

The Orthodox View of the Jews and Judaism*

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The whole subject of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism is beset by complexity and distorted by all kinds of contradictory historical developments. One can quote a range of individual theological opinions on the subject, but unfortunately they do not produce a coherent picture. God could very probably solve the problem with a single word, but for us it remains a mystery. We are seeking a solution by adopting a pluralistic approach, which acknowledges that human truth is multifaceted while it excludes anything that is a lie.

We will offer some observations on aspects of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, observations which on the whole do not contradict Orthodox teaching.

First, let us consider Judaism before Jesus Christ. The New Testament undoubtedly has its grounding in the Old Testament and therefore Old Testament religion before Jesus Christ is also the religion of the Orthodox Church. Denial of the role of the Old Testament is a heresy and a perversion of Christianity, which is condemned by the Orthodox faith (for example, the gnosticism of Marcion).

The question becomes more difficult after the advent of Jesus Christ and in the light of later developments within Judaism.

Judaism after the advent of Jesus Christ is part of the religious history of the development of humanity. Contemporary Judaism and Old Testament theology, it would seem, cannot be placed on the same level, even though God is undoubtedly working in the development of Judaism just as in all other religions.

We cannot approve of everything by any means in the history of Christianity. It is a history in which human beings have committed crimes and sins for which we are obliged to repent.

The Jewish people were chosen by God. It is impossible to deny from a reading of the Bible that the 'gifts and call of God are irrevocable' (Romans 11:29). God made His eternal covenant with the Jewish people and in His sight it is indissoluble. However, in not accepting Christ the Jewish nation was quite capable of unilaterally dissolving its covenant with God. God's covenant with the Jews thus remains in force today, but is onesided. With the advent of Jesus Christ God made a new covenant with humanity. God's chosen people include not only Jews but Christians – the 'New Israel'. Christians become Jews of a new kind, 'spiritual Jews', the new children of Abraham, not of the flesh, but of the spirit. The New Israel is the inheritor of God's promises.

Jews and Christians have the same God. We can state quite firmly that the God of

*This will be the concluding chapter of the book *Pravoslavnaya Tserkov' i Yevrei*.

the Jews, the God of the Old Testament, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is also the God of the Christians.

There is the question of Israel's denial of the Messiah. The fact that many Jews did not accept the Messiah is not a crime and does not prove the moral depravity of the people as a whole. It is their tragedy, and a Divine mystery. Christians do not have the right to persecute Jews for rejecting Jesus. Moreover, Christians must be grateful to the Jews for having succeeded in carrying this holy religion to us across the centuries, for 'it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you' (Romans 11:18). The Apostle Paul particularly warned Christians about arrogance towards the Jews: 'So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you' (Romans 11:20–21).

Those passages in the New Testament where Jesus Christ and the apostles denounce the Jews refer nowadays not only to the Jews, or even, perhaps, not so much to Jews in the first instance as to all of us Christians. There is not one sin condemned by the Lord and the apostles, not one crime before God and mankind, of which Christians are not guilty.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that the Jews have not accepted Christ and we must take this fact into consideration soberly and with Christian love, neither exaggerating nor underestimating it. Rejection of Jesus can after all also be found in Christianity. We Christians can fall away from Christ and also unilaterally dissolve our covenant with Him (through atheism, rejection of the Holy Spirit and so on).

Jewish culture has undoubtedly contributed to the common culture of humanity, as indeed it has to Russian culture and history (many examples could be quoted here, both positive and negative).

Identification of particular Jews with the whole Jewish people leads to anti-semitism – racial, economic and social. This antisemitism can sometimes be explained on more or less rational grounds, but there is no justification for it. We Christians must understand fully the reasons for antisemitism, in order not to allow it in the future, to exclude it from history.

A Christian who strikes a Jew, abuses him or is angry with him is a bad Christian, but a Christian nonetheless. We are all bad Christians in one way or another. But if a Christian lays blame on the whole Jewish people, then he ceases to be a Christian. Antisemitism is not compatible with Christianity. Christianity rejects racism. From the Christian point of view racism is a denial of God as the Creator of all people, a denial of the fact that all people are children of God. A racist in fact dissolves his side of the covenant with God.

It must also unfortunately be noted that Jews are often suspicious and sense anti-semitism where there is none.

Some of the Church Fathers and Teachers have had harsh things to say about the Jews (for example, St John Chrysostom, St Ignati Bryanchaninov, Feofan Prokopovich). It seems to us that their hostility was produced by historical conditions and that their anti-Jewish sermons were often a reaction to a particular situation in society at one or another historical period. For example, in Antioch at the time of St John Chrysostom there was a very strong Jewish influence on Christians. Christianity had by then lost its Jewish–Christian culture. In order to preach successfully to the pagans Christianity had to separate itself from its Jewish roots, a separation which was like 'cutting living flesh'. One of the results of this process was St John Chrysostom's *Shest' slov protiv iudeyev* (*Six Words against the Jews*), as were other similar Christian essays. It is our opinion that this whole question deserves special objective research.

Jewish history is deeply tragic. Christians are among those responsible for pogroms against the Jews, the Holocaust and other terrible events in the history of the Jewish people which contradict the teaching of the Church and cannot be justified. One of the most important tasks for Christianity today is to oppose the development of evil and violence in the world and in particular of evil and violence towards the Jews.

(Translated from the Russian by Emma Watkins.)