



Samson Raphael Hirsch

"Religion Allied to Progress"

... "Religion allied to progress": [the leaders of Reform have] with undaunted courage embroidered [this slogan] in scintillating colours on to the banner of our present-day religious struggles, that the educated "progressive" sons and daughters of the new age might rally to this new flag of the prophet and advance with it unhindered. How leaderless was this new congregation of prophets before this new messenger with this new message of salvation appeared among them! Since the beginning of the century the ancient religion had been to them--ancient; it no longer fitted into the society of the sons and daughters of the new age with their frock coats and evening dresses. In club and fraternity, at the ball and supper party, at concerts and in salons--everywhere the old Judaism was in the way and seemed so completely out of place. And even in the counting-house and in the office, in the courtroom and at the easel, on board ship and in the train--throughout the stream-driven lightning activity of the new age the old Judaism acted as a brake on the hurrying march of progress. Above all it seemed to be the only obstacle in the race for emancipation. No wonder then that without hesitation they shook off the old obstructive religion and hurried into the arms of "progress." And in the political market-place where emancipation was to be purchased, the modern sons of Judah could be seen in every corner offering to exchange the old Judaism for something else, since in any case it had lost all its value for their own use. For many a decade modern Jewry thus soared aloft like dust on the wings of a butterfly and tasted freedom in the unwonted airy heights; and yet they felt a pain in their hearts where the absence of religion had left a void, and at the end they were ashamed while enjoying the brilliance of modern life to be walking the earth without religion; they felt restless and miserable.

But behold! The prophet of the new message came into their midst with the cry of "religion allied to progress"; he filled the blank, pacified their conscience and wiped out their shame. With this magic word he turned irreligion into Godliness, apostasy into priesthood, sin into merit, frivolity into virtue, weakness into strength, thoughtlessness into profundity. By this one magic phrase he distilled the ancient world-ranging spirit of the Torah into a single aromatic drop of perfume so fragrant that in the most elegant party dress they could carry it round with them in their waistcoat pockets without being ashamed. By means of it, he carved out of the ponderous old rock-hewn Tablets of the Law ornamental figures so tiny that people gladly found room for them on smart dressing tables, in drawing-rooms and ballrooms. By means of this one magic phrase he so skilfully loosened the rigid bonds of the old law with its 613 locks and chains that the Divine Word which until then had inflexibly prohibited many a desire and demanded many a sacrifice, henceforth became the heavenly manna which merely reflected everybody's own desires, echoed their own thoughts, sanctified their own aspirations and said to each one: "Be what you are, enjoy what you fancy, aspire to what you will, whatever you may be you are always religious, whatever you may do--all is religion; continue to progress, for the more you progress the further you move from the ancient

way, and the more you cast off old Jewish customs the more religious and acceptable to God will you be....

All this would of itself worry us who are of different mind very little. We allow everyone his own peace and bliss and also his fame, if only he would be fair enough to leave us not indeed our "fame" (to which we lay no claim), nor indeed our "bliss" (which cannot be impaired by human opinion) --but at least our peace and quiet.

But the eulogist of "religion allied to progress" and its prophet has found it necessary to enhance the brightness of his cause by painting its opposite in the blackest colours. He therefore describes us, [we the so-called proponents of Orthodoxy] who do not believe in the mission of the new prophet, as the "black opponents of progress and civilisation." . . .

May one of these "fools and obscurantists" be permitted in the face of such provocation, a few carefully considered and objective remarks, for the purpose of stating fully and placing in their true light the facts which certain people are so glad to call "religious confusions" (because they fear lest they might be cleared up) and so taking the first step towards resolving them? ... [First] a point of fact, it was not "Orthodox" Jews who introduced the word "orthodoxy" into Jewish discussion. It was the modern "progressive" Jews who first applied this name to "old," "backward" Jews as a derogatory term. This name was at first resented by "old" Jews. And rightly so. "Orthodox" Judaism does not know any varieties of Judaism. It conceives Judaism as one and indivisible. It does not know a Mosaic, prophetic and rabbinic Judaism, nor Orthodox and Liberal Judaism. It only knows Judaism and non-Judaism. It does not know Orthodox and Liberal Jews. It does indeed know conscientious and indifferent Jews, good Jews, bad Jews or baptised Jews; all, nevertheless, Jews with a mission which they cannot cast off. They are only distinguished accordingly as they fulfill or reject their mission....

