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WHAT IS A JEW?

Address by
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It is an act of chutzpah, audacity, on my part even to suggest that I can within the compass of thirty minutes or so answer the question: What is a Jew? How can one deal seriously in one half of one hour with four thousand years of history, spread across all the continents of the world, ranging the full spectrum of human experience from tragedy to triumph, through heroism and destruction, from Mount Sinai through Babylonia, Bergen-Belsen, Brooklyn and Beersheba reborn, all of which have forged the complex destiny, the mysterious and yet marvelous survival of the Jew in the salvation history of mankind. To seek to reduce that to "a talk" really borders on blasphemy. And yet, as the Rabbi said to the parishioner who came to him saying that he felt that he was not adequate to pray, had great fear of it, "My son, have fear and pray." So with fear and trepidation, I embark prayerfully on a suggestive statement regarding What is a Jew? I should like to approach this in something of the Biblical and Prophetic tradition, which is to say, that this is to be a non-speculative statement. I seek to address myself to the perceptions that many of you may have about the Jew in your concrete human situations and to see whether I can help to clarify your understanding of the Jew

on this reality level, perhaps raise some questions and, hopefully, even try to answer some.

Anyone who travels in interreligious circles can give you, on quite short notice a check-list of Catholic perceptions or misperceptions about Jews, Judaism, Jewish history, the Jewish people. And I am sure, as Robert Hoyt has already made impressively clear, that on the other side of the coin one can point up similarly Jewish misperceptions of Catholics. But instead of improvising such a list, instead of giving you my impression of what I think these perceptions are, let me rely on something more substantial in terms of what is a Catholic understanding of the Jew.

Recently a prominent Catholic educator traveled around the country addressing students in Catholic colleges and universities about the problem that we are discussing here today. And as a result of her discussions with Catholic students, she came away with a list of the questions which Catholics ask her most frequently about Jews and Judaism. The following is a verbatim report of the questions asked of this lecturer by Catholic students. I leave it to the judgment of our Catholic friends in this audience as to whether these views are peculiar to students or whether they are more broadly representative of Catholic opinion about the Jewish people and their tradition. My impression is that the latter is probably the case.

These questions fall into four categories, and these provide the framework for my discussion of What is a Jew? The first category deals with the problem of "The Jews in the Business World." These are some of the questions which were asked:

"Don't you think that in this country we are antagonistic to Jews because they are too successful in business?"

"Why are all Jews rich?"

"Why are the Jews better than anyone else in business?"

"I have heard it said that Hitler had to do what he did because the Jews held all the money in Germany."

"Why did the Jews in the middle ages have money to lend people in states? You said that it was the only profession that they were allowed to exercise but where did they get the money in the first place?"

Category number two, roughly entitled, "Jews Are Secular," and these are the questions:

"Why do Jews who do not go to the synagogue, even atheists, insist that they are still Jews? A fallen-out Catholic does not still consider himself a Catholic; why does an irreligious Jew still consider himself a Jew?"

Third category, which Philip Scharper dealt with so extraordinarily this afternoon, "The Role of the Jews in the Crucifixion:"

"If the Jewish people did not kill Christ, who did?"

"You said that the high priest and the elders and not the Jewish people had a share of responsibility in Jesus' condemnation; that is not true, the Gospel says that the people clamored for his death."

"I am a Catholic and I know what I have been taught when I went to catechism, and that is that the Jews killed Christ. This is what my Church teaches. I don't like it. I have several friends who are Jewish, but what can I do? I have to believe my Church."

"My Church teaches that the Jews are no longer the chosen people since they killed Christ. I don't hold it against my Jewish friends; that would be silly. Yet I cannot help remembering that they are not chosen any more and I guess it does make a difference. What can I do?"

Fourth category, "New Approach to Jewish-Christian Relations:"

"You said that we Christians have a deep conscious or a subconscious contempt of the Jews, but the Jews have a deep contempt for us, too, believe me; so that's 50-50. Don't you think that the Jews should also meet us part of the way in this new approach?"

"I do understand that we cannot hold present day Jewish people responsible for Jesus' death; I don't think I ever did. Yet, my Jewish friends do not become Christians. Why?"

There were several other categories of questions, such as religious freedom in the State of Israel, the Dead Sea scrolls, the threat of communism to Christianity and its impact on the Christian response to the new world situation. But these questions would carry us far afield. I have selected these four categories out of six or seven as the basis for my remarks.

