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**La Laïcité: une chance ou un défi pour les religions?
En France et dans le monde**

**Secularity: Opportunity or Peril for Religions,
The French Experience and Global Perspectives**

Sunday, June 30, 2013

Opening – introduction to the life and work of Jules Isaac

By Dr Edouard Robberechts

The legacy of Jules Isaac

I have the honour and the heavy task of opening this ICCJ symposium by evoking the memory of Jules Isaac, as we commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of his passing this year. Memory in Hebrew means of course “to remember”, but also, more than this, “to revitalize”. That's why I think to evoke today the memory of Jules Isaac in the very place he lived, means of course to remember who he was and what he did, but, more than this, to try to revitalize the will that animated him, the challenge which he felt responsible for. So I would like to dedicate the conference to the memory of Jules Isaac and the two passions that have animated the life of this great republican for whom secularity was so dear: the passion for truth, and the ethical requirement for justice.

Nothing predisposed Jules Isaac to become the man he eventually became. Indeed his life can be safely separated into two clearly distinct epochs: before 1942 and after 1942, when he was already 65 years old.

What went before? Jules Isaac was born November 18, 1877 in Rennes to a largely assimilated Lorraine Jewish family, in which patriotism had long prevailed over religious belief.

At thirteen, Jules Isaac lost both his parents just a few months apart. At twenty he began a long friendship with Charles Peguy who first revealed to him the injustice of the Dreyfus trial. Isaac became a Dreyfusard, not at all out of religious solidarity, but because of what would become the main constant in his life: the passion for truth and the requirement of justice that bears, crosses and even exceeds this passion for truth. Even after the upheaval of 1942, these two virtues would remain the standard for all his fights and hopes.

Isaac was admitted as an agrège in history in 1902. In addition to his teaching career, he began in 1906 a collaboration with Hachette, which published the history books of Albert Malet. Malet died on the front line in 1915. Jules Isaac himself survived 33 months in the trenches until he was badly wounded at Verdun. He would continue to write only the textbooks required for new programs. But the name of Malet remained associated with the collection, because Isaac's name alone would have resonated as too Jewish for republican and secular textbooks! Isaac tried to draw out the consequences of World War I: he believed that the role of the historian was to write truthful books where historical criticism and the insight that accompanies it, clarifying the respective responsibilities of both sides, open the doors to an examination of conscience and a necessary reconciliation. The work around the historical truth becomes an indispensable condition for the search for a just peace. True to the tradition of the Republican Left, a member of the League of Human and Civic Rights, and of the Vigilance Committee of Antifascist Intellectuals, he committed himself simultaneously to a better understanding between Frenchmen and Germans and to reconciliation between France and Germany. In 1936, Jules Isaac was appointed Inspector General of Public Instruction. His life seemed mapped out: performing work of scientific and historic integrity with a goal of teaching the truth to the greatest number of people, while searching for peace and justice with deep Republican roots.

But everything changed with the new world war. Aged 63 in 1940, under the discriminatory measures taken against Jews by the Vichy government, Isaac lost his position due to his Jewish heritage. "It was not acceptable," said Minister of Education and academic Abel Bonnard in the newspaper *Gringoire* on November 13, 1942, "for the history of France to be taught to French youth by an Isaac." This was obviously a shock and a challenge to everything he had until then lived for. In the words of his son, Jean-Claude Janet, "imagine what it was like for this great Frenchman, from a long line of Lorraine soldiers, all, like him, servants of their country from father to son and holders of the Legion of Honor since the creation of the Order... what it was like for the historian who contributed to the formation of countless generations of young French, both by teaching and by his manuals, for the General Inspector of Public Instruction with an unquestioned and feared authority, what a sudden shock it was, inconceivable, to be suddenly revoked, expelled from the University, deprived of his civil rights, reduced to a state of pariah by the same Petain, who in 1936, wrote to him to express his sympathy and admiration, and proposed him a "fair conversation" ... ¹. The awakening was brutal, and it meant a complete reversal, as he himself later highlights it: "If only by grievous and ever worsening persecution, the Jewish question forced itself upon my mind and Jewish solidarity upon my heart and conscience. I was part of this hated, slandered, scorned Israel; facing the persecutors, I fully accepted being part of it. I also had to take on a new struggle, to deal with the unfair complaints they heaped upon us." ("Overview," in *Cahiers du Sud*, No. 376, 1964, p. 226-227, quoted by André Kaspi, *Jules Isaac*, p.179).

