
The Question

Chapter 1 of *You Gentiles* by Maurice Samuels (Pub 1924)



By Maurice Samuels

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Chapter 1: The Question

I

These last ten years and more I have been asking myself, with increasing urgency, a number of questions:

Is there any special significance in the distinction I have so long cherished—the distinction of "Jew-gentile"—not to be found in the class of distinctions implied in "American-Foreigner" or "Englishman-Foreigner"? Is there, between us Jews and you gentiles, that is between the Jew on the one hand and the Englishman, the Frenchman, the American on the other hand, that which transcends all the differences which exist among yourselves, so that, in relation to us, you are gentiles first, and afterwards (and without particular relevance in this connection) Englishmen, Frenchmen, Americans? Or is there nothing more implied in that distinction, Jew-gentile, than (in a general way) in the distinctions Jew-American, American-Englishman, Englishman-Frenchman? In other words, are we Jews but part of the gentiles, Americans, Englishmen, Jews, Frenchmen, or is there a deeper cleavage between us? Is this Western world divided primarily into two parts—you gentiles; we Jews?

From the outset I shall be asked: "Even if you suspect the existence of such a primal cleavage, beyond the reach of ordinary national or racial classifications, what purpose can you have in urging it upon the attention of the world? Has it any practical application? Does it in any fashion clarify the status of the Jew, or give greater cogency to such claims of his as are still unsatisfied?" This question will be asked of me by many Jews—but in particular it will be asked with the utmost insistence by those Jews who have based our case for national rights, national equality, precisely on this assumption—that we Jews are a people like all other peoples, similar in needs and impulses: that we are Jews, you are Englishmen, you are Italians, you are Americans; that we, the world's races or peoples, are all of us similar in our differences.

Leaving on one side those who deny the existence of any distinctions at all, those, that is, who say that the Jew is either a Frenchman, an American or an Englishman according to the place of his birth, I would answer: "For me the ordinary nationalist or racial classification has not sufficed."

If I have long pondered this question of Jew and gentile it is because I suspected from the first dawning of Jewish self-consciousness that Jew and gentile are two worlds, that between you gentiles and us Jews there lies an unbridgeable gulf. Side by side with this belief grew another, which is related to the practical aspect of the distinction.

I do not believe that, situated as we are in your midst, scattered among you from one end of the Western world to the other, we have the right to retain our identity if we are but another addition to the gentile peoples. (Nor, by the way, do I believe that we could have retained it so long had this been the case.)

If we are but one more people added to the long roster of peoples, living and dead, we have no claim worth while, under these circumstances, to continuity of separate consciousness. Such a claim could never have arisen had we remained secure, segregated on our own soil—it would have been our tacit birthright. But as it is, our existence is secured at an infinite expense of special effort on our part, and of peculiar discomfort to you. Wherever the Jew is found he is a problem, a source of unhappiness to himself and to those around him. Ever since he has been scattered in your midst he has had to maintain a continuous struggle for the conservation of

his identity. Is it worth while, in the face of this double burden, our own and yours, to perpetuate what may be, after all, an addition of one unit to scores of similar units? Were these centuries of alternate torture and respite not a disproportionately high price for the right to increase by one page the already overburdened records of the nations?

Were it my belief, as it is, at least in expression, the belief of many fellow-Jews, that our right to exist is founded on our similarity to other peoples, that where American or Belgian or Italian has a right to homeland, culture, history, parliament, we Jews have the same right, for the same reasons[^] and for no other reasons—were this my belief, I could not find the heart to continue the struggle or to urge the struggle upon others. The effort is too severe; the price is too high: the guerdon is insignificant. Were we like other peoples we ought to have done what other peoples, under similar circumstances, would do: a people driven from its homeland, a people ground into dust and carried by winds of misfortune into every corner of the world, has no right to inflict its woes and longings on others. It should cease to exist, it should rid the world of its importunate presence.

