

Hermann Cohen and Jewish Religious Education*

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The eminent philosopher and Jewish intellectual Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) lived his life in accordance with the principles and ideas he developed in his philosophical and religious thought. His work fell during the German Empire, a difficult historical era for Jewish society, when anti-Semitism and immature liberalism were gaining ground. In the history of Jewish philosophy, Cohen's writings stand out as systematized and rationally grounded. The article presents a range of biographical facts that had a direct influence on the religious and philosophical views of the founder of the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism. In his philosophy of religion, Cohen sharply criticizes both Zionism and anti-Semitism, which are extremely harmful for understanding the ideas of true Judaism. Anti-Semitism, in his view, blocks the possibility of a synthesis of Jewish religion and German culture, and Cohen sees in Zionism a dangerous attempt to downplay the role of the ethical core of the Jewish religion and to reduce its significance to a narrowly national and state-centred one. Hermann Cohen's philosophy of religion is characterized as an attempt to synthesize Kantianism and Judaism and as a necessary part of his philosophical system, giving it the specificity that largely determines the originality of Cohen's philosophical position both in relation to Kantian philosophy and to neo-Kantianism in general. It is noted that the Marburg philosopher was an important thinker in the Jewish community of his time, a well-known supporter of Judaism, and the problem of Jewish religious education was by no means marginal or private for him.

Keywords: Cohen, neo-Kantianism, philosophy of religion, Judaism, Zionism, anti-Semitism, education.

Introduction

As the only child in the family, Hermann Cohen was first brought up at home by his father, a Jewish school teacher. From 1853, he began attending a gymnasium in the neighbouring town of Dessau, which was 14 kilometres away from Koswig. His father visited him there every weekend to continue his Jewish studies. From 1957, Cohen studied at the Jewish theological seminary in Breslau (now Wrocław) under Zecharias Frankel and Heinrich Gretz but abandoned his original intention to become a rabbi.

Hermann Cohen grew up in an orthodox Jewish family that made every effort to give its only son an excellent education. His father was a cantor in a synagogue and teacher at the Jewish school in Koswig (Anhalt). He taught Cohen from childhood Hebrew and

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Jewish national literature, so that he was intimately acquainted with Jewish tradition. In 1857, at the age of fifteen, Cohen changed from the gymnasium to the student bench at the Jewish theological seminary in Breslau, but three years later he interrupted his seminary studies and entered the philosophy department of the university. In 1865, he got his doctorate from the University of Halle. In 1873, he was invited by F. A. Lange to the University of Marburg.

He was a member of the Marburg Union against anti-Semitism and “in 1888, in a widely resonated trial, defended the ethical dignity of the Talmud against hostile invectives against Judaism” [1, p. 252]. The Marburg philosopher was also a trustee of Jewish educational institutions. In particular, he supported a “boarding school for Jewish pupils and students”, which was “an equally social and religious institution that was intended to facilitate the entry of Jewish children into professional life” [1, p. 253]. After his retirement in 1912, he moved to Berlin and taught at the Institute for Jewish Study (Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentums), on whose board of trustees he had been a member since 1904.

The appreciation of his work can be gauged from the fact that on July 4, 1912, in honour of the philosopher's seventieth birthday, a Hermann Cohen Chair in Religious Philosophy was established at the Institute. A member of the board of trustees donated 100 000 marks for this purpose. The courses that he taught at the Institute, whose building today serves as the seat of the Central Jewish Council in Berlin, included, among others, seminars on Plato and Kant, a study of the works by Maimonides, and seminars on the logic of the Jewish medieval philosophers. After moving to Berlin, Cohen did not change his philosophical identity, even though his main focus henceforth became on topics related to Judaism.

On the contrary, it was philosophical reflection that represented for Cohen a proven means of combating the general decline of Jewish scholarship, which, gaining strength, was becoming an internal problem of Judaism.