Now it should be evident at the outset, that these questions are formulated in sometimes rather naive or gross terms. That is a matter of language and should not detract from the substance of the questions raised. It is also necessary to keep in mind that there were other questions asked which

reflected a more positive understanding of and orientation toward the Jew. But these questions that I have just read to you must be taken for what they are, namely, an indication of the mode of perception of the Jew by many Catholics, and to this fact I seek to address myself this afternoon.

Let us seek first to dispose of, at least to try to understand, this popular and negative perception of the Jew as a business man, the Jew as a merchant, because it is one of the most persistent myths and one which Christians, and Catholics in particular, encounter most frequently. Catholics encounter it most frequently because the sociology today of Catholic-Jewish relationships brings Catholics and Jews into greater contact in the major urban centers of America more than it has at any time in the past. Now this myth has deep and ancient roots. A spirit of charity, it would seem to me, requires a genuine effort to try to understand the sources of this sinister view of the Jew as the economic conspirator, a view that is not far removed from the Kremlin's caricature of American capitalists as a collective breed of "Wall Street robber barons."

In seeking to achieve such understanding, hopefully we will gain some insight into the larger process of myth-making and stereotypy, confusing truth with half-truths, leaping from the particular to "generalization," all of which are the surest barriers to mutual trust and to love of neighbor as one's self.

The Jews in western Europe, going back to the fourth century, were not business people. The Jews were predominantly a farm community, and on the continent, and in particular in Rome, Sicily, in France and Germany, they earned their livelihood as farmers, artisans, and as petty tradesmen. But through the pressures of history, as is known to many of you, Jews were perforce driven from the farms and were compelled to become merchants. The entire farm economy of the Roman Empire was based on slave-holding. By virtue of the social arrangement that prevailed at that time, the slave generally adopted the religious practices of his master, and so many slaves owned by Jews became Jews. Adolf Harnack, the eminent historian, adduced evidence that by the fourth century there were at least two million Roman converts to Judaism, many of them slaves in the household of Jewish masters. When Constantine established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, Jews were forbidden on the penalty of death to convert pagans, heathens, non-Jews, to Judaism. Thus the basis of the slave economy, and, therefore, of the farm economy was destroyed for the Jew, and he had to find other ways of subsisting.

During the period of the Moslem-Christian conflict in the seventh and eighth centuries, trade was mainly in the hands of Syrian Christians, and the Moslems on rising to power prevented the Syrian Christians from having commerce with their

brothers in the Levant. The Jews were then encouraged both by the Christians and the Moslems to become the tradesmen of that world, bridging East and West. Very often, the Jews were indentured as the merchants of princes and Popes. Consequently, the only profession open to Jews were those of banker or usurer. In a number of instances, the Church turned to the Jews for funds with which to build magnificent churches and cathedrals which are the glory of Europe.

And so this history of the Jew as merchant goes back to the earliest days. It is a complex story and cannot in respect to truth be explained simplistically as the sinister plot of the Jew to infiltrate the financial power centers of the Christian West. Rather the force of events of history, in most cases not of his own making, cast the Jew into a mercantile role, and throughout the entire period of the middle ages he was given no other option that would enable him to survive. Parenthetically, it may well have been an act of Providence that the Jew's properties were in liquid assets because the expulsions and the persecutions that overtook him demanded that he be able to move swiftly, taking his possessions with him overnight, across foreign borders. It is no accident today that on forty-seventh street in New York City, the Jews who have come recently from eastern Europe, from the ghettos of Poland and Russia still wearing beards and sidecurls, dressed

in caftans and gabardines, trade in jewelry and diamonds. A pocketful of pearls, or precious stones can be the ransom price for buying one's safety and the security of one's family from border guards. Even in the freedom of America many of these immigrants act on Old World memories.

The fact that America has beckoned to Europeans precisely because it was the pre-eminent mercantile society doubly served to enhance its appeal for Jewish immigrants who were uniquely prepared by their histories for the great American dream of success and security through commerce and industry. A marriage of the Jew's past and the pressing needs and opportunities presented by a dynamically expanding America encouraged the Jew to concentrate his energies and creativity in the world of business, trades, and professions. The ancient and inherited Jewish reverence toward Torah as learning, the pursuit of intellectual perfection, provided the internal motivation and the mental orientation that enabled the Jew to respond successfully to the challenges of an industrialized technological society that has placed a premium on the kinds of educational and allied skills that Jews have come by over the centuries. Thus, it is factual to state, as did the college students, that Jews have been successful in business, but the reasons one holds in making such an observation spell the difference between empathy and bigotry.

