



THE JACOB RADER MARCUS CENTER OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH ARCHIVES

Preserving American Jewish History

MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

Box 5, Folder 11, "Jewish-Christian Relations: Achievements and Unfinished Agendas", 27-30 November 1988.

**JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS:
ACHIEVEMENTS AND UNFINISHED AGENDAS**



Rabbi Marc. H. Tanenbaum,
Director of International Relations of
The American Jewish Committee

Chairman, International Jewish Committee
for Interreligious Consultations (IJCIC)

Paper presented at Symposium on
"Jews and Christians in a Pluralistic World"
Sponsored by the INSTITUT FÜR DIE WISSENSCHAFTEN VOM MENSCHEN,
Vienna, Hofburg (Redoutensaal), November 27 - 30, 1988

Jewish-Christian Relations
Achievements and Unfinished Agenda

Marc H. Tanenbaum

During the past 28 years since the adoption of Nostra Aetate <1> by Vatican Council II, the Catholic church and the Jewish people have experienced what has rightly been called "a revolution in mutual esteem."

That transformation of a 1,900 year-old encounter between Christians and Jews which had been characterized mainly by a culture of contempt - (a decide culture against the Jews) - into a radically new culture of "covenantal partnership" and growing mutual esteem, even of "Love between us," (Pope John Paul II, February 15, 1985) <2> is a momentous achievement in its own terms.

It is an achievement, even in its infancy, that also resonates with moral and spiritual meaning for enabling us to understand and cope constructively with the enormous challenges and threats that are posed by the immense diversity of religions, races, ethnic groups, and political ideologies in the pluralistic world which we inhabit:

Since 1968, I have devoted a large measure of my energies to working with Jewish and Christian groups seeking to bring relief to suffering refugees and starving peoples in Southeast Asia (the Vietnamese boat people, Cambodians, Laotians, ethnic Chinese); in Africa (Ethiopians, South Africans in the black homelands; Nigeria, Uganda, the Sahel, Sudan, Mozambique, etc.); in the Caribbean (Haitians, Cubans); and in South America (Miskito Indians, descamisados in the favelas of Brazil, Venezuela, etc.); in India (Tibetans, Sikhs); Sri Lanka (Tamils, Sinhalese); Soviet Jews and Polish refugees in the United States. <3>

There are today about 12 million refugees scattered throughout the world, some 6 million of them in Africa alone. Through study and personal observation, it is now apparent that many, if not most, of these refugees are victims of profound religious, racial, and tribal conflicts. In a large number of these tragedies, religious fanaticism and absolutistic, messianic nationalism have become the terrible chemistries which resulted in these explosions causing so much human devastation and pain.

The late psychoanalyst, Dr. Eric Fromm, a great humanist, became deeply disturbed by the growing pattern of violence and fanaticism throughout so many parts of the world. At the time of the strife between Hindus and Muslims in India, he carried out a clinical psychoanalytic study of that intergroup violence. In his last monumental publication, "The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness," <4> he presents his findings.

Dr. Fromm concluded that there is "a pathological dynamic" at work in such religious-political conflicts which he termed "Group Narcissism." As is the case with individual narcissism, groups that are narcissistic attribute to themselves all virtue and ultimate value, while denying value to the outside group, "the other". The narcissistic group views itself as "superior" and regards the other as "inferior". This mentality leads to a process of "dehumanization" or "monstrosizing" in which the so-called superior group feels justified in emptying the alleged inferior group of all human dignity and value. Such dehumanization becomes the precondition as well as the justification for destroying the other.

There are two vital corollaries to this process which Dr. Fromm characterized as the engine of such vast destructiveness in the World.

First, physical violence against the human person or group is invariably preceded by "verbal violence." White racist segregationists in the American South invariably abused blacks verbally before carrying out their lynchings. <5> The Nazis engaged in systematic verbal violence against the Jews (and also the Polish people, gypsies, among others), reducing them to dehumanized Untermenschen as a cultural precondition for their systematic pogroms. In every instance, it becomes easier to destroy human beings when they are reduced to caricatures filled with contempt and hostility. "Psychic numbing" makes that possible. (Dr. Robert Jay Lifton's concept). <6>

Second, in practically every major religious, racial and tribal conflict that I have studied in recent years, there is non-existent or seriously undeveloped religious ideology or political doctrine of co-existence in a pluralist society. There are simply no religious or ideological resources for living with differences. Difference invariably is experienced as a threat rather than the possibility of becoming a source of enrichment.

