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“SOME ARE GUILTY BUT ALL ARE RESPONSIBLE” – A.J. HESCHEL’S OPPOSITION TO ALL FORMS OF PERSECUTION

Abstract

The main purpose of this article is to analyze racial persecution in the light of Heschel’s religious concept of equality. The Jewish thinker analyzes this problem based on the phenomenon of persecution of black people by the followers of monotheism in the United States, both by Jews and Christians. Heschel asks a fundamental question: How can a religious man persecute another man because of the color of his skin?

Keywords

Racism, Persecution, Equality, Religion, A.J. Heschel

The phenomenon of persecution may be considered from a perspective of the entire humankind or be narrowed individual, national or international, pan-cultural or merely religious standpoint – within the broad notion of religion or relative to a specific denomination. Usually, publications draw particular attention to the persecution suffered by Jews at the hands of other nations, for whom they constituted a minority and were perceived as strangers. It may be argued anti-Semitism has become central issue of animated debate among historians, theologians, philosophers, sociologists, psychologists and even politicians and journalists. The well-known forms of non-Jewish attitudes towards Jews, which tend to be termed as anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism, anti-Jewishness and anti-Zionism, have been quite extensively explored and described. However, it may be worthwhile to answer a question which is no less important: what

position do Jews adopt towards the persecution of other peoples, cultures and religions?

When asked how Jews respond to the tragedy of the war in Ukraine and how they help, Michael Schudrich – Chief Rabbi of Poland – replied:

It is about helping Jewish refugees, but we feel equally responsible for the non-Jewish refugees as well. Here, in Poland and in the efforts of our Jewish communities, I often experience this in a very tangible way: when anyone asks our help, we help them. Most of those who approach us and require support are Jewish. But there are also others who turn to us and receive the same extent of help. Now is not the time to make any distinctions¹.

Similar words were spoken in a slightly different context by Abraham Joshua Heschel, for whom suffering or persecution of any kind is not exclusive to any person, nation, religion, gender, race or colour.

Hence, our deliberations here will attempt to show how racism was construed as a source of persecution in the thought of Abraham Joshua Heschel², arguably one of the greatest contemporary thinkers³. The rabbi opted for a multifaceted approach, as his insights spanned elements which were universal and individual, cultural and religious, Judaic and monotheistic simultaneously.

Heschel found a point of reference not only the tragic history of anti-Semitism but also drew on personal experience. He was the only survivor of his entire family, and was unable to forget the horror of his last months of life in Germany and Poland. He was invariably aware of the extermination of millions of Jews who died in concentration camps for racial reasons, simply because they were Jews. This memory remained vivid even twenty-five years later, as evidenced by the words he said during an official meeting:

I speak as a person who was able to leave Warsaw, the city in which I was born, just six weeks before the disaster began. My destination was New York, it would have been Auschwitz or Treblinka. I am a brand plucked from the fire, in which my people were burned to death. I am a brand plucked from the fire of an altar of Satan on which millions of human lives were exterminated to evil's greater glory, and on which so much else was consumed: the divine image of so many human beings, many people's faith in God of justice and compassion, and much of the secret and power of attachment to the Bible bred and cherished in the hearts of men for nearly two thousand years⁴.

¹ Nie wszyscy rabini mówią to głośno 2023 [online].

² Biographical details on Heschel may be found in: S. Heschel 1996; Merkle 1985; Kasimow, Sherwin 1991; Halkowski 1992; Lichten 1975; W. Szczerbiński 2000.

³ R. Niebuhr pronounced Heschel to be Heschel the "commanding and authoritative voice not only in Jewish community but in the religious life in America". Idem 1951, p. 12.

⁴ Kasimow, Sherwin, p. 3.

