

French Protestant Churches and the Persecution of the Jews in France

Michael R. Marrus

Generally speaking, French Protestantism was inevitably more sensitive to the predicament of the Jewish minority in France than the Catholic majority. Numbering about 600,000 on the eve of the war, Protestants were divided into several confessional groups, gathered under the umbrella of the Fédération Protestante de France. Themselves a minority, Protestants had a long history of being outside the religious mainstream and carried a historical memory of fierce persecution during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Further, they often had Jewish or German-sounding names, and of course were normally unable to produce baptismal certificates, useful in proving that the bearer was not Jewish. Ever since the advent of the Vichy regime, as pressure mounted against Jews and Freemasons, Protestants harbored fears of "a new clericalism," of which they too might become victims. In the summer of 1941, Pastor Marc Boegner, president of the Fédération Protestante, heard widespread rumors that Protestants were next on Vichy's list of enemies. Along with a handful of other Protestants, Marc Boegner was among the first to protest Vichy's anti-Jewish legislation. Of Alsatian background, and profoundly patriotic, Boegner was widely respected at Vichy as a figure of international standing. His words could not be ignored. Under instructions from the Eglise Réformée de France, of which he was also the head, he expressed his objectives in two letters, sent in March 1941, one to the head of government Admiral François Darlan (himself of protestant origins) and the other to Isaïe Schwartz, then Grand Rabbi of France. The letter was made public, appearing in the anti-Semitic newspaper *Au Pilon* in Paris, and widely distributed in the unoccupied zone.

Boegner couched his appeal in polite terms, and in deference to official doctrine on the "Jewish Problem", he made an unsubstantiated reference to the "hasty and unjustified naturalizations" of the 1930s. (Such references

were common at the time, reflecting a sincerely held but erroneous belief about the magnitude of Jewish immigration into France in the decade before the war, and also, perhaps, expressed a desire to make the most credible appeal to the Vichy Government.) But the thrust of his statement was a dignified and open challenge to the injustices of the anti-Jewish legislation. He told the Grand Rabbi:

“Our Church, which has known suffering and persecution in the past, has an ardent sympathy for your communities which have seen their freedom of worship compromised in certain places and the members of which have been so abruptly struck by misfortune. We have undertaken and we will continue to pursue our efforts to bring about the necessary changes in the (anti-Jewish) law.”

Like many at the time, Boegner assumed incorrectly that Vichy had acted under Nazi pressure. Consequently, he may have been optimistic for a change in policy, if only Vichy would show more independence.

If such were the Protestant leader's hopes, they were dashed in the months which followed. In May, Darlan told Boegner that his sole concern was protecting the Jews who had been in France for several generations - "des Français Israélites", as they were generally known, to distinguish them from the unassimilated "Juifs". "As for the others", Boegner reported Darlan's views, "he only wants to see them leave." Interventions became more numerous after the June 1941 anti-Jewish law and the beginning of the aryanization of Jewish property in the unoccupied zone. Boegner wrote to the Vichy head of state, Marshal Philippe Pétain, at the end of August, and apparently mobilized Cardinal Gerlier to make some representation on behalf of Catholic opinion. Simultaneously, a dramatic and forceful appeal came from an associate of Boegner, René Gillouin, the son of a Protestant pastor and an authentic traditionalist who was in close and frequent contact with Pétain.

In these and other expressions of protest from the Protestant camp, beyond the points we have mentioned, was a sense of common biblical heritage which Protestants shared with Jews — a link to the Old Testament and to Jesus himself. In his letter to the Grand Rabbi of March 1941 Boegner

affirmed this tie, echoing sentiments in the Protestant underground press.

This also emerged during an important meeting of sixteen Protestant leaders at Pomeyrol, near Tarascon in the Bouches-du-Rhône, in September 1941.

The Pomeyrol group had profound religious objections to antisemitism:

Founded on the Bible, the Church recognizes in Israel the people that God elected to give a savior to the world, and that is to be, amidst the nations, a permanent witness to the mystery of its fidelity. That is why, while recognizing that the state finds itself faced with a problem which it has to solve, it raises a solemn protest against any law placing Jews outside the human community.