In May 1914, the idea of spreading Jewish philosophical scholarship led to the fact that Cohen, at the invitation of Russian Jews, spent four weeks in Tsarist Russia, where he gave talks. He visited St Petersburg, Moscow, Riga, Vilna, and Warsaw, among other cities. The reason for lecturing on the essence and ethical content of Judaism directly in the territory of “Eastern Jewry” was the impression made by the trial in Russia of Mendel Beilis, who was accused of ritual murder. The “Beilis affair”, which caused a huge public outcry throughout the world, was an anti-Semitic campaign fuelled by the legend of ritual murder. One can only surmise how depressed the enlightener Cohen was by this campaign of anti-Semitism against the “occult conspiracy” of the Jews.

Judaism without Zionism and against anti-Semitism

“The Marburg philosopher seeks to define his philosophical and civic position as independent of the manifestations of Zionism and anti-Semitism, which, in his opinion, are extremely harmful, to the understanding of the ideas of true Judaism. Therefore, he enters into scholarly polemics on two fronts at once: against the influential German historian Heinrich von Treitschke, on the one hand, and Martin Buber, on the other” [2, p. 216]. As the contemporary German researcher M. Pascher notes, in the second half of the 19th century a new form of anti-Semitism appeared on the political scene in Germany,

which “directed its hostility not against the Jewish religion, but against the ethnic-national and then against the “racial identity” of the Jews. Anti-Semitism in this new form blocked the possibility of a synthesis between Jewish religion and German culture, the main goal of Cohen’s efforts” [3, p. 107–108]. Treitschke was one of the inspirers of this new form of anti-Semitism. He, criticizing crude anti-Semitic policies, advocated the assimilation of Jews and the minimization of Jewish influence on German culture. For Cohen, however, it was obvious to him what such an attitude of state power actually led to: “Treitschke calmly expressed what is believed to be expected from emancipation... One expects, assumes the transition. But what about when it will not follow? If the Jewish community must assert its right to continue to exist? We can see the consequences that society and the state structures derive from such a perception: it is difficult for a Jew to be accepted into public service. What am I talking about recruitment? They want to perpetuate the separation at its roots: the spectre of school ghettos looms again” [4, p. 345].

Cohen sees in Zionism a dangerous attempt to downplay the role of the ethical core in the Jewish religion, to reduce its significance to a narrowly national and state-centred one. He presents his views on the problems arising in connection with Zionism in the article “Religion and Zionism”. In it, the Marburg philosopher opposes two incorrect, in his opinion, identifications, carried out in Zionist views: the identification of religion and nationality and the identification of the state and nationality. As for the first identification, Cohen, while not counting himself among anti-Zionists in this aspect, draws attention to the fact that nationality is not identical with religion, but is “an anthropological means for the spread of religion” [5, p. 322]. It is not nationality that plays a more significant role here, but the family, which he metaphorically defines as “the cradle of religion” [5, p. 322]. As for the second identification, Cohen also finds scientific inconsistencies. In particular, he considers it important in this matter to separate the concepts of nationality and nation and remarks: “It is not the nations that unite the state, but the nationalities. The state for the first time establishes and establishes one nation, with which it identifies itself. And already this nation, defined by the state, can unite many nationalities” [5, p. 322].

In his other article, which followed as a response to Martin Buber’s open letter, Hermann Cohen specifies that if “nationality remains a moral natural fact”, “the nation is first constructed by the state by means of a pure act of political morality” [6, p. 330]. He also clarifies the essence of the dispute, which, according to Cohen, “revolves not so much around the Jewish people, as around the Jewish state” [6, p. 331].

Having summarized all his arguments about the state, religion, nation and nationality in the light of Buber’s Zionist position, Cohen declares his position in this issue: “...we do not want to form a state of our own, therefore we do not want to be a separate nation, as the modern state is a nation state. But we have our own religion, and we stay with it. And to preserve it we are and remain a separate tribe, a separate nationality” [6, p. 332].