Such would be my belief if I saw in ourselves only the replica, with the proper variations, of the rest of the world. But this is not my belief, for I see otherwise. Years of observation and thought have given increasing strength to the belief that we Jews stand apart from you gentiles, that a primal duality breaks the humanity I know into two distinct parts; that this duality is a fundamental, and that all differences among you gentiles are trivialities compared with that which divides all of you from us.

I am aware that this is a thesis which cannot be supported by diagrams, tables and logarithms. It cannot even be urged with the apparent half-compulsion of social and economic laws. The cogency of what I have to say does not depend on reference to obvious and ineluctable laws, natural processes acknowledged and accepted. I am also aware that the weight of what is called learned opinion will be thrown against me, that my contention will meet with the ridicule of facile common sense and of scholarship. Nevertheless I set it down clearly that in this Western world there are essentially two peoples as spiritual forces, only two human sections with essential meaning—Jew and gentile.

But at least what credentials have I to offer—since the presentation of credentials must always precede the presentation of the thesis? What claim have I on the attention of the world? I can only answer that this book, being a serious book, must carry its own credentials, and does not attempt to borrow importance from outside sources. I offer myself only as a Jew who has lived, observed and thought: my experiences and contacts have been somewhat more varied than those of most men, but this has little to do with my views. The truth which is spread over the whole world is also contained in any part of it. The laws of gravitation are implied as completely in the falling of a pebble to earth as in the rush of the sun against the counter-rush of its companion stars. The law of Einstein works no less truly in the crawling of a snail than in the dizzy vibration of the fastest atomic sub-unit. These laws are more easily observed in the one set of cases than in the other: that is all.

If I have touched the truth it has been primarily through contact with life—and I have regarded books as but a class of living things, to be observed and interpreted and placed in their setting. Life itself, observation of men and women, singly and in masses, a knowledge of their works (among which books are important), a feeling for their desires, perception of their intent in cities, laws, theaters, games, wars, all this has brought me to the conception I shall set forth. All scholarship—particularly that scholarship which deals with the manifestations of man's desires and fears—consists of unauthoritative marginal notes, which are of interest chiefly as giving us some insight into the nature of those who jotted them down.

It does no harm to know the history that is in books; but the only authentic history is around us. It is made daily in newspapers, theaters, meetings, election campaigns. And is it less valuable to know what the waiter said at the Simplicissimus cabaret in Vienna when I was there three years ago than to know what Terence reports a slave to have said in Rome when he was there two thousand years ago? What if my neighbor, the Professor, reads Greek rather less fluently than did a certain thick-witted Athenian citizen who lived in the time of Pericles and by no means as well as I read English? Is that proof of wisdom or understanding? And supposing my neighbor on the other side, the famous professor of History, knows rather less about the Peloponnesian war than the intelligent college student knows about the World War—is that Professor therefore wiser than most men, is his opinion on life more valuable? And supposing another scholar purports to tell us what the ancient Egyptians believed, and from his account of this dead religion pretends to teach the secrets of faith. Can he tell me what John Doe or Isaac Levy believes? Does John Doe believe that Christ rose from the dead? Really believe that, as a plain truth, as he would believe it if his mother, whom he buried five years ago, should suddenly come walking into his house, rotted away and clad in her tattered cerements—believe it as simply and as terribly? And does Isaac Levy believe that the waters of the Red Sea were divided, as he would believe it if one day, below the Williamsburg Bridge, he were to see the waters split, rear, and fall again? And if neither John Doe nor Isaac Levy believes as cogently as this, then what do they really believe, if they believe anything at all? And if the professor cannot answer these questions, what does he mean when he says that the Egyptians believed that Osiris rose from the dead? And what do his reports matter?

There is no test or guarantee of a man's wisdom or of his reliability beyond what he says about life itself. Life is the touchstone: books must be read and understood in order that we may compare our experience in life with the sincere report of the experience of others. But such and such a one, who has read all the books extant on history and art, is of no consequence unless these are to him an indirect commentary on what he feels around him.

