

The Hebrew Christian Shoah and its Soteriological Legacy

Response

If the word « Shoah » is well known as designating the huge genocide of the Jews during the World War II, it's certain that very few people know or realize who were really the Jews who died in the death camps. Because we speak so often of millions of Jews, we forget easily that all these people had names and individual stories. Aside the “great” story of the Shoah in Poland and many other places in Europe, there are tragic stories of individual peoples. Some of them were religious, others totally not, and others again were not conscious that they were still Jews. No matter what they did or not, they went all of them to the same destination for death. It's always a difficult and delicate exercise to add an adjective after the word “Shoah”. However, we are still at the beginning of the work of collecting witnesses of all the crimes against the Jews in Eastern Europe. Even after the War, there were terrible mass murders, less known and called the Shoah¹ of “bullets”.

Concerning the categories of Jews who were believers in Yeshua' and who joined the millions who died, practically, few informations exist and it's very sad that the Church, most of time and for many reasons, has “forgotten” or may be abandoned these people who were their *brothers* and *sisters* too. It is clear that the Shoah in general has had a great influence on the conception, or misconception of the redemption in a soteriological perspective for the Church and the missions to the Jews after the war. I'm afraid to say that it was not mainly for spiritual reasons.

Some thought that because of the Shoah, the Christians – recognized as partly responsible through the historic Christian anti-Semitism strongly present in Germany – were not worthy any more to share the Gospel of salvation to the Jews. Others – not only Christians, but also Jews – have searched other reasons in the Shoah's event itself. After 65 years, many Christians and Jews believe that the Jews have “suffered” so much that they didn't need to believe in Yeshua' for being forgiven of their sins. It's a sort of redemption through the “works” of suffering, if a “suffering” can be assimilated to a *mitzva*.

I wonder sometimes what should be the missions to the Jews today if the Shoah never existed. Maybe no major change in the strategies for reaching the Jewish people for Yeshua' would raise. Maybe also no real rupture between the Church and an important Jewish community who would believe in Yeshua' would arrive. But maybe another major point would change the minds and also theology considerations.

Whatever could be the opinions, it is certain that there is a great link between the Shoah event in Europe and the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. The focus of the Nations on Israel for more than 60 years is significant and it is sure that if Israel has not existed, the situation of the Jews in Middle East, but also in North Africa would be very different. It could constitute certainly another interesting matter to study the transformation of the Christian approach in a soteriological perspective after the creation of the State of Israel.

Daniel has clearly shown the evolution of the spiritual conception of the mission to the Jews and the misconception of the redemption for Jews and in a certain way for Gentiles too, before and after the Shoah.

“Le Berger d'Israël” - in English *the Shepherd of Israel* – the Jewish organization with whom I'm

1 On this topic a very good book is available (only in French) - “Porteurs de Mémoires” Editions Flammarion 2009 - of the “Père Patrick Desbois” a French Catholic Priest who made a remarkable work of collecting witnesses in Ukraine, Bielorussia, Russia, Poland, etc. on all these systematic crimes against Jews. Informations are also accessible on the Shoah by “bullets” (also in English): <http://www.yahadinum.org/en/>

currently serving the Lord, has been created in 1936, so before the war. For being short, at this time, many Christians, Baptist mainly, were involved practically in reaching Jews for Yeshua'. In Paris, they organized free distribution of food, clothes and of course literature for the Jews, refugees from East. At this time, the first issue of our journal had been published in Yiddish. Rapidly, several Jews came to faith and they were more than 60 people together as a little community of believers in Yeshua' having meetings in Paris during these time before the war. This ministry was led by a French pastor, Henri Vincent, with an assistant, a messianic Jew from Hungary, named Frankl.

All the activities have been stopped during the war. But what happened after the war?... Many Jews stayed in France or came back from death camps, and most of time in very bad situation. Why Christians didn't restart the work of support this population by food and different furniture?... Only the publishing ministry continue and at lower scale. For the Christians, priorities were elsewhere. But, even today, after so many years, it didn't change very much.

Before the Shoah already, it was clear that some considerations divided Jewish and Gentile ministers among the Jews. The expression of solidarity or motivation to reach the Jewish people could be ambiguous if one was Jewish or Gentile. Was it just a problem of priority or strategy?... Or a deeper question raised from the typical situation?... Jewish leaders also accused missionaries to be sometimes too attached to preach the gospel without providing needs, and sometimes to use the same argument to “buy” the faith of poor Jews. Indeed, for most of the Jewish ministers, it was simply impossible to not be close to their brothers and sisters from the same people.

The Hebrew Christian Shoah put everyone in the same pot of solidarity for death. Do the brothers and sisters in faith understood that?... Not sure and it seems difficult to answer. After the Shoah, this solidarity became stronger than before and the existence of the State of Israel reinforce this invisible link between Jews whatever they could be believers in Yeshua' or not.

About how Jews are saved, for the generation of Jewish believers who has lived before the war, the Shoah didn't change anything. For the Christians, the Shoah made a sort of spiritual revolution as explained after the war certain protestant leaders in France².