Now what about the principle, the much-vaunted, world-redeeming principle of "religion allied to progress"? If it is to be a principle--something more than an empty phrase meant for show--it must have a definable content and we must be permitted to try to clarify it. In the expression "religion allied to progress," progress is evidently intended to qualify religion. Indeed, this is the very essence of the "idea," not religion by itself, but religion only to the extent and in so far as it can co-exist with progress, in so far as one does not have to sacrifice progress to religion. The claim of religion is therefore not absolute but is valid only by permission of "progress." What, then, is this higher authority to which religion is therefore not absolute but is valid only by permission of "progress"? What, then, is this higher authority to which religion has to appeal in order to gain admission? What is this "progress"? Evidently not progress in the sphere of religion, for then the expression would amount to "religion allied to itself" which is nonsense. It means, then, progress in every sphere other than religion. Speaking frankly, therefore, it means: religion as long as it does not hinder progress, religion as long as it is not onerous or inconvenient.. ..

The subordination of religion to any other factor means the denial of religion: for if the Torah is to you the Law of God how dare you place another law above it and go along

with God and His Law only as long as you thereby "progress" in other respects at the same time? You must admit it: it is only because "religion" does not mean to you the word of God, because in your heart you deny Divine Revelation, because you believe not in Revelation given to man but in Revelation from man, that you can give man the right to lay down conditions to religion.

"Religion allied to progress"--do you know, dear reader, what that means? Virtue allied to sensual enjoyment, rectitude allied to advancement, uprightness allied to success. It means a religion and a morality which can be preached also in the haunts of vice and iniquity. It means sacrificing religion and morality to every man's momentary whim. It allows every man to fix his own goal and progress in any direction he pleases and to accept from religion only that part which does not hinder his "progress" or even assist it. It is the cardinal sin which Moses of old described as "a casual walking with God." Civilisation and culture--we all treasure those glorious and inalienable possessions of mankind. We all desire that the good and the true, all that is attainable by human thought and human will-power, should be the common heritage of all men. But to make religion--which is the mother and father of all civilisation and culture--dependent upon the progress of this same civilisation and culture would mean throwing it into the melting-pot of civilisation; it would mean turning the root into the blossom; it would mean crowning the human edifice with that which should be its foundation and cornerstone. . . .

Now what is it that we want? Are the only alternatives either to abandon religion or to renounce all progress with all the glorious and noble gifts which civilisation and education offer mankind? Is the Jewish religion really of such a nature that its faithful adherents must be the enemies of civilisation and progress? . . . We declare before heaven and earth that if our religion demanded that we should renounce what is called civilisation and progress we would obey unquestioningly, because our religion is for us truly religion, the word of God before which every other consideration has to give way. We declare, equally, that we would prefer to be branded as fools and do without all the honour and glory that civilisation and progress might confer on us rather than be guilty of the conceited mock-wisdom which the spokesman of a religion allied to progress here displays.

For behold whither a religion allied to progress leads! Behold how void it is of all piety and humanity and into what blunders the conceited, Torah-criticising spirit leads. Here you have a protagonist of this religion of progress. See how he dances on the graves of your forefathers, how he drags out their corpses from their graves, laughs in their faces and exclaims to you: "Your fathers were crude and uncivilised; they deserved the contempt in which they were held. Follow me, so that you may become civilised and deserve respect!" Such is the craziness which grows on the tree of knowledge of this "religion allied to progress"!

If our choice were only between such craziness and simple ignorance, again we say we would remain ignorant all our life-long rather than be thus godlessly educated even for one moment.

There is, however, no such dilemma. Judaism never remained aloof from true civilisation and progress; in almost every era its adherents were fully abreast of contemporary learning and very often excelled their contemporaries. If in recent centuries German Jews remained more or less aloof from European civilisation the fault lay not in their religion but in the tyranny which confined them by force within the walls of their ghettos and denied them intercourse with the outside world. And, thank goodness, even now our sons and daughters can compare favourably in cultural and moral worth with the children of those families who have forsaken the religion of their forefathers for the sake of imagined progress. They need not shun the light of publicity or the critical eye of their contemporaries. They have lost nothing in culture or refinement, even though they do not smoke their cigars on the Sabbath, even though they do not seek the pleasures of the table in foods forbidden by God, even though they do not desecrate the Sabbath for the sake of profit and enjoyment.

Indeed, we are short-sighted enough to believe that the Jew who remains steadfast amidst the scoffing and the enticements of the easy-going world around him, who remains strong enough to sacrifice to God's will profit, inclination and the respect and applause of his fellows, displays far greater moral strength and thus a higher degree of real culture than the frivolous "modern Jew" whose principles melt away before the first contemptuous glance or at the slightest prospect of profit, and who is unfaithful to the word of God and the teachings of his fathers in order to satisfy the whim of the moment. . . .

