

ANSWERS TO
A JEWISH ENQUIRER

BY THE REV.
FATHER THEODORE RATISBONNE
1814-1884

TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH

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Introduction¹

The “Oxford Movement” still arouses interest in England. What led to it? What forces were at work? Whence came this revival of Catholic feeling, affecting some of the most brilliant minds of the day? The names of the great converts—Newman, Faber, Ward, Oakley, Dalgairns and others—are well known to students of the period.

But comparatively few people have looked as far as another ancient University, that of Strasbourg, where a religious movement was also taking place, also important and significant—the first considerable modern conversion from Judaism to Christianity.

For centuries cruel methods of persecution had thrown the Jews back upon themselves, and there seemed no point of contact with the Christian world. Then, in the year 1791, amongst the thunderbolts from the storm of the French Revolution, came an act which decreed their emancipation. Fifteen years later, the genius of Napoleon ordered the fusion of French and Jewish nationalities, and it was just at this moment that the author of the following *Answers to a Jewish Enquirer* was born. He came of an aristocratic Jewish family. His grandfather on one side obtained a patent of nobility from Louis XVI, and his maternal grandfather, the gentle and much-beloved Theodore Cerfbeer, gave shelter

¹ This short sketch is based on *The Brothers Ratisbonne*, published by the Catholic Truth Society, to which readers are referred for further particulars.

to priests and religious during the reign of one and was the trusted guardian of many sacred vessels from Catholic churches.

From this worthy stock came the famous brothers Theodore and Marie Alphonse Ratisbonne, the latter being the hero of that miraculous conversion which was one of Our Lady's most gracious acts.

We are told that the child Theodore longed for the coming of the Messiah, but as he grew older eighteenth-century scepticism laid hold of him. He "complained with Rousseau, he scoffed with Voltaire—it was the sneer of Satan." He hoped that science might solve his doubts, and it was indeed through his love for the silence of nature and the mysterious beauty of the midnight sky that he began to see the first faint promise of the dawn. After a night spent in contemplation of the stars he realized that an intelligent power must have created them, and regulated their harmonious movement, and he prayed, in bitterness of soul: "O Mysterious Being, Creator, Lord, Adonai, if Thou existest, have pity on Thy creature; show me the way which leads to truth, and I promise to consecrate my life to it."

The way was shown him; it led through the lecture-room of M. Bautain, a young and brilliant personality, suspended at that moment by the Académie Royale of Strasbourg for having dared to pass through scepticism and rationalism to Christianity. Not only Theodore Ratisbonne, but Isidore Goschler,² barrister, philosopher, and finally priest, Jules

² Biographies of Goschler and Lewel are published for the Catholic Guild of Israel by the Catholic Truth Society.

Lewel, and others of the same high level of intelligence were converted by his clear and luminous teaching, which led them to understand, gradually, how Christianity is the logical development and completion of Judaism. "Become good Israelites," he told them, "and truth will do the rest; works must accompany ideas, if ideas are to become conviction."

For three years the direction of Jewish schools absorbed the greater part of Theodore's time. He was already unconsciously a Christian. The name of Jesus became familiar to him, he spoke it with confidence. He invoked Our Lady; his love for his own mother led him to love Mary. Jesus and Mary together took possession of his heart.

At this critical moment in his life, he owed much to the wisdom of a very remarkable woman, a Mademoiselle Humann. She was about sixty at the time, and became a spiritual mother to the young student. She it was who prepared him for his baptism, which took place secretly, "for fear of the Jews," on Holy Saturday, 1827.

In the same year his friend Goschler also became a Christian. As at Oxford, it was a movement amongst intellectuals. The Strasbourg students arrived at the truth through hard and concentrated study, partly philosophic, as in the case of Newman, who was at that time a brilliant member of the philosophic Oriel school and in 1826 a public tutor at that college. In 1827, too, began what his biographer has called the second period of Newman's Oxford career, which culminated in his conversion in 1845, three years after that of Father Alphonse Ratisbonne—memorable years these for Catholicism, both in France and England !

For a short time Father Theodore succeeded in concealing his conversion from his family; but when challenged by his father, he made his confession of faith, which naturally drew down on him indignant displeasure. He therefore left home, and entering the seminary with his teacher, M. Bautain, was in due course ordained priest and celebrated his first Mass on the Feast of the Epiphany, 1831.

Father Theodore began his priestly career very successfully at the Little Seminary, but he longed for pastoral work, and in 1840 became assistant to the Abbé Desguettes of Notre Dame des Victoires, in Paris. Here he found that their Archconfraternity was already praying for the conversion of the Jews. To this encouragement was added that given him by Gregory XVI at an audience: “*Ite potius ad oves quæ perierunt domus Israel,*”³ commanded the Vicar of Christ, embracing him with fatherly affection.

The Abbé, like all religious reformers, knew how necessary it is to begin with the children. He therefore decided to procure Christian education for those small Jewish folk whose parents wished for it. A beginning was made in Paris by Mme. Stouhlen and Mlle. Louise Weywada, who educated twelve Jewish girls and instructed those who desired to be baptized. From this modest start arose the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion which today has Houses in every quarter of the globe. In 1858 Father Theodore came to London, and two years later a House was started there. The Congregation, given its canonical existence by the Archbishop of Paris in 1847, received Papal approbation in 1863 and the

³ “Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (Matt. 10:6)

definite sanction of its Rule in 1874. The Confraternity of Christian Mothers founded in 1852 was raised to the rank of an Archconfraternity in 1856, and has today over 1,500,000 associates distributed amongst 2200 Confraternities. There are three Houses in England—Bayswater and Holloway in London, and Worthing in Sussex.

