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THE IMAGE OF THE JEWS IN CATHOLIC TEACHING

A Memorandum to

THE SECRETARIAT FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

AMERICAN JEWISH
ARCHIVES



Submitted by

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

New York

I. CHRISTIANS AND JEWS

Spiritual Man at the Crossroads

The middle years of the twentieth century have ushered in a period of profound change, unparalleled in the history of mankind.

Titanic forces--technical, intellectual and spiritual--are at work. Atomic energy, new methods of communication and travel, the population explosion and the dawn of space exploration, are remaking our society. Political and economic upheaval is the order of the day, as rich nations, blind and complacent, are faced with the awakening of the world's underprivileged masses. Established religions everywhere are confronted by the legions of those who either deny spiritual values, or else wear a false religious badge while seeking only success, material comfort or power.

Under the impact of these forces, a totally new age has come into being in less than 25 years. Two overwhelming factors dominate this age. First: there are no islands any more; what happens anywhere on earth happens next door to us. Second: man is now able to destroy himself in a matter of minutes.

For these reasons, man's actions today have far wider repercussions than formerly-- for better or for worse. The mighty forces at large in today's world can spell spiritual division and physical annihilation; or they can speed man on his search for unity and spiritual fulfillment.

Catholic-Jewish Tension

The state of the world thus calls for a re-appraisal of values among all those concerned with the spiritual destiny of man. In this grave hour, His Holiness Pope John XXIII has called an Ecumenical Council, the first in nearly a century.

The American Jewish Committee would like to take the opportunity afforded by the calling of this Council to lay before the Head of the Church a matter of deep concern: the question whether Catholic teaching about Jews--particularly in the United States--is fostering prejudice and hostility.

Tensions between Jews and Catholics are centuries old, but the dangers of the present day make the issue more urgent than ever before. Whatever may have been true in past ages, prejudice against any religious group today inevitably weakens the entire fabric of society, degrades both the haters and the victims, and saps the spiritual strength of all mankind. Hostility among believers of different creeds serves only to advance the cause of anti-religious forces. In this hour of peril, all those who share the spiritual heritage of the Bible must stand together if humanity is to survive.

The Christian Conscience and the Jews

Jews have lived in the Christian world since its beginning, yet their status among the Christian majority has almost always been precarious. On one hand, the Church has protected them; Popes and Church Councils, in medieval and modern times, have condemned anti-Jewish propaganda, violence and persecution, and

for five hundred years (from the 11th until the 16th century) Jews enjoyed safety in the Papal states. But, on the other hand, Jews in nearly every century have undergone untold suffering and degradation at the hands of supposed Christians, sometimes with the acquiescence of ecclesiastical authority.

This ambiguous attitude of the Christian world toward the Jews has persisted into our own time. When Hitlerism -- an essentially pagan movement generated chiefly by social and economic forces unrelated to religion -- unleashed the most terrible of all persecutions, some devout and valiant Christians courageously saved Jewish lives; but the majority of Christendom stood indifferently by. The Jews will not forget their rescuers, but neither can they forget the six million whom no one rescued.

How could this diabolical crime have come to pass, in a country of ancient Christian traditions, unless the Christian conscience had been numbed -- unless a strong undercurrent of anti-Jewish feeling ran through the Christian culture? In the days of the death camps as in those of the Black Death, many nominal Christians must have felt that the Jews were outside the human community, that they somehow deserved their fate, and that the rest of mankind was not responsible for them. It was this hostility, contempt and indifference which made possible the greatest mass murder in history.

Teachings About the Jews

It is appalling, therefore, to find that fifteen years after the catastrophe our culture still is permeated by

religious prejudice -- the result of a variety of social, psychological and political forces -- and that the old hostility, contempt and indifference are being transmitted to a new generation.

Churches must share some of the responsibility for this state of affairs. Religious bodies invariably condemn anti-Semitism in principle, but often give sanction to it by some of their teachings. Thus, Catholic religious teaching today contains defamatory misstatements and omissions which may encourage hostility and contempt for Jews.

Such teachings appear in all their monstrous absurdity when read against the true relationship between Catholicism and Judaism. The close historical and spiritual ties between the two faiths were forcefully recalled in 1938 by Pope Pius XI:

"Anti-Semitism is ... a movement in which we, as Christians, cannot have any part whatever.... Spiritually, we are Semites."^{1*}

Among the influences by which anti-Semitism is perpetuated, faulty religious teaching is one of the most insidious, because it permits the erroneous belief that anti-Semitic ideas have the approval of the highest moral and spiritual authority.