In solving the ethnic and political issues of the Jewish people and the Jewish state, the Marburg philosopher proposes to proceed from the essence of the Jewish religion, which, in his opinion, is prophetic and messianic. Therefore, the substance of the divergence with Zionism in the prospects of Jewish development is defined by Cohen as follows: “While the Zionist believes that it is possible to preserve Jewry only through a complete, unrestricted Jewish nationhood, we hold the opposite view, that exclusively only a universal human Jewry can preserve the Jewish religion” [6, p. 336].

Philosophy of Religion

Hermann Cohen's philosophy of religion is one of the most debated topics in contemporary research literature regarding the nature of Cohen's philosophical system. It is no secret that the Marburg philosopher, drawing on Kant's philosophy of religion, endeavoured to establish the religion of reason in Judaism. Therefore, he directs his main efforts here to achieve the most harmonious synthesis of Kantianism and Judaism.

In order for this synthesis to be realized, it is necessary, in Cohen's opinion, on the one hand to point out the shortcomings of Kant's assessments of Judaism, and even their fallacy, and on the other hand to reveal the truly humane and tolerant spirit of Jewish belief.

In these efforts to "build bridges" between Kantianism and Judaism in the religious-philosophical work of the Marburg philosopher, three periods can be clearly traced: "the first period conditionally covers the time from the appearance of the Marburg philosopher's first fundamental work on ethics 'Kant's Justification of Ethics' (1877) to the first edition of another fundamental work on ethics 'The Ethics of Pure Will' (1904)... the publication of which marks the beginning of the second period" [7, p. 53–55]¹. The third period, causing the most controversial evaluations among researchers, is marked by two major works by Cohen on religion: "The Notion of Religion in the System of Philosophy" (1915) and "The Religion of Reason from Jewish Sources" (1919).

"It is also necessary to affirm the understanding of the German-Jewish thinker's philosophy of religion as a necessary part of his philosophical system, giving it the specificity that largely determines the originality of Cohen's philosophical position both in relation to Kantian philosophy and to neo-Kantianism in general. It is philosophy of religion that allows Cohen's system to expand the framework of criticalism, rationalism and humanism of the transcendental tradition of philosophy. Throughout his life and work, Cohen justifies the need for philosophy to strive to be prophetic and the philosopher to be a prophet. Only through such an ideal, in his view, can the cultural-historical mission of philosophy and the philosopher be justified" [7, p. 62].

Jewish religious education

The founder and main representative of the Marburg school of neo-Kantianism, the teacher and mentor of F. Rosenzweig and many other young Jews (suffice it to mention such famous Russian students as B. Pasternak, S. Rubinstein, M. Kagan and others) was an important thinker in the Jewish community of his time and a well-known supporter of Jewish studies, and the problem of Jewish religious education was by no means marginal or private to him.

In the systematic constructions of the Marburg thinker, it is connected in various ways with all parts of his system, but especially with ethics and philosophy of religion. His views on Jewish education are embedded in his general understanding of the essence of Judaism as a teaching and not as a dogma, his assessment of the role of religion as a guarantor of ethical human behaviour, his belief in the ethical progress of human civilization, through which the beginnings of tolerance and humanism will be strengthened in the latter.

¹ For a more detailed analysis of the nature of the evolution of Cohen's views on the place of the religion of Judaism in European philosophy and culture, see: [8, p. 81–91; 9, p. 23–36].

As one contemporary researcher on the subject correctly observes, Cohen's work remains valuable to Jewish education today because it "points us to a living philosophical tradition" [10, p. 151].

Because it demonstrates that "the academic study of Judaism is not only a study of facts, but also of values, not only the study of subjective opinions, but also the search for objective truth, not only the study of abstract ideas, but also the study of a way of life after graduation" [10, p. 149].

