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EVANGELISM AND THE JEWS

A Background Document Prepared by Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, National Interreligious Affairs Director of the American Jewish Committee, based on Research by Gerald Strober, AJC Consultant on Religious Curricula

Recent announcements of plans to launch a series of nationwide campaigns to "saturate the entire nation" with evangelical appeals for conversion to Christianity have begun to raise a series of concerns in the Jewish community about the potential of these programs for intergroup tension and misunderstanding. These concerns focus on the implications of this "new evangelism" for the pluralist character of American society, as well as for the unfolding nature of Jewish-Christian relations. Also, these concerns have begun to mount especially in response to recent intensified efforts undertaken by the American Board of Missions to the Jews (Beth Sar Shalom Fellowship) - a so-called Hebrew-Christian movement - that has aided a stepped-up direct conversion effort at the Jewish people through well-financed nationwide television programs and full-page ads in major daily newspapers ("So Many Jews Are Wearing 'That Smile' Nowadays"). "The Jews for Jesus" movement and the Young Hebrew Christian Alliance (YHCA) have concentrated their missionary attention on Jewish youth on the college campuses, apparently riding on the wave of popularity of "the Jesus movement" and "the Jesus freaks." The Broadway rock musical "Jesus Christ Superstar" - shortly to be made into a film in Israel - which was recently the center of controversy over the portrayal of Jews in the Crucifixion of Jesus,

both contributed to and is a by-product of this movement.

The potential for intergroup and interreligious conflict and polarization is evidenced in the growing debate that has begun to develop in the wake of the Rabbinical Court of Justice of the Associated Synagogues of Massachusetts which, on March 1, 1972, issued an official decree declaring, inter alia, that "a person born of Jewish parents, when he joins the so-called 'Hebrew-Christian' movement abdicates his rights as a member of the Jewish faith." (See Newsweek)

In light of these developments, it is apparent that both the general evangelism campaigns and the specific Hebrew-Christian missionary efforts will confront the Jewish community and others, during the coming months - and perhaps the next several years - with one of the most complicated and challenging intergroup and inter-religious problems. How to assure freedom of religion and at the same time preserve the diverse, pluralist character of American society in the face of tendencies to regress to an earlier "Evangelical Empire" which imperially acted as though Christianity and America were one and the same; how to preserve the substantial gains that have been made in recent years in Jewish-Christian understanding, and at the same time communicate to Christian evangelists that the Jewish people reject any theological views that require that the Jews be "saved" by ceasing to exist as members of the historic Jewish faith and people, are at the heart of this task of interpretation.

In response to requests for "guidelines and suggestions" from

the Jewish community - especially from Rabbis, Hillel Directors and Jewish parents - the AJC Interreligious Affairs Department has prepared this background memorandum for the purpose of: (a) providing information about the various projected evangelism campaigns, and Hebrew-Christian movements; and (b) suggesting approaches for articulating a Jewish response to these efforts insofar as they affect the Jewish community.

CURRENT EVANGELISTIC CAMPAIGNS

One of the most striking phenomena in recent American religious life has been the renaissance of evangelical Christianity. The period since the end of World War II has witnessed an extraordinary advance by evangelical groups. These groups are today growing at a rate which exceeds the expansion of the mainline denominations and the rise of the general population. In recent years evangelical bodies have increased their membership 500-700% while the major denominations and the Roman Catholic Church have increased by only 75-90%, barely keeping up with the rise in general population.

The contemporary evangelical movement continues to articulate the traditional theological concepts of fundamentalist Christianity but with increasing intellectual acumen and respectability. The message of evangelicalism is articulated through a highly skilled and effective utilization of the mass media.

At the heart of the evangelical thrust is the revivalistic ministry of Billy Graham who stands today as perhaps the single most prominent religious leader in America. The popularity of Graham has given prestige to a conservative Protestant message which for

generations had been relegated by most observers to the fringes of American life.

The articