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Preserving American Jewish History

MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

Box 1, Folder 18, Address before 1000 delegates to the National Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs 34th annual convention [excerpts], 29 April 1963.

Excerpts from Address by Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, Director, Interreligious Affairs Department, American Jewish Committee, before 1000 Delegates to the 34th Annual Convention, National Federation of Jewish Men's Clubs, Concord Hotel, Kiamasha Lake, New York, Monday April 29, 1963.

Ecumenism, pluralism, and human relations are the three major "new frontier" social action issues confronting the Jewish community in specific and urgent ways during the coming decade.

A much clearer and deeper understanding of each of these areas than is now generally evident will be required if the multiple representative Jewish agencies are to help the Jewish community steer a steady and constructive course, rather than drift and blunder.

The ecumenical movement in Christendom, without question the most significant development in western religious history since the Reformation in the sixteenth century, is weighted with consequences for American and world Jewry, and yet appears to be only dimly comprehended. Some Jewish leaders continue to be confused about the distinctions between "ecumenism" and "interfaith relations" and have failed to grasp the fundamental implications that inhere in each of these movements for Judaism and Jewry.

Ecumenism is first and foremost a Christian movement, and represents an historic effort of Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox to overcome the sources of their division and to seek to unite on the basis of a shared Christology. While Jews should properly maintain an interest in these developments, it is foolhardy for them to believe that they must be involved in every dialogue between Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox,

and if they are not, that they are being left out or are being discriminated against. Any student of Christian life recognizes how complicated are the relationships between the various communions and denominations, and the presence of Jews in internal Christian discussions will only complicate still further these explorations and, in fact, will prove to be an embarrassment as much to the Jew as to the Christian.

At the same time, Christian leaders are recognizing that the ultimate ground of their ecumenical unity as, indeed, of the American religious consensus rests on their common understanding and loyalty to the Bible, as the Word of God. It is inconceivable that the Biblical renewal that is taking place within Catholicism and Protestantism can proceed very far without serious reference to Jewish Biblical scholarship which preserves the original Hebrew modes of thought, belief and practice and Prophetic categories. In fact, we are already witnessing that the Biblical renewal is Protestantizing Catholicism, the liturgical renewal is Catholicizing Protestantism, and both Catholicism and Protestantism by virtue of their effort to recapture the dynamic of the early Church in Palestine during the first and second century of this era are becoming more Jewish!

The implications of these developments for the Jewish community are that increasingly during the immediate years before us the most meaningful encounters between Christian and Jew will take place on the deeper levels of Biblical and Liturgical scholarship. Thus, we may well find ourselves having to rethink in radical terms the degree of emphasis and priority we have assigned to our conventional "social action" programs which have been designed to interpret the Jew and Jewish interests to

to the Christian in heretofore limited community relations terms. We will need to begin thinking seriously about the undertaking of more comprehensive scholarly projects that will require greater resources to meet growing Christian demands for deeper understanding of themselves through an informed awareness of their roots in Judaism and the early Synagogue, the Rabbinic background of the New Testament, and the present meaning of Torah in the life of the Jewish people.

The momentum that is carrying forward the ecumenical outreach between Catholics and Protestants operates to lend on a secondary level new force to interfaith or interreligious relations. While these tri-faith dialogues usually are based on an examination of social justice issues and problems of pluralistic accommodation, the subterranean currents beneath these encounters most often turn up as theological or theologically-conditioned problems. Those social action practitioners who emphasize working together in the civic order and avoid or postpone confronting the religious icebergs beneath the surface may very well be creating more problems for interreligious cooperation than they are seeking to resolve. The profound and mounting interreligious conflicts over such public policy questions as religious practices in the public schools reveal that Americans have hardly begun to face up publicly to the theological and historical roots of the present-day Catholic perception of the Protestant, the Protestant perception of the Catholic, the Christian perception of the Jew, and the Jewish perception of the Christian.

The religious textbook studies conducted at St. Louis

University, Yale Divinity School, and Dropsie College, which were inspired by the American Jewish Committee, is just now beginning to force out into the open a realization that social action positions that each of these groups take toward each other are crucially shaped by their respective faith perspectives. Thus, in a somewhat oversimplified formulation, these studies reveal that certain mainline Protestant denominations have been teaching in their church schools for decades that Catholicism is a conspiracy. Many Catholic textbooks have been teaching parochial school students that Protestantism is a heresy. Both Catholic and Protestant textbooks have been inculcating in their children a view that the Jews by virtue of their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah are faithless and unredeemed. Jewish textbooks in many instances condition Jewish children to a view of the Christian as his persecutor throughout history.

To a very large extent, these underlying attitudes which Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish teaching systems communicate in their religious subcultures correspond remarkably to the way in which their members view each other in their public debates over the Supreme Court decisions on prayer and Bible reading in the public schools, over federal aid to private education, Sunday closing laws, birth control, and similar issues.

The implication of this for social action, generally, and Jewish social action in particular, it seems to me, is that a major "new frontier" in interreligious affairs for the next decade or so will be for each of the religious communities to assume responsibility for overcoming the distorted perceptions

and images that each group prolongs about the other, in order that Catholic, Protestant, and Jew can relate to each other in real human terms rather than through the inherited polemical myths of the past. Only until each religious community sheds its mask, and pretense, and enters emphatically into the fears, anxieties, hopes and needs of the other, will we be in a position to make religious pluralism a working reality rather than a verbal formula disguising our biases and resentments.

It is for this reason that progressive religious leaders in the three-faith communities have so warmly applauded and staunchly supported the pronouncements and actions of Pope John XVIII and Cardinal Bea, the World Council of Churches, National Council of Churches and leaders in the Jewish community who in individual and cooperative ways have sought to remove the bases of their misunderstanding and animosities that are grounded in teachings and attitudes of earlier polemical periods.

I am persuaded that Catholic and Protestant leaders are determined, as a matter of Christian principle, to remove those anti-Jewish teachings which have perpetuated a nefarious image of the Jew in western culture and have given religious sanction to anti-Semitism. As these efforts become translated into reality through more affirmative portrayal of the Jew and Judaism in Christian teaching materials, liturgy, and publications, and indeed in the mind and the daily practices of the individual Christian, Jews themselves will be confronted with the inescapable

moral obligation to face their own anti-Gentile and anti-Christian attitudes which are defensive and compensatory inheritances from their painful encounters with Christians. As Jews dig deeply into their histories they will find justification and precedent for a positive revision of their view of the Christian, even as they expect that the Christian has resources in his tradition that will enable him to reinterpret and revise his understanding of and relationship to the Jew in affirmative terms. And this area of revision of basic images and attitudes that Christian and Jew hold toward each other may well be one of the most decisive areas of concentration in the new frontier of social action for the Jewish community.