Every step of the way, Heschel fought against racism as such, of which anti-Semitism was a manifestation⁵. His commitment to combating all forms of racism – which he believed to be a major source of persecution – was not confined to issues involving Jews. He became a defender and advocate of all those wronged, in America and beyond. His “prophetic outcry” against racism, against US involvement in the war in Southwest Asia, his pleas to help Jews persecuted in Russia and aid Israel against imminent annihilation, his appeals on behalf of the hungry and persecuted around the world, derived from profound identification with those who need support and succour. He would meet Martin Luther King, leader of the anti-racist movement, on many occasions, walking alongside the latter in the famous Selma protest march in 1965.

Persecution is defined as “inflicting constant annoyance, harm on someone; bringing abuse, oppression and harassment to bear, especially because of someone’s beliefs, political stance, etc.”⁶ A particular person or social group may be discriminated against, maltreated, repressed, terrorized, put down, oppressed or fought against. Religious persecution is motivated either by any belief in a divinity or the fact of belonging to a particular denomination. This kind of persecution is usually referred to when speaking of the followers of Judaism or Christians. In a particular environment, a follower of Judaism, Christianity or Islam may feel alienated or accepted. Alienation (Latin *alienus*, *alienum* – stranger, other) is understood as a sense of being separate and isolated from a community or society: “a state in which a person has lost his or her connection with the people among whom they live and feels alien among them”⁷. In consequence, the alienated person finds themselves rejected. Conversely, acceptance (Latin *acceptatio* – to receive) translates into an act of consenting, admitting, approving, or confirming with respect to something or someone. To accept a person is to acknowledge their qualities or roles in an environment. “If people accept a person, they agree to that person’s presence and demonstrate favourable attitudes towards that person”⁸. Here, the bivalent concepts of stranger – ours, distant – close and enemy – brother are crucial to understanding the problem, whereby the concept of fraternity is not unequivocal; on the contrary, it has many possible scopes and no fewer applications. Fraternity can be spoken of when referring to someone close, common,

⁵ The modalities of prejudice against Jews, which tends to be labelled as anti-Semitism, anti-Judaism, anti-Jewishness and anti-Zionism are usually reduced to one common denominator. Nonetheless, essential differences between those attitudes could be argued. Ethnicity informs the anti-Semitic mindset, but the underlying “rationale” is distinct in others, even though the corollaries may be identical or similar. More broadly in: Szczerbiński 2012, p. 95-108.

⁶ Zgółkowska 2001, p. 73.

⁷ Alienacja 2007, p. 26.

⁸ Akceptacja 2007, p. 16.

and known. Closeness is also subject to different criteria: racial, national, social, cultural or religious.

The problem of strangeness is universal, affecting every person and every community; it is encountered in interpersonal, international and inter-religious relations, with either objects, phenomena or people being strange or other. In the case of human persons, everything that is not them or theirs may appear alien⁹. The most significant marker of the position of the stranger is the fact that he or she does not originally belong to a particular group (familial, tribal, national, social, religious, cultural) and, by entering its spheres, they introduce qualities which are not indigenous to the self-determination and self-awareness of the individual and the community. This gives rise to a new situation, in which there occurs a clash between what is one's own/ours (old) and what is foreign (new). The unity of proximity and distance which is inherent to every interpersonal relationship is constantly being modified, but the opposition "close – distant" always engenders a tension. Thus, a stranger may become close and one's own/ours may turn out to be distant. In general, however, the distance either increases or decreases, accompanied by a change in the modes of social coexistence.

The concept of strangeness is not unambiguous either. Usually, anything strange does not belong somewhere, it is foreign or unknown. A dictionary puts it thus:

one defines strange as that which is not ours, e.g. does not belong to us or is distinct from our habits, traditions, culture (...). "Stranger" describes someone whom we do not know or who does not belong to a certain circle of people, e.g. our family, group, society, religion (...). If certain things or phenomena are strange to us, we do not know them (...). If people are strangers to each other, they have nothing in common and are indifferent to each other (...). If something is strange to someone, it is incompatible with their value system, nature, habits¹⁰.

The latter observation also applies to religion. Jews, Christians and Muslims have been and are occasionally perceived as strangers by the adherents of other religions. At times, different forms of persecution may be observed within the same religion.

