

# Spiritual Semetism

## Gaston Zananiri OP

(adapted and translated by Simon Tugwell OP)

*The following text is an extract from the Memoirs of Gaston Zananiri OP, of which copies of the complete text have been deposited in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, and the Dominican Historical Centre, Oxford. This extract allows us to relive the Jewish-Arab problem as it existed in the 1930s. Palestine was still under the British mandate, but its inhabitants were waiting for independence. This was the time when Pius XI declared, 'Spiritually we are all Semites.' Since then the Near East has witnessed political, nationalist and religious movements which have entirely changed the situation. We think it useful, in the present climate of renewed hopes and tensions, to publish this testimony from someone who was personally involved in this earlier period. The author, a Dominican priest in France since 1956, is an Alexandrian Melkite on his father's side, and a Jew on his mother's side.*

### 1 The Holy Land

My discovery of Semitism goes back to my first visit to Jerusalem in 1930, where I found the three religions derived from Semitic monotheism living side by side in the chaos of the Old City. I got the impression of a dense mass of people of various origins co-existing in mutual disdain, under the firm control of the British occupation. As soon as the British left Palestine, the fire hidden beneath the ashes broke out all over the region. A similarity of temperament on all sides, shaped by a common spiritual ancestry, became apparent, in which tenacity and terrorism were the salient features. Jews and Arabs (whether Muslim or Christian) had the same psychological reactions and instincts, shaped by their common inheritance derived from the mystical, spiritual and social teaching of the bible, the gospel and the Quran. These similarities could have provided a basis for mutual understanding, but in fact they led to disagreement, fostered by the interplay of international politics and local interests.

On my return to Alexandria I published my impression in a review edited by a Muslim colleague, Ahmed Rashad, *Le Flambeau d'Égypte*. Shortly afterwards a Jewish friend, John Weinblatt, a Zionist who was as sensible as he was keen, suggested that I should visit the Chief Rabbi, David Prato, whom I already knew in fact, who was to end his days as head of the Jewish

community in Rome. He reminded me of my own Jewish ancestry—which he took more seriously than I did at the time—and spoke to me at length about Jerusalem. From that time onwards a spiritual friendship was established between us. He also talked to me about Elijah Benamozegh, Chief Rabbi of Livorno.

In the last years of the nineteenth century Benamozegh profoundly impressed his contemporaries with his doctrine, inspired by the Talmud, of a religious universalism based on the covenant with Noah found in Genesis 9. He envisaged a society made up of priests (the Jews) and a people of gentiles, united by love of God and by the moral law. He let it be understood that there was nothing to prevent a Christian remaining attached to the person of Jesus of Nazareth, so long as the Trinity and the Incarnation were abandoned. Such a proposal emptied Christianity of its substance, but this did not stop some Christians from participating in his 'union of believers'. Amongst others a Catholic intellectual, Aimé Pallière, felt the attraction of this idea of universalism. He quickly realised the theoretical weakness of a scheme which had no basis in any confession of faith, in spite of its moral and social perspectives, but all the same he saw in it a way of behaving in practice which could cement links of friendship between Jews and Christians. He concluded his own role was to be a witness to Christianity within the synagogue, though without practising the Jewish religion. For years his participation was misunderstood and his book, *Le Sanctuaire Inconnu* (1928), could be read as meaning that he had become a Jew. In fact, after a period of spiritual struggle, in 1942 he returned to the practice of the Christian sacraments, while continuing to respect the Jewish feasts. Nowadays the name of Aimé Pallière means nothing, but in his own time this strange, ambiguous figure was much discussed and commented on in the most contradictory ways. In 1949, shortly before his death, he wrote to a friend, 'Someone said to me one day, "How can you expect anyone to understand you? Your religious position puts you a century or two ahead of your time."' "

Rabbi Prato also talked of the Messianic times he considered to be in the process of realisation. He insisted on his own desire to establish a 'union of believers' based on Semitic monotheism. We understood each other, he and I. I mentioned it to some Coptic Christian and Muslim friends and they saw a political purpose in his attitude, but Dr Prato was a scholar and saw the question only in mystical and intellectual terms.

