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Box 3, Folder 41, "Jewish-Christian Relations in the 1980s - A Jewish Perspective", 16 May 1980.



EXCERPTS FROM ADDRESS BY RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM, NATIONAL INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DIRECTOR OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, BEFORE PLENARY SESSION ON JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS, AT AJC ANNUAL MEETING, MAY 16, 1980

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"JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS IN THE 1980S - A JEWISH PERSPECTIVE"  
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October 1980 marks the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption by Vatican Council II of the historic declaration, Nostra Aetate, the Declaration on Non-Christian Religions. A careful and systematic examination of the evidence regarding the growth in relationships between Christians and Jews, especially in the United States, during this period argues that greater improvement in understanding and mutual respect between the Jewish people and most branches of Christendom has taken place during the past fifteen years than during the entire 1,900 years preceding it.

While clearly there remains a substantial number of real and important problems of a theological and inter-group character, the basic thrust of the movement toward strengthening Jewish-Christian solidarity and reciprocal appreciation is stronger and more hopeful than at any time in the historic past.

There have been essentially four primary cycles in the evolution of the interreligious movement in the United States:

PROTESTANT-JEWISH RELATIONS

The first cycle was that of Protestant-Jewish relations which peaked during the period of 1945-1967. When one speaks of Jewish-Christian relations during the period, one is talking primarily about relationships between liberal, mainline Protestants and the Jewish community. That was the only game going on in America during that quarter of a century.

In response to the Nazi holocaust, eminent Protestant statesmen of the stature of Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, Dr. Paul Tillich, and Dr. John Bennett were in the forefront of condemning Nazi anti-Semitism and in calling for a Christian reevaluation of its attitudes toward Jews and Judaism.

Protestant scholars and religious educators also provided the lead in examining and revising Christian teachings and textbooks in order to remove the sources of anti-Jewish attitudes in Christian schools, seminaries and universities.

Liberal Protestant denominational leaders and activists were then also the closest natural allies of the Jewish community in areas of social and economic justice, and helped forge the powerful alliance that undergirded the civil rights movement.

Less dramatic but hardly less significant, liberal Protestant scholars gave creative leadership in establishing in real life the principles of religious liberty, the separation of church and state, and the fundamental conception of religious, racial, and cultural pluralism.

In the wake of the 1967 Middle East war, the silence of many Protestant leaders in the face of Arab threats to destroy Israel resulted in an alienation between Liberal Protestants and Jews, an estrangement which has lasted up to recent days. Serious efforts are now being undertaken to overcome that polarization, and a number of recent dialogues between the AJC and the National Council of Churches and other Protestant bodies are serious efforts to heal that breach. The latest report of the NCC Middle East Panel, while containing a number of critical problems for Israel and Jewry, is a sign of genuine movement toward being sensitive to fundamental Jewish concerns centered on Israel's security and America's creative role in the Middle East.

With whatever strains remain in the Protestant-Jewish alliance, all of us must recall with appreciation the rich and basic contributions that liberal Protestantism at its best has made to the emergence of the ecumenical movement, the Jewish-Christian dialogue, and to the very pluralistic character of American society.

#### CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS

The second cycle was that of Roman Catholic-Jewish relations which owes its inception to the towering contributions of Vatican Council II from 1962-1965. All Americans should acknowledge with appreciation that it was the American Roman Catholic hierarchy which played a decisive role in leading the Vatican Council to understand and then to adopt the historic declarations on religious liberty, on Catholic-Jewish relations, on ecumenism, and on the church and the modern world. These documents and the guidelines for implementation which followed decisively changed the relationships of the Catholic church to the Jewish people and to other peoples.

Subsequent statements and guidelines adopted by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops have led to an explosion of creative and positive activity in Catholic-Jewish relations during the past fifteen years. Textbooks have been revised on all levels of Catholic teaching so that today there are virtually no anti-Semitic references to be found in any Catholic textbooks. Major theologians have been working assiduously to develop a Catholic theology that discards the ancient displacement theory of Judaism - namely, that Christianity has displaced Judaism - and that now recognizes and appreciates Judaism in its own terms, as a living faith, a vital source of truth and light to the Jewish people.

Catholic teachers and leaders are increasingly involved in studying the Nazi holocaust and are engaged in institutes that seek to help the 50 million Catholics of America to learn the profound moral lessons of that catastrophe for the Jewish people and for the world at large. The Catholic literature on anti-Semitism and on the holocaust has become impressive.

