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"American Religious Values & the Future of America", Undated.

COMMENTS ON MICHAEL NOVAK'S PAPER

BY MARC H. TANENBAUM

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AMERICAN RELIGIOUS VALUES AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICA

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In 1654, twenty-three Jewish refugees fled the Portugese Inquistition in Recife, Brazil, and ^{embarked} ~~land~~ on the French privateer, ~~St. Charles~~ St. Charles, to New Amsterdam where they petitioned for asylum and residence. At the wharf of the ostensibly "liberal" Dutch colony, the 23 Jewish "illegal aliens" were greeted by Governor Peter ~~Stuyvesant~~ Stuyvesant and his Council who ordered them to depart.

Jewish merchants in Holland, among them some major shareholders in the Dutch West India Company, supported their co-religionists' right to remain in New Netherlands, which was in fact seeking immigrants to help build the Dutch colony in the New World. Governor Stuyvesant pleaded vigorously against extending rights to the Jews. In October 1655, he wrote to the Directors of the Dutch West India Company in Amsterdam, "Giving them (the Jews) liberty, we cannot refuse the Lutherans and the Papiets."

After repeated petitions and pressure from affluent Dutch Jews in Holland, this hapless group of Jewish men, women, and children were finally allowed to remain, But they had to engage in continuous struggle for the minimal rights to engage in trade, to own property, to serve in the militia, and to gain citizenship. The rights to work at crafts, to hold public office, to build a synagogue or to engage in public religious services were never won in New Amsterdam. These were to come later, after incessant struggle by Jews over decades in every colony of the new nation.

As Michael Novak demonstrates persuasively in his essay, nativist prejudices of anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism run very deep in American culture. A Jew as well as a Catholic utters such a judgment, especially in a Bicentennial year, with evident ambivalences. On the one hand, it is a manifest truth that, despite the deep-seated intolerances, bigotries, and discriminations ~~xxxxxxx~~ toward non-White Anglo-Saxon/minorities throughout much of our nation's 200-year history, both Catholic and Jewish communities have achieved what the Rev. Andrew Greeley has characterized in his latest book, An Ugly Little Secret: Anti-Catholicism in North America (Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, Inc., Kansas City, ~~xxxxxxx~~ Dec 1977), "an ethnic miracle"

Contrary to the popular images promoted in the academic and media worlds that "the blue collar ethnics" are illiterate and impoverished, the Rev. Greeley writes (as corroborated by Michael Novak in this essay):

"The eastern and southern European immigrants now have a higher college attendance rate than the national average for young people of college age. In the space of a single generation, between 1945 and 1975, Poles and Italians have surpassed the national average in college attendance (The Irish, incidentally, also surpassed the national average, and they did it in 1910.)

"Eastern and southern European immigrants not only earn more money than the national average for whites but also more than British Protestants. Those who could not assimilate have become successful. Irish Catholics, for example, are the richest, the best educated, and the most occupationally successful of any Gentile group in American society. And in terms of income at least, the Italian Catholics are right behind them— and moving up fast."

Greeley concludes, "Reformers didn't manage to Americanize us in the public schools and ..there is substantial evidence that it is precisely the strong values of home, family, and neighborhood that facilitated the educational, economic, and occupational success of the ethnics." (pages 72-75).

As anyone conversant with the sociological literature knows, similar empirical evidence documents "the ethnic miracle" of American Jewry whose socio-economic status is at least comparable to that of Episcopalians and Presbyterians. The academic achievement of the Jewish community, which is the "secret" of Jewish mobility and attainment, is probably the highest of any religious-ethnic group in America.

In the face of such unparalleled historic achievement for both Catholic and Jewish ethnics, - both of whom are authentic embodiments of the "rag s-to-riches" mythos of America - the most appropriate human responses are those of deep gratitude and appreciation for the opportunities which American society made possible. Not only opportunities for material abundance and security, ^{but as well} for the authentic and equally unparalleled experiences for religious, political, and civic freedoms in which both communities have flourished spiritually and intellectually.

But the other horn of the ambivalence remains, and cannot be ignored. There is underrepresentation of Catholics in the elite, decision-making centers of American life, which by and large are WASP preserves - the foundations, the universities, the media, the board rooms of major corporations and banks. While General George Brown and the discredited former vice-president, Spiro Agnew, blithely

hurl anti-Semitic stereotypes across the nation's media of "Jewish control of America," the leadership and ~~xxxxxx~~ control of the real centers of American financial and ~~xxxxxxx~~ industrial power, the Fortune 500 corporations, are virtually "Judenrein" in their "executive suites" and their "social clubs" where ~~ax~~ the business contracts of heavy industry are negotiated. All our "executive suite" studied continue to demonstrate that Jews - as well as Catholic ethnics, blacks, and Hispanics - are excluded from the management levels of the major banks, the public utilities, the insurance companies, the sanctum sanctorum of Protestant power and domination of America's wealth.

It is critical for the future self-understanding and well-being of America that the nation face up in a wholly conscious way to Michael Novak's major thesis, namely, that "Protestant Christianity is the single most determinative cultural force on the American character." It is not my interest to do unto Protestants what Protestants have frequently done unto Catholics, Jews, blacks, and other "foreigners," that is, engage in the latest form of bigotry and scapegoating, "anti-Wasplism".

But Novak's analysis of the formative influences of the constituent elements of "the Protestant way" - or more accurately, "the several Protestant ways" - ~~are~~ ^{is} not simply nostalgic reflections on a past heritage, but ~~are~~ ^{is} a statement about clear and present ~~influences~~ forces that continue to impact on the lives of non-Protestants and on the domestic and foreign policy-making of American society.

With candor and courage, Novak lays out the elements in this three-fold pattern

1) "The American Protestant style places an extraordinary

degree of weight upon "moral" factors in social situations. ~~xxx~~ The Protestant style in America is to use the word 'moral' as a club by which to undermine the standing of others. By presenting them as 'moral,' one realizes one's interests as effortlessly as possible."

2) "The American Protestant style also has a manifest anti-institutional bias. The Protestant tendency, as Rollo May has put it, is to desire a world innocent of power and politics."

3) "The American Protestant style is, finally, a style of revival -- of moral spasm. Intense moral outrage leads to hurried rituals of reformation, ends in quick forgetfulness. Laws of power, self-interest, and institutional necessity require practical and lasting compromises. Striving for purity, the children of light often reject those modest compromises that might bring small but real and long-term relief."

Let me illustrate how real and potentially serious that style of Protestant moralizing can be. As is generally known, the ~~safety~~ safety and security, the very existence of the State of Israel and its three million inhabitants is a supreme issue of moral, spiritual, and human concern to the Jewish people everywhere. After the loss of one-third of the Jewish family to the murder-machine of the Nazi holocaust, it is simply unendurable psychologically to any Jewish conscience that any credence whatsoever could be given to Article 15 of the Palestine Liberation Organization's Covenant which calls for the destruction of the State of Israel, its replacement by a so-called "secular democratic Palestinian state," (what the PLO wrought in Lebanon, especially to its Christian Maronite community whose power has been fatally destroyed), and the use of terror and violence as justifiable means for realizing the PLO's "self-determination."

The following are true accounts of what I actually experienced with liberal Protestant church officials:

*Two years ago, the director of overseas missions of one of the major liberal Protestant denominations, in a face-to-face "dialogue", told me in exactly these words, "The right of the State of Israel is by no means a closed issue. Israel may have to be dismantled for the sake of world peace." (Some months later, the WASP President of one of our nation's leading banks, declared, "Israel is standing in the way of increased trade with the Arab nations. I hate to say it, but Israel may just have to go down the tube in our national interest.")