The confirmation of this reasoning of the contemporary researcher can be found in many of Cohen's works. In particular, in his 1904 article "The Establishment of Chairs of Ethics and Religious Philosophy in Jewish Theological Institutions" (Die Errichtung von Lehrstühlen für Ethik und Religionsphilosophie an den jüdisch-theologischen Lehranstalten), the German philosopher points to the close unity in Judaism of life and teaching, scholarship and doctrine. This connection in Judaism is so close that it gives Cohen the right to argue that Jewish "communities may not be particularly concerned with study about Judaism if they are concerned with divine service". For, as the philosopher emphasizes, "divine service is fundamentally impossible without a comprehensive and thorough study of the Torah. Only differences in intellectual ability could make the division between divine service and Torah study justifiable; social differences could not express such a difference as a whole; after all, a box man could be a very great scholar. The rabbinic pulpits thus became centres for the teaching of study and religion at the same time" [11, p. 113].

Continuing to clarify the importance of scholarship in the study of Judaism, Cohen points here to the central role of philosophy, believing that "without philosophy one cannot comprehend the essence of Judaism", and stating that "the further development and continued existence of Judaism is due to its philosophical foundations" [11, p. 115].

In what exactly does the German philosopher see this central role of philosophy? This significance is centred in the idea of God, which is represented in the teachings of Judaism. "All directions, all branches of the general field of Judaism — Cohen emphasizes — must have their unity in the Jewish idea of God. This is the basis of faith and morality. Therefore, an independent professional view of ethics and religious philosophy should be the centre of our teaching; just as it should be the centre of all our efforts to advance the study of Judaism" [11, p. 125]. That is why "ethics and religious philosophy together belong to the study of Judaism" [11, p. 122].

The German philosopher is convinced that this idea of God gives Judaism an advantage over Christianity, firstly, in the justification of morality, and, secondly, in the justification of the possibility of moral progress through the assertion of the idea of messianism instead of the Christian idea of eschatology. Pointing out that "in the idea of God the contradiction between Judaism and Christianity is irreconcilable" [11, p. 117], Cohen insists that only in Judaism "the idea of God has the exclusive content of human morality" [11, p. 117], because in it "the transcendence of God is the deepest guarantee of the immanence of human morality" [11, p. 118]. As for the Messianic idea, the German philosopher sees the merit of "Protestant academic study" [11, p. 116] in spreading it and making it universal.

In another of his articles, "Speeches at the Israelite School and Students' Dormitory in Marburg" (Die Sprüche im Israelitischen Schüler- und Lehrlingsheim zu Marburg a.L. (1901)), Cohen explains why in Judaism doctrine is closely linked to moral teaching. Again, in this explanation he emphasizes the importance of an idea of God which does

not plunge the human mind into mystical experiences but, on the contrary, enables it to comprehend the divine being quite consciously. “Why,” asks the German philosopher, “is our creed at the same time a moral doctrine? Why do we not have a division between moral doctrine and doctrine of faith?” And he answers: “Because the love of God must not be experienced in a mystical immersion in God, but must be constantly manifested in the hard, difficult but joyful work of research and knowledge. Love for God means knowing his essence. But his essence is morality. Thus, the knowledge of God is the knowledge of morality. But knowledge of morality is love of morality. This connection between knowledge and love is found in our key word of the Torah” [12, p. 102].

Cohen understands and tirelessly emphasizes the close connection between home and school education and upbringing, the connection between education and upbringing religious and moral and, finally, the connection between education and upbringing religious and general cultural. The German philosopher assigns a special role in education to the head of the family: “The duty of education lies first and foremost with the father. It is a natural, i.e., logical, but no less thankful, merit of the Talmud in placing on the father the duty to bring up and educate his children. It is a religious duty and, as such, a moral one. Consequently, it is necessary in connection with the moral tasks of society... We believe in a harmonious relationship between education and knowledge of general culture and our teaching of faith and morals” [12, p. 103].

Cohen presents the whole process of education and upbringing here through the metaphor of rooms in a house, laying down the perception of this process as warm, domestic, intimate. According to him, the first step — the first room — should be the purification of the student’s soul, an inner purification that prepares the correct understanding of freedom not as permissiveness, but as duty, and its disposal the benefit of others. The second step — the second room — together with the Torah reveals to a person that with purity the soul also acquires immortality. Only the third step, according to Cohen, relates to religious instruction, which forms “the central point of Jewish life” [12, p. 107].

