THEODOR HERZL MEETS POPE PIUS X

THEODORE HERZL (1860-1904) is commonly acknowledged to be the visionary founder of modern political Zionism that led to the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. A secular Jew educated in the high culture of Vienna, Austria, having received a doctorate in law in 1884, Herzl’s confrontation with European anti-Semitism led to the eventual conclusion that the only solution was the establishment of a distinct nation for this distinctive people. At first Herzl would consider any location, but then he concluded that only relocation in Palestine was a satisfactory solution. His pamphlet, The Jewish State (De Judenstaat), published in 1896, was catalytic in leading to the first Zionist Congress in Basle, Switzerland, in 1897. As a result, the World Zionist Organization was established with Herzl as its first elected president. Having died in 1904 with his dream unfulfilled, in 1949 his remains were transferred to a mountain in western Jerusalem which became Mount Herzl, and is today a major military cemetery.

Much of Herzl’s remaining time was spent in courting world leaders, both Jewish and non-Jewish, with the goal of enlisting financial and political support for his dream of a Jewish state. In 1904 he became acquainted with a Papal Count, B. Lippay, who assured Herzl that should he visit Rome, he could arrange an audience with Pope Pius X. In a short while, such a meeting was arranged, and the following account of this meeting is taken from The Diaries of Theodor Herzl by Marvin Lowenthal. The relevance of the conversation that took place between this secular Jew and a professed world Christian leader, will become obvious.

In an early entry of Herzl’s diary there is an interesting confession in which, at the age of 35, he reflects upon his earlier encounter with Christianity.

At first the Jewish question [of European anti-Semitism] vexed me bitterly. There was perhaps a time when I would have gladly slipped over into some corner of the Christian fold. But, in any case, this was only a faint vagary born of adolescent weakness. For I can say to myself with the honesty demanded by this diary—which would be utterly worthless if I played the hypocrite with myself—that I never thought seriously of becoming baptized or changing my name.

In the light of this, it would not seem unreasonable to speculate what might have been the effect of Christianity upon Herzl had he grown up in a Gentile Christian society that had seriously taken into account the Apostle Paul’s admonition, to “not be arrogant toward the [Jewish] branches [under discipline]; but if you are arrogant, remember that it is not you who supports the root, but the root supports you. . . . Do not be conceited, but fear” (Rom. 11:18, 20). But further, even as Herzl is now close to his judicial encounter with Jehovah, how better it would have been that a more merciful, Christ-like witness had been conveyed by the supposed vicar of Jesus Christ. How profoundly sad it is that a harsh and most un-Christ-like witness was communicated.

Rome. January 26, [1904].

Yesterday I was with the Pope [Pius X]. . . . I arrived ten minutes ahead of time, and without having to wait I was conducted through a number of small reception rooms to the Pope.

He received me standing and held out his hand, which I did not kiss. Lippay had told me I had to do it, but I didn’t. I believe this spoiled my chances with him, for everyone

1 Marvin Rosenthal, The Diaries of Theodor Herzl, pp. 4-5.
who visits him kneels and at least kisses his hand. This hand kiss had worried me a great deal and I was glad when it was out of the way.

He seated himself in an armchair, a throne for minor affairs, and invited me to sit by his side. He smiled in kindly anticipation. I began:

HERZL: I thank Your Holiness for the favor of granting me this audience. [I begged him to excuse my miserable Italian, but he said:

POPE: No, Signor Commander, you speak very well.

HERZL: [He is an honest, rough-hewn village priest, to whom Christianity has remained a living thing even in the Vatican. I briefly laid my request before him. But annoyed perhaps by my refusal to kiss his hand, he answered in a stern categorical manner.

POPE: We are unable to favor this movement [of Zionism]. We cannot prevent the Jews from going to Jerusalem—but we could never sanction it. The ground of Jerusalem, if it were not always sacred, has been sanctified by the life of Jesus Christ. As the head of the Church I cannot answer you otherwise. The Jews have not recognized our Lord, therefore we cannot recognize the Jewish people.

HERZL: [The conflict between Rome and Jerusalem, represented by the one and the other of us, was once again under way. At the outset I tried to be conciliatory. I said my little piece... It didn’t greatly impress him. Jerusalem was not to be placed in Jewish hands.] And its present status, Holy Father?

POPE: I know, it is disagreeable to see the Turks in possession of our Holy Places. We simply have to put up with it. But to sanction the Jewish wish to occupy these sites, that we cannot do.

