Hermann Cohen's Relationship to Christian Thought

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Seventy years after his death, Hermann Cohen's view of Christianity is still the subject of considerable debate and confusion. This confusion is centered in a duality within Cohen's own writings. On the one hand, his claims about the "unity" of Judaism with Christianity indicate a conciliatory attitude which many have regarded as assimilationist. This side of Cohen's writings de-emphasizes the differences between the two religions and argues that they are essentially in harmony with one another. This might seem to compromise the essence of Judaism as a particular religion with its own distinctive ideas, reducing it to a form of Christianity. On the other hand, Cohen defended the uniqueness of Judaism, arguing that it represented the purest form of monotheistic religion. This side of his writings focuses on the differences between Judaism and Christianity, with a clear preference for Jewish views as those which are most in accord with ethics and the heart of religion. Cohen's two-sided approach to Christianity has left his interpreters with the task of explaining how one man could hold two such seemingly opposed views.

Scholars have used various approaches to make sense of Cohen's dual attitude towards Christianity. One method divides Cohen's life conveniently into an early period in which his philosophy was basically "non-Jewish" (i.e., his "Kantian" period) and a later period in which his philosophy was self-consciously "Jewish." This approach allows one to associate his more "pro-Christian" remarks with the former and his more "pro-Jewish" remarks with the latter. However, there is some disagreement as to what year marked the transition point.

Some scholars point to Cohen's own statement that he "returned" to

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Judaism in 1880, having turned away from it earlier. This was when Cohen wrote "A Confession on the Jewish Question" in response to the anti-semitic writings of the historian Heinrich von Treitschke. However, most of Cohen's pro-Christian remarks occurred after this date, so this supposed reconversion to Judaism at this time does not explain his continuing emphasis on the unity of Judaism and Christianity. In fact, many of Cohen's allegedly assimilationist remarks were made in the very article which he said marked his return to Judaism! Eliezer Berkovits tried to explain this inconsistency through the claim that Cohen "could not make the return complete" after his youthful "estrangement" from Judaism. But this effectively reduces Cohen's "return" of 1880 to a figment of his own imagination which involved no change in his views, making it impossible to explain Cohen's dual approach to Christianity as a product of his 1880 experience.

Other scholars have fixed the transition point later in time. In 1912, Cohen retired from the University of Marburg where he had taught Neo-Kantian philosophy for almost forty years. He then went to Berlin to teach at the "Hochschule fuer die Wissenschaft des Judentums" until his death in 1918. Cohen spent these years fully engaged in the teaching and study of Judaism, and he wrote a systematic Jewish philosophy which was published after his death as Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism. Emil Fackenheim pointed to 1912 as the year of Cohen's real return to Judaism, claiming that before this time his Judaism was mainly a "childhood memory" rather than a "lived reality." However, Fackenheim himself realized that Cohen wrote one of his most pro-Christian writings during these years, the infamous "Germanism and Judaism." This shows that even at this late date, Cohen is still engaged in praising Christianity as well as defending Judaism.

The other problem with the 1912 dating of Cohen's "return" is that Cohen had been defending Judaism publicly for over thirty years before he went to Berlin. Helmut Holzhey and Steven Schwarzchild have pointed out that Cohen left Marburg due to the pressures of anti-semitism which

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2 Noted by Franz Rosenzweig in his preface to Cohen's Judische Schriften (Berlin: C.A. Schwetschke & Sohn, 1924), 1: xxvi. (Hereafter Judische Schriften to be cited as JS.)
