

Untitled Review of ‘A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question’

By Dorothy Day

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Summary: Reviews Jacques Maritain’s book, *A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question*. Quotes from the book extensively agreeing with his denunciation of anti-Semitism in Europe, a call for better emigration policies, and using “the real power of love and truth even over political and social relations.”

Keywords: anti-Semitism, racism, truth, justice (DDLW #349).

A Christian Looks at the Jewish Question. By Jacques Maritain. Longmans, Green and Co.

(The following review was published in the Jewish Frontier last month.)

“‘Spiritually we are Semites.’ No stronger word has been spoken by a Christian against anti-Semitism, and this Christian is the successor of the apostle Peter.”

But Jacques Maritain, French philosopher, is also a writer of strong words in this short book of ninety pages dealing with what he considers the foremost problem of the day.

“From a cultural and social viewpoint,” he writes, “racism degrades and humiliates to an unimaginable degree reason, thought, science and art, which are thenceforth subordinated to flesh and blood and divested of their natural ‘catholicity.’ It brings to men, among all the modes of barbarism which threaten them today, a mode in itself the most inhuman and the most desperate of all. For, it rivets them to biological categories and fatalities from which no exercise of their freedom will enable them to escape.”

Maritain points out that all Christians “are converts to the God of Israel who is the true God, to the Father whom Israel recognized.”

“We Are Semites”

And to give the complete statement of Pius XI, when he commented upon the words of the Canon of the Mass, *sacrificium Patriarchae nostri Abrahami*,—“Notice that Abraham is called our patriarch, our ancestor. Anti-Semitism is incompatible with the thought and sublime reality expressed in this text. It is a movement in which we Christians can have no part whatsoever. Anti-Semitism is unacceptable. Spiritually we are Semites.”

In a letter written recently to the Chancery office in New York, signed by a group of Catholics and non-Catholics, it is asked that Archbishop Spellman publicly disassociate Catholicism from the Christian Front movement which the signers of the letter claim is 90% Catholic.

Personally, I should say that this estimate is too high. As editor of *The Catholic Worker* I have been called upon to speak at many meetings not only throughout greater New York but also through the larger industrial cities in the East, and I have found, as have Protestant ministers with whom I shared the platform, that Protestantism is just as concerned at the anti-Semitism expressed by its adherents who are also members of the Christian Front group.

Maritain points out in his little book, the third part of which deals with anti-Semitism in European countries other than Germany, that in Rumania anti-Semitism is strongly tinged with anti-Catholicism, putting Catholicism on a plane with Communism. In Poland, indeed, anti-Semitism has taken a Catholic form; in Italy it is a government tactic opposed by the Church; in Germany itself, it is anti-Christian altogether, Protestants, Catholics and Jews sharing the concentration camps.

Two-Fold

Maritain does not mince words in the widely quoted book of his. He recognizes the two-fold aspect of persecution as Jews themselves also have through history. "The Germany of Hitler," he says, "has embraced the very worst of Israel. I mean that sentiment of racial pride which is in some carnal Jews, the naturalistic corruption of the supernatural idea of divine election. The racists are indebted to the old Testament as the Communists are to the New. It is the Scripture of the Jews from which the former drew, only to corrupt it, the idea of a chosen people, a people of God; it is the Gospel from which the latter received, only to denature it, the idea of universal salvation and human brotherhood."

Maritain's ideas in regard to the vocation of Israel is intensely interesting. "While the Church is assigned the labor of supernatural redemption of the world, Israel we believe, is assigned on the plane and within the limits of secular history, a task of earthly activization of the mass of the world. Israel, which is not of the world. Israel, which is not of the heart of the world's structure, stimulating it, exasperating it, moving it. Like an alien body, like an activating ferment injected into the mass, it gives the world no peace, it bars slumber, it teaches the world to be discontented and restless as long as the world has not God, it stimulates the movement of history."

From this standpoint Maritain believes that "the conflicts and tension which under all sorts of masks, necessarily prevail between Israel and the nations, will never completely vanish."

Emigration

But he does not hesitate to devote the last part of the book in a discussion as to what must be done. He deals with the proposed cure of emigration which he considers only a partial remedy. While he recognizes that mass emigration is impossible, both because Jews are not permitted to leave and because of the “scanty generosity” other countries have shown in this matter, he also calls attention to the necessity of emigration. “We are facing,” he writes, “the general phenomenon so fatal to civilization that of turning in of nations upon themselves.” While he concedes that emigration is only a palliative, he also says that “unless some world catastrophe does not alter radically and tragically the terms of all the problems of today, this problem of Jewish emigration must be regarded as one which unconditionally requires a prompt solution for the entire West.”

But with the war going on in Europe now, it would seem that this world catastrophe is already under way. And in consideration of the anti-Semitism in Poland which has existed acutely in the past, the present war against Hitler will probably only increase it. With the Germans in Poland the position of the Jews is lamentable. And probably the mass of Poles will blame the Jews within their borders for the catastrophe which has overtaken them. It is hard to see a solution now.

“There remains for us all,” he writes in the closing pages of his book, “Jews and Christians, to turn toward the invisible powers residing in the heart of man, toward the springs of history which lie within ourselves, in order to purify these springs.

“If we but realized to what point external events and the forms of things depend on the invisible patterns which our free wills delineate within us, we would have more confidence in spiritual means.

Love and Truth

“At the same time we would renounce fighting hatred with hatred. We would understand what has been so often affirmed by Gandhi, the real power of love and truth even over political and social relations.”

These are some of the points stressed also in the essay “The Purification of Means,” in “Freedom and the Modern World.” Also in Maritain’s latest book, “True Humanism.”

The advance of social justice and of economic equipment, the building of the pluralist state defined in these two books, these are remedies for times of peace. It would indeed seem that now when all the world has turned to the use of force, the spiritual weapons are the only ones left to us.

Maritain’s last paragraph is a provocative one:

“Today these material forces have been brought to a state of barbarism, and it is only the natural result of the perverted mentality which in its delusory belief that through them it could reign supreme, put everything in their power. In order to face violence let loose in this way, men of freedom must not renounce the means which lay at their disposal in material energies, provided that these are subordinated to the spirit of justice; but they can no longer put their confidence in them, since the world itself summons them finally to put their trust in love and truth alone.”