HERZL: [I said that we based our movement solely on the sufferings of the Jews, and wished to put aside all religious issues].

POPE: Yes, but we, but I as the head of the Catholic Church, cannot do this. One of two things will likely happen. Either the Jews will retain their ancient faith and continue to await the Messiah whom we believe has already appeared—in which case they are denying the divinity of Jesus and we cannot assist them. Or else they will go there with no religion whatever, and then we can have nothing at all to do with them.

The Jewish faith was the foundation of our own, but it has been superceded by the teachings of Christ, and we cannot admit that it still enjoys any validity. The Jews who should have been the first to acknowledge Jesus Christ have not done so to this day.

HERZL: [It was on the tip of my tongue to remark, “It happens in every family: no one believes in his own relative.” But, instead, I said:] Terror and persecution were not precisely the best means for converting the Jews. [His reply had an element of grandeur in its simplicity:]

POPE: Our Lord came without power. He came in peace. He persecuted no one. He was abandoned even by his apostles. It was only later that he attained stature. It took three centuries for the Church to evolve. The Jews therefore had plenty of time in which to accept his divinity without duress or pressure. But they chose not to do so, and they have not done it yet.

HERZL: But, Holy Father, the Jews are in a terrible plight. I do not know if Your Holiness is aware of the full extent of their tragedy. We need a land for these harried people.

POPE: Must it be Jerusalem?

HERZL: We are not asking for Jerusalem, but for Palestine—for only the secular land.

POPE: We cannot be in favor of it.

2 Here unrelenting replacement theology is plainly upheld as the norm of the Roman Catholic Church. Further, this confession, along with the whole tone of the Pope in his meeting with Herzl, indicates the perpetuation of a doctrinal emphasis that has resulted in centuries of degrading behavior toward the Jews.

3 However, this response has the “grandeur” of total avoidance of that which Herzl had intimated, namely that the abusive reputation of Roman Catholicism toward the Jews was unlikely to foster conversion. Further, if, “It took three centuries for the Church to evolve,” it was that very same period of time that it took for the Church to consolidate and launch its thrust of anti-Semitism through the following centuries.
HERZL: Does Your Holiness know the situation of the Jews?
Pope: Yes, from my days in Mantua, where there are Jews. I have always been in friendly relations with Jews. Only the other evening two Jews were here to see me. There are other bonds than those of religion: social intercourse, for example, and philanthropy. Such bonds we do not refuse to maintain with the Jews. Indeed we also pray for them, that their spirit see the light. This very day the Church is celebrating the feast of an unbeliever who became converted in a miraculous manner—on the road to Damascus. And so if you come to Palestine and settle your people there, we will be ready with churches and priests to baptize all of you.

HERZL: [At this point Conte Lippay had himself announced. The Pope bade him be admitted. The Conte kneeled, kissed his hand, and joined in the conversation by telling of our “miraculous” meeting in the Bauer beer-hall at Venice. The miracle was that he had originally intended to stay overnight in Padua, and instead, it turned out that he was given to hear me express the wish to kiss the Holy Father’s foot.

At this the Pope made no movement, for I hadn’t even kissed his hand. Lippay proceeded to tell how I had expiated on the noble qualities of Jesus Christ. The Pope listened, and now and then took a pinch of snuff and sneezed into a big red cotton handkerchief. It is these peasant touches which I like about him best and which most of all compel my respect.

Lippay, it would appear, wanted to account for his introducing me, and perhaps ward off a word of reproach. But the Pope said:

Pope: On the contrary, I am glad you brought me the Signor Commendatore.

HERZL: [As to the real business, he repeated what he had told me, until he dismissed us:]

Pope: Not possible!

HERZL: [Lippay stayed on his knees for an unconscionable time and never seemed to tire of kissing his hand. It was apparent that this was what the Pope liked. But on taking leave, I contented myself with shaking his hand warmly and bowing deeply. The audience lasted about twenty-five minutes.

While spending the last hour in the Raphael gallery, I saw a picture of an Emperor kneeling before a seated Pope and receiving the crown from his hands. That’s how Rome wants it.]

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This would not have impressed Herzl, especially since he would have been well aware of the notorious kidnapping of a six year old Jewish boy from his home in Bologna, Italy, by the Roman Catholic authorities in 1858. The reason was that since a Gentile nurse had secretly “baptized” Edgardo Mortara as a baby, the Church determined that he had to be brought up under a Roman Catholic environment. The prior Pope Pius IX was deeply complicit in this whole sordid affair that attained to world-wide notoriety. Refer to, David I. Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*.

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