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Josephine D. Casgrain

ISRAELI REACTIONS

ON MARCH 27, Good Friday of 1959, the following story was carried by Israeli newspapers:

Rome (INA)—Yesterday Pope John XXIII modified a prayer that has been said for hundreds of years on Good Friday, the Friday before the Sunday on which the Christians celebrate the resurrection of Jesus.

The preceding Pope, Pius XII, had already begun to change this prayer. The ancient text had contained the following formula in Latin: "Let us pray for the 'treacherous' Jews." The late Pope directed that it be translated in this manner: "Let us pray for the unbelieving Jews."

Pope John has now decided to omit this epithet, and from this day forward the prayer will read: "Let us pray for the Jews, *Oremus pro Judaeis.*"¹

Decades before this excision by Pope John, Catholic scholarship had taken pains to prove that, in the Latin of Christian antiquity, the epithet *perfidis* of the Good Friday intercession did not mean "treacherous," much less "perfidious" as we understand the word today, but simply "unbelieving"—that is to say, unbelieving in Jesus as the Christ.² As a matter of fact, any Jew could so describe himself, and even with a certain fervor. But no matter how carefully the semantics of the prayer be examined, such efforts alone cannot assuage a wound deeply embedded in the Jewish consciousness—the wound brought into being by the cruel behavior of some "Christians" of the past, especially during Holy Week. That this trauma is still felt by Jews

1. In printing the story, *Davar*, voice of the Histadrut, the General Federation of Labor, and *Al Ha-mishmar*, organ of Mapam, the United Workers' party, published a photograph of the Pope. All quotations from Israeli newspapers are translated from a comprehensive French survey, privately issued, of the Israeli reactions to the change in the Good Friday prayer.

2. For a discussion of this prayer and references to other literature on the subject, see Kathryn Sullivan, R.S.C.J., "Pro Perfidis Judaeis," *The Bridge*, II, 212-223.

today is sometimes evident in their public and private attitudes towards the Church.

Precisely how well the memory of abuse has lingered can be seen in the works of Jewish historians. Heinrich Graetz, for instance, castigates the French clergy of the ninth century:

How malicious was the spirit animating [it] can be judged from the fact that the successive bishops of Béziers were in the habit of preaching vehement sermons from Palm Sunday until Easter Monday, exhorting Christians to avenge themselves on the Jews of the town, because they had crucified Jesus. The fanatical mob thus incited armed themselves with stones to attack the Jews. The mischief was repeated year after year for centuries.³

The more detached Cecil Roth, who calls the Catholic Church "always intensely objective, even in its severity," also refers to "the exposure [of the Jew] to licensed mob violence at Eastertide" and describes the prevailing attitude toward him during the Middle Ages:

He had come to be regarded widely not as a mere miscreant, but as a deliberate unbeliever, who persisted in denying the verity of what he knew to be true, and consciously battled in fact against the God whom he purported to worship.⁴

By eliminating the ambiguous words *perfidia* and *perfidia*, Pope John put the blessing of silence upon the endeavor of Catholic apologists and let fly another shaft of love into the ecumenical light. His action—initiated spontaneously before a Good Friday service and only later decreed—was the first of a number of similar gestures this Pope of great heart has made toward the Jews. His tokens of friendship seem to spring from a three-pronged root: the early example and teachings of St. Peter and St. Paul (see Ac 2:22, 29; Rom 11:28–29); the special consideration given to the plight and place of the Jewish people by his immediate predecessors; and above all, his own experience during the last war, of which Mrs. Golda Meir, Israel's Foreign Minister, had this to say:

3. Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1945), III, 173.

4. Cecil Roth, "The European Age in Jewish History (to 1648)," *The Jews, Their History, Culture, and Religion*, ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York: Harper's, 1949), I, 220, 225.

During the second world war, when he was Apostolic Delegate to Constantinople, John XXIII busied himself with saving the Jews of the Balkans during the Nazi occupation; and this great personality gave proof of the heroic affections that animate him.⁵

I

NEVER was a change in the wording of a prayer so widely reported as this one. And nowhere were the comments so extensive as in the state of Israel. Of these, several deserve to be recorded, first perhaps, the views of *Al Ha-mishmar*:

The Jewish people has welcomed with great satisfaction the decision of Pope John XXIII to pray on Good Friday "for the Jews," and no longer for the "unbelieving" Jews, thus completing the work begun by his predecessor, Pope Pius XII. This change is but one of the signs of the new spirit that animates the ancient city of the Vatican, which no longer refuses co-existence. It is quite possible that at the General Council, which is to open in the not too distant future, we shall witness astonishing events. . . .

If the Vatican, fortress of conservatism, has not hesitated to change an offensive liturgical text, one may well ask whether or not the time has come for the Grand Rabbinate to fix its attention upon the text of some of *our* prayers. Day after day in his prayer, the religious Jew congratulates himself for not being a "goy" (and also for not being a woman!). . . . And on the eve of the Passover, can one still pronounce without embarrassment the petition: "Pour out thy wrath upon the nations that know thee not" (see Ps 78[79]:6)? It must be said to the honor of some devout Jews that they do not hesitate to suppress this phrase from the liturgy of the Seder.

Just as the reference to the "perfidious" Jews who "crucified Jesus" once created disturbances in the countries of the diaspora, so are the offensive expressions about the non-Jew in our own prayers a source of contempt and mockery in this refound land of ours. May the decree of Rome give rise to a decree from Jerusalem.⁶

Even heartier than this comment is a signed article that appeared in Israel's leading Hebrew newspaper. Having given the facts, the writer remarks enthusiastically:

5. See *Davar*, March 3, 1959.

6. See *Al Ha-mishmar*, March 31, 1959.

There is no question here of a purely exterior change, and it is not a game of words to which we wish to give our attention. Among all peoples, prayer expresses the heart's joy or sorrow. Are we, then, not in the presence of an historic change that may well improve the relations between the two camps?

