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Joint Program Plan

Background

THE WIDE, WIDE WORLD OF
JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN 1978

by

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Public policy and public opinion affect one another reciprocally. Politicians gravitate toward popular causes and are repelled by unpopular ones. At the same time, official policies and the declared positions of public officials heavily influence the opinions and attitudes of the people.

JOINT PROGRAM PLAN, 1977-78, FOR JEWISH COMMUNITY RELATIONS ISSUED BY NJCRAC

As far back as 1835, the year in which Democracy in America was published by the young French nobleman, Alexis de Tocqueville, this astute political scientist (whose treatise has been universally regarded as "a classic") was able to see that "America is a nation with the soul of a church."

His perception was that of a political scientist, not that of a theologian. Yet he had the insight and the wisdom to grasp the empirical fact that there was a profound interrelationship between the civic behavior of the American people and their moral and spiritual commitments. Prof. Clinton Rossiter was later to make the connection explicit in his Political Thought of the American Revolution:

Revolutionary thinkers drew heavily on their colonial heritage in proclaiming virtue the essence of freedom. There was a widespread conviction that free government rested on a definite moral basis -- a virtuous people. Conversely, the decay of a people's morals signalled the end of liberty and happiness. On no point in the whole range of political theory were Americans more thoroughly in accord. Free government was in large part a problem in practical ethics.

In ways that have not been always manifest in the past, Jewish community relations in 1978 and beyond, I should like to suggest, will need to give substantially more serious attention to the empirical realities that de Tocqueville, Rossiter and others long ago recognized; namely, that:

First, religion and religious institutions play a very large role in the lives of the majority of the American people -- a fact that many of us concentrated in eastern, liberal, secularized urban centers are not necessarily conscious of in any meaningful ways;

Second, America is presently beginning to enter into "a profound religious revival with the evangelical movement providing a powerful religious thrust," as a recent George Gallup survey puts it.

Those realities are implicit with ambiguities, mixed blessings for the American Jewish community, Judaism, Israel, Soviet Jewry, for Jewish-Christian relations, and for America itself. They pose both rich and creative opportunity, as well as unsettling challenge; in some cases, even threat to Jewish security and well-being here and abroad.

Let's examine those propositions first in terms of their "rich and creative opportunities" for Jewish community relations:

According to the 1977 Yearbook of the National Council of Churches, some 131,012,653 out of nearly 220 million Americans belong as members to 223 religious bodies. Roman Catholics number nearly 49 million members, the nation's largest religious groups. Mainline Protestants represent about 32 million constituents. Evangelical Protestants count nearly 50 million members, with the 13 million Southern Baptist Convention, the largest U.S. Protestant body (the Southern Baptists claim to convert 8,000 people every Sunday morning).

The meaning of these statistics is to be found in the fact that the churches of the United States -- with all their diversity -- represent the single largest network of communication, organization, and of public opinion formation: (A liberal Protestant friend recently kibitzed, "Why, Marc, there are more Methodist churches in the United States than there are post offices." "I hope that they deliver their goods more effectively," I replied.

The NJCRAC Program Plan for 1977-78 stated the evident truth that "public policy and public opinion affect one another reciprocally." The civil rights struggle, the anti-Vietnam war effort, the support of the Watergate proceedings that led to the Nixon impeachment were dramatic changes in America's domestic and foreign policy -- and, if you examine the record carefully, you will find that the organized churches (and in some cases, synagogues and the Jewish community) and para-religious groups played central, even decisive roles. Christian and Jewish groups alone -- without any aid whatsoever from universities, labor unions, business -- were responsible for reversing a negative vote of House and Senate committees for the provision of food aid for millions of starving and dying people. And today, Christian and Jewish groups are in the forefront of activist programs for seeking to promote universal nuclear disarmament, before mindless nuclear proliferations among the Qaddafis and Idi Amins and South Yemens blunder into setting off nuclear bolocausts.

I dwell quite deliberately on underscoring the role, or the potential role, of church groups and of Jewish-Christian relations programs, because I do not believe that the Jewish community -- both organized and "the Jewish streets" -- fully comprehend as yet their ongoing importance for support for most of the central issues on "the Jewish agenda", as well as for the American democratic ethos.

