

Bergson, Judaism and Catholicism¹

R. J. Weksler-Waszkinel ■

Introduction

The title of this paper features the name of one of the greatest French philosophers of this century--one whose commitment to modernity was matched by his commitment to the principles of religious faith. In the pages that follow, I wish to clarify some aspects of Bergson's religious principles, by focusing on his last will and testament.

After publishing his work, *Les deux sources de la morale et la religion* (1932), Bergson came to be very close to the Catholic Church. It was even believed that he had been baptized. When, however, his last will was published and it became clear that he had refused to be baptized, his decision to stop on the doorstep of a baptistery was interpreted as a gesture of solidarity with the persecuted Jews. In interpreting Bergson's decision as primarily a indication of solidarity with the persecuted Jews, however, we miss his deepest intentions and, consequently, fail to understand the message he left us in his will.

My object here is to place Bergson's decision in the context, not of the times--i.e., by focusing on the error of a too 'political' reading--but of the life of the man who wrote

■ Rev. Fr. Romuald Jakub Weksler-Waszkinel is a lecturer in Philosophy at the Catholic University of Lublin Poland.

1. Translated by Roman Majeran.

it, and of the character of the religious institutions which he saw around him. The text of his will is a testament to the encounter within himself of his Judaism and of his inclination towards Catholicism--a Catholicism that, however, was not without its own tensions. It is important for us, I suggest, to hear Bergson's voice--to hear an account which, in the end, leaves many of us accountable.

Bergson and France

Henri Bergson was born in Paris, in 1859; he died there as well. He owed his whole education to France and, while a student at the Ecole Normale Superieure, he obtained French citizenship³. Already in his lifetime he achieved popularity, and even fame, thanks mainly to the literary merits of his style--he was awarded the 1928 Nobel Prize for Literature--and to his famous lectures at the College de France which attracted crowds of listeners. Among his philosophical works, the best known is the *L'Evolution créatrice* [*Creative evolution*]⁴.

Through his contribution to France's culture, it is clear that Bergson deserved to be called "*every inch a Frenchman*"⁵. It was also France that he loved as his native soil. Let his own words, taken from two of his public pronouncements, show how much he loved her. One statement is taken from a speech he made on *Radio-Paris* in 1934, concerning philosophy and the spirit of France; he said in the last sentence of that speech: "I am finishing now, being so happy that at the end of my career, before I leave, I have had the opportunity to express my love, my admiration, and my fervent gratitude to France, to this magnificent and kind mother whose thoughts nurtured my

3. See R.M. Mosse-Bastide, *Bergson educateur*, Paris, 1955, pp 15-25.

4. English translation: A. Mitchell, New York, 1911.

5. Cf. E. Gilson, *La philosophie et la théologie*, Fayard, 1960.

thoughts and to whom I owe everything."⁶ The other statement comes from a text entitled *Mes missions (1917-1918)*, written in 1936, in which he describes his diplomatic activity in the years of World War I. At the end of that text he declares: "Deep in my heart I did not care about all the honours. Or perhaps, I felt unworthy of them. I did not count; it was only France that counted."⁷

These words of love and gratitude, spoken by an "adopted" son, were, as it soon turned out, words of farewell to the great and free France: dark clouds were coming from the East. On May 10, 1940, the German army struck by attacking neutral Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg and France. On June 14, Paris surrendered to the enemy and, at 9 a.m., the first German troops entered the empty centre of the city and marched from the Arc du Triomphe to the Place de la Concorde. At the top of the Tour d'Eiffel a Nazi flag was fluttering.⁸

On June 17, Marshal Philippe Petain, a World War I hero made famous by the victory of Verdun and who became the Prime Minister of the new cabinet, said, in his first radio address: "Being sure of the confidence of humanity *I lay my own person down as an offering to France* to lessen her calamities. [...] It is with a heavy heart that I say to you that the fight has to be stopped now. [...] At this time of ordeal let all the French unite behind the government I am at the head of, let them overcome their anxiety and follow the call of the faith in their Country's destiny."⁹

6. See H. Bergson, *Mélanges*, Paris, 1972, p. 1517.

7. *Ibidem*, p. 1570. Bergson was awarded all existing degrees of the Legion d'Honneur, beginning with *chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur* in 1902 to the *grand croix de la Legion d'Honneur* in 1930.

8. Cf. J. Eisler, *Philippe Petain*, Warszawa, 1991, pp. 113-117.

9. Translation mine. I cite after J. Eisler, *op. cit.*, p. 119. Italics are also mine.

What sort of Frenchmen united behind the government of one who "laid himself down as an offering" to France? Only two days after the transfer of power to Petain by the National Assembly, an *ordonnance* was published making it clear that only "French citizens born of parents who are native French could enter the government."¹⁰ It was but a portent of what was to come.