*In recent years, liberal Protestant church officials have joined with Arab propagandists and American oil companies in attacking "the Israel lobby" or "the Jewish lobby" in Washington as being somehow "un-American." What is not generally known is that in April 1977 and again in October 1977, these same liberal Protestant moralists met with Arabist members of the State Department and drafted a strategy for producing a series of resolutions for adoption by liberal Protestant church assemblies that would recognize "the PLO as the sole, legitimate representative of the Palestinian people."

In September 1977, the Arab missions people of the United Presbyterian Church drafted exactly such a resolution, had it printed and placed in the kit of the delegates to the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church meeting in Philadelphia. The delegates - local pastors and lay delegates from across the country - declared that they refused "to baptize the PLO and terrorism as legitimate." They voted down the pro-PLO resolution by a 75 to 25 percent vote, and adopted instead a balanced resolution that recognized Israel's right

to security as well as the legitimate rights of Palestinians - which the majority of the Jewish people support (What form of nationhood those rights will take is to be worked out by the hard negotiation of political compromise)

*In November 1977, the Division of Overseas Ministries of the National Council of Churches drafted a similar initial text that was anti-Israel and pro-PLO. The text went through several reformulations, but even the final version was filled with moralistic, pietistic jargon about "righteousness requires" and "justice demands "

The mentality and rhetoric of these liberal Protestant church bureaucrats toward Israel, the Palestinians, and Middle East are a classic illustration of the "Protestant moralism" that Novak describes. Beneath ~~xxxxx~~ the high-sounding, moralistic phrases, with all its suggestion of altruism and perfectionism, is obscured the naked power and financial interests of these elements within liberal Protestantism. If you will read the "Handbook of Missions," you will find a fascinating statistic which these moralistic churchmen never acknowledge in any of these discussions American liberal Protestantism provides seventy percent of the finances for their missionary installations in Arab countries as well as in other overseas areas They also provide close to seventy percent of the missionary personnel in these countries.

I happen to hold to a Jewish theology of Christianity which looks favorably upon constructive missionary enterprises as instruments which have brought the Covenant of Israel to the farthest reaches of the earth which, if not for Christian missions, might never have been exposed to the Torah and its redemptive message of Love of God and Love of

Fellowman But I am appalled by the hypocrisy and the double standards. when Catholic ethnics engage in political action that is specifically Catholic that is sneered at as "machine politics," when Jews engage in political action designed to secure the lives of millions of their brothers and sisters, that is "the Jewish lobby" which is somehow to be disdained as conspiratorial and "unAmerican" and smacks of "double loyalty" When liberal Protestant church bureaucrats engage in identical behavior with their friends in the State Department and in the U. S. Congress or the White House, that is the work of salvation.

Reinhold Niebuhr earned the reverence of Jews and Catholics as well as Protestants because he refused to play such moral shell-games with himself as well as with others. "Our pressure on all previous sovereignties who shared ~~the~~ the hemisphere with us," he wrote in A Nation So Conceived, (with Alan Heimert, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963, New York), "and the tenacity of our land hunger under the moral sanction of what our patriots called 'manifest destiny!' may have given the first intimation of the formation of a unique national characteristic or trait of character, namely, the expression of a vital impulse in the name of an ideal. For we began our history by claiming the sanction of a democratic ideal for an imperial ~~impulse~~ impulse, which was ostensibly disavowed and overcome by these same democratic principles." (p.10)

Prof Niebuhr concluded with advice for coping with such dangerous moralism that is as appropriate today as when ~~it~~ he wrote in 1963.

"Democracy," this great Protestant prophet asserted, "is an ultimate norm of political organization in the sense that no better way

has been found to check the inordinancy of the ~~power~~ powerful on the one hand and the confusion of the multitude on the other than by making every center of power responsible to the people whom it affects, by balancing subordinate centers with other centers of power to prevent injustice, and by denying immunity from criticism^r and to any organ or mouthpiece of prestige ~~or~~ authority." (p. 127)

