

'I Found It'

The Current Campaign To Affirm Christianity And Its Effect On Jews



What do you say when a Christian comes up to you and, in one way or another, tries to interest you in his religion with the hope of "leading you to the greater light" or "saving you from hell"? This question has been asked me repeatedly of late by our young people. They are being besieged in the halls and playgrounds of their schools by young Christians who apparently deem it their duty to convert everyone to their particular religion. The present campaign is well organized. It is part of an area-wide, perhaps national, campaign, which is well financed. It is tied in with TV advertising, radio advertising, and it is sponsored by many churches in our area. Participating Christian children, some of them in self-defense, wear buttons reading, "I Found It," the slogan of the campaign. Those not wearing the button are obviously outsiders. They are "not saved," doomed to hell, perhaps, candidates for conversion. They are anything but individuals to be respected for their own belief and to be allowed the privilege of being different. No wonder our Jewish young people feel threatened and isolated by this campaign.

Our young people ask me, "What do we say to these missionaries?" It is very difficult to tell a fervent fundamentalist Christian that you think his God is no God at all, but merely a good man. He can hardly think well of you when you challenge his belief, but does he not invite this answer when he tries to teach you that your belief is inadequate? Such would-be converters come primed with a few quotations from scripture. Unfortunately, these few lines are more than many Jewish children have memorized, and they are unable to respond with an equal show of "scholarship." These are, of course, the same old lines which Christians have presented to Jews for thousands of years, and Jewish teachers have said over and over again that in OUR scripture (and it is OUR scripture; we wrote it with our lives), the lines do not have the meaning Christians read into them. Of course, anyone can take a line of Scripture and make of it what he wishes, and Christians have that right, but they cannot take away from us our right to read our Scripture as we wrote it and lived it. Yet, some of the missionaries do exercise just this authority. They tell us, "You don't understand your own Scripture. Let us interpret your creation for you." How hard can you put somebody down!

Jewish children would be wise to learn a little Scripture (we have prepared mimeographed material entitled "Know How to Answer." It is available at the office), but in my many years of dealing with such missionaries, I have found that they do not want to be answered, nor do they wish to listen to our side. They want to convert us, save us, do their thing as a Christian. They do not want a dialogue. The very word dialogue suggests that the two parties involved stand on equal ground, where the missionary assumes that he has the real answer and you are simply ignorant or confused. It has been my experience that dialogue is not possible with fervent missionaries, so I do not participate in it with them.

For Jewish children, the value of learning a little Scripture, at the very least on the points the missionary brings up, is that the child can know what his own tradition says and feel secure in his knowledge. The learning is for his own sake, as a Jew, not for arguing with the missionary. Besides, Judaism teaches us to respect the other person's religion and not to try to convince him that he is wrong. I take no pleasure in convincing a Christian that his interpretation of our Scripture is not based on scholarship. I do not wish to undermine his faith. For example, I have studied the question of the messiah in infinite detail, including many Christian sources. I can marshal sufficient facts in a few minutes to counter any suggestion that Jesus is prophesized in the Old Testament, but when I am asked a question concerning the messiah on my visits to churches, I do not present these facts, nor do I answer the question. I simply say, "the purpose of my visit here is to emphasize the areas in which we agree, not to make points for the Jewish position."

Elsewhere on this page, you will find a listing of "Basic Jewish Ideas." Jews have believed in these ideas down through the centuries, in spite of the fact that their rituals and forms have changed. Read these ideas and study them. You will find that fundamentalist Christianity disagrees with many of these ideas. It is here that the real difference between Judaism and Christianity can be seen. The interpretation of Scripture varies because Jews and Christians have different basic ideas about the world, about God, and about the role of man.

It should be made clear that all Christians are not involved in the current "I found it" campaign. This is apparently financed and projected by certain Protestant Churches. Other Protestants are embarrassed by this attempt to teach that Christianity or Jesus can be "found" in a flash. They hold that becoming a Christian is a matter of slow development and constant effort. This is much closer to our Jewish view that the search for God is a life's effort and the search for the truth is never ending.

BASIC JEWISH IDEAS While Judaism is the evolving and changing religious expression of the Jewish people, Jews have always believed a basic core in all ages. Certainly, the core of our belief as understood by Reform Judaism is as follows:

1. GOD IS ONE--that is, there is one plan and purpose for the universe; there are no conflicting wills; no good god competing with a devil; nor are there greater and lesser gods or divine beings.
2. THE NATURE OF THIS GOD IS TO BE UNDERSTOOD IN TERMS OF CREATION, LAW, JUSTICE, MERCY, FORGIVENESS, LOVE--that is, He is not blind force, acting on sudden whim, nor is He angry and punitive (this understanding of the nature of God evolved over thousands of years and is open to new insights). God is not to be understood in terms of human powers or definitions and is beyond man's full comprehension.
3. THERE IS A TORAH, A MORAL LAW, UNDERGIRDING THE UNIVERSE, AND MAN'S HAPPINESS AND THE STABILITY OF SOCIETY DEPEND ON THE LEARNING AND OBSERVANCE OF THIS LAW.
4. A MAN'S RELIGIOSITY IS TO BE DEDUCED FROM HIS ACTIONS, NOT FROM HIS STATED BELIEFS. (CONDUCT, NOT PROFESSED FAITH, IS THE CRITICAL MATTER).
5. MAN IS BORN WITH THE POTENTIAL TO BE GOOD OR EVIL DEPENDING UPON HIS OWN CHOICE TO FOLLOW THE MORAL LAW. He is not born in "original sin," nor need he be mystically or miraculously "saved" from this "sin." Hence, the notion of the growth and improvement in the character of man by creating the good society becomes possible.
6. THIS WORLD IS THE CENTER OF MAN'S EXISTENCE. Whatever the "world to come" may be, man must correct the evil in this world. "It is not incumbent upon him to finish the task, but neither is he free to neglect it."
7. MEN MUST STRIVE TOWARDS A MESSIANIC DAY, WHEN ALL MEN SHALL LIVE IN PEACE AND HARMONY. There is a meaningful future ahead which men must strive to achieve with God's help. There is a part of the Messiah in all of us, and we must bring the pieces together to create "God's Kingdom."