

CHAPTER ONE

REASON, HUMANITY AND RELIGIONS

In his Discours sur l'histoire universelle, the last great version of universal history based upon religious history, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet explained the reasons behind the survival of the Jewish people: it served as a warning not to resist salvation and it bore witness to the Scriptures. The benchmark was Christianity, as appeared increasingly evident in later movements and in those attempts to convert the Jews during the eighteenth century, which took place with an insistence that was loaded with prejudice. Even Moses Mendelssohn, the enlightened Jewish philosopher, found himself caught up in Lavater's attempt to convert him. His response to this was to emphasise the principle of tolerance on the basis of reason, and he theorized the distinction between universal religion and the positive historical religions. The difference between Judaism and Christianity in their facing up to modern needs took on a crucial importance: whilst Mendelssohn championed the former as being free from dogmatic imposition, Kant sustained the absolute superiority of the second, which conformed more with the autonomy of practical reason. However, both of them considered reason as a fundamental criterion and affirmed the link with the Enlightenment, albeit in a different way. By contrast, this criterion was openly challenged by Hamann and Jacobi, in the name of divine revelation and faith. Their criticism was especially directed at Mendelssohn, who represented for them the fusion between Enlightenment rationalism and Judaism. In this debate, the concept of modernity underwent variations and changes and the meaning of history, with its presumed progress, was called into question. More than any other point, it was this which separated

Mendelssohn from the group, including his friend Lessing. Not only these figures, but other writers and thinkers, such as Eisenmenger, Michaelis, Kölbele, Lavater and Herder, also played their part in shedding light on the ambiguities and implications of a debate that was due to have far-reaching consequences towards the end of the eighteenth century and upon the rise of Romanticism.

1. "True" religion and positive religions: Mendelssohn and Lavater

In the New Testament there is an evident attempt to establish a link between the new announcement of salvation and the Word of God as handed down to Moses and the prophets. A central category is that of accomplishment: if, on the one hand, the Old Testament was still valid and not even the smallest word could be omitted from its laws (Mt. 5,17-118, Lc. 16,17), on the other hand, it was also subjected to radical criticism as representing an oppressive yoke, confirming the slavery of sin (Gal. 3,19.22.23.25; 4,3.8; Rom. 3,9.20; 5,20).⁵³ Between these two positions, with their element of conflict,⁵⁴ there stood the problem of election, which, in one sense had been passed on to the Christians, but in another continued to attribute the Jews with a unique role in history (Rom 11,1.24.32). The Jews at least bore witness to the transfer of the inheritance to the Christians, and as a warning not to resist salvation. Then, at the end of time, they would convert.⁵⁵

This theological discourse ended by changing meaning when the overall design of salvation history took on more mundane and secular characteristics. The last great draft of universal history which centred on

⁵³ For the tension within the Pauline conception itself and its evolution, see Hans Hübner, *Das Gesetz bei Paulus. Ein Beitrag zum Werden der paulinischen Theologie*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982³, spec. 25-43, 62-80. For the interpretation of the contrast between Judaism and Christianity in terms of letter and spirit, see Jeffrey S. Librett, *The rhetoric of cultural dialogue: Jews and Germans from Moses Mendelssohn to Richard Wagner and beyond*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, spec. 12-18, 30, 43-46, 50-53, 54-55, 68-74, 95-96, 97-99, 113-117, 132-145, 188-189, 207.

⁵⁴ For the problem of interpreting *Vetus Testamentum in novo receptum*, see Hans Hübner, *Biblische Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, vol. I. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990, 13-36, 62-70, 149-73.

⁵⁵ On the theological implications, see Renzo Fabris, *L'olivo buono. Scritti su ebraismo e cristianesimo*. Brescia: Morcelliana, 1995, 53-94.

religious history, although burdened with judgements and secular evaluation,⁵⁶ can be considered the *Discours sur l'histoire universelle* (1681) by Jacques-Benigne Bossuet who, faithfully following the biblical chronology, set strict correlation between biblical stories and historical testimony, exalting the “secret plans of divine providence” upon which “this long concatenation of particular causes that make and break empires depends”.⁵⁷ The decisive authority is that of Moses “the most ancient of historians, the most sublime of philosophers and the wisest of legislators”, on the basis of which, the Creation can be established as 4004 B.C. and the Flood 1656 years later, these two moments marking the beginning “of all histories”, according to the testimonies of the tradition known “all over the world”. The authority of Moses ensured the centrality of the Jewish people in ancient times and the value of their law. This was “a perfect book which, being linked by Moses to the history of God’s people, taught them their origins, their religion, their culture, their customs, their philosophy, all that was necessary to regulate life, all that united and created a society, the good and the bad examples, the rewards for the former and the severe punishments for the latter”. Even the presumed limits of the *torah* are justified: the detailed ritual precepts were necessary “to separate the people of God from the other peoples and to serve as a barrier against idolatry”, a danger which still menaced Christians.⁵⁸ Silence on the question of the immortality of the soul prevented confusing the spirit of Man with that of God, an error frequently committed by philosophers.⁵⁹ The formative value of the law appears even greater if the characteristics of the Jewish people as “rude and rebellious as much as if not more than any other”⁶⁰ are taken into consideration.

These characteristics emerge forcefully on the question about the punishment of the Jews for having refused Christ. Rather than focussing on the death of Christ, Bossuet concentrated on the destruction of Jerusalem and

⁵⁶ For its nodal position in the passage from theology to the philosophy of history, see Christhard Hoffmann, *Juden und Judentum im Werk deutscher Althistoriker des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*. Leiden: Brill, 1988, 11, 21-22 which also establishes a significant connection with Voltaire.

⁵⁷ *Oeuvres*, ed. Velat and Yvonne Champailier, “Bibliothèque de la Pléiade”. Paris: Gallimard, 1970, 1024.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 669-70, 796, 793.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 846. This silence over personal immortality represented a constantly repeated accusation, from Voltaire to Reimarus, from Kant to Reinhold, from Hegel to Schopenhauer, see also Liebeschütz, *op. cit.*, 11, 18, 32.

⁶⁰ *Discours*, 792.



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