

Response to Rosemary Ruether

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Professor Ruether's basic thesis that "at its root anti-Semitism in Christian civilization springs directly from Christian theological anti-Judaism" seems to me, in itself, unimpeachable. Insofar as the rest of her paper elaborates this point, it impresses me as a forceful statement informed by considerable moral passion. I could quibble with her about a few historical details, but within the framework of this conference it would be pedantic and irrelevant to do so. There are larger issues to be explored.

This is no ordinary scholarly symposium. It is a very contemporary discussion between Christians and Jews in the shadow of the murder of a third of the Jewish people a generation ago. Its title—"Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era"—is ambiguous, even presumptuous, and some of its possible connotations trouble me.* Be that as it may, neither the conference nor the title have any *raison d'être* unless they point forward. In the case of Rosemary Ruether's paper and, I assume, also in others to be presented, the historical record is invoked not merely as a post-mortem, but to help us all cope with the present and direct ourselves toward a future.

My reaction to Rosemary Ruether's historical summary has more to do with what she has left unsaid than with what she has actually narrated, though the one ultimately affects the other. It would be unfair, of course, to present this as a stricture. Her task has been to talk in brief compass about the impact of Christian theology upon the development of anti-Semitism, and she has done so with eloquence. There are, however, vital reasons for me to stress what she has left out.

Before I go on to explain what I mean, I must make one thing perfectly clear. I am obviously not a Christian apologist of the sort mentioned by Rosemary Ruether in her first paragraph, nor can I possibly be cast in any such role. I am, in fact, a Jewish historian. As it happens, my own work has been done largely out of the archives of the Inquisi-

*Editor's note: The question mark at the end of the title was inadvertently omitted from the material publicizing the Symposium.

tion in Spain, Portugal, and Italy. Concerning the reality and influence of Christian theological anti-Semitism through the ages I not only have no doubt; I could easily supplement Ruether's data at every stage with equally strong and more vivid materials. Nor is it for me, a Jew, to defend the church against Rosemary Ruether, a Christian, a notion as whimsical as it is absurd. Indeed, I am not at all concerned with the church per se, but only as it affects the fortunes of the Jewish people. And it is precisely for this reason that I find myself with a set of problems and emphases different from those of Rosemary Ruether.

Paradoxes

Throughout her summary of Christian theological anti-Semitism I could not help but ask: If such was the teaching, why did they not destroy the Jews?

Ruether touches briefly upon the issue when she states: "However, although Christian theology decreed misery for the Jews, it did not decree extermination." She then goes on to say: "The paradox of the church's attitude to the Jews was that it was simultaneously committed to their preservation and to making them exhibit externally the marks of their reprobation." The next sentence is, however, at least a partial non sequitur: "It was out of this contradiction that the tragic history of the Jews in Christian society was to flow." Surely Rosemary Ruether would agree that the tragedy flowed from only one side of the paradox, and that brings us to the heart of the matter.

The entire paper dwells exclusively on "reprobation." Of "preservation," except for this fleeting reference, we hear next to nothing. Yet both were present, and one can hardly understand the survival of the Jews in the midst of Christendom without taking both elements into serious account. That Christian theology "did not decree extermination" is, after all, not to be glossed over so lightly in a conference devoted to the Holocaust. In our time such restraint cannot be taken for granted. Nor, for that matter, was it self-evident in the past.

Speaking of the establishment of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire, Ruether notes that "the faith and practice of pagans and heretics were proscribed by law. Their temples and churches were destroyed or confiscated." Yet whatever Judaism suffered, it did not suffer the same fate. Judaism, for Jews, continued to be a *religio licita*. Though technically no new synagogues were to be built (a rule obviously observed in the breach), existing synagogues were certainly

protected by law. If, on occasion, that law was violated, such cases represent departures from the norm. That Jews are to be tolerated in the midst of Christendom, that they have the right to regulate their internal affairs according to their law, that they are entitled to a basic protection of life, property, and the free exercise of their religion so long as it does not directly interfere with the dominant faith—these principles remained constant in Christian law down through the Middle Ages. Had it not been so, I would not be here today.

It could easily have been otherwise. The church could have dealt with the Jews as it did with the Samaritans and declared Judaism a heresy. The penalty for heresy was death.

