

Christendom and Jewry: a Study in Irony by Edmund Hill, O.P.

I take the terms 'Christendom' and 'Jewry' to mean the cultural and political embodiments of the Christian and Jewish religions. Christendom is the socially visible manifestation and product of Christianity, as Jewry is of Judaism. It is with these products of the two religions that I am concerned, not directly with the systems of religious belief and practice that constitute the two religions.

'Christendom', however, the concrete equivalent of the abstract 'Christianity', is a much less definite term than 'Church', which is so to speak the official and necessary embodiment of the Christian religion. Now it is in the almost Protean development of the indefinable, ill-disciplined, not always very Christian reality meant by 'Christendom' that I see much irony; not in the mysterious theological reality meant by 'the Holy Catholic Church'. And I am presuming – I hope fairly enough – that as Christendom is to Church, so *mutatis mutandis* is Jewry to Israel. Jewry in its very different manner I find as ironical a reality as Christendom. My point, in fact, will be that in some ways Christendom would have been a much more suitable correlative to Israel than to the Church, and Jewry more suited to the Church than to Israel.

I take it as a starting point that some sort of visible embodiment in human society is of the essence of both religions. And that is why I cannot altogether agree with Dr James Parkes when he makes the generalization in one of his Parkes Library booklets (*Jewry and Jesus of Nazareth* by Maurice Eisendrath and James Parkes), that, whereas Judaism addresses man as a social being, Christianity addresses man as a person. Granted that the generalization states the characteristic emphasis of Judaism, I do not think it is accurate as a statement of the Christian, or at least of the Catholic Christian, emphasis. Jewish religion has of its essence a political dimension, because it is the religion of a divinely chosen people; and a people, to achieve and preserve its identity, really requires to be organized in some sort of state or polity. The case with Christianity is less simple, because the Christian revelation claims to be the fulfilment of that earlier revelation which had created Israel in the Old Testament, a fulfilment moreover which is universally valid for all men, all peoples. The revelation made to the world in Christ does indeed create a people, just as the Old Testament revelation did – a people called by St Paul the Israel of God, a people built upon the foundation of the prophets and the apostles, a community of communities with its own structure of authority and custom and mutual inhesion and life together. Hence the inadequacy, as I think, of Dr Parkes' generalization about Christianity as essentially a personal rather than a communal religion.

However, the Christian people or Church is not, like Israel, a people among peoples, but a people from among all peoples; a people therefore that does not require to be – indeed requires not to be – organized as a polity or state. As St Paul again says, our *politeuma* (so unrecognizably translated as 'conversation'), our citizenship is in

heaven. And here, according to *Hebrews*, we have no abiding city, no *polis*. Our city, our *polis*, is that Jerusalem which is above, the heavenly Jerusalem which is our mother. The Christian individual, and equally the Christian community, is in this world, according to St Peter's words, as a stranger and a pilgrim.

'Otherworldly' is a word that is given little respect by Christians nowadays. Many suspect it of meaning a propensity to contract out of the pressing responsibilities of the here and now. And yet I cannot think of a better word for expressing the essential quality of the Christian community, the Church. The New Testament positively reeks of otherworldliness. It is not a matter of abdicating present responsibilities to one another in this world, but of subordinating them as goals and objects of endeavour to a divinely promised fulfilment which is only to be manifestly enjoyed in the world to come. And it certainly is a matter of abdicating any millenarist hope of establishing a society of faultless perfection and justice on earth. Even granting for the sake of argument that such a hope is not a social and political chimera, it is surely not the Christian hope, bred of Christian faith and sustained by Christian charity. Perhaps, however, some such hope is the appropriate and distinctive Jewish hope, because the community of Israel as instituted by the Old Testament revelation is not an otherworldly but a thisworldly society, ideally therefore a state or polity, ideally therefore the best possible polity this world is capable of.

Given then the essential otherworldliness (i.e., the world-to-come-liness) of Christianity, it follows that the visible Church on earth, with its structure of authority and forms of association, cannot be the last word in the form of Church, of Christian community, as such; it is only an interim affair. The visible, historical Church on earth is not meant to be, and never really can be, an *imperium in imperio*. It is meant to be a sign, a sacrament, of a heavenly reality. In Daniélou's phrase it is a *sacramentum futuri*; it is a *signum imperii quod est supra omne imperium*.

