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Religious Humanism and Politics To the Editors of *Judaism*

Erich Fromm
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The excerpts from the writings of Rabbi Aaron Samuel Tamaret (*Judaism*, Winter 1963) constitute an extraordinary document. They apply the principles of prophetic Judaism to the scene of contemporary politics. This is extraordinary in the literal sense of the word. Much as the Jewish religious tradition has been cultivated and carried on by pious Jews and learned rabbis in the last two thousand years, it has kept itself apart from world politics and from the application of the religious principles to the secular world. There are of course exceptions, the most remarkable ones in our time being men like Nathan Chofshi and Rabbi Benjamin of *Ichud*. There were many outstanding Jews in the last one hundred and fifty years, like Marx, Einstein and others, who believed in and expressed the ideas of humanism but outside of the flow of Jewish tradition. Eventually there are the Zionists and the leaders of Israel who certainly have turned to contemporary politics-but, in spite of quoting the prophets frequently, not in the spirit of Jewish religious tradition.

It is not difficult to recognize the reasons for this fact. The Jews, during most of the two thousand years of exile, were at the best tolerated and felt not „at home“ politically in the lands of exile. They remained within their own tradition and they were more prone to study the Talmudic laws about the treatment of a city conquered by a Jewish army or the relative rights of the King and the High Priest than to be concerned with the political events around them. When, with the beginning of their political emancipation, the path was open to the world outside the Jewish enclave, many who espoused the causes of internationalism and peace had left the religious Jewish tradition and joined the world outside the gates. Inasmuch as organized religious Jewry is concerned most of its representatives made the compromise which Rabbi Gendler describes so well in his Introduction; they expressed the ideas of the „establishment.“ They are for peace but also for „realism.“ They deplore war but they accept the fact that the right of powerful nations to wage war is not in contradiction to the laws of humanity.

Rabbi Tamaret does not try to „square the circle.“ He is a devoted religious Jew and he represents the Jewish tradition without compromises. Indeed, the prophets were not defending any „establishment.“ In many utterances (although there are contradictions) they turn against nationalism, and toward peace and the inherent unity of the human race. Rabbi Tamaret's criticism of nationalism is written in the spirit of that tradi-



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tion which has God forbid the angels to sing psalms of jubilation when the Egyptians were drowned-for the Egyptians were God's creatures.

Rabbi Tamaret touches upon another phenomenon of the most fundamental importance, that of idolatry. Prophetic and Talmudic {224} teaching is concerned with the fight against idolatry, the worship of things to which man bows down, thus restricting his humanity. Rabbi Tamaret sees with a rare clarity that primitive idolatry has persisted among the nations down to modern times. Eventually, Rabbi Tamaret speaks of war in an uncompromising way. He does not call killing by all kinds of sweet names but he sees it as the crime it is-regardless of the way it is rationalized.

What is remarkable about Rabbi Tamaret's writings is that he continues the prophetic tradition in which politics cannot be separated from religious values. In the Jewish tradition God is primarily a god of history, and only secondarily the god of nature. He reveals Himself in history, hence historical events, that is politics, are to be understood and judged from the standpoint of spiritual values. In a time when politics has become completely secularized and separated from the values which characterize Jewish religious thought, Rabbi Tamaret's writings are of great significance; they should give new strength to all who fight against idols, especially the idols of nationalism and war.