I leave the detailed account of these and subsequent events to historians. What is of interest for us, because of its reference to Bergson, is the *Statut de Juifs* of October 3 (in the official record, it appeared as October 18) 1940, which was both a continuation and a crowning of the preceding anti-Jewish measures of the Vichy regime.¹¹

The guiding idea behind Marshal Petain's policy was that of the so-called "national revolution." The new French State rejected the triple slogan of the Republic: Liberty-Equality-Fraternity, and replaced it with another: Work-Family-Homeland. The main task of the State was to effect a moral regeneration of France; in order to achieve that goal, it was necessary to "cleans" France of alien elements and influences. And, first of all, this meant removing persons of Jewish descent from official posts, the learned professions, and from economic and cultural life. The *Statut des Juifs* was in the service of that idea.

Now, in order to remove the Jewish element from the life of the country, it was necessary to define first who was

10. See T. Janasz, *Panstwo francuskie wobec kwestii zydowskiej* (1940-1944) [The French State and the Jewish Question 1940-1944], Wroclaw, 1968, p. 31.

11. See p. 32. Among these measures was the law concerning the modification of naturalization. On the recommendation of the Minister of Justice and the commission "for modifications of naturalizations," a decree could be issued cancelling the French citizenship of a person even if it had been obtained before that law came into force. The long lists of those who had their French citizenship taken away under that law were announced in the *Journal Officiel*. See op. cit., p. 31.

a Jew. Thus, Article 1 of the *Statut* stated: "Under this law any person will be considered a Jew if three of their grandparents are *Jewish by race* or if two of their grandparents are Jewish and they are married to a Jew."¹² (It is, perhaps, of interest that the counterpart of the *Statut* issued by the Germans in the occupied zone on September 27, 1940--that is, nearly a month before the *Statut* itself--used religious rather than racial terms in defining Jewishness¹³!)

One may easily assume that, in Vichy France, both sides wished to please the other: the Germans, knowing that racism was not a feature of French anti-Semitism (more precisely, of the French right)¹⁴ were reluctant, at least to begin with, to provoke French public opinion. The French, on the other hand, perhaps wishing to win the confidence of the Reich and the Führer, made a bow to the racist theory of Nazism.

This bow, unfortunately, was followed by actions¹⁵. The great majority of Jews living in France were removed from their posts in the state administration, the courts, the

12. I am quoting after T. Janasz, op. cit., p. 33. Translation and italics are mine.

13. In the *ordonnance* of 27 September we read: "Persons who profess or professed the Jewish religion, or of whom more than two grandparents were Jews will be considered to be Jews. Those grandparents will be considered Jews who profess or professed Jewish religion. I cite after T. Janasz, op. cit., p. 31-32. Translation and emphasis mine.

14. Cf. J. Eisler, *Od monarchizmu do faszystu. Koncepcje polityczno-społeczne prawicy francuskiej 1918-1940*, [From Monarchism to Fascism. The Political and Social Conceptions of the French Right], Warszawa, 1987, pp. 293 and ff.

15. One should note that, of all the countries of Western Europe occupied by Nazi Germany, only France had an anti-Jewish legislation judged by historians to be very harsh. E.g. J. Eisler cites the opinion of Henri Michel, a French historian, who maintains that "Fascist Italy was less anti-Semitic than Vichy France!". See J. Eisler, op. cit., p. 302. Cf. F. Raphael, "Les Juifs de France" in *Histoire de la France religieuse du XX siècle*, vol.4, (edited by J. Le Goff and R. Remond), Paris, 1992, pp. 253-333.

army, police, education, and--in general--from culture. However, one would be mistaken if one thought that this was the way the French State bade farewell to Bergson. Totalitarian systems, before finally destroying their more distinguished victims, often attempt to debase them. A separate decree was issued by the Vichy regime, in accordance with proviso 8 of the *Statut*, individuals coming under the *Statut* who had achieved distinction in the areas of science, literature, art, etc. might be exempted from the obligation to comply to its rules¹⁶. Of course, no one was in any doubt that Bergson had achieved distinction and had rendered services to the French state, so it was entirely up to him what move to make next. What was his decision?

The eighty year old Philosopher, weak and ill, queued conspicuously for a few hours in order to fulfil the obligation to register as a Jew. Moreover, dutifully abiding by the injunctions of the anti-Jewish law, he relinquished all the honours and awards he had been given by France¹⁷. Such was Bergson's answer to the above-mentioned decree of the French State. This was the last "move" of the Philosopher; this was also his final farewell to France--so different from the first one. But France, too, was no longer the same. Bergson died on January 3, 1941.