He invited me to expound his ideas one evening in the Rabbinat's conference room. I accepted and, to my surprise, found myself addressing a full house. After my talk a man between 30 and 40 years old came up to me and introduced himself as EHUD, the son of Ben-Yehuda. The name meant nothing to me. I learned that his father had been the driving force behind the renewal of the Hebrew language. He spoke of his desire to put me in touch with his mother, who had worked with Ben-Yehuda, and he invited me to Jerusalem. He insisted on the friendly relations that existed between Jews and Arabs and his desire to show me this.

I also learned that his father had succeeded, after a life of toil and struggle, in reviving Hebrew, which became, with English and Arabic, one of the three official languages of Palestine under British rule, and that his family had, since its arrival at the end of the last century, fraternised with Arab milieux. It was important to strengthen mutual understanding between all the inhabitants of the land.

'Come to Jerusalem,' Ehud said to me. 'You will meet my mother. She will tell you of all the difficulties, the intrigues, the condemnations, and of my father's work in which she was his close collaborator. She will give you the essentials you will need to tell the story of his life. You will understand how close the Arabs and the Jews are. The witness of our coexistence is crucial.'

Some weeks later I was in Jerusalem, at the house of the Ben-Yehudas at Talpioth. The first words of Ben-Yehuda's widow to me were: 'I am happy to welcome a Jew under my roof.' 'My mother was Jewish,' I replied, 'but my father was a Christian.' 'So what? The Jewish law only recognises the mother.' I looked at her in surprise, and she went on, 'One knows who the mother is; one never knows who the father is.'

Her reply made me choke, but Hemdah Ben-Yehuda took not the slightest notice. Taking my arm, she led me into the house. Thus began a friendship which lasted until her death some twenty years later. From her I learned how a young Lithuanian, Eliezer Elianov, arrived in Jerusalem with his young wife, Deborah, and his children, with the ambition of making Hebrew rather than Yiddish the language of everyday conversation. It was a huge scandal. The religious authorities excommunicated Ben-Yehuda, as Elianov now called himself. She told me of how the first supporters of this innovation met and of the difficulties of the young household, of the death of Deborah and Ben-Yehuda's marriage with herself, Deborah's sister, and how she quickly began to work with him and to take the necessary steps in Europe to raise funds for the publication, in fascicles, of the *Thesaurus* which was to serve as the basis for the renewal of the language.

I also met the eldest son of Ben-Yehuda, Ithamar Ben-Avi, who was a member of the Jewish delegation at Versailles in 1919, when the status of the Jews in Palestine was discussed. He told me of his experiences and particularly of the creation of the first Hebrew paper, which he founded in 1882, *Ha-Zevi*. It came out once a week, under the auspices of a modest printer in the old quarter of Jerusalem. Every day he and his father took copy to him and supervised the rather amateurish type-setting. On Thursday evening they worked at the printing of it, in the light of a candle which gave the primitive machines the air of antediluvian monsters. Then they took the copies home themselves to fold the papers and address them. On Friday morning they were delivered. *Ha-Zevi* knew many ups and downs before it ceased to exist. *Ha-Or* and *Hashkafa* took its place, to allow Ben-Yehuda to pursue his task of popularisation. As the years went by, the number of his assistants grew, as did the number of his readers. Despatches from abroad, sent in by friends, completed his information. All this was happening at a

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time when Jews and Arabs were living in harmony, as they had for generations.

While Mme Ben-Yehuda and Ithamar told me the story of these far-off days, I had the occasion to meet the representatives of one of the leading Muslim families in Jerusalem, Fakhri Nashashibi, who fell victim some months later to the bullets of Jewish terrorists. Arab terrorists were also beginning to be active.

Mme Ben Yehuda also put me in touch with the chief editor of the Arab journal, *Falastine*. He received me with an ungraciousness that suggested a certain mistrust, which made me suspect that relations were not as harmonious as Mme Ben Yehuda had suggested. As a Jewess of ancient stock, in spite of her Eastern European origins, she had believed for half a century that Jews and Arabs could and should live in harmony together.