Another work worth looking at in the context of our topic is the 1912 article “Emancipation. Towards the Centenary of Citizenship of the Prussian Jews” (Emanzipation. Zur Hundertjahrfeier des Staatsbürgertums der preußischen Juden, 11. März 1912). In it, Cohen reiterates the need for a study of Judaism, along with a concern for synagogues. He writes: “Every modern Jew should acquire a sense of obligation to care for the study of Judaism, for its preservation and continuation, and in this care at least be aware of the duty of his own learning. It should not be enough for him to care for the house of prayer and other institutions of worship. All these requirements will remain inadequate if the maintenance of scholarship does not become the primary concern. Modern cultural religion cannot assert itself through its cult alone but must always supplement its right to life and through study develop it into a living fruitful tradition. Study of religion is the best defense and strength of religion. Study explores its history and at the same time renews and strengthens the inner basis of the truth of religion. Without this inner development of its past, as well as the right to the future, modern religion lacks real life, no matter how it is otherwise bound by rigid customs” [13, p. 225].

The German philosopher draws attention to two modern prejudices against religion. First of all, he comments on the well-known democratic position of separation of church and state. Cohen believes that the state should be separate from faith and equidistant from real churches, but as for religious study, the state should, on the contrary, actively assist

in its dissemination. Another, even more widespread and persistent prejudice, according to Cohen, is the position that science and religion are hostile, that they are in irreconcilable and eternal conflict. He rightly remarks on this point: "Rather, religion has been influenced by science in all church constitutions, and for its part, it has not seldom and not superficially impregnated science. Like science, religion also has a cultural task, the content of which is the state. On the other hand, from the point of view of the absolute contradiction between religion and science an ambiguity arises concerning the freedom of science, as if faithfulness to religion destroys or threatens to destroy it. Freedom of science in no way means freedom from religion, from all, let alone one's own, but only impartiality in relation to its individual components. Consequently, it means the ability and authority to investigate which traditional parts of religion are compatible with science and which are completely at odds with it. Criticism of one's own religion in relation to its historically acquired elements was everywhere really and fruitfully combined with a lively faithfulness to the creed" [13, p. 226].

In "Towards the Founding of an Academy for the Study of Judaism" (Zur Begründung einer Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums, 1918), Cohen pointed to the need for the joint efforts of all Jews to overcome "the greatest deficiency and deepest need... in the absence of Jewish scholars" [14, p. 213].

The Marburg philosopher recalls that it was precisely to overcome this deplorable state of Jewish scholarship that the "Society for the Promotion of the Study of Judaism" was organized in 1903 with his direct involvement, but the situation has not improved since then. In his opinion, specific scholars, researchers of Judaism, should be supported on a regular basis. If the Jewish religion is to become a truly living faith, it is necessary for scholars, along with rabbis, to be involved in strengthening the faith. Cohen confidently states: "Like no other study, the study of Judaism cannot be viewed solely in the abstract terms of literary production. It really comes alive only in the authors, in the creators of scientific works. Therefore, it is not enough to promote the study of Judaism in literary works: it must first be promoted among living people who have devoted themselves to this study, who make this research their life's work. This cannot end with the rabbis remaining the sole bearers of the study of Judaism, and with individual scholars receiving support from time to time" [14, p. 212].

Thus, one can state a gradual change in Cohen's views regarding the necessity of studying Judaism by scholars rather than rabbis. Despite the unity, in the German philosopher's opinion, of the doctrinal and scientific elements in the Jewish religion, a closer integration of Judaism into the general cultural life of the country can be ensured by the fact that Judaism will be represented not only by ministers of religion, but also by scholars who have nothing to do with the process of ministry. "Even from an apologetic point of view", Cohen states, "the number of rabbis is not sufficient to represent the spirit of Judaism in relation to the diversity of contemporary culture. A living religion as a cultural religion, for its establishment and further development, requires a free spirit of science and, accordingly, educated researchers who are at the same time not members of the clergy" [14, p. 213].