Bergson's 'Testament'

Paul Claudel noted in his *Journal* under January 5, 1941: "I hear about the death of Bergson who has been a Catholic in his heart since long ago."¹⁸ How long? In 1933, B. Romeyer, a Jesuit in close touch with Bergson, wrote that the baptism of the author of *Les deux sources* was

16. Cf. T. Janasz, op. cit., p. 34.

17. See Bergson, Henri Louis (1859-1941), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, 1978, pp. 619-621.

18. Translation mine after: P. Claudel, *Dziennik 1904-1955* (Polish version of Paul Claudel's, *Journal*, by J. Rogozinski), Warszawa, 1977, p. 365.

likely to come in the near future¹⁹. How could this be so? Henri Gouhier, one of the most distinguished experts on Bergsonism, writes: "Having written what he did in the *Les deux sources* about the Christ of the Gospel, Bergson could not but see himself among those who listened and still continue to listen to the Sermon on the Mount"²⁰. As a matter of fact, having written that work Bergson showed great interest in Catholicism and this "excited" the imagination of some to the extent of mistaking their wishes for reality. Only this can justify what Jacques Maritain's wife, Raissa, wrote from New York in a letter of January 7, 1941 (Bergson having died four days earlier): "*Henri Bergson, although more in sympathy with his people than at any other time, was however baptized. As it might seem that by this gesture he has abandoned the persecuted Jews in their suffering, out of thoughtfulness he did not wish this fact to become public during his lifetime.* Now, however, there remains no reason whatsoever to be silent about this great spiritual event."²¹

This piece of information and its like gave rise, of course, to much speculation and conjecture. But an end was put to all that when the *Gazette de Lausanne*, on September 9, 1941, published a letter from Bergson's wife to Emmanuel Mounier in which she clearly stated that, although her husband had been interested in religion for a long time and--particularly after the publication of the *Les deux sources*--had regarded Catholicism with increasing sympathy, he had, however, never made the decisive step of accepting baptism. To dispel all doubts, she appended a

19. Cf. B. Romeyer, "Caractéristique religieuse du spiritualité de Bergson," *Archives de philosophie*, XVII, cahier I, 1946, p. 32.

20. H. Gouhier, *Bergson et le Christ des Evangiles*, Paris, 1987, p. 171. The Sermon on the Mount mentioned here is in Mt. 5-8.

21. R. Maritain, *Souvenir* in: *Henri Bergson, Essai et témoignages recueillis*, par A. Beguin et P. Thevenaz, Neuchâtel, 1943, p. 350. The italics are mine.

passage from her husband's last will supporting her statement²².

In this text, dated February 8, 1937, Bergson had written:

(1) "*My reflections have led me closer and closer to Catholicism, in which I see the complete fulfilment of Judaism.* (2) *I would have become a convert, had I not foreseen for years a formidable wave of anti-Semitism about to break upon the world* (this, unfortunately, being due to the errors of some Jews completely devoid of a moral sense). (3) *I wanted to remain among those who tomorrow were to be persecuted.* (4) *I do, however, hope that a Catholic priest may agree to come, provided the cardinal bishop of Paris gives his consent, and say the prayers at my funeral.* (5) *In the case that such consent is not given, a rabbi is to be approached without, however, keeping my moral adherence to Catholicism and my expressed wish for a Catholic priest to pray at my funeral secret from him nor from anybody else.*"²³

Once this letter from Bergson's wife to Mounier, together with the quoted passage from the philosopher's will, had been published, the fact that Bergson had refused to be baptized was beyond any doubt. What attracted interest now were the reasons that made him refuse. All those who comment upon this testament, despite the variety of circumstances to which they point, agree with respect on one point: Bergson refused to be baptized because he wanted to remain with the persecuted Jews. Why is there such a unity of opinion?

22. See pp. 11-12.

23. The text of the will follows that cited in F. Delattre, "Les dernières années de Bergson," *Etudes Bergsonniennes. Hommages à Henri Bergson (1859-1941)*, Paris, 1942, pp. 5-18. Sentences 3-5 of the will are my translation; the numbers and emphasis are also mine.

When Bergson's *Les deux sources* came out, in 1932, every reader could easily see that the author's sympathy was on the side of Christianity²⁴. Those who were closer to Bergson knew more, and expected Bergson to become a convert; as we have seen, there were even people who believed that he had been baptized²⁵. When this turned out to be untrue, explanations were looked for which--understandably enough--referred to the circumstances the philosopher found himself in during the last months of his life.

I have already outlined these circumstances. The philosopher's behaviour in the face of the anti-Jewish legislation of the Vichy regime was beyond all doubt a demonstration of his solidarity with the persecuted. His refusal to become a convert could also be interpreted as a gesture of solidarity with the persecuted Jews. This interpretation seems all the more plausible if we take into consideration the fact that the Catholic hierarchy did by and large--at least to begin with--offer its support to the Vichy regime²⁶.

