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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 3, Folder 3, "Vatican Council II Tenth Anniversary" [excerpts],
1975.

1975

EXCERPTS FROM ADDRESS BY RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM, NATIONAL
INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE,
BEFORE CONFERENCE MARKING TENTH ANNIVERSARY OBSERVANCE OF
VATICAN COUNCIL II

This conference is an eloquent testimony to the historic and enduring impact of Vatican Council II on the improvement of Jewish-Christian relations, for this meeting could not have taken place in this form and with this spirit of candid self-criticism, openness, and friendship had not Vatican Council II set the stage for just this interaction. At the same time, Vatican Council II would have remained a grandiose gesture had not meetings of Christians and Jews taken place during the past decade devoted to serious and systematic implementation of the practical proposals of the Council for uprooting anti-Semitism and every form of hatred and prejudice, and for building solid bridges of human fraternity through academic dialogues and joint cooperation in education and social action programs.

In very large measure, these achievements are the fruit of the brilliant and courageous leadership provided by the American Catholic bishops who spearheaded the adoption by the Vatican Council of the Declarations on Catholic-Jewish Relations and on Religious Liberty, which are the foundation-stones on which all progress in Catholic-Jewish relations have been built. Thanks to enlightened Catholic and Jewish leadership, a great deal of real progress has been made during the past decade in removing the roots of anti-Semitism, anti-Christianity, and racial prejudice in our respective

teaching systems, more progress in fact than had been made during the 1,900 years that preceded this period. But as long as a single hostile or pejorative teaching remains in any of our textbooks or in the minds and behavior of any of our teachers or parents or children, that negativism or rejection of others remains as a fundamental contradiction to the highest professions of our individual faiths and we are morally obligated not to rest until we are totally free and clean of any prejudices whatsoever. This consultation is intended as a major collective impetus to push forward this purging and purification process without which genuine human community is ultimately not realizable.

In addition to the tremendous value of the actual findings of our respective textbook studies and human relations programs for teachers and parents and students, quite possibly one of the decisive achievements of our interreligious experience on the American scene is that we have learned how to make pluralism work. We have learned how to instruct a new generation of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews in how to be faithful to one's own doctrines and traditions, and at the same time to develop authentic respect for the faith and religious commitments of others. We have in short developed a model of building community without compromise of our most cherished beliefs. That achievement, which is taken for granted by far too many, may well be the most valuable "export" which we have to share with other nations, peoples, and non-Western religious communities.

The ultimate significance of the improvement of understanding between Christians and Jews, which Vatican Council II advanced so dramatically, is to be appreciated against the reality that we live today in an age of violence, of terror, and of widespread violation of fundamental human rights. There is not a continent on the globe that is not despoiled by terror and violence, by barbarism, and by a growing callousness to human suffering and by threats to human existence itself. At the center of the human crisis today is the fundamental depreciation of the meaning and value of human life itself. The rise in "verbal violence," the staggering increase in murders in America, the proliferation of the arms race and of nuclear weapons on an international scale are all threatening and battering the Biblical affirmation that each human life is created in the sacred image of God and is therefore of ultimate worth and preciousness.

If we are to re-create some moral limits that will inhibit the widespread and growing destruction of human lives, it is essential that Christians and Jews join together with other peoples of conscience in the following ways:

First, Christians and Jews must help engender a national and international attitude of scorn and contempt for those who use violence or who advocate the use of violence. We must work to de-romanticize all appeals to use violence and terrorism as means of liberation or of institutional oppression, since from a moral standpoint, no ends can justify such anti-human means.

Second, Christians and Jews must work to curtail the resort to inflammatory propaganda, especially from international forums which have psychological impact on an international scale. As Prof. Gordon Allport of Harvard University demonstrated in his monumental study, "The Nature of Prejudice," there is an inevitable progression "from verbal aggression to violence, from rumor to riot, from gossip to genocide."

Third, Christians and Jews must work toward educational development and communication among peoples to reduce the abrasive effects of "differences." Differences, as we have learned in the pluralistic experience of America, can be a source of enrichment rather than a threat.

Fourth, Christians and Jews should engage in a massive effort to establish a "new humanism" on a global basis that seeks to restore the Biblical value of the infinite worth and preciousness of each human life that must be appreciated as an end in itself and never as an object of somebody's project or program. We must also engage in an urgent and sustained intellectual and educational effort to elaborate a theology and ideology of pluralism which presupposes the right of each religious, racial, and ethnic group to define itself in its own terms and to be accepted unconditionally by its own self-definition. Christians and Jews have a decisive contribution to make to the building of the ideological foundations without which a stable world community cannot come into being.

Fifth, Christians and Jews should work toward making the economy of each nation as self-sufficient and stable as possible in the sense of not perpetually requiring relief support. Inextricably linked with such an effort is the control of the arms race on an international scale, gun control in America, and a rational reordering of priorities that allows for adequate defense and yet at the same time reallocates some of the billions wasted on arms that should be applied to the crying needs of the hungry, the diseased, and the homeless.

And finally, Christians and Jews should work for the completion of the judicial instrumentalities called for by Article 6 of the Genocide convention in the form of an international penal tribunal for trying those who are accused of genocide attempts anywhere in the world.

"The salvation of mankind," Alexander Solzenyitzhen reminds us, "will depend on everyone becoming concerned about the welfare of everybody everywhere."

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