What does all that have to do with "Jews and Christians in a Pluralistic World"?

Since the adoption of Nostra Aetate by Vatican Council II, a great reversal of historic proportions has taken place in the Church's relationship to Judaism and the Jewish people.

His Holiness Pope John Paul II expressed that new spirit powerfully during a February 15, 1985, audience with the American Jewish Committee:

"I am convinced and I am happy to state on this occasion, that the relationships between Jews and Christians have radically improved in these years. Where there was ignorance and therefore prejudice and stereotypes, there is now growing mutual knowledge, appreciation and respect. There is, above all, love between us, that kind of love, I mean, which is for both of us a fundamental injunction of our religious traditions and which the New Testament has received from the Old (cf. Mk. 12:38; Lv. 19:18)." And then, as if to suggest his idea of pluralism between

Christians and Jews, he added, "Love involves understanding. It also involves frankness and the freedom to disagree in a brotherly way where there are reasons for it." <7>

I wish to pause here and acknowledge with respect and appreciation the singular contribution that Pope John Paul II, building on the foundations laid by his predecessors, Pope John XXIII and Pope Paul VI, personally has made in redefining and advancing on deep theological, moral and human levels improved understandings between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people. That assertion should not obscure the fact that there are significant differences regarding certain policies and actions - relating mainly to some interpretations of the Nazi holocaust and the State of Israel. But anyone who wishes to speak seriously about the role of the Pope in his inspired commitment to fostering genuine solidarity and mutual respect between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people has a moral duty to study the texts of his numerous addresses and declarations contained in the booklet, On Jews and Judaism, 1979-1986, <8> edited by Dr. Eugene Fisher and Rabbi Leon Klenicki, and the pamphlet, John Paul II - On the Holocaust, <9> also edited by Dr. Fisher.

His Eminence Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, President of the Holy See's Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews and a worthy bearer of the mantle of the late Cardinal Augustin Bea, has recently affirmed that "the Pope was consistent and untiring in his efforts to spread the teachings of Vatican Council on Jews and Judaism elaborated in the foundation documents of Nostra Aetate of 1965, the Vatican Guidelines in Catholic-Jewish Relations of 1974, and, Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church, of 1985. In their essence, these themes embody the central theological and practical achievements in Catholic-Jewish relations since Vatican Council.

I - The Spiritual Bond between the Church and the Jewish People

The spiritual bond with Jews is properly understood as "a sacred one; stemming as it does from the mysterious will of God:" (10/28/85). The relationship is not marginal to the Church. It reaches to the very essence of the nature of Christian faith itself; so that to deny it is to deny something essential to the teaching of the Church (cf. Vatican Notes, I,2).

The dialogue between Catholics and Jews is not a dialogue between past (Judaism) and present (Christianity) realities; as if the former had been "superseded" or "displaced" by the latter. "On the contrary," the Pope declared in his moving allocution to the Jewish community of Mainz, "it is a question rather of reciprocal enlightenment and explanation, just as is the relationship between the Scriptures themselves." (cf. Dei Verbum, 11).

Instead of the traditional terms of "Old Testament" and "New Testament" which might be understood to imply that the "old has been abrogated in favor of the "new", the Pope in his recent address to the Jews of Australia (11/26/86), has suggested the use of the terms, "the Hebrew Scriptures" and "the Christian Scriptures" as appropriate alternatives.

In his historic visit to the Great Synagogue of Rome (4/13/86) the first such visit since Apostolic times, the Pope asserted, "The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain way is 'intrinsic' to our own religion. With Judaism, therefore, we have a relationship which we do not have with any other religion. You are dearly beloved brothers and in a certain way, it could be said that you are our elder brothers."

II - Judaism - "A Living Heritage"

In his address to the Jewish community of Mainz, the Pope spoke of "the spiritual heritage of Israel for the Church" as "a living heritage, which must be understood and preserved in its depth and richness by us Catholic Christians."

The "common spiritual patrimony" of Jews and Christians is not something of the past but of the present which includes an understanding of post-Biblical Judaism and "the faith and religious life of the Jewish people as they are professed and practiced still today ..." (3/82)

"Jews and Christians are the trustees and witnesses of an ethic marked by the Ten Commandments in the observance of which man finds his truth and freedom." (Rome Synagogue 4/13/86)

III - The Permanent Validity of the Covenant

The Pope teaches that the Jews remain God's chosen people in the fullest sense ("most dear") and this in no way diminishes the Church's own affirmation of its own standing as "the people of God." In Mainz, the Pope addressed the Jewish community as "the people of God of the Old Covenant, which has never been revoked by God," referring to Romans 11:29, and emphasized "the permanent value" of both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Jewish community that witnesses to those Scriptures as sacred texts (11/17/80).