Hence, if I have drawn chiefly on experience and contemplation and little on books—which others will discover without my admission—this does not affect my competency, which must be judged by standards infinitely more difficult of application. Life is not so simple that you can test a man's nearness to truth by giving him a college examination. Such examinations are mere games—they have no relation to reality. You may desire some such easy standard by which you can judge whether or not a man is reliable:

Does he know much history? Much biology? Much psychology? If not, he is not worth listening to. But it is part of the frivolity of our outlook to reduce life to a set of rules, and thus save ourselves the agony of constant reference to first principles. No: standardized knowledge is no guarantee of truth. Put down a simple question—a living question, like this: "Should A. have killed B.?" Ask it of ten fools: five will say "Yes," five will say "No." Ask it of ten intelligent men: five will say "Yes/" five will say "No." Ask it of ten scholars: five will say "Yes," five will say "No," The fools will have no reasons for their decision: the intelligent men will have a few reasons for and as many against; the scholars will have more reasons for and against. But where does the truth lie?

What, then, shall be the criterion of a man's reliability?

There is none. You cannot evade your responsibility thus by entrusting your salvation into the hands of a priest-specialist. A simpleton may bring you salvation and a great philosopher may confound you.

And so to life direct, as I have seen it working in others and felt it within myself, I refer the truth of what I say. And to books I refer only in so far as they are manifestations of life.

II

But another question, more subtle and disturbing, must be faced. I have said, "There are two life-forces in the world I know: Jewish and gentile, ours and yours." If this be a truth, we must not be driven from it if, like many other truths, it is overlaid and obscured by the irrelevancies of life, by the intersection and confusion of currents. Here is the gentile life-force: here is the Jewish life-force. What their origin was I cannot say. I can only surmise dimly what circumstances, reacting upon what original impulses, produced the Jewish life-force and the gentile life-force. I can only affirm—to the Jews, in the main, belongs the Jewish life-force, a consistent and coherent force, a direction in human thought and reaction. To you others belongs the gentile life-force, a mode of life and thought distinct from ours. But the border line is not clear. Not all of us Jews are representative of the Jewish life-force: not all of you gentiles are altogether alien to it.

We have lived for many centuries in close contiguity, if not in intimacy. Our prophetic books, our most characteristic influence, have been read to you for many hundreds of years. Something in these books has developed here and there, among you, a latent individual impulse to our Jewish way of life and thought. Essentially our prophetic books cannot change your gentile nature: but in stray, predestined hearts they bring forth fruit. Your outlook on life, your dominant reactions, are the same today as they were two thousand years ago. All that has changed is the instrument of expression. You live the same life under different faiths. But something clings to you here and there resembling the original form of the faith we gave you. Here and there our somber earnestness breaks out on the dazzling kaleidoscope of your history. And we, for all our segregation have caught, particularly of late, something of your way of life. As a few gentiles have spoken in Jewish tones, so more than one Jew speaks the language of the gentile. Jews live a gentile life here and there, while gentile lives give expression to Jewish emotions.

Yet the cleavage is there, abysmal and undeniable. In the main, we are forever distinct. Ours is one life, yours is another. Such accidental confusions as make some Northerners darker than Southerners does not affect the law that the Southerner is darker skinned. The law holds none the less for accidental and contradictory cases.

You may even have Jews in your midst who did not learn their way of life from us, and did not inherit it from a Jewish forbear. We may have authentic gentiles in our midst: these single protests are of no account: they are extreme and irrelevant variations.

And of as little account are the occasional transferences of customs and conventions, taken over in the mass. We may have customs and conventions of yours imposed on our fundamental way of life—even as you have the surface credo of a Jewish faith imposed on your way of life. But in the end your true nature works itself into the pattern of the borrowed faith, and expresses itself undeniably. So we; borrowing from you, finally assimilate the loan and in time make it essentially ours.

