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BIAFRA: TEST CASE OF INTERRELIGIOUS RELEVANCE

by Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, National Director of Interreligious Affairs, American Jewish Committee, and President of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization. Rabbi Tanenbaum, who originated the effort of the organized Jewish community to provide humanitarian relief to Biafrans, serves as Chairman of the Jewish emergency committee's liaison with Catholic Relief Services and Church World Service.

The deputy director of UNICEF blurted out what had been on the minds of most of the people sitting around the conference table who had come together on two hours notice to discuss the Biafran situation:

"Thank God for the religious groups. I shudder to think of how much greater would have been the human tragedy in Nigeria and Biafra had they not been there!"

During the past three weeks, I have been in almost daily communication with Catholic Relief Services, Church World Service, UNICEF, various Nigerian and Biafran representatives, three Irish Catholic priests who came to the United States from their mission stations in Biafra, and with various national Jewish agencies. The horror and the magnitude of the daily suffering in Biafra is so enormous, that one naturally is reluctant to think in terms of praise or compliments; whatever is being done is so incredibly inadequate in the face of the need. Nevertheless, for the sake of

the historic record as well as for the future self-understanding of the religious communities the judgment made by the UNICEF official must not be lost. The response of the religious communities in the United States and overseas to the plight of the victims of the Nigerian-Biafran struggle has been moving and marvelous: it is a landmark in the quest of the relevance of religion to life.

In 1966, it was already known that some 30,000 Ibo tribesmen were massacred. By and large the world remained silent. Governments, including the United States Government, and the United Nations, played the diplomatic bird-dance. Even the International Committee of the Red Cross was practically paralyzed into inaction by its constituencies which reflected the political pressures of their sovereign states. By June 1968, the world could not plead ignorance: two to three thousand people were dropping dead every day from starvation or slaughter, and trustworthy newspapermen were reporting that ghastly reality on the front pages of the world's press. It is by now a commonplace headline - "Two to Three Millions to Die By End of August."

It is to the eternal credit of the Catholic and Protestant communities that they have responded to this human crisis with a moral passion, courage, and realistic help that, as of now, is not matched by any other group, voluntary or governmental. While governments and international relief bodies that have had on hand large quantities of food and medicines, and as well as transportation capabilities, have failed to act for reasons of state, Caritas

Internationalis, the World Council of Churches, Catholic Relief Services, and Church World Service were flying in nightly two and three airlifts of mercy supplies from Sao Tome and Fernando Po, the two islands off West Africa. The flights were risky, they were expensive, they were carried out in the face of bitter criticism of the Nigerian federal government, they were even shot down. To these relief bodies, the moral and humanitarian claims of the sick, starving and dying superseded the need for correct diplomatic relations.

The genocidal nature of the tragedy in Biafra, as well as the model of the response of the Christian bodies, had a profound effect on the Jewish community. The creation last week of the American Jewish Emergency Relief Effort for Biafran Relief by 21 national Jewish organizations which represent the entire spectrum of organized American Jewry - religious, communal, social welfare, philanthropic - is in itself unprecedented, indeed, historic. Only two other challenges in recent history have evoked similar responses that united American Jewry - the campaign of genocide by Nazi Germany against European Jewry, and the struggle to build the State of Israel and to secure the survival of the Jewish people there.

These two watershed events which have decisively shaped modern Jewish consciousness in fact provide the clues to an understanding of the Jewish reactions to Biafra. The echoes from the impassioned debates over the silence of governments, universities, and church

institutions, among others, who, by and large, were spectators to the Nazis' "final solution of the Jewish problem" in Europe still reverberate in Jewish ears. More recently, the straddling on the part of many church institutions and Christian leaders of the moral and humanitarian issues that were at stake in May and June 1967 when Arab governments were explicitly and publicly threatening to annihilate the two and a half million Jews of Israel has resulted in a radar-like sensitivity in the collective Jewish psyche to any threat of genocide or mass destruction against any group. Silence, indifference, spectatorship to human suffering are the cardinal sins in the Jewish value system today. "Thou shalt not stand by idly by the blood of thy brother" has become virtually the eleventh commandment in contemporary Judaism.

It is for these reasons that the three Irish priests from Nigeria and Biafra - Fathers Anthony Byrne and Raymond Kennedy of Sao Tome and Fintan Kilbride of Port Harcourt - who met with Jewish leaders early in July to give personal testimony to the vast human misery that they had experienced, found such an instantaneous and sympathetic Jewish response. The photographs that the priests scattered on the table showing starving children with bloated bellies and match-stick legs were to Jewish eyes 1968 versions of photographs of Jewish children taken in the 1940's in such other

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notorious sites named Bergen-Belsen, Theresenstadt, Auschwitz.

