

WHAT IS A JEW ?

THE question presents difficulties. It would not be asked if the answer was obvious. But the answer is not obvious because the name Jew seems to be used with diverse meanings both by Jews and others. Some give the name primarily a racial significance; a Jew is just one who is born of Jewish parents. Others give the name primarily a national significance; a Jew is one who belongs to a distinctive nation which has a culture of its own, a language of its own, national characteristics of its own, and, they would add, needs a national home or political state of its own. Others give the name Jew a religious content; a Jew is one who is an adherent of Judaism.

These diverse, and divergent, uses of the name Jew arise out of the Jews' long history. The definition of a Jew must be related to the definition of the Jews as a group. What constitutes a Jew obviously depends on the basis and nature of the collective life of Jews. There are, in general, three categories of human groups—races, nations and religions. Into which of these do the Jews fit? Or, to put the question the other way about, which of these descriptions fits the Jews?

No one of them fits the Jews exactly. For one thing, Jews began their collective existence at a time when these categories were undifferentiated; they simply did not exist in the ancient world. They are comparatively modern divisions. There were separate human groups which included in their collective life all, or nearly all, that is now included under the terms race, nation and religion. That is still largely the case in the part of the Eastern world where the Jews originated; though the influences of the West are producing a growing distinction between religion and nation. The conception of nationality is, however, new. There have always been separate human groups, each under its own rulers, with its own political organisation; but nationality is more than political identity; it is a spirit of community in a political framework.

Now the Jews have a strong spirit of community. Though varying in strength with individuals, it is present in every Jew. The Jewish consciousness includes a feeling of relation to all Jews and a sense of integration in Jewish history and involvement in the fortunes, fate and destiny of the House of Israel. It would, I think, be taken as axiomatic that this Jewish consciousness is an essential element in the constitution of a Jew. A Jew must feel himself a member of the universal community of Jews, with a loyal attach-

ment to it, a conscious realisation of his responsibilities to it, an appreciation of his individual share in its life. What, however, is the ground of that feeling in the individual Jew, and what is its significance? What is the nexus between the individual Jew and the universal community of Jews, and what is the nature of the responsibilities which the community lays upon the individual?

The view that the Jews are a race can be put to one side, it cannot supply the definition of a Jew. 'Race' when applied to the Jews can mean nothing more than community, group or people. It has no biological signification; the Jews of the world show all the biological variations found in the human race; and everywhere they correspond biologically to the non-Jews among whom they live. 'Race' can, therefore, be applied to them, if at all, in a sociological sense—that is, to describe them as a distinctive group. But that means little or nothing until the nature of the distinctiveness is defined. The definition of a Jew must, therefore, be derived from one of the other two possible categories: nation or religion.

They are not wholly irreconcilable, nor do they completely exclude each other. Obviously, there might be a nation with a distinctive religion, or a religion embodied in the life of a nation. One, therefore, who thinks of the Jews primarily as a nation may recognise the importance of the Jewish religion; and, conversely, one who thinks of the Jews primarily as a religious community may want for them a national framework. Or, to put the same thing differently, the Jews might be conceived at the same time as a religion and a nation; as a nation, committed to a distinctive religion; as a religion, confined to a particular nation. Such a classification of the Jews would miss one of the fundamental teachings of Judaism, which has persisted throughout its history, that it is a universal religion. And those who, like myself, believe in emphasising the universal character of Judaism must object to both these attitudes as inconsistent with, and dangerous to, it. Either, then, the Jews are a nation with a national religion, or a universal people based on, and maintaining, a universal religion.

Up to this point the search for a definition of a Jew has led to two conclusions. One is that a Jew is one who feels the spirit of community with all Jews; the other, that there is a difference among Jews about the quality of this spirit, or the nature of the collective life of the community. The difference is most pronounced between those who translate community into nation and those who translate it into universal people bound by religion.

One difficulty in resolving the issue lies in the fact that both views involve some departure from Jewish history. They make a

distinction between religion and nationality, which did not arise with Jewish thought itself. Isaiah would not have understood it, nor would the Rabbis Jochanan ben Zaccai or Akiba have understood it. On the other hand, both views can draw support from Jewish history. To the Pharisees as to the Prophets, all aspects of group life were combined in their conception of the Jewish people, though the Pharisees, unlike the Prophets, were not, with some exceptions, interested in politics (probably because they lived when the Jews had lost political independence, and the Pharisaic view accepted the loss as permanent until God restored the nation).

