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RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

IN THE FUTURE TENSE

Marc H. Tanenbaum

*Rabbi, National Director of Interreligious Affairs,  
The American Jewish Committee*





AMERICAN JEWISH  
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Rabbi Tanenbaum spoke on Sunday evening, immediately following the participation of about 1600 people in "Where the Rainbow Ends." Commitment, tolerance, community, biomedical ethics, and the use of power are the crucial issues.

"Religious Education in the Future Tense" — the subject of my talk — presupposes that we are interested in not just academic education alone, but in that broader religious formation that involves the total growth direction of a person's life. Given the widely-held and valid assumption that such formation should prepare young people for life, it goes without saying that they — and all of us — need to be made aware of the major developments that are strong probabilities or even virtual certainties in the emerging world order.

The literature on futurology has become a little short of staggering. Out of that welter of documentation, I choose two texts written by incisive minds that set the stage, I believe, for an effort to comprehend the nature of the changes which encompass us and to probe their far-reaching implications for religious education.

The first text is from the study, *Between Two Ages*,<sup>1</sup> by Prof. Z. Brzezinski of Columbia University, who writes:

The paradox of our time is that humanity is becoming simultaneously more unified and more fragmented. That is the principal thrust of contemporary change. Time and space have become so compressed that global politics manifest a tendency toward larger, more interwoven forms of cooperation, as well as toward the dissolution of established and ideological loyalties. Humanity is be-

<sup>1</sup> *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Age*, 334 pages. Viking Press, New York, 1970.

coming more integral and intimate even as the differences in the condition of the separate societies are widening. Under these circumstances, proximity, instead of promoting unity, gives rise to tension prompted by a new sense of global congestion.

The second text is from *The Abstract Society*,<sup>2</sup> by the Dutch theologian and social scientist, Anton C. Zijderveld, who writes:

The structures of modern society have grown increasingly pluralistic and independent of man. Through an ever enlarging process of differentiation, modern society acquired a rather autonomous and abstract nature confronting the individual with strong but strange forms of control. It demands the attitudes of obedient functionaries from its inhabitants who experience its control as an unfamiliar kind of authority. That means societal control is no longer characterized by a family-like authority but dominated by bureaucratic neutrality and unresponsiveness. The individual often seems to be doomed to endure this situation passively, since the structures of society vanish in abstract air if he tries to grasp their very forces of control. No wonder that many seek refuge in one or another form of retreat (p. 11).

He adds (p. 54):

Modern society has become abstract in the experience and consciousness of man! Modern man, that is, does not "live society," he faces it as an often strange phenomenon. This society has lost more and more of its reality and meaning and seems to be hardly able to function as the holder of human freedom. As a result, many modern men are turning away from the institutions of society and are searching for *meaning, reality and freedom* elsewhere. These three co-ordinates of human existence have become the scarce value of a continuous existential demand.

These two authors reinforce a shared conviction about what is the paradoxical and contradictory predicament in which the contemporary person finds himself and herself. The planetization of the human family through electronics, automation, instant mobility and satellite communications has made mandatory that everybody adjust to the vast global environment as if it were a global city. At the same time, that globalization of the human consciousness has led to the undermining of dependencies on the more limited local loyalties, such as the nation-state. The effects of that are to be seen especially among our young people many of whom feel a weakened sense of national patriotism, have little emotional fervor about national flags and other national sancta and rituals, while feeling very much at home roaming about Europe, Asia, Africa, and Latin Amer-

ica as if they were born as natural citizens of the world. To many of them, the global city is already a dominant fact of contemporary life.