Yet the irony of history – which is of course the irony of divine providence – has so arranged the course of events that Israel, whose religion of its essence is 'national culture forming', 'polity forming', has been unable since the Jewish war to form a national culture or polity, and has only been able to manifest itself in the guise of Jewry. By contrast, the heavenly *politeuma* which is what the Christian Church considers itself essentially to be, has had thrust upon it since Constantine, and perhaps definitively since Charlemagne, a culture-forming, polity-forming rôle that would have been more appropriate to the bearer of the Old Testament revelation than to the depository of the New. And indeed one cannot but feel that much of the Carolingian Church's inspiration, and hence much of the quality of the Christendom it produced, was drawn from the Old Testament rather uncritically interpreted. The *imperium* of David and Solomon and the *sacerdotium* of Aaron provided the imaginative colours in

which European princes and prelates painted their own images. They were heirs to all the *apparatus* of the earthly Jerusalem and its temple. Christendom became, what it had not been under the Roman Empire (when indeed there had been no Christendom, only the Church), a religiously formed culture-polity, and a culturally, politically embodied religion quite as definitively as Israel had been before the *diaspora*.

Thus the Church became politically involved, and what is more crucial, culturally identified with its world. In the first formative – and may we say normative – centuries of its existence it had been neither. It could only have avoided this development by being less successful at evangelizing the Greco-Roman and barbarian European worlds. In becoming culturally identified and politically involved with its own world; in becoming the Christendom it created, the Church did not cease to be the sign of a heavenly polity, to be essentially otherworldly. Indeed in the eyes of some thinkers, it perhaps imparted something of this sacramental, heaven-pointing quality to the civilization with which it was identified and the political structures with which it was involved.

But it was, surely, a paradoxical, ironical state of affairs, even while it continued to be more or less effective, say for the thousand years from 800 to 1800 A.D., the Carolingian to the French revolutions. And for the last 150 years, when the Church's identification with its own product and *alter ego* of Christendom has ceased to be effective and yet has still been generally thought to be normative; when the very substance of Christendom has been dissolving like the baseless fragment of a vision, and yet has left many a haunting wreck behind; well, the paradox and the irony have become increasingly difficult to bear. It has to some extent been as though the Church of Christ had forgotten how to be a visible *sacramentum futuri* except in an alien style that is not well suited to its nature. This style has come to obscure the evangelical meaning of the Church even to the European culture which it accidentally created on Greco-Roman foundations; how much more obfuscating must it be to the rest of the world, which very naturally regards 'Europe' (which includes, of course, America), and therefore Europe's religion, with a mixture of envy and well-merited distrust.

The twentieth century, from 1918 onwards, is seeing the resolution of this double irony of Christendom and Jewry. Or rather the fact that the paradox is being resolved has at last come to be accepted as providential. On the Catholic Christian side the significance of Vatican I lay in its vigorous assertion, in the teeth of political Christendom, of the supra-political or heavenly character of the 'supra-polity' which is the Church. After all, in terms merely political, papal infallibility is a meaningless and fantastic pretension. Yet at the same time as the Church's heavenly quality was being so defiantly asserted, its rulers were showing a very earthly reluctance to part with what merely political power they still had. Nor were they yet prepared to face the fact

that the Church's cultural identification with Christendom was a thing of the past; to accept what has well been called the *diaspora* situation of the Christian Church in the modern world. Nostalgia for the Christian civilization of a golden past continued to be a dominant Catholic mood.

It is so no longer. Vatican II, I suggest, marks the conscious, indeed grateful acceptance by the leading forces in the Church of the *diaspora* situation as something preferable to the establishment situation. It marks the formal abdication by the Church as such, i.e., as an organized community of believers, of any pretensions to political or cultural leadership. How to live in such a situation, however, is something which we have yet to learn for ourselves. To forego cultural distinction is perhaps as difficult as to renounce political power. Progressive Catholics, for instance, are sometimes inclined to bemoan the cultural insignificance of the English Catholic body. I suggest this should be a matter for rejoicing, as satisfying a fact as the Church's political insignificance in England. I do not take this view merely because I happen to be a Philistine, or consider politics to be futile. But I consider the Church to be a city set on a hill, and its business in this world to be a beacon signal beckoning to the next; it was not instituted to nurture culture or manage politics. These are secular provinces which only interest me as a Christian because they interest me as a man, a Western European, English man. And I expect therefore to have more in common culturally and politically (as I do linguistically) with an agnostic Englishman than with a French, or German, or Indian, or Japanese Catholic Christian. With these I share something infinitely more precious – my inheritance in the kingdom.