There is also a growing and deepened understanding among Catholic leadership - and among Protestant leadership as well - of the central religious and historic importance of Israel and of Jerusalem in Jewish consciousness.

If these trends continue apace in the 1980s - and there is little reason apparent at this time why that should not happen - Catholic-Jewish relations will be alive and well during the coming decades. Those relations will increasingly be marked, I believe, by growing collaboration in such vital areas of human concern as helping Southeast Asian and other refugees, promoting human rights for Soviet Jews and other oppressed peoples, and in strengthening the moral and economic substance of America.

There will be continued and increasingly frank and uninhibited dialogue over such tension issues as abortion, pornography, censorship, aid to private schools, but the atmosphere will be one of agreeing disagreeably where necessary, rather than previous acrimony and polemic.

#### EVANGELICAL-JEWISH RELATIONS

The third cycle is that of Evangelical-Jewish relations. Beginning roughly at the end of the 1960s, the American Jewish Committee took the lead in organizing the first national Southern Baptist-Jewish conference, which became a turning point in Evangelical-Jewish relations. Stereotypes on both sides began to collapse, and in their place mutual understanding of each other as persons and of each other's rich and varied religious traditions began to emerge.

As a result of a number of other conferences, and closer ties with people of the stature of Dr. Billy Graham and leaders of the National Association of Evangelicals, strong ties were forged between these groups who had been virtually alien to each other.

Jews were heartened by the natural sympathies and support that came from evangelical leaders who struck out against anti-Semitism and who manifested strong and spontaneous support for the right of Israel to exist in security as a Jewish state, free of belligerency and terrorist assaults. Evangelicals have also been stalwart in supporting a unified Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty, all of which added impetus to growing Evangelical-Jewish solidarity.

There remain of course outstanding problems such as that of mission and conversion, the evangelical push for prayers in the public schools, and in some quarters, an evangelical movement to "Christianize" America. While these are central concerns in both groups, the atmosphere of a new respect has made possible forthright dialogues in a spirit of civility.

During the period of 1968-1980, there were also movements to increased dialogue between Greek Orthodox churches and Jews, and between Black churches and Jews.

#### ARAB-JEWISH RELATIONS

The fourth cycle that is now emerging is that of first steps toward dialogue between Arab Christians and Muslims and Jews in America. Some fifteen years ago, there were about 250,000 Arabs in the United States;

today, an AJC study discloses, there are about two million Arab Christians and Muslims. Many Arab Americans coming from the Middle East or from Muslim countries have little experience with religious pluralism or peer-to-peer relations with Christians and Jews. The beginning of the present Arab-Jewish dialogue will have a constructive role in sensitizing the new Arab Americans to how central this theological and sociological reality of pluralism and mutual accommodation is to the success of the American democratic experiment.

On the unfolding agenda of the Arab-Jewish dialogue attention will need to be given to the anti-Semitism and anti-Islamic stereotypes that overflow from the Middle East conflict. And serious efforts will need to be made to prevent the hostilities and hatreds from the Middle East from leading to the "Balkanization" of American intergroup life.

Looking towards the 1980s, there are overreaching concerns that will confront all these elements of Jewish-Christian-Muslim mosaic in America. First, there will be an urgent need for Jews and Christians and Muslims and other people of good will to join hands together to uphold the dignity of human life created in the sacred image of God. There is an epidemic of dehumanization in the world - violence, terrorism, massacres, and torture - and people committed to the Biblical and democratic values will have a special obligation to uphold and nurture the value of human life in the face of so much human destruction.

Second, the severe and growing energy crisis and economic problems will inevitably create a national atmosphere of considerable anxiety. Such a mood lends itself to exploitation by scapegoating and is rife for the flourishing of political extremism of the left and the right. The stirring of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi party and their recent turn toward violence against blacks, Jews, and Catholics are worrisome signs of terrible possibilities for America. Only the rebirth of alliances committed to social justice and economic progress will have the moral stamina to withstand such demagoguery and intergroup rivalries.

Third, the American people have a stake in the peaceful resolution of the Middle East conflict, and Jews and Christians and Muslims must not allow themselves to become polarized and fragmented. Increased efforts will need to be undertaken to contribute together to establishing security and justice for all the peoples of the Middle East.

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