The American Jewish Committee is presently conducting a joint study with the National Council of Churches of the present state of Jewish-Christian relations around the country. Of 86 responses received thus far from local and regional Christian councils (either all Protestant, or ecumenical Catholic-Orthodox-Protestant), 74 reported that they "had direct involvement with some part of the Jewish community in the past two years." Twelve groups replied they had none.

In describing the kinds of involvement they had with the Jewish community, these mainly liberal Protestant, local community groups reported the following:

- 27 Commemorative or ceremonial events relating to Israel
- 28 Commemorative or ceremonial events relating to the Holocaust
- 37 Formal theological dialogues, seminars, etc., on Israel or the Holocaust
- 25 Events relating to anti-Semitism
- 52 Joint services, pulpit exchanges, or ceremonial occasions related to community events (Thanksgiving, etc.)
- 60 Joint social action/human justice projects
- 41 Formal theological dialogues, seminars, etc. on other aspects of mutual interest

When asked to describe "the organizational relationships between the Jewish community and the Christian community in the area of the responding agency,"

- 25 responded generally excellent
- 26 responded fairly good
- 12 responded mediocre
- 2 responded fairly poor
- 4 responded poor.

This is not the place to attempt any detailed analysis of the preliminary findings of this study. (When completed, we will be glad to share its results with NJCRAC and its member agencies.) Suffice it to say for our present purposes the following:

a) There exists today a larger network of communication between Christians (and this would include Catholics, increasingly Evangelicals,, as well as mainline Protestants and Greek Orthodox) and Jews in local communities than have ever existed before in Jewish history. But as the data attests, in many instances the relationships are a mile wide and an inch thin.

b) In view of the fact that pro-Arab missionary groups located in the national liberal Protestant headquarters frequently dominate or certainly seek to influence policy-making in a pro-Arab, even pro-PLO direction, the influence of local church councils, local pastors, and local lay leaders assumes increasing significance. Our experience with the United Presbyterian Church in September 1977 was instructive on this point. Pro-Arab missionaries and "third worlders" printed up a resolution (after consultation with Arabists in the U.S. State Department) that they inserted into every kit of Presbyterian delegates to their General Assembly. The resolution urged that the liberal Presbyterian church to recognize "the PLO as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people."

After we talked with numerous Presbyterians from the communities, they arose on the assembly floor, declared they would not "baptize the PLO as legitimate" and defeated the canned resolution by a vote of 75 to 25.

REFLECTION: The United Presbyterian Church is a quintessential "liberal Protestant" denomination, and Jewish organizations and many of our Rabbis and lay people have cooperated energetically with this denomination, and other liberal denominations, in many causes of domestic justice and foreign policy which are as vital to us as to them -- civil rights, church-state separation, economic justice, foreign aid, etc. We have felt, and continue to feel, in many ways comfortable with such leadership for their theological and institutional leadership have been in the forefront of opposing proselytization of Jews, and even in combatting traditional Christian anti-Semitism. But there are sobering realities that both liberal Protestants and Jews need to face. Beneath all the Protestant moralism and universalistic rhetoric, liberal Protestant denominations have very particularistic vested interests in the Arab world and in the third world generally. Consult the "Handbook of Missions" and you will find the interesting statistic that American mainlining Protestants provide about 70 per cent of the finances supporting overseas Protestant missions -- church schools, hospitals, clinics, relief -- and nearly 70% of overseas Protestant missionaries.

Even should peace break out in the Middle East -- as we all pray devoutly it will -- there can be no illusions about the power of group interests. Overseas missionary interests and investments are the Zionism of American mainline Protestant church bureaucrats and officialdom. The masses of Protestant church goers may contribute to overseas missions -- they are especially generous to relief and welfare campaigns -- but they are far more concerned about personal, experiential faith, about quality religious education for their children, and about their local churches as a supportive resource for their families and their neighborhoods.

