

CD-1105 Transcription

Address at the Dr. B. Benedict Glazer Institute, Temple Beth El,
Bloomfield Hills, Mich. [2]

M1:

Friends, I've been sitting, waiting for somebody to reconvene us, and I realize that it's me. (laughter) So, let me invite you to find your way either back to the seat that you were in before or another one. I hope as well that [01:00] you will feel free not only to take notes, but to frame questions, because at the end of Dr. Tanenbaum's presentation, of the second presentation, we'll leave some time for some questions and answers and some more direct exchange. Don't want you to feel totally passive. You'll have an opportunity to participate in the dialogue as well. And then, of course, after lunch, Reverend Ed Willingham and Monsignor Leonard Blair will have the daunting task of formulating responses as well, and sharing some more formal reactions. Looks like we're about ready to begin.

To this point, I think, Marc has done a really wonderful job of summarizing [02:00] the spirit of the 50 years in which this institute has existed, the 30 years that he has been at the center of inter-religious discussion and activity. The challenge becomes now for Dr. Tanenbaum and for us to try to imagine what

the future holds. That is, having laid this foundation of these past years, what comes next, and what can we anticipate in inter-religious affairs? I am as eager as you are to hear what Dr. Tanenbaum has to teach us and to challenge us, and I know that we will be richly rewarded. [03:00]

Marc Tanenbaum:

Can't tell you what a great personal pleasure it is for me, along the way, to renew my acquaintanceships and friendships with so many friends here whom I've worked with as far back as the 1960s, in many of the areas of Jewish-Christian relations. At the risk of alienating most of you, I want to pay tribute to Father Alex Brunet, who's been one of the great pioneers in Catholic-Jewish relations in this city and nationally. He's a dear and trusted friend. [04:00] I saw people I worked with in the 1960s, in the civil rights movement and in human rights causes, Jack Biersdorf, who's written a wonderful book on, in effect, future innovative congregations, really still worth reading. Hugh White, with whom he worked together with groups of blacks and Hispanics and Native Americans in trying to bring economic and political justice to many of the people, especially those living in the ghettos. So, I'm sure there are many others here, whom, if I hang around long enough, will may have a reunion before the meeting's over.

There is a presumption in the second title of the talk that I was asked to deliver, namely "Prospects for the Next 50 Years."

[05:00] I think, as some of you may know, certainly my Jewish colleagues will know, that there is a central Jewish teaching which says that after the prophets Haggai, Mehseiah, Zechariah, and Malachi, prophesy came to an end in Israel. And the only people who would presume to engage in prophecy, as the rabbis tell us in the Talmud, is , [zahresh?], shoteh, [dicoton?], somebody who is deformed, or foolish, or stupid -- an idiot, literally. A [coton?] is an immature child. And, since, after the nice introduction I got here today, I'm not going to ruin that by trying to presume to be any one of three people violating [06:00] the tradition about prophecy, so this is not even a pretense at wanting to try to prophesy what will happen.

Apart from other considerations, our human realities and experiences have made it clear that even our foremost pundits, both in and out of government and universities and think tanks, were not able to predict what has happened in the Soviet Union and the East European countries, in the spirit of time. In a matter of months, we are now in a radically altered world, and when we look back at the so-called prophecies, even among some of the best of them, I think almost very few of them were

prepared for the extraordinary transformation that has taken place. So, what, essentially, I should like to do is address myself to a much more modest task [07:00] and realistic task, namely, to look at certain trends which have unfolded over the past 50 years, certainly 30 years, in which I have been involved in Jewish-Christian, Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, and see if there are any seeds which hold promise for development during the course of the common period.

I want to come back to a theme I touched upon. I think potentially, one of the most significant trends, which is now, thank God, substantially underway, is the emergence, literally, of a transformed theology of Israel, of Jews and Judaism, [08:00] and the beginnings of a transformation in a Jewish theology of Christians and Islam. But particularly, Jewish theology dealing with Christians because there has been so much to sort out over the past 1,900 years in the Western Christian world. The scholarship that I would commend to your attention -- excuse me -- in this two-volume work on Jews and Christians by Professor Charlesworth, who is a Professor of Jewish-Christian Relations at Princeton University, biblical scholar. And the writings of some of the major scholars in that volume, Geza Vermes on "Jesus the Jew: [09:00] Jesus and First-Century Judaism."

