

## Christophoric flesh

Since the days of the first disciples of Jesus, there has probably never been a time without Jewish disciples of Jesus. I do not mean here Jews who converted by force or sought conversion to gain social advantages. I mean Jews who, whether secretly or publicly but always sincerely, came to identify Christ with the Messiah of Israel. Let us call them Messianic Jews in the broad sense of the word. The least one can say is that there has been little thinking about the providential meaning of their existence. Well, of course, a number of Church and political leaders have seen in them an instrument given by God in order to attract the remaining part of the Jewish nation to true faith. As theologically motivated as such proselyte views might be from a Christian point of view, I would refrain from calling them a reflection on the providential meaning of Jewish Messianic existence. Indeed, according to this proselyte worldview, this existence has no meaning at all as such. It is providential as long as it drives other Jews away from Jewish existence by inducing them to merge with and finally melt in the “normal” Christian population. If some thinking is involved here, it is not about Messianic life but about Jewish death. As a privileged instrument of God’s providence, a Messianic Jew is supposed to lead the way towards the final abandonment of Jewish life, just as the wise man from Jesus’ parable leaves behind all his wealth to acquire the precious pearl of true faith. The question about the providential meaning of Messianic Jewish existence is therefore the complete opposite to this proselyte worldview. It reads as follows. Does it make sense that Jewish disciples would retain their Jewish identity within the Body formed by all the disciples? And when I say “make sense”, I do not mean for us but for God. I could therefore put the question in even more cogent

terms; namely, is it the will of God, as manifested in Jesus Christ, that Jews should retain their identity as they form one Body with his other disciples? If it is the will of God, then the existence of Messianic Jews must have a precise purpose in God's providential plan. But what could it be?

There are Messianic Jews that are holier or less inclined to sin than others. There are Messianic Jews who are more knowledgeable about Judaism than others. There are Messianic Jews who tend to observe more customs or *mitsvot* from Jewish traditions than others. But when we discuss about the existence of Messianic Jew as such, we are considering it independently of this variety of cases and circumstances. We are setting Jewish Messianic existence and Gentile Christian existence side by side. Here again, a Messianic Jew will probably always find Gentile Christians who are holier, more intelligent, and even in some cases more knowledgeable about his own Jewish tradition than he is. In spite of this, is there something that gives special purpose and value to his existence in the eyes of God? If this is not about virtues, commitments or skills, then the only reality one is led to think of is the fact that he was born a Jew. The uniqueness of a Messianic Jew has to do with his flesh in the broad or theological sense of the word as it were.

At first sight, Christian tradition has little positive to say about flesh as a theological notion. Jesus himself teaches that "it is the spirit that gives life, the flesh has nothing to offer". (Jn. 6:63 NJB). There is a sense in which flesh is more or less identified with sin: "For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, (Gal. 5:17 NAS). This should of course be distinguished from the way flesh is used to designate biological kinship. But it is precisely according to this meaning that Paul denies a special privilege to Jews when it comes to the grace manifested in the New Covenant. As he writes in his epistle to the Romans: "That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants"(Rom. 9:5-8 NAS). Still, the notion of flesh has yet another content in