This past January, I was privileged to serve as Program Chairman of the National Conference on Religion and Race, held in Chicago. One revelation for me that came out of that meeting, far and beyond others, was the failure of the white man, the white Christian, the white Jew - to understand and to feel genuinely the depth of the predicament of the Negro. James Baldwin gave us but a foretaste of what became disturbingly evident at this historic conference, namely, the widespread Negro resentment toward the white man because of the failure of the white man to come to grips with the truth that the Negro is the creature of the white society and he is blamed and abused for being the product that that society has made him. I felt something of a mystical communion taking place over and again between Negro and Jew throughout the conference. Undoubtedly, there was a profound sharing of feeling of common plight; the Negro and Jew alike have suffered from a dominant society which proclaims self-righteous principles of spiritual and democratic equality, but which persists in a relative insensitivity and hard-heartedness to the pain and insult to the human dignity of these minority peoples. The Negro like the Jew understands in very personal terms the comment of Heinrich Heine, "My friends, first you cripple the Jew and then you blame him for limping."

What bothers the Jew when he finds his Catholic neighbor espousing such unsympathetic stereotypes is that his understanding

of Catholic beginnings in this country leads him to expect the very opposite. The similar immigrant and ghetto phases of their respective American pasts, the discriminations and hurts their communities suffered should have led, at least theoretically, to greater mutual empathy. And certainly the Catholic teaching of charity would lead non-Catholics to a certain expectation in attitude and behavior on the part of those who belong to the faithful. But perhaps what the Jew has not understood is that it is precisely the distinctive character of the Catholic immigrant experience that had predisposed many Catholics to be negative if not hostile to the Jew. The heaviest Catholic immigration to this country came after the Irish potato famines. The immigrants came here penniless, ravaged. The Jewish immigrants, who also fled from dire circumstance, nevertheless brought abilities as shopkeepers, petty tradesmen, and business competence. The encounter between Catholic and Jewish immigrant, therefore, in the early days of this century began in numerous instances as a merchant-customer relationship, a form of relationship which under the best of conditions is attended by resentments, claims and counter-claims, and bruised feelings.

As the American Catholic and Jew today leave behind their immigrant pasts and enter simultaneously into the urban middle class societies and cultures in which they share increasingly the same values and aspirations, the same levels of education and opportunities for status employment, it is to be devoutly

hoped that the stereotypes of the past which crudely served to compensate for depressed and unequal life situations will collapse in the face of new social realities which will bring Catholic and Jew together increasingly as human beings and not as abstractions or gargoyled myths.

Even as we confront and try to explode "the social myths" about each other, we will need to be on guard to see through some of the "ideological myths" which time and unreflective habit have allowed to be conjured up to our mutual disadvantage. Perhaps the most vexing "ideological myth" that many Catholics continue to hold about the Jew is that reflected in the students' second category of questions, namely, "The Jew as Secularist."

The most complex challenge that the Jew has been faced with since the Emancipation is that of his own self-definition. Is the Jew to be defined solely in terms of religion? Are the Jews a people? Are they a race? A nation? It is no great wonder that Catholic students asked perplexed questions about Jews who do not attend the Synagogue and yet insist on identifying themselves with the Jewish people. By all conventional categories, the Jew is an anomaly. It has taken a French Catholic priest, Father Paul Démann, to penetrate into the deeper meaning of Jewish identity. Writing in his most perceptive book, Judaism, Father Démann has avoided the easy way of tagging a label on the Jew, but has sought to understand him in his complexity and reality:

"What does it mean to be a Jew?" writes Father Démann. "Perhaps the least inadequate answer would be something like this: To be a Jew is to belong to a community, a special destiny, which is defined only by history, and this unique history and destiny, with a concrete human condition which flows from them, are closely bound up with the bible history, the history of salvation in the eyes of the believer. With some this belonging will be expressed by loyalty to the tradition of Judaism and the conscious acceptance of a destiny founded on divine election. In others it will take the form of an attachment, whether willing and accepted or almost instinctive, and of the feeling of solidarity founded on a common descent, tradition, education, and condition. Clearly, then, there are several ways of being a Jew. But this does not prevent the Jews from forming an entity whose cohesion, permanence, and personality stand out with extraordinary vigor."