And that of Roman Catholics, mainline Protestant and Evangelical scholars, I believe, will become the deepest spiritual and moral substructure, founded in the most solid ground, of the best scholarship of Roman Catholics, mainline Protestants, Evangelical Christians -- many of whom are writing remarkable things, a good number of them are -- Greek Orthodox Christians. We see that already in the book that we did together with Father Stylianopoulos, a Professor of New Testament Studies, and we're about to engage in an international ecumenical conference with orthodox churches around the world later on this year, with the Ecumenical Patriarch's blessing. [10:00] That scholarship is, I believe, going to be not in the foreground, but in the background, which will help morally and spiritually to sustain the most serious advances in Jewish-Christian relationships, many of which I believe are still before us.

Let me say a word about Jewish scholarship. It was literally, psychologically, emotionally impossible for Jews even to begin to think about what, in Jewish religious terms, to deal with the subject matter so central to our Christian neighbors and friends, [11:00] of Christ the Messiah. Christianity, the evolution of Christianity in its various forms, and our Christian neighbors, our relationship primarily has been one of

sociology and historic developments and events. There have been, however, seeds of Jewish scholarship which indeed for us go back to a theology of creation, God's creation of the inhabited world, at the center of which is the teaching that [*haadam B'tzal'mo B'tzelmen elohiyim?*]. That man -- interestingly, scripture speaks of the first man being both male and female [12:00] -- that humankind was created in the sacred image of God, and therefore, all of God's children are equally sacred in God's eyes.

And that central emphasis on the dignity of every human life, men, women, people of all races, religion, and cultures, will be one of the common threads I believe we will be dealing with. But what I should like to indicate is that there is now emerging a body of Jewish scholarship by some of our best, Talmudic and rabbinic scholars, as well as theologians, systematic historians, who are writing [13:00] the most serious theology of Christians and Christianity and its meaning for Jews and Judaism. Not just a matter of social accommodation, but a recognition, as much of the more recent scholarship has indicated, that Judaism and Christianity are both offspring of a common mother faith. That early Judaism, prior to the year 70, of the destruction of the Temple, were among the various sects that had exploded all over Palestine. We think, essentially, of

four sects: this is the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, and the Zealots. But it now becomes clear that there were dozens of sects and an explosion of religious thinking in ancient Palestine, [14:00] and Jesus the Galilean who came with his followers to Jerusalem were known in that pre-70 period as the Palestinian Jesus movement.

Now, Jewish scholars are seeking to come to terms with that, as with the whole apocalyptic tradition, which has subsided in much of Jewish scholarship and is being reviewed by major Jewish scholars today. There's a book that recently came out by Professor Fritz Rothschild, at my seminary, the Jewish Theological Seminary, on Jewish perspectives on Christians and Christianity. Very deep and serious work of scholarship. Eugene Borowitz has been writing about Christology in Jewish terms. Books on Paul, basic doctrines of the church, and their interaction with Judaism. And, I think one of the inevitable conclusions that emerges is that it is literally [15:00] impossible for Christians to understand their true nature, from their origins and their evolution, without steeping themselves in an understanding of what Jesus understood his mission was about in the world, and what Paul thought about that as well, without all of the later Greek overlay which obscured the depth of his involvement, as a Jew, in first-century Palestine.

I read Romans 9:11 again, and indeed, Paul is a Pharisee of Pharisees, and how rich and wondrous is the knowledge of God there, beyond human understanding. What our ultimate destiny is to be is in the hands of God, and we are not to manipulate each other to conform to our own preconceptions [16:00] of what our destiny needs to be, as Jews and Christians. Now, as I say, I think that will be one of the major developments and challenges for us, to open ourselves to that scholarship on both sides, not in fear and defensiveness, but in a spirit of spiritual adventure and search for the truth. Not in the polemical traditions that has dominated so much of the past 1,900 years, but what sacred scripture has to say to us and what all of the enormous studies, and the sociology, and the history, and the geography, and the demography, and the economics of the early church and the early synagogue were about. [17:00]

Our relationships, as I see it, in many ways will be governed by the deepest continuities. And we've affirmed so much of the differences between us, that which is alienated, that which has made us adversaries, and we know about many of those differences, but it is the similarities, while keeping in mind the differences, that I believe will become increasingly emergent, and a recognition that Jews and Christians and Muslims

have the deepest basis of commonality, of spiritual and human solidarity. There are at least five affirmations which I believe we share, which beneath all the polemics and the bad history [18:00] remain continuous for us and the foundation of our being together and our working together to try to make a more humane and civilized world community for all of our communicants.