In trying to communicate the awfulness of the tragedy and the urgency of the need for maximum, immediate aid, Father Kilbride continuously resorted to analogies with the events in the 1930's and 1940's. "To our eternal shame," he said in his soft, compelling Irish accent, "we sat by while millions of Jewish people and others were put to death before our very eyes. We did practically nothing then." Then his Irish fire broke out, "Have we learned nothing from those days? What is happening to mankind? We know all too well what is going on with the poor, helpless people in Nigeria and Biafra. Why are we so silent?"

To the Jews gathered around the conference table, Father Kilbride's voice was like a replay of the voices of the few Jews who managed to flee from Germany and Hungary and Poland in the early 1940's and who came to Paris and London and New York to stir the world's conscience to come to the aid of their doomed brothers. In the main, their cries for succor fell on unbelieving or deaf ears. Just 25 years later, it could not be allowed to happen again.

This deeply-felt conviction led to a second unprecedented development in the Jewish community and in interreligious relations.

The leadership of practically the entire Jewish community--not just the ecclesiastical front that some Christian leaders presume to prop up as their sacerdotal peers in the clerical game-playing--but the authentic Jewish community in its religious and communal realities, came to an unparalleled and unanimous decision: ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ whatever monies, food, medicines and drugs the Jewish community would collect during its emergency campaign for Biafra would be channeled through Catholic Relief Services and Church World Service, as well as through the U.S. Committee for UNICEF.

This Jewish decision was based on principle as well as pragmatism. The pragmatism rested on the hard fact that the Catholic and Protestant relief agencies have the best and most effective distribution centers in Biafra which assure that the supplies reach the people. But the principle was of even greater significance, namely, that this was the first time that the entire Jewish community volunteered to join with Catholics and Protestants on an international humanitarian endeavor, to serve people who were not Jewish and would not likely ever become Jews. (Ironically, the Ibos, who are regarded as a culturally advanced and highly literate community, very much in tune with 20th century science and technology, are familiarly called "the Jews of West Africa." A Biafran medical student, interning at a Jewish hospital in New York, told me last week that Biafrans feel a profound kinship with Jews. "When I read a Jewish history book," the Biafran said, "I feel I can almost everywhere substitute the word Ibo for Jew, and

read much of your history as my own.")

That this effort represented an important new advance in Jewish-Christian cooperation was underscored by the fact that the Jewish community had another option, a Jewish option as against an inter-religious and ecumenical option, by which to respond to the Biafran crisis. The U. S. Jewish community might easily have funneled its monies and supplies through the Jewish community in Israel. After an impassioned appeal for aid to the victims of the Nigerian civil war made by Israel's Foreign Minister to the Knesset (Israel's parliament), the Israeli government sent tons of food, medicines, X-ray equipment, and other medical supplies to Biafra. Israel also sent a medical team to Biafra, and technical assistants to aid victims on both sides of the struggle. American Jewry was aware of this option, but it chose to go the interreligious route. In my judgment, this signified that the Jewish community has matured in a way that finds it now willing to give practical expression to its ancient inheritance of prophetic universalism, while at the same time continuing its intensive concern for such particular Jewish problems as combatting anti-Semitism, providing for Jewish refugees from Arab and other countries, and standing by the side of the people of Israel until peace is restored in the Middle East.

A few episodes have taken place during the past three weeks that illustrate how new and subtle is this Jewish communal effort for Biafra:

*In San Rafael, California, a group of Jewish doctors had organized a voluntary medical supply operation called Alliance for Health. Deeply stirred by the reports of the Biafran plight, Dr. Richard Hahn, president of the group, prepared a shipment of three tons of medicines and drugs, mainly expensive anti-biotics, and hospital and clinic equipment. Not being clear about the best channel for transmitting the supplies, he prepared to send a cable to the Vatican asking Caritas to accept this Jewish contribution. That same day he read in the newspapers a Religious News Service report of a talk that I had just given in Marquette University in which I made the first public appeal to the Jewish community to create an ad hoc Jewish relief committee for Biafrans. Dr. Hahn telephoned me in New York, and we accepted immediately and with gratitude his contribution. Father Raymond Kennedy of Biafra was on the west coast last weekend and we arranged for him to organize the shipment of the three tons of supplies to Biafra through Catholic Relief Services.