No, what happened is not obvious, at least not to me, and the problem as I see it is the reverse of that which preoccupies Rosemary Ruether. Perhaps I take a dimmer view of human nature, and so, for example, I am more baffled by the Danish rescue of Jews during the Holocaust than I am by the collaboration of other subject peoples in destroying them. Perhaps, also, I have a lower threshold of expectation from the past. I do not have any great difficulty in understanding the Christian animus against Judaism (to understand is not to condone). That is to say, I am not really surprised that the need of nascent Christianity to establish its legitimacy bred a violent hatred for those whose birthright it usurped. The problem is not why the Jews were derogated, but rather—why were they not wiped out?

Similarly when we come to the inferior status of the Jews under Christendom, which Rosemary Ruether has so ably documented. What are our expectations? In ages when religious truth was considered absolute and its possession exclusive, is it to be anticipated that no visible distinctions would be sought between believer and infidel? Islam, whose case against Judaism did not even rest upon an accusation of deicide, did the same, and indeed such symbols of reprobation as the Jewish badge had their origin there. But again, this is not where the real problem lies. Granted the hostility, and given the desire to objectify the theological inferiority of Judaism in the socioeconomic sphere, why did Christian theology not call at least for the actual enslavement of the Jews? In Visigothic Spain the attempt was actually made, but once again, this is an exceptional case which sets the norm into relief. Reprobate as they may have been, the Jews were not enslaved under Christendom. Contrary to the depiction by Rosemary Ruether of the "status of the Jew as a person without honor or civil rights," the Jews were never rightless in Christian society. Indeed, medieval Jewry has an entire gamut of well-defined rights which, on the whole, made the

socioeconomic status of the Jews superior to that of the Christian peasantry who often constituted the bulk of the population.

The same problematics reveal themselves also with regard to conversion. Why did the church not decree the forced conversion of the Jews? The forced baptisms which did occur in the Middle Ages should not obscure the fact that conversion by force, however tempting, did not represent official church policy. To be sure, the papacy in the thirteenth century did narrow the definition of what constitutes "force," and once baptized the Jew was barred from reverting to his former faith. The often tragic consequences of such equivocations for Jewish history are manifest. But how much greater would the tragedy have been if the church had not followed the basic policy of Gregory the Great in disavowing force as a legitimate means for the conversion of Jews. That the church chose to take its stand on an *eschatological* rather than immediate conversion of the Jews was yet another factor of inestimable importance for the survival of Jewry, and, like the others, it is obvious only in retrospect. At the outset, it could well have been otherwise.

The explanations advanced for these phenomena are important, I think, yet inadequate. Historically, there was some momentum deriving from the tolerated status of the Jews in pagan Roman law. In the economic sphere, the Jews often proved themselves useful. Theologically, various reasons could be found, and were indeed proposed, for the preservation of the Jews. And yet somehow it all strikes one as insufficient. The theological arguments, especially, seem more like post-factum rationalizations than initial motives. Yes, the Jews preserve the Scriptures, and Christ himself asked mercy for them, and they testify by their degraded presence to the triumph of Christianity, and the prophecies forecast their ultimate conversion, so that they must be preserved until the Second Coming. It is all very neat, but is it really convincing? Had there been a real will to make Judaism disappear from history, whether by universal genocide or forced conversion, would these arguments have sufficed to prevent it, or would not some other theological rationale have arisen to condone it? As an example of what could be argued even within the accepted framework, consider Duns Scotus' strong advocacy of forced conversion. Anticipating the objection that the Jews must be preserved until the Second Coming so that the prophecies may be fulfilled, he observes that for this purpose it would suffice merely to leave a small band of Jews on some island until that time should come. Fortunately, however, this medieval "Madagascar Plan" remained a minority view.