In our discussion, the aim is to show how race-related persecution of Christians by Christians (along the lines of us versus us) was interpreted in the light of Heschel's religious concept of equality. His analysis of the issue revolved around the persecution of black persons by followers of monotheistic religions in the United States, both Jews and Christians. This is because he believed that racism either

⁹ Using the Hegelian paradigm, one could say that everything is the anti-thesis of the thesis (a specific person) and a negation of the thesis, which inevitably provokes tension.

¹⁰ *Obcy* 2007, p. 224.

demonstrated or tolerated by people who believe in God is primarily a religious problem. He poses a fundamental question: how can a religious person persecute another person because of their skin colour? After all, a paradox occurs when a Catholic persecutes a Catholic and a Baptist persecutes a Baptist based on race alone¹¹. In such circumstances, one’s own/ours becomes a stranger and the close becomes the distant. Heschel lived most of his life in America, where he saw active racism among the “children of the One God”. Segregation in general was beyond the rabbi’s understanding in any case, but he was horrified by such segregation in religious communities, where special sectors in churches were designated for people of colour, where blacks were not admitted to the seminaries of the clergy, where followers of the same religion could not even visit each other in their homes. During Heschel’s lifetime, racism among religious Americans was a fairly widespread phenomenon. Although this situation has greatly improved since, the issue it has not disappeared.

The Baptist church where Martin Luther King was pastor is still active. But its parishioners are exclusively black. Although whites and blacks in Montgomery share the name of Baptists, they do not pray together, they do not live in the same neighbourhoods¹².

To this day, black Christians in the US feel inferior to their white brothers and sisters in faith and, moreover, have little trust in white priests or pastors. “There is only one black Baptist church in New York with a white minister, but he was only accepted by the community when it was acknowledged that he sings like a black man”¹³. Racism as such is evil, but racism of believers and between believers is the very opposite of faith in Heschel’s eyes. And yet, racial persecution is an undeniable fact in religious communities.

Heschel emphasizes that racism and religion are two mutually exclusive realities, as religion must unite the divided and consider all people children of the One God. Meanwhile, racism divides people and denies some the dignity of God’s children. Any attempt to link religion and racism should thus provoke remorse¹⁴. There is no doubt whatsoever that racism as a doctrine with its hierarchy of values and conduct is worse than idolatry. “Racism is satanism, unmitigated evil”¹⁵. The

¹¹ It is usually overlooked that there are black-skinned Jews – the Beta Israel. Most are followers of Judaism hence the appellation Black Jews, though some are actually Christians.

¹² Sorman 2004, p. 49.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 101.

¹⁴ “Religion and race. How can the two be uttered together? To act in the spirit of religion is to unite what lies apart, to remember that humanity as a whole is God’s beloved child. To act in the spirit of race is to sunder, to slash, to dismember the flesh of living humanity. Is this the way to honor a father: to torture his child? How can we hear the word race and feel no self-reproach?” Heschel 1990, p. 165-166.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 166.

very assumption that whites and people of colour have different gods or the supposition that the relationship between the One God and whites is different than it is the case with people of colour is tantamount to erecting idols. "Any god who is mine but not yours, any god concerned with me but not with you, is an idol"¹⁶.

