

REVIEW ARTICLE

Zinzendorf and Judaism

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The history of conflict between Christians and Jews is very long and painful. It may be the longest and most bloody religious conflict in history. James Carroll's *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001), gives an unsparing account of the Roman Catholic Church's involvement in persecution of Jews through the centuries, including the apparent complicity of the Vatican with the Nazi program of elimination. Without detracting from the moral vigor of Carroll's book, it is helpful to see that there have been other threads in this story. Christiane Dithmar, *Zinzendorfs nonkonformistische Haltung zum Judentum* (Univ. of Heidelberg, 2000) offers an insightful, but inadequately documented, discussion of Zinzendorf's unique perspective on Judaism and how this affected the Moravians. For example, she explains why Moravians were the first church to add a prayer for Israel to the Litany and why it was that Moravians used to celebrate Yom Kippur.

Until the rise of Protestantism, there were three basic theological perspectives on Judaism and the Jews. One, which is evident in the synoptic gospels and perhaps the letter of James, focused on the intimate connections between Jesus and the Apostles to the Torah and prophets of Israel. Jesus, a faithful Jew, was the fulfillment of the covenant who brings Gentiles and Jews together. The second approach, evident in the Gospel of John and several non-canonical gospels, defined Jews as those who blindly rejected and even killed the Son of God. Often, this idea of Jewish rejection was connected to a portrayal of Jews as uniquely evil or even satanic.

The third approach, which can be seen in Paul, particularly Romans 9-11, represents a complex attempt to reconcile the fact that "salvation comes from

the Jews" and yet few Jews accepted Jesus as the Christ. Paul tried various ways to address this vexing problem, and proposed that Gentile Christianity was grafted onto Judaism, especially Old Testament Judaism. He argued that it was ultimately God's will that Jews had not embraced the gospel, but that in the end "all Israel will be saved." While Revelation does not discuss the relationship of Judaism and Christianity directly, it is interesting that the heavenly vision of the 144,000 is based on the twelve tribes of Israel.

Until the Reformation, the history of Jewish-Christian relations varied according to which of these three perspectives dominated. For the most part, the hierarchy's official stance was Pauline. Judaism should be tolerated, grudgingly, and even protected until the return of Christ, but only as a symbol of unbelief. On a popular level, though, the second point of view was often dominant. The launching of the First Crusade in 1095 reawakened Jewish persecution and forced conversions.

The Reformation reawakened interest in Judaism on the part of Christians. The renewed interest in establishing an accurate text of Scripture led Christian scholars and theologians to study Hebrew with local rabbis. It was because of this contact with Judaism that Protestants by and large rejected the Apocrypha and accepted as canonical only the Old Testament books recognized in the Jewish canon. Martin Luther emphasized the Jewishness of Jesus and urged Christians to love all Jews for the sake of Jesus. By the end of his life, though, he gave up on converting Jews to Christianity and wrote one of the most enduring anti-semitic tracts in history. Such was the usual course of Protestants and Jews. Initial admiration and helpful contact was followed by disillusionment and hostility.

The Pietist movement repeated this pattern for the most part. Halle revived interest in Jewish missions and won a few converts among Jews who were already interested in Christianity. Then, the disillusionment set in and Pietists grew less positive toward Judaism. The Radical Pietists, though, introduced a new perspective on Judaism and Christ. Their reading of Paul and Revelation indicated that one of the eschatological signs would be the conversion of Israel to belief in Jesus as the Messiah. If Jews could be converted in large numbers, then Christ would be sure to come. This idea of the conversion of Israel shortly before the parousia became a key component of American fundamentalist theology, by the way. This is how we can explain the phenomenon of evangelical Christians stating that Jews are damned while working diligently for the return of Jews to Zion and the establishment of a purely Jewish state or even a Jewish monarchy.

Zinzendorf charted a different and intriguing course. Initially he appears to have held to the typical understanding of Judaism. Jews were the symbol of the blindness of unbelief, but there was some hope that individual Jews might convert. Dithmar discusses Zinzendorf's personal contact with Jews who followed the radical teachings of Sabbatai Zevi, which initially misled Zinzendorf into believing that Jews would readily recognize that the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 is both Jesus and the Messiah. Through further personal contact with the Jewish community in Amsterdam and especially with a Portuguese refugee named Nunez da Costa, Zinzendorf came to appreciate the distinctiveness of Judaism. Da Costa, for a while, was one of Zinzendorf's closest friends, and he attempted to live with the Moravians in Europe. Eventually Zinzendorf helped set him up in business in Amsterdam.