Since the 1967-1973 Yom Kippur Wars, and the shocking inadequacy (and worse) of the responses of mainline Protestant church bureaucrats, we have learned, contrary to the New York Times, that Jews have not turned their backs on liberal Protestants, but some liberal Protestant officials have turned their backs on the Jews -- even though their numerous local parish constituents have not. We need to accept the operating principle that there are "selective coalitions." And, as some Jews feel, we should not be ashamed of acknowledging the validity of Talleyrand's maxim for liberal-Protestant-Jewish relations: "We do not have permanent alliances; we have only permanent interests."

If participatory democracy ever becomes a reality in the liberal Protestant denominations, it is not altogether inconceivable that local mainline Protestant clergy and laity may some day become a constructive countervailing influence in the national policy-making of their denominations, whose bills they continue to pay.

Catholics and Jews

Foreign-policy issues have been increasingly concentrated and centralized in the hands of the Holy See, especially since Vatican Council II. For that reason, the American Catholic hierarchy and Catholic people generally have concentrated historically on matters of faith and morals, and on domestic American concerns. The Vatican shapes policies of detente with the East European countries, relations with the third world, and international Catholic approaches on human rights issues in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. American Catholic leaders, especially the bishops who owe their appointments to the Roman Curia, become involved in foreign policy questions, such as human rights or the Middle East, when the lead for such supportive action comes from Vatican City.

That reliance on authority from Rome has had its beneficial implications, particularly for Catholic-Jewish relations. The adoption by Vatican Council of the Declaration on non-Christian Religions in 1965, which condemned anti-Semitism and called for fraternal dialogue with Jews, and the subsequent 1975 Vatican Guidelines on Catholic-Jewish Relations, has had the most positive consequences, especially on the academic and clerical levels of the Catholic church.

In cooperation with the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League, among other Jewish agencies, Catholic textbooks have been virtually purged of all anti-Semitic references. Catholic liturgy and Catholic Biblical studies and seminary curricula are being systematically reviewed by the U.S. Bishops Committee on Catholic-Jewish relations, and significant progress can be reported on almost every level of catechesis, liturgy, sermons, teacher training, etc. The most important indication of the continued possibilities of removal of anti-Jewish references in the entire Catholic culture is now to be found in a large, growing, scholarly, and impressively serious and committed literature that is now available to every level of Catholic education and communication. (See, for example, the recent study, Faith Without Prejudice by Dr. Eugene Fisher, newly-appointed secretary of the Bishops' Catholic-Jewish Committee; Catechesis and Prejudice by the Rev. John Pawlikowski; How Catholics Look at Jews by Claire Huchet Bishop; all published by the Paulist Press. An AJC bibliography on such materials is available on request.)

Even the most difficult and sensitive issues of developing a more adequate Catholic theology that respects Judaism as a living religion to be appreciated in its own terms rather than as a mere preparation for Christianity is being developed by major Catholic scholars. As one important example of how far advanced this development has gone among Catholic scholars, I can recommend no better study than "Christology After Auschwitz," by the Rev. Michael B. McGarry (Paulist Press). One excerpt:

"Logos-Christology, properly understood, does not see Judaism as only preparatory to Christianity, as destined to disappear from the earth. Rather it sees Judaism as one of God's ways of speaking to his world through his continued election of the Jewish people in terms which Christians can understand."

As the history of ideas demonstrates, breakthrough ideas always begin in the minds of an individual or a few seminal minds. It takes decades for such fresh ideas which depart from traditional perceptions to percolate down among the masses and to become part of the popular culture. But the important thing is that there are now clusters of first-rate scholars in the Catholic academic, theological, and biblical communities who are formulating such positive ideas about Jews, Judaism -- even about Israel and the Nazi Holocaust -- and that is a sign of hope for tomorrow.

Conflict Issues

The traditional conflict issues between Catholics and Jews in America are self-evident and need no recounting here -- abortion, the right-to-life campaigns, and aid to parochial schools. My own testimony is to avoid automatic "nyets" to every Catholic proposal on these issues, and to continuously seek to find new ways for sympathetic accommodation without compromising basic principles. The Los Angeles statement drafted by the Cardinal's Committee on Catholic-Jewish Relations and the Southern California Board of Rabbis, which the AJC office in Los Angeles helped inaugurate, is a fine example of civilized and mutually respecting ways of exploring the abortion issue by committed Catholics and Jews, who differ.