But Father Theodore's ministry was not limited to these two great works, the Congregation of Our Lady of Sion and the Archconfraternity of Christian Mothers. All his life long he carried on besides an active apostleship; baptism, abjurations, instructions, confessions, retreats to parishes and religious congregations, to say nothing of an enormous correspondence, were all rendered possible by his tremendous zeal and activity. He possessed that eternal youthfulness of spirit which is the secret of the saints. He "drank love at its source" and neither insult, rebuff, nor contempt nor insolence lessened his courage or diminished his faith. God was manifest to him in all human events, as in the beauty of Nature; he enjoyed the "eternal serenity of God." He was a great reader of Holy Scripture; it was to him "God's book, to be read in God's spirit."

His heavenly Father sustained him through his last long illness, and the end, which came on May 6, 1884, was a transfiguration rather than death; for the marks of suffering passed away, and the beautiful and delicate features became again those of a young man.

Father Theodore lies in the cemetery at Grand Bourg, Corbeil; on his tombstone is the inscription: "Our good Father, 1802-1884," and below it the text, which he made most truly

his own, “Super omnia caritatem habete—quod est vinculum perfectionis.”⁴

⁴ Above all, have charity, which is the bond of perfection.

Chapter 1

The Messiah, The Divinity of Jesus Christ

Religion

Q. What is Religion?

A. Religion, according to the literal meaning of the word, is the sacred bond which unites man to God, his Creator; it includes, therefore, all those beliefs and duties by which man ought to glorify and serve God.

Q. What is true Religion?

A. True Religion is that which God Himself has instituted; for it belongs to Him to teach us in what manner He ought to be served. Now, God began His revelation of true Religion as soon as the world was created, and He has successively developed it in that order of time which His infinite wisdom prearranged. An architect places first the foundations of the edifice which he is about to build; then he continues his work, and at the last he puts the finishing touches. So God, according to Holy Scripture, after having spoken with Adam and the Patriarchs, later confirmed and extended these first teachings by the written Law which He gave to Moses.

Q. What is the principal truth taught by this Religion?

A. This Religion is based upon faith in the Messiah, whom God promised to Abraham and through whom He willed

to save the human race which had fallen beneath the yoke of Satan. This promise was often repeated to the Patriarchs, to Moses, and to the Prophets, who all lived believing in a liberator whom God should send, and in the expectation of His coming.

The Fall of Our First Parents

Q. Why does man need to be saved?

A. Because he deserved the condemnation of his Creator. The first man, in whose will the fate of all his posterity was included, committed a sin of disobedience against God. From that moment he lost the original innocence in which he had been created, and thereby heaven, his home, was shut against him. Thus, too, all the children of Adam are born stained with the sin of their first parent: all bear the weight of this terrible loss. That is what is meant by original sin.

Q. Do the Jews admit the dogma of original sin?

A. All the peoples of the world attribute the ills and scourges which afflict human nature to some primitive fall, but to the Jews especially the mystery of this fall has been revealed in the Holy Scriptures, for besides the third chapter of Genesis, Job in his fourteenth chapter declares the children of men to lie under some curse—“Who can make him clean that is conceived of unclean seed? Is it not Thou who only art?”¹ King David, voicing the

¹ Job 14:4

lament of the whole human race, cries out in the fiftieth Psalm: “For behold I was conceived in iniquities and in sins did my mother conceive me.”²

Q. Can it be proved that man is really fallen?

A. Only if you accept the teaching of Holy Scripture that man was created in a state of perfection both bodily and spiritual; from this the actual state of man today shows an evident fall. This degradation of human nature is seen in the ignorance, weakness, evil inclinations with which we are all born, and by the ills of every kind to which the human race is heir.

The Promise of a Messiah

Q. Did God abandon man after his fall?

A. God in His infinite goodness has not abandoned man. On the contrary He promised him a merciful restoration.

Q. Could not Adam and Eve have become once more holy and pleasing to God by their own efforts, if they had returned into the path of humble submission?

A. No, it was impossible for man to return to grace by his own efforts, or to establish himself by his own merits in that state of holiness from which he had fallen. Only God who had given him grace at his creation could restore it to him. Besides which how could man offer any sufficient reparation to the Infinite Majesty which

² Ps. 50:5

he had outraged? And how could such a reparation have been acceptable to God from a creature soiled by sin?

Q. What then are the conditions of salvation?

A. The salvation of man, then, could only be accomplished by God Himself. This is why the Messiah-Saviour was promised.

Q. When did God make this promise?

A. The promise of a redeeming Messiah was made immediately after the fall of Adam. God said, "I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: it shall crush thy head."³ This promise was often repeated in Holy Scripture; and the greater part of the prophecies refer to it.

Messianic Prophecies

Q. What are the principal prophecies which relate to the Messiah?

A. The whole Bible speaks of the Messiah, and reveals not only His coming into the world, but the time, the place, and small details of His life and sacrifice. Here, however, are some of the principal texts:

God said to Abraham, "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed."⁴ He also said to Isaac, "In thy

³ Gen. 3:15

⁴ Gen. 22:18

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