May I respectfully comment that I think it is inherent in the Christian situation that the Jew will never be entirely understood to the satisfaction of Christians. The neo-Platonic and Scholastic categories which are the basis of Catholic thought preclude any precise definition of the Jew in his existential reality. These categories perceive all reality, all of nature, as falling within the duality of the sacred and the secular. To these dualities are attached values,

the sacred being associated with the divine and holy, and therefore superior, and secular being associated with an inferior and "unredeemed" order of nature. Therefore, when the term "secular" is used in the Christian tradition, and in particular in the sense of medieval scholasticism, it must perforce bring to mind a negative association.

Christian humanists such as Erasmus and Thomas More sought to close the gap between the secular and the sacred in their conception of the Res Christiana penetrating the Res Publica, a conception closer in many ways to the Hebrew view of the Biblical categories of reality than to Thomas Aquinas. But up to this day at least Thomism and the secular-sacred dualism remain as orthodoxy in Catholic thought, and the Christian humanists are referred to still somewhat critically as Erasmismo.

We need to face the fact that the conception of the secular, and all that it implies, is a tradition that is uniquely Western. The metaphysique of sacred and secular does not exist in the Orient; this dichotomy is unknown to the Moslem, the Buddhist, the Hindu traditions. And the Jew is more the theological child of the East than of the West. The Jewish community emerged out of the Mediterranean world, out of near-Eastern traditions. And the dichotomy of sacred and secular in the scholastic sense is essentially alien to the Jewish experience and thought, and therefore the Jew resists and resents

having to define himself in terms which are inherently not Jewish, especially when those terms are employed for polemical purposes of intimidation or coercion.

The Jewish religious experience reflects the Semitic background which viewed religion as the praxis of a particular people; religion was the way of life, the paidea of a destined community. The Jew by virtue of being born into this community is committed both as a member of its polity as well as of its religious tradition, and the degree of his religious observance or lack of observance does not remove him from his natural society, the most ancient form of human association. (I suggest you read W. Robertson Smith's classic study, "The Religion of the Semites," to perceive the distinctiveness of Semitic religions.) The Rabbinic sages of the Talmud gave a religious interpretation of this ethnic factor in Judaism indirectly in their injunction, "An Israelite even though he has sinned remains an Israelite. Until the day of his death he is able to repent."

The foregoing hardly begins to do justice to the complex question of secularism, both in its general meaning and in its Jewish significance. (A fuller discussion, for example, would have to confront the issue of why there is virtually no anti-clericalism in Judaism, while Catholicism with its traditional opposition to secularism has been beset by anti-clerical movements, very often the most powerful expressions of secularist

movements in history.) What I have been trying to suggest is the need for a psychological Mercator's globe of adjustment in our perceptions of each other. Our Western hubris (intellectual pride) combined with our American swagger and superiority hinder us from accepting people as they are, in their own terms; prevent us from respecting them in their full integrity and uniqueness. There is some tragic truth in "The Ugly American" insensitivity to the preciousness of other human beings' cultures and ways of living; but for religious people to wear such "ugly" spectacles is to fall into a heresy that blasphemes the very image of God.

Profoundly related to the problem of Catholic perception of the Jew sociologically ("the merchant") and ideologically ("the secularist") is the theological ground on which the Christian first confronts the Jew. The third category of questions asked by the students regarding "The Role of the Jew in the Crucifixion" is in fact the most important influence in the shaping of the Christian's attitude toward the Jew. Philip Sharper has already stated with characteristic perception and scholarship how the misinterpretation of the role of the Jew in the Passion, contrary to the authoritative teaching of the Church in the Council of Trent catechism which he described, has contributed to the historic use of the Jew as a scapegoat for one's own sins, "the mask" which hides one from one's self.