Scriptures, a content which, if not positive, is at least neutral. Flesh can designate human condition in general. The Son of God was made flesh. Seen from this point of view, could the existence of Messianic Jews have a providential meaning? After all, what distinguishes Jews from Gentiles and what Gentile Christians continuously wrestle with - is the fact that one is born a Jew whereas one cannot be a Christian without becoming it willingly. Before being an individual faith, Jewishness is an ontological fact that goes back to the transforming blessing bestowed on an obscure Chaldean figure called Abram: "And you are no longer to be called Abram; your name is to be Abraham, for I am making you father of many nations". (Gen. 17:5 NJB). One could say that Jewish individual faith is faith in Jewishness as an ontological fact - this transforming blessing repeated from one biological generation to the other that Christian theology has commonly designated as an election - a first election as it distinguishes it from the second and definitive election associated with the Covenant in Christ. Circumcision, this cutting of the flesh, is to be understood as the first expression of an individual faith confessing this election inherent to a divinely transformed biological reality. Christ is God who became flesh. A Jew is a human being who has God inscribed in his flesh, like it or not. As Dostoevsky puts it in his *Diaries*: "This is truly something strange: one cannot conceive of a Jew without [his] God: it is impossible to imagine a Jew without [his] God "Да и странное дело: еврей без бога как-то немислим; еврея без бога и представить нельзя" (*The Jewish Question*, 1877). What we are asking is whether God wants some of Christ's disciples to be Jews as to the flesh. Or to put it negatively, is it not a positive will of God that a unilateral emphasis on election in terms of faith in Christ replace any consideration of election in terms of flesh? We all have in mind the passages of Paul's letters where he repeatedly points that there are no more Greeks and Jews in Christ (Gal.3:28; 1 Cor.12:13; Col.3:11; Rom.10:12). But we also read in these passages that there are no more masters and servants or men and women in Christ. It is obvious that what Paul wants to question is the a priori inequality of status,

from a religious point of view, that used to distort these relationships. But this does not prevent Paul from ascribing distinct roles to men and women as well as to masters and servants elsewhere. The author of the letter to the Ephesians, be he Paul or not, even bases his description of the relationship between Christ and his Church on the distinction of roles between a man and a woman (5:25-33). The truth is that Paul has never seen a contradiction between the cancellation of the a priori superiority of Jews in the economy of the new Covenant and the distinction between a Jewish component and a Gentile one in the Body of the pristine Church. *First to the Jews, then to the Greeks....* Of course, one may argue that this reflected a transitory situation, a fact without significance since Jewish identity was anyhow destined to disintegrate into the wider Body of the Church due to the sheer pressure of numbers. St Jerome and St Augustine among other Fathers of the Church reasoned in those terms (Jerome, Letters 112 and 116, Augustine, Letters 75 and 82). If there was a providential meaning attached to the existence of Jews in the Body of the Church, it had to do with the necessity of ensuring the transfer of the spiritual gifts associated with the First Covenant to the people of the Second Covenant. Once the transfer had been completed, the existence of a specifically Jewish entity in the Body would lose its *raison d'être*. Please note that when these Fathers spoke about the Church as the new economy of Gentiles replacing the old Jewish economy, there was absolutely no ethnic racism implied. For them the economy of Gentiles precisely meant the refusal of ethnicity as a criterion of membership in God's covenant, this in contrast to the old Jewish economy. This universal openness is the distinguishing mark of the Church of Christ. True, there are specific Church rites that correspond to a national identity and tradition. Still, it is understood that no tradition stands higher than any other when it comes to accessing Christ's message of Salvation, except in the case of schism and heresy. In actual fact, the only ones who have never been welcome - and not welcome in principle - to develop a rite corresponding to their national identity and tradition are

Jewish converts. The reason for this exception is not different from the rule. Should Jewish customs find some recognition in the Church, one would fear a surreptitious re-enactment of the ethnic privilege granted to Jews in the Old Testament within the new economy of Christ. It is therefore no coincidence if Jewish converts wanting to join a Church were traditionally asked to sign a preliminary declaration according to which they would renounce all Jewish observances and customs. This situation has generated an attitude of silence, secrecy and even shame among Jewish converts. They have usually dedicated a significant amount of their energy to making their Christian brothers and sisters forget about their own identity and background. It goes without saying that this strategy has hardly ever succeeded. Who can forget that Jewishness, like baptism, can never be erased, not even by the adoption of another religious faith or the denial of religion as a whole? It sticks to a Jew's flesh from birth to death. As a consequence, Jewish converts have usually looked at their Jewish identity from a Gentile point of view. They have tended to consider it as something of a cumbersome and slightly obscene appendix one has to live with although it already stands deprived of any religious meaning or theological justification.

