophets carry the Apostles on their shoulders, in the famous rose window at Chartres. On the other hand, the dependence of the Christian liturgy on the Jewish liturgy has been often demonstrated. With regard to election, we have entered into the inheritance of Israel, which is not for all that dispossessed (Rom. 9,4-5). The very existence of the Jewish people continues to question our faith. We are so close that friction is inevitable. K. Barth mentioned one day, in the Secretariate for Christian Unity, that if Christian ecumenism is a good thing, the essential problem remains of defining our relations with Judaism, on to which we are grafted (Rom. 11,17).

2. *The Incarnation of the Word* is a fact which is inserted in the unfolding of time. To believe in the reality of the Incarnation is immediately to evoke a country, a people and its history, a human family in a given context, at a precise moment. The Man-God is not a meteorite, as Gnosticism would have it. Entering human history meant for the Messiah joining a caravan whose journey had already been long; it meant joining a people which had its own religious and social life, its own customs and traditions, its own ways of thinking and of feeling, its own cultic institutions, and its own aspirations.

The Jews as a people have been the first witnesses to the Incarnation, directly involved in this divine adventure. We can

easily understand that many were not able to "believe". To believe in the foretold salvation, as long as its realization was situated in the far distant eschatological future, was infinitely easier for the Jews than to admit that this "carpenter's son" (Mt. 13,55), with such and such physical characteristics, dressed and living like one of themselves, was the Messiah of the Prophets. Which of us can say how he would have reacted to the shock of the first encounter with the mystery of Jesus? It is easier to believe in the Incarnation far from Palestine than at Nazareth itself, where the dilemma "True, yes or no?" directly confronts the Christian.

Jesus never disowned his people. It is even to them alone that he addressed himself during his ministry, wishing, in the line of the prophets, to make them the holy people of God. Finally they rejected him. That is why Jesus is at the same time the one who unites and separates Jews and Christians. To know Judaism better is also to understand better the place of Jesus, rock of scandal, torn apart because he is Jewish and because his mission cannot be fulfilled without also provoking rejection (Lk. 2,34).

It is a pity that the Judeo-Christians, the Church's living and fleshly link with the people of the Covenant, should have disappeared so soon from history, towards the beginning of the fifth century.

3. *The history of relations between Christianity and Judaism* also obliges the Christian to reflect. If we are not responsible for all that the Jews have had to suffer from Christians, we are nonetheless in solidarity with our predecessors in the faith. We have known so many centuries of more or less violent confrontation, of hostility and aggressiveness, of pogroms and of forced conversions with, in the background, a certain rudimentary catechesis which seemed to suggest that love for Christ was in proportion to hatred for the Jews. Some texts of the Fathers of the Church are nowadays painful to read. Even the liturgy (above all certain eastern liturgies) has indirectly contributed to what J. Isaac has studied in his book, *The Teaching of Contempt* (cf. the "Pro perfidis Judaeis" of Good Friday).

Jewish-Christian dialogue, since the Council, has brought about profound changes on this point: in certain countries, liturgical books and school texts have been revised on both sides in the direction of greater objectivity. A slow change

from intolerance and contempt to respect and the recognition of our brotherhood is taking place. The two religions are so intimately united that the truth of the one seems to postulate the falseness of the other. In particular, a certain Christian theology of pure substitution (*true Israel, new people of God, new covenant*) has contributed to considering the Jewish people as "theologically finished", since it was only destined to prepare a fulfillment already brought about in Jesus⁶. The truth of Christianity implied the end of Judaism. It would have been beneficial to go deeper into the relationship between *figure* and *truth/reality* which, in this case, implies an underlying *continuity* up to a new creation. It is the one and same plan of God that is being carried out, the same salvific covenant between God and man that is renewed in a definitive way⁷. The insistence on opposition and discontinuity has given rise to anti-Judaism (religious antagonism), that can be diagnosed as the basis of many of the expressions of antisemitism. Even apparently harmless jokes, partly explicable by the social and historical context, express an attitude that cannot be called "Christian".

C. OUR INTEREST IN JUDAISM AS SPIRITANS

In the Congregation, we like to recall the Jewish origins of Libermann. There is still benefit to be obtained from deepening this point. The suggestions grouped under the following titles provide only indications and would need to be studied more deeply.

1. *Libermann is a Jew.*

"When a Jew becomes a Christian, that makes one more Christian, not one Jew less". This reflection - sometimes

⁶ Cf. the document already quoted: "In any case, we must get rid of the traditional notion of a people being *punished*, retained as a *living argument* in Christian apologetics" (*Doc. Cath.*, *ibid.*, 737). This apologetic is that of Augustine as well as of Pascal.

⁷ Christ instituted the new covenant, "ex Judaeis ac gentibus plebem vocans. . . novus populus Dei" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 9). Fr Dubois (*ibid.* 230) writes: "We have been divided for 20 centuries by a family *quarrel* about a Testament; we are beginning to discover that we are mysteriously brought together by a *family quarrel* about a Testament that is to be announced to the world".

malevolent – is in fact perfectly correct. Besides, how can he deny his race and his tradition? All that we can learn about Libermann's Jewish heritage will help us to reconstruct his personality. First, to what type of Judaism did he belong?