In short, there must have been deeper, inner reasons for the preservation of the Jews than those thrown up on the surface. As to what these may have been I have no ready answer, and as a Jew I can only speculate. If the church did not decree the physical or spiritual extinction of Jewry, it must have been either because it could not bring itself to do so, or because it was vital to it not to do so. Perhaps it was both. Somehow, though there is no way of proving it, I think that the awareness of its Jewish matrix was, even if subliminal, sufficiently strong to inhibit the church from obliterating it. It is here that the real paradox resides and, upon examination, it turns out to be no paradox at all. The peculiar ferocity of the abuse of children for a mother is common enough; actual matricide is another matter. Be that as it may, I feel on firmer ground with regard to the "vital interest of the church." The decision to preserve the Jews has always appeared to me linked to an even more primal decision made in the early centuries, one which involved an intense inner struggle whose outcome was long in doubt. It was the decision to retain the Jewish Scriptures in the Christian canon, and to posit a direct continuity between the two. However adversely the exegesis which this decision entailed may have affected the image of the Jews, it is as nothing compared to what might have followed otherwise. One shudders to contemplate what might have been the fate of the Jews had Marcion been victorious.

Variables

I should like now to approach some other aspects of the paper.

The church, as Rosemary Ruether knows better than I, has never been a monolith. And yet, in relation to the Jews, she discusses the church in a curiously monolithic way. As a matter of fact, medieval Jews themselves knew very well how to distinguish among the constellation of forces surrounding them. In his analysis of Jewish historical catastrophe entitled *Shebet Yehudah*, the Spanish exile Solomon Ibn Verga observes that in the church it is generally the lower clergy who are the true enemies of the Jews, while the episcopate and the papacy are their protectors. Now while there is an obvious oversimplification here, there is also a core of truth which corresponds to the realities of medieval Jewish life. For all its pejorative references to Jews, the *Constitutio pro Iudaeis* was a basic formulation of papal policy committed to the protection of Jewish life and property. In times of crisis the pope could be appealed to for a bull condemning the excesses. The blood li-

bel was never condoned by the popes; on the contrary, it was condemned in many official pronouncements. To be sure, the very popes who periodically renewed the *Constitutio pro Judaeis* were not necessarily pro-Jewish. They could also call for the strict enforcement of the harshest canonical regulations concerning the Jews. Nor were papal condemnations of physical violence against Jews always prompt or effective. But that is not the point. One has only to consider the alternative. In what might otherwise have been for the Jews an anarchic jungle, the king, on the one hand, and the pope, on the other, were at least committed to the rule of law, and were thus pillars of whatever stability the Jews enjoyed.

As the church is not a monolith, so are people not theological automata. All the bishops of the Rhineland during the First Crusade had studied the same theology, yet it was John of Speyer alone who made a genuine effort to protect his Jews. Bernard of Clairvaux was a theological anti-Semite, yet he issued a ringing and influential call against the massacre of Jews during the Second Crusade. Theology can be analyzed. The human variable still eludes us.

Into Modern Times

Coming to modern times, Rosemary Ruether states that "modern anti-Semitism is both a continuation and a transformation of the medieval theological and economic scapegoating of the Jews." Few, I think, would deny that medieval anti-Semitism survives into the modern age both in its original and in certain secularized forms, and that there is a continuum between the two. The crucial word is "transformation," and it is this which raises more complex questions.

Is modern anti-Semitism merely a metamorphosed medieval Christian anti-Semitism? Through what conduits and channels did the transformation occur? If, as has been proposed by some, it was through the French Enlightenment, then one must obviously take into account its non-Christian sources as well. But this is not the time to discuss such purely historical matters. More important, what is the nature of the transformation itself, and what are the consequences thereof? What happens along the way in the shift from religious to secular, theological to racial, anti-Semitism? Here, it seems to me, Ruether's formula explains little and glosses over much.

The issue is physical extermination. Not reprobation, discrimination, or any variety of opprobrium, but—*genocide*. From Rosemary Ruether we gather that genocide against the Jews was an inexorable

consequence of Christian theological teaching. I do not think that is quite the case. If it were, genocide should have come upon the Jews in the Middle Ages. By this I do not in any way intend to exonerate the church of its real and palpable guilt. There is no question but that Christian anti-Semitism through the ages helped create the climate and mentality in which genocide, once conceived, could be achieved with little or no opposition. But even if we grant that Christian teaching was a necessary cause leading to the Holocaust, it was surely not a sufficient one. The crucial problem in the shift from medieval to modern anti-Semitism is that while the Christian tradition of "reprobation" continued into the modern era, the Christian tradition of "preservation" fell by the wayside and was no longer operative. To state only that modern anti-Semitism is a "transformed" medieval anti-Semitism is to skirt this central issue. Surely there must be some significance in the fact that the Holocaust took place in our secular century, and not in the Middle Ages. Moreover, medieval anti-Jewish massacres were the work of the mob and the rabble. State-inspired pogroms of the type that took place in Czarist Russia, state-instigated genocide of the Nazi type—these are entirely modern phenomena. The climactic anti-Jewish measure of which the medieval Christian state was capable was always expulsion and, on rare occasions, forced conversion. The Holocaust was the work of a thoroughly modern, neopagan state.