The human situation is complicated by the fact, however, that those of us who live in the advanced Western societies based on scientific and technological foundations confront bureaucracies and vast organizations as the crucial and all-pervasive structures through which we sustain all the material conditions of our existence. And as Zijderveld indicates, the dominance of these bureaucracies in our lives has resulted in a profound identity crisis. By and large we do not dominate these structures, rather they control us. We have very limited roles in decision-making in these vast systems. Our functions are generally partial, fragmentary, frequently frustrating, leaving most of us with little sense of mastery or control or direction over this large segment of our lives. In the pursuit of personal meaning, a desire for wholeness, and for clarity about one's identity, it is no accident that there has emerged in recent years such a spontaneous growth of youth communes, encounter and human potential movements. On another level, this search for identity is also reflected in the growth of ethnic group self-assertion, and in the support of denominationalism rather than interdenominationalism, which is perceived as abstract and distant from personal and direct communal needs. The identity quest is also a factor in the movement of peoplehood among blacks, *la Raza* among Spanish-speaking groups, "red power" among American Indians, and the mystique of peoplehood and mutual interdependence among Jews throughout the diaspora and in Israel. There is evidently a vast yearning for human-size communities in which the individual can relate to another person on a face-to-face basis, in an environment of caring, shared concern and mutual confirmation.<sup>3</sup>

## NATURE AND HISTORY

If this analysis of our situation is reasonably accurate, albeit sketchy, what then are some of its implications for religious education today and tomorrow? I suggest that the following four issues are involved and deserve our priority attention:

First, the emerging transformation of the planet into a global city makes it mandatory that we establish some living connections

<sup>3</sup> See "Do You Know What Hurts Me?" by this writer in the February, 1972 issue of *Event* magazine, published by the American Lutheran Church Men. Reprints available from the American Jewish Committee, 165 East 56 Street, New York, N. Y. 10022.

<sup>2</sup> *The Abstract Society*, 198 pages. Doubleday and Co., New York, 1970.

for ourselves and for our students between our theologies, our religious teachings and the realities of the emerging unity of the human family as well as its pluralism. Never before in human history, in my judgment, have Judaism and Christianity had an opportunity such as the present one to translate their Biblical theologies of Creation — and the unity of mankind under the fatherhood of God — into actual experience.

This extraordinary, indeed unprecedented, moment of potential fulfillment of Biblical ideals and values has become obscured for us by the dominance of uncritical tendencies to sloganeer that we live in a "post Judeo-Christian era," a "post-Western age," a "post-modern era." The effect of such doom-and-gloom slogans is that they tend to become self-fulfilling prophecies, contributing to the paralysis of insight and will. If we would penetrate to the reality beneath the slogans, we could justifiably conclude in fact that we are in a "pre-Judeo-Christian era." There are evidences supporting such a conclusion all around us if we will insist on careful analysis rather than allow ourselves to be seduced by faddist catchwords.

It is no accident that the most dramatic advances in science and technology have taken place in the Western world. The decisive impact of the Biblical world-view on Western civilization, in particular the Genesis teachings on Creation, have resulted in the "disenchantment" of nature — to use Max Weber's concept — which enabled Biblical man to subdue and master nature for human purposes, an absolute precondition for scientific and technological experiment. Further, the Biblical theology of redemption contributed to a messianic conception of history, which conditioned Biblical man to responsibility for the events of history.<sup>4</sup>

In non-Biblical cultures, religions, and societies, this linear view of history leading to messianic redemption does not prevail. Rather the cyclical views of history have by and large resulted in passivity and quietism, preconditions for indifference to poverty, illness, and illiteracy. If history is fated to repeat itself as an endless cycle, what reason exists for seeking to alter the course of history?

As nations in the third world have begun to come to grips with the magnitude of human suffering and deprivation in their midst, and to embark on economic development and nation-building, it is evident that they will have to appropriate science and technology as

<sup>4</sup> For a fuller discussion of this issue, see my essay, "Some Current Mythologies and World Community," *Theology Digest*, Winter, 1971, St. Louis University Divinity School. Reprint available from the American Jewish Committee.

the instruments for producing the food, clothing, medicine, and shelter for meeting their basic human needs. The third world nations will be able to mediate the benefits of Western scientific-technological technics, I contend, only if they make some fundamental accommodations to the Western, hence Judeo-Christian, assumptions and categories regarding nature and history, as well as toward man, society, and God. That means that a genuine convergence must perforce take place in which the Jewish and Christian *weltanschauung* become central and formative in the construction of a universal technetronic civilization.

The moral and spiritual challenge to Judaism and Christianity in that convergence process will be as acute as the culture shock for Oriental religions and civilizations will inevitably be. The temptations to repeat triumphalisms, imperialisms, and monopolies of truth will have to be resisted mightily by the bearers of Western scientific cultures into the third world. The need to help preserve the integrity of non-Western cultures and religions, their rich inheritances of spirituality and inwardness, and not to allow these legacies of mankind to become obliterated by the machines of science and technology becomes all the more evident with every passing day.

Thus, a primary issue on the agenda of the human family is that of helping build a united human community that respects diversity and difference as a permanent good, quite clearly as a God-given good. We must confess, however, that based on present evidence we are far from adequately prepared either theologically or humanly to realize this delicate and essential balance of unity in the midst of diversity.

### SONS OF NOAH

To the development of such a theology of human unity and pluralism I would hope that Judaism, in dialogue with Christianity and Islam and other world religions, would make a special and distinctive contribution.<sup>5</sup> It is not widely known that there is available a substantial body of Jewish doctrine and teaching which, though composed over the past 3,000 years, contains ideas, conceptual models, spiritual and human values of surpassing insight and meaning for our present situation. Let us review briefly some of the

<sup>5</sup> See "Judaism, Ecumenism, and Pluralism," by this writer, delivered as a radio talk over NBC's Catholic Hour sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and the article, "Is Christian Ecumenism A Threat to the Jews?" published by *The New York Times Syndicate*. Reprint available from American Jewish Committee.

highlights of what is called "the Jewish doctrine of the nations of the world — *ummot ba'olam*," which today we might well call the Jewish doctrine of pluralism — and world community.

The relationship of the people of Israel to mankind takes as its first and foremost principle the fact that, according to the Torah, all men are descended from one father. All of them, not as races or nations, but as men, are brothers in Adam, and therefore are called *bene Adam*, sons of Adam.

From the time of the occupation of the Promised Land of Canaan down to the present day, the treatment of every stranger living in the midst of an Israelite community has been determined by the commandments of Mount Sinai as recorded in the book of Exodus: "And a stranger shalt thou not oppress, for ye know the heart of a stranger, seeing ye were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 23:9).

In the extensive Biblical legislation dealing with the stranger, the *ger* (sojourner) or the *nokhri* (foreigner), whom you are to love as yourselves (Deut. 10:19), are equated legally and politically with the Israelite.

From the first century of the present era and thereafter, the "stranger within the gate" in the Diaspora, who joined in the Jewish form of worship but without observing the ceremonial laws, became known as a *yiré adonay* — a god-fearer. A god-fearer was one who kept the Noahide principles, that is, the moral principles known to Noah and to pre-Israelite mankind. As described in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 56), the seven commandments of the sons of Noah are these: The prohibition of idolatry, of blasphemy, of sexual immorality, of murder, of theft, of cruelty to animals, together with the positive commandment to establish courts of justice.

The great 12th century Jewish philosopher, Maimonides, formulated the normative Jewish conception, held to and affirmed by all periods of Judaism (in Mishnah Torah IV, Hilkot Melakhim, Section X, Halachah 2:) in these words:

"Whoever professes to obey the seven Noachite laws and strives to keep them is classed with the righteous among the nations and has a share in the world to come." Thus every individual who lives by the principles of morality of Noah is set on a par with the Jews. Indeed, a statement made by Rabbi Meir (ca. 150 CE) is recorded three times in the Talmud, "The pagan who concerns himself with

the teaching of God is like unto the High Priest of Israel" (Sanhedrin 59a; Baba Kamma 38a, and Aboda Zara 36a).

Thus, this Rabbinic doctrine about "the righteous men among the nations" who will be saved made it unnecessary, from the point of view of the Synagogue, to convert them to Judaism. At the same time, it should be acknowledged that Jews pray daily in the Synagogue for what appears to be the ultimate conversion of the Gentiles not to the cult of Israel but rather to the God of Israel:

"Let all the inhabitants of the world perceive and know that unto thee every knee must bend and every tongue give homage. Before thee, O Lord our God, let them bow down and worship, and unto Thy Glorious name let them give honor."

While there is no unanimity in Judaism regarding the ultimate conversion of the Gentiles, there can be no doubt that, theologically speaking, Judaism does expect a redeemed mankind to be strict monotheists — in the Jewish sense. It is the duty, therefore, of every Jew to encourage both by teaching and personal example the universal acceptance of the "Seven Principles of the Sons of Noah." The ultimate conversion of the world is understood by Judaism to be one of the "messianic" events. We will know that the messianic age has come when we realize a change — a conversion — in the kind of life being lived on earth, and not just in the inner life of the individual. Wars and persecutions must cease, and justice and peace must reign for all mankind.

Translating this religious language into contemporary terms, it suggests that Judaism affirms that salvation exists outside the Synagogue for all who are God-fearers, that is all who affirm a transcendental reality as a source of meaning for human existence, and who also live by the moral code of the Sons of Noah. This Jewish theological view also perceives and undergirds world pluralism as a positive good. Thus Judaism advocates a unity of mankind which encourages diversity of cult and culture as a source of enrichment, and that conception of unity in the midst of diversity makes possible the building of human community without compromise of essential differences.

#### THE PEDAGOGICAL PROBLEM

Thus the central issue of teaching about the unity of mankind raises the pedagogical problem: How to teach commitment and loyalty on the part of our youth and adults to one's own faith, and at the same time recognize, respect, and even reverence the claims to truth

and value of religious traditions outside our own? Such an approach involves a fundamental abandonment of triumphalism and imperialism, mutual negation, and a reconceptualization of mission and witness in bringing the truths of ethical monotheism to the human family.

This is not to call into question the fundamental right to proclaim one's truth in the marketplace of ideas. A commitment to religious liberty, freedom of conscience, and to an open, pluralist society would be meaningless without allowing for the right to seek converts. But from a Jewish point of view, directing the Great Commission toward those who are already believers and whose lives are graced by virtue of their abiding faith and commitment of their lives to the Covenant of Sinai seems at the very least a misplaced and misguided undertaking. As Franz Rosenzweig aptly declared, "Jews do not need to come to the Father through the Son. They stand in direct relationship with the Father by virtue of their birth into the household of Israel." Given the self-evident fact that there are millions of baptized Christians whose association with Christianity is nominal, and the uncounted others who are Gentiles and/or domestic heathens, it would seem that evangelical fervor and material resources would be far more rationally and legitimately employed in converting Christians to Christianity than in the relatively fruitless proselytization of Jews, with its consequent affront to the dignity of Judaism and its potential for serious intergroup discord.

In the wake of the current revivalist and evangelical movements, most especially the pronounced efforts of Key '73 that will be launched under the slogan of "Calling the Continent to Christ in '73," the need for articulating and asserting forthrightly this ecumenical, pluralistic vision of building community without compromise of the identities of the various faith traditions, becomes more than an academic undertaking. And that need for a theology of pluralism and religious co-existence becomes especially urgent on college and university campuses, as well as on high school grounds, as the Campus Crusades for Christ, the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, and the Jews for Jesus sects have emerged, frequently as psychologically coercive pressure groups disturbing the privacy of vulnerable and often isolated young people as well as disrupting the academic process in the classroom.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See the author's analysis of "Evangelism and the Jews," available from the American Jewish Committee.

This revival of emotional fervor in the evangelistic resurgence is understandable as a response to the rationalism and abstract arid intellectualism of much of Western religious experience since the Enlightenment. It is also a response to "future shock" — to permanent transience, phenomenal novelty, and the often unbearable rapid pace of change which uproots and disorients. And it must be candidly acknowledged that aspects of the current religious revival, especially in the youth community, contain recovery of religious dimensions of an authentic and meaningful human existence in the cosmos — the rediscovery of nature, the more honest sexual mores, the emphasis on living in the present, and freedom from life as social projects and ambitions.