I also met an Arab nationalist who twenty years later became a minister in Jordan, when the state of Israel was proclaimed. As far as he was concerned the Jews could go to Hell, but he added, at the end of his diatribe, 'I have said plenty of bad things about the Jews, but believe me, they are not the worst. Our most dangerous enemy is the English. If they had not interfered, we could long since have reached some sort of agreement. After all, Jews and Arabs have lived side by side in this country for ages.'

I was also received by the Zionist labour movement leader, Chaim Arlosoroff, the representative of Keren Kayemeth, the Jewish National Fund. He was to be killed shortly afterwards by Arab terrorists. There was already a climate of conflict, which was soon to degenerate into open war. In such an atmosphere, in 1932, I met Meir Dizengoff, the founder of Tel Aviv. He received me in his office and gave me the impression of being a survivor from an age gone by. He was then 70 years old; his face was still full of life and his mind clear and his step alert. He had been one of the first enthusiasts to land in Palestine, where he knew the first pioneers of the Jewish homeland.

## 2 Humanism

My meetings with Chief Rabbi Prato to establish a movement of believers were achieving little because of the suspicions of the Egyptians. Relations between Jews and Arabs were deteriorating in Palestine, and in Egypt both Muslims and Copts were disinclined to encourage a movement they tended to politicise at the expense of its spiritual significance. This confusion became more and more obvious, until it even affected ecclesiastical milieux. All the same, the original idea was not forgotten; but it was the expression of a reality that people now wanted to crush. Benamozegh's vision of a universal society based on the covenant with Noah was nothing other than the 'union of believers' suggested by Prato at the very time when Pius XI declared, 'Spiritually we are all Semites.'

My chance to address the issue came unexpectedly at the beginning of 1935, when *Le Front Latin* announced a congress on Humanism to be held in Monaco the following year, under the auspices of the Mediterranean

Academy. This Academy, founded in Nice in 1926–7, had recently established itself in the principality. The article referred to the Mediterranean as ‘a Greco-Latin lake’. I consulted Chief Rabbi Prato and John Lugol, a Swiss journalist and Hebraist who specialised in Jewish-Arab problems; he was the chief editor of the Alexandrian daily, *La Bourse Égyptienne*. In response to the notice in *Le Front Latin* I published an article in Lugol’s journal on 8 May, entitled, ‘Latin thought and Mediterranean civilisation’, in which I pointed out that the Mediterranean is not a Greco-Latin lake, but a Semitico-Greco-Latin lake, if one takes into account the Semitic civilisations, notably those of the Jews and Muslims, which were spread along its coasts. My article was reprinted in the June issue of the Bulletin of the Société des Gens de Lettres de France, of which I was a member at the time. Some weeks later I received a letter from Jean Desthieux, secretary general of the Mediterranean Academy, inviting me to present my view at the congress on Humanism. In this way Semitism was registered as an element in the development of Mediterranean humanism.<sup>1</sup>

This was the origin of my ‘Communication sur le Sémitisme’, which I made a point of writing under the inspiration of conversations with Chief Rabbi Prato, Jean Lugol and some others. Once the text was completed, it was important to get it approved by representatives of the intelligentsia of Alexandria and Cairo. I was given the green light with some fifty signatories; more than two thirds of the signatories were people I knew personally. They represented the spectrum of the various milieux which had their own message to contribute.

On my arrival in Monaco, Desthieux came to visit me. ‘I expected an older man,’ he said, smiling. Three of the papers dealt with the same question: mine, entitled ‘The basis, the culture and the universality of Semitism’; ‘Jewish humanism’ by Joshua Yehuda, director of *La Revue Juive de Genève*; and ‘The role of the orientals and the Semites in Mediterranean civilisation’ by Probst-Biraben. Although these three communications represented only a small element in the congress, the whole congress expressed a desire related to the theme treated by Yehuda and myself, namely Semitism as a feature of Mediterranean humanism: ‘Granted the indisputable importance of Semitism in the development of Mediterranean thought, the Congress expresses the desire that due attention be paid to Semitic cultures in Mediterranean education.’<sup>2</sup>