24. This is how one Polish reader has read Bergson: "At the time when theoretical and, even to a greater degree, practical atheism is spreading, when philosophical thought takes a hostile position to religion in general, attempting to reduce it to the sphere of emotions, at a time when so many currents of thought have been proclaiming a lay morality, and a "religion without God", a thinker of such a standing as Bergson does not hesitate to recognize in religion the highest and noblest manifestation of spiritual life. [...] While extolling religion, Bergson does not construct his own system of beliefs, but *points to Christianity* as the ideal, perfect type of religion. For he does not hesitate to affirm that only Christianity gives a sufficient answer to the anxieties and puzzles of life and he holds Christian saints to represent the pinnacle of human spiritual development..." Father J. Pastuszka, *Filozofia religii H. Bergsona*, Warszawa, 1936, pp. 54-55. The italics are mine.

25. One ought to note that Raissa Maritain was not the first nor the only one to spread the information of the alleged conversion of Bergson. As early as 1937, news to that effect reached I. Benrubi in Holland, when Bergson was still alive. Cf. I. Benrubi, *Souvenirs sur Henri Bergson*, Neuchatel, 1942, p. 131.

26. Cf. J. Baszkiewicz, *Historia Francji*, Warszawa, 1995, p. 604; J. Eisler, op. cit., pp. 289-290; F. Raphael, op. cit., p. 300.

Still, one ought to recognize immediately that such an interpretation--depending on the context of the last moments of Bergson's life--has one basic flaw: it cannot apply to the philosopher's will. His testament, let us repeat, was dated February 8, 1937. The author of a document written in 1937 could not possibly have known the events which were to take place in 1940. Even though he was a thinker of genius and belonged to the nation of the Prophets, he never aspired to the role of a prophet himself; moreover, his own philosophical views excluded even a possibility of a knowledge about the future²⁷. No doubt Bergson, while writing his will, was disturbed by the menacing noises coming from Nazi Germany. Still, the events of 1940 could not possibly have had an influence on a decision made three years earlier.

Thus, we have to go back to the content of Bergson's will. When we examine it more closely, we see that there is no room for doubt that he consciously decided not to seek baptism, and it is equally clear what inspired him to make such a decision--namely, the existence of anti-Semitism!

Now what is surprising is the fact that even such distinguished French historians as Etienne Gilson and Henri Gouhier, when interpreting the document under discussion, join the chorus of those who wish to explain away Bergson's decision concerning his conversion in terms of solidarity with the persecuted, without even using the term "anti-Semitism"²⁸. Is there any explanation of this astonishing silence?

27. The impenetrability of the future to any foresight lies at the essence of Bergson's theory of *duration*. An illustration of it may be found either in his conception of freedom or in his theory of *élan vital*. Cf. B. Skarga, *Czas i trwanie, Studia o Bergsonie*, Warszawa, 1982, p.216.

28. Cf. my paper: "Spor o interpretacje testamentu Bergsona," [Controversy over Bergson's Testament], *Roczniki Filozoficzne*, z.2, 1996.

The answer seems to be yes. One can point to at least two reasons for this reticence. The first motive--the one closer to us and more conspicuous--is a political reason. For France, the darkness of the collaboration with Nazism during World War II still remains difficult to penetrate. Consider what a distinguished witness of those events, Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger has to say about that time:

"The history of that period remains dark and painful; it is striking that even today any discussion of it is almost impossible. [...] *France is a country ill with its own history.* [...] What took place at the moment of liberation, that is, what De Gaulle did²⁹ [...] may have been a dressing put on a wound, a necessary dressing, for the shame was unbearable, for the nation needed to have its dignity restored, as the feature of the Vichy regime was to toy with the feeling of shame and concede to what was unacceptable. [...] *But what was strange and horrifying was the taboo put on the Jewish question, the fact that nobody said anything about it and nobody wished to speak.* Here the suffering was too great, too dark. Nobody was able to speak about it."³⁰

The silence concerning the Jewish question in France immediately after the war flowed from the fact that for some the suffering was too great, but there were also those for whom the shame was too great! Certainly, there were--and still are--those who are not ashamed of anything³¹. It seems that it was with such people in mind that the

29. Here Cardinal Lustiger alludes to General De Gaulle's gesture who, once World War II was over, publicly declared that during the war France was unanimously on the side of the Resistance. As we know, the truth of France's conduct in those days was not so unblemished.

30. J.-M. Lustiger, *Le choix de Dieu*, [Wybor Boga, Polish translation by A. Turowiczowa, Krakow, 1992, pp. 81, 82, 85]. Translation and italics are mine.

31. See the very interesting work by S. Moati and J.-C. Raspiengeas, *La haine antisemite*, Paris, 1991.

President of France, Jacques Chirac, in his address at a ceremony on July 16, 1995 (commemorating the French Jews deported to the Nazi death camps on 16 July 1942) admitted at last that the murderous craze of the Nazi occupiers was aided by the government of the French State and that the roundups organized by the Vichy regime enjoyed the support of a considerable part of French society³². One had to wait half a century for a Gaullist Chirac to tell the whole truth about France in that period--a truth General De Gaulle was so unwilling to accept.

Rereading Bergson's Testament

To return to Bergson's testament, one thing seems to be clear: up to now, most interpreters have read it through the political context of the events of the last war. The arguments so far advanced should be sufficient to show that that context is inappropriate, not to say completely wrong, for an adequate understanding of it. Let me repeat: it is not plausible to explain Bergson's decision, made in 1937, by referring to events that occurred in 1940.

The first thing to do when undertaking an analysis of Bergson's will is, therefore, to place it in the right context. The philosopher wrote his will in the thirties; these were the years of economic crisis, more and more pronounced nationalisms, increasing xenophobia, anti-Semitism, and so on. But all this--all the political, economic, and demographic context--is by far not enough. Moreover, it is not at all what the author of the will took most interest in. In his will, he writes above all about the encounter of Judaism and Catholicism that took place in him. It seems, therefore, that when reading Bergson's will, one ought first

32. Cf. D.S. Wyman, *Pozostawieni swemu losowi* [Polish version of *The Abandonment of the Jews*], transl. W. Sadkowski. Warszawa, 1994, pp. 53.

of all to keep in mind the history of the 'meetings'--or rather confrontations--between Judaism and Christianity.

Generally speaking, to understand the content of Bergson's will correctly, one should consider the history of Jews in the Christian world. This is a very sad history: an abyss of suffering, an ocean of tears³³! And what does an average Christian know about all this? Or even a Christian specially trained for priesthood? Until not long ago he knew next to nothing, and even today he does not know too much. For even when a Christian was the direct cause of this suffering, these tears, or even death (e.g. during the Crusades), the Christian annalist all but ignored it³⁴. The bitter truth is that, when a Jew was baptized, it was usually out of fear of persecution or to avoid being a despised, second-class citizen. Many a time a conversion so motivated was no more than a show, and it changed nothing in the inner disposition of the "convert".

Now--very importantly--Bergson's case as presented in light of his will is very specific, probably unique, at least as far as biographies of distinguished Jewish persons are concerned. While confessing his specifically moral adherence to Catholicism, the philosopher refuses to be baptized.

33. See J. Isaac, *Genèse de l'antisemitisme*, Paris, 1956; F. Lovsky, *L'antisemitisme chrétien*, Paris, 1970; L. Poliakov, *Histoire de l'antisemitisme*, vol I-II, Paris, 1981.

34. See J. Uminski, *Historia Kosciola* [A History of the Church], vol. I, Opole 1959, p. 424 ff.; D. Knowles, D. Obolensky, *Historia Kosciola*, vol. II, transl. into Polish by R. Turynski, Warszawa, 1988, pp. 166-169; cf. H. Graetz, *Historia Zydow* [A History of the Jews], translated into Polish by S. Szenhak, vol IV, Warszawa, 1929, p.375 ff.; Frere Yohanan, *Juif et chrétiens d'hier à demain*, Paris 1990, p. 326ff.

But notice a change for the better in the *Histoire du Christianisme*, Sous la direction de J.M. Mayeur, Ch. et L. Pietri, A. Vauchez, M. Venard, vol. I ff. Paris, 1990. A German version is about to be issued by Herder. There, the Jewish question is taken into account and presented at length with much concern for objectivity.

To make the quoted passage from his Testament as "audible" and meaningful as possible, let us look at the chronology of the most important events in its author's life. At six years old, he promised his parents--both devout Jews--to pray for them every day³⁵. As a student at the Ecole Normale (1878-1881), he was reputed to be an atheist and even a materialist³⁶. When the first two of his works appeared, namely the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889) and the *Matière et memoire* (1896), he was classified as a spiritualist or idealist³⁷. In 1907, his *L'Evolution créatrice* appeared, a work which gave rise to much controversy; theologians and philosophers from Catholic milieux reproached Bergson for having a monistic conception of reality³⁸. In a letter to the most vociferous polemicist, Father J. de Tonquedec, a Jesuit, Bergson wrote: "*L'Evolution créatrice* presents creation as a fact. From all this clearly follows the notion of God both creating and free". Further on, while explaining why he thought that the charge of monism made against him was unjustified, he wrote: "... to make these conclusions [namely, concerning God] more precise and say more on this subject, one would have to discuss a different set of problems--the moral problems. I am not sure if I will ever publish anything on this theme; and *I shall do it only when*

35. We know of this from the letter six year old Henri wrote to his parents in which he says: "Je prierai tous les jours le bon Dieu pour qu'il vous conserve longtemps pour le bonheur de vos enfants", cf. M. Barthelemy-Madaule, *Bergson*, Paris, 1967, p. 11.