To see how both of the classical strands in the Christian tradition concerning the Jews united in the medieval state one has only to consider the paradigmatic definition of the status of the Jews in the *Siete Partidas* of Alfonso the Wise of Castile. In this famous thirteenth-century legal code we read:

Jews are a people who, although they do not believe in the religion of our Lord Jesus Christ, yet the great Christian sovereigns have always permitted them to live among them

We intend here to speak of the Jews, who insult His [God's] name and deny the marvelous and holy acts which He performed when He sent His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ into the world to save sinners. . . .

The reason that the church, emperors, kings, and princes permitted the Jews to dwell among them and with Christians, is because they always lived, as it were, in captivity, as it was constantly in the minds of men that they were descended from those who crucified our Lord Jesus Christ. . . .

No, the terminology is not exactly flattering, and the clauses that follow are hardly the terms under which I should personally choose to live. But there is no death here, and at the court of Alfonso the Wise Jewish courtiers, scholars, and mathematicians moved with ease. The

Siete Partidas knows at least that "a synagogue is a place where the Jews pray And for the reason that a synagogue is a place where the name of God is praised, we forbid any Christian to deface it, or remove anything from it, or take anything out of it by force." European Jewry from 1933 to 1945 could have lived under the formulations of the *Siete Partidas*. Between this and Nazi Germany lies not merely a "transformation" but a leap into a different dimension. The slaughter of Jews by the state was not part of the medieval Christian world-order. It became possible with the breakdown of that order.

An example of a different kind may heighten our awareness of the problem. It concerns the behavior of the papacy during the Nazi era. My bill of particulars concerning Pius XII does not postulate a continuum to his medieval predecessors. On the contrary, my private *pacuse* is based on the fact that he *broke*, in essence, with the tradition of the medieval popes. It is precisely because the medieval papacy managed to speak out for the Jews *in extremis* that the silence of the Vatican during World War II is all the more deafening. The same is true in other aspects of papal reactions. Rosemary Ruether has called attention to the statutes of purity of blood in Spain (which were not "copied" by the Nazis, though there are phenomenological parallels). What she fails to note is that when the first such statute was drawn up in Toledo in 1449, it was immediately denounced by Pope Nicholas V, and its perpetrators were excommunicated. No protest was heard from Pius XI when, in 1935, Germany promulgated its own infamous statutes of racial purity in the Nuremberg Laws. When we turn, finally, to Italy itself, the contrast is even more striking. Because it was the seat of the popes, Rome was the one great city of Europe from which the Jews were never expelled, and where they had the longest unbroken history. The roundup of Jews by the Nazis began in Rome in the fall of 1943. On October 18, over one thousand Roman Jews, more than two-thirds of them women and children, were deported from the Eternal City to Auschwitz. On October 28 the German ambassador, Ernst Heinrich von Weizsacker, reported to Berlin: "Although under pressure from all sides, the pope [Pius XII] has not let himself be drawn into any demonstrative censure of the deportation of Jews from Rome." Are we confronted here by a medieval or a modern phenomenon?

Toward a Future

Rosemary Ruether ends her paper with an incipient vision of a new relationship between Christian and Jew, sharing a future hope of re-

demption which, even for Christians, is still unachieved. In order for this to be accomplished, she calls for a repentant church. Involved are a massive repentant acceptance of responsibility for what Christendom has done to Jews, a new Christology, and an end to ecclesiastical and Messianic triumphalism.

As a Jew, how can I not endorse such aspirations? Even in a secular world the church still exerts an influence over millions. A forthright repudiation of anti-Jewish teachings, both in theory and in school curricula, would certainly help clear the air. Though there is no possibility of rewriting the text of the Gospels, a more historical exegesis would also have an impact. As for a more future-oriented Christian messianism—such a reassertion of Jewish prophetic emphasis would obviously have wider reverberations.