Heschel is most disturbed by the fact that few among the believers realize that racism is a widespread and radical phenomenon: supreme hatred backed by a paltry reason, a mindset that must be deemed the greatest threat to humanity.¹⁷ Hence the conviction that there is no third option as far as resolving the issue is concerned. The choice is a fundamental one: "Religion or Race. You cannot worship God and at the same time look at man as if he were a horse"¹⁸. To underscore the importance of this fundamental option, the Jewish thinker cites Christian theologian Niebuhr¹⁹: "Race prejudice, a universal human ailment, is the most recalcitrant aspect of the evil in man, a treacherous denial of the existence of God"²⁰. For the believer, the Bible – on which Heschel draws in his reflections – is invariably the superior authority. He identifies racism with the civilization of death, which he sets against the civilization of life. Paraphrasing Moses, he asserts: "I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life"²¹. Racism is both blasphemy and a curse²², while the idea of equality is not and cannot be subject to any speculation or scepticism. Racial equality of all human beings follows directly from the act of creation and manifests God's design. Its negation demonstrates betrayal of God's will. On the grounds of this conviction, Heschel recognizes the religious imperative of equality. Anthropological pluralism means that from the very outset God intended not one human being but many human beings who will differ in many ways, but no actual difference between them. From this it follows that racial distinctiveness is secondary and incidental. In this respect, the biblical account of creation does not leave the slightest doubt and does not warrant racist interpretations. According to Heschel, biblical analyses of Genesis lead to one conclusion: "To think of man in terms of white, black or yellow is more than an error. It is an eye disease, a cancer of the soul"²³.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ "Few of us seem to realize how insidious, how radical, how universal an evil racism is. Few of us realize that racism is man's gravest threat to man, the maximum of hatred for minimum of reason, the maximum of cruelty for a minimum of thinking". Ibidem.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

¹⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) was an American Protestant theologian and moral philosopher. He propounded a vision of socially committed Christianity, and opposed liberal theology.

²⁰ Heschel 1990, p. 166.

²¹ Ibidem. Heschel draws on the words of Moses in Deut; 30:19.

²² "Racial or religious bigotry must be recognized for what it is: blasphemy", Heschel 1990, p. 166.

²³ Ibidem.

Meanwhile, observation of the actual state of affairs reveals that in believers religious communities, do not always feel a kinship with all people. Too often, they make their attitude towards others contingent on the colour of their skin. Simply being black makes one a stranger²⁴. Racial prejudice is an “abomination” to God, especially if it stems from the heart of a person who prays and participates in the worship of God at the same time²⁵. For Heschel, racism is not only a sin against another human being, but also against God himself. “Thus the problem is not only how to do justice to the coloured people, it is also how to stop the profanation of God’s name by dishonouring the Negro’s name”²⁶. A white person who considers themselves religious must seek liberation from the mass contempt of the black person. Quoting the Bible, the American Rabbi reminds one that God Himself is the witness to all oppression²⁷.

Various forms of racial persecution may be distinguished: physical, spiritual, economic, or political. Heschel found that public humiliation to be the most acute. Citing the Talmud, he states: “It is better to throw oneself alive into a burning furnace than to humiliate a human being publicly”²⁸. This sin is so grave that it closes the gates of heaven. “He who commits a major sin may repent and be forgiven. But he who offends a person publicly will have no share in the life to come”²⁹. Any harm inflicted on another person for racial reasons requires not only repentance but, above all, redress. Mere regret before God does not suffice. “We must first ask for forgiveness of those whom our society has wronged before asking the forgiveness of God”³⁰. A person of faith must be aware that he or she is complicit in persecution both when they directly and demonstrably harm another person and when contribute to racism indirectly. “Daily we patronise institutions which are visible manifestations of arrogance towards those whose skin differs from mine. Daily we cooperate with people who are guilty of active discrimination”³¹. Heschel attempts to stir the consciences of believers asking: “How long will I continue to be tolerant of, even participant in, acts of embarrassing and humiliating human

²⁴ “Pigmentation is what counts. The Negro is a stranger to many souls. There are people in our country whose moral sensitivity suffers a blackout when confronted with the black man’s predicament”. *Ibidem*, p. 167.

²⁵ “Prayer and prejudice cannot dwell in the same heart. Worship without compassion is worse than self-deception; it is an abomination”. *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ “I saw all the oppressions that are practiced under the sun. Behold, the tears of the oppressed, they had no one to comfort them! on the side of the oppressors there was power, and there was on one to comfort them”. *Eccl.* 4:1.