After the World War II, some Christian denominations renounce to consider Judaism *under the sign of hostility, but love. There is a new real interest for knowing one another, and not only theoretically.* That new positive attitude reinforce most of the declarations.

For example, the declaration of Amsterdam in 1948³ by the CEC (Churches Ecumenical Council) affirms clearly the rejection of the anti-Semitism and underline the importance of the Jewish people in the Christian faith. However, the participants of this council were still shared on the type of relationship to built with the Jewish people. Should it be still in a Mission concept of something else?...

13 years after, in 1961, in New Delhi, they crossed officially a new step and renounced to consider the Jewish people as responsible of the Jesus death. We are very close to the Vatican II Council.

In 1967, at Bristol (UK), the CEC have tried to establish a new concept of relation between Christianity and Judaism based on a respect of the Jewish identity aside the Christian identity. The Christian leaders started also to have a deeper theological discussion on the questions of the *replacement theology* or the durability of Israel's “election”. We can affirm that all these thoughts were the fruit of a wish to built a new relationship based on respect after the tragedy of the Shoah.

Practically, it's only in 1988 that officially, the CEC adopted the declaration of “two ways of salvation”, one for the Jews and one for the Christians. Of course the first consequence of this position has been to refuse all type of mission activity among Jewish people. And this is a key point

² These positions are quoted in an interesting report “Protestant faith and Judaism” made by the French Protestant Federation (oct. 2010). One resume the evolutions of the Christians and particularly the protestant positions (not only in France) from 1948 to now.

³ Declaration of Amsterdam 1948 at the foundation of the Churches Ecumenical Council.

for our matter.

In Germany, earlier in 1961, the *Evangelische Kirche Deutschland* (EKD) already renounced to the mission vocation of the Church, as well as the World Lutheran Federation. We can supposed that this early decision in Germany was a consequence of a shame after the Shoah or the feeling to not be worthy any more to share the gospel to the Jews in the country where the Shoah raised.

However, in France, the first discussions about the pertinence of the mission among the Jews were only in 1979 and 1982.

In our reflection, it is difficult to ignore the central place taken by the Israel's State question. Regarding to the discussions about relations with Judaism, Protestant leaders, especially in France, seemed to have followed positions similar to political leaders of their time. If many pastors had supported Zionism movement in early times, already in 19th century, after 1967 "six days" war, they have been deeply divided in different opinions. Some protestant thinkers took very "anti-zionist" positions during the seventies. Others continued to support Israel State. It is certain that progressively, the relations between Christianity and Judaism will be more and more affected by the question of the State of Israel and less and less by the Shoah.

The last important text of reflection about the relation of the Church with Judaism or the Jewish people has been written in 1999 and is known as "the Ecclesiastic Communion of Leuenberg" (Communion Eclésiastique de Leuenberg). It represents the positions of Reformed and Lutheran Churches in Europe.

This text put in light the difficulties resulted from the rejection of "replacement theology" in new concept of Christology and Ecclesiology for the Protestants, with, as a main and central Soteriological consequence, the consideration of Judaism as a specific way of salvation for Jews and of course a renouncement of all type of mission to the Jews.

Otherwise, the Ecclesiastic Communion of Leuenberg didn't want to discuss too much of the problematic of the Jews who are believing in Jesus and who are still willing to follow their Jewish traditions, probably because they wanted to preserve good relations with the Jewish community and to not provoke new sources of anti-Semitism. Even if the shadow of the Shoah is still in the filigree of the spiritual evolution of the main Churches since the 2nd World War, the question of the role of Israel and his place in Christian theology continues to disturb and feed contradictions.

A last question: Did Evangelical Churches take different options concerning relations with Judaism?... No real survey has been done on this matter. But, as I already proposed, we can supposed that many Christians followed the main Protestant stream.

It is significant that the first declarations among Evangelicals about the Jewish people were quite late with the Lausanne Movement and the LCJE (Lausanne Committee for Jewish Evangelism) group of theologians. One of the most important text has been probably the Willowbank declaration in 1989, 44 years after the Shoah. About mission to the Jews, this text is probably the only one which is turning back to previous positions from before the war. After 21 years, I'm not sure that the strength of text has influenced so much the Christians and the priorities of Christian missions for reaching Jews. We could dream better effects.

So, to conclude, we could deplore that most of the Christians, even evangelical Christians, has followed the main streams of the Catholic or Protestant institutions, may be also on the soteriological position of the "two ways of salvation". One of the main consequence of this is the renouncement of the mission to the Jews.

Whatever could be the important world declaration of the LCJE about Jewish mission and soteriological position, the investment of the churches for Jewish mission is fare to be as it should be and, for France particularly, as it has been before the second war.

After 65 years, it seems that the question of the existence of Israel as a Jewish state has become a sensitive matter, much more than the Shoah, and source of division among the believers. It is certain that these questions affect the theological options of the Christians and their mobilisation for reaching Jewish people for Yeshua'.

However, we must never forget that, if it should arrive, a "new" Shoah in our century would concern certainly Jews, believers or not in Yeshua', as well as in 1939, and probably also Christians.