

Preface to Europe and the Jews

WHY DO SOME BOOKS move us so deeply that we never forget them? It is hard to give a general answer to this question, but when we stop to think about it we realize that for most of us the list of such books is not very long: it is likely to include the Bible, a few plays, more biographies and novels, possibly a few works by philosophers (Plato would appear on many lists, and Spinoza and Nietzsche on some) — and very little else. Few readers indeed would include anything from the natural or social sciences, and — this comes as a surprise — hardly any books by historians would appear on such lists.

Herodotus and Thucydides, some Roman historians, and Gibbon have written classics that are still widely read and honored, but not many readers are deeply moved either by the historians of the past or by their present-day successors. In fact, it is widely assumed today that history is at best entertaining but more often myopic and pedestrian, and that the only way for a historian to achieve something of genuine significance is to abandon historiography in an attempt to offer something infinitely more ambitious, comprehensive, and unsound: an all-inclusive system and predictions. Short of that, most people think, history is not really important but at most diverting; and in any case a historian is not supposed to be capable of moving us as much as a good novelist.

Malcolm Hay's book gives the lie to these implausible assumptions. He shows how moving and important a straightforward history can be. He does not forsake the standards of his craft to stun us with intriguing but ill-founded schemes;

he does not make the world his stage; and instead of regaling us with countless anecdotes he sticks to a single story. To establish its significance, he begins with a problem that is relevant to our time and lives. Then, when he studies it historically, we find that he illuminates it and deepens our understanding of men and events. In the process he does something to us, as a historian should: he corrects scores of important false impressions and beliefs and makes us see the past, the present, and ourselves in a new light.

Hay begins with the Nazis' systematic liquidation of about six million Jews. Drawing on official records and on eye-witness accounts, he brings to life in seven pages what the grim statistics have quite failed to get across. The style is terse, sometimes sarcastic, never sentimental. "The shooting of about two million people, whose bodies could not be left lying about, presented a difficult problem owing to the shortage of labor." But then an eye-witness offers a detailed description, a page later: ". . . Everything was spattered with blood and brains." And another witness describes in some detail how a family went to its execution. Throughout, Hay writes as a historian, not as a novelist who speculates about what people may have thought or felt at various points.

These opening pages only set the stage. Hay agrees with a Jew who survived Auschwitz that the responsibility for these six million deaths does not lie with Germany alone. He is not one of the false prophets who tell the public what it wants to hear, who place the blame where everybody puts it, and who ooze and multiply self-righteousness. He heeds the historian's noblest calling, which is to recall the past to us, reminding us of what we had gladly forgotten and informing us of what we had never permitted ourselves — or other writers had never allowed us — to realize.

For years before they were at long last liquidated by the Germans, hundreds of thousands of Jews tried to leave Ger-

many and did not succeed — not because the Germans would not let them leave, but because other countries closed their borders to them. Nor is this all. After the war, Americans considered it hypocrisy, evasion, and dishonesty when many Germans claimed that they had never realized what had happened in the concentration camps during the thirties, and that the systematic killing of six million Jews during the war was news to them. Yet in Germany no books about the concentration camps had been permitted, and the prisoners who were released were warned that, if they talked in any way about their treatment, they would be interned again without hope of release. Outside Germany, on the other hand, many memoirs were published by ex-inmates, escaped from Germany, and thousands of others who did not go into print talked freely to all Westerners who cared to listen. Non-Germans therefore had much less excuse for their purported ignorance of concentration camp atrocities than did most Germans.

When wholesale liquidation began during the war, Hitler withheld the news from the German public, and it was dangerous in Germany to ask and answer questions on such matters. But the Western world did not find out about it because Western governments who knew the facts felt that it would be frightfully inconvenient — to cite an official of the British Foreign Office — “if the Germans should offer to dump a million Jews on us.” And officials of the U. S. State Department, too, “procrastinated when concrete rescue schemes were placed before them, and even suppressed information about atrocities in order to prevent an outraged public opinion from forcing their hands.”

Between the first chapter, in which some executions are described, and the Epilogue, from which these last quotations come, the book attempts to show how such things could have happened in countries that call themselves, or until recently did call themselves, Christian countries. Hay goes back to the

Gospels and relates one of the most instructive, fascinating, and upsetting stories ever told — that of “The Pressure of Christendom on the People of Israel for 1900 Years.”

The book tells a single story, based on about five hundred footnotes in the back. The scholarship is not obtrusive: it appears in the form of events and quotations that, but for the footnote references, would probably be shrugged off as incredible. The book is easily as gripping as the most exciting novel, but at no point can we say to ourselves that, after all, it is *only* a story.

The book deals with Europe and the Jews — not with the contributions which the Jews had made to European science, literature, philosophy, religion, art, and politics, but with the sufferings inflicted on the Jews; and it singles out the Christian contribution to this suffering. Indeed, the book might have been called “The Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism”; but the author feels that in the title it is better not to call a spade a spade (everywhere else he does) because he does not care to preach to the converted only, and he thinks that people stained by anti-Semitism might not read his book if they were told too clearly what it is about.