So he took refuge in the free zone in Aix-en-Provence in 1941 and 1942, and began to resist using the writing of the *Oligarchs*, a pamphlet seeking to defend the trampled democracy. It was there in June 1942 that Jules Isaac would make a first dazzling discovery: he read the Gospels in Greek and discovered to his amazement that the traditional teachings of the Church had betrayed them. Yet it was this teaching, which for him was the source of Christian anti-Semitism that had prepared and led to what was happening in Europe during those dark years of Nazism. One had therefore to return to the text, and even prior to the text, to the Jewish historical truth of Jesus, to change history and repair Christianity where it had failed: by condemning Israel without appeal for nearly 2000 years. In 1942 he began to write *Jesus and Israel*, which would be finished in 1946 and published in 1948.

Yet, all this almost failed. When the Nazis invaded the unoccupied zone in November 1942, Jules Isaac settled first in Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, then in Riom, near his daughter and his son-in-law. Involved in a resistance network, they were arrested, along with his wife and his youngest son Jean-Claude, by the Gestapo in Riom on October 7, 1943, and deported by the Germans to Drancy

¹ Jean-Claude Janet, « Jules Isaac à Aix-en-Provence : les raisons du legs », dans *Cahiers de l'Association des Amis de Jules Isaac*, n°1, 1996, p.11.

and then to Auschwitz where they were all killed, except his son who escaped from a camp in Germany. But he would only know that after the war. Meanwhile Isaac, who had survived by chance, was distraught and did not know what to do with himself. It was a letter from his wife in Drancy that would revive and guide him for the twenty years he still had to live. In this letter, his wife had indeed the extraordinary intuition and finesse to write: "My beloved friend, we're leaving tomorrow. It is very hard, and the greatest suffering is to know nothing of you since the dreadful day of separation. My friend, guard yourself for us, have confidence and finish your work that the world expects."

Thus he committed himself to continue the work he had begun in 1942, a concern that would never leave him until his death in 1963. Immediately after the war, he moved back to Aix-en-Provence. His life can then be summarized in three points:

First, the writing of his books: *Jesus and Israel* in 1948, *Genesis of Anti-Semitism* in 1956, and finally *The Teaching of Contempt* in 1962. All are intended to show historically the Christian responsibility for laying the groundwork that allowed Nazi anti-Semitism to flourish in Europe in the twentieth century.

Second, the eighteen proposals he brought to the conference in Seelisberg (Switzerland, July 30-August 7, 1947), and which would form the basis of the ten points of Seelisberg, aiming to transform Christian teachings about Judaism into teachings of esteem and respect. In addition, he met Pope Pius XII in 1949 - asking him to review the Good Friday prayer *pro perfidis Judaeis*. In 1960 he also met Pope John XXIII, who in parting promised him "more than hope," a promise that would be implemented only after his death with the declaration *Nostra Aetate* of Vatican II.

Finally, Jules Isaac was one of the founders of the Judeo-Christian Friendship of France in 1948, in Paris at the national level, and Aix-en-Provence, at the regional level. It is in this concept that Jules Isaac designed the most effective remedy against old anti-Semitic hatred: what has been sown by education must be eradicated by education. The essential idea is to highlight the deep Jewish roots of early Christianity, so that Judaism and Christianity can meet again on a sound and solid base.