It was not a particularly portentous result, but it was a beginning, a move to stop the Mediterranean being seen as essentially a Greco-Latin lake, as certain Western milieux tended to suppose, through prejudice or historical insensitivity. They had forgotten the past and the mingling of peoples and cultures. It also opened a door between the peoples of the Eastern Mediterranean, formed by a single ethos but divided by an emotional and political environment which more powerful interests had poisoned. After many years of hostility and strife, it would take an unexpected meeting of two men of good will, Begin and Sadat, in November 1977 to show to what extent human relationships and religious traditions could still prevail over

transient enmities.

My communication on Semitism was reproduced in several journals, in Egypt and elsewhere. For instance, *Al-Muqtataf* printed it in June 1936. This review, encyclopaedic in character, was founded in Beirut in about 1879 and moved to Cairo in 1884. It has always tried to bring to light the various trends of thought which are in the air: in 1925 it campaigned against the dangers of socialism; in April 1940 it investigated the relationship between scientific research and industry; in February 1944 it warned against complacent self-sufficiency. On the other side, the extremist Young Egypt movement, *Misr-El-Fatat*, which had earlier published an article of mine on the caliphate (1 September 1938), printed the complete text of my communication on Semitism on 3 March 1939.

### 3 Culture

At a time when people's minds are harassed by questions of race, which are probably illusory anyway, it is important to consider Semitism as a spiritual reality and to try to recover something of its culture.

The basis of Semitism is monotheism, the belief in an immanent power, a perfect, invisible Being, whose attributes are infinite, an eternal principle, unique, absolute, indivisible, from which everything proceeds and to which everything returns; one law which rules nature and humanity and creates universal harmony and a universal morality. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, issuing from this monotheism, ought to serve as the basis for a Semitic renaissance. This monotheism ought to reunite in a sort of melting-pot people who are divided more by social prejudices than by their spirit, tradition or morality.

Semitism is constituted by a range of factors which together form a whole which it is difficult to divide:

a) geography: the Arabian peninsula, Palestine, Syria, the Euphrates and Nile valleys, the eastern Mediterranean basin and the Red Sea basin brought together peoples coming from different directions, to give birth to Semitism;

b) ethics: the principles of Semitic morality and monotheism created a homogeneous tradition in the minds of the peoples of these regions, who evolved beneath the banners of Judaism and Islam, not to mention eastern Christianity under the regime of the patriarchates;

c) language: Arabic and Hebrew have a common pedigree, as well as certain other languages now only used liturgically, such as Syriac and Chaldaean;

d) philosophy: Jews and Arabs cooperated closely in a philosophical enterprise which played a significant role in the spread of Semitic culture in Europe in the Middle Ages, as well as making possible the production of works which can be regarded as Semitic in inspiration;

e) history: Semitic empires took shape in the Mediterranean Near East, and Jews, Christians and Muslims, all Semites, made a joint contribution to the history of the East and of Medieval Europe.

In addition to these factors, which give Semitism its particularity, there is

its spiritual identity (its pure morality and its understanding of things), which gives it a certain universality. By its monotheism, its faith, its tradition, its ethics and its fundamental concept of unity, Semitism is more than just an ethnic or geographical entity; it possesses an undisputed advantage with regard to the principles which govern humanity as a whole.

Semitism accordingly has a particular and a universal aspect. Semitism as a particular reality, based on factors of geography, language, history and so on, must expand on a sound foundation and with new principles among the nations whose origins lie in the lands between the Nile and the Euphrates, where the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Babylon, Phoenicia and Israel were born, as well as primitive Semitism, which first developed among the nomadic and pastoral tribes who lived between the desert, the mountains and the sky, under the influence of a sublime harmony which, translated into social terms, resulted in a cult of family life, protection of the clan and hospitality towards strangers.

Under the inspiration of its pure morality and its understanding, Semitism must universalise itself. These inner forces brood over people and contribute to the development of their feelings and their ideas, indeed they are at their source. And they know no frontiers. They are adaptable to different traditions, but there is one unchanging principle they always instil, that of spiritual brotherhood.

Semitic culture, which spread across the world from Baghdad, Cairo, Cordoba, was a mixture of Arabic and Hebrew culture and Greek philosophy. Its principle exponents knew both Arabic and Hebrew. Some were Muslim Arabs, some were Christian Arabs, some were Jews. The intellectual traffic they embodied occurred particularly in Spain, Provence and Italy. In this way Semitic civilisation, Arabic and Hebrew, influenced the Aryan thought of Europe. This two-fold culture, which gave such a stimulus to European civilisation, ought to give our thought an orientation which can bring about a new renaissance by means of the Semitic spirit. But this renaissance can only reach its full flowering in as much as the basic ideas of Greek thought are brought into play as well as the principles of Semitism. Semitic understanding, filtered through Greco-Latin civilisation (of Aryan origins), spread across Europe to reinforce a western civilisation built on a foundation of a purified Semitism and a matured Aryanism. A culture inspired by such principles can create a new trend in our society.

Of course the way ahead is complex. Paul Valéry's message to the Monaco congress makes the point with prophetic clarity:

It is an undeniable fact that the notion of the human person has been laboriously, sometimes painfully, elaborated on the banks of our sea. Man as an individual constituting a value in his own right precisely as a man, in politics, in law and in philosophy, is an original creation brought about only thanks to the unique conditions found here. The whole of western civilisation is related to this idea of man. Or so it has been *up to now*.

But we cannot doubt that a time has come, or will come soon, when

there will be a serious challenge to a view one would have thought until very recently to be established for ever indestructibly in people's minds.

Maybe, of course, the rapid and profound changes occurring in the world of human life call for a corresponding modification in our ideas and our value judgments. There is therefore nothing more urgent than that we should not leave to chance the preservation or the reconstitution of the intellectual principles and the affective tendencies of civilised humanity. Such a crucial question must not be left at the mercy of impressionistic whims, the random action of events, or the interested action of political forces. That would *not* be 'Mediterranean' in the sense we understand here.

This is why we must not consider the work of this Congress, and also the teaching and studies undertaken at our Centre in Nice, of which I have the honour to be the administrator, as purely theoretical, with nothing serious at stake. The Mediterranean does not like anything vague; its policy is never to leave theory and practice separate for long. This is why it has seen on its shores the birth of geometry and of law, of the art of correct thinking and that of organising civic life.<sup>3</sup>

#### 4 Society

Religion lives by its ethics. It can only become universal in as much as its ethics are accessible to all. This is why the Semitic morality spread so fast throughout the world, sowing the seed of common principles which are at the basis of all true sense of humanity. The idea of a Semitic renaissance need not mean playing up any one faith at the expense of another. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, three religions with a common moral origin, should by their moral influence help the Semitic civilisation which engendered them to become universal, to inject a new vigour into a whole world grown decadent. It is intolerable that the peoples among whom the three monotheistic religions were born and developed should not be able to have a common perspective on a spiritual future they all ought to have in common one day.

Religion is not just dogmas and theological arguments, it is also a profound human reality. As such, it is a personal sentiment, imbued with morality, which can occur in any human spirit, regardless of differences of faith and cult. In this sense, it is the very essence of the fundamental ideas underlying social organisation and the ethical principles which govern the world. It is an interior call to recollection and brotherhood. Semitism, as we have been presenting it here, does not put forward a particular creed so much as a set of norms which ought to serve as a starting point for the development of morality and thought.

Semitism, as a social and spiritual principle, is incompatible with any idea of 'race' which would imply a restricted group of people living cut off from everyone else. As a matter of race, Jews and Muslims are not all of



