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CHRISTEN UND JUDEN

A Manifesto on the Jews by the German Evangelical Church

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AFTER SEVERAL YEARS' work, a committee set up by the German Evangelical Church to study the question of 'Christians and Jews,' has published its report. The Church is a union of nearly all German Protestant Churches, representing thirty million believers. It has issued a series of papers on current political and social affairs that have had a decisive bearing on public opinion in the Federal Republic of Germany — as, for example, one on the East German matter, which, long before the Oder-Neisse Line was officially recognised, pleaded for its recognition as well as reconciliation with Eastern Germany. In the same way, the present report will undoubtedly sway public discussion on the crucial problem of Jewish-Christian relations. Lack of space does not permit us to reproduce the entire document, so we must confine ourselves to noting its main content and most important passages.

In the preface, Bishop Class, President of the Council of the Church, says:

For many centuries, Christians viewed their relationship to the Jews almost exclusively in the light of the question: What separates us from them? Behind this was an attitude characterized by estrangement and mutual rejection... As a result of the catastrophe of European Jewry, Christians after World War II began to rethink the relationship: they discovered how much they still had in common, became conscious again of a shared

heritage and started to converse in a manner impossible in previous centuries.

Accordingly, the report, in its first part, deals primarily with links that join Jews and Christians and with their like origins. The preamble reads:

'Remember that
it is not you who sustain the root:
the root sustains you'
(Romans 11:18)

The Christian Church has its roots in Judaism. Jesus lived and taught among the Jewish people. He himself, his disciples and the apostles were Jews. They shared the faith and history of their people. Within the Jewish environment, they proclaimed what was new in their message: that in the person of Jesus the expected Messiah had come, and with his Resurrection the 'Day of the Lord' had dawned.

Differences and contrasts arose from the acceptance or rejection of this message. In the beginning, they remained within the one compass, but led eventually to the independence of the Christian community, and in the end to a total schism between Christians and Jews. In the course of this development, each community took on its own unmistakable character.

Yet common features were still not lost: they have

survived within the overall context of the Christian or the Jewish faith, and offer the possibility of a new encounter and a new consideration of unified responsibility in today's world.

The common features are described under six headings.

1. One God

Jews and Christians confess One God, the Creator and Redeemer.

When we as Christians speak of God, we, like the Jews, are convinced that God, to whom Holy Scripture testifies, is One...

2. Holy Scripture

Jews and Christians base their faith on a common 'Scripture' (the 'Old Testament'), to which the 'New Testament' of the Christians is related.

The first Christians, like all Jews, possessed a collection of biblical books which corresponded basically to that which the Church was to term the 'Old Testament.' In the New Testament, these writings are called 'the law and the prophets' (Matthew 22:40). Often they are simply called 'the Scriptures,' as they were generally known and recognised as a basic witness to faith. Christians as well as Jews found in them a variety of guidelines for everyday life, prayer, sermons and worship.

The Scriptures belong to Jews and Christians alike. Through Christian proclamation, they are made known to non-Jews. Paul addressed himself also to Gentile listeners with utterances from them. Thenceforward, non-Jews became acquainted with the history of God's relationship to His people Israel, and are included in that history. The Church has striven again and again for an understanding of the Old Testament. But there have been, as well, many attempts to depreciate individual Books of the Old Testament or to deny all of it recognition as a part of Holy Writ. Those attempts were repudiated by the Church because it confesses the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as the Father of Jesus Christ. Thus the Old Testament, Holy Writ of the Jews, remains, no less, one of the two component parts of the Christian Bible.

3. The People of God

Jews and Christians both understand themselves to be the People of God.

4. Worship

Jews and Christians express their faith in worship wherein many identical elements are to be found.

... The similarities in the structure and form of services allowed the first Christians to continue to foregather with the Jews and worship with them in the synagogue. In the meantime, there has been a long period of divided development, but Christians and Jews have now been brought to reconsider the fact that they belong to one another and have attempted again to pray in unison on particular occasions.

5. Justice and love

The faith and action of Jews and Christians are determined by the interrelation of justice and love.

Christians and Jews alone are typified in their self-understanding by the fact that they know themselves to be the chosen partners of the One God within His Covenant. God had revealed His love and His justice in this election. For both, this is the basis of their responsibility to practise justice and love in the world.

6. History and fulfilment

Jews and Christians, though divided, share the relationship between God and His People and await its fulfilment.

... Through these experiences, Jews and Christians believe that the process of history is not to be seen as blind fate or as a chain of unpredictable accidents; they realise and bear witness that the ultimate meaning and goal of history are God's salvation for all mankind...