Our aims also include the conscientious promotion of education and culture, and we have clearly expressed this in the motto of our Congregation: An excellent thing is the study of the Torah combined with the ways of the world [Yafeh talmud torah im derekh erez]--thereby building on the same foundations as those which were laid by our sages of old-- [then] what is it that separates us from the adherents of "religion allied to progress"?

A mere trifle! They aim at religion allied to progress--and we have seen that this principle negates the truth of what they call religion--while we aim at progress allied to religion. To them, progress is the absolute and religion is governed by it; to us, religion is the absolute. For them, religion is valid only to the extent that it does not interfere with progress; for us, progress is valid only to the extent that it does not interfere with religion. That is all the difference. But this difference is abysmal.

Judaism as it has come down to us from our forefathers is for us the gift and the word of God, an untouchable sanctuary which must not be subjected to human judgment nor subordinated to human considerations. It is the ideal given by God to all the generations of the House of Jacob, never yet attained and to be striven for unto the distant future. It is the great edifice for which all Jews and Jewesses are born to live and die, at all times and in every situation. It is the great Divine revelation which should infuse all our sentiments, justify all our resolutions and give all our actions their strength and stability, foundation and direction. Comparisons are futile. Judaism is not a religion, the synagogue is not a church, and the rabbi is not a priest. Judaism is not a mere adjunct to life: it comprises all of life. To be a Jew is not a mere part, it is the sum total of our task in life. To be a Jew in the synagogue and the kitchen, in the field and the warehouse, in the office and the pulpit,

as father and mother, as servant and master, as man and as citizen, with one's thoughts, in word and in deed, in enjoyment and privation, with the needle and the graving-tool, with the pen and the chisel--that is what it means to be a Jew. An entire life supported by the Divine Idea and lived and brought to fulfilment according to the Divine Will. It is foolish, therefore, to believe--or to pretend to believe--that it is the wording of a prayer, the notes of a synagogue tune, or the order of a special service, which form the abyss between us. It is not the so-called Divine Service which separates us. It is the theory--"the principle" as you call it--which throws Judaism into a corner for use only on Sabbaths and Festivals, and by removing from Jewish souls that have strayed from their Divine Destiny the consciousness of their guilt robs them also of their last hope of penitence.

The more, indeed, Judaism comprises the whole of man and extends its declared mission to the salvation of the whole of mankind, the less it is possible to confine its outlook to the four cubits of a synagogue and the four walls of a study. The more the Jew is a Jew, the more universalist will his views and aspirations be, the less aloof will he be from anything that is noble and good, true and upright, in art or science, in culture or education; the more joyfully will he applaud whenever he sees truth and justice and peace and the ennoblement of man prevail and become dominant in human society: the more joyfully will he seize every opportunity to give proof of his mission as a Jew, the task of his Judaism, on new and untrodden ground; the more joyfully will he devote himself to all true progress in civilisation and culture--provided, that is, that he will not only not have to sacrifice his Judaism but will also be able to bring it to more perfect fulfilment. He will ever desire progress, but only in alliance with religion. He will not want to accomplish anything that he cannot accomplish as a Jew. Any step which takes him away from Judaism is not for him a step forward, is not progress. He exercises this self-control without a pang, for he does not wish to accomplish his own will on earth but labours in the service of God. He knows that wherever the Ark of his God does not march ahead of him he is not accompanied by the pillar of the fire of His light or the pillar of the cloud of His grace.

In truth, if only most Jews were truly Jews, most of the factors would disappear which today bar many an avenue of activity to them.

If only all Jews who travel or who are engaged in business observed their Jewish duties, the need would--as always--produce its own remedy. The Jew would everywhere find the food demanded by his religion; it would be but little sacrifice for him to refrain from business on the Sabbath; and even in the regulations laid down by state and public bodies enlightened governments would gladly pay respect to a display of conscientiousness which would in itself be a not inconsiderable contribution made by Jewish citizens to the society in which they live. It is only through unfaithfulness of the majority that the loyalty of the minority becomes a duty demanding so much sacrifice, though the crown which it wins is all the more glorious for the thorns which our brethren strew in our path.

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Press [here](#) to return to the chapter "**Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch and Neo-Orthodoxy**"

Press [here](#) to return to the "**Varieties of Orthodox Judaism**" chapter

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888)--Founder of the "Neo-Orthodox" movement