



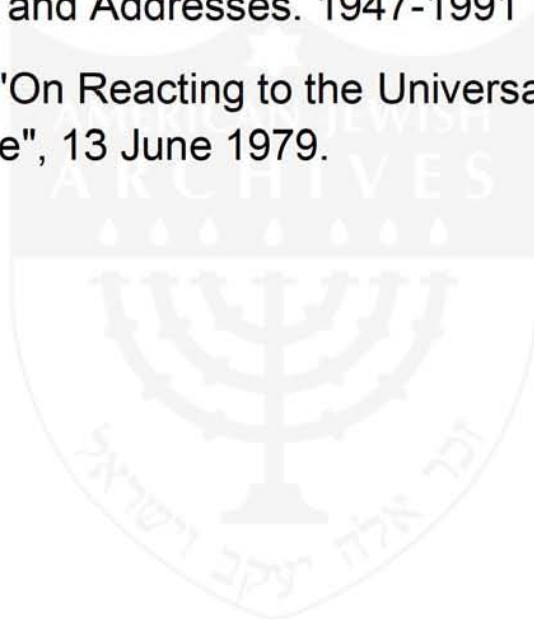
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INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS
"ON REACTING TO THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN CRISIS - A
JEWISH PERSPECTIVE"

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DIRECTOR, AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE; WED., JUNE 13, 1979

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From the perspective of the history of ideas, Judaism and Christianity (and Islam) constitute a breakthrough in human consciousness. That radical transformation of the mentality of a large segment of mankind is best understood when the Biblical world of ideas and values are viewed against the background of the surrounding cultures of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.

In his study entitled, Between Mesopotamia and Egypt, the late Prof. Ephraim Speiser documents the reality that in that ancient cultural world human life was considered worthless. Pharaoh was a divine-king, the source of all law, never its servant. With a flick of his royal finger, he could determine to ~~now~~ throw the entire generation of first-born Israelites into the Nile. Genocide.

The Israelite slaves were the outcasts - the untouchables - in ancient Egypt. Make bricks without straw. Slavemasters whipped them mercilessly in the building of the pyramids, for the immortal monuments were more highly valued than mortal lives.

Exodus, Sinai - and Calvary - were a decisive break with that ancient dehumanizing past. The children of Israel, slaves unto Pharaoh, were liberated from physical oppression and spiritual darkness - the worship of a divine emperor and the idolatries of animal worship - by a power mightier than themselves whose reality they experienced as the Divine Presence in their midst.

At Sinai, the surviving generation of former Israelite slaves, standing in the awe and majesty of that desert wasteland, encounter the Holy One of Israel who reveals Himself for the first time in their collective history as moral will. They accept the Decalogue ~~and then~~ as the Code of their existence. Their consciousness is transformed - "You shall be unto me a Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation." What a Divine-human scenario - yesterday slaves; today, by virtue of accepting the Covenant as the center of their lives, they become, and perceive themselves to be forever after a "holy people."

VIOLENCE AND HUMAN RIGHTS/ ICCJ

I - The scholarly debate - now spilled over into popular discussion - about the SOURCES OF HUMAN VIOLENCE OR DESTRUCTIVENESS. The basic question might be formulated as follows:

IS HUMAN DESTRUCTIVENESS INNATE, AND HENCE INERADICABLE
OR IS IT LEARNED, AND HENCE PRESUMABLY UNLEARNABLE?

On the one side are those who stress the continuity of human life with that of our animal ancestors; a key figure here is Konrad Lorenz, a founder of the science of ethology or animal behavior, whose book On Aggression (1966) has evoked an especially sharp reaction pro and con. Also associated with this view is Robert Ardrey, author of The Territorial Imperative and other works.

-Robert Ardrey and Desmond Morris informed us that people obey the same behavioral laws as animals

-Prof. Edward O. Wilson, prof. of Science and Curator of Entomology at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at the Harvard Univ.. In his new book, On Human Nature (Dec. 1978) - the third volume in a trilogy of which The Insect Societies (1971) and "Sociobiology: The New Synthesis" (1975) formed the first two parts, Prof Wilson assumes more or less the same thing that the theological popularizers did.

The question of interest is no longer whether human social behavior is genetically determined; it is to what extent. The accumulated evidence for a large hereditary component is more detailed and compelling than most persons, including even geneticists, realize. I will go further, it is already decisive.

Contrary to Konrad Lorenz (and Erich Fromm), Wilson argues that

human aggression cannot be explained as wither a dark-angelic flaw or a bestial instinct," but rather - and the distinction here is fine but decisive - that

Human beings are strongly predisposed to respond with unreasonable hatred to external threats and to escalate their hostility sufficiently to overwhelm the source of the threat by a respectably wide margin of safety.

On Human Nature is not basically a description of biologically programmed man

The Exodus-Sinai mythos embody the core belief system which has decisively shaped the millennial history of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and became a catalytic force in Western history - indeed, world history. What are the essentials of that belief system, and what is its relevance to the world condition in the 1980s?

First, God has revealed Himself as moral will, and His nature is experienced through the imitation of moral attributes - mercy, compassion, forgiveness, justice, slow to anger ("The Thirteen Moral Attributes of God" as He revealed them to Moses in the cleft of the mountain);

Second, each human being is created in the sacred image of God and is therefore possessed of dignity; each human life therefore is of infinite value, and human beings cannot be used as a means to anyone's ends, neither for anyone's ideology, revolution, or terrorist program;

Third, a covenanted people has a messianic responsibility for the ethical quality of life of society, the "kingdom of priests". And in that kingdom, all human beings possess equal sanctity in the eyes of God, and are entitled to equal justice and compassion;

Fourth, a covenanted people are responsible for the events of history, for they are co-partners with God in the completion of the works of Creation.

Calvary - if I may presume to suggest as a non-Christian - stands in continuity of that Biblical worldview for it proposes that mankind has the possibility of being graced by Divinity. ("Tell me that I am greater than I am, and I will be so," Ernest Hemingway put it in secular speech.)