²⁸ Heschel 1990, p. 168.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

beings, in restaurants, hotels, buses, or parks, employment agencies, public schools and universities?³²

Heschel is concerned that there are many among believers who do not regard racism as a sin at all. Christians – on a par with followers of other religions – often do not even feel remorse for having partaken in the persecution of black people. According to Heschel, there are several ways to deprave one's conscience:

We can extenuate our responsibility; 2) we can keep the Negro out of our sight; 3) we can alleviate our qualms by pointing to the progress made; 4) we can delegate the responsibility to the courts; 5) we can silence our conscience by cultivating indifference; 6) we can dedicate our minds to issues of a far more sublime nature³³.

So characteristic of the American mentality, relativism and pragmatism is reflected in morality. Normative ethics is increasingly supplanted by descriptive ethics, in which there is no place for the appraisal of human behaviour, only for description and insightful analyses of human acts. Everything becomes complex, too convoluted, contingent and ambiguous. Human responsibility is diluted.

Modern thought has a tendency to extenuate personal responsibility. Understanding the complexity of human nature, the inter-relationship of individual and society, of consciousness and subconsciousness, we find it difficult to isolate the deed from the circumstances in what it was done. Our enthusiasm is easily stunned by realising the ramifications and complexity of the problem we face and the enormous obstacles we encounter in trying to implement the philosophy affirmed in the 13th and 14th Amendments as well as in the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court³⁴.

The logic of faith is replaced with the logic of contemporary notions, also where racism is concerned.

The existential remoteness of the white and black communities and the separation of one from the other is, according to Heschel, a glaring manifestation of racism. For the sake of "peace of mind", whites want nothing to do with blacks. The Jewish thinker quotes from an article in the "Christian Century":

The ghettoisation of the Negro in American society is increasing. Three million Negroes – roughly one-sixth of the nation's Negro population – are now congested in five of the greatest metropolitan centres of the north. The alienation of the Negro from the mainstream of American life proceeds apace. The Negro discovering to his sorrow that the mobility which he gained in the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th and 14th Amendments to

³² Ibidem.

³³ Ibidem, p. 169.

³⁴ Ibidem.

the Constitution nearly a hundred years ago merely enables him to move from one ghetto to another. A partial apartheid – economic, social, political and religious – continues to be enforced by the white people of the U.S. They use various pressures – some open, some covert – to keep the Negro isolated from the nation’s social, cultural and religious community, the result being black island surrounded by a vast white sea. Such enclaves in American society not only destroy the cohesiveness of nation but also offend the Negro’s dignity and restrict his opportunity. These segregated islands are also an embarrassment to white people who want an open society but are trapped by a system they despise. Restricted housing is the chief offender. So long as the racially exclusive patterns of suburban America continue, the Negro will remain an exile in his own land³⁵.

In the religious context, this means that within a single denomination there are separate schools, separate temples, separate organizations, separate parish communities.

Heschel notes that racism in America is sustained and tolerated within religious communities due to a widespread notion that the situation of blacks is justified and, relative to the past, much better. Slavery was abolished while the material and social standing of blacks has changed for the better. Revolutionary changes have already been made in the domain of civil rights, and the attitude of blacks themselves is to blame for the persisting inequality. Whites have done what they could. According to Heschel, however, whites have only taken the first step. Love of one’s neighbour arising from faith demands total equality³⁶.

Another way of assuaging one’s own conscience in matters relating to the persecution of black people is the pernicious belief that the responsibility for the current state of affairs lies with the state, the judiciary in particular. Statutory law which applies in a country becomes the criterion for judging the conduct of its citizens, while the courts safeguard respect for that law. Heschel does not question the necessity of statutory law or the need for courts. However, he reminds one that for the believer, God’s law is the supreme statute, and God himself is the ultimate Judge of human conduct. Meanwhile, many believers devolve the task of tackling

³⁵ “Christian Century” is an American periodical propagating Christian thought, largely of the Protestant provenance. Based in Chicago, Illinois, it been published under that title since 1900. Authors whose text were featured in the magazine include Jane Adams, Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, Richard John Neuhaus and Albert Schweitzer. The excerpt comes from the issue dated 26th December 1962. After: Heschel 1990, p. 170.

