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ANTI-SEMITISM TODAY--PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

It is one of the major historic paradoxes of this generation that the classic advocates and opponents of anti-Semitism have been virtually reversed. For much of the past two millennia, Christians -- and, in particular, the Catholic Church -- have been perceived by the vast majority of the Jewish people as "the enemy" of the Jews. Today, despite some residual pockets of anti-Jewish attitudes, Christian churches have become the primary agents for combatting anti-Jewish attitudes and behavior.

In the 1930s and 1940s, numerous Jews looked to the Marxist revolutionaries as the messianic carriers of the classless, utopian society in which all prejudice would dissolve in socialist egalitarianism. Today, in the 1980s, the Soviet Union has become the most vigorous purveyor of venomous anti-Semitism both at home and abroad. It is one of the few countries in the world that has established center for research and publication of anti-Semitic tracts and propaganda materials that are disseminated throughout the East European bloc, the Arab-Muslim world, and Third World nations in multiple languages.

The ironies are compounded by the emergence of Arab nations since 1973 as super-powers agglomerated in OPEC and attended by the rise of Islamic fanaticism. Historically, Jews suffered far greater from the furies of anti-Semitism in the Christian West and looked to Islamic countries for haven despite their status as second-class citizens as ordained by the

Koran. (Jews and Christians, although termed in the Koran as "the people of the book" nevertheless experienced their status in Arab-Muslim countries as "dhimmi," protected peoples tolerated by the Muslim majorities.)

As a result of the decades of hostility engendered by the Middle East conflict between Israel and the rejectionist Arab States, formerly "tolerant" Muslim governments have mounted incessant campaigns of anti-Zionism within the United Nations and in many parts of the world. "Zionism is racism" resolutions promoted by Arab-Muslim countries in virtually every session of the United Nations and its agencies have converted that international body into "the bulliest pulpit" of anti-Semitism, with anti-Zionism serving as a mask for the most virulent forms of anti-Jewish and anti-Israel attitudes and actions.

Thus, this incessant Arab-Muslim campaign, spearheaded by the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and supported by the Soviet Union and a number of Third World nations, has become the most serious challenge to Israel and the Jewish people since the Nazi Holocaust. The intention of that religio-political drive is nothing other than to "delegitimize" the State of Israel and reduce the Jewish State to a pariah among the nations, a moral leper--much as Hitler sought to reduce the Jewish people to a pariah among Aryan peoples.

The invasion of Lebanon by Israel in June 1982 in its determined effort to uproot the terrorist PLO and to put an end to its genocidal intentions against Israel's population resulted in a further intensification of anti-Israel and anti-Jewish propaganda. Despite the fact that the PLO held innocent Lebanese and Palestinians hostage by installing their massive military technology and munitions dumps in the midst of civilian churches, mosques, hospitals, schools, and apartment buildings, the unfortunate and tragic killing of Arab civilians by the

Israeli Army provided a pretext for the PLO to defame the Israelis, calling them and their Jewish supporters "Nazis." That demonic theme -- "Jews are like Nazis," "the Israelis have inflicted a holocaust on the Palestinians" -- was picked up by a sensationalist-bent world media, by some left-leaning Christian leaders, and became a major propaganda theme thundered around the world by the Soviet Union and Arab diplomats.

The anti-Jewish effects of that political drive were devastating. For months on end, the international message became: If Jews are like Nazis, they have no more claim on the moral conscience of the Christian West and the human community at large than did the Nazis. The moral standing of the Jewish people as "the people of the Bible," the carriers of the Ten Commandments, the vehicle of prophetic social justice, was now challenged as at no time since the Nazis launched their campaign to delegitimize Jews and Judaism and to portray the Jews as demonic.

Ironically, the one group that stood steadfastly against these diabolical efforts were Evangelical Christians in the United States, Israel, and Western Europe. The fastest growing group in the United States, now numbering forty to fifty million adherents, Evangelical Christians stake their existence on the truth of the Bible, and believe that God's promises to the Jewish people as His Chosen People and the Holy Land as the patrimony of the Jews since the covenant with Abraham, is not subject to recall nor abrogation. Evangelicals staged rallies in support of Israel, published advertisements condemning anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism, and in general became a bulwark of moral support to Jews at a time when they were feeling battered and abandoned.

Despite the complicated relationships that Jews have had with Evangelicals over

missions, proselytizing, and a conversionist theology, Israel and the Jewish people were grateful for their support when it was most needed. A powerful anti-Communism also informed much of the Evangelicals' support of Israel, for they saw Israel as a strong fortress against Soviet expansionism and Communist atheism in the Middle East as well as elsewhere. Feeling strongly the Biblical teachings about the dignity of human life, Evangelicals were also appalled by the violence and terrorism of the PLO and their Arab-Muslim and Soviet supporters.

Prior to the Lebanese crisis, Roman Catholics, especially those in church pews, were among the stalwart supporters of Israel, and moved into the vanguard of combatting anti-Semitism. The Vatican Declaration on Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), adopted in October 1965, powerfully condemned anti-Semitism "by anyone at any time." The Vatican Guidelines, promulgated in January 1975, gave concrete instructions to the Catholic faithful (numbering about 800 million people throughout the world), for the uprooting of anti-Semitic reference in Catholic textbooks, the liturgy and homilies, and called for fraternal dialogue and joint social action between Catholics and Jews.

Between 1965 and 1982, greater progress was made in uprooting the poisonous weeds of anti-Semitism in Catholic culture than had been made during the past 1,900 years. As evidence, not a single Catholic textbook published in the United States during the past two decades contains a blatant anti-Jewish reference.

A chill fell on Catholic-Jewish relations for a brief period following the audience that Pope John Paul II granted to PLO president Yassir Arafat. Catholics were angered by Prime Minister Begin's statements referring to the Pope's action as "repulsive" and "disgusting."

Jews were horrified that the Vicar of Christ on earth, himself a man of peace who had vigorously condemned violence and terrorism, would agree to meet with "the vicar" of international terrorism, thereby giving him the implied sanction of the Holy See.

But as a result of the series of clarifying statements made by the Vatican and by Jewish leaders, that unfortunate episode was placed in a moderating perspective, and Catholics and Jews began to return to their previous track of advancing "the revolution in esteem" between Catholics and Jews that the Vatican Council intended to bring about.

A small group of liberal Protestant leaders who identified almost completely with the views of the PLO also outraged the Jewish community. But it became clear that the vast majority of mainline Protestants in the pews did not share the extreme views of this ecumenical elite and alliances between Protestants and Jews in local communities continued to progress. Liberal Protestants, prior to Vatican Council II, were among the first Christians to launch campaigns to uproot anti-Semitism in their textbooks; were allied with Jews in upholding the separation of church and state; collaborated in social justice causes; and upheld together the principles and practices of democratic pluralism.

Should peace come to the Middle East in the decades ahead, there can be little question that the alliances between Jews and all branches of Christendom will be restored. And Jews will find, to the ironic amazement of many, that Christians and Christianity has become the most significant force for combatting the secular and political forms of anti-Semitism that now continue to bedevil the Jewish people.