

IN THE NAME OF RELIGION

By James Parkes

The writer is a noted authority on Christian-Jewish relations.

THE period which covers the European and Spanish Inquisition, as well as the Wars of Religion is the most shameful period of *Christian* history. It is the basic cause, too, of the most shameful period of *European* history, that of modern anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.

Though, in fact, it is totally irrelevant, it is no wonder that Arabs protest that they are being made to pay for the sins of Europe towards the Jewish people. For there is nothing comparable in the Arab or Islamic record.

Yet so paradoxical and fantastic is human history that the Jewish people recovered better from the Inquisition and the intolerance of both Protestantism and Catholicism during this period if they stayed in Europe than if they took refuge in Turkish-dominated Islam. The cause of the malady and the roots of that recovery are dealt with in the latest two majestic volumes of Salo Baron's, "A Social and Religious History of the Jews: (1200-1650)"*

At first sight the choice of terminal dates appears curious, for 1200 seems to be right in the middle of the medieval period, politically, socially and aesthetically, while 1650 seems to be the middle of the preliminaries of the modern



Prof. Salo Baron

world. Yet for a work in which the central interest is the Jewish people the dates are absolutely right.

By 1200 the medieval church felt itself securely in the saddle, and defined its philosophy and theology and was ready to deal firmly with those who, within or outside Christendom, were seen as deviators and dangers. The beginning of inquisitorial activity and of violent methods of dealing with heresy dates from the beginning of the thirteenth century.

Thirty years' war

LIKEWISE the terminal date, coinciding with the end of the bitter wars of religion which decimated Germany through thirty years of tragedy, ends the period in which the final say about Jewish destiny in Europe (outside Russia) lay in the hands of the churchmen. The politician had discovered that his interest in Jewry was quite independent of the Jewish attitude to Christianity. The period of the *Hofjude*, of the welcome international financier and the

* A Social and Religious History of the Jews. Second Edition, Revised and Enlarged. Late Middle Ages and Era of European Expansion (1200-1650). Vol. XIII, Inquisition, Renaissance and Reformation. Vol. XIV, Catholic Restoration and Wars of Religion. By Salo Wittmayer Baron. Columbia University Press and Jewish Publication Society of America. \$10 each.

trading colleague, was about to give Jewry a new start. The Jews were no longer the medieval *servi camerae* but incipient European citizens.

There was a long established tradition within Christendom of dealing with deviant belief by force rather than argument. It dates from the first access of churchmen to political power in the reign of Constantine; but it had been in abeyance during the Dark Ages. When it reappeared in the medieval world it is said (I do not know with how much truth) that the laity would have insisted on executing heretics, even had the clergy been reluctant to do so. Certainly by the thirteenth century there is little evidence of protest at the crusades against the Albigenses and similar displays of force.

The idea was universally accepted that physical torment and fear of punishment could safeguard a man's belief, and so his access to eternal bliss after death. For the whole of the medieval attitude, even at its most revolting to modern minds, must be seen against the background of a conviction that heaven was reserved for those obedient to the church, and that the church had the keys which determined what obedience implied.

Even the remotest parish church displayed in the most prominent position, over the arch separating laity from clergy, a hideous representation of the Last Judgment with the few saved being taken by angels to heaven, while the mass of the damned were forked by devils into the fiery mouth of hell.

In an environment holding such intolerant beliefs, a tolerated deviation was always in a dangerous position. For the permitted deviation inevitably had a frontier easily passed once emotions were aroused, especially emotions among an ignorant populace.

In the very earliest days of Christian political power, laws were in force in both the Eastern and the Western Empire to prevent Jewish influence over a Jew converted to Christianity, to protect a slave or servant of Jews who might desire to become a Christian. In 408 Theodosius II in the eastern provinces of the Empire, and Honorius in the western passed legislation punishing Jews who made a mockery of the Christian sacraments or who substituted Jesus Christ for Haman in the Purim festivities.

It is clear from the denunciations of Agobard, archbishop of Lyons at the beginning of the ninth century, that, when circumstances were favourable and it

Klesmorin, by Herman Wald

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seemed safe to do so, Jews expressed very freely their opinion of the doctrines and activities of their Christian neighbours. The medieval world introduced a subject peculiarly lending itself to such dangerous activities in the increased veneration paid to Mary, the mother of Jesus. There were, after all, limits to Jewish mockery of Christian theological tenets based on the monotheism of the Old Testament or the Jewish belief in a Messiah. But there was nothing in Judaism which suggested respect for the Christian medieval doctrine of the Virgin Mary's role in the drama of salvation.