But, I will be asked, is this infinitely more precious thing to have no social embodiment? Certainly it is, in whatever flesh is most suited to me as an Englishman, or to them as Frenchmen, Germans, Indians, and Japanese. And perhaps all of us in our own proper *diaspora* situation can now learn something about how to live and embody our religion from the Jewish experience of their paradoxical *diaspora* situation since 70 A.D. The medieval ghetto we should *not* learn; for (from the Jewish point of view) that was a kind of defensive arrangement in which to preserve those cultural and political aspirations – 'next year in Jerusalem' – which are proper to Judaism but not proper to Christianity. We have no need to preserve any national consciousness as a people, because we are not a people in any national sense.

But we can learn something from the Jews which in England perhaps Catholics have already learnt from circumstances – how to bear with being regarded as 'peculiar people'; peculiar people, because, like them, we are 'a peculiar people'. We must accept being, in all sorts of irritating little ways as well as in crises of some moral grandeur, at odds with the world; because we are not of the world, even though we have not been taken out of the world. To make this oddness easier to bear, we could also

profitably learn from the Jewish *diaspora* how to give a much firmer *domestic* dimension to our religion. In my very limited acquaintance with Jews I have been impressed by the strongly domestic quality of their liturgy; the weekly sabbaths and the great feasts seem to be far more prominently marked by domestic rites than by special synagogue services. The whole domestic stuff of life is thereby very effectively consecrated and made sacramental.

This domestic quality of Jewish religion goes hand in hand with its essentially lay character. The Jews are neither blessed nor cursed with a clerical order. Now the Church is so blessed – and by Christ himself. But it is for the Church to see that this blessing does not turn into a curse, into that clericalism which becomes a curse when the concentration of ecclesiastical authority in clerical hands induces by a sort of capillary attraction the concentration in the same hands of a now dehydrated religion. Christians could learn much from Jewry in these fields by sympathetic and dispassionate study.

Jewry meanwhile, having emerged from the ghetto with the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, found itself threatened by assimilation far more insidiously than by pogrom or persecution. The answer to this threat – or at least that one out of many answers which concerns us – was Zionism, and Zionism's creation, the state of Israel. The establishment of a Judaic political state in the Holy Land poses the most fascinating theological questions to a Christian, which cannot be discussed here. But to a Jew it must seem (I would have thought) the appropriate termination of a *diaspora* situation which, while normative for Christianity, is paradoxical for Judaism. Judaism requires a political expression and at last once again it has achieved it. Some Jews, whom I hold in honour, feel very ill at ease about the Israeli state for reasons of political morality; and for similar reasons many Christians doubtless share their reserve. But here I simply accept the state of Israel as a fact, and as such it does seem to fit the logic of Judaism, the religion of a people.

In this new and no longer paradoxical situation perhaps the Israeli Jew can learn something from the paradoxical political involvement and cultural identification of post-Carolingian Christendom. He already seems to be facing some of the crucial problems which so long vexed the European Christian. I am in no position to say what lessons he should learn from that bygone Christendom; I only hope he will learn from Christendom's mistakes. Established Christendom afforded as a rule an easy tolerance to Christian laxity, and an ill-natured, grudging, but still real tolerance to outsiders like the Jews, and no tolerance at all to heretics. So in Israel today (I am given to understand) there is easy tolerance for Jews who scarcely practise their religion at all, and genuine but sometimes grudging tolerance for outsiders like Christians and Moslems – and no religious recognition at all given to non-orthodox, i.e., liberal

Jews, who apparently are not permitted to open any synagogues in Israel. This is a kind of pattern which one tends to find in religiously based societies. But just as one hopes that *diaspora* Christianity will not learn the ghetto from *diaspora* Judaism, so one may be allowed to hope that establishment Judaism will deliberately unlearn the religious intolerance of establishment Christianity. Now that Judaism finds itself in this establishment situation, which is suited to its proper nature, I am sure that it could learn much from a cool and sympathetic study of Christianity's millenary experience of being what so ill fitted it, the established religion of a polity and a civilization.

The Gibbet by Benet Weatherhead

O do not ask me, the thief cried,
Burning and burning on the gibbet,
Do not ask me if I stole money
For doxy, children or starving wife.
I stole, *you* call it stealing, for life.

And now I die and will grow bare,
And you will see as the chains turn,
Turn me to the four cold winds,
What you should not need to prove,
The terrible diagram of love.