He goes on to speak of the tensions of the past two thousand years. The Christian world, he assumes, inherited the negative attitude with which some writers of antiquity spoke of the Jews as "the most despicable people on earth." Even as modern a man as Renan wondered whether it was not the Jewish spirit of separation, of hatred for Greek and Roman culture, that was responsible for the unhappy relationship between the Jewish people and the rest of the world. For the Jewish people, the writer of the article continues, the road of history is marked by pogrom after pogrom and, finally, by that most recent catastrophe of which the foundation of the state of Israel was the immediate result. He feels that this event and the gesture of Pope John are related to one another, and he concludes with these strong words:

In any case, the fact is that a hand has been extended to us. Let us grasp it with joy and thankfulness, and prove by our own acts that we are not responsible for the great hatred which has darkened our relationship with the Christian world for hundreds of years; we have paid for its consequences with the blood of our sons and our daughters. Let us prove to ourselves and to others that we carry hatred for no one, that we do not want hatred: On the contrary, it is love that we want, and the establishment of truly human rapport. It may well be that the hour has come for us to revise our own prayers and to suppress all offending passages. We need the sympathy of other peoples as we do the air we breathe. We are confronted with an alternative that is at the same time a question of life and death: Will we be isolated and cut off from the rest of the world or will we be able to live in harmony with it, be truly a part? Without doubt, a state that shows breadth and tolerance will draw and awaken sympathy, while a reactionary and intolerant state can arouse nothing but resentment and antipathy.⁷

A later issue of the same prominent newspaper devoted another article to a similar appeal:

7. See Shlomo Cohen, "Let us Pray for the Jews," *Davar*, April 17, 1959.

Some time ago, we gratefully acknowledged the noble gesture of the Pope. . . . There is no need to go to any great length to demonstrate the full significance of this important and happy event, though we do not wish to attribute to it a weight it does not have, as if we were on the verge of a revolutionary change in the relations between the state of Israel and the Jews, on the one hand, and the Christian world, on the other. It is sufficient to say that the head of the Catholic Church, with its hundreds of millions of faithful throughout the world has given proof of a courage and a sense of humanity that are worthy of every praise. Although the suppression is a small one, paradoxically, it is constructive in the noblest sense of the term.

The writer of these discerning lines does not doubt for a moment that thousands and thousands of Jews were unable to read this news without asking themselves when some of their own practices would be eliminated or adapted to the times. With great frankness, he speaks of certain strange marriage customs among Moroccan Jews in Israel and of the inflexible official attitude toward mixed marriages in the State. Finally he asks:

When will there be rabbis who have enough courage in their hearts, enough greatness in their souls, enough wisdom in their minds to renew, modify, and adapt the laws and the customs so that they will correspond to the conditions of our day and our life? When will the rabbis dare suppress those things that offend Jews so deeply? ⁸

II

DISAPPOINTINGLY, these bold pleas have gone unheard, and hope has been shattered for official gestures similar to that of Pope John, at least for the present. The newspaper representing Orthodox Judaism responded to the suggestions for revision with the voice of irritation, an irritation so oblivious of historic perspective that it burdens the Good Friday prayer with all the ills that have fallen upon the Jewish people during the Christian era:

On the eve of the Easter of Christians, the Pope announced that henceforth one would no longer say: "Let us pray for the unbelieving Jews" but simply "Let us pray for the Jews so that God will lift the veil from their

8. See H. Shorer, "Things that must Disappear," *Davar*, April 30, 1959.

hearts and that they may recognize Jesus." This pious prayer has provoked, as one knows, pogroms and accusations of ritual murder. In real content, the modified text does not differ from previous texts: The Church shows great solicitude for our souls and prays that we will cease to be Jews. Here is one of the sources of anti-Semitism among Christians.

Those who have nothing but admiration for the things done by others—and there are such people in Israel—have declared their enchantment at the slight correction of this Easter prayer; they have launched a concerted campaign for "suppressions" in various religious formulas of the Jewish prayer book. One gentleman could not contain his emotions at this "humanitarian measure" of the Church and demanded that, without delay, we suppress from the Passover service the phrase: "Pour out thy wrath upon the nations," and this only sixteen years after the massacre of six million Jews by Christian peoples, with the tacit or explicit consent of the Church!

"Pour out thy wrath"; this desperate prayer of Judaism against the paganism that spilled the blood of our faithful; this admirable prayer of free men, offends, it seems, the delicate feelings of those who seek only to forget.⁹

Though not intended as an answer to the "uncompromising" stand taken by the voice of Orthodoxy, a letter to the editor of *Davar* serves as a graceful reply:

To be sure, the prayer: "Pour out thy wrath upon the nations" can be explained but it would be far better to dispense with complicated explanations and correct the prayer itself. After all the interpretations have been given, the prayer still remains basely chauvinistic and detrimental from an educational point of view. If the most conservative of all the Christian churches can sustain a change in a traditional text, can the Jewish religion, a religion of life and the most elastic of all, not do likewise?¹⁰

To pass judgment on a family quarrel, much less to settle it, is not among the prerogatives of an outsider. But one can hope that the voices pleading for the rule of love will not cease to speak out and that, in the end, they will be heard.

9. These words, from an editorial in *Ha-zofe*, April 17, 1959, were quoted in *Proche-Orient chrétien*, IX, 2 (April-June 1959), pp. 175-176. This periodical gives its own account of the Israeli reaction to the elimination of *perfidis* in the issue cited, pp. 174-177.

10. See *Davar*, May 4, 1959.