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The Ecumenical Council and the Jews

By RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM

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St. Athanasius, one of the Church Fathers of the third century, said that "the Jews are the great school of the knowledge of God and the spiritual life of all mankind." St. Jerome (circa 340-420), who spent 40 years in Palestine where he studied Scriptures with Jewish scholars and translated the Bible into the Vulgate, wrote that "the Jews were divinely preserved for a purpose worthy of God."

Pope Calixtus II issued a Bull in 1120, beginning with the words *Sicut Judaeis*, in which he strongly condemned forced Baptism of Jews, acts of violence against their lives and property, and the desecration of Jewish Synagogues and cemeteries. Pope Gregory IX issued the Bull, *Etsi Judaeorum*, in 1233 (repeated in 1235) in which he demanded that the Jews in Christian countries should be treated with the same humanity as that which Christians desire to be treated in heathen lands.

* * *

In Antioch in the year 387, St. John Chrysostom, described as "the greatest preacher ever heard in a Christian pulpit," delivered eight sermons about the Jews to the newly-converted Gentiles. This is an excerpt from one of his sermons:

The Saint's Sermon

"I know that a great number of the faithful have for the Jews a certain respect and hold their ceremonies in reverence. This provokes me to eradicate completely such a disastrous opinion. I have already brought forward that the synagogue is worth no more than the theater . . . it is a place of prostitution, it is a den of thieves and a hiding-place of wild animals . . . not simply of animals, but of impure beasts . . . God

has abandoned them, what hope of salvation have they left? They say that they too worship God; but this is not so. None of the Jews, not one of them, is a worshipper of God. . . . Since they have disowned the Father, crucified the Son, and rejected the Spirit's help, who would dare to assert that the synagogue is not a home of demons! God is not worshipped there; it is simply a house of idolatry. . . . The Jews live for their bellies, they crave for the goods of this world. In shamelessness and greed they surpass even pigs and goats. . . . The Jews are possessed by demons, they are handed over to impure spirits. . . . Instead of greeting them and addressing them as much as a word, you should turn away from them as from a pest and a plague of the human race." (*Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 48, as translated by Father Gregory Baum in *The Jews and the Gospel*).

Beginning of Ghetto

In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council inaugurated a new era of ecclesiastical legislation in relation to the Jews (canons 67 through 70) which reduced them virtually to the status of pariahs throughout the whole Catholic world. Canon 68 ordained a special dress for Jews—a "Jewish badge and (yellow) hat"—which exposed Jews to scorn and ridicule and resulted in their complete abasement. Canon 69 disqualified Jews from holding public offices. Subsequent Councils confined Jews to ghettos and sought to achieve a complete separation between Christians and Jews.

More than 1500 years after St. John Chrysostom, in the middle of the 20th century, the St. Louis University study of Catholic secondary school religious textbooks revealed that the following teachings are contained in some books:

"The Jews wanted to disgrace Christ by having Him die on the cross."

"When did the Jews decide to kill Christ?"

"The Jews as a nation refused to accept Christ and since that time they have been wandering on the earth without a temple or a sacrifice and without the Messiah."

An Unresolved Ambivalence

This brief sampling from the history of the encounter of Christians and Jews during the greater part of the last 1,900 years is adduced here to focus on the critical issue of the unresolved ambivalence of Christian teaching and practice towards the Jewish people and Judaism. In many ways, it is paralleled by the white society's contradictory attitudes and behavior toward the Negro minority. We uphold solemnly religious and democratic principles of "love, mercy, and compassion" and "equality, justice, and fraternity." The 300-year-old

history of the Negro in our midst has been overwhelmingly and scandalously the opposite. To give balm to our troubled consciences, we rationalize our practices by conceiving myths about the Negro his genetic illiteracy, sexual immorality, weak family life, laziness. These help justify our resistance to allowing the Negro to enter our schools, to buy the house next door, to have equal opportunities in employment. And demonically we keep alive a myth of the Negro's "bad odor" in order to exclude him from social interaction with the white man.