In the first part of the report, reference was made to the differences which exist notwithstanding all the mutual features. This is followed in Part II by an historical sketch of the divergences in most of the spheres mentioned in Part I. Here we need quote only the introductory remarks:

The faith of the Jews and the Christians has common roots, yet their ways have diverged more and more in the course of the centuries. Opposing views were kindled, particularly on the questions whether Jesus is the Messiah; how the Scriptures are to be interpreted; the meaning of God's People; the manner in which statements of faith need to be developed. The conflicting answers, and related claims to the truth, sever Jews and Christians to this day.

Thus, sharply defined differences were unavoidable; besides, open hostility and persecution came

in mounting measure and were intensified by a multitude of other motives. If, in the beginning of Christianity, the Jews bore ill-will towards Christians, soon the Jews were being persecuted. Often their very existence was at stake and countless Jews lost their lives during the controversy in the ensuing centuries.

So there developed an irreconcilable antagonism between Jews and Christians, which more and more shrouded their common elements, but could not wholly bury them. Today, we face the question whether, and to what extent, the common ground that there is can become a starting-point of mutual understanding despite the significant differences.

The heart of the report, with its cardinal pronouncements, is in Part III: Jews and Christians today. We quote *in extenso*:

‘But if a man says, “I love God,”
while hating his brother,
he is a liar.

If he does not love the brother whom he has seen,
it cannot be
that he loves God Whom he has not seen.’
(I John 4: 20)

Because of the heavy preponderance of Christians, the small Jewish minority was, in the course of a long development, degraded into the role of the outsider. In recent history, hatred of the Jews led to the attempt by National Socialism to exterminate them.

However, this catastrophe produced a changing attitude among Christians and Jews. Many Christians, because of the shock of events, began to have new thoughts about the basis of their faith and discovered anew the roots of their faith in the Old-Testament-Jewish tradition. At the same time, they recognized that the Jews appeal to the same God as Father, Whose children the Christians understand themselves to be. So they became conscious of the fact that the Jews are their nearest neighbours. Many Jews gained a new understanding of their own position from the foundation of the State of Israel in the Land of their Fathers. In this way, preconditions for a new encounter between Jews and Christians have emerged, which should conduce to understanding of one another and find expression in a corporate responsibility for the world resulting from faith in the One God.

Point I of this section describes the variety of structures within Judaism and Christianity which, un-

fortunately, cannot be reconciled by the general unity of outlook. The final paragraph reads:

On the way to ecumenical fellowship, the Christian Churches find themselves dealing with the question whether and how they are bound to Judaism. A series of statements about the relations of Church and Judaism shows how conscious the Church is of this question. The special position of the people of Israel as the people of the Covenant of God was already strongly emphasized at the first full Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Amsterdam. For many Christians, the continuing existence of a Jewish people after the coming of Jesus Christ is an unfathomable mystery that they understand as a sign of the unchangeable faithfulness of God.

The next two paragraphs boldly discuss a theme which has been taboo in Christian theological thinking — the problem of the Land and State of Israel. They are of paramount importance.

2. The Two Forms of Jewish Existence

Jews have always lived in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora; however, the full realization of Jewish life was bound up with the Land in all ages.

From earliest times and until today, the Jews have lived both in the Land of Israel and outside it. For example, only some of the Jews who were deported to Babylon came back from their exile to their Land. After that, a Jewish Diaspora came into being not only in the Land of the Two Rivers but also in Syria, Egypt and the whole area of the Mediterranean. It grew as a result of emigration and also through mission. At the time of Jesus, the Diaspora had a cultural importance and its Jews were greater in number than those living in the Land of Israel. Even today, the majority of Jews live outside Israel.

In spite of this, the election of the people is still linked indissolubly to the election of the Land in the Jewish faith. In the Book of Deuteronomy the thesis is emphasized that Israel can be obedient to God only in its own Land. Israel's prophets promised the return of the people to the Land in which the Torah can be fulfilled and God will build His Kingdom. Judaism has held to this connection between People and Land. After the unsuccessful Jewish wars of liberation in the first

and second centuries AD, Jewish life was possible only in parts of the Land, mostly in Galilee, and often in difficult circumstances. Even at that time the Jewish sages challenged the people to remain in the Land as far as possible or to return to it. In their daily prayers the Jews still say: 'Bring us together from the four ends of the earth.' The liturgy for the celebration of the Passover reaches its climax with the call: 'Next year in Jerusalem!' Not only many details of the fulfilling of commandments but also all the feast days of the Jewish year derive their meaning from the nexus between People and Land, so that Jewish existence according to the traditional interpretation can only be fully realized in the Land of Israel.

It would appear, then, that life in the Diaspora is something temporary and to be overcome. Therefore, from the start, the Jews who live in the Diaspora have always tried to maintain the connection with the Land. The individual could accomplish this through contributions for those living in the Land, through pilgrimages and through return to the Land, even if only to be buried there. Again and again there were large immigrations, most of them inspired by messianic movements. The Zionist settlement movement of the last century also belongs to the long list of attempts to re-establish the unity of People and Land.

