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The Catholics and the Jews: Two Views

Future Test

By Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum

The Vatican declaration on the Jews has become something of a projective test revealing the complicated range of Jewish attitudes and feelings toward the subject.

No Jewish opinion poll has been taken, but enough public statements have been made, enough lectures and sermons have been delivered, and enough articles have been written to demonstrate that there exist roughly three sets of views regarding the declaration, held in common among Jews here and abroad:

1. There are those who resent it.
2. There are those who are indifferent to it.
3. There are those who welcome it, but with regrets.

These are not "pure" positions; they shade one into another to form a variety of combinations. While it is impossible to estimate precisely just how many Jews there are who share these clusters of views, there is no question but that the number of Jews, either leaders or informed laymen, who are "happy" with the document in its present form, is small. Nevertheless, one is aware that there is a widespread desire on the part of many Jews to acknowledge those genuinely positive assertions in the document, in the expectation that liberal Catholics will seize upon them as guidelines for future relations between Catholics and Jews.

Above all, there now is almost universal conviction in the Jewish community that the American Catholic hierarchy has demonstrated beyond any doubt its genuine friendship for the Jewish people, and that development may mean more for the future than anything the Declaration says or fails to say.

Those who resent the declaration do so for what it says, how and why it says what it does say, as well as the episodes that occurred during the past three years, which created a cloud over the entire process. In this view, shared mostly by traditional religious elements in the Jewish community, the declaration is both a threat and an insult.

The threat and insult exist on several levels: First, the document appears not to have resolved conclusively the ancient ambivalence of love and contempt for Jews and Judaism which has dominated Church literature and practice for almost two millennia.

That failure leaves open the possibility that bigots and anti-Semites will be able to exploit negative teachings about Jews, saying that these are "not inconsistent with the truths of the Gospel."

On the one hand, the declaration affirms that "the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is so great." On the other hand, it asserts that "the Church is the new people of God," the plain inference being that the old people of God, the Jews, have been superseded.

Now Jews acknowledge that this "new-people" doctrine is basic to the Gospels, and no Jew would presume to ask Christians to revise their Sacred Scriptures for good will purposes, any more than Jews will allow the revision of their Torah or Talmud for inter-faith harmony. However, the ultimate effectiveness of this declaration will be seriously compromised, and Christian-Jewish relations will founder, unless Christians begin to realize how seriously they offend their mother-faith and the dignity of the Jewish people by this emphasis on "preparatio evangelica" (Judaism existed only to prepare the way for the emergence of Christianity).

There is now a growing body of respectable theological opinion which understands that the problem is no longer how Jews continue to justify their existence since the Coming of Christ, but how do Christians justify their claim to enter the Covenant that God made with His Chosen People. In the final analysis this declaration points up sharply that the relation of the Church to Israel is still very much a

(continued on page 2)

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Past Errors

By James O'Gara

There is no escaping it: the figure of Hitler casts his dread shadow over any discussion of the Vatican Council's Declaration on the Jews. Under Hitler, 6 million Jews died in concentration camps and gas chambers in the heart of Christian Europe. How could this happen? How could the pagan perversity of Hitler take root among Christian people? It could happen, I am convinced, for only one reason: the Nazis' attack was carried out in a climate of opinion prepared by centuries of hostility toward the Jewish people.

Professor Jules Isaac said that we who are Christians have received, from childhood on, "a certain instruction in contempt." No matter how good our parents or our teachers, there is a profound truth in this statement. It is not Christian teaching which is at fault; it is historical myth. The myth would hold that Jews—all Jews—are guilty for the death of Christ and that Jews for this reason are an accursed race, condemned to wander through the world until the end of time. Indeed, so strong was this idea that at one time there were even those who thought they were doing a service to God by killing Jews.

The notion of the Jews as an accursed people is folk-legend; it was never official Catholic teaching. But honesty compels recognition that the gap between official teaching and popular belief was often large. Too many early Christian writers and preachers tried to glorify the Church by degrading the synagogue. Too many depicted the Jews as stiff-necked people, condemned for the crucifixion of Jesus and reaping their just punishment in this world—an open invitation to persecution. Can anyone imagine that such distortions would be without effect? Can anyone imagine that Christians would remain untouched and unmoved by such perverted exhortations? This would be too much to hope for, and here lies the importance of the Vatican Council Declaration on the Jews, resoundingly approved last year on its first vote.

But has the original Declaration now been emasculated? Has it been watered down out of all recognition? Hardly. Indeed, if the words of last year's draft version were not so widely known, men of good will would now be hailing the Declaration with enthusiasm. For proof of this, one has only to look at what the amended document says.

The present version explicitly rejects the idea that Christ's suffering and death can be attributed even to all the Jews of his time, let alone Jews of today. It then goes on: "... the Jews should not be presented as rejected by God or accursed... Moreover, the Church, which rejects every persecution against any man, mindful of the common patrimony with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, deploras hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone."