It was around the time of the contact with Da Costa (1739) that Zinzendorf added the petition for Israel to the Litany in 1740. According to Dithmar, this marks this first time that a Western church made prayer for Israel a regular part of the liturgy. Zinzendorf's petition

asked that God would "restore the tribe of Judah in its time and bless its first fruits among us." Zinzendorf here joined two of his developing ideas on the Jewish mission: that Israel's salvation is in God's hands, but that some individuals (first fruits) had accepted Jesus as the Messiah and could live among the Moravians. After the death of Zinzendorf, this prayer was changed to a plea to save Israel from "blindness."

Zinzendorf made several attempts to establish a Jewish "Kehilla" or community within the Moravian community or "Gemeine." He spent years pursuing this project, but he never succeeded. He did arrange for the marriage of Jewish-Christian couples according to Jewish rites, but there was never a large enough group to establish a separate community. Samuel Lieberkühn spent much of his life working among the Jews, especially in Amsterdam, and became so versed in Torah and the rituals of 18th century Judaism that his friends called him "rabbi." Dithmar notes that Lieberkühn and Zinzendorf disagreed fundamentally on the role of reason in religion, but Lieberkühn remained a key contact in the Jewish community.

Among Dithmar's more controversial conclusions are that Zinzendorf was profoundly influenced by radical Pietist eschatology, but that he adapted it in his own unique fashion. If I understand her accurately on this point, she argues that Zinzendorf shared the idea of an in-breaking eschaton and the spread of the reign of Christ over all people. The Holy Spirit was already working to unite all souls, each in their own cultural manifestations, in bonds of mystical love. This eschatological hope was a key component of his "tropus" concept, which may have included plans for a Jewish tropus. Perhaps most significantly, according to Dithmar, Zinzendorf insisted that God remains true to the covenant that he made to Abraham (p. 243-244). Her discussion of Zinzendorf's Christocentric reading of the Torah is also intriguing if incomplete.

Thanks to Dithmar's study, we now have a better understanding of some unusual features of the Moravian

Church in Zinzendorf's day. Moravian communities, such as Bethlehem, celebrated Yom Kippur as a Christian festival, even though there were no Jews in the community, to emphasize the Jewish roots of Christian doctrine. Zinzendorf also hoped this would make it easier for Jews who wanted to follow Jesus to live in a Moravian settlement. Zinzendorf and his household ate kosher so as not to offend Jews or create a barrier between Jews and Christians. He criticized the Western church for adopting the name "Oester" (Easter) instead of holding to the original "Pasch." Pasch makes clear the connection between Passover and Easter. Dithmar does not include the tidbit that lamb was the preferred Easter dinner for many Moravian families throughout the 19th century.

There are questions about the scope and accuracy of Dithmar's research that I cannot adjudicate here. Suffice it to say that some of her conclusions will need to be confirmed by other researchers. Also, she completely dismisses Beyreuther's thesis that there was a connection between Hassidic Judaism and Zinzendorf. She claims that she found no solid evidence that Moravians had any contact with the Hassidim; however, I suspect that

more research into the Moravian diaspora work in the Balkans might yield some fruit in this regard.

She does agree with Beyreuther that there are typological, sociological, and even theological similarities between the 18th century Moravians and 18th century Hassidic Judaism. I wish she had developed this idea more thoroughly rather than leaving the impression that these similarities are merely an historical accident. Most disappointing is her claim that the Cabala had no influence on Zinzendorf. I think that closer attention to the Moravian understanding of the mystical marriage and an examination of Cabalistic terms in Zinzendorffian hymns and litanies may offer a different conclusion. This also requires further research.

This is all to say that Dithmar has opened a fascinating and largely unexplored world of Moravian-Jewish interaction that deserves more study. In this, as in many other things, the Moravians had a distinctive perspective and approach that may prove beneficial in the modern world. Zinzendorf's small voice hardly overcomes the dominant story of violence and persecution presented by Carroll and others, but it should still be heard.

Coming Soon in *The Hinge:*
Regarding the Interpretation of "Resolution 6"

Glenn Hertzog

Announcements

Now Available: *Community of the Cross: Moravian Piety in Colonial Bethlehem*, by Craig D. Atwood (Penn State Univ. Press, 2004). This is an in-depth study of Zinzendorf's theology and its impact on Moravian communal life, including the most controversial aspects of the so-called Sifting Time.

Also Available: *Jesus Still Lead On: An Introduction to Moravian Belief* by Craig D. Atwood (Moravian Publications Office, 2004). This is a guide for congregational discussion of two basic statements of Moravian belief.