I would like to contrast this mindset with a famous passage of the Epistle to the Romans: "For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in ἄχρι οὗ τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν εισέλθῃ;<sup>26</sup> and thus all Israel will be saved καὶ οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται.". Remarkably, Paul looks at the same situation from a symmetrically opposite perspective: it is not the Jews that are supposed to come into the Church as converts, but the Gentiles. The place left vacant by a number of Jews ἀπὸ μέρους τῷ Ἰσραὴλ, who have hardened their hearts gives to Gentiles an opportunity to come in. When Paul declares that all Israel will be saved, I believe that rather than the Jewish nation, he has in mind the whole, formed by Gentiles

who have come in and by Jews who have stayed - otherwise the consequential link which marks the end of this process of ethnic reconciliation “ οὕτως, thus” would not make logical sense. Still, it means that the presence of Jews in the Church is part of a providential design, μυστήριον , related to the completion of the Body of Christ at the end of times. One can legitimately wonder how the Jewish component that welcomed Gentiles at the beginning of Church history would still be existent at the end of times. If a Jewish component is not welcome in the Church *qua* Jewish, this in order to preserve the unity of the Body, how could Jewish existence and identity endure until the end of times? Should we think of this whole Israel that Paul has in mind **as** something structurally different from the Church of the origin, as featuring one homogeneous people in which all Jewish particularities will have disintegrated? But then why contrast the future salvation of Israel with the current hardening of a number of Jewish hearts? And if this were the case, why would Paul bother to invoke a μυστήριον - a secret intention of God which is not easily grasped by the human mind since it refers to the design of God on his Creation, a design hidden from the origin and unfolding in the most unpredictable ways during the course of time?

Actually, when one looks at the course of history, it comes as an astonishing fact that there has always been a Jewish presence in the Church, regardless of all the measures taken against the *mores judaici*, and other Judaizers throughout the history of the Western and Eastern Churches. This is a fairly supernatural fact *per se*. Jewish presence in the Church was biologically and culturally bound to die. It never did. Generation after generation, it has been renewed by the integration of new Jewish converts. Would this not **lead** us to think that there is a providential purpose to the presence of Jews in the Church, even if this purpose has never been the object of an official acknowledgment? Paul would hardly have envisaged the Church of the end of times as the whole composed of Jews and Gentiles if this distinction had lost all *raison d'être* with the advent of the

New Covenant in Christ. But if it is so, how could we define this alleged *raison d'être*?

I believe we need to go back to the notion of flesh as we try to deal with this issue. Without great originality, Dostoevsky when he reflects on the Jewish Question in his *Diaries* emphasizes the connection between this sacred flesh that defines Jewish identity and the cult of matter, as opposed to the truth of the Spirit which is the token of Christian faith. Writing about the influence of Jews in modern European society, he observes that it goes together with the advent of materialism - "this blind, flesh-devouring thirst for personal material well-being, the striving for the accumulation of money by all possible means – there is no other way of conceiving the ultimate end, Reason, Freedom - and this is what is meant to take the place of the Christian idea of salvation promoting the intimate union of all men on the basis of moral purity and fraternity.

- - слепая, плотоядная жажда личного материального обеспечения, жажда личного накопления денег всеми средствами - вот все, что признано за высшую цель, за разумное, за свободу, вместо христианской идеи спасения лишь посредством теснейшего нравственного и братского единения людей”.

According to Dostoevsky, it is clearly the rejection of Christ that leads Jews to build their nation on values that are squarely opposed to the self-sacrificial generosity of the new people of Christ. But what then of those Jews who no longer reject Christ and espouse the self-sacrificial values of the new people of God? Should we say that their endorsement of these values can never be sincere due to this strange but irreducible connection with evil that sticks to their Jewish flesh? That would exclude the apostles from the people of God. That would actually exclude Christ himself from it. And yet if we say that the sacred flesh of Jews is not incompatible with Christian faith, if we say, moreover, that it is destined to recognize its God and Messiah in Christ, this does give to Jews a very special place in the people of God, since no other component of this Body can likewise claim to be