³⁶ “To some Americans the situation of the Negro, for all its stains and spots, seems fair and trim. So many revolutionary changes have taken place in the field of civil rights, so many deeds of charity are being done; so much decency radiates day and night. Our standards are modest; our sense of injustice tolerable, timid; our moral indignation impermanent; yet human violence is interminable, unbearable, permanent. The conscience builds its confines, is subject to fatigue, it longs for comfort. Yet those who are hurt, and He Who inhabits eternity, neither slumber nor sleep”. Heschel 1990, p. 170.

racism to the courts and thus evade individual responsibility, as if justice were the work of professionals and experts.

But to do justice is what God demands of every man; it is the supreme commandment, and one that cannot be fulfilled vicariously. Righteousness must dwell not only in the places where justice is judicially administered. There are many ways of evading the law and escaping the arm of justice. Only a few acts of violence are brought to the attention of the courts. As a rule, those who know how to exploit are endowed with the skill to justify their acts, while those who are easily exploited possess no skill in pleading their own cause³⁷.

In this context, the biblical prophets³⁸ serve as role models who, without any human authority, speak on behalf of the weak and persecuted to defend their rights. Heschel draws attention to the fact that the principal labour of the prophets was to intervene, to protest harm done to others, to pry into matters which, apparently, were neither their concern nor their responsibility³⁹. A believer, like a prophet, should be a person who does not tolerate evil done to others, who is outraged at the harm suffered by others. The Jewish Rabbi emphasizes that Isaiah's call for justice is addressed not only to the judges but to all members of the community⁴⁰.

According to Heschel, the greatest prophetic boon to humanity is to show that the believer must be interested in the fate of others and must not remain indifferent to evil⁴¹. It is indifference to evil that is the most common sin found in religious communities.

There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrong done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself; it is more universal, more contagious, more dangerous. A silent justification, it makes possible an evil erupting as an exception becoming the rule and being in turn accepted⁴².

³⁷ *Ibidem*, 170-171.

³⁸ Heschel is the author of "The Prophets", New York 1962. In the work, including a part of this doctoral dissertation from 1936, he sets the Aristotelian notion of God – the Unmoved Mover – against the prophetic notion of the Divine Pathos, where God is construed as the Most Moved Mover.

³⁹ "Indeed, the major activity of the prophets was *interference*, remonstrating about wrongs inflicted on other people, meddling in affairs which were seemingly neither their concern nor their responsibility". Heschel 1990, p. 171.

⁴⁰ Heschel quotes Is. 1:17: "Seek justice, undo oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow" (Is. 1;17).

⁴¹ Shortly before his passing, Heschel confessed: "I've written a book on the prophets. A rather large book. I spent many years. And, really, this book changed my life. Because early in my life, my great love was for learning, studying. And the place where I preferred to live was my study and books and writing and thinking. I've learned from the prophets that I have to be involved in the affairs of man, in the affairs of suffering man (...). I say that this book on the prophets which I wrote changed my life." Heschel 1996, p. 399.

⁴² A.J. Heschel 1990, p. 171.

This also applies to the persecution of black people by the children of the One God.

Heschel argues that there is a temptation among believers to downplay racism, accompanied by the notion that there are more important problems to be solved. He calls it a tragedy that the divine is separated from the human; the spiritual from the secular⁴³. Such a separation leads to a situation in which the connection between the temporal and the eternal is overlooked.

We worry more about the purity of dogma than about the integrity of love. We think of God in the past tense and refuse to realise that God is always present and never, never past; that God may be more intimately present in slums than in mansions, with those who are smarting under the abuse of the callous⁴⁴.

