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POPE JOHN PAUL I, THE JEWS, AND ISRAEL

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

A Background Memorandum

(Rabbi Tanenbaum, national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, is a leader in Jewish-Christian relations and was recently voted among the "ten most respected and influential religious leaders in America" in a poll of newspaper writers.)

Religion is more caught than taught, the Anglican divine Dean Inge once wrote. If there is truth to that maxim - as I believe there is - Pope John Paul I seems to have "caught" favorable attitudes toward the Jewish people and Judaism from his mother, and that may prove to be more promising for the future of Catholic-Jewish relations under his Papacy than anything that he might have been taught.

As the media have abundantly documented, Pope John Paul was born and raised in a desperately poor family in the northern Italian village of Canale d'Agordo. To eke out a living for his family, his father became a migrant bricklayer in Switzerland, and then returned to an island north of Venice where he worked as a glass artisan. To help sustain her family, Albino Luciani's mother worked as a maid in the household of a Jewish family.

In March 1977, at a meeting of the joint Vatican-International Jewish Committee concerned with Catholic-Jewish relations, Cardinal Luciani saw fit to recall his mother's experience as deeply formative of his own personal attitudes toward Jews. The affable Cardinal warmly recalled that the Jewish family was very kind to Mrs. Luciani, and their faith in Judaism greatly impressed her. The Cardinal said that his mother passed her respect for that Jewish family and their religion on to him, and he added, he traces his warm feelings toward Judaism to that childhood experience.

Bishop Francis Mugavero, of Brooklyn, N.Y., who attended the March 1977 meeting, recently said that the group could feel that Cardinal Luciani had warm and respectful feelings toward Jews and Judaism and "he meant it." He was also "very much 'with it' in terms of understanding the cause of promoting respect between Catholics and Jews."

During World War II, Don Albino Luciani, then a young seminarian and teacher in Belluno, visited prisoners in Nazi jails and was "an indefatigable pastor" supporting morally partisans in the anti-Nazi resistance. Don Albino's anti-fascism was consonant with Dr. Lucy Dawidowicz' description of the attitudes of the Italian people toward Jews under the Nazi regime. She writes in her classic study, The War Against the Jews: 1939-1945, on page 358:

"In Italy, the Catholic hierarchy behaved like the Italians...The overwhelming cooperation that the Italians gave their Jewish compatriots (was) ...the consequence of the repudiation of anti-Semitism and the commitment to unconditional equality."

An old Jewish community, Dr. Dawidowicz adds, the Italian Jews since the Emancipation had been fully accepted socially and economically into Italian society. Anti-Semitism was not a serious threat to Italian Jews, even during the early years of the Fascist regime when some 57,000 Jews lived in Italy, about 10,000 of whom were refugees from Germany and Austria. Dr. Dawidowicz asserts that the Italians remained unresponsive to German demands to deport Jews. (The 8,000 Jews in Italy who were annihilated were mainly destroyed by the Nazis.)

Given the philosemitic nurture he received from his mother and his own personal encounter with Nazi bestiality, it is not surprising that in 1975, as Cardinal Luciani, the new Pope John Paul took part in an interreligious observance in Venice commemorating the six million Jewish victims of Nazi genocide and millions of other human beings destroyed by the Nazis. According to the London Jewish Chronicle, Cardinal Luciani then condemned anti-Semitism, expressed his horror over the Nazi massacres, and pledged to lend his efforts to uproot the sources of anti-Jewish hatred in Christian culture.

That deeply human and empathic appreciation of both the grandeur and the tragedy of Jewish life apparently carried over to Cardinal Luciani's spontaneous understanding of the importance of Israel to the Jewish people. In an interview that he gave to Maariv, the influential Israeli newspaper, on December 8, 1972, Cardinal Luciani declared:

"I certainly view favorably the return of the Jews to Palestine, and believe that, after being dispersed for all these years, they are at last entitled to a state of their own."

While noting that there were those in the Catholic Church who believed that the modern-day Jewish state contradicted one of Christianity's historic dogmas which viewed the wretched state of the Jews among nations as a punishment for not accepting Jesus as Messiah, the Cardinal told Maariv:

"I, however, do not view the return of the Jewish people to its land today as a contradiction of any religious principle of Christianity. It does, perhaps, contradict...traditional beliefs prevalent in the Christian world over the centuries; but that can be overcome." And, as if for emphasis, he added,

"For my part, I have no doubt that there is a link between the Jews and Palestine."

Turning to the issue of Jerusalem, Cardinal Luciani stated that (Christian) pilgrims returning from Jerusalem said they were very satisfied...The Church does not wish to control Jerusalem, only to worship in the holy places."

His views then seem to anticipate the present policy of the Holy See which has recently abandoned the traditional position of calling for the internationalization of the city of Jerusalem, advocating instead an international statute that would give extraterritorial status to all holy places.

The practical implications of Pope John Paul's direct and open feelings toward Jews and Israel were perhaps most clearly reflected in his first public reference to the Middle East situation since he became Pope. At his first weekly general audience on September 6, 1978, the Pontiff asked the cheering crowd of some 10,000 people to pray for "a special intention very close to my heart" - that "a just and complete peace" may emerge from the Camp David summit talks.

Such a "just solution" could come about, the Pope said, only if the problems of "the Palestinians, the security of Israel, and the holy city of Jerusalem" were solved. This conflict, he added, "which has been fought for more than 30 years in the land of Jesus has already caused so many victims and so much suffering, both among Arabs and Israelis."

Vaticanologists concur that this is the first time that any Pope has spoken in such balanced terms about Arabs and Israelis, and it is certainly the first clear and unambiguous recognition by any recent Pope of the needs of "the security of Israel."

As Patriarch of Venice, Pope John Paul I took a tough stand against Catholic collaboration with Communists, urging that Catholics could not vote for Communists or pro-Communist Socialists. It remains to be seen what impact the new Pope's anti-Communist views will have on the recent Vatican policy of promoting detente with the Soviet Union and East European Communist countries. Conceivably his personal abhorrence of Communist denial of religious liberty and human rights will be of some consequence to the fate of millions of Christians and Jews under Soviet domination.

Pope John Paul, as is evident from his writings and recent pronouncements, articulates orthodox Catholic doctrine regarding evangelization as the first priority of the church, speaks of "the uniqueness of the Catholic church," and embraces "all people in the world...as brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus." Those are heady theological doctrines with problematic implications for Jews, Protestants, and others among the world's four billion peoples who do not share his religious commitment.

But given his smiling, sunny disposition, his pastoral care for people, and beyond that, his impressive track record regarding Jews, Israel, and human rights, it will be a pleasure to dialogue with such a "mentsh," and even to disagree agreeably.

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