destined to receive and carry Christ *according to the flesh*. Taking a stance opposite to that of Dostoevsky, Vladimir Soloviev and Sergei Bulgakov have emphasized the fundamentally positive and quasi sacramental character that matter and flesh receive in the Jewish tradition. Accordingly, the real reason behind Dostoevsky's ranting against Jews as the enemies of God, just as behind so many similar anti-Semitic declarations, is the unavowed fear that Jews might actually happen to be God's and Christ's closest friends. What in particular would become of the idea of the Russian people as "God-bearer", *Christoforos*, if Jews were to be identified with the true God-bearers, as possessing this elective title by birth, in contrast to all other nations of the earth? If there are good reasons to consider those who have been chosen by God from of old as destined to join the new people of God, there are also serious reasons to view those who claim to have been called to take their place, in terms of God's favorite nation, as little more than a bunch of usurpers. When Vladimir Soloviev wrote that the Jewish question was in reality a Christian question, he had precisely this fundamental contradiction in mind: "Jews have always related to us in a Jewish manner. But we [Christians] have not until this day learnt to relate to Jews in a Christian way" (*The Jews and the Christian Question*).

Иудеи всегда относились к нам по-иудейски; мы же, христиане, напротив, доселе не научились относиться к иудейству по-христиански.

In actual fact, Christian anti-Semitism is not motivated by the love of Christ and the rejection of his enemies, but by the anti-Christian sentiment that is still very much alive within the Body of Christ. It is the voice of the ancient serpent whispering to the hearts of Cain and Joseph's brothers: "Kill the one who claims to be God's favorite, is it not the best way to discard **your** own doubts regarding the legitimacy of your election?"

Surprisingly, I have not lost sight of the point of my argument. I am still trying to define the purpose of the presence of Jews in the Church. But while formulating a definition is always a positive result, the object which is being defined can be a



negative reality. In some way, I think the role of Jews in the Church is essentially negative. In virtue of their own flesh or through their mere presence, Jews are called to exorcize the pagan spirit that still haunts the minds of so many Gentile Christians. There is – this belief is the fruit of my private experience as well as the experience of the Helsinki Consultation- an instinctive knowledge about God, a familiarity with Him that is equally shared by Jewish disciples of Christ and is neither communicated nor communicable to Gentile Christians. As I said before drawing on Paul’s teaching, it does not confer any status of superiority to Jewish disciples over Gentile disciples, just as being a man does not confer any privilege over being a woman when it comes to the reality of Christ’s Salvation. But I see , the main purpose of a Jewish presence in the Body of Christ in the very difficulty that Gentile believers experience when they try to relate to their Jewish brothers and sisters as the actual bearers of God’s never- disowned gifts to. If Gentile disciples have behaved as if the gifts of the First election had disappeared with the Second, if they have induced their Jewish brothers to think likewise, it is not because of the fundamental equality of both in Christ or due to some evil inherent to Jewish flesh, but because Gentile disciples perceive the reality of the enduring Jewish election as a threat to their own status and privilege in the New. One cannot simultaneously profess to own the truth about God, to have received this absolute knowledge from God himself, and acknowledge that others have an access to that very truth that will remain forever beyond one’s reach. I view the very idea of being granted the monopoly of truth as demonic and quintessentially foreign to the truth of Christ. The presence of Jews in the Church prevents Gentiles from paganising her. And let no one say that this amounts to conceding the same monopoly to Jews. When a Jew decides to become part of this Body of Christ, he understands that he needs to be taught a treasure of knowledge and an experience that is the fruit of the Gentile genius or equivalently, the sign of the particular grace of God bestowed upon a non-Jewish world. Why should Gentiles not conversely acknowledge that the Jewish component of the Body

sets a limit to what it can know and experience of God's existence and truth? Neither of the two components owns the wisdom and truth that have been revealed to us in Christ. Nobody apart from the divine Head of the Body has the monopoly of truth. In sum, if all Christians, especially the Jewish disciples, are called to see in Jewish identity an invaluable present from God to his Church, it is because the people that they form together has not renounced the will to reach its final destination: become one in Christ; that is, being an authentically Christophoric nation.

fr. Antoine Levy, OP