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James V. Mullaney

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Will Herberg: JUDAISM AND MODERN MAN *

THIS "interpretation of Jewish religion" is entitled "Judaism and Modern Man," not "Judaism and Modern Jews." It is written, therefore, for all of Mr. Herberg's contemporaries and not merely for his fellow Jews. For what it seeks to establish is the relevance of the Jewish faith for contemporary man as contemporary man and not as Jew or Gentile.

"The whole burden of my 'confession of faith,'" Mr. Herberg tells us in his Foreword, "is that I find the truth of my existence as man and as Jew illumined by historical Judaism in a way that directly compels acceptance—not merely intellectual affirmation but total acceptance as the very foundation of life." This acceptance is one "which involves one's whole being and upon which one stakes one's entire existence. My 'confession of faith' is, therefore, meant as a declaration of total commitment." The "historical Judaism" to which Mr. Herberg thus commits himself is "the religious affirmation embodied in the biblical-rabbinic tradition" (p. ix).

The author confesses his debt to Reinhold Niebuhr, who formed his general theological outlook, and to Solomon Schechter, who made him appreciate how vital, relevant, and contemporary the rabbinic tradition can be. To Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig he owes his basic "existentialist" approach. Evident, too, is the influence of Kierkegaard, Pascal, and, with many reservations, Bertrand Russell. It would be petty to try to count the points in which Herberg's religious convictions stem from post-biblical Judaism and those in which they stem from the Christian tradition. The significance of this book is that a profoundly religious soul has assimilated to his Jewish perspective truth wherever he has recognized it.

The book is divided into four parts. The first part, "Modern Man in Search of the Absolute," is an existential analysis and criticism of contemporary human life. The degradation and depersonalization of man

* New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951.

implicit in secularism are analyzed, and the inadequacies of the "substitute faiths"—scientism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, nationalism, and racism—are exposed. The author concludes that the "leap of faith" is necessary to give life meaning, "not a leap of despair but rather a leap in triumph over despair" (p. 39). "Through faith," which he calls an "orientation of the whole man," "existence is transposed into a new key" (p. 40). This "postulatory theism," which is an existential necessity—for "we need God in order to be"—is more a decision *for* God than a decision *about* God.

Part Two, "God and Man," points out the relevance of Jewish teaching to individual human life. For God is not a metaphysical principle or an idea in the mind; He is personal, a "Thou." And man is one whose being consists in being-to-another. He is a person whose being consists above all in being-to-the-"Thou" who is the living God. Man is—a Thomist would paraphrase Herberg—a person whose personhood is constituted by a transcendental (not a predicamental) relation to *the* Person. Hence morals are a question of obedience and fidelity, of being established in the face of Another, and not a natural quest for natural self-perfection as in Aristotle. Any such natural ethic is, Herberg holds, one of many instances of idolatry, self-worship.

Part Three, "Religion and Society," discusses the relevance of Jewish teaching to social life. All social relations are grounded on love: the love of God, and of man under God. In the realm we inhabit, the realm of history, the law of love is doomed to merely partial fulfillment. But precisely because one cherishes the whole, one prizes the part that is attainable instead of despairing over the unattainable remnant. Historically, Judaism has been neither a this-worldly naturalism nor an other-worldly idealism but a trans-worldly messianism, an encounter between God and man.

Part Four, "The Mystery of Israel," presents the Jewish faith as redemptive history, or redemption in history, in time. Christianity is seen as "Israel's apostle," as the carrier to the world of the divine truth revealed to Israel. It is through Christianity that Israel brings man to God. "Christianity looks ever *outward* to the Gentiles, who, through it, are brought to the God of Israel. . . . The primary and basic aspects of the vocation [of Israel], the heart of the divine purpose in the calling of Israel—the 'sanctification of the Name'—remains pre-eminently and irreplaceably the responsibility of Israel. To receive and

to cherish the Torah of God, to live a holy life under His ever-present kingship, to stand witness to His word against the idolatries of the world: these are the functions for which Israel is appointed. That this vocation involves suffering and martyrdom all history testifies; how could it be otherwise?" (pp. 272-273).

From the first page to the last *Judaism and Modern Man* is a book of deep faith. In the presence of piety, one is silent. One does not applaud a hymn. But human piety, as Mr. Herberg might phrase it, operates within human limitations. I detect, I think, two such limitations.

The first is failure to do justice to the natural order. Mr. Herberg is no humanist, not even a theocentric humanist. He is so preoccupied with the religious, the supernatural, as to fail to appreciate the natural. God is the author of the book which is revelation, and Mr. Herberg has studied that book painstakingly. But God is also the author of the book of nature, including the powers of human nature, and Mr. Herberg has neglected that.