Such themes were not universally accepted by Protestants, of course. Like the Catholic Church, Protestants were divided. Notably, the conservative and Calvinist Independent Reformed Evangelical Church, was far more respectful of Vichy and more favorable to the anti-Jewish laws than the Protestant mainstream. There was even a group of royalist and nationalist Protestants, led by Pastor Noël Noguét, who objected to the Pomeyrol statement on the grounds that Israel would benefit from the punishment inflicted upon it. But generally speaking such dissent was extremely limited and Boegner spoke for most Protestant groups. Uneasiness about the anti-Jewish legislation was both deep and genuine among various Protestant communities.

Persecution of Jews in France reached a new intensity in mid-1942. First came the imposition of the Yellow Star in the occupied zone - decreed at the end of May by German forces for all Jews over the age of six. Following quickly upon this decree came a series of Nazi ordinances excluding Jews from public life north of the demarcation line. Within days, the deportation trains carrying them to Auschwitz began to roll. In the year 1942 over 42,000 Jews were deported, several thousand of them came from unoccupied France, rounded up in the massive manhunts conducted by French police and various French auxiliary forces.

Apart from the interventions of Boegner and some Protestant associations, Church opposition to the persecution of the Jews in France before the beginning of the deportations had been rather limited or muted. Direct and specifically Christian attacks on antisemitism fell to individuals or to small groups. However, for the first time in the course of the occupation, the

deportation caused a substantial numbers of churchmen to denounce the persecution of the Jews. Along with important Catholic voices of protest, the Protestants added a public message – an eloquent statement by Pastor Boegner, circulated to almost all Protestant pulpits on September 22, 1942, to be read a few days later.

The 'Eglise réformée de France', it said, 'cannot remain silent in the face of the suffering of thousands of human beings who have found asylum on our soil. . . . Divine law cannot accept that families willed by God can be broken, children be separated from their mothers, the right of exile and compassion be unrecognized, respect for the human person be violated, and helpless individuals be surrendered to a tragic fate [livrés à un destin tragique]. . . . The Gospel obliges us to consider all men without exception as brothers for whom the Savior died on the cross. How can the Church ever forget that it was from that people from whom the Jews are descended that came in the flesh the Savior of the world?'

Throughout the Vichy period, some churchmen were active in France at all levels, providing practical aid for the Jews escaping persecution. Hundreds of Jewish children were hidden, thanks to the work of Protestant and Catholic religious institutions. Rescue activity began even before the turning point in the summer of 1942, but vastly expanded thereafter, when Jews were literally being hunted down and were often in desperate need of false papers, aid and shelter. Such work was usually clandestine, often dangerous, and conducted frequently in relatively isolated areas.

Protestants who had been members of pre-war youth movements were prominent among those who provided assistance to the Jews. Vital relief and later resistance efforts were organized by CIMADE (Commission Inter-Movements auprès des Evacués), a relief organization originally established to assist internees in 1939, led by Madeleine Barot and Pastor François Delpech. In heavily Protestant areas, such as the isolated communes of the Haute Loire, the Hautes Alpes or the Tarn, Jews found shelters and sometimes assistance in leaving the country. Chambon-sur-Lignon (in the Haute Loire) is perhaps the most famous of these Protestant villages, virtually an entire commune that mobilized for rescue. Frequently cut off by snowdrifts

during the winter, this almost homogeneously Protestant enclave helped thousands of refugees who passed through it. Jews there received the solid support of the local population, as well as the Cévenole normal school, headed by two nonviolent Protestant pastors, André Pacal Trocmé and Edouard Theis.

Looking back, one is impressed by the diversity of response among French Protestants and other churchmen, whose reactions to the persecution of Jews extended from the support given to Vichy's anti-Jewish laws by Protestant enthusiasts in 1940, to the wholehearted plunge into rescue activity by Protestant youth groups who provided Jews with false identity papers or smuggled them across the Spanish frontier. There was no single "Protestant" reaction, just as there was no single reaction from French society. That there was significant Protestant aid extended to Jews, that there was a sense of human brotherhood, and that there was a kinship between some Protestants and Jews is obvious from the many instances of practical help and occasional heroism to which many survivors of the Holocaust in France can testify.

Source: Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith & Irena Steinfeldt, *The Holocaust and the Christian World*, Yad-Vashem 2000, pp. 88-91