Chapter Ten

Epilogue

When Montefiore conducted his discussion with Rabbi Mattuck about sending Jewish missionaries to the non-Jewish world, he was 75 years old and past the stage in his life when he could hope to launch this or any other major programme of action. Anglo-Jewry had changed, after the "Russian" influx of the 1880s, from being a fairly prosperous, settled and largely anglicised group, to become a more "foreign," unassimilated and rather "traditional" community. Violent Antisemitism had moved west into Germany and would soon overshadow even the worst excesses of the Tsarist cruelties. Jewish nationalism had revived, and although Montefiore saw this as a cause of increased Antisemitism, he yet records that Theodor Herzl had confessed to him that "it was antisemitism which had made him a Zionist."¹ As Liberalism in general began to wither, and war clouds began to gather, it is not surprising that world Jewry began to close ranks and look to its own resources to meet its needs, with an inevitable waxing of the Particularist stream and a waning of Montefiore's beloved Universalism.

Montefiore had many Christian friends, but his special "window" on the Christian world was his London Society for the Study of Religion, which he co-founded with the Roman Catholic scholar and mystic, Baron von Hugel in 1904. Fifteen of the original seventeen members were non-Jews and it was to this society in 1935 that he poured out his heart regarding the shattering of his life's dreams. Perhaps in his great scheme for a renewed and purified Judaism, if it had ever succeeded in reaching out to embrace great numbers of Gentiles and even Christians, some of the distinguished Christian members of this society might have played a part. Instead he had to say to them:

So, my friends, you see before you a disillusioned, sad and embittered old man. But yet, not a hopeless old man, for he still believes in God. He refuses to bow the knee to the fashionable Zionist Baal. He refuses to succumb to Jewish nationalism, on the one hand, or to gentile anti-Semitism on the other, even though these powerful forces so powerfully react upon, and stimulate, one another. He is an extremist, a diehard, a

Claude Montefiore & Christianity

fanatic, if you will, but he has not lost his faith. His old ideal of the Englishman of the Jewish faith shall yet, as he believes, prevail. If it does not, then indeed, as a good Victorian, he must take refuge in the familiar saying of the Victorian poet. He must seek to believe that God fulfills himself in many ways.²

Although Montefiore is not recanting, and maintains his integrity as a reformer to the end, he in effect concedes defeat in the matter of his great scheme to transform the religious map of his day. For his Christian contemporaries, the conversion of Europe, America and Australia to Judaism would be unthinkable, notwithstanding any lip-service they might pay to the excellencies of the Jewish faith. To Montefiore's Jewish contemporaries, even those who supported the "Mission of Israel" concept, such a prospect would have certain nightmarish aspects. Certain rabbis such as Rabbi Alexander Schindler in America have spoken in favour of "missionary" work amongst Gentiles,³ as have Rabbi Roger Pavey,⁴ and Rev. Leslie Hardman,⁵ in England, but they have in mind more of a "replenishing the synagogue" exercise than a fully-fledged "winning the world" vision such as Montefiore cherished.

In conclusion, it should be said that a student of Montefiore's life and work does not have to agree with his aims to admire the devotion and diligence and magnanimity he showed in seeking to further them. Montefiore left this world just before the 1939-45 war which left the world a vastly different place from the one he had known. It is tempting to speculate about what his attitudes to changed conditions would have been. The great efforts of his son Leonard to help the victims of Nazi cruelty show quite clearly the philanthropic spirit of his father, and indicate the line the father would have taken. Claude Montefiore may or may not have become reconciled to the fact of the State of Israel, but certainly it could be said that his attitude to Israelis, both Ashkenazi and Sephardi, both Jew and Arab would have been benevolent and generous, as it had always been to his fellows. The inter-faith discussions between Jew and Christian which have been a feature of the post-war world would have interested him, but in the light of what was discussed in the previous chapter, it would be difficult to predict his response. Perhaps all that can be said of one with such a lively and original mind is that his response to all the challenges of our day would have been lively and original!

²ibid, pp.227-228.
⁵L. Hardman, "Jews Should Become Missionaries," Jewish Telegraph, 23.10.81 (Manchester).