CHAPTER 15

Jewish Mysticism, Nostra Aetate and Renewal in Judaism and Christianity

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1 Introduction

Nostra Aetate ("In Our Time") represents a pivotal document of the Second Vatican Council, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965. It was passed by a vote of 2,221 to 88 among the bishops assembled, as the Council’s “Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions.” It stands as a triumph of a respect for other religions that goes beyond bare tolerance, as well as a committed expression of human rights.

In choosing the opening words, “in our time,” the Declaration presses home its concerns in view of the way technology, already during the nineteen sixties, was transforming the world and drawing people on the planet ever closer together.1 Fifty years later, the sense of urgency experienced on a technological and demographic basis should be all the greater.

Yet the path towards the Declaration during the Council was by no means easy. In the shadow of the Shoah, many theologians, particularly Cardinal Augustin Bea within the Second Vatican Council, wanted to address anti-Semitism directly, as a deep fault of Catholic (and indeed, Christian) tradition reaching back into the earliest centuries. But an anonymous author circulated a pamphlet which asserted that the genocide of the Third Reich had been plotted by Jews, so as to weaken legitimate resistance to Judaism.2 The problem was not merely recourse to an ethnically motivated conspiracy theory, but a rejection of the possibility that Judaic culture or Jewish life could have value. In contrast, the capacity to offer an alternative, to discover within other


cultures, if not a new truth, then at least truth in a fresh light, was nurtured by curiosity about mysticism.

The roots of the achievements of *Nostra Aetate* reached down into the investigation of mysticism since the beginning of the twentieth century. When Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941) took up the topic, she was partially inspired by the Kabbalah; her investigations contributed to the scholarship of Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), Harry Wolfson (1887–1974), and Erwin R. Goodenough (1893–1965). The last three scholars, in turn, have fed the revolution in the study of the New Testament that is a part of the post-War inheritance of Christianity, as well the redefinition of Judaism after the Shoah. Although often suspected of heterodoxy, scholars of mysticism have contribution to the renewals of Judaism and Christianity, and the current phase of research promises more to come.

2 Formative Scholarship on Mysticism Prior to *Nostra Aetate*

Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism* pioneered modern attention to the topic, and fed the expanding interest during the twentieth century. First published in 1911, her work is—as its subtitle indicates—devoted to the issue of the changes of consciousness involved in meditation. Both in its survey of Christian materials related to mystical practice and in its typology of the path of mystic inquiry, Underhill’s book remains valuable, and is a stunning achievement of a single mind working long hours in the British Museum.

Although Underhill famously worked on her own, she did not work in isolation, nor was hers the only mind at work in the British Museum that was consumed by the topic of mysticism. She freely acknowledges the influence of A. E. Waite in *The Doctrine and Influence of the Kabalah* [sic], and directly quotes his generalization, as applying to Christian mysticism as well as the Kabbalah, that “God is considered as immanent in all that has been created or emanated, and yet is transcendent to all.” She nonetheless becomes critical of Waite’s association of mysticism with magic, and her perspective challenged his view that ritual was designed to raise what Waite called “the energy of the

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