36. See J. Guitton, *La vocation de Bergson*, Paris, 1960, p. 61; R.M. Mosse-Bastide, *Bergson éducateur*, Paris, 1955, p. 24.

37. Cf. e.g. B. Jacob, "La philosophie d'hier et celle d'aujourd'hui," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 6, 1988, pp. 201; L. Brunschvicg, *L'Idéalisme contemporain*, Paris, 1900, pp. 39-57.

38. J. de Tonquedec, *Comment interpreter, l'ordre du monde à propos du dernier ouvrage de M. Bergson*, Paris, 1908 and his *M. Bergson: Est-il moniste?* Etudes par des Pères de la Compagnie de Jesus, 130, no I, 10 February 1912, pp. 506-516; J. Maritain, "L'Evolutionisme de M. Bergson," *Revue de Philosophie*, 19, No. 9-10, 1911, pp. 467-540.

*I reach results which I am able to prove and demonstrate as well as the results I have published so far.*³⁹"

The letter containing this passage was written in 1912. In February 1914, Bergson was elected member of the *Académie Française* and, in June of that same year, the three works mentioned above were put on the *Index*⁴⁰. It was in that period that the philosopher experienced acute hostility from Catholic circles as well as those united behind the *Action Française*, who looked askance at his Jewish origin and all "horrors" allegedly resulting from this fact⁴¹.

In 1932, in his work *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, Bergson published the results of the investigations he had promised to undertake in his letter to Father Tonquedec, cited above. What interests us here is that, in this work, he placed the greatest mystics of Christianity at the summit of humanity as the champions of goodness. Here, he mentioned St. Paul of Tarsus, St. Francis of Assisi and three saintly women: St. Theresa of Avila, St. Catherine of Siena and Joan of Arc⁴². All these are, according to Bergson, but imitators and original, albeit imperfect, followers of the ideal which was only fully actualized in Jesus Christ. That same Christ, the preacher of the Sermon on the Mount⁴³, stands at the origin of Christianity ("à l'origine du christianisme")⁴⁴.

39. *Mélanges*, p. 964. Translation and italics are mine.

40. *Mélanges*, pp. 1037-1038 and p. 1089. See *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 12 June 1914, pp. 314-315.

41. See e.g. A. Farges, *La philosophie de M. Bergson - Exposé et critique*, Paris 1914, and, in particular, APPENDICE - *Response aux critiques de la Presse*, pp. 491-527. Cf. A. Martin, "Le dossier Bergson-Peguy," in: *Les Etudes Bergsonniennes*, vol. VIII, Paris, 1968, pp. 3-12; B. Skarga, *Czas i twanie*, Warszawa, 1982, p. 265.

42. Cf. H. Bergson, *Oeuvres*, Paris, 1959, p. 1168.

43. The authorship of the Sermon on the Mount was, for Bergson, an argument for the historicity of Jesus. "Those who have been led to deny the

The text of Bergson's last will was, as noted earlier, made public nine months after his death. Thus, his Testament was a sort of account of his whole life coming from beyond the grave. Is not this the impression one gets from listening to this Testament, especially to its first sentence? "*My reflections have led me closer and closer to Catholicism in which I see the complete fulfilment of Judaism*".

What sort of reflections does the philosopher refer to in the first sentence of his Testament? It seems that he cannot have in mind his philosophy (his positive metaphysics), for philosophy, as the author of *Les deux sources* understands it, "[...] *ignores a historical revelation, institutions which have preserved it, the faith which accepts it; philosophy ought to follow experience and reasoning.*"⁴⁵ Now, most certainly neither Judaism nor Christianity ignores historical Revelation, supernatural faith and the institutions preserving and transmitting the deposit of what has been revealed, even though both religions understand these things differently. Everything, therefore, seems to point to Bergson's reflection as being first and foremost his confession of a religious faith, a testimony of the encounter of Judaism and Catholicism that took place in him.

Listening to the content Bergson could not but hear Jesus saying: "Do not think I have come to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I have not come to destroy but to fulfil" (*Mt 5.17*). The Jesus of the Gospels stands at the origin of Christianity; the great mystics mentioned in *Les deux sources*, are venerated as saints by the Catholic Church.

actual existence of Jesus cannot deny that the Sermon on the Mount along with other divine words are there in the Gospels. The author may be given whatever name one wishes to give him, but there is nothing one can do to make him not to have been." *Oeuvres*, pp. 1178-1179.

44. See pp. 1178-1179.

45. *Oeuvres*, p. 1188. The italics are mine.

This series of associations seems to throw light on the first and, undoubtedly very important, sentence of the Testament under discussion.