IV - Condemnation of Anti-Semitism, Remembrance of the Shoah

In this his very first audience with Jewish representatives in March 1979, the Pope reaffirmed the Second Vatican Council's repudiation of anti-Semitism, "as opposed to the very spirit of Christianity," and which "in any case the dignity of the human person alone would suffice to condemn". The Pope has repeated this message in country after country throughout the world.

And despite the recent controversies, the record is clear that the Pope, who lived under Nazism in Poland and experienced personally the ancient evil of anti-Semitism, has called on Catholics in country after country to remember "in particular, the memory of the people whose sons and daughters were intended for total extermination" (Homily at Auschwitz; 6/7/79).

In Otranto, he linked for the first time, the Holocaust and the rebirth of a Jewish state in the land of Israel: "The Jewish people, after tragic experiences connected with the extermination of so many sons and daughters, driven by the desire for security, set up the state of Israel" (10/5/80).

On the 20th anniversary of Nostra Aetate, the Pope stated that "anti-Semitism, in its ugly and sometimes violent manifestations, should be completely eradicated." He called the attention of the whole Church to the mandate given in the 1985 Vatican Notes to develop Holocaust curricula in Catholic schools and catechetical programs: "For Catholics, as the Notes (no. 25) have asked them to do, to fathom the depths of the extermination of many millions of Jews during World War II and the wounds thereby inflicted on the consciousness of the Jewish people, theological reflection is also needed" (10/28(85)).

On August 29, 1981, Pope John Paul II condemned a bomb-throwing attack on a synagogue in Vienna, Austria, as a "bloody and absurd act, which assails the Jewish community in Austria and the entire world," and warned against a "new wave of that same anti-Semitism that has provoked so much mourning through the centuries" (NC News 9/1/81).

V - Land and State of Israel

The complexities of the Middle East situation and the differences between the Holy See and Israel on the issue of establishing full diplomatic relations are well-known.

Suffice it for these purposes in this limited space to cite the Pope's generally positive views on a moral plane toward the State of Israel as disclosed in his Apostolic Letter of April 20, 1984, Redemptionis Anno:

"Jews ardently love her (Jerusalem) and in every age venerate her memory, abundant as she is in many remains and monuments from the time of David who chose her as the capital, and of Solomon who built the Temple there. Therefore, they turn their minds to her daily, one may say, and point to her as a sign of their nation."

"For the Jewish people who live in the State of Israel and who preserve in that land such precious testimonies of their history and their faith, we must ask for the desired security and the due tranquility that is the prerogative of every nation and condition of life and of progress for every society."

VI - Catechetics and Liturgy

Beyond the rethinking of the traditional understanding of Jews and Judaism, the Pope has called upon Catholics to undertake a major effort: "We should aim in this field, that Catholic teaching at its different levels, in catechesis to children and young people, presents Jews and Judaism, not only in an honest and objective manner, free from prejudices and without any offences, but also with full awareness of the (Jewish) heritage."

He said that it also needs to be made clear to Catholic youth the often tragic history of Christian-Jewish relations over the centuries: "The proper teaching of history is also the concern of yours (ICCJ). Such a concern is very understandable, given the sad and entangled common history of Jews and Christians - a history that is not always taught or transmitted correctly."

During his Rome Synagogue address he urged the implementation of the Vatican Guidelines and Notes: "It is only a question of studying them carefully, of immersing oneself in their teachings, and of putting them into practice."

VII - Joint Witness and Action in History

The Pope repeatedly affirms his vision for Jews and Christians of joint social action and witness to the One God and the reality of the Kingdom of God as the defining point of human history. This way of collaboration "in service to humanity" as a means of preparing for God's Kingdom unites Jews and Christians on a level that, in a sense, can be said to be deeper than the doctrinal distinctions that divide us historically.

The Pope's views have been reinforced by pronouncements issued by National Bishops Conferences in the United States, Austria, Holland, Belgium, France, Switzerland, the Federal Republic of Germany, Colombia and Brazil who have promulgated their own statements on Catholic-Jewish Relations, on occasion advancing their teachings beyond those presented in the Vatican documents. Individual Cardinals and Bishops, as well as theologians, have made pronouncements on a variety of religious and moral issues relating to Catholic-Jewish bonds that have enlarged the culture of mutual esteem.

To appreciate the dramatic changes in Catholic teaching about Jews and Judaism inaugurated by Vatican Council II and significantly advanced by the Vatican Guidelines on Catholic-Jewish Relations of 1974, and the Notes on the Correct way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church, issued in June 1985, one needs only to examine the contrasts in educational materials published since the Council with textbooks and teaching manuals in common use into the 1960s. The St. Louis University textbook studies conducted in the United States by three Catholic sisters under the supervision of Jesuit Father Trafford Naher, revealed teachings of hostility and contempt that lent credence to Jewish concerns about Christian polemical traditions as a source of anti-Semitism.

In Europe, the Louvain and Pro Deo University studies which examined Catholic teaching materials in a variety of languages - Italian, French-speaking countries (Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Canada) and Spanish - showed that teachings of contempt were widespread throughout the religious culture. In her study summarizing these findings, Mme. Claire Huchet-Bishop, a Catholic scholar, wrote in her book, How Catholics Look at Jews, that many young Catholics in these countries were still being instructed in the 1960s, twenty years after the Nazi holocaust, the following teachings:-

1. The Jews are collectively responsible for the Crucifixion and they are a 'deicide people';
2. The Diaspora is the Jews' punishment for the Crucifixion and for their cry, "His blood be upon us and upon our children;"

3. Jesus predicted the punishment of his people: the Jews were and remained cursed by him, and by God; Jerusalem, as a city, is particularly guilty;
4. The Jewish people as a whole rejected Jesus during his lifetime because of their materialism;
5. The Jewish people have put themselves beyond salvation and are consigned to eternal damnation;
6. The Jewish people have been unfaithful to their mission and are guilty of apostasy;
7. Judaism was once a true religion; but then became ossified and ceased to exist with the coming of Jesus;
8. The Jews are no longer the Chosen People, but have been superseded as such by the Christians;

Mme. Bishop noted that charges against the Jewish people were accompanied by a rhetoric of invective, - "verbal violence" - which attributed the most vicious motives to them.

In citing these themes of negative theology toward the Jews, it is not my intention to obsess about the past, nor to seek to evoke guilt. Rather my purpose is to underscore that the radical improvement in Catholic-Jewish relations, theologically and morally significant in itself, may also be a primordial model of how it is possible to transform a culture that once demonized and thereby dehumanized a people into a whole new culture of rehumanization. It also has something to teach us about the importance of overcoming verbal violence and toxic language which destroy human dignity and family solidarity, and replace those invectives with healing language of respect and mutual affirmation. That lesson applies equally to Jews as well as Christians, and, I believe, to all groups who are afflicted by such dehumanizing tendencies.

One of the critical methods for bringing about the dismantling of the old negative culture and constructing a new culture of mutual esteem is to be seen in the dramatic effects in improved and enlightened education. Thus, both the Louvain and Pro Deo studies reported a sharp drop in negative statements in textbooks and other teaching materials issued after Vatican Council II. Mme. Bishop observed; "It seems reasonable to assume that these figures reflect the Church's adoption of a new positive policy toward Jews and Judaism at the Second Vatican Council."

In the United States, Dr. Eugene Fisher, executive secretary of the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, published a study of post-Vatican Council II Catholic textbooks covering sixteen major religion series used in the grade and high school levels. In his book, entitled Faith Without Prejudice, Dr. Fisher found great improvement in the treatment of many of the past troublesome themes. For example, he found clear references to the Jewishness of Jesus, which had been mostly avoided in the past. He found the

notion of Jewish suffering as an expression of Divine retribution completely eliminated from the textbooks. References to the Holocaust were handled with great sensitivity. References to violence against Jews during the Crusades and the Inquisition and references to the modern State of Israel he found to be still "inadequate".

I would like to return to the educational issue under the rubric of "unfinished agenda".

Here it may be appropriate to report that in the growing atmosphere of confidence and trust, the Jewish community has conducted its own self-studies of Jewish textbooks in terms of what Jewish schools teach about Christians and Christianity. As summarized by Ms. Judith Bank, my former assistant at the American Jewish Committee, which sponsored the Dropsie University study and the study of Jewish seminary curricula, we found the following:

While Judaism has been influenced in its development by interaction with Christianity more than is generally acknowledged (Maimonides and St. Thomas Aquinas, etc.), it does not define itself in contrast or comparison with Christianity. The Jewish-Christian encounter as described in Jewish high-school textbooks is social and historical, not doctrinal or theological. On the one hand, this avoids the problem of polemical approaches to Christianity; on the other hand, recounting the episodes of persecution, expulsion and massacres which Jews suffered at the hands of Christians for centuries, and which are among the realities of Jewish history, tends to leave a negative image, not so much of Christian faith, but of the Church as temporal power. In fairness, it must be said that this negative image is somehow offset by attention paid to righteous Christians who shielded and protected Jews across the years, and to the high value assigned in Jewish textbooks to religious and cultural pluralism and human kinship.

Still, many Jews - like many Catholics - are not aware of the momentous changes in Catholic thinking about Jews and Judaism that have issued from the highest levels of the Church since Vatican Council II. As part of the future agenda, Jewish students, as well as others in the general Jewish population, need to be informed of these developments both in formal education and through mass communications.

On the Jewish seminary level, briefly, Christianity and Jewish-Christian relations are taken seriously; and there are a number of courses dealing with the origins of Christianity; the intertestamental period, medieval and contemporary relations. There are also a number of programs that bring Jewish and Christian seminarians together for study and dialogue.

It is important to record that a number of prominent Jewish theologians, scholars and rabbis have been working to conceptualize systematically a Jewish theology or religious understanding of Christianity. As Orthodox Rabbi Yitchak Greenberg formulates the issue; "It is possible for Judaism to have a more affirmative model of Christianity, one that

appreciates Christian spiritual life in all its manifest power ... After the Holocaust, a model of the relation of Judaism and Christianity ideally should enable one to affirm the fullness of the faith claims of the other, not just offer tolerance."

UNFINISHED AGENDA

EDUCATION - While remarkable progress has been made since Vatican Council II, there is still much to be done to change habits of thinking. The self-definition-by-denigration model has not yet been fully replaced on the pedagogical level. Current scholarship which sets the conflict events described in the New Testament - particularly the Passion narratives and the portrayal of the Pharisees - into historical perspective should be reflected in textbooks, teacher's manuals, teacher training, seminary education, and homilists, and clergy to a much greater extent than at present.

Excellent basic reference materials, such as Dr. Eugene Fisher's publication, Seminary Education and Christian-Jewish Relations, provide important perspectives on such areas as sacred Scriptures, liturgy and homiletics, Church history, catechetics, systematic and moral theology, spiritual formation and field education.

In Jewish education, particularly the seminaries, there is need to overcome the little knowledge about Christian beliefs, history of present communities, as well as a longer view of the development of Christian thought and history.

COMMUNICATIONS - There should be a concern that commitment to improved Jewish-Christian relations is progressing primarily among the "ecumenical generals" leaving a substantial gap with the vast number of "infantry troops". A thoughtful, creative and systematic use of modern means of public education through mass communications would help close this gap and give depth to Jewish-Christian solidarity.

JOINT WITNESS, SOCIAL JUSTICE, and HUMAN RIGHTS - The epidemic of dehumanization at loose in large parts of the world is, I believe, one of the most profound challenges facing Christians and Jews. Fanaticisms, resort to verbal and physical violence, torture, terrorism, violations of human rights and freedom of conscience are daily assaults on the dignity of human life created in the Divine image. Close collaboration of Christians and Jews who share a common vision of Biblical humanism could become a critical mass in stemming the forces of dehumanization and in upholding the preciousness of every human life in God's human family. There are models and structures in both the Christian and Jewish communities for advancing this fundamental objective of redemption. It requires moral will, commitment and courageous leadership.

WORLD REFUGEES, WORLD HUNGER - At a time when nations and peoples squander billions on arms races and weapons of death and destruction, it is scandalous that such modest resources are available to help relieve the staggering hunger, starvation,

poverty and disease in so many parts of the developing world. Wherever and whenever Christians and Jews join hands together and mobilize their common will and material resources, they make a crucial difference in relieving vast suffering and in saving human lives. There is no clearer moral and religious duty than Tikkun Olam, the repair and healing of a broken world. The "covenantal partnership" of the Church and the Jewish people is the surest of God's instruments for realizing that work of the Kingdom.

PLURALISM - If after two millenia of estrangement and hostility Christians and Jews can create a genuine culture of mutual esteem and reciprocal caring, the Christian-Jewish dialogue could well become a sign and an inspiration of hope to other religions, races and ethnic groups to turn away from contempt to realizing authentic human fraternity. This pluralistic model of the Jewish-Christian symbiosis may be the most important service that we have to offer to our troubled world.