Alsatian Judaism is linked to the *Ashkenaze* (literally, German) branch, which is very different from the *Sepharades* (literally, Spaniards) of the Mediterranean basin and the Near East. This group was formed from the 6th to the 11th century in the Rhine valley and spread to the west as far as Paris and Troyes. From this latter town came the spiritual master of all Judaism, Rashi (1040-1105), famous for his commentaries on the Bible and the Talmud, that Libermann *certainly* studied. This branch of Judaism had much to suffer from Christian "reprisals" at the time of the crusades. Afterwards, the Ashkenazes also emigrated in the 15th and 16th centuries to Eastern Europe. To this group is attributed a tendency towards fundamentalism and rigorism (against which the Hasidic movement of the 18th century reacted), a tenacious attachment to traditional ideas and customs, with a greater interest in biblical exegesis than in juridical discussions. The Alsatian rabbis underwent at the same time the influence of Rashi (who had also studied at Mayence and Worms) and that of the Rhenish schools. Rabbi Libermann had himself been educated at Worms. In the 19th century, the Alsatian Jews were reputed for their strict doctrine and Alsace, after 1844, provided rabbis for the rest of France, for Algeria and other countries. There existed an "Alsatian rite" (first edition, Frankfort 1725) that it certainly would be fruitful to study in order to know better the spirituality of the young Jacob Libermann. Besides, nowadays it is easy to find Jewish prayer books, with translations attached, which would also do the job.

Traditional Jewish life is permeated with prayer and with a sense of the presence of God⁸. For the Jew, there is no non-religious act. As first among the prayers, mention must be made of the *Psalms*. There can be no doubt that Libermann prayed them, in union with all his people, with the just of long ago, who in them expressed their praises, their sufferings and

⁸ "The family is a little temple and the family table is its altar" (Talmud).

their joys. Is it not still a good way to pray the psalms, that Christian tradition places on the lips of Christ? Libermann's piety was shaped and nourished by the numerous daily prayers with the family and, on the Sabbath Day, in the synagogue. On that day, as on the great feasts (Passover, Kippur, New Year) whose liturgy offers so many fine prayers inspired by the Bible and traditional teaching, his religious personality was influenced in an indelible manner. The Talmud itself, while forming the mind in rabbinical dialectic, provided rich teaching on the relations between Israel and its God, on the way of remaining constantly "plugged in" to the divine will. In this initiation into prayer and union with God, emphasis must be placed on the influence of his first master, his father, a reputed rabbi whom he always loved and venerated.

There has been too great a tendency to depreciate somewhat this first Jewish stage of Libermann's spiritual life. Fr Letourneur (in his *Papers*) speaks sometimes of the "already Christian" virtues of Jacob Libermann, as if Christianity had some kind of monopoly in that area (A. Chouraqui likes to speak of "so-called *Christian* charity"). It is certain that he adhered "with all his heart and with all his soul" to the religion of his community. The doubts of adolescence were, because of that, all the deeper and more painful. The *shema' Israel* (Deut. 6,4-5), recited several times a day, is also the first commandment of Jesus (Mk. 12,29-30). The young Jacob was marked by the typical characteristics of Jewish piety: a sense of the divine transcendence, of the absolute dependence of man, humility and abandonment to God. "God is all; man is nothing": he lived this doctrine before learning this expression of it later at Saint-Sulpice.

And the influence of the social milieu? It has often been described in the more or less romanticized biographies of Libermann. To what extent were his character and his personality influenced by his Jewish origins, by his years of childhood and youth? What was the place of his mother? Is this saying of a Jewish author, often repeated by the Jews themselves, borne out: "You can take the Jew out of the ghetto, but you cannot take the ghetto out of the Jew"? It is for the specialists in Libermann to respond. Perhaps it is also necessary to recall that there was in Alsace, in the first half of the 19th century, a series of famous conversions of Jews: that of David Drach (1791-1865) and those of the brothers Ratisbonne, Theodore (1802-1884) and Alphonse (1812-1884),

who founded the Congregation of Notre Dame de Sion. What were the social and historical causes which helped this movement in Alsace?

2. *Libermann is a Jewish Convert.*

We find it difficult to conceive the trauma involved in former times for a Jew in his transition to the Church. It was quite simply to pass over to the enemy. The traditional literature is full of animosity against Edom (= Rome = Christianity) which had never ceased to persecute Israel in the course of its history. To embrace the cross (symbol of the persecutors), having learned to hate it, what an about turn!⁹ To the happiness of encountering Christ ("I never enter a church without having a feeling of coming home", J. J. Bernard, a Jewish convert, used to say) was mingled a feeling of being torn apart, with regard to his family, his tradition and his history. Such an experience could explain in part why Libermann insisted so much on renunciation, asceticism, sacrifice and the austere virtues, elements foreign to Jewish spirituality.