This anti-natural orientation is evident first in the anti-intellectualism implicit in *Judaism and Modern Man*. Mr. Herberg's piety is a piety of the will—love, obedience, fidelity. One does not discover in him any sheer joy in knowing the truth. He lacks interest in, and sympathy for, the majestic metaphysical and theological tradition of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Maimonides, Aquinas and the medieval schoolmen, Maritain, and the other representatives of classical thought. It is true, and admirable, that Mr. Herberg's sources are, fundamentally, the Old Testament and rabbinical tradition. It is true, also, that a man is free to exclude such sources as he does not wish to use. But every such exclusion is itself a commitment to a position. By selecting the existentialist approach to the Bible and Jewish tradition and excluding all other sources, Mr. Herberg has cut himself off from that uncomplicated love of truth which rejoices in *every* articulation of the truth. His intellectual position is not nearly so inclusive as his ethico-religious position.

Anti-natural orientation is evident, too, in the handling of the difficult problem of self-love. All self-love, we are told, is sinful: specifically, it is the sin of idolatry, of setting oneself up as supreme (pp. 117-121). (Just a little later, on pp. 133-139, we are told that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves—but let that incon-

sistency pass.) Now, many centuries ago, that incorrigible "intellectual," Aristotle, distinguished two kinds of self-love. There is, first, self-love in the sense of loving myself as an individual, loving the *I* as against the *you*: and this, naturally, Aristotle condemned. There is, second, self-love in the sense of loving the nature that is in me: the magnificent light of intellect, the free power of will, the promise of greatness that is human nature—a God-given, God-directed, greatness, the believer would add. This kind of self-love is, as Aristotle pointed out, the very basis of love of others. If I love myself for the sake of the nature that is in me, then for precisely the same reason I must love you, also, who share that nature. Aristotle's analysis here rivals at the very least Martin Buber's much later analysis of the I-Thou relation. For what Aristotle proposes is an I-I relation: that is, the intuition that each man is "I" and that love means that the "I" that is he and the "I" that is I are a "we." The phrase "other I" which is, superficially, a hopeless contradiction is in fact a deep truth once we have understood not the "you-ness" of you as in Buber but the "I-ness" of you. This kind of self-love—the love of the human person as such, and therefore quite as much in myself as in you—is high virtue, not sin.

The natural order is underrated by Mr. Herberg's political philosophy also. He holds the view, which one had thought long since discredited, that government is a consequence of sin (p. 171). It has been shown, by Yves Simon among others, that authority and government proceed precisely from the natural perfection—the intelligence and the freedom—of man, not from his imperfections. It is precisely because each of the people has the mind to see, and the will to execute, the means to the common good as end, that there must exist an agency, government, to determine authoritatively which of the many possible means shall be actually employed.

Like many Christians, Mr. Herberg is disturbed by the blatant secularism of the times: and justly so. Like many Christians, he is tempted to minimize the subordinate autonomy of the natural order as a defense against naturalists or secularists. But it is naturalists, not nature, that have done the damage. Theocentric humanism distinguishes the natural from the supernatural without injury to either. For the natural order is existentially contained in the supernatural even though essentially distinct from it.

Mr. Herberg's second limitation is evident in his view of the relation

of Christianity to Judaism. I do not wish to suggest that his view is false, but it is incomplete on two scores. It is unquestionably correct to say, as Mr. Herberg does, that it is the function of Christianity to bring the world to know, to love, and to live the genuine revelation vouchsafed Israel, without injury to the integrity of that revelation. But Christianity must also bring the world to know, love and live the integrity of revelation as such—from the Law and the Prophets to the Good News. For the Good News, too, is part of the revelation given to the Jews, and is the perfection, the fulfillment of the earlier portion. It is the *whole* of the revelation to the people of Israel that the Church must propagate: ever unspeakably grateful both to the God who gave the revelation and to the people through whom it was given. Mr. Herberg says more than he means to say, speaks more truly than he himself knows, when he says that Christianity is to publish to the world the divine message to Israel.

There is no chapter so haunting as the final one: "The Mystery of Israel." But that mystery is deeper even than Mr. Herberg has seen. In his view, the people of Israel and the Church have different functions: Israel is commissioned, he says, "to sanctify the Name" by its inward life and "to stand witness to the living God amidst the idolatries of the world" (p. 272); while to the Church he accords the mission of converting the Gentiles. But God has been much more lavish in His gifts: He has broken down the division. He is One, and His witness ought to be one.

Whether it is a question of the intellect's love of truth, of the soul's acceptance of revelation, or of man's religious function, it is the same attitude that man must bring to the Lord—openness to all: all truth, all revelation, all functions He may honor us with. In the face of God human selectivity is not permitted.

JAMES V. MULLANEY