In a sense, then, the topic of this book is narrower than the title indicates. But there is also a sense in which the topic is much larger. Beyond Europe, Jews, and Christians, Hay's book is concerned with honesty.

Of course, Hay is highly selective and does not come anywhere near telling “the whole truth.” Nobody could tell the whole truth about the sufferings of even a single victim of Auschwitz in just over 300 pages; much less the whole truth about nineteen centuries of persecution. Those who identify honesty with telling the whole truth define honesty out of existence and assure us that dishonesty is quite inevitable and therefore all right. Selectivity is inevitable, but there is a difference between selectivity and selectivity.

A historian can propose a daring thesis and, to back it up, select solely what fits, ignoring both the facts that contradict his thesis and rival interpretations of the data which he uses. This method, which involves a staggering abandonment of all standards of scholarship, is no bar to enormous popularity in the United States, where advertising, politicians, and religious spokesmen have combined to inculcate a frightening tolerance of unabashed dishonesty.

There are few things about which most men are less honest than they are about their attitude toward honesty. A charge involving lying or dishonesty is still considered heinous. But in advertising, which permeates our national life, gross misrepresentations are taken for granted and so little resented that it seldom occurs to anyone *not* to buy a product just to register a protest.

In politics, one can be elected to very high office even if it is known that one has quite deliberately mouthed untruths in one public address after another; while an avowal of agnosticism would ruin any man's political ambitions. Our statesmen, once elected, frequently deny in cold blood true reports, and nobody minds greatly if within a day it turns out that they were not honest. One forgives them readily if, although unbelievers, they profess in public to believe, while an honest failure to avow beliefs one does not have is ruinous. Yet one simply cannot understand how it is possible that the Soviet leaders doubt the honesty of our statesmen and, quite naturally, often disbelieve them on occasions when, in fact, they mean exactly what they say.

Children and fools are suffered to speak truth; priests and ministers, as men engaged in politics and advertising, are suffered to speak untruth. Like parents who deceive their children about Santa Claus, the men of God enjoy a dispensation to deceive their folds for their own good — it is not always clear whose good. Publicly, the shepherds give every

appearance of believing what in conversations with philosophers they claim, of course, not to believe at all. Many, no doubt, are not too clear in their own minds about just what they do and don't believe, but that is not considered a good reason for appearing one whit less convinced in public.

For all that, honesty is possible; and Malcolm Hay's book, though selective, represents a rare triumph of honesty. He does not try to vindicate a new hypothesis, much less a system, and he does not attempt to impress us with vague, oracular predictions. He wants to bring to our attention words and deeds that both historians and the world at large have swept under the rug. He is not trying to blacken Christianity or some specific version of it. He happens to be a Roman Catholic and in his earlier works tried to show how anti-Catholic historians have significantly falsified some episodes in British history. He tried to set the record straight, in the name of honesty. The same concern dominates this book.

Hay never obtrudes anything that relates to his own person, and one might read his book without realizing that the author is a Catholic. But it is well to know that these unflattering vignettes of great saints, popes, and some of the most celebrated Christians, these terrible quotations from their writings, and the unforgettable sketches of the Crusades were not drawn by an exultant rationalist but by a true heir of the Hebrew prophets who, without the comfort of the least delight, accuses, spurred by honesty, his own fold and whatever it holds sacred — and does it in the name of standards that are publicly professed but shamefully belied in worship and in action.

To those of us who are not Catholics one of the most disturbing things about Catholicism is the lack in it of an articulate and prominent continuation of its ancient prophetic tradition. In that respect ancient and modern Judaism and Protestantism present a more inspiring record. Catholicism

has to its credit great marvels of architecture, both in words and stone; but it has a less impressive record when it comes to radically honest criticism. Malcolm Hay confronts us as a heartening exception, a true heir of Amos and Hosea.

Hay never pretends to give us well-rounded portraits of the celebrated Christians whom he quotes. He introduces only what is relevant to his story; but in the process he raises – and deliberately so – questions about their saintliness and, indeed, their humanity. Others may try to answer these questions, though most readers will probably remember mainly the indictments of the men for whom they never cared in any case, forgetting how this story affects all of us. But this book does not merely raise questions about dozens of revered names. It stands as a major contribution to our understanding of humanity: although it does not venture new suggestions, it adduces facts that almost everybody has ignored; and suggestions that ignore such facts as these need not be taken seriously.

If there is one thing that keeps this book from being utterly depressing, it is the author's exhilarating honesty. If most priests and ministers resembled Malcolm Hay, I should still feel that Christianity is intellectually, and today emotionally, too, a failure; but I should not feel, as I do now, that it is such a dismal moral failure.

This book, then, deals with honesty in two ways. It is one of the most gripping indictments ever written of dishonesty. It exposes the dishonesty of great religious figures, the dishonesty of generations of historians, the dishonesty of statesmen, the dishonesty of millions in our time. It almost makes one despair of honesty and humanity by showing how rare and difficult they are. But for all that the book is not predominantly negative. It stands as a monument of honesty, humanity, and, for that reason, hope.

WALTER KAUFMANN