It is difficult to doubt that here Bergson confesses his adherence to Catholicism and, at the same time, clearly points to the genealogy of that Catholicism as the "*complete fulfilment of Judaism*". To use this confession, however, as a ground for an apologetical case in the spirit of substitution⁴⁶ theology would be a clear misconception and something thoroughly alien to the attitude of Bergson himself. On the other hand, it does not follow that we should pass lightly over what he himself affirms. Apart from the statement contained in sentence one, I would like to point to sentences four and five of his will. There, he asks a Catholic priest for a prayer and then--and this is most characteristic--he makes explicit his wish that his moral adhesion to Catholicism--*adhesion morale au catholicisme*--be made no secret of. Therefore, even if the *opinio communis* holds it that Bergson was not baptized because he wished to remain with his persecuted people, sentences one, four, and five of his will raise some doubt concerning this interpretation⁴⁷. Bearing this in mind, let us read once again sentence two of the Testament: "I would have become a convert, had I not foreseen for years a formidable wave of anti-Semitism about to break upon the world (this, unfortunately, being due to the errors of a certain number of Jews completely devoid of a moral sense)".

What may this phrase "*I would have become a convert*" mean, juxtaposed with the moral adhesion to Catholicism so unambiguously declared in sentence five? From the very

46. For more on substitution theology, cf. A. Roy Eckhardt, *Jews and Christians: The Contemporary Meeting*, Bloomington, 1986.

47. Cf. e.g. I. Berlin, "Żydzi - od zniewolenia do emancypacji," *Znac*, 1983, no 339-340, pp. 481-500; E. Levinas, *Trudna wolność. Eseje o judaizmie*, Gdynia, 1991, pp. 103-166.

beginning--that is, from Apostolic times--a conversion from Judaism to Christianity was inseparable from baptism⁴⁸. Bergson, however, did not write : *I would have been baptized*, he wrote as he did: *I would have converted*. This master of language did not choose his words casually!

In sentence three of his will, he affirmed: *I wanted to remain among those who tomorrow will be persecuted*--to remain a non-convert (un-baptized) among non-converts (the un-baptized), for tomorrow they are to be persecuted. But the true cause of his refusal to be baptized was not the intention to manifest his readiness to suffer persecution. A seventy-eight year old man, weak and ill--for so he was in 1937--must have been aware that he had little to lose and ran little risk by remaining to suffer among those who "*tomorrow were to be persecuted*". True, solidarity in suffering has its significance no matter who gives it, a young man or an old one. But in this particular case, the case of the coming persecution of Jews, the important question to answer was not only who is to suffer but, above all, why persecution occurs *once again*. To prevent an illness, it is not enough to know the damage it does and weep over the suffering. First of all, one has to identify the causes and eliminate them!

In short, all who have up to now commented on Bergson's will and affirmed that he refused to become a convert because he wished to remain with the persecuted compatriots, mistake the result (persecution) with the cause (anti-Semitism). As a consequence, not only do they remove the problem of anti-Semitism from view, but make it look as though the persecuted Jews were to be blamed for Bergson's refusal. This, unfortunately, is not a mere misunderstanding; this is a very serious blunder which distorts the truth concerning the reality of those times. It

48. See Acts, 2, 38-41.

was not the Jews who stopped Bergson from crossing the doorstep of a baptistery.

Although in 1940 the philosopher queued for a few hours to register as a Jew, in this way demonstrating his solidarity with the persecuted, he made no changes to the will he had drawn in 1937. Now, in that very document, in the parenthesis he included in sentence two, he accuses a number of Jews whom he describes as completely lacking a moral sense. What did he have in mind? He meant the involvement of certain Jews in the Bolshevik revolution which, in Bergson's opinion, contributed to the strengthening of anti-Semitic attitudes⁴⁹. However, whatever the errors of a certain number of Jews and however manifold they might have been⁵⁰, they did nothing but strengthen the force of the 'wind' that bore the name of 'anti-Semitism.' And no doubt it was anti-Semitism, and not solidarity with the persecuted, that was the cause of Bergson's refusal to be baptized.

Why, then, has so obvious a thing been hitherto ignored? The reason was probably the fact that what Bergson wrote in his will was unacceptable to Catholics. True, the Catholic Church most decidedly condemned anti-Semitism by a decree of the Holy Office of March 21,

49. As early as 1918, Bergson remarked that the involvement of a certain number of Jews in the Bolshevik revolution will have "terribles consequences, for the whole Jewish community. See Ph. Soulez, *Bergson politique*, Paris, 1989, p. 326.

