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Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

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THE DANGEROUS PRECEDENT FOR "INDIRECT  
RESPONSIBILITY"

Georgette Bennett and Marc H. Tanenbaum

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When the findings of the Israeli Inquiry Commission were released in February, some observers said that this was the first time in history that the concept of "indirect responsibility" has been applied to a nation.

They were wrong.

There is an ancient precedent for the concept. It dates back to 30A.D. That was when the Jewish people acquired an appellation that has led to nearly two thousand years of defamations, exiles, burnings, and pogroms, climaxed by a Holocaust. The appellation: "Christ-killers." It emerged because Jews as a group were held responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus. Then, as today, it was not those <sup>who</sup> directly committed the act who were held accountable.

Crucifixion was a uniquely Roman form of punishment brought to ancient Palestine by Varus, the Roman legate to Syria. The Romans used crucifixion as a deterrent against rebellion, and crucified thousands of Jews during their occupation of Palestine. To the Jews, crucifixion was a loathsome form of inhumanity, outlawed by Jewish law. Finally, the Jew, Jesus, became its victim.

Yet, the Romans and the descendants of Pontius Pilate

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have never been held in universal opprobrium for the forced march of Jesus down the Via Dolorosa or for the hammering of crude nails through his flesh. Nor is the blame restricted to Judas Iscariot, the single disciple who betrayed Jesus. (People seem to forget that Judas was but one among twelve disciples - all Jewish - of the Rabbi, Jesus of Nazareth. The other eleven did nothing to betray Jesus. And Judas' own Jewish roots are questioned by some scholars.) Rather, it is the Jewish people as a whole who have been held responsible for the deicide. Not only the Jews of Jesus' time, but all the generations succeeding them. A clear-cut imputation of "indirect responsibility" if there ever was one!

It appears that nothing has been learned - even though Jesus himself forgave those who betrayed him. Today, as in ancient times, those who actually committed the deed are absolved - certainly, ignored. The Christian Phalangists who pulled the triggers that killed Palestinians, engaged in a distinctively Arab form of tribal blood feud - the vengeful "razzia." That form of cruel revenge is alien to modern-day Jews and Judaism. Yet, today in Lebanon and throughout the Arab (and perhaps, Western) world, the "indirectly responsible" Israelis are left to carry the moral and political freight.

Then-Defense Minister Ariel Sharon's callousness during the massacres cannot be justified. He is, however, correct in some of his responses to the findings of the Israeli Inquiry Commission. As quoted in the New York Times, Sharon

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used these words: "Judge for yourselves how this passage will sound to anyone in any language in any place on the globe. The danger is not in the narrow legalistic interpretation - that's for the jurists - but in the interpretation that will be recorded in the mind and memory of everyone in the world ."

The world will not be tuned in to the moral nuances and subtleties of the concept of "indirect responsibility." It is not the word "indirect" that will be remembered, but only the word "responsibility." Israel will be branded with a massacre it did not commit.

And Jews will once again be damned as "killers." "Absolved" by Vatican Council II of the killing of Jesus, they will now be stigmatized as "Palestinian-killers" rather than "Christ-killers." Can the world assuage its historic guilt for persecuting Jews only by making Jews killers too? Will we now have license for another two thousand years of atrocities and hatred against Jews? The verbal pogroms have already begun.

The Israeli Inquiry Commission goes to some pains to be precise about the sources of "indirect responsibility" within the Israeli government and military. It avoids across-the-board generalizations. (Yet, Israel's acceptance of moral responsibility is extraordinary when viewed against the aftermath of the Holocaust.) The Allied governments and the Vatican itself - when faced with charges of standing by indifferently while Nazis massacred millions of Jews and other human beings, - reject, to this day, even the suggestion of their "indirect responsibility" for <sup>(abandoning Jews to)</sup> the Holocaust.) The reactions of the world

press and various religious and ethnic bodies do not seem to discriminate so finely. Rather, one sees the kinds of sweeping indictments that characterized the "Christ-killer" stereotype.

One suspects there is much more going on here than a straightforward reaction to Sabra and Shatilla. After all, where is the universal outcry over our killings of Vietnamese civilians in My Lai? The butchering of Moslems by Hindus in Assam? The massacring of Christians by Moslems in Uganda? The expulsion of two million Ghanians and Chadians from Nigeria? The genocide of Cambodians by Pol Pot in Kampuchaa? The starving of Somalis by Ethiopians in Ogaden? Where are the righteous attributions of responsibility?

No, none of these seems to raise the hackles of the world as much as anything in which Israel (read Jews) is even "indirectly responsible." The key variable here is Jews, not atrocity.

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## Biography

### DR. GEORGETTE BENNETT

Dr. Bennett, a criminologist and sociologist, is a nationally syndicated radio commentator affiliated with the Center for Policy Research in New York. She is a former Network Correspondent for NBC News. She has also been Deputy Assistant Director for Administration of Justice, New York City Office of Management and Budget and Personal Consultant to the Police Commissioner for the New York City Police Department. Dr. Bennett has written numerous articles for scholarly and popular publications and has worked with criminal justice agencies throughout the country. She is active in broadcasting and as a consultant in the criminal justice field.



AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE  
BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM

Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, has been a pioneering leader and thinker in interreligious relations and social justice movements during the past thirty years.

NEWSWEEK magazine has described him as "the American Jewish community's foremost apostle to the gentiles...who has been able to solicit support from all factions of the Jewish community." A poll of America's newspaper religion editors in 1978 voted Rabbi Tanenbaum one of the ten most respected and influential religious leaders in America (he ranked fourth), and the citation of his fifteenth honorary degree characterized him as "The Human Rights Rabbi of America."

In a cover story entitled "The Ten Most Powerful Rabbis", NEW YORK magazine described Rabbi Tanenbaum as "the foremost Jewish ecumenical leader in the world today."

President Carter invited Rabbi Tanenbaum as the American Jewish leader among ten national religious spokesmen to discuss "the State of the Nation" at Camp David "summit" meetings in 1979. The rabbi was also the Jewish spokesman at the January, 1980 White House Conference on Energy and Conservation. He is presently Chairman of the Technical Committee on the Media of the 1981 White House Conference on Aging.

He has been a major force in the promotion of social justice and human rights. At the invitation of the International Rescue Committee, he joined delegations of prominent American leaders to carry out fact-finding investigations of the plight of Vietnamese "boat people" and Cambodian refugees. He has organized many relief efforts for victims of war, refugees, and the starving.

Recently he served as the consultant to the NBC-TV nine-hour special "Holocaust" and earlier was consultant to the special "Jesus of Nazareth." President Carter appointed Marc Tanenbaum to serve on the Advisory Committee of the President's Commission on the Holocaust.

Rabbi Tanenbaum was the only rabbi at Vatican Council II, and he is a founder and co-secretary of the Joint Vatican International Jewish Consultative Committee as well as of a similar liaison body with the World Council of Churches. He also participated in the first official audience of world Jewish leaders with Pope John Paul II.

In March 1979, he was invited to consult with Chancellor Helmut Schmidt and German parliamentary officials in Bonn on the abolition of the statute of limitations on Nazi war criminals.

He has lectured at major universities, seminaries, religious and educational bodies in the United States, Europe and Israel, and at numerous national and international conferences. Rabbi Tanenbaum is the author or editor of several published books and of numerous articles.