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F- Conversion

ON PROSELYTES

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

The just-concluded visit to the United States of a British Roman Catholic priest who converted to Judaism has pointed up once again the conflicted and unresolved attitudes of Jewry toward proselytization.

In a number of official U. S. Jewish religious quarters, a sense of relief prevails now that the three-month visit of Abraham Carmel, formerly Father Kenneth Cox of Stix Stirling, Scotland, has ended without incident. In other circles of Judaism here, there is a feeling of regret over the Jewish community's not having exploited Mr. Carmel's tour for greater proselytization purposes.

Mr. Carmel, whose spiritual odyssey has been reported in the London Jewish Chronicle, has ~~had~~ met with considerable success in the States, as success in this sort of thing is measured by American standards. Large audiences have attended his lectures given mostly at synagogues and at Hadassah and ~~ix~~ other Jewish organizational meetings. The New York Board of Rabbis, which ~~repres~~ represents some 700 Conservative, Orthodox, and Reform rabbis, witnessed the largest turnout in recent history for its executive board meeting when the lecture by Mr. Carmel was announced. Reportedly, many ~~suspicious~~ suspicious rabbis came to mock and left intrigued.

Interestingly, Mr. Carmel received a better press in the general secular periodicals than in the Anglo-Jewish press. George Cornell, the religion editor of the Associated Press, wrote a sensitive and sympathetic interview which was published in sixty daily newspapers in the major cities of America. Newsweek magazine printed a similarly thoughtful story under the headline, "The Anglican-Roman-Jew". The only negative reaction from the Christian community ^{to this publicity} that has come to this writer's attention is an article by a Roman Catholic priest in a Mid-West

Catholic diocesan newspaper in which Carmel was labeled "a Judas".

The pro-proselytization and the anti-proselytization camps in the Jewish community both adduce the Carmel experience as another argument for their respective positions. The "pros" are persuaded that Carmel's success, both ~~with~~ in terms of the lift in morale that his presence has given to Jews and of the absence of a more negative reaction on the part of Christians, is a barometer that the climate is increasingly comfortable for an organized Jewish proselytization campaign among non-Jews. They make clear, somewhat defensively, that their target would be the seventy million "unchurched" or "unaffiliated" Americans, and not the believing and practicing Christian community.

The "antis" believe that a Jewish missionary effort, no matter how skillfully implemented, will give offense to the Christian majority and may ultimately jeopardize the harmony that prevails among Catholics, Protestants, and Jews in America. They term the "Judas" reference to Carmel as a straw in the wind.

Despite the felt but unorganized opposition to "missionizing," the "pros" have been moving forward quietly but determinedly in organizing their missionary programs. Sensitive to Jewish and ~~Christian~~ Christian criticisms, the proselyters have used euphemisms in naming their societies; thus, the New York Board of Rabbis have created an "Information and Consultation Center" to answer questions about Jews and Judaism. In 1959, an independent "Jewish Information Society" was established in Chicago by a group of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform laymen and rabbis "to unite all the people of the world in a commitment to the One Universal God and the Brotherhood of Man." The Society has since opened another office in Los Angeles. Prior ~~to~~ to the organization of these bodies, the major sword-carrier in the cause has been the United Israel World Union, an affiliate of the ~~the~~ Israel-based World Union for the Propagation of Judaism. The ~~United Israel~~ United Israel group appears to be the pet hobby of a fine Anglo-Jewish journalist, David Horowitz, who has gone in for occasional dramatic conversions of Bible-belt Christians to Judaism and for somewhat melodramatic

Western
observance of Passover on the/mountaintops ~~of the~~ by communities of golah.

The two most active propagandists for Jewish proselyting in the United States have been a Reform rabbi, David Max Richberg, and a leading Conservative rabbi-scholar, Robert Gordis. Both have argued, in widely-publicized articles and in public addresses, that Judaism was a missionizing religion throughout the Roman Empire (Gordis has cited the historian Lecky to the effect that at one point in history some two million Roman citizens were converts to Judaism), and that only the threatened death penalty for conversion imposed by Constantine and by subsequent Byzantine edicts forced Judaism to abandon its mission. The open and pluralist society of America, and the fact that some 2,000 Christians convert annually to Judaism without any kind of organized proselytization, ^{insue} ~~insue~~ these men with a fervor that has begun to attract many of their colleagues to their sides.

The Reform movement has been particularly attracted to this effort. Guided by the support of this idea first given by Isaac Mayer Wise in 1889, the founder of American Reform Judaism, and by the saintly Dr. Leo Baeck who, in 1949, urged the World Union for Progressive Judaism to recapture the "mission of Judaism", the majority of Reform rabbis have advocated a stepped-up missionary effort ~~among~~ ^{by their} national ~~mission~~ agencies. Thus, in 1950, the Central Conference of American Rabbis set up a "Committee on the Unaffiliated to study practical means of extending the influence and acceptance of the Jewish religion". The Committee has prepared and distributed tract literature; presented Judaism on radio and television; and organized congregational preaching missions "to enlighten both Jew and non-Jew".

The New York Federation of Reform Synagogues has conducted a "Course for the Preparation of Prospective Converts to Judaism". In 1955, for example, Rabbi Daniel Davis, federation director, reported that in one year more than 145 men and women were enrolled in the course.~~and~~

The fact that Protestant evangelists, most notably among the Lutherans and Presbyterians, have announced in almost brazen terms of challenge concerted campaigns to convert Jews has apparently only served to strengthen the determination of Jewish missionizers to meet Christians on their own playing fields. #