Life in the Diaspora was not only understood as an imposed destiny, as the incomprehensible direction of God or as the temptation to surrender through assimilation. There were also always individual Jews and Jewish groups that saw an opportunity in the Diaspora for the Chosen People to proclaim the message of the One God among the nations.

In this way, the Diaspora made an essential contribution to the religion, culture and ethics of many peoples. The formation and further development of Christianity and also of Islam were largely influenced by the continuing encounter with it. Jewry, in turn, was subjected to manifold influences in its life amidst other nations and religions.

3. The State of Israel

The present-day State of Israel is a political entity, but also understands itself in the historical context of the Chosen People.

... The return of many Jews to their Homeland took place because of the pressure of a hostile

environment, but, at the same time, it meant the final realisation of the millennial longing to return to Zion. Beyond its political function, Israel has thus a religious meaning for many Jews. In the Land of Israel, Jews encountered the Bible and post-biblical tradition in an entirely new way. Israel is increasingly becoming a spiritual centre which also influences the Diaspora. It is, furthermore, the intention of the State to provide a safeguard for the existence of all Jews living in the Diaspora in case of new threats of persecution or threats to their identity as Jews. Israel, in one of its Basic Laws, ensures the entry and the right of citizenship for all Jews.

As a political entity, the State of Israel is organized as a modern, secular State and a parliamentary democracy. In ancient times, the people of Israel were also organized in the political systems that prevailed. For the modern State, however, its description as a democracy does not fully cover its nature: by choosing the name of Israel, and in its founding charter, Israel puts itself expressly into the biblical tradition of Judaism and thereby into the context of the history of the Chosen People. It considers its task to be to secure the existence of this people in the country of its forefathers.

This is also meaningful for Christians. They have the duty, in view of all the injustice perpetrated against the Jews — especially by the Germans, to recognize and support the decision of the United Nations of 1947, validated by international law, which was intended to give the possibility of a secure existence to the Jews in a State of their own. At the same time, Christians work forcefully for a proper conciliation between the Palestinian Arabs and the Jews. Neither should the Palestinian Arabs alone carry the burden and consequences of the conflict nor should Israel alone be held answerable for the conflict. Therefore those who are not immediately involved must also work together towards a lasting peace in the Middle East. Christians, especially in Germany, cannot withdraw themselves from this cooperation. They also have to strengthen their contact with Christian Arabs who have been drawn into an especially difficult situation because of the conflict.

Of the next paragraph, entitled 'Jews-Christians-Germans,' the second half reads:

... It is true that only few Germans had complete

insight into the entire plan of annihilation. But most knew of the legislation and of the public outcry against the Jews that began in 1933, the burning of the synagogues and the looting of businesses in November 1938, the sudden disappearances of Jewish neighbours and school-mates. There was also news of the events through foreign broadcasts and rumours. But most Germans did not, or did not want to, believe in the planned extermination of European Jewry ('the final solution'). They allowed themselves to credit the news of resettlement of Jews in Eastern Europe. On the whole, the Christian Churches did not speak up. Only a few people helped Jews to flee or hid them at peril to their own lives.

The extermination of six million Jews and, with it, the almost total destruction of Jewish culture in Europe, have left deep-seated wounds in the consciousness of the Jewish people throughout the world, wounds which will not heal for generations to come and which make Jews insecure, frightened and particularly sensitive to any form of existential threat.

For the Jewish people in Israel and in the Diaspora the catastrophe of genocide and annihilation (Holocaust) is associated with the name of the largest extermination camp: Auschwitz in Poland. Like Hiroshima, Auschwitz has become a symbol for the experience of the horror of annihilation and also a turning-point in historical and theological thinking, especially for Jews.

Recognizing the guilt-laden negligence of the past, we, as Christians in Germany, are especially called upon to fight the recurring enmity against Jews as well as the politically and socially motivated forms of 'anti-Zionism,' and to work on the building of new relationships with the Jews.

Here, in Paragraph 5, the common tasks are described in general terms:

In the present world situation, Christians and Jews are called upon to realise their responsibility for shaping the world on the basis of their common belief in One God.

and again:

... Despite all the obvious difficulties, it is also an important task to work for joint approaches among Christians, Jews and Moslems for the cause of justice and peace in the Middle East...

The final paragraph, headed 'Encounter and Witness,' begins:

When Christians and Jews face the question of how the different aspects of their common belief in One God can be made fruitful for mutual witness, Christians have continually to consider how they justify their witness to the Jews.

Christians and Jews understand and witness their belief in the One God Who has revealed Himself in history, following their own interpretation. Central to the Jewish belief is the Torah as God's plan and tool to shape and finish the world; for Christians it is Jesus Christ with his message of salvation for all mankind. In the light of these differences and similarities, an encounter of Christians and Jews cannot simply remain on the plane of getting to know each other. Such encounters offer each the opportunity to enrich and clarify his own belief by listening to Holy Scripture together. The more open and concentrated such encounters are, the more freely will the decisive factors which exist be brought out into the open...

