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On Being a Christian: Star



A Rabbi's Reponse

By Steven L. Jacobs

The Catholic priest Father Andrew M. Greely, director of the Center for the Study of American Pluralism, in his review of "On Being a Christian" by Hans Kung, writes

"This is the best Christian apologetic book of our time. It almost certainly will become a classic of religious literature, one to read in decades, perhaps even centuries to come, if not for its content then at least for the integrity, honesty, courage, and balance of its style. No one who is seriously interested in contemporary Christianity can afford to miss it. . . . For Kung, religion is too important to be just scholarship: one becomes a Christian not merely by knowing about Christianity in a theoretical way but understanding its practical implications for our lives. ON BEING A CHRISTIAN is written by a committed, active Christian to move others to also be Christians. . . . Reading it is almost like making a retreat. One gains not only new understanding into the essence of the Christian belief, but also cannot escape examining one's own conscience and asking how well one responds to the God who has revealed himself in Jesus . . . one of the most brilliant, ingenious, and convincing descriptions of the Christian life ever to be written."

Truly, a book which can merit such praise from as critical a reviewer as Father Greely must also have something significant and meaningful to share with those of us engaged in Jewish-Christian Dialogue. And so it does!

Kung begins his presentation by drawing our attention to what one scholar has termed "the sorry record of the past," a past beclouded by initial Jewish persecutions of the neophyte Christian movement, and subsequent Christian persecutions of the Jewish people. (Fellow Catholic priest Father Edward Flan-

nery in his book, *The Anguish of the Jews: A Catholic Priest Writes of 23 Centuries of Anti-semitism* details these events with forthrightness, objectivity, and a healthy regard and respect for scholarship and truth. It, too, is a book with which all of us must be familiar. . . .)

Kung does not, however, choose to dwell on the ancient past with its repetitious litany of persecutions—which is as it should be. He prefers, instead, to focus on the modern period, known as the Holocaust, which saw the death of six million Jewish men, women, and children (among others!) because they were Jews. He writes:

" . . . it must be absolutely stated that Nazi anti-Judaism was the work of godless, anti-Christian criminals. But it would not have been possible without the almost two thousand years' pre-history of 'Christian' anti-Judaism, which prevented Christians in Germany from organizing a convinced and energetic resistance on a broad front. . . . it must be noted in order to define more precisely the question of guilt that none of the Nazi anti-Jewish measures were new: special distinguishing clothing, exclusion, expropriation, expulsion, concentration camps, massacres, burnings. All these things existed in what were called the 'Christian' Middle Ages . . . and at the time of the 'Christian' Reformation. Only the racial argument was new. . . . After Auschwitz there can be no more excuses. Christendom cannot avoid a clear admission of its guilt. (page 169)"

Strong language indeed! As a Jew whose paternal family members were themselves victims of this carnage, I am far less concerned about the question of Christian guilt than I am about the question of Christian acknowledgement of the events of the past as they historically occurred without reference to personal, collective, or religious bias, prejudices, or rationalizations. For without a true appreciation of history as it has affected the Jewish People—especially the history of the Twentieth Century—dialogue between our two faith-communities will never achieve the desired level of openness. History for the Jewish People has been and will continue to be a prime vehicle of meaning and value, governing much of our response to contemporary realities. A true appreciation of this past for both Christians and Jews is vitally important for our present and future Dialogue.

Kung then continues his discussion by claiming that the Jewish People have an internal integrity of their own and exist

in a unique and special relationship to God as well as a "special vocation among the peoples of the world" (p. 170), all of which is quite contrary to the views of British historian Arnold Toynbee who would label us a "fossilized people". Kung would also include in these major perspectives for a sensitized Christian community an awareness of the religious significance of the Return to Zion for a portion of our People.

I do find myself very much in accord with his understanding of "chosenness," for that is really what he is talking about, and would elaborate in the following manner: In a major statement by our Reform Jewish Movement in celebration of our 100th anniversary on these shores, the following is found:

We (i.e. the Jewish People) are God's witness that history has meaning.

That is the "special vocation" of which Kung so eloquently writes! That is what the conscious act of "choosingness" as I prefer to call it is all about since we first contracted our Covenant with God so very long ago. Given all that has befallen this numerically insignificant people, our continuing existence despite all obstacles and odds is incontrovertible evidence that history does indeed have meaning; And that meaning is, quite simply, that God—however understood—is real, and that only through partnership with God is survival, both individual and group, a continuing possibility. God is and we, the Jewish People, continue to be.

Kung then takes great pains to remind his Christian readers that "Jesus was a Jew and all anti-Judaism is a betrayal of Jesus himself" (pg. 170), and that "... despite numerous inhibitions and difficulties, there is a growing awareness of a common Jewish Christian basis which is not merely humanitarian but theological." (pg. 171-72). He even goes so far as to quote our March Jewish-Christian Dialogue and Ministerial-Institute speaker Dr. Jakob J. Petuchowski of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, Ohio, who calls for "a Jewish theology of Christianity and a Christian theology of Judaism" (Ibid.)

I heartily concur. It is simply not enough here in Mobile to dialogue over our points of similarity and mutual humanitarian concerns. What is needed—indeed what has been needed for a long, long time—is a major revolution in theological thinking and writing in both the Jewish and Christian worlds which would prayerfully result in a profound re-evaluation of the positive contributions of both faiths to humankind's on-

going quest for God. Unlike other aspects of religion, such a thorough re-assessment must start at the top — with the major denominational leaders, scholars, theologians, philosophers, and seminaries—rather than at the grass-roots level. Its success will be measured by the ability of the great thinkers in both our faith-groups to translate their visions into a language all of us can understand as we attempt to build our human community together.

Quite naturally, Kung concludes his discussion of "Christianity and Judaism" by addressing himself to the person who unites as well as separates us: Jesus of Nazareth. And it is here that we are afforded our closest insight into the religious integrity of Hans Kung himself: For without apologetics, he asks the question:

If today the religious significance of Judaism is being subjected by Christians to a new appraisal, should not Jews on the other hand face up to the question on the religious significance of Jesus? Jesus—the last of the Jewish prophets? (p. 172)

Unhesitatingly, the answer is yes! And while I have no doubt whatsoever that we in the Jewish Community will continue to reject any understanding of Jesus as the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, I, too, would agree that it is high time that we address ourselves to the Jewishness of Jesus—as David Fluser, Shalom Ben-Chorin, Samuel Sandmel, and others are already beginning to do. Our own religious structures will in no way be threatened or undermined by an honest, objective look at Jesus himself, a look which could, conceivably, lead us as Jews to a healthy appreciation of the historical foundations and contemporary realities of Christianity. We shall never know unless we try. . . .