What are these five affirmations? I think we all know them.

First, that we believe that God reveals himself to his people, has made a covenant with his people to endure until the end of time. At the heart of that covenant, as Professor David [Flister?] writes, is that "the unique affirmation in world history of a God since creation who revealed himself as [morrow will?]," the Ten Commandments becomes the sign of God's covenant with Israel [19:00] and the early church, and I believe with Islam as well. And it is then evident that the transformation that the Exodus experience meant for early Israel and for all of us who believe in the sacred work of scripture, the transforming power of both Judaism and Christianity and Islam is that it transfigured the perception of the value of human life, the human dignity of every human being.

In ancient Egypt, when Jews were helping to build the pyramids, Israelites under pharaohs, human beings were chattel. If you

read Professor [Spieser?]'s studies on the cultures of Mesopotamia [20:00] and Egypt in that period of time, human beings were slaves. They were bought and sold as animals. The first-born child could be thrown into the Nile River to drown at the whim of an Egyptian pharaoh who, like the Roman emperor, was both god and man. Well, the torah and the gospel reacted powerfully against that dehumanization of God's creatures and affirmed the theme that man -- every human being, man and woman -- every human being is created in the sacred image of God. And there is an important, at least to me, a very important rabbinic teaching which says [21:00] that the affirmation, the biblical affirmation that [*haadam b'tzal'mo B'tzelmen elohiyim?*], that every human being -- every human being! -- black, white, brown, whatever, wants providence. Every human being was created in the sacred image of God, that that teaching was taught at the time of creation before there were any human beings. Which is to say it is an affirmation for the whole of created order, and we in our prides, in our arrogances, in our narcissisms, have proceeded as if the world must become the Tower of Babel.

Thirdly, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, I believe, share together the affirmation [22:00] that we have a responsibility for the social wellbeing of the human community. That's not simply a liberal humanitarian affirmation: it is powerful, it

has been for me, that after the Israelites left the Exodus, crossed the Jordan River, entered into ancient Canaan, then Palestine, one of the first biblical mandates that came out of the biblical tradition was to establish the Sabbatical year, and then the Jubilee year. The Jubilee year was an incredible revolutionary development in human history. It somehow has become some kind of phrase for us, some kind of symbol, almost a mythology. The Jubilee year ordered that on the forty-ninth [23:00] year, every slave must be freed. The manumission of slaves, and if a slave preferred the security of being a slave in his master's house and did not seek to realize the freedom given to him by God, "For unto me they are slaves; they are not slaves unto any other human being." That the slave's ear was to be bored with an awl so that he would know that he has defied the will of God for his freedom and dignity as a human being.

And then, the Jubilee year proclaimed economic liberation. Namely, in the forty-ninth year, in order to avoid the polarization between the very rich and the very poor, all land is to return to its original earners. There is to be a redistribution of wealth and justice [24:00] so that none would be sickly rich, earning today \$18 million a year as income, with stock options if your company fails, and those who are impoverished. And so, it brought about that kind of revolution

when the Jubilee year operated, that brought about a fundamental distribution of justice and economic justice for all the members of the society. It also ordained, in the Jubilee year, ecological liberation -- namely, the land must lie fallow for an entire year. The land is sacred to God, it is God's creation, and no one has the right or the justification to poison the land, to pour toxins in the land, to create ozone layers, to destroy the human environment that God gave to us as a gift for stewardship. That's part of the Jubilee year as well.

And during that year's time, when the land was to lie fallow, [25:00] when redistribution of wealth in a just means was to take place, ancient Palestine became a spiritual democracy because during that year, the religious leadership and the justices of ancient Israel were ordained to go through every town and village in ancient Palestine and to teach the word of the Lord, to teach the torah to every inhabitant of the country. Whether he was a scholar or whether he was an [Amaharits?], whether he was a peasant, because the land was to become a spiritual democracy in which education had to be made available for all because the rabbis thought, "[lo amhe aretz hasid?]," an ignorant person cannot become a genuinely righteous person. One had to be able to read the word of the Lord, read the Torah, read the prophets, and understand them [26:00] in order to have

genuine conviction and commitment as a religious person. And so, that issue of responsibility for social welfare, the theme I want to come back to for a moment, I believe, will be, again, one of the great challenges for all of us during the coming period.