But in the final analysis I am still troubled by two aspects of this paper, and since I am not even a Jewish theologian, I speak only for myself.

I do not think that I err in my impression that while Ruether's sincere and profound involvement in the fate of the Jews is abundantly clear, the problem of the Jews must necessarily appear to her as part of a larger problem—that of the church itself. She herself says so, in effect, when she speaks of the displacement of evil upon the Jews as "the special archetype of this refusal [by the church] to internalize self-judgment for its own sins," and when she invokes Vatican II as the beginning of a break with "ecclesiastical triumphalism." That is not only her prerogative, it is entirely natural. And when she places the dawn of a new attitude toward the Jews within the context of an obvious hope for a total regeneration of the church, she may well be correct, for on a certain level the one may well depend upon the other.

And yet, it seems to me, on another plane the two must be separated. Historically, reformist tendencies and movements within the church have not necessarily led to a positive reevaluation of the Jews. Indeed, they have often been accompanied by an even more virulent anti-Semitism. The Cluniac reform, where it took cognizance of the Jews, was hostile to them. Not even the most anti-Jewish popes of the Middle Ages advocated such measures as expulsion, the destruction of synagogues, or the prohibition of rabbinic teaching, as did Martin Luther. In Calvin's Geneva, not in papal Rome, Jews were forbidden to reside. Nor was hostility to Jews limited to triumphalist official theologies. Those who revolted against the church—Catharists, Flagellants, Millenarians of all sorts—were most often just as hostile, and sometimes far less restrained. Rosemary Ruether will therefore forgive me if I am initially somewhat skeptical that the reformist and revolutionary ten-

dencies within the Catholic Church today will necessarily engender pro-Jewish attitudes.

My last point concerns Ruether's presentation as a whole. If what she has related here is a summary of the history of Christianity vis-à-vis the Jews, then I see my own hopes dwindling. If the entire theological and historical tradition forged by Christianity is one of anti-Semitism, then the only hope lies in the radical erosion of Christianity itself. It would mean that in order to achieve a more positive relationship to Jews and Judaism Christians must, in effect, repudiate their entire heritage. But that, in turn, does not impress me as a very realistic expectation. It is partly for that reason that I have felt it important to argue that the historical record is more varied and complex than can be anticipated from this account.

Rosemary Ruether calls at the end for "massive repentance." I am not certain that this is what is required. There is something about the phrase that worries me. Knowledge and acknowledgment of what has been done to the Jews in the name of a crucified Messiah, yes. But no more. I do not welcome a collective mea culpa from Christendom. It tends toward a kind of masochism, behind which may lurk an eventual sadism. I do not want Christians to brood on the guilt of their forebears and to keep apologizing for it. I do not want to encounter Christians as confessor and penitent, just as when I go to the Spanish archives I don't expect the archivists to plead guilty for the Inquisition or the Expulsion of 1492.

Theology? In 1974, after all that has happened, do we still have to await a reformulation of Christian theology before the voice of Jewish blood can be heard crying from the earth? Is our common humanity not sufficient? In any case, Christian theology is an internal affair for Christians alone. Perhaps my trouble is that I am more oriented toward history than toward theology, more to what Unamuno called "the man of flesh and bone" than to the theologian in him. My fundamental problem has not been solved, and perhaps it is insoluble. I want to know why Rosemary Ruether is my friend, and one of the *hasidim* 'umot ha-'olam, the righteous among the nations. Her theology alone does not explain it, for there are others who share all her theological concerns and reformist causes, but who do not speak for the Jews as she does.

To Christians generally I should like to say: I hope that the condition for our dialogue is not our mutual secularization (though at times it certainly seems so). You do not have to repudiate everything in the Christian past concerning the Jews. Much of the record is dark. There

were also patches of light. There was "reprobation" and there was "preservation," and each has to be understood in its historical context. It is up to you to choose that with which you will identify. If it is important to you, integrate and reinterpret what you cull from the past into your theology, as you will. Be it known to you, however, that not by your ancestors, but by your actions, will you be judged. For my people, now as in the past, is in grave peril of its life. And it simply cannot wait until you have completed a new *Summa Theologica*.