The report has a number of appendices, designed to enlighten the wider public and thus make for better understanding between Jews and Christians. Here are extracts:

- 1) Who is a Jew?
- 2) The extermination of European Jewry
- 3) The position of the Jews in the Federal Republic of Germany
- 4) The existing ecumenical discussion of the question of the Church and the Jewish People
- 5) Islam.

Next comes an explanation of the following concepts: Israel, Judaism, Palestine, the Babylonian Exile, Diaspora, Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, Messiah, Jewish-Christian, Zionism, Holocaust.

A bibliography of the most important German publications on this subject is appended. Finally, the members of the committee are named, including such well-known personalities as Prof. Harder (Chairman), Prof. Gollwitzer, Dr F. v. Hammerstein, Prof. Marquard, Dr R. Mayer, Prof. Rendtorff and Prof. Rengstorff.

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In passing judgement on the report, one must bear in mind that it is an official statement issued on behalf

of a gigantic and extremely heterogeneous entity. The German Evangelical Church is in itself not a unified body but an amalgamation of entirely different Churches, some conservative, and others more progressive in orientation. Furthermore, the subject treated in the report is, for the Churches, a new problem which has scarcely been touched by theological thinkers. We do not find it surveyed in any modern system of theology as a separate topic of discussion. In Christian theology, there is a long history of the outlawry and misunderstanding of Judaism. Only in some small circles was a new start made after the Holocaust and the establishment of the State of Israel. Moreover, there is still, in most Churches, a strong missionary urge in relation to the Jews.

The committee had to take account of all these tendencies and the leaders of the Churches endeavoured to bring together, in its membership, representatives of all shades of opinion. I, myself, as a guest, attended a few sessions and had to write preliminary drafts for some parts of the report; I can also testify to the vehement debates which many themes provoked. There is the additional factor that the committee was not autonomous but had to have its drafts approved first by the various Church Offices and then by the Council. In view of all these complications, it is surprising that the report turned out as well as it did. One must admit, in favour of the authors, that they make every effort to present Judaism in the light in which Jews see it and that this presentation takes up much space in the report, which surely marks a great advance in Jewish-Christian relations. If this attempt to present Judaism as seen through Jewish eyes has not been altogether successful, its imperfections must be attributed rather to faulty knowledge than to ill-will. This is a difficulty which could easily have been overcome by inviting Jewish representatives to join in the committee's deliberations. As it was, however, some members felt that the opinions represented on the committee were already so various that they should first be thrashed out by the existing body. The Council has, in fact, decided to co-opt Jewish advisers in any future discussions, a direct confrontation that could be most productive in leading to further activity. The courage shown by the committee and by the German Evangelical Church in not keeping silent on such burning political questions as the State of Israel and its Land is a new departure, even though theological arguments are sometimes abruptly interrupted by political con-

siderations. To present a reasonably balanced debate on the problem of the Near East the report would have had to be much longer and more detailed; as it stands, whatever is said on this subject is somewhat disjointed and lacks reasoned pleading. But it was asking too much of the committee to expect it to solve this problem, too, within the limited dimensions of the report.

The main difficulty is the ambivalent attitude of the report in regard to the question 'Mission or Dialogue?' On this point, an untenable compromise is suggested. We read in III.6:

In past years the discussion about it has above all revolved around the two concepts "mission" and "dialogue." Often they were understood as mutually excluding opposites. In the meantime, however, the understanding has developed that mission and dialogue are two dimensions of the one Christian testimony.

This is just what they are not. But this attempt to gloss over the true state of affairs stems from the fact that the committee cannot answer the question whether Christians must regard the Jews, even today, as God's People. The dilemma is clearly expressed at the end of II.3:

The conflict over the matter of belonging to the people of God has placed a decidedly heavy burden upon the relationship of Jews and Christians throughout the centuries. Up to the present time the question bound up with this is: does the claim of being the people of God by the one group exclude the same claim by the other?

(An earlier draft had 'include' instead of 'exclude'.)

The conflict arises from the failure of the Churches to agree on this problem. Some hold that the Church has taken the place of Jewry as the People of God, so that the only possible attitude of Christians towards Jews is a missionary one. Others maintain that Jews, like Christians, belong to the People of God, which, though divided, is yet one; thus the relationship between them can be described only in terms of a dialogue. Any confusion of the two concepts cannot lead to progress. Dialogue and mission are, indeed, mutually exclusive. But the committee has not been disbanded; on the contrary, it has been charged by the Council to pursue further tasks. With this report, a start has been made — on the whole, in the right direction. ♦