

Teacher disputes notion of Judaism without dogma

By SYLVIA HART
Press Register Reporter

Jews frequently say the only dogma to which they subscribe "is that Judaism has no dogma," according to Dr. Jakob J. Petuchowski, who said this notion is false.

Petuchowski, research professor of Jewish theology and liturgy at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati, made the comment in the second of two lectures presented at this year's annual Ministerial Institute sponsored by Spring Hill Avenue Temple for Mobile area clergy.

Petuchowski said Jews point to Moses Mendelssohn, an 18th-century German Jewish thinker, as teaching Jews have no dogma.

What Mendelssohn actually taught should be clarified, said Petuchowski. "Philosophically, Moses Mendelssohn was a deist. That is to say, he did not believe in supernatural divine revelation of religious truth because religious truths are accessible to human reason."

Yet said the speaker, Mendelssohn "wasn't such a thorough-going deist" because he believed "God revealed himself on Mount Sinai.

"What did God reveal? Not religious truth but religious laws. Mendelssohn did not speak about the revelation of truth, of theological proposition. They don't have to be revealed. All you have to do is think right and you get at those conclusions. What God revealed in the Torah was the legislation which is to be binding for the Jews until such time that God will revoke that legislation. . . . What happened at Mount Sinai was revealed law and not revealed doctrine."

This teaching by Mendelssohn "has given some Jews ever since the notion that Judaism has no dogmas at all." The notion is mistaken, said Petuchowski.

Another statement frequently made by Jews is that "Christianity is the religion of creed, and Judaism is the religion of deed. . . . Unfortunately, it's a half-truth," according to the speaker.

He elaborated, "What is true is that a lot more time and energy was invested by Christianity in the precise formulation of the common creed than it was in Judaism, and a lot more time and energy was invested by Judaism in precise formulation of the covenant deed rather than our creed. It may be that relative investment of time and energy which gives rise to the mistaken notion that Christianity only knows creed and Judaism only knows deed."

A general climate of belief existed in Judaism in early centuries, and rabbis were not "getting together and voting on matters of belief, and you have the most diverse beliefs expressed without any attempt at harmonization. That wasn't their bag.

"Their bag was to see to it that there would be a commonality of practice which presupposed certain beliefs but without defining the beliefs, giving the individual

believer a considerable amount of leeway."

In the 12th century, according to the speaker, "a great Jew, Moses Maimonides," drew up a list of "basic principles of Judaism" — a creed.

Several Jewish scholars of Maimonides' time "rejected Maimonides' formula as arbitrary."

Even though Jews have no recognized authority or ecclesiastical machinery for promulgating creed, Maimonides' list of principles spread among Jews.

The creed formulated by Maimonides spread primarily because he as an individual was a respected moral authority and because "in the 14th century some poet came along and put it all in a hymn, and that hymn got into the Jewish prayer book. . . . and that helped general circulation."

According to the speaker, Maimonides formulated his principles on the basis of challenges to Jewish belief by Christianity and Islam. "In fact, this is the key to the whole creed-making industry whether in Judaism or Christianity. . . . These creedal formulations were made in order to reject certain other beliefs which were heretical."

As examples, Petuchowski said Maimonides' list of principles included the belief that the messiah is yet to come, which was addressed to Christians, and the belief that Moses is the greatest prophet, which was addressed to the followers of Mohammed.

Why did Maimonides draw up his principles of belief?

The reason, in the view of Petuchowski, is that Maimonides had absorbed the Aristotelian philosophy of that time of the "doctrine of immortality," which meant "the soul really disappears when the body disintegrates, and then in Medieval Aristotelianism there's only that much of the soul that is immortal as has become part of the active intellect and by sharing metaphysical truths becomes as immortal as those metaphysical truths themselves."

The belief expressed by Maimonides "meant immortality for theologians, philosophers and the clergy," said Petuchowski.

However, the documents of Maimonides' Jewish heritage had for centuries taught that "all Israel has a share in the world to come. If I were to translate this into Christian terms, it means all Jews will be saved," Petuchowski said.

Thus "the charity of Maimonides induced him to provide a shortcut for non-philosophers and non-theologians, sparing them the laborious intellectual process of acquiring metaphysical truth and providing them with the ultimate outcome of metaphysical speculation" — the formulation of the list of the principles of faith.

In this way "dogma is the shortcut for the non-philosopher, at least for Maimonides."

Turning his thoughts to the 19th century, Petuchowski said that liberal Reform Judaism of that century became more dogmatic than Orthodox Judaism.

"If Jews, by and large, throughout history could afford not to dabble in dogma too much, it was because the unity of the community of believers was guaranteed by the common religious practice. They all kept the dietary laws. They all kept the Sabbath, or at least were meant to keep the Sabbath. They all used pretty much the same prayer book."

Petuchowski continued, "As long as you had a common religious observance of binding religious law, Jews could allow a considerable leeway in a general climate of belief that was presupposed."

However, Reform Judaism, "particularly radical Reform Judaism. . . got rid of religious observance, got rid of tradition and law."

Yet Reform Jews "needed something by which Reform congregations would recognize one another."

The result was that Reform Judaism "went into the business of writing catechism, of borrowing the ceremony of confirmation from the church. . . a most un-Jewish thing."

Petuchowski said, "Reform Judaism had so completely gotten rid of the unifying bond of the common religious observance that now it was forced into a dogmatic mold."

He noted, however, that today's Reform Judaism "is far less dogmatic than 19th century Reform Judaism."

The result is that "it's very, very difficult to define Reform Judaism. . . One of the questions agitating the Jewish world today in general is the question who is a Jew?"

The professor continued, "I think it's a question that has to be faced and is being increasingly faced, not only by the legislators in the state of Israel but also in diaspora Jewry circles (Jews outside Israel)."

The teacher predicted that "as the discussion of Jewish identity becomes more serious and leaves the biological, the racial, the nationalistic realm, I think the dogma question in Judaism will be reopened and enthusiastically pursued."



HEBREW SCHOLAR Doctor Jacob Petuchowski (standing at left, above) was the featured speaker March 5 for the annual ecumenical dialogue sponsored by Mobile's Springhill Avenue Temple. Shown with the speaker (and Temple Rabbi Steven L. Jacobs, seated) are Bishop May and Episcopal Bishop George M. Murray. A large crowd enjoyed the lectures and the discussion, and the lunch. Doctor Petuchowski's topic was "An American Jewish View of Israel and the Diaspora."