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IS CHRISTIAN ECUMENISM A THREAT TO THE JEWS?

by

Marc H. Tanenbaum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum is national director of interreligious affairs of the American Jewish Committee. A modern historian recently characterized him as "the leading figure among Jewish ecumenists in interreligious affairs and social action.")

Christian ecumenism, the movement to unite all Christians in one body, is probably among the most significant religious developments of the 20th century. But some of the directions in which the ecumenical movement has been steering - or drifting - have begun to stir considerable uneasiness among many Jews, and quite possibly others.

Most Jews initially have welcomed the efforts of Protestant denominations to unite among themselves, and with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. The early sympathetic Jewish response grew out of the painful knowledge that in the religious wars and struggles throughout the centuries the Jews were among the first to become bloody scapegoats in the crossfire between Christians - for example, in the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Reformation conflict with the Papacy. Thus, simply put, if the choice is intra-Christian hatred and conflict, or love and unity, clearly most Jews would prefer the latter.

There is also a sociological factor. Given the social turmoil in America, the Middle East, and elsewhere, if Christian solidarity can contribute to civic peace and tranquility, the majority of the Jewish people would surely count that another reason for favoring Christian unity.

And not to be minimized is the influence on Jews of the positive teachings of Judaism whose messianic visions of mankind "forming one brotherhood" would see Christian unity as one major development toward the fulfillment of this Biblical goal.

Nevertheless, Jewish anxieties about Christian ecumenism is growing and for several quite compelling reasons:

- * Some forms of Christian ecumenism are showing signs of becoming a potential threat to the pluralist character of American society and to world community.
- * Christian ecumenism in certain of its present institutional arrangements threatens to undermine "the three major faiths" formula of American society, with the possibility of reducing Judaism and the Jewish community to second-class status - the characteristic status of Jews throughout much of their history in the Christian West.

*Christian ecumenism in some of its theological thinking holds the seeds of sprouting again the Marcionite heresy, which in the second century urged Christians to break away from their Old Testament moorings. Marcionism became the source of much anti-Jewish thinking and behavior.

Lest this appears to be a case of Jewish paranoia, let me provide some documentation:

In Texas, the Protestant Council of Churches and the Catholic Conference of Bishops about two years ago merged their separate church structures to form the Texas Conference of Churches. Jews in Texas and on the national scene paid little attention to the merger, seeing in it a natural and legitimate Christian effort at reorganization, primarily of internal interest to Christians. But rather shortly it became evident that the Texas Conference of Churches had vital "external implications for Jews."

The Conference united fifteen Christian denominations not only to give expression to their theological unity in Christ, but to give more effective practical witness to their social action concerns in the community.

As the Texas Conference began to move into various local communities to deal with social justice problems, such as race relations, anti-poverty, low-income housing, leadership training for Mexican-Americans, and so forth, the Christian ecumenists very soon began to bump into Jewish groups and Jewish civic leaders who were deeply involved in these areas.

The dilemma was immediate and unavoidable - to be realistic and effective, it was essential to relate to this Jewish leadership force. But what should be the nature of the relationship when the Christian ecumenical body was "a closed club" that made no provision for ties with Jews?

To the credit of the Texas Conference of Churches, it has begun to worry about this paradox. Its efforts to create unity and inclusiveness among Christians has resulted in a disunity and exclusiveness in the larger community.

Troubled by its "exclusive club" image and the social pattern that it might be creating of isolating others, the Conference has begun to explore seriously with Jewish leaders how it might go about reorganizing in a way that will enable it "to do its Christian thing" and still work constructively with Jews - and others - in areas of common social concern on a peer-to-peer basis.

A formula that is now being considered by the Texas Conference to meet this need - and that undoubtedly would be acceptable to the Jewish community - would be the creation of a division or a commission on Jewish-Christian relations within the existing structure of the Conference, with adequate staff and resources that would really work seriously at its relationships with Jews. That arrangement would parallel the "Committee on the Church and the Jewish People" set up several years ago by the World Council of Churches in Geneva.

The Vatican also has a special "Secretariat on Catholic-Jewish Relations" and the U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops has established an American version of the Vatican's secretariat. No American mainline Protestant denomination has any such commission or a single full-time person to maintain communication with American Jewry, the largest and strongest Jewish community in the world.