Beyond all these irrelevancies which hide at times but do not change the issue lies that clear and fateful division of life—Jewish and gentile. Because I have mingled intimately with the Jewish world and with the gentile world, I know well how easily exceptions obscure the rule: but I know just as well the unsounded abyss between us. What I have learned in your midst stands in my mind sharply severed from what I have learned in the midst of my people. I listen to your life, to the brilliant chorus which goes up from lands, governments, cities, books, churches, moralities: and in my mind I can no more confuse it with the tone of Jewish life than I could confuse the roaring of a tempest with the deliberate utterance of the still, small voice. I repeat: it is of life I speak, of masses of men and women: of the things they say and do : of their daily selves, as I have known them. It is of life at first hand that I speak: of yourselves as you are in masses and singly, of my own people as I know them. My conviction came first from this contact, and from meditation on its meaning. I learned, this belief of mine not in books, not in history, but in Manchester, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, New York. So gentiles, I concluded, have a way of living and thinking, wherever they may be. So Jews have a way of living and thinking. Had no books ever been written, were there no histories to refer to, I would have come to this belief.

I do not believe that this primal difference between gentile and Jew is reconcilable. You and we may come to an understanding, never to a reconciliation. There will be irritation between us as long as we are in intimate contact. For nature and constitution and vision divide us from all of you forever—not a mere conviction, not a mere language, not a mere difference of national or religious allegiance. With the best - will on both sides, successful adaptation to each other will always be insecure and transient. Waves of liberality may affect our mutual relationship from time to time: we shall delude ourselves—you and we—with the belief that we have

bridged the gulf. Many will pass their lives in that delusion. But, as has come to pass so often, the difference which is deeper than will, deeper than consciousness, will assert itself. There is a limit to our moral or mental possibilities. We cannot climb out of ourselves. The complete and permanent reconciliation of your way of life with ours is beyond that limit.

Of course it is the frequent theme of editors, of popular professional optimists and of gullible and facile publicists that the path to reconciliation between Jew and gentile is the path of knowledge—or, rather, of information. The more you know concerning our history, our customs, our beliefs, the nearer you will find us to you, the less you will dislike us. But this is futile (and unreliable) amiability. It is by no means even a general rule that the best-informed people are the least accessible to anti-Semitism, that the most backward countries are the most infected. Here is a cult, or at least a feeling, which sits with equal grace on the grossest of your peasantry and the most refined of your aristocracy. In the one case it is fortified by superstition, in the other case by all the information that "scientific" research into philosophy, history, ethnography and anthropology can accumulate. Not that, in my opinion, the aristocrat knows us better than the peasant, the scholar better than the boor. But even if you should understand us—and I offer you this toward that end—we would not find mutual tolerance any easier.

This book, therefore, cannot be presented as an effort to achieve an end which from the outset is declared impossible. I do not propose to combat anti-Semitism. I only wish to present what seems to me its true explanation in the hope of changing some of its manifestations.

III

We shall not come to understand the nature of the primal difference between gentile and Jew if we attempt to treat it merely as a difference in accepted dogmas and philosophies. A religion, in its formulated essence, is seldom the real religion, the practice and belief. Creeds which in their formulated essence are alien to a people may be accepted by the people. But this true nature of the people asserts itself. The form and dogma of the religion are retained: but the fabric, the institutions, the true reactions which make the religion what it is outside of its sacred books—these are the indices to its actual force and significance. There is such a thing as conversion of a man's opinions: there is no such thing (outside the field of long and laborious psychotherapy in individual cases) as conversion of a man's nature. That is beyond the reach of conscious effort, certainly beyond the reach of the missionary. Change a man's opinions and his nature will soon learn to express itself through the new medium.

This I preface to my observations on the difference between Jew and gentile because I anticipate the commonplace allusion to the similarity of our creeds, to the identity of source and to the origin of the founder of your religion. Christianity (the reality, not the credo) is not a variant of Judaism, whatever Christ or his chroniclers may have intended. Your nature is the same to-day as it was before the advent of Christianity. Within the framework of another creed your instincts would have woven a similar design.

