

CHAPTER TWO

CHRISTIANITY, PEOPLE AND NATIONS

During the Romantic period, the emergence of nationalist aspirations meant that the problem of the Jew's presence in the German states was posed in new terms: was it possible to integrate them despite the difference of traditions and religion? The harsh position taken up by the young Fichte was emblematic: he said that it was necessary to change their minds in such a way that they no longer had "Jewish ideas". Although he used slightly more moderate tones, Schleiermacher demanded their renunciation of certain aspects of Judaism and public assurances of their fidelity. The practical consequence of this widespread pressure were the baptisms of convenience. However, not only members of the Jewish community, but also Christian theologians, like Schleiermacher himself, viewed these baptisms with preoccupation, as a threat to the identity of both religious faiths. The dominant idea continued to be the relationship with Christianity. This relationship was also important in the writings of Hegel, who focussed on the destiny of the Jewish people on various occasions. While considering the still unhealed scissions in Jewish history, Hegel matured his dialectical thinking and progressively revalued the pain endured by that people, and their conception of divinity. Hegel was convinced of the important role played by the Jews in the spiritual formation of the modern world, and used fairly conciliatory tones towards them, which included the possibility of their civil integration. On the contrary, Fries adopted a far from open approach, which he justified by severe judgements on the negative social influence of the Jews and the peculiarities of their race. He was countered by Wilhelm Zimmern, who had attended Fries' lessons and was the first Jew

to be nominated Privatdozent in law at a German university. The integration process proceeded slowly and not without a degree of ambiguity, as Heinrich Heine noted in his reflections on the course of liberal Judaism after Mendelssohn.

1. Liberty, morality and the state: Fichte

The application of criticism to religion by Fichte was interwoven with that carried out by Kant himself who, worried about the radical outcome, ended up by suffering a negative conditioning.³⁹⁹ It is already well known that the *Critique of All Revelation*, which came out anonymously in 1792 with Königsberg indicated as the place of publication, was originally mistaken for the work on religion that Kant was drawing up and which would actually come out the following year. In this work, the distinction that Semler had already introduced between theology and religion, was translated into criticism of the former as “mere science, dead knowledge without practical influence” and into the reassessment of the second as “something that *obliges* us”. This obligation could not be founded on other motives than the moral law itself. Thus, the only revelation that could come from God was that which “used only moral means for its announcement and affirmation”. “The essential factor of the revelation in general” was “the announcement of God as moral legislator”. In contrast to this understanding of religion and God, Fichte evoked not only the ancient Jews, but also those of more recent times. The starting point for his criticism was the idea by which God had taken pleasure in the smell of food: “That the Jews of ancient times really argued in this way is testified by the prophets’ criticism of this error: That they have become no wiser in recent times is shown by the ridiculously infantile representations of God contained in their Talmud; whether this be due to the fault of their religion, or to their own fault, let us reserve judgement for now”.⁴⁰⁰ Fichte pointed out that something of this mentality had remained in Christianity when it was held that certain invocations had a particular efficacy. He, therefore, anticipated the Kantian discourse on the Jewish inheritance within Christianity, just like the appeal to the purification of religion from the ties of sensibility, making Kant’s moral vision his own.

³⁹⁹ See Claudio Cesa, *L’influenza della “Religione”*, in *Kant e la filosofia della religione*, ed. Pirillo, 462, 470.

⁴⁰⁰ *Critik aller Offenbarung, Gesamtausgabe (GA) I/1*, ed. R. Lauth and H. Jacob. Stuttgart: Frommann, 1964, 23, 19, 76, 77, 92-93n.

In this way, he expressed philosophically motives that he had sustained independently in a theological context. In a youthful piece, *On the Purposes of Christ's Death*, he had contrasted the death and resurrection of Jesus with the Messianic expectations of the Jews, emphasising the need to eliminate the Mosaic religion. In a detailed comment on the Letters to the Romans, he had reduced the pre-eminence of the Jews over the pagans to the greater facility with which they had been able to receive Christianity and he concluded from this that their reception of salvation was less meritorious.⁴⁰¹ The exaltation of Christianity as a religion "for all times and peoples", absolutely superior to the previous religions, even Judaism, which were still bound to anthropomorphism and dominated by the needs of the heart, had also returned in other pieces, reflecting a significant closing of the distance between New Testament moral and Kantian moral.⁴⁰² The commandment on love was, therefore, explained as the need to love virtue and truth.⁴⁰³

However, the step taken in *The Critique of All Revelation* goes beyond this philosophical and theological statement, suggesting a connection between antiquity and the recent era of the Jews, raising the question of whether their limits were to be ascribed to the religion or to themselves. This posed the problem of a people as such and hinted that it also concerned the present in some way, too. This idea emerged in a sermon on the Christian duty of loving one's enemies. By enemies, Fichte assumed the Jews. "The Jews, whose greatest proof of the truth of their religious principles lay in the affirmation that even their fathers and forefathers had believed this way, had sacrificed this way, had prayed with the same formulas, hated, persecuted and killed, when they could, the first Christians, since the latter wanted to introduce a cult to an enlightened (*aufgeklärte*) God, an attempt the Jews judged worthy of severe punishment". The similarity drawn between the original Christianity and Enlightenment demands accompanied the description of Judaism as the obstinate defender of an oppressive tradition and, for this reason, ready to kill. The contrast, therefore, assumed a symbolic value. Fichte observed that such enemies still exist today, convinced that they are fighting for a just cause. It is therefore a question of establishing how someone who is more enlightened should behave: "Should we fly into a temper because we are more enlightened than them?"⁴⁰⁴ The precept of love for one's enemies invites a superior conduct.

⁴⁰¹ *Über die Absichten des Todes Jesu* (dated 1786), GA, II/1, 83-5, 96.

⁴⁰² *Einige Aphorismen über Religion und Deismus*, *ibid.*, 287-88.

⁴⁰³ *Über die Wahrheitsliebe*, *ibid.*, 153.

⁴⁰⁴ *Über die Pflichten gegen Feinde*, GA, II/3, 273.



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