Semitic stock, but both have been shaped by a spirit built on the social and spiritual traditions and on the monotheism of Semitism. It is nonsense to accuse them of any kind of racialist ethic. From the beginning there was Jewish proselytism; one finds it at the time of the Exile, and in the epoch of Hellenism and Roman dominion it became more and more active. When the Christian missionaries began their own proselytising, they found themselves in competition with Jewish missionaries, a competition that lasted unabated until the recognition of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire. The last major success of this Jewish missionary activity was the conversion of the Khazars, a tribe of Turkic stock, coming originally from central Asia, which was converted to Judaism between 740 and 800. For several centuries the Khazars governed the vast territory bounded on the south east by the Caspian Sea, on the south west by the Black Sea, on the east by the Don and on the west by the Dnieper. By embracing Judaism the Khazars wanted to avoid falling under the Christian influence of Byzantium or the Muslim influence of the Persians. They served as a link between the Empire to the south of them and the barbarian tribes to the north. Under pressure from the Mongols they emigrated towards central Europe, where they settled. They are the origin of the Ashkenazi Jews.

Islamic missions followed the same logic as those of the Jews. This is why the term 'diaspora', in spite of its literal meaning of 'dispersal', is close to the term 'umma', with its sense of 'collectivity'. In both instances the result is the same: a 'nation', either Jewish or Muslim. In spite of their dispersal both nations are seen as homogeneous groups characterised by spiritual and social cohesion. Practically, the Muslim nation advances in the world thanks to its missionaries, while the Jewish nation maintains its homogeneity by means of its 'law of return', which grants Israeli citizenship to any individual who can claim Jewish descent on his mother's side. Muslims and Jews make no distinction between 'religious' and 'social', unlike the Christians, who insist on the separation between Caesar and God, so that the separation of powers is a dominant principle of Christian society.

The spirit of 'umma', referring to the Muslim community dispersed throughout the world, is directed toward the temporal and spiritual welfare of the society of believers. This idea is fundamental to the theocratic structure of the Muslim state, which is why many countries with a Muslim majority have established Islam as the state religion; it also explains why a Muslim is always at home in any Islamic land and can integrate himself there without difficulty. I cannot forget what an intimate Muslim friend once told me: 'I shall never say to you what I would say to any Muslim the first time I met him, "Peace be with you" (*al-salam 'alaykum*) .'

The spirit of 'diaspora', which is as old as biblical Judaism, has in our days acquired a sense somewhat different from the past, because it has been affected by Nazi genocide (though we should not forget that the Jews were not the only victims of Hitler's racism; millions of gypsies and Poles and other people were its victims). But the essential meaning of 'diaspora' is the age-old testimony of the Jewish people in their dispersal, a testimony

consisting of *being* and *living* in the presence of God. The survival of the Jewish people is not just a psychological, emotional or biological fact, it is a *theological reality*. The diaspora cannot be understood politically, it has to be seen as an affirmation of faith, an *élan* towards God. Think of the unforgettable graffito on a bit of wall from a Jewish house entirely destroyed at Cologne:

‘I believe in the sun, even when it does not shine.  
I believe in love, even if I do not feel it.  
I believe in God, even if he is silent.’

Such was the ideal which animated President Sadat. He hoped to make Mount Sinai a place of prayer and union between the different peoples who inherit the Semitic spirit. His violent death put an end to these spiritual aspirations. In his youth, he had been a revolutionary; at the end of his life he was an apostle of the vision of the three faiths inspired by the Semitic genius and its monotheism. He had had three architects—an Egyptian, a Frenchman and an Israeli—design a tri-confessional complex with three sanctuaries on an equal footing, to be the symbol of the union of which he dreamed .

1 The proceedings of the congress were published by the Académie Méditerranéenne as their Cahier II: *L' Humanisme de la Méditerranée*, Monaco 1936.

2 Op. cit. p.69.

3 Op. cit. pp.36-37.

## A Green Theology?

Roger Arguile

Before beginning to try to define what kind of Green theology is most likely to have an enduring place, let us try to define what Green theology certainly should *not* be.

The prophets call us to account. The tone of the call is certain, because there must be no risk of our not seeing the difference between our present failure and what they propose. The ecological problems which now occupy some portion of every week's news produce prophecies of doom and demands for action. Our inertia, our denials and the plausible reassurances of governments necessitate both subtlety and strong language, if there is ever going to be a widespread change of attitude. For, to our minds, the villains are always other people.

In this situation the voices loudly resound of self-proclaimed prophets