Ideally, most knowledgeable Jews would prefer the creation at the outset of an "interreligious" or "interfaith" council, since that means that the Jewish community takes part as an equal partner with Catholics, Protestants, and Eastern Orthodox bodies in decision-making that affects its constituents. A number of such interreligious

groups exist and function effectively as pluralist instruments in cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore, and Los Angeles, among others. Another model is that of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, but membership in that is individual and not group participation.

Despite the existence of these interreligious agencies, the dominant pattern that Christian leadership is creating in every region of the United States - as well as in Western Europe and Latin America where sizeable Jewish communities exist - is that of mergers of Catholic and Protestant institutions, a number of which are modeled on the Texas Conference pattern. Such joint Christian structures now exist in Arizona, New Mexico, New York City, the Christian Association of the nine counties of Southwest Pennsylvania, the Louisiana Inter-church Conference, the Ohio Council of Churches, the Vermont Ecumenical Council, cooperating Christian organizations in Minnesota, North Dakota, Portland, Maine, among many others. A number of these merged ecumenical bodies, incidentally, were established since January 1, 1970, indicating that this is a growing movement.

In addition to consolidating church bodies, a parallel movement of joint Christian professional associations is developing, which ignores Jewish professionals working in the same areas. There are now joint Catholic-Protestant mass media bodies, joint Christian press associations, joint Christian biblical study societies, joint Christian women's, youth, and men's groups.

This ecumenical tendency is even more complicated, and potentially more serious for Jews, on the national and international levels. The most important in the United States is COCU, the "Consultation on the Church of Christ Uniting," which is a plan for the merger of nine major Protestant denominations with an estimated membership of some 26 million members into one church structure. The pamphlet, "A Plan for Union," which outlines the merger plans scheduled to take place in mid-1970s, consists of 104 pages. The references to ties with the Jewish community are contained in five lines.

Throughout the process of organizing COCU during the past decade, the Protestant leadership has invited Roman Catholic consultants to express Catholic concerns and views which have been reflected in the thinking of the COCU organizers. It is only within the past month that contact has been established between

Jewish leaders and COCU officials, and efforts are now being made to reflect some Jewish sensitivities and concerns in the organizing processes of COCU, even though a decade of work has already gone by.

Similarly, on the international level parallel developments between the World Council of Churches and the Vatican have begun to trouble Jewish leadership. In January 1968, the World Council, which represents 242 Protestant, Anglican, and Orthodox denominations throughout the world, and the Vatican's Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace established a joint agency called SODEPAX, which stands for Society, Development, and Peace. The Sodepax Commission is devoted essentially to study and education on third world development problems. While communication between world Jewry and the Vatican and World Council has improved measurably in recent months, few approaches have been made to any Jews for meaningful program involvement in this crucial area of emerging world community.

Ironically, the Jewish community in Israel alone has both research and major action programs in economic development and technical assistance under way in 65 countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Add the facts that some 40 percent of the U.S. Peace Corps consists of Jewish personnel and that Jewish experts

are prominently involved in key United States and United Nations international aid programs, and the question becomes inescapable: how long can world Christian ecumenists afford evading the Jewish presence on the international scene?

Of course, it would be a monumental presumption on the part of Jews to tell Christians how to run their internal affairs - no less a display of "chutzpah" than were Christians to seek to impose their ideas as to how the Jewish community should organize itself. (In fact, some Christians have tried to do just that, with one Episcopalian ecumenist recently suggesting that he would relate only to "Jewish church officials" rather than to the Jewish community as it exists in its own terms.)

But the evidence now argues that the internal affairs of Christian ecumenists do have profound and growing external consequences--not just for Jews and Judaism, but for America and world society as well.

Are Christian ecumenists redefining service to the common good in terms that inevitably lead to the recreation of a Christian society in America?

Would not a unitary Christian society undermine the pluralism of America, which has been the foundation of religious liberty and the source of religious creativity?

Does not world community with its non-Western high religions and cultures require a more imaginative pluralist approach rather than a simply refurbished version of the 19th century Christian mission to the heathens?