And then, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, unlike some other traditions, share the deepest conviction about linear history. History is not a cycle which constantly turns back on itself, and therefore, one reacts to that circular history with passivity and quietism -- what is the point of doing anything to history if it's simply going to repeat itself? But the whole biblical tradition about history was that it is a linear development, with creation and ultimately redemption, and that we have a responsibility for the events of history. [27:00] That we cannot sit by and allow human beings to die and suffer and to say, "I'm a religious person, I simply want to sit in my study and become more religious." There is a responsibility for the events of history and, in our tradition, we call it *tikkun olam*, a responsibility, as partners with God in the work of creation, to help redeem and repair a broken and fragmented world. We are partners with God in the work of creation, to contain evil and suffering and to bring justice and uphold the human dignity of all human beings.

And finally, Jews, Christians, and Muslims share a profound conviction about the Kingdom of God, the messianic age. However differently we interpret that, [28:00] the substance, the content of that conviction is that at the end of history, in the messianic age, there will be an end to hatred and hostility and contempt and bloodshed and prejudice and violence. And the world will be transformed through God's messenger, the Messiah, who will help usher in the messianic kingdom. A time, like the paradise before its fall, of universal love, caring, compassion, mutual respect, and human solidarity. Well, those, I believe, are the underlying religious, [29:00] moral, even ideological motifs that Jews and Christians and Muslims share in their depths of their tradition, at their best. And God knows, we are going to need all of the moral, spiritual resources we can muster together to deal with the massive challenges that I believe confronts us now, especially as Americans, but also as citizens of the world community.

These affirmations are not simply liturgical phrases, if they're taken seriously. Teachings of the prophets, Isaiah 54, is it the noise of solemn assembly which I [30:00] seek of you, it is to take care of the hungry, clothe the naked, to care for the widow. To say the obvious, the United States is going through a

period of domestic crisis, without being apocalyptic about it. Anyone who travels around the country, one does not have to go beyond Detroit, Michigan, to know how much pain and suffering is taking place among people in the middle class and the poor, the joblessness, the unemployment, to read some of the stories of middle class families who devoted their lives to trying to create a modest, decent civilization, culture, society, for their children, and to find overnight that they are fired from their jobs. [31:00] Many of them have to give up the mortgages on their homes. The unemployment lists grow. And whatever their appearances, with collars and ties and suits and dresses, their pain and suffering is as real as that of any other class of Americans who are hurting.

I believe that churches and synagogues, Christians and Jews, if they take their tradition seriously, have an obligation to intensely develop congregations of compassion. That congregations are not only places of worship and fellowship, but places in which [32:00] people who hurt can come, get understanding, family support, extended family support, and practical help in trying to alleviate their terrible conditions. I recall in 1978, and I want to come back to this a little later on, but it was for me a powerful experience: I'd gone to Southeast Asia with the International Rescue Committee to try to

bring some relief to the Vietnamese boat people and Cambodians, ethnic Chinese. And thousands of them, thank God, through the intervention of religious people, mainly, were brought to the United States to be resettled. And I recall going around the country with a number of people, Christian friends who had been on the mission with us, [33:00] we'd been on three separate missions to Southeast Asia.

Going around to city after city around the country, speaking to priests, ministers, rabbis, nuns, and our laypeople, that as Vietnamese boat people and Cambodians and ethnic Chinese are coming into your community, they are going to need help, an outstretched hand. And I will never forget sitting through some congregational meetings when a pastor or minister or rabbi called the group together, or they did it ecumenically, coming together in the presence of these refugees who had suffered incredible hardship. Many of them, a quarter of a million of them at least, sinking in the South China Sea because of the indifference of the world. And then the religious leader turned to the congregation, "What can you do to help them?" And after some hesitation, [34:00] one man raises his hand and he says, "I'm a physician, I'll be glad to look after their medical needs." Another man said, "I'm a lawyer, I'll do whatever I can to help them legally." Children volunteered to say, "I will help

teach them English, I will help transport them around until they're comfortable and can move in this society." It was incredible what happened to those congregations all over the country.

In some cases, religious leaders became deeply innovative in seeking to link together their mission as pastors and as teachers with that of carrying out their social obligations, and often, they would begin a session with the refugees present, they would begin studying a sacred text, what the scripture, what does the torah, what does the gospel teach us about *tzedakah*, charity? [35:00] Social responsibility? Social justice? They would pray together, and they prayed in ways that were deeper and more poignant than almost any way they had prayed before because it was real. The prayers had something to do with saving human lives, with preserving human dignity. And then a whole congregation became this congregation of compassion, where anyone who could help went into the life of these refugees to help them. I think we have, increasingly, domestic refugees in the United States. We have domestic displaced persons in the United States. You cannot walk through the streets of New York without being appalled, if you have a glint of a conscience. Without walking past the bodies of homeless people sleeping on grates [36:00] in 18-degree weather,

and finding a number of them dying. The next morning, the police take away their bodies.