Prohibition and punishment

JEWES would have been superhuman had they behaved otherwise, and it is not surprising that laws were passed prohibiting and punishing such mockery which was peculiarly offensive to the deepest feelings of the majority. But there was no need for the emergence of the Inquisition, first in its general form, then in its appalling Spanish manifestation, to prevent a licensed Jewish minority from unlicensed abuse of its position.

The Inquisition, in both forms, arose out of a different background, the presence throughout western Christendom of men and women whose religious beliefs had been imposed by physical force, especially when the imposition of the new "beliefs" had been ratified by the sacrament of baptism. The Inquisition had no authority over the beliefs of Jews; its authority was confined to baptised Christians, and its task was to see that such Christians conformed to rulings about behaviour and credal affirmations, as they were understood and practised by the official church.

It touched Jews because from early times there had been mass baptisms of unwilling Jews during mob violence, and such Jews, having received the sacrament of baptism, came under the necessity of conformity. The whole position is difficult for the ordinary

modern man, Christian or Jew, to understand sympathetically. It arose from the traditional doctrine of the ineradicable nature of a sacrament. Nor can we dismiss this as just "medieval superstition." Edgar Mortara, taken violently at papal orders from his parents because his Christian nurse had secretly baptised him, died during my life-time.

But, when all this is said, it remains a matter of profound shame and penitence that, arising out of such convictions, the Inquisition, especially in its Spanish form, could carry its activities to such lengths. Reading the lucid and dispassionate account of Professor Baron I am forced again and again to say to myself: "Is it in the name of *my* religion that men did and ordered such things?" For I have to admit that neither in Judaism, nor in Islam, both religions capable of the same narrowness and intolerance as Christianity, is there any record of comparable cruelty and sheer beastliness.

Nor is it any excuse to say that the Spanish Inquisition was the product of the Spanish temperament. If it were, then Christianity would not be a universal religion: it would apply only to nations which do not possess the basic human capacity for cruelty. Dr. Baron rightly dismisses with contempt the alternative explanation, that the Spanish Inquisition was justified because the Spanish people needed at that time a unique enforcement of its unity. It cannot be white-washed.

On the other hand, it is reasonable to ask whether other than religious motives entered into its cold-blooded and unremitting cruelty. Here Professor Friedrich Heer of Vienna, in his new book *God's First Love*,[†] makes the interesting suggestion that the immense bureaucracy which its activities created was drawn largely from the lower classes, who found in their unlimited power to cast suspicion on the aristocratic, the wealthy, and the politically powerful a not wholly

[†] Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 84s.

religious delight! For that is one of the most detestable aspects of the whole story, that suspicion could be cast from any source on the most blameless and noble life. Even St. Theresa, who shares with St. James the venerable position of patron Saint of Spain, was at one time suspected.

There is, in fact, no excuse whatever for the excesses of the Spanish Inquisition. Spain paid dearly for its horrifying activity, but it remains a blot on the story of Christendom in which all Christian churches and countries must share by the mere fact of being part of the Christian tradition and the Christian experience.

Events in Ulster warn us that it is still not possible to say that religious intolerance is no longer a social menace. But it is not enough today to be satisfied with a negative condemnation of intolerance. We are unquestionably entering a period from which we will emerge, either with a few relics of mankind scattered in distant islands, or with a world civilisation based on the unity of mankind and the unity of man's spiritual experience.

It is superficial to claim that all religions are equal. But there is an inescapable challenge to any religious group that claims that it alone is authentic — the challenge being to the word "alone," not to the authenticity, for none are likely to hold beliefs they do not regard as "authentic."

Upsurge of dynamism

NEEDLESS to say the Inquisition and the Wars of Religion are not the only topics of Professor Baron's splendid volumes. They maintain that tradition of balanced and comprehensive scholarship which we have become accustomed to expect from him. The beginnings of "dialogue" in the work of Christian Hebraists, the effects of the new dispersion of the Marranos, the positive and negative influences of that upsurge of dynamism, political, intellectual and aesthetic, which we subsume under the word "Renaissance," all give a positive picture; while the lamentable identity of the newly reformed with the old churches' attitude to Judaism and Jews gives the negative.

— J.C.N.S.

"Mitzvah Dance" (Jewish Wedding Dance) by Herman Wald

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