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THE VATICAN, JEWS, AND ISRAEL

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum, national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, is a leading authority on Jewish-Christian relations. He was the only rabbi in Rome during the Vatican Council's deliberations on the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions.) Why has there been a mixed reaction in the Jewish community to the recently-

promulgated Vatican Guidelines on Catholic-Jewish relations?

The answer to that question lies, in part, in knowing something about the behind-the-scenes facts regarding the way in which the document was released, as much as it has to do with a precise understanding of its contents

The Guidelines were prepared by the Vatican Commission for Catholic-Jewish Relations, appointed by Pope Paul VI in October 1974, and headed by three Catholic leaders who are genuinely sympathetic to Judaism, the Jewish people, and quite possibly, Israel. (They are Cardinal Jan Willebrands, a learned Dutch theologian who is president both of the Commission and of the Vatican Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity; Canon Charles Moeller, a brilliant Belgian philosopher, who is vice-president, and the Rev. Pierre de Contenson, an effervescent French Dominican priest, ^{scholar,} who serves as Secretary.)

In recent years, a major ~~struggle~~ struggle for power has taken place between the various branches of the Curia, with the Vatican Secretariat of State emerging with all the political control centralized in its hands. When the Guidelines on Catholic-Jewish relations were completed, they were sent "upstairs" to the Secretariat of State for approval.

The Secretariat of State "took over" the document, made a number of changes in its text, and then arranged for its world-wide distribution to Catholic hierarchies on a "sub secreto" (secret) basis. The State authorities also set the publication date for Friday, January 3, 1975 "12:00 a.m." (Rome time). That date preceded by three-days the long-scheduled meeting between the Vatican Commission on Catholic-Jewish Relations and the International Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC).

The general contents of the Guidelines became known to the Jewish representatives about ten days before their release to the press. When it became clear that some of the contents would become a cause of controversy - especially the studied omission of any reference to Israel's religious and historic meaning to the Jewish people and a contrived reference to the Catholic's need to "witness" their Christian faith to Jews, albeit sensitively - I telephoned the European office of the American Jewish Committee and asked if it was possible to have the publications of the Guidelines postponed. After all, I argued, we were to meet with the Vatican Commission three days later in Rome. Why could we not discuss the Guidelines together and find a way to help formulate a text-especially those "sticky" parts - so that misunderstanding and friction could be reduced to a minimum, and in order that its genuinely positive features could gain maximum acceptance and thereby really give Catholic-Jewish relations a major push forward?

The answer came back promptly from Rome that postponement of the Guidelines was absolutely out of the question, and that the power to change that decision was out of the hands of the Vatican Commission for Catholic-Jewish relations.

The reason for that arbitrary publication of the text of the Guidelines on the very eve of the Vatican-Jewish meeting soon became abundantly clear. The Vatican Secretariat of State, ~~which is the "foreign office" of the Holy See~~, has been actively engaged in its own diplomatic offensive exploring detente with the Arab governments, Moslem nations, and the Moscow-dominated Communist bloc. By publishing the Guidelines three days "Erev" the Vatican-Jewish consultation, the Secretariat of State's diplomats signaled a clear and unambiguous message to the Arab-Muslim-Communist world.

Stripped to its essence, that message was: Have no anxiety about the meeting with the Jews next week. Nothing will change in Vatican policy. There will be no moves toward recognition of the State of Israel, for, as you can see in the actual text we are publishing before ^{hand} which is not subject to modification once it is promulgated ^{there} will not be even a single religious or theological reference to "the holy land." And when the Jewish delegate ^{met} with Pope Paul VI on January 10 - an altogether warm and "gemutlich" audience - it was the Jewish statement (which I was asked to draft for the Jewish delegation) which referred to the importance of Israel ^{and Jerusalem} to Judaism and the Jewish people. The Pope's statement conformed entirely to the Vatican Secretariat of State policy of total silence on Israel, even in spiritual terms.

The Guidelines also communicated a reassuring message to Arab Christians, such as Patriarch Maximos Hakim, arch-defender of gun-running Archbishop Capucci, and Archbishop George Khodr of Lebanon. These Arab churchmen, and hundreds of others like them throughout the Middle East, have been preaching an unreformed theology that asserts in the classic formulation of 4th century Bishop ^{Eusebius} of Cesarea, that Judaism is "preparator ^{io} Evangelica", ^{that is, the Jewish religion} existed solely as a preparation for the coming of Christianity which is now the "true Israel." That triumphalistic version of pre-ecumenical Christianity happens to be a powerful theological support for current Arab nationalism, for if ^{Arabs} can succeed in persuading the Christian world that God's permanent election through the Sinaitic covenant with the people of Israel has been invalidated ^{or displaced}, then it should easily be able to make the case that the same God's covenant with Abraham to whom the Promised Land was given "forever" can also be cancelled. (Gen.12)

Prof. David Flusser of Hebrew University, perhaps the greatest authority

the interrelationships of

on ~~first century~~ Judaism and Christianity, has written that the reference to

(and that "it's a pity, a great pity that this passage on mission was included.")

"Christian witness" in these Guidelines was not necessary "in principle." No

such statement appeared in any form in the magnificent 1969 proposed set of Guidelines which the Vatican Secretariat on Christian Unity prepared; nor in the 1973 French Bishop's Committee's Declaration on Christian Relationships with Judaism; nor in the 1967 American Catholic Bishops Guidelines.

Indeed, the 1969 Vatican "working document" had it not been suppressed by the same alliance of pro-Arab political forces and ultra-conservative theologians- would have deserved to be called "historic" for it dealt forthrightly and with intellectual honesty with ~~the~~ *the* fundamental issues that are central to any real understanding between Christians and Jews.

On Judaism as a living religion, it declared, "God has revealed himself to his people Israel and made to it the gift of the Torah. And he has confided to it a word that 'endures forever' (Isaiah 40 8), a word that has become an unquenchable source of life and prayer, in a tradition that has just not ceased to enrich itself through the centuries."

On The Land of Israel, it said, "Fidelity to the covenant was linked to the gift of a land, which in the Jewish soul has endured as the object of an aspiration that Christian's should strive to understand..."

On Proselytizing, it stated:

First, it acknowledged that Judaism is a living religion that "endures forever;"
Second, it called upon Christians to "ask pardon of their Jewish brothers" for the "persecutions and moral pressures" brought by Christians against Jews across "long generations of painful trials" and "condemned all forms of anti-Semitism."
Third, it stated unambiguously that "all intent of proselytizing and conversion is excluded" in the Jewish-Christian relationship,
Finally, it called upon Christians to understand and respect the religious significance of the link between the people and the land of Israel.

This 1969 document, and those of the French Catholic Bishops' committee and the American Catholic Bishops, make it abundantly clear that the Catholic church has available to it "the theology of Judaism" that would enable it to put aside once and for always its proselytizing approach to the Jewish people, and to come to terms both spiritually and practically with the momentous importance of Israel as the dominant existential reality in Jewish self-consciousness today.

It is tragic that representatives of the World Jewish Congress and the Synagogue Council of America have found it necessary ^{repeatedly} to explain why the Vatican has not found it possible to adopt these enlightened views toward those issues which count most to Jews today. Are Jewish institutional ^{needs} and personal ^{defenders of and} careerist publicity ~~so~~ so corrosive that Jewish spokesmen become apologists for anti-Jewish forces in the Vatican, rather than proud advocates of their people's interests?

The Guidelines of Jan. 3, 1975, does have many good things in it, and they should be welcomed as far as they go, and should be actively implemented. But when compared with how far they should have gone as an act of justice to the Jewish people, the welcome should be - as Prof. Flusser rightly advised - modest and restrained.

When identical problems arose in connection with the "Jewish text" ^{the} Vatican Council II, the American Jewish Committee arranged ^{during} to send the late ^{esteemed} Rabbi Abraham J. Heschel, to meet with the Pope, laterally on ~~the~~ ^{the eve} of Yom Kippur, in order to remove such offensive conversionary passages, ^{which} which we succeeded in doing. Ten years later, bureaucrats of the World Jewish Congress and the Synagogue Council, who ^{tried to tell} were actually theologically illiterate, ^{gagged up} gagged up ~~the~~ to silence the objections of the American Jewish Committee, and ^{issued a} issued a press release, denying that there was any "proselytizing intent" in Rome