To conclude this brief overview, I would like to draw your attention to a fundamental characteristic of this reversal and this period in time, because it has not been sufficiently noticed or considered, but seems able to bounce into the future the truth effort undertaken by Jules Isaac.

As I stressed at the beginning, his life was a struggle for truth, but not just any truth. Not a theological or religious truth, but a historical truth. History allows him to say what he says, and want to change what he wants to change. But this historical truth will necessarily have two faces for him: the basic face, essential and necessary, of historiography, which constitutes the major portion of its investment; but also another face, more discreet but not any less urgent or necessary, of history as responsibility or search for justice by and through the pursuit of truth.

Such duality is very clear from the warning he wrote in 1946 about his book *Jesus and Israel*. This book, he says, "is the cry of an outraged conscience, of a broken heart. It is to the conscience and the heart of man that it is addressing."

Thus this historical work is primarily an appeal to responsibility and the need for justice: it shouts for indignation, because it wants to raise awareness among the people it addresses, so that things can change in a more ethical direction. And in the same breath, he adds: "However, if it is not scientific in its essence, it is by its infrastructure, its methods of information and discussion, I think I can say by its strict probity". The purpose is clear from the outset: the search for historical truth will travel between science and conscience, between historical criticism and ethical requirement.

In this search for truth and justice, two main points will get his attention. This is primarily to bring out the truth that the Holocaust would not have been possible without the teaching of contempt distilled for almost 2000 years by the Church in the heart of and under cover of its message of love. So there is for Jules Isaac an immense responsibility for the Church in the face of this unimaginable human catastrophe unfolding in the heart of Christian Europe. Because even though Nazism was opposed to the Church, he is convinced that its virulent anti-semitism could not have been built or have met such

an echo without the Christian teaching of contempt. More importantly, he wants to show that Christianity is born of Judaism and could never have been formed without it: it was a Jew fact before being a Christian fact, and the persecution of Jews by Christians proves thus to be one of the most horrific misunderstandings of history – which demands and requires repair: indeed does not anti-semitism mean ultimately the self-destruction of Christianity by itself - and beyond of Western civilization?

But to do so, we must first establish this double truth, by honest and patient scientific work. Because as he says himself, "the contempt of Judaism goes with the contempt of truth" (EM 24-25). We must therefore return to history to show how Jesus was Jewish and should be seen as part of his people. And how a certain Christian bad faith used the Gospel texts to make them say what they do not: the disapproval of Israel, its condemnation, and the election in its place of the nations because of Israel's refusal.

So he revisits the New Testament to eradicate the simplistic vagaries of the theologians, and to put it back into its complex historic Jewish context, not yet split between Jews and Christians, but where the two can still encounter each other around an event - Jesus - that is beyond either of them. It's a matter of relearning to read what is written in the Gospels not in the theological context of the late church, but based on its Jewish historical context. This reappropriation of Jesus through history can enable a new sharing that is no longer a total loss for the Jew and a total gain for the Christian. Going back to the truths of history permits for the first time the defusing of the bomb of Christian anti-Judaism, showing that being anti-Jew is to be anti-Jesus and hence anti-Christian, since anti-Judaism undermines the very foundations of Christian civilization.

And what Jules Isaac seeks to do through this basic work of historiography is to reveal the emergence of a second truth, or a second face of truth: one that demands justice and calls for individual responsibility, so as to repair history and direct it in a new sense, more humane and more worthy of the divine gaze. History as a responsibility in effect requires that a teaching of contempt - once established – ends, to be replaced by a teaching of esteem and respect, and that a new history emerges between Jews and Christians whereby their common roots may help them to rediscover their common challenges and common dreams of humanity. This is the challenge that drove Jules Isaac, and this is the memory that we would like to revitalize through this conference and those that follow, thus returning to the roots of what made the very Judeo-Christian notion of friendships emerge in history. Thank you.