Hermann Cohen, “Germanness and Jewishness“ [“Deutschtum und Judentum”] (1915)

Abstract

Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) was one of the most important German philosophers of the second half of the nineteenth century. He was professor at the prestigious University of Marburg and is perhaps best remembered as one of the founders of Neo-Kantianism. Cohen was thus a proponent of reason at a time when philosophical materialism and positivism were assuming increasing prominence. As a German Jew, he was also interested in exploring the nature and role of Judaism within German culture, as evidenced by his descision to co-found the Society for the Promotion of the Scholarly Study of Judaism [*Gesellschaft zur Förderung der Wissenschaft des Judenthums*] in 1902. In this 1915 essay, Cohen discusses the affinities between Germany and Judaism and calls for a greater recognition of Judaism’s contributions to German intellectual and spiritual life. For Cohen, World War I was a potential opportunity to replace the parochial prejudices plaguing Christian-Jewish relations with an all-unifying patriotism.

Source

So we as Jews, too, are proud to be Germans in this epic era, in which the fate of nations is at stake, for we have become aware of the task that should convince all our fellow Jews throughout the world of the religious significance of Germanness, of its impact, of the legal claims that it exerts on Jews among all the nations of the world, both for their religious development and for all their cultural activity. Thus we feel ourselves to be German Jews, conscious of a central cultural power that has been called upon to bring the people of the world together in the consciousness of a messianic humanity, and we may reject the reproach made against us [as Jews] that it is our historical nature to corrupt the nations and tribes of the world. When it again comes to a serious effort at international conciliation and really well-founded international peace, our example may properly serve as model for recognizing German *predominance* in the deepest domains of all intellectual and spiritual life. And without this willing precondition, we do not believe that there is a sufficient foundation for genuine international understanding.

We are delighted in the confident belief that through the heroic victory of our Fatherland, the God of Justice and Love will put an end to the yoke of barbarism that weighs upon our Jewish brethren in the Russian empire, whose entire political existence mocks all justice, all political rationality, all religion and morality, all human compassion, and all respect for the nobility of mankind. We are hoping as well for the *triumph* of German arms – that it will raise these people up to the dignity of man, which they, through their glorious martyrdom, have preserved in themselves.

And for ourselves, too, we hope above all else to achieve the further establishment of full equality for our *confessional community* alongside the other religious communities in the German state – that the reluctance will disappear that permits us to participate in the highest and most holy tasks of our state, [but] without love or trust; *that the moral and religious equality of our religion will find unqualified recognition;* that on the basis of this free insight, this true enlightenment, the religious community will be recognized that binds us to the *Christian confessions,* in which our special character still forms the irreplaceable foundation for the further *ethical development of monotheism*; that accordingly the gates of the university will finally be opened to the *scholarly study* of Judaism, which is the only means by which the state’s interest in the continued existence and spiritual and moral development of our religion will be put into practice.

We are living amid the high emotions of German patriotism, the conviction that the unity between Germanness and Jewishness, for which the entire history of German Jewry has paved the way, will finally shine as a *cultural historical truth* in German politics and in the life of the German people, and even in the *spirit* of the German people.

Source: Hermann Cohen, “Deutschtum und Judentum” (1915), *Werke*. 16 volumes, Hildesheim, 1978–97, Vol. 16, pp. 528–30.

Translation: Jeffrey Verhey and Roger Chickering

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