Here, too, the believers should look up to the prophet, “who holds God and men in one thought at one time, at all times”⁴⁵. According to Heschel, one must not be under the illusion that the task of the clergy (priests, pastors, rabbis) is “to lead the souls of men to God, not to bring about confusion by getting tangled up in transitory social problems”⁴⁶. God’s solicitude, His pathos also applies to the worldly matters.

Racial persecution is nothing but defiance against the commandment of charity. We are accountable to God for practicing charity and we will be brought to account by God for it. In the eyes of the Creator, we are all equal. It is not the society which grants inalienable rights to persons. Nor does the equality of all human beings stem from human innocence or virtue. Human equality is the result of God’s love and commitment binding on all human beings⁴⁷. The equality of all human beings has its foundation in God himself. Religious leaders should constantly remind their congregations of the truth that “some are guilty, but all are responsible”⁴⁸. Innocence in the eyes of the law does not mean innocence before God.

As we can see, the religious imperative of equality argued by Heschel derives from God’s will as opposed to any human decision or covenant. The equality of people whose skin colour is different is undeniable and inalienable. For Heschel, nothing is more obvious:

⁴³ “Our tragedy begins with the segregation of God, with the bifurcation of the secular and sacred”. Ibidem, p. 172.

⁴⁴ Ibidem.

⁴⁵ Ibidem.

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ “It is not society that bestows upon every man his inalienable rights. Equality of all men is not due to man’s innocence or virtue. Equality of man is due to *God’s love and commitment to all men*”. Heschel 1990, p. 173.

⁴⁸ Ibidem, p. 172.

God is One, and humanity is one. There is no possibility more frightening: God's name may be desecrated. God is every man's pedigree. He is either the Father of all men or of no man. The image of God is either in every man or in no man⁴⁹.

Equality as a religious precept implies personal commitment, fraternity, mutual respect and concern.

Equality of all is a matter of course for some, for others it still remains a scandal. Hence the rabbi's appeal:

The way we act, the way we fail to act is a disgrace which must not go on forever. This is not a white man's world. This is not a coloured man's world. It is God's world. It is time for the white man to repent. We have failed to use the avenues open to us to educate the hearts and minds of men, to identify ourselves with those who are underprivileged. But repentance is more than contrition and remorse for sins, for harms done. Repentance means a new insight, a new spirit. It also means a course of action⁵⁰.

From a religious standpoint, the problem of racism is a peculiar test of our faith, a situation that God confronts us with and an opportunity to bear witness before the world.

The plight of the Negro must become our most important concern. Seen in the light of our religious tradition, the Negro problem is God's gift to America, the test of our integrity, a magnificent spiritual opportunity⁵¹.

Persecuting one's neighbour because of the colour of their skin, treating them like a slave or an inferior human being, would have to be seen as a failure of the believer. "We are all Pharaohs or slaves of Pharaohs. It is sad to be a slave of Pharaoh. It is horrible to be a Pharaoh"⁵².

Heschel not only calls for an end to racial persecution, for tolerance and acceptance, but argues that black people are as much as God's gift to white people. He recalls the story of the biblical Joseph, who, rejected by his brothers and sold into slavery, became their deliverance in the future.

Perhaps it is the will of God that among the Josephs of the future there will be many who have once been slaves and whose skin is dark. The great spiritual resources of the Negroes, their capacity for joy, their quiet nobility, their attachment to the Bible, their power of worship and enthusiasm, may prove a blessing to all mankind⁵³.

⁴⁹ Ibidem, p. 173

⁵⁰ Ibidem, p. 174.

⁵¹ Ibidem, p. 175.

⁵² Ibidem, p. 176.

⁵³ Ibidem, p. 177.

Racism is a sin and leads to persecution. Fighting racism is an obligation arising from faith in the Creator of the world, who has called all human beings into existence as equals. God needs human beings here and now⁵⁴.