For this reason, the American Jewish Committee considers it a duty to bring the matter to the attention of the Head of the Church, and to add its voice to those of others who ask for a

* Sources of quotations are listed at the end of this memorandum.

re-examination and revision of Catholic teaching materials concerning Jews, insofar as they violate the precepts of love and brotherhood.

We do so without accusation and without rancor, moved solely by the belief that eradicating religious antagonism will greatly benefit both Christians and Jews, and will strengthen the spiritual forces in the world.

II. AMERICAN ASPECTS.

Prejudice a Danger to America

Because of certain historical and ethnic factors in American society, the problem of Catholic attitudes toward Jews in the United States has important civic and social implications in addition to its spiritual ones.

The immense variety of religious faiths and national backgrounds among the American people makes it necessary to work steadily and rapidly toward the elimination of intergroup tensions -- not by persuading anyone to abandon his religion for that of the majority, nor by preaching syncretism in any form, but by creating a climate free from prejudice.

To accomplish this end, Americans of all faiths in recent years have made special efforts to do away with all religious sanctions of bigotry. The election of a Catholic to the Presidency of the United States is in part the result of these efforts.

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That such a provocative charge may be found in Catholic homily five years after the horrors of the Nazi death camps is a source of deep disturbance. Not only does commentary of this sort misrepresent the intentions of the Church, it must, of necessity, create anxiety and suspicion among Jews.

In the light of the Church's authoritative and self-critical teaching, is it not time to put an end to the un-Christian use of the Jews as a scapegoat people?

We respectfully request that the Church, rectify, according to its own precedents and through its own methods, the passages in liturgy and teaching which, in themselves, or by way of homily, stimulate and reinforce the slanderous concept of the Jews as a cursed, despised, deicide people.

At this critical time in human history, the adherents of the great monotheistic, revealed religions must bend their efforts to do away with the barriers of suspicion and prejudice which have created bitterness and bloodshed in the past. We are faced, on the one hand, with the possibility of a man-made Armageddon and, on the other, with the threat of totalitarian anti-religious oppression. If we are to confront these great challenges, no fellow man who lives by God's commandments should be defamed or humiliated.

While the social and political realities of our time warrant such a response, our appeal is based primarily on moral grounds -- the principles of charity and the demands of justice.

Quod si delibatio sancta est,
et massa, et si radix sancta,
et rami. (Rom. XI: 16)

Secundum evangelium quidem
inimici propter vos; secundum
electionem, charissimi propter
patres. (Rom. XI: 28)

Pax omni operanti bonum Judaeo
primum, et graeco; non enim est
acceptio personarum apud Deum
(Rom. II:10, 11.)

For if the firstfruit be holy,
so is the lump also: and if the
root be holy, so are the branches.
(Rom. XI: 16)

As concerning the gospel, indeed,
they are enemies for your sake:
but are touching the election,
they are most dear for the sake
of the fathers.
(Rom. XI: 28)

But glory and honour and peace
to every one that worketh good:
to the Jew first, and also to the
Greek.
For there is no respect of persons
with God.
(Rom. II: 10,11)

kind -- as to leave a lasting mistrust in the minds of Jews.... To avoid even the appearance of slander, Pope John XXIII dropped the term 'perfidis Judaeis' from the liturgy of Good Friday.... Can the rest of us do less, this Easter time, than try to eliminate slander from our words and ideas about Jews?"⁴⁵

It would not be truthful to suggest, however, that this positive attitude has been adopted by the Catholic press as a whole.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

= Catholic attitudes toward Jews and Judaism today range all the way from foresight and understanding, as expressed in the efforts of Pope John XXIII and certain Catholic leaders, to age-old hostility, wittingly or unwittingly kept alive in many parts of the Church community.

The moral obligation of religion to inspire love and respect for all the children of God, as well as the need for unity in a world threatened by materialism and totalitarian oppression, demand an end to religious prejudices that have scarred the relationship between Catholics and Jews for many generations.

To ensure that a spirit of good will toward people of other faiths may animate the entire Church community, we respectfully request, in private and without publicity:

That His Holiness, Pope John XXIII, cause precise directives to be issued from the Vatican--through proper channels and according to established methods--for improving Catholic teaching about Jews and Judaism, by cleansing all Catholic educational and liturgical publications of inaccurate, distorted, slanderous or prejudiced statements about Jews as a group.

Such a revision would bring books and teaching materials into line with the precedent already set by recent changes in the liturgy of the Church, made by the present Pope and his predecessors.

We, members of the American Jewish Committee -- an organization devoted to fostering cooperation and understanding among religious and racial groups in the United States -- believe that the improvement of Catholic teachings about the Jews is an urgent task, of equal importance to the spiritual health of America and that of the whole world.

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