But I think that Jewish history and the logic of facts together show that the name Jew has primarily a religious significance, that, whatever else it *may* mean, it *must* mean one who is an adherent of the Jewish religion. Until the end of the nineteenth century the Jews who looked for a restoration of the Jewish nation in Palestine were moved by religious considerations. They saw no value in a national life for the Jews apart from its religious significance. Zion was for them not the political capital of a nation, but the fountain-head of religion. The Jewish religion has been the dominating factor in Jewish history, giving to it its significance and value. Even more, the Jewish religion created Jewish history. Without the Jewish religion there would have been no Jewish history. And in religion have the Jews of the past made their collective contribution to the life of mankind.

And now for the evidence of present facts. Even those who apply the name Jew to themselves in a racial or national sense recognise, though it may be inadvertently, the place of religion in the life of the Jewish people. Even to them, Jewish distinctiveness is in some measure religious; a Jew is not only one who has a community of origin with all other Jews but also some kind of spiritual bond with all other Jews. The racial Jew may be conscious of only a very attenuated connection with Judaism, yet he feels religion to be part of his racial inheritance. If he becomes a Christian he may speak of 'the race from which he is descended,' but not of himself as a Jew. Those Jews who, though converted to Christianity, retain the name Hebrew are an exception. And it may be justifiably doubted whether their designation will survive to the second or third generation of their descendants.

Among Jewish nationalists some hold their nationalism in a religious context, for others it is just a form of secular loyalty. It is not easy to discover how far Jewish nationalism incorporates a religious element. Could a man be Christian or Mohammedan by religion and a Jew by nationality? I confess that I do not know

what answer Jewish nationalists would give. The very question suggests, however, a strong argument against secular Jewish nationalism. How could anyone call himself a Jew in any sense who could not say with full conviction, 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord, our God is One,' and with the acceptance of all the implications which the declaration has for Jewish belief? It is, I think, a fair inference from all the facts that though there are Jewish nationalists who show no personal attachment to the Jewish religion, no religion other than Judaism could be compatible with Jewish nationalism.

While, however, the racial and national Jews are constrained by history and present facts to give religion a place in their racialism or nationalism, the Jew who defines himself in religious terms need not, and frequently does not, give Jewish racialism or nationalism any place in his religion. He can be, and is, fully a Jew without them. The consciousness of being a Jew includes for him belief in the Jewish religion, with a sense of integration in the universal community of Jews on the basis of religion and history. The spirit of community is established and maintained in him by his belief in the Jewish religion. It is re-enforced by the effects of Jewish history. Judaism passed, during its most important formative period, through a national framework. In the time of Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah the Jews had a national organisation. That experience left a precipitate in the feeling of unity comprehending all Jews after they were scattered, which re-enforced, and re-enforces, the bond of religion. The sufferings imposed on the Jews because of their religion further strengthened, and strengthens, their cohesion.

The reference to history in the spiritual constitution of the Jew is, however, not merely a reference to the memories of the past. It is much more than that. It is a present force. It works to continue itself under the impulsion of its inner power. And its inner power is religion. From it springs also the sense of a mission, the consciousness of a function to perform in human history, of a service to fulfil for humanity, of a contribution to make to civilisation under God's command and direction. This sense of mission is another factor to maintain a sense of community in the individual Jew, who translates it, on the one hand, into the assurance that it is worth while to be a Jew, and, on the other, into the realisation of individual Jewish responsibility. To be a Jew means to apprehend the importance and value of the Jews' existence.

In some Jews the sense of Jewish community is only the survival of a sentiment that has lost its roots. There are some calling themselves Jews for whom the name is nothing more than a nostalgic devotion to the memories of their parents. That is, I think, the ex-

planation of the fact that some 'Jews' are without religion. They carry the label only as a sentimental recollection. That does not mean that they have not been influenced by the Jewish religion; but it does mean that, in their case, the name Jew refers to their ancestors, not to themselves.

It emerges from the examination of history and present facts that the name Jew has a religious content. It signifies adherence to the Jewish religion. That means more than to accept a particular creed and to maintain particular religious observances; it means also a sense of community with all other Jews, with a religious basis and in a religious framework. The basic bond which unites all Jews is religion. The religious differences among us, though they may interfere with it, do not break it. There are fundamental agreements in the conception of God, His unity and uniqueness; in recognising the value of the Law though it is interpreted differently by Orthodox and Liberal Jews; in ascribing divine and, therefore, eternal value to man; in looking for the ultimate recognition of God's rule by men and humanity; and in ascribing to Israel a function in the spiritual consummation of human history. And as the basic factor in the life and history of the Jews is religion, so it is the nexus between the individual Jew and the Jewish people.

This, then, is the answer which I suggest to the question 'What is a Jew?' A Jew is one who adheres to the Jewish religion, and because of that adherence is imbued with a sense of membership in the universal community of Jews, sharing in its present life, its past history, and its future hopes; aware of its heritage, alive to its responsibility, and confident of its ultimate destiny.

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