A conversion is a conclusion, but above all the beginning of a search. It involves such a fundamental choice that the whole of life is radicalized. Like Paul, Libermann forgets the past (Phil. 3,13), giving himself completely to Christ who becomes his life (Gal. 2,20). Converts are often rigid and demanding. Jews, in particular, experience a certain disappointment because of the imperfections that they find in the Church. Often they have to suffer from the Church and from their new Christian brothers. That perhaps even more in our times when they are fully conscious they do not have to renounce any of their Judaism. The situation of the Judeo-Christian community shows this clearly. The converts accept completely their Jewish identity and see their "conversion" rather as the natural fulfillment of their former faith¹⁰.

In the 19th century, the convert tended more or less to break his Jewish ties, to minimize the value of his past, turning

⁹ In 1960, there was nearly a ministerial crisis in Israel because, on a stamp, there appeared the cross of a Church in Nazareth.

¹⁰ In certain cases, it is the encounter with Christ the Jew, that leads them to discover their Jewishness. Cf. Rina Geftman, *Guetteurs d'aurore*, Paris Cerf 1985. This book is a moving introduction to the experience of Jewish converts.

his back on acquaintances and experiences connected with it; in short, to discover a radically new religion. That is to be explained by the theology of relations between Judaism and Christianity before Vatican II. Unknown was today's openness, in which the Church has adopted a less triumphalistic and less simplistic apologetic with regard to Judaism. Long-side official documents of the Holy See and of episcopal conferences, mention might be made, as an example of this new view of Judaism, of the document discussed at Venice by the "Judaism-Catholicism Liaison Committee" on *common witness*, which excludes all form of proselytism with regard to the Jews (cf. *Doc. Cath.* 1977, n. 1719, 421). In the last century, the Ratisbonnes founded a congregation "for the conversion of the Jews". Today, John Paul II goes to pray in the Roman synagogue.

Libermann speaks relatively little about his past and does not quote the Jewish sources that he knew well. A solitary reference to the *Targum* (a paraphrase of the Bible in Aramaic), at the beginning of his Commentary! If he had written in our days, he would from memory have strewn the text with parallels from Jewish tradition. But in his time that would not have been understood. Besides, it is a question of a meditation which is expressed quite naturally in the language and the expressions learnt at Saint-Sulpice. To render in French religious ideas assimilated in Hebrew and in Yiddish would represent also an arduous undertaking for someone who handled that language with some difficulty. Perhaps he would have taken up again many of the expressions of Jewish spirituality which he continued to love and to practise, if he had used his maternal tongue. But, throughout the Commentary, it can be seen that Libermann, ill at ease in speculation, excels at creating the atmosphere of a gospel scene: he feels "at home". On the other hand, Libermann could have, with competence, turned his Jewish education to good account in an apologetic career like that of Drach. He preferred *mission*, in the vanguard of the Church which had welcomed him. This step is, as in the case of Paul, linked to the discovery of Christ: such an opening to the pagans is unknown to rabbinical literature, where proselytism is above all a phenomenon of attraction. It is significant that Jeremiah's vocation as "prophet of the nations" (1,5) is reduced, in the Targum, to "pouring over the nations the cup of malediction".

In spite of Libermann's reticence, it would be worth while

to make a study, in his letters and in the *Notes and Documents*, of all that has to do with his relations with Judaism. The letters to his family first of all. But also, for example, the correspondence with Mr Libmann (a Jewish convert) who asked his advice about how he should behave with his family. Curiously enough, words in Yiddish appear in these letters.

The spirituality that Libermann lived is a symbiosis of the Jewish religious tradition and the revelation of Christ. In his conversion he had to experience the *transition* from the first covenant to its fulfillment; whereas the Christian finds himself straight off in the time *after Jesus Christ*. This might appear as a trite statement of fact, but it is full of significance for history and faith. Christianity cannot be understood without knowing both the *before* and the *after* Jesus Christ. Likewise, to understand Libermann we would need a greater familiarity with the Jewish tradition from which he comes, in order to reconstruct especially those elements of which he spoke little.

Let the last word be an invitation to read some of the texts which nourished the first stage of his life and which can throw light on an obscure side of his personality¹¹. But to understand another religion, it must be approached with sympathy. In the case of Judaism, given the "quality" of our past relations and the accumulated prejudices, that is more difficult. But it is a way of getting to know Libermann better and at the same time of arriving at a better understanding of the Church itself whose history begins with the "qahal" (assembly) of Israel.

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Translation: Tony Geoghegan, CSSp.

¹¹ Like A. Cohen, *Le Talmud* (Payot); C. G. Montefiore - H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (Paperback), New York 1974. Why not the *Targum du Pentateuque*, in the series *Sources chrétiennes* or the article *Judaïsme* in the *Dict. de Spiritualité* (published in a separate volume by Beauchesne, 1975)?