In the 1970s, there were a group of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews -- and Muslims and Hindus -- who came together in New York under the leadership of Episcopal Bishop Paul Moore. It was the eve of Christmas and the eve of Hanukkah, and all of us that had this incredible experience of seeing New York alive, it was not like today, when the economy was a little bit better and people were affluent and people were running around, kidding themselves, buying presents, and... On both Jewish and Christian side. And we came together and Paul Moore called a press conference at the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, and all of us together testified against the horror [37:00] of the richest city in the world allowing 35,000 human beings to sleep in the streets and gutters of that city, and almost no one, except mainly for religious leadership, Covenant House, Salvation Army, volunteers, some synagogues, trying to do something to relieve their suffering. And we called a press conference in which we put a charge before the mayor and the governor and the federal government to look at how they had destroyed programs of housing for homeless, medical care, had withered away budgets. We had money to spend billions of dollars to build one airplane; we couldn't find several hundred thousand dollars to help relieve

the suffering of fellow human beings created in the sacred image [38:00] of God.

In any case, that coalition of religious leaders together, making a powerful testimony, and then following up on it with real estate people and housing people, forced the mayor and the governor to include a \$50 million budget for the sake of bringing relief to the homeless. Rehabilitation housing and housing strategies. While much has been done, I serve on the board of Covenant House in New York, and to go to that building day by day, unwed mothers, 15 years old, children of drugs, pulled out of the streets of 8th Avenue and 42nd Street, and even with whatever decent help has been provided, the problem remains staggering and vast, and it can be dealt with. There are models of dealing [39:00] with it, provided there is a moral and political will to want to help save human beings. To end the pain and the suffering that continues to go on.

I think one of the challenges we also need to deal with, and it's difficult for us because the counter-forces seem so massive, has to do with the moral quality of our society. Something has deteriorated, and I don't want to sound like an Evangelical preacher, although I think I'm spending too much time with Billy Graham these days, (laughter) but there is a

moral decline in this society. With sex and violence and hedonism and materialism, the greed, the fraud, the corruption, the lies, we are taught about the major issues of American with 30-second bites!

M2:

Amen!

Marc Tanenbaum:

That's the means of communications that that has been [40:00] reduced to. Look at what is going on in an election campaign! You can't find a decent candidate to vote for. I hope George Bush will forgive me. But the wealthiest country in the world, with one of the highest levels of education, why is it that people of competence and quality don't want to expose themselves to participating in shaping a society that is humane and civilized and just? And we end up with all kinds of deals and backroom stuff and then every personal story is told, and... There's a kind of depression sets in after a while, the cynicism, and that cynicism is corrosive. It undermines moral and political will to do the things that we ought to do, that we can do, if there's any confidence that it can make a difference. I believe that it happens now in modest ways. [41:00] Religious leadership can find a way to engage in dialogue with politicians

and with leaders of industry, to talk about moral and ethical responsibilities as major forces in shaping the quality of life of a society.

I'll tell you just briefly an account of influence and believe me, when this is over, I'm not converting, but... Before the Persian Gulf War, interventions were made by some mainline Protestant leaders with George Bush. He was close to some of them -- I won't mention their names -- some of them were friends.

(break in audio)

-- actually, in Europe, and Eastern and Central Europe. Thank God we've reached the point now where this is enough momentum in Jewish-Christian [42:00] relationships. There's enough security and confidence in ourselves and our own faith traditions, in our relationships with one another, that I think we must realize that building bonds with Muslim brothers and sisters of all denominational groups is, as is the case of Jewish-Christian relations, no longer a luxury. It is a necessity. Indeed, I believe it is God's will for all the children of God's human family. Thank you.

(applause) [43:00]

M1:

Marc, I hope that you hear the tribute that is intended by that applause for your remarks, and that you bask in it -- for no more than 10 minutes. (laughter) And why don't we bask in one another's friendship for 10 minutes, and let's say by five after 11:00, be back in this place for Rabbi Tanenbaum's second presentation? [44:00]

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