And if not religious, this difference certainly cannot be in the nature of a philosophy or a Weltanschauung. It is true that a man's nature dictates his philosophy and Weltanschauung, even as it does his religion. But we must also remember that our logic is nearly always at variance with our natures: a man's nature expresses itself only indirectly—is never found in the face value of his assertions. Surely we differ in religion and philosophy- but only if we consider religion and philosophy not as assertions but as the practice, or art of life, presented in their name. Though you and we were to agree on all fundamental principles, as openly stated, though we should agree that there is only one God, that war is evil, that universal peace is the most desirable of human ideals, yet we should remain fundamentally different. The language of our external expression is alike, but the language of our internal meaning is different. You call that line, in that part of the spectrum, red; so do we. But who will ever know that the sensation "red" in you is the sensation "red" in us?

Life is fluid and dogmas are fixed: and life, trying to come to terms with dogmas, does not easily break with them, but endows them with almost infinite plasticity. Under the same dogmas a man will kill another or die rather than lift his hand to kill. One generation means one thing in a dogma: another generation means another thing. And at last even the elasticity of the dogma will not stand the strain: a sudden wave of emotion comes to reinforce accumulated resentment: there is a revolution and a new religion is founded; new dogmas are accepted. Perhaps they do not answer the need; perhaps they express only a passing fashion; perhaps they are no nearer than the old dogmas to a reconciliation between philosophy and instinct. But they may take root. And the process begins all over again. Instinct endures for glacial ages; religions revolve with civilizations.

Let us differentiate, then, between a religion as a dogma and the same religion as a practised art or way of life. We may compare religion with religion: that is legitimate and fruitful. But let us, in so doing, compare dogma with dogma, practice with practice: and even when we treat of dogma let us be careful to distinguish between the dogma as proclaimed and the dogma as it is transmuted by the emotions.

And certainly between the dogmas of your religions and ours there is little difference—for we gave you the dogmas. It is absurd to assert that the sole difference between you and us is that you believe the Messiah has already come while we believe that he is yet to come; or that you believe (even in theory) in the doctrine of forgiveness while we believe in the doctrine of retaliation. Even in theory this difference is trifling in the face of the overwhelming bulk of common inspiration. The difference between us is abysmal: it is not a disagreement about a historic fact or about a commandment which neither of us observes. In some of these dogmatic disagreements we may find the key to our differences: they do not constitute the difference. A few of them (those which have not been stretched to accommodate your instincts but express them readily) were caused by the difference between us. They did not cause it.

That primal difference, which I have sensed more and more keenly as I have tasted more and more of life, your life and our life, is a difference in the sum totals of our respective emotions under the stimulus of the external world; it is a difference in the essential quality or tone of our mental and spiritual being. Life is to you one thing—, to us another. And according to these two essential qualities we make answer to the needs and impulses which are common to both of us.

To you life is a game and a gallant adventure, and all life's enterprises partake of the spirit of the adventurous. To us life is a serious and sober duty pointed to a definite and inescapable task. Your relations to gods and men spring from the joy and rhythm of the temporary comradeship or enmity of spirit. Our relation to God and men is dictated by a somber subjection to some eternal principle. Your way of life, your moralities and codes, are the rules of a game—none the less severe or exacting for that, but not inspired by a sense of fundamental purposefulness. Our way of life, our morality and code, do not refer to temporary rules which govern a temporary and trivial pastime: they are inspired by a belief (a true belief, a belief which reaches below assertion into instinctive reaction) in the eternal quality of human endeavor. To you morality is "the right thing" to us morality is "right." For all the changing problems of human relationship which rise with changing circumstances you lay down the rules and regulations of the warrior, the sportsman, the gentleman; we refer all problems seriously to eternal law. For you certain acts are "unbecoming" to the pertinent ideal type—whether he be a knight or a "decent fellow." We have no such changing systems of reference—only one command.