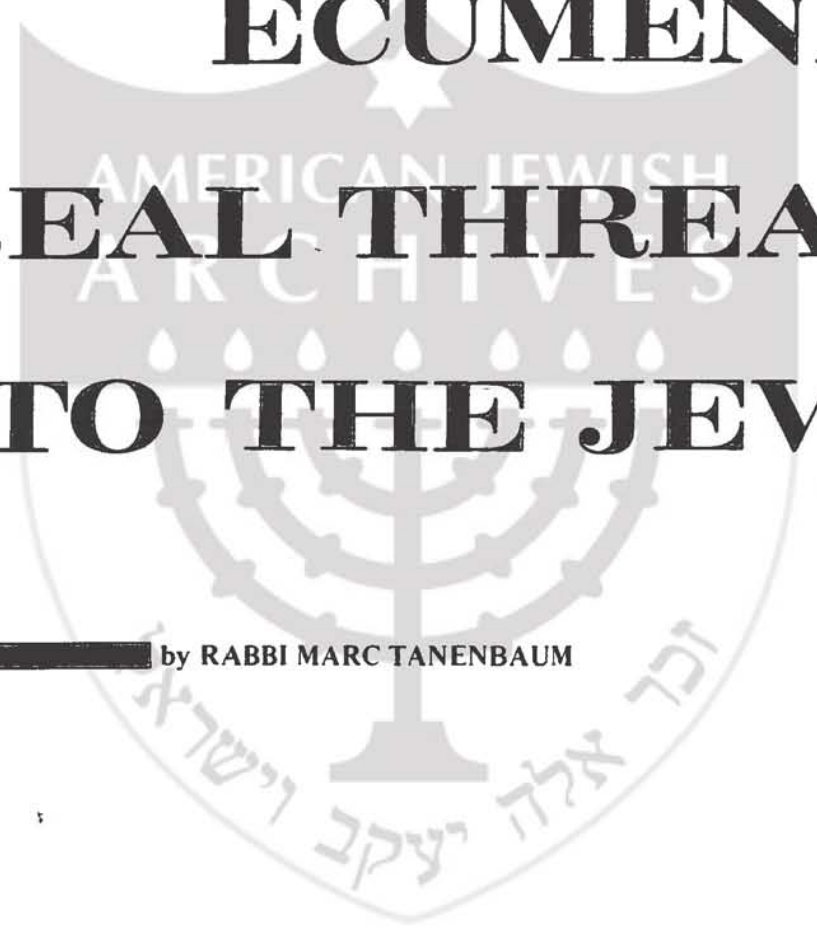
Increasingly many Jews feel today that they not only have a right to confront their Christian neighbors and friends with such critical questions, but in fact have a moral responsibility to do so, while there is still time to change. That the possibility for such constructive reorientation of Christian ecumenism exists is reflected in the fact that leading Christian scholars are now making "the Jewish case" to fellow Christians in such forthright statements as that of Professor Markus Barth, who wrote in The Journal of Ecumenical Studies:

"In communion with Jews, Christians will always be recipients rather than givers. Goiim need Jews to receive every possible help against slipping back into Gentile ways. For this reason Jews have to be beseeched to participate in innumerable

attempts made by Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox, to recover now the unity of God's people on earth. If Jews were excluded from the respective encounters, discussions and decisions, the unity reached might well resemble a pagan symposium, but hardly the unity of God's one people gathered from all the nations, on the mountain of the Lord. Christians cannot help but beg the Jews to join the ecumenical movement, not for the sake of a super church, but for the search of true service to the one true God."



IS CHRISTIAN ECUMENISM A REAL THREAT TO THE JEWS?



 by RABBI MARC TANENBAUM

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CHRISTIAN ECUMENISM, THE MOVEMENT to unite all Christians in one body, is probably among the most significant religious developments of the twentieth century. But some of the directions in which the ecumenical movement has been steering—or drifting—have begun to stir considerable uneasiness among many Jews, and quite possibly others.

Most Jews initially have welcomed the efforts of Protestant denominations to unite among themselves, and with Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. The early sympathetic Jewish response grew out of the painful knowledge that in the religious wars and struggles throughout the centuries the Jews were among the first to become bloody scapegoats in the crossfire between Christians. This happened, for example, in the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the Reformation conflict with the Papacy. Thus, simply put, if the choice is intra-Christian hatred and conflict, or love and unity, clearly most Jews would prefer the latter.

There is also a sociological factor. Given the social turmoil in America, the Middle East, and elsewhere, if Christian solidarity can contribute to civic peace and tranquility, the majority of the Jewish people would surely count that another reason for favoring Christian unity.

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“A Closed Club” of Christians

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Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, national director of interreligious affairs of the American Jewish Committee, asks: Is Christian Ecumenism a Real Threat to the Jews? The question implies at least a tentative answer: yes. Increasingly many Jews feel today that they not only have a right to confront their Christian neighbors and friends with critical questions, he declares, but in fact have a moral responsibility to do so while there is still time to change. Rabbi Tanenbaum's article was originally written for *The New York Times*.

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