But the swing of the pendulum to unreason and to apocalypticism — even the occult and the satanic — manifest among substantial segments of the revivalistic cults frequently renders the religious medicine worse than the illness that it is designed to cure. As in the case of the pietistic, romantic, privatistic religious currents and moods that dominated the religious and cultural experience of Germany at the close of the Weimar period and in the early Nazi experience, such tendencies invariably provide the ground for evasion of social responsibility for religious leaders, their followers and institutions. "Give unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's" is an invitation to demagogues, totalitarians, and political opportunists to exploit religious pietistic movements as support for their anti-human politics. There is too much of this pietistic religion in the air of America at this moment and it urgently requires the reassertion of the prophetic, this-worldly orientation and demands of Biblically-committed people who recognize that the Covenant requires concern and involvement in the affairs of this world, and not a cop-out for the afterlife.

We need to remind ourselves that the Biblical tradition rests crucially on two distinctive myths: the Exodus and Sinai. The Exodus instructs us that the intervention of the God of Israel involved actual physical liberation from slavery, and liberation from material oppression and persecution was a fundamental precondition to spiritual liberation. Without Passover there could be no Pentecost. Thus there can be no evasion of the obligation to be a partner with God in bringing about liberation from physical oppression wherever it occurs; to do so is to apostasize from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The Covenant at Sinai instructs us that Israel became a theo-

phoric people — a kingdom of priests and a holy nation — by virtue of its collective acceptance to become a covenanted community charged with a task of redemption in the world. By living as a model society seeking "to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God" it would engage in the messianic journey leading to the Kingdom of God. The affirmations and accents of the covenanted traditions are clear and unambiguous — a faithful people has an obligation made with God to shape the events of history, not to evade or transcend them; to build a genuinely humane society that reflects the Divine presence in all its relationships between man and his neighbor. To instruct generations in that way of life, and to act out those values in the daily life of our people is the highest calling of religious education today.

#### GENUINE COMMUNITY

The second priority concern, I would suggest, involves a consideration of the role of religious educators in helping our people to create and experience genuine community. The bureaucratization of urban, industrial societies has created a critical need for bringing into being small communities on a human scale in which the individual can realize his or her selfhood, personal meaning and freedom. Given the traditional "edifice complex" of our large and urban and suburban churches and synagogues, and the factory-sized models of our religious schools, do we have the imagination, the will, as well as enough time to restructure and retool our institutions in order to meet these genuine human and spiritual needs of our people? Enough models of task forces and communal study-worship-action groups exist to demonstrate that such reordering of structures is possible when leadership is serious about being responsive to the signs of the times. Continued failure to be responsive on a far greater scale that is commensurate with the obvious need is going to lead inevitably to a condition where the authentic religious institutions and leadership will be swamped by a growing wave of para-religious, revivalistic, and evangelistic movements a number of which do not offer promising in-depth religious alternatives. These apocalyptic, salvationist sects will become effective only because the historic communions persist in remaining ineffective spiritually.

Clearly there is a critical need for the recovery of the sacred in

the historic traditions. As Mircea Eleade has written in *The Sacred and the Profane*<sup>7</sup> and in other studies.

It is difficult to imagine how the human mind could function without the conviction that there is something irreducibly *real* in the world, and it is impossible to imagine how consciousness could arise without conferring meaning on man's drives and experiences. The awareness of a real and meaningful world is intimately related to the discovery of the sacred. Through the experience of the sacred, the human mind grasped the difference between that which reveals itself as real, powerful, rich, and meaningful and that which does not; i.e. the chaotic and dangerous flux of things, their fortuitous, meaningless appearances and disappearances.

The 'sacred' is an element in the structure of consciousness, not a stage in the history of consciousness. A meaningful world — and man cannot live in 'chaos' — is the result of a dialectical process which may be called the manifestation of the sacred.

Living as a human being [Eleade adds] is in itself a religious act; eating, sexual life, and work have a sacramental value. In other words — to be — or rather to become — a person means to be religious. . . . The 'total man' is never completely desacralized, and one even doubts that this is possible. Secularization is highly successful at the level of conscious life — old theological ideas, dogmas, beliefs, rituals, institutions, are progressively expunged of meaning. But no living, normal man can be reduced to his conscious, rational activity, for modern man still dreams, falls in love, listens to music, goes to the theater, views films, reads books — in short, lives not only in a historical and natural world, but also in an existential private world and in an imaginary universe. It is primarily the phenomenologist of religions who is capable of recognizing and deciphering the 'religious' structures and meanings of these private worlds or imaginary universes.

The conscious efforts to restore an appreciation of the sacred and the transcendent in the lives of individuals and communities in the face of dehumanizing bureaucracies might well become one of the most important tasks of religious education in the years before us.

#### BIOMEDICAL ISSUES

The third priority: the surge in biomedical research and genetic manipulation have placed medicine and science on the threshold of creating life in test tubes, of altering sex, of determining mental and physical characteristics of future generations of mankind. These developments pose fundamental moral and spiritual issues.

<sup>7</sup> *The Sacred and the Profane*, Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovich.

The whole belief system that man is created in the image of God is now actually threatened by the possibility of man being created in the image of man. The challenge is one of the ultimate consequences to our 4,000 year old understanding of the nature of man as explicated, for example, by Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel, who has written in his essay on "The Sacred Image of Man,"

There is something in the world that the Bible regards as symbol of God — not a temple or a tree, not a statue nor a star. The one symbol of God is man, every man. God himself created man, in his image. Human life is holy, holier even than the scrolls of the Torah. Reverence for God is shown in our reverence for man. Treat yourself as a symbol of God. What is necessary is not to have a symbol, but to be a symbol.<sup>8</sup>

As biomedical research and genetic scientists manipulate on their own volition the very nature of man, the moral and ethical value questions become inescapable: On what theological and moral basis are such choices to be made? By what authority and by what criteria of choice? Religion traditionally has been the custodian of moral and spiritual values, upholding the sacred dignity of the human person as an end in himself. And yet religious thinkers and leaders, as well as philosophers, literary men, historians, and other humanists have contributed relatively little to this whole enterprise that affects the very future of human personality and mankind's existence, presumably because they are not equipped with the necessary specialized knowledge and techniques.

One of the most important contributions that religious educators and thinkers could make to education for the future is a basic study of the problems of moral and human values and value judgements — judgements that students are not trained to make in the social, behavioral or biomedical sciences, whose approved methodologies do not lend themselves to such purposes, but rather support the common illusion that true science is value-free. A true dialogue between religious thinkers and scientists would then be possible and would be long overdue.

#### MAN'S NEW POWERS

The fourth priority concern: in view of the compulsive drive to acquire systematically ever more knowledge, and with more power, the question is: what will man do, or ought he to do, with his new

powers? Is all the change really necessary? Is it desirable? If so, by what standards? The need of being flexible, adaptable, and resourceful is greater for this generation than for any before them. Religious education should help make them so immediately through a fuller awareness of their fast-changed world and then by developing their powers of choice. There is need to concentrate on efforts to give the young a better idea of what civilized life has meant and can mean at its best (the Kingdom of God), so that they might help to shape a future in which people would not be condemned to possible unnatural living conditions — such as submarine communities — that futurologists glibly propose.

In the face of the environmental or biological crisis, aggravated by the population explosion, many young people have reacted with an understandable pessimism about the future. A hopeful spirit is needed if there is to be any hope for the future, and responsible messianic studies and speculation may gain a new lease on life.

In summary, religious education, which concerns the effective communication of attitudes and commitments about how life can be lived to the fullest, should seek increasingly to go beyond intellectual talk to levels of feeling and choice of what really counts in relation to such significant problems of self, neighbor, society, and world community.

People learn in a significant way only what interests them as having some direct bearing on their lives. What often passes for learning is the glib parroting of information and opinion that is unconnected with the vital center of the searching self. As Eugene Bianchi has observed, when people can link their inner problematic with classroom questions, they stand on the threshold of that interested "yes" and "no"-saying that religion calls conversion, *metanoia*. If religious education wants to touch the deeper dimensions of human becoming, teachers and students must delve in more personal and self-reflective ways into the core questions of existence. There we confront the mystery of existence, of the marvel of the earth and mankind calling to new modes of selfhood with integrity, and of fellowship with compassion. Within this limited terrestrial enterprise, we sometimes glimpse and feel the all-embracing mystery.

<sup>8</sup>*The Insecurity of Freedom: Essays on Human Existence*, Schocken Books, 1972, 306 pages.



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