*A black church leader who is in charge of an inner city-race relations program of one of the major Protestant denominations became concerned over the relative indifference of black community leaders to the plight of black people in Biafra. He heard about the Jewish community's effort and sent a check to the American Jewish Committee, with an accompanying note, "What you are doing is a very good thing."

*On the solemn Jewish fast day of Tisha B'av, commemorating the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, students and faculty members at the Jewish Theological Seminary contributed the money they did not spend for food and drink during the 24-hour fast period for Biafran relief. They cited a Biblical injunction, "Is this not the fast day I have chosen? Is not its purpose to give thy bread to the hungry?" (Isiah 58:6-7) as the motivation for their action. A special student-faculty committee manned a booth to solicit contributions. They also collected signatures for a petition to President Johnson, appealing to the United States to begin a massive airlift of emergency food and medical supplies to Biafra.

As valuable as has been the humanitarian relief effort of the major faith communities, -their priestly role of service- one should not scant the critical contribution they have already made through their sophisticated actions on a political level -- their prophetic role as the voice of the deprived. Morris B. Abram, chairman of the American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief, put the issue sharply to Catholic and Protestant leaders during one of the early July meetings:

"Your relief efforts are impressive and praiseworthy. But the humanitarian issues will never be adequately resolved unless there is a political resolution, at least through a cease-fire. No matter how much food and medicines we collect together, we will not be able to airlift massive quantities into Biafra without a cease-fire. Even

if we manage to get in substantially more food and medicines, unless the slaughter is brought to a halt, we will be pouring our aid into a cemetery."

The Christians and Jews agreed that there was virtually no voice speaking to the United States Government and to the United Nations in these terms. There was certainly no lobby in Washington representing American citizenry that was articulating the inter-relationship between the humanitarian relief and the political and military issues, and that one could not deal adequately with one without confronting the other.

With remarkable speed and flexibility, these Christians and Jews, joined by the American Committee on Africa and the International League on Human Rights organized a "prophetic-political" effort. Within four hours they dispatched a strong telegram to President Johnson, imploring "our government to brook no further delay for military and political reasons, and offer at once logistics for a massive helicopter lift of meaningful quantities of supplies." Two days later President Johnson issued a strong statement in which he called upon the warring parties in Nigeria to end their hostilities, and to allow massive airlifts of supplies to be sent in through the International Committee of the Red Cross. Similar telegrams were sent by the Interreligious group to Vice-President Humphrey, the political candidates, and the House and Senate leaders. Public statements were subsequently issued by almost every one of the government

officials who were contacted. An American citizens' lobby began to be brought into being on this issue through this interreligious initiative.

On two days' notice they had an audience with Dean Rusk and African desk experts in the State Department, and certain reactions were set in motion that should help accelerate aid to the Biafrans. A cable was sent to Emperor Haile Selassie which reached him on the day that the Nigerian-Biafran negotiations opened in Addis Abbaba, appealing "especially for the sake of suffering children, who have no part in war, we pray that agreement may be reached, first for a truce, and then for lasting peace."

A meeting with President Johnson is now being explored by the interreligious group to continue to keep the Biafran issue on the front page of the world' conscience.

In addition to the political problems of governments, there are political problems of the religious communities themselves. There is no question that a major Muslim-Christian confrontation is taking place in Nigeria that will affect the future of millions of Christians in Central Africa. There is also no question that an additional factor motivating many Jews to come to the aid of Biafrans is the grotesque alliance between the Soviet Union and the Egyptian government whose 46 pilots are using Russian planes to bomb helpless civilians. The relative silence of world opinion, and especially

of black militants who have identified with the Arab League and other so-called third world forces, over the calculated Egyptian murder of black people in Nigeria, of Muslims who have massacred millions of blacks in the Sudan, of Egyptians who have napalmed black and brown people in Yemen -- these silences have deeply perplexed and angered many Jews, and that emotion is also a factor in the intensity of the Jewish response to the black victims in Biafra.

However, as Christians and Jews have urged their governments and the United Nations to rise above their political needs and to address themselves to the emergency humanitarian problem, they have sought to do no less by repressing their own respective political problems that haunt the Biafran situation.

The last word that the Catholics, Protestants, and Jews committed themselves to is to "keep in touch" until we are able to see the light at the end of the Biafran tunnel.

8/9/68