The race relations crisis in America, over which we will win or lose our soul as a civilized nation, has become a prism through which is refracted more clearly than perhaps at any time before the tangled contradictions of Christian-Jewish relations. There is a tradition stemming from Pauline teaching (in particular, Romans 9-11) which affirms the eternality of God's promises to the Jews and the "engrafting" of Christianity onto the olive branch of Judaism. This tradition provided the basis for those numberless episodes, dating back to the earliest centuries of the Christian-Jewish encounter, which testify to the mutual respect and helpfulness which prevailed among the "common people," Christians and Jews, as well as between Christian and Jewish scholars and clergy (viz., St. Jerome and Bar Hanina; Rashi and his influence on Nicholas de Lyra).

Systematic Debasing

There has been a contradictory tradition, however, which grew out of the competition and conflict between the Church and Synagogue in the first four centuries of this era. This tradition was dominated by Church spokesmen like St. John Chrysostom who engaged in a systematic effort to debase the Jewish religion through "teaching of contempt" in order to disidentify early Christianity from Judaism, since in the minds of the Romans, Christianity was "a Jewish sect."

("The Teaching of Contempt" is a concept formulated by the late French historian, Prof. Jules Isaac: it is also the title of his latest study of this problem [Holt, Rinehart].)

Tragically, these teachings, reinforced during the superstitious Middle Ages by myths that the Jews were in league with the devil and engaged in ritual murder of Christian children and desecrated the Host at every opportunity, contributed to a litany of savage murders, brutal persecutions, and plundering of Jewish lives and communities carried out by many who called themselves Christian. So pervasive became this mythic perception of the Jew that by the time of

Rabbi Tanenbaum is National Director of the Interreligious Affairs Department of the American Jewish Committee. He has worked closely with Cardinal Bea's Secretariat in helping to advance Catholic-Jewish relations. He is the Jewish consultant to the Pope Pius XII Religious Education Center in Monroeville, Michigan; the Sister Formation Conference, and served as a "founding father" and program chairman of the historic National Conference on Religion and Race.

the first Crusade in 1096 (regarded to this day in Christian textbooks as "a holy war against the infidels") monks like Peter the Hermit were leading hordes of Crusaders across the Rhineland to the marching slogan, "Kill a Jew and save your soul!"

To most Jews—and especially to those who came from Eastern Europe and brought with them vivid memories, which they passed on to their children, of a bloody pogrom on their tiny villages led oftentimes by a Russian Orthodox priest with a pectoral cross glinting on his cassock and leading a mob out of his Church on Good Friday or Easter Sunday, the time of the Passion and the betrayal by Judas—to most Jews, and to a growing number of Christian theologians and scholars, it is obvious that there is an unbroken connection between the endless teachings across the centuries that "the Jews are an accursed people, rejected by God," and the persistence of anti-Semitism in the Western world today.

While it is clear that anti-Semitism has multiplied and complex causes—political, economic, social, as well as religious—scholars and social scientists have long been convinced that certain distorted and prejudicial teachings deeply imbedded in Christian tradition and inherited from polemical conflicts of the past have served to sanction hatred and persecution of Jews across the centuries by lending the supposed authority of the Church to the support of anti-Jewish attitude and behavior.

The Charge of God-Killer

Undoubtedly the most invidious of all these teachings has been the charge that the Jews are a people of "God-killers" (as if one can "kill" God!) or "Christ-killers", a race of murderers whose sufferings are visited upon them by God in each generation for the sin of having crucified Jesus. The deicide charge has powerful implications. It tends to cut Jews off from the family of mankind, and to create not only indifference to their fate, but expectation of Jewish suffering.

As Father George Tavard, the Catholic theologian, has written (*The Church, the Layman, and the Modern Man*, pp. 79-80):

"To the mind of anti-Semitic bigots (the idea that the Jews are cursed because their ancestors crucified the Lord) explains a good deal of history. God would periodically 'visit' the murderers of Christ and incite them to penance through persecution. All the anti-Se-

mitic excesses of times past and present can thus be cheaply excused! They are freely granted the blessings of Providence. . ."

Lest one think that the influence of the deicide conception is mainly of academic and historic interest, of no particular relevance to human lives today, it is necessary to cite some hard facts:

FACT ONE: Since the swastika-daubing incidents of 1959-60, Argentina's century-old Jewish community has lived through the most threatening wave of anti-Semitic demonstrations and crimes in its history. On June 21, 1962, a Jewish university student, Graciela Sirota, was kidnapped and driven to an isolated place where swastikas were carved on her body. Jews were daily subjected to anonymous threats, provocations, and personal attacks, including the bombing and machine-gunning of Synagogues and Jewish-owned businesses. Many of the outrages were the work of the *Tacuara*, a neo-Fascist, ultra-nationalist organization of upper-class youth in Buenos Aires. The chaplain of the group is Father Julio Meinvielle, author of a rabidly anti-Semitic book whose thesis is based on what he considers to be the authentic attitude of the Church toward the Jews and Judaism. Father Meinvielle has served as adviser to the *Tacuara*, has helped write their anti-Semitic propaganda, and in cooperation with like-minded Catholic allies in the military and police, has shielded them from arrest and prosecution.

Deicide Charge Today

FACT TWO: In Italy, despite a law forbidding calumny against any religion passed in February 1948, a Turin magistrate, Giovanni Durando, who is editor of a journal, *La Voce della Giustizia*, published an unsigned article on May 6, 1961, which contained the following:

"The Jews, by not recognizing the divine innocence of Christ, must be considered deicides even today . . . The unconscious and permanent authors of the crucifixion of Christ must be deprived of the possibility to judge those not belonging to their progeny . . . Jews are totally lacking in morality."

The Turin Jewish community sued Durando for calumnies against Judaism and defamation of Jews as a group. The court acquitted Durando, declaring that "the fact in question (disparaging the Jewish religion) does not constitute an offense," and that defamation of Jews as a group was not established. The Genoa Court of Appeals upheld the acquit-

tal. A final appeal to the highest court is pending. A seasoned commentator in Italy observed:

"The importance of Durando's article and his trial probably lies not so much in the Fascist themes as in the charges of deicide against the Jews. Catholicism is all-pervasive in Italian life; Catholic teachings that the Jews are 'guilty' of Jesus' death, and therefore doomed to suffer eternally, have undoubtedly encouraged anti-Jewish sentiments, latent or otherwise."

FACT THREE: In a recently-published volume entitled *Hitler's Table-Talk*, the Nazi leader is reported to have insisted that the Oberammergau Passion Play continue to be produced because it helps to keep alive a tradition of hostility toward the Jews, and the effective myth of the Jew as Judas, the eternal betrayer. Other documentation has revealed that "the final solution" of the Jewish problem was simply an effort to carry out a program that Christians have been preaching and teaching about the Jews since the first four centuries.

Explains Interest in Council

Against this background, one can understand perhaps why there has been such widespread interest and expectancy in connection with the introduction of the proposed so-called "Jewish decree" at the third session of Vatican Council II next September. As has been widely reported, this decree strongly condemns anti-Semitism. But the Church has condemned anti-Semitism on several occasions in the past. The decree affirms the rootedness of Christianity in Judaism, the fact that Christians should never forget that Jesus, Mary and the Apostles were Jews. But this too the Church has affirmed through encyclicals and other means.

The great and potentially historic significance of this document (in the version introduced but not voted on at the second session) is that it proposed to repudiate explicitly—on behalf of the highest authorities of the Church—the calumny that the Jews are "deicides" or "Christ-Killers." The adoption of such a declaration by the 2,300 Council Fathers from throughout the inhabited world would signify that the Church has ceased to "halt between two opinions" with regard to the Jews and has at long last reconciled the contradictions between its theology and its history, between love and contempt toward the people from whom the Christian derived his faith in God, his Sacred Scriptures, and his Savior.

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