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THE VATICAN, THE JEWS AND DEMONS

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

Twenty-five years ago this month - on October 28, 1965 - the Roman Catholic hierarchies from throughout the world adopted at Vatican Council II Nostra Aetate ("In Our Time"), the historic declaration that launched the most dramatic changes in 1,900 years of Catholic-Jewish relations.

In several weeks, international Catholic and Jewish leaders will meet in Vatican City with Pope John Paul II and Catholic authorities to assess the progress made during these 25 years in improving ties between Catholics and Jews. They will also examine the problems that still bedevil Catholic-Jewish understanding.

Contrary to current polemics of some critics, the achievements have been significant and encouraging to anyone open to the impressive evidence of positive changes. Catholic textbooks have been revised so that today anti-Semitic references have been virtually eliminated in school texts used in the United States, parts of Europe, and Latin America. Liturgies and sermons have rejected anti-Jewish themes.

Catholics and Jews cooperate increasingly in a wide range of social justice efforts. Cardinals, bishops, priests, nuns and lay people have taken part in Holocaust observances and have marched in demonstrations to liberate Soviet Jews - and Christians.

The record justifies the oft-repeated judgment that greater progress has been made in overcoming misunderstanding and in building mutual respect

and friendship during these 25 years than throughout the past 1,900 years.

But hevering over this historic change are uncertainties and reservations. I do not speak of the obvious public issues of establishing full diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the State of Israel, nor of the Vatican's indefensible defense of its relative silences in the face of the Nazi campaign to exterminate the Jews. These issues are maturing in Catholic circles, and I think they will be resolved in the not too distant future.

The critical underlying issue is still to be confronted full-face. It is, I believe, the recognition by Christian authorities that anti-Semitism in Western society is as much psychopathological as it is theological. In his recent study, the psychiatrist, Dr. Theodore Isaac Rubin, writes that "anti-Semitism is a non-organic disease of the mind...a malignant emotional illness. People sick in this disease can be very dangerous and even murderous but are not ~~not~~ treated accordingly." (Anti-Semitism - A Disease of the Mind, Crossroad/Continuum, New York.)

Unless the social-psychological dynamic of anti-Semitism as a sickness is grasped and dealt with therapeutically, theological fine-tuning in imagery and language could ultimately become surface repairs of uncertain duration.

The psychopathology I speak of begins with the systematic demonization of Jews and Judaism in the sermons and treatises of the Church Fathers in the first four centuries of this era. Thus, the "golden-tongued" St. John Chrysostom in his notorious four sermons delivered in Aleppo in 387 CE (AD), brutally attacked the synagogue as "the work of Satan," a "house of prostitution," and urged that Jews be packed into their houses of worship and destroyed.

Church Father Eusebius, the great historian of Caesarea, wrote circa 324 CE (AD) two massive works - Preparatio Evangelica and Demonstratio Evangelica - in which he formulated one of the first systematic theologies of the displacement and rejection of Judaism through the rise of the Church and Christianity.

In subsequent centuries, these demonic images of Jews and the Jewish religion were intensified and penetrated the ^m marrow of Western Christian society. In the 12th and # 13th centuries, Christians enlarged the impact of that hostility and rejection through passion plays, the slanders of ritual blood^d libel, through artistic presentations of Jews as being in league with Satan, the Jews as "anti-Christ."

The Reverend Martin Luther, the Augustinian monk who fathered Protestantism hoped to convert the Jews through kindness. When Jews did not respond to his "friendly" conversionary appeals, after 1543 CE (AD) he wrote several hostile pamphlets ("The Jews and Their Lies," "Vom Shem Hamepherash") in which he appropriated entirely the demonic images of Jews and the synagogues from the writings of the Church Fathers.

The verbal violence was invariably followed by the physical violence of pogroms, inquisitions, crusades, auto-da-fes, expulsions, ghettos, and other frequent persecutions.

Scholars make a convincing case that both Nazism and Communism created a secularized demonization of Jews that borrowed extensively from the surrounding, everflowing cornucopia of ^d anti-Jewish metaphors, caricatures, and icons.

Vatican Council II inspired Roman Catholics to remove such scandalous group libels of Jews as "Christ-killers," and as "wandering Jews" punished

by God for not accepting Jesus. These revisions, welcome as they surely are, are a form of theological cleansing in keeping with the church's religious renewal and is sensitive to the modern attitudes of respect for decent human rights. The Nazi holocaust and the restoration of ~~the~~ Jews to their homeland in Israel gave strong impetus to that purification process.

But, after 25 years of work in Jewish-Christian relations, I am convinced there needs to be and can be more than that academic, pedagogical religious house cleaning. To vanquish anti-Semitism at its malignant source, theological reformulation must be comprehended as a radical psychological transformation. It involves a conscious, systematic de-demonization of Jews and Judaism, and replacing those dehumanizing images with a whole new mentality that views Jews as ^{normal} human beings, with strengths and weaknesses, "the elder brother" without whose continuous, living spiritual traditions and values Christianity might never have ~~been~~ emerged into history.

This is not an issue of resolving guilt for past offenses, or of being nice to Jews, especially in light of the Holocaust. The future character of Western societies is deeply affected by this challenge. Neither Germany, nor Poland, nor France, nor ~~Argentina~~ Brazil, nor any other predominantly Christian country will be able to build stable, unified, peaceful societies as long as the landmines and timebombs of anti-Semitism lurk in their cultural subconsciousness, exploding periodically as political or economic crises erupt. Poland is Exhibit A of that destructive pathology which witnesses anti-Semitism flourishing without Jews ("symbol sickness" Dr. Rubin terms that phenomenon of transferring hostility *for* Jews to the symbol of the Jews, making inhuman action plausible.)

The psychological task of cultural therapy involves facing up to finally the magnitude of the dehumanization of the Jewish people that has dominated Western Christian civilization over the past 1900 years. A theological renewal that is fully conscious of that systemic illness and ~~mobilized~~ mobilizes all its moral and spiritual resources to heal profoundly, in depth, that sickness would hold the greatest promise for the future health of Catholic-Jewish relations in the next 25 years, and beyond.

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Rabbi Tanenbaum, former director of international and interreligious affairs of the American Jewish Committee, was the only rabbi present at Vatican Council II⁷ as a guest observer. He is now writing a book on "The Vatican, the Jews and Israel" for Greve-Weidenfeld Publishers.