As for the Academy of Judaism itself, according to Cohen, it should fulfil several tasks, both scientific and purely domestic. First of all, the German philosopher believes that in such an Academy two processes will naturally unite: study and upbringing. And bringing together under one roof scientists of different specialties, engaged in research in

different fields of science, according to Cohen, will contribute to their lively communication and thus “ensure and strengthen their strength and prosperity”. In addition, Cohen hoped that through the Academy its staff would gain stability in their financial situation and be able to concentrate on their scientific activities [14, p. 214–215].

Conclusion

The study of Hermann Cohen’s religious-philosophical work provides ample evidence of his innovative ideas in the context of the significance of Judaism, encapsulated primarily in the necessity of a scientific approach to Judaism. According to the Marburg neo-Kantian, the synthesis of science and faith is not only possible, but also expedient due to the historical importance of the self-identification of Jews in European civilization, and education and upbringing according to Jewish traditions corresponds to the natural essence of the moral provisions set forth in the Talmud and Torah.

It should also be emphasized that for all the specific features of the changes in the Jewish-German philosopher’s attitude to religion and in his assessment of the nature of the interaction between philosophy and religion, it is necessary to point out two main features that remained dominant and unchanged in his religious-philosophical position. Firstly, it is devotion to his religious beliefs and defense of their uniqueness and dignity, and secondly, it is confidence in the necessity of uniting the efforts of philosophy and religion in the social transformation of society on the basis of morality. The Marburg philosopher saw no contradiction between the desire to recognize Jewish religious identity and the desire for a harmonious relationship between knowledge and faith. The development of Hermann Cohen’s religious-philosophical views was in the direction of a more serious recognition of the significance of religion in the historical affairs of culture, the recognition of the duality, but not dualism, of the cultural rational principles of mankind: philosophy of reason — Kantianism and religion of reason — Judaism. The unifying beginning here, in his opinion, should be reason, the reasonable beginning in man. However, just as in Kant’s philosophical system we find the dualism of theoretical and practical philosophy, so in Cohen’s philosophy of culture, in our opinion, in the end, the dualism of philosophy and religion emerges, which Cohen failed to reconcile, although he made considerable efforts to do so.

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Герман Коген и еврейское религиозное образование*

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Выдающийся философ и еврейский интеллектуал Герман Коген (1842–1918) прожил свою жизнь согласно принципам и идеям, которые он развивал в своей философской и религиозной мысли. Он творил в период Германской империи, в трудную для еврейского общества историческую эпоху набирающего обороты антисемитизма и незрелого либерализма. В истории еврейской философии труды Когена выделяются как одни из наиболее систематизированных и рационально обоснованных. В статье приводится ряд биографических фактов, которые непосредственным образом повлияли на религиозно-философские взгляды основателя марбургской школы неокантианства. В своей философии религии Коген выступает с резкой критикой как сионизма, так и антисемитизма, крайне вредных для понимания идей истинного иудаизма. Антисемитизм, по его мнению, блокирует возможность синтеза между еврейской религией и немецкой

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культурой, в сионизме же Коген видит опасную попытку принизить роль этического ядра в иудейской религии, свести ее значение к узко национальному и государственному. Философия религии Когена характеризуется как попытка синтеза кантианства и иудаизма, а также в качестве необходимой части его философской системы, придающей ей ту специфику, которая во многом определяет своеобразие философской позиции Когена как в отношении кантовской философии, так и неокантианства в целом. Указывается, что марбургский философ являлся крупнейшим еврейским авторитетом того времени и известным поборником и покровителем исследований иудаизма и проблема еврейского религиозного образования была для него отнюдь не маргинальной или частной.

Ключевые слова: Коген, неокантианство, философия религии, иудаизм, сионизм, антисемитизм, образование.

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