More than one study has revealed that the predisposition on the part of many Christians to think the worst of the Jew is related to that distorted teaching of the dramaturgy of the Crucifixion in which the Jew is portrayed as the villain, banished and rejected forever, and deserving of his persecution. A study of Protestant religious textbooks, recently published as "Faith and Prejudice" by Yale University Press, and the Catholic textbook study conducted at St. Louis University, with which I have been privileged to be associated through my work with the American Jewish Committee, support this thesis. At the same time, the studies indicate that Protestant and Catholic teachings contain resources, "anti-ethnocentric antidotes" that allow the noblest teachings of charity, truth, and justice to be set forth in a way that is not contradicted by misrepresentations and inadequate formulations about Jews - as well as about Protestants, Negroes, and others that are more reflective of history than of theology. The recognition on the part of His Holiness Pope John XXIII and Cardinal Bea of the primary need to separate the essential teaching from the non-essential - those accidental accretions of changing cultural, political and social conditions of the past - represent one of the most heartening developments in relations between the faith communities since the earliest centuries of this era. Pope John's removal from the Good Friday liturgy of "the perfidious Jew" reference, and Cardinal Bea's condemnation of the charge

that Jews are responsible for deicide are historic contributions to the improvement of relations between Christians and Jews.

I come now to the fourth category of questions, "The New Approach in Christian-Jewish Relations." Despite the impressive growth in ecumenical understanding, suspicion continues to hover on both sides. Not all Catholics are aware of the great strides that have been made, especially in recent years, toward improving radically the basis of understanding between Catholics and Jews; and among those who are aware, there are some who are not necessarily happy about it. Somehow to view the Jew and Judaism sympathetically calls into question cherished childhood antipathies which have been hallowed by time into dogmas. There are also many Jews who are totally ignorant of the Christian outreach to the Jew as a genuine expression of Christian love and charity. And among those who have heard of the "new approach" there are some who are suspicious of its genuineness and of its motive. Are Christians changing their tactics, substituting "honey for vinegar" in order that Jews lower their defenses and become easier candidates for conversion, or are they prepared to love Jews as they are, as loyal sons of the Covenant between God and Israel.

These resistances reveal the degree to which we are victims of the polemical readings and conditionings of our histories. If the world is not to give up altogether on the now tired yearning that the forces of religion translate into reality

their professions of respect for human dignity based on love of God, that they become in fact agents of reconciliation and harmony in the social order as contrasted with their past histories so outrageously pockmarked with religious wars, heresy hunts, and bloody persecutions, then upon us, each of us, rests the heavy but inescapable obligation to become pedagogues of the new kerygma of Christian-Jewish fraternity. Pedagogues in the specific as well as in the general meaning. We need to examine with meticulous care what we teach our children about each other in our textbooks, catechisms, liturgy, in our Sunday schools, religious schools, our homes. We need to train our teachers to be sensitive to the intergroup factors in their classroom presentations. We need to make our parents aware that if our homes are truly altars to the Divine Presence that anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-Protestant, anti-Negro attitudes, either as intentional barbs or as unreflective jokes, are in fact violations of the sanctity of the home, of their stewardship of God's children.

Without touching our doctrinal and dogmatic truths, we can reinterpret in our history textbooks, our social science textbooks, and in all our relevant curricula the irenic view of the relationship between Christian and Jew as contrasted with the polemical presentations which now predominate in the majority of our teaching materials. In my studies of the interaction

between Christians and Jews from the first four centuries onward, even through the Middle Ages, I have found literally hundreds of episodes which bespeak the warmest and mutually helpful ties between the ecclesiastical leaders of Christianity and Judaism, as well as on a daily level between "the common people." This is not to minimize for a single moment the tragic fact that the contemporaries of these Christians and Jews were engaged in the most horrible mutual antagonisms and violence, with, let the record be kept clear, Jews being the victims in the majority of instances of this sad history. But Christian textbooks, both Catholic and Protestant, have a far road to travel before they portray adequately and empathetically the Jewish people and Judaism as a living, vital, relevant community in Western civilization. Similarly, Jews are a far cry from dealing adequately and sympathetically with Christians and Christianity. While there are Jews who feel that the persecutions of the past, and in particular the Nazi holocaust which took place in a nation that boasted of its ancient Christian culture, does not obligate them to meet the Christian half-way, there are also many of us who feel that our obligations to future generations of Jewish children require us to help prepare them to live humanely and fraternally with their Christian neighbors.

The cycle of mutual recrimination, suspicion, and hostility has run long enough. It is time to set into motion a cycle of

benign relations, mutually trusting and loving, as befits noble sons and daughters of the Sovereign of the universe. I, as a Jew and as a Rabbi, and together with me thousands of my co-religionists here and the world over, are prepared to join hands with you, our Catholic neighbors, to work together unceasingly toward the realization of that goal so simply but compellingly enunciated by Pope John in his encyclical, Ad Petri Cathedram,

"Let every man tend to do that not which divides one from another, but let every man do that which unites one to another."