And all your moral attributes are only varieties of Queensberry rules. Honor, loyalty, purity—these are sets of regulations. The best of you will not swerve from them: you will die in their defense—like the gallant gentlemen you are. But you will not brook the question whether your system of honor is founded on right, whether loyalty has relation to intelligence, whether purity has relation to the state of mind. Honor means but one thing—to do the honorable thing, whether it be honor in dueling, honor among thieves, honor of women; loyalty means the quality of being loyal independent of right or wrong; purity means the chastity of the body or the denial of desire—as such; it is related to the game, not to God.

For us these distinctions do not exist, for we are serious in our intentions. We will not accept your rules because we do not understand them. Right and wrong is the only distinction we are fitted by our nature to appreciate. We are puzzled by your punctilios, your quaint distinctions, your gentleman's cotnme il fauts. We are amazed when you fight for them; we are struck dumb when you die for them—a song on your lips.

Not that me do not know how to die for a cause. But we must die for a serious cause, for a reason, for right, for God. Not for a slogan without meaning, for a symbol for its own sake, for a rule for its own sate. We will die for the right—not for "the right thing."

This difference in behavior and reaction springs from something much more earnest and significant than a difference in beliefs: it springs from a difference in our biologic equipment. It does not argue the inferiority of the one or the other. It is a difference in the taking of life which cannot be argued. You have your way of life, we ours. In your system of life we are essentially without "honor." In our system of life you are essentially without morality. In your system of life we must forever appear graceless; to us you must forever appear Godless.

Seen from beyond both of us, there is neither right nor wrong. There is your Western civilization. If your sense of the impermanence of things, the essential sportiness of all effort, the gamesomeness and gameness of life, has blossomed in events and laws like these I have seen around me, it cannot, from an external point of view (neither yours nor ours) be classified as right or wrong. Wars for Helen and for Jenkins' ear; duels for honor and for gambling debts, death for a flag, loyalties, gallant gestures, a world that centers round sport and war, with a system of virtues related to these; art that springs not from God but from the joyousness and suffering of the free man, a world of play which takes death itself as part of the play, to be approached as carelessly and pleasantly as any other turn of chance, cities and states and mighty enterprises built up on the same rush of feeling and energy as carries a football team—and in the same ideology—this is the efflorescence of the Western world. It has a magnificent, evanescent beauty. It is a valiant defiance of the gloom of the universe, a warrior's shout into the ghastly void— a futile thing to us, beautiful and boyish. For all its inconsistencies and failures within itself, it has a charm and rhythm which are unknown to us. We could never have built a world like yours.

The efflorescence of our life, given free room, is profoundly different. We have none of this joyous gamesomeness. We fight and suffer and die, even as we labor and create, not in sport and not under the rules of sport, but in the feeling and belief that we are part of an eternal process. We cannot have art such as you have, a free and careless lyrical beauty, songs and epics. Our sense of beauty springs from immersion in the universe, from a gloomy desire to see justice done in the name of God. Morality itself we take simply and seriously: we have none of your arbitrary regulations, your fine flourishes and disciplined gallantries: we only know right or wrong: all the rest seems to us childish irrelevance. When God speaks in us, when his overwhelming will drives us to utterance we are great: otherwise we are futile. With you there cannot be a question of futility. We belong to the One mastering God: you belong to the republic of playful gods.

These are two ways of life, each utterly alien to the other. Each has its place in the world—but they cannot flourish in the same soil, they cannot remain in contact without antagonism. Though to life itself each way is a perfect utterance, to each other they are enemies.

Chapter 2: Sport

You Gentiles: Contents

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| 1. The Question 7 | 6. Discipline107 | 11. The Masses177 |
| 2, Sport 38 | 7. The Reckoning124 | 12. Solution and Dissolution188 |
| 3. Gods64 | 8. But as Moderns135 | 13. The Mechanism of Dissolution 196 |
| 4. Utopia78 | 9. We, the Destroyers144 | 14. Is There Any Hope?210 |
| 5. Loyalty 91 | 10. The Games of Science156 | 15. A Last Word221 |