50. These errors were not limited to the Jewish involvement in the Communist movement; on the other hand, one should not exaggerate that involvement. This was what Hitler and the Nazi propaganda excelled in. Cf. E. Grodzicki, *Filozofia Adolfa Hitlera w Mein Kampf*, Warszawa, 1992, pp. 59-92. Also other nationalisms were keen to exaggerate Jewish participation in international Communism. For the truth of the Jewish contribution to the overthrowing of the Communism, see historian A. Besancon, *L'unique Israel de Dieu. Approches chrétiennes du mystère d'Israël*, ed. J. M. Grigues, Limoges, 1987, pp. 211-229, in particular, p. 224. Cf. J. Smaga, *Narodziny i upadek imperium. ZSRR 1917 1991* [Poles, Jews, and Communism, The Anatomy of Half-truths], Warszawa, 1992.

1928; Pope Pius XI, in his encyclical *Mit brennender sorge* of March 14, 1937 severely censured racism, the cult of the leader and the party-cult. On September 6, 1938, the world heard the courageous voice of the author of this encyclical say that "Spiritually we are all Semites"⁵¹. Yet despite these and many other protests, the Catholic Church, or, more precisely, all the Christian churches made no change in their centuries-old anti-Judaism. As late as 1958, the Catholic Church in the liturgy for Good Friday prayed for the "perfidious Jews"--*pro perfidis Judaeis*. It was only during Paul VI's pontificate--that is, in the period of the reform initiated by the Second Vatican Council, in a decree of March 7, 1960--that all those anti-Judaistic references were removed from the missal and from the ritual⁵².

In brief, when Bergson was writing his will, and long thereafter, the Catholic Church saw no chance of an encounter with Judaism; what was more, the Church could see no place at all for Judaism. The Church looked upon herself as a "new Israel," and embracing Catholicism meant renouncing, even eliminating, Judaism⁵³. For these reasons, Bergson's "*I would have become a convert had I not seen...*"--the most important sentence in his will--was not understood at all. "There is no 'had I not'", replied Gilson,

51. It was courageous, though in essence not very felicitous. See J. -M Garrigues, *L'unique Israel de Dieu*, Limoges, 1987, pp. 13-20.

52. E.g. In compliance with the rite which was obligatory up to 1965, while christening a Jew, the priest had to recite the following words: "Horresce Judaicam perfidiam, respue Hebraicam superstitionem". Cf. *Rituale Romanum*, Romae, 1926, p. 34.

53. E.g. E. Gilson, referring to the *catechism of his childhood*, made the following comment on the opening sentence of Bergson's testament: "I believe that Christianity, by revealing to him the "complete fulfillment of Judaism," brought him closer than he had probably ever been before to the religion of his fathers, but *this solemn statement*, in which every single word counts, *clearly shows that Bergson was not converted.*" E. Gilson, *La philosophie et la théologie* [*Filozof i teologia*, Warszawa, 1968, p. 122]. Translation and italics are mine.

"For a convinced Christian there exists no conceivable reason to stop him from being baptized right away."⁵⁴

Convinced, by whom, though? There can be no doubt that Bergson was convinced by the Jesus of the Gospels. Philosophically, he expressed this in his *Les deux sources*; he did the same with respect to religion in his will, when he made it clear that he wished his moral adhesion to Catholicism to be publicly known. His anxiety was aroused by the anti-Judaism included in the doctrine of the Church. This point of doctrine was incompatible with the teaching of the Author of the Sermon on the Mount. HE had not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets, he had come to fulfil! Thus, Bergson's "I would have become a convert" was, in its essence, an appeal to his closest friends--to his friends who expected him to become a convert. It was an appeal *for them* to be converted, to change their position on the Jewish question.

Catholicism and Bergson

Even though his appeal has escaped the attention of the scholars commenting upon his will, Bergson's voice in the end did not remain unheard. True, the formidable wave of anti-Semitism, whose onset Bergson predicted, did break upon 'Christian' Europe. In time, however, the Catholic Church, speaking through the voice of the Second Vatican Council--that is, in a way that was the most official and the most solemn at the same time--changed her position with respect to Jews. In the Council's declaration *Nostra aetate* (no. 4) we read as follows:

"The Church, who condemns all persecutions directed against any people whatever, *bearing in memory the heritage she has in common with the Jews, deploras--not moved by political considerations but under the influence*

54. Ibidem; the italics are mine.

of the religious Evangelical love--acts of hatred and persecution and expressions of anti-Semitism, which were directed against Jews at any time and by any person". (italics mine).

Now, in the light of the passage quoted above, the three opening sentences of the will under consideration should no longer pose any interpretative problems. There should be no doubt what stopped Bergson on the doorstep of the baptistery: it was the same thing that the Church, bearing in mind the heritage she has in common with Jews, now deploras.

The encounter of Judaism and Catholicism which came to be Bergson's lot and which he carried out in his own peculiar way continues to take place. Moreover, it is difficult to ignore that the person who now presides over this encounter and gives it a remarkable dynamism is the pope from Poland, John Paul II. His visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome in 1986, and the words spoken there which I chose as the motto for this text, are just one of the many examples of his contribution.