On the Horizon

During 1978 and thereafter, the Jewish community -- and other Americans -- may well anticipate that the issue of "anti-Catholicism" will surface and will find its way on the Catholic-Jewish agenda. This will invariably develop as a result of a new book, "An Ugly Little Secret -- Anti-Catholicism in America," by the Rev. Andrew Greeley; from some new writings by Michael Novak; and from intensified activity, including the formation of local chapters of the Catholic League for Civil and Religious Liberty. As Greeley, Novak, Virgil Blum and others are declaring publicly with increasing concern, Catholic ethnics have moved dramatically up the socio-economic ladder, produce more university graduates than children of British Protestants, and feel underrepresented in the elite sectors of American business, political and cultural life.

What can be troublesome for Jews, among other things, is that a tendency is developing to contrast Jewish "success" with Catholic "failure" implying somehow that Jews bear some responsibility for that alleged failure. "Anti-Catholicism" side by side with anti-Semitism will be the next hot agenda item.

Another sleeper on the Catholic-Jewish agenda will be the surfacing of Hispanics in the Catholic church. There are 12 million Hispanics among the 49 million U.S. Catholics. Fifty per cent of the Catholics in New York are Hispanic-Puerto Ricans. The Catholic Hispanic culture has not yet been seriously illuminated by Vatican Council II's instruction. We are now involved in a special program to examine this issue -- which takes different forms among Chicanos, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans, with different social consequences.

Evangelicals and Jews

The noted Protestant historian, Dr. Martin Marty, has recently written that the widespread public support of Israel by Dr. Billy Graham and leaders of the 50

million Evangelical Christians in the United States was probably "the most important religious story in America in 1977." This sign of friendship is cheering, Marty wrote, "and should help dispel lingering Jewish fears that the soil from which President Carter comes breeds only anti-Semites and anti-Zionists."

Given the legitimate anxiety that Israel and the Jewish community felt following the adoption of the October 1 Soviet-American agreement, there can be little question that the upsurge of support by Evangelicals through public statements and full page ads was not only heartwarming, but was also politically significant in Washington and elsewhere.

Fifteen years ago, the JACommittee began relating to Evangelical leaders and institutions because it was clear then that they were the fastest growing religious community in America. Contrary to the "redneck," "cracker" stereotypes, they are now generally middle-class and upper-middle-class, with university educated leadership, and growing numbers of captains of industry. We have developed the most extensive network of relationship between Evangelicals and Jews in the United States. This month, Baker Book House, a leading evangelical publishing house will issue the first book of its kind, "Evangelicals and Jews in Conversation: Scripture, History and Theology," edited by Prof. Marvin Wilson, my colleague James Rudin, and myself. We commend this to you as the basis for organizing any Evangelical-Jewish dialogue in your community.

Even should peace become established in the Middle East, the need for continued mass support of Israel, her military and economic needs, defense against charges of violations of human rights, conflict over the status of Jerusalem, Jewish settlements, etc. will be great. The Evangelical community will be a backbone of support if we continue to develop mutual understanding.

The issues of conversion will continue to be the subject of Evangelical-Jewish dialogue. There are signs that enlightened Evangelical scholars are seeking to find new Biblical insight for modifying their traditional conversionary approach, samples of which are to be found in our book. Who would have thought that the Catholic Church could make such major strides forward in relating to Jews and Judaism in a new way? At least we have an obligation to try to collaborate in good faith, perhaps ultimately recognizing that on this issue as on others we will both have to leave something to God, "whose mystery is beyond our understanding."

Finally

Americans are hungering for a restoration of some deeper basis for our moral and ethical behavior as a nation. Because of the exigencies of recent history, Jews and Israel have appeared to be to many Christians "a problem," but Judaism transformed history at Exodus and Sinai as a great moral, human, and spiritual resource that undergirded the dignity of human life, that sought redemption for all people in society. The rabbis called it Tikun Haolom, the repair of the world. As the pressures of assuring simple survival may ease in the Middle East and in the Soviet Union, and hopefully elsewhere, this primary task of the Jewish people as a messianic, redemptive force in history may once again occupy our attention and resources. In a world of violence, crime, and dehumanization, the world needs us and what we have stood for more than ever before.