The universe is done. The greater masterpiece still undone, still in the process of being created, is history. For accomplishing His grand design, God needs the help of man. Man is and has the instrument of God, which he may or may not use in consonance with the grand design. Life is clay, and righteousness the mold in which God wants history to be shaped. But human beings, instead of fashioning the clay, deform the shape. God needs mercy, righteousness; His needs cannot be satisfied in space, by sitting in pews, by visiting temples, but in history, in time. It is within the realm of history that man is charged with God’s mission⁵⁵.

Much has certainly changed in terms of racial persecution in the United States and in the world since Heschel. However, it still may be worthwhile to ask oneself continually:

Do whites still believe in their superiority over blacks and other minorities of colour, the dark-skinned, the red, the yellow, who have meanwhile become more numerous than blacks? (...). Racism is reprehensible, but it is the result which counts; moral condemnation of racism is less valuable to Americans than specific actions that will eliminate its practical ramifications. Europe is a continent of good intentions, America of palpable results⁵⁶.

Racism – with its various forms and varying scope – continues to challenge all religions in the modern world. “Is Judaism, is Christianity, ready to face the challenge?”⁵⁷, Heschel inquires. The most important problem facing religions is not the unadulterated purity of faith, but rising to the test given by God and meeting His expectations. Christians and adherents of Judaism alike should be afraid lest distancing oneself from the other drives them farther away from God himself⁵⁸. This is what racial persecution entails. We can remedy this together and only together, because “no religion is an island”⁵⁹.

⁵⁴ God endowed the human not only with life; they were also granted significance, value, and entrusted a task. Hence, God needs the human. This very issue was discussed by Heschel 1981. See also *idem* 1975, p. 140-145.

⁵⁵ Heschel 1990, p. 175-176.

⁵⁶ Sorman 2004, p. 131.

⁵⁷ Heschel 1996, p. 236.

⁵⁸ “The supreme issue is today not the halacha for the Jew or the Church for the Christian – but the premise underlying both religions, namely, whether there is a pathos, a divine reality concerned with the destiny of man which mysteriously impinges upon history; the supreme issue is whether we are alive or dead to challenge and expectation of the living God. The crisis engulfs all of us. The misery and fear of alienation from God make Jew and Christian cry together”. *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ This is the title of the book dedicated to Heschel’s contribution to interreligious dialogue: Kasimow and Sherwin 1991.

“SOME ARE GUILTY BUT ALL ARE RESPONSIBLE” – A.J. HESCHEL’S OPPOSITION TO ALL FORMS OF PERSECUTION

Summary

This paper is concerned with racial persecution as seen from the standpoint of the religious conception of equality advanced by A.J. Heschel, one of the most original and influential Jewish thinkers. Addressing a fair number of theological and philosophical issues, his work also explored the problem of persecution, which he regarded to be entirely at odds with faith in God. Racism, he argued, is the most common and dangerous cause of hostility between people, even worse than idolatry and on a par with Satanism. For Heschel, all racist acts in one’s religious life are blasphemy, “a treacherous contradiction of God’s existence”. The Jewish thinker conducted a remarkably thorough analysis of racism in a religious context. Relying on biblical sources and personal experience of anti-Semitism, he asserted explicitly: “religion or race”. In his opinion “you cannot worship God and at the same time look at man as if he were a horse”. Not only does Heschel demonstrate the existence of diverse forms of racism within religious communities since the biblical times until today, but he primarily propounds the religious notion of equality, which in his opinion is the only alternative religion may opt for and the only remedy to rectify the situation of the racially persecuted. The concept sets out with the necessity to rebuild conscience, which often does not respond to one’s unrighteous acts. Next to discussing persecution, Heschel also reacted vehemently to all instances of hostility. He became an advocate of all wronged people, not only among Jews and not only in America. One of the figures he would often meet was Martin Luther King, a leader of an anti-racist movement. In 1965, they both participated in the Selma to Montgomery March. The Jewish rabbi continuously asserted – in both word and deed – that moral responsibility for persecution must not be rescinded or substituted by someone or something. One must invariably remind oneself that everyone is embroiled into what is done by few. “Some are guilty, but all are responsible”.

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