What happened to last year's text? Two changes seem major. For some reason not completely clear, the Declaration now "deploras" rather than "condemns" prejudice. More seriously, although it is explicitly specified that not even all Jews of Christ's time can be held accountable for his death, the word "deicide" itself has been removed from the working text. Why was this done? Rightly or wrongly, some theologians feared that a flat denial of deicide suggested that the Church no longer saw Christ as the Son of God. Apparently this fact plus pressure from fearful Christians in Arab countries was enough to dictate the change.

Even so, there are those who consider the present document stronger than last year's version; I am not among them. If I had my choice, last year's version would be this year's. But this does not mean that the revised document is not worthy of enthusiastic support.

The Nazi horror, I submit, was the end-result of the perversion of true Christian teaching. Whatever its flaws, the present draft of the Council Declaration plainly rejects that perversion; it plainly proclaims the Christian doctrine of love; it explicitly seeks, in its words, "to foster and recommend a mutual knowledge and respect." On that basis, the Declaration on the Jews deserves the overwhelming approval of the Council Fathers.

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"mystery" and a great deal more of patient study and prayer will be necessary before God's judgments and ways yield to human searching and finding out (Romans 11:33).

The overriding basis of resentment, however, is to be found in the fact that this declaration was intended by the late Pope John, and was so universally heralded, as an unprecedented effort to extirpate the "Christ-killer" charge against the corporate Jewish people and to uproot the related teachings of contempt, which have given rise to so much bloodshed and martyrdom of Jews in the Christian West. The November, 1964, version did just that in strong, unambiguous language:

"May them all see to it that in their catechetical work or in their preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that could give rise to hatred or contempt of the Jews in the hearts of Christians.

"May they never present the Jewish people as one rejected, cursed, or guilty of deicide. All that happened to Christ in His Passion cannot be attributed to the whole people then alive, much less to those of today."

Under the demand of conservative theologians who insisted that a proper New Testament portrait of the Jews required "severe" judgments against them, the present version acquiesced. It included two new sentences that did not appear in the first version:

"Jerusalem did not recognize the time of her visitation nor did the Jews for the most part accept the Gospel; indeed many opposed its spreading."

In addition, it said:

"Although the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ, nevertheless, what happened to Christ in His Passion cannot be attributed to all Jews, without distinction, then alive nor to the Jews of today."

In the "resentment" view, the Church has given with one hand, and has taken away with the other; and what she has taken away may be more than what she has given.

Also, much has been made of the fact that this latest version has added that the Church "deplores anti-Semitism." A Jewish newspaper editorial probably expressed the sense of this view when it declared recently, "After the murder of six million Jews by the Nazis, the Church can only 'deplore' anti-Semitism. How many more millions of Jewish lives will have to be lost before she can bring herself to 'condemn' anti-Semitism?" The words "deplores, indeed condemns" were used in the 1964 document.

Apart from the problems of content, I would wager that contributing to this sense of annoyance and distress were the incredible backing and filling over three to four years to carry out an act of elementary justice long overdue. A prominent figure in the conservative leadership, who publicly proclaimed on several occasions that all Jews today, as in ancient days, are collectively "responsible for Deicide"; Pope Paul VI's Lenten Passion homily which plainly said that the Jews "finally killed" Jesus; the Arab prelates and Arab politicians who demanded that the Church compromise religious truth for political blackmail—these episodes are felt to be built into the spirit of the declaration and speak to a substantial body of Jews as emphatically as the words in the text itself.

In the second view, those who are indifferent feel generally that religion is irrelevant in the real affairs of men today. With regard to anti-Semitism—a good number of religiously committed Jews would share this view—they rely more on the democratic ethos and the power of the secular state to enforce anti-discrimination programs than they do on Christian humanism or piety, whose record in combating anti-Semitism in the past has not inspired great confidence.

Those who welcome the document, even with regrets, seem to operate on the conviction that history is intended to be a guiding post, not a hitching post. In this view, with which I strongly associate myself, the adoption of the declarations of historic significance because for the first time in the history of 21 Ecumenical Councils the Catholic Church has committed herself to rejecting the invidious tradition of attributing corporate guilt to the Jewish people for the Crucifixion and to repudiating anti-Semitism. The overwhelmingly positive vote endorsing these positions as the official teaching of the Church, when promulgated, will give additional impetus in the growing world-wide movement to purge preaching, catechetical and other forms of religious instruction of those negative and polemical traditions of bygone ages which have been frequently used to justify brutal and inhuman treatment of Jews.

The designation last week of a special commission on Catholic-Jewish relations by the American hierarchy, with the distinguished Bishop Leipzig of Baker, Ore., as chairman, and with the able Msgr. George Higgins as secretary for the purpose of fostering mutual knowledge and respect between Catholics and Jews, may well be one of the most significant and tangible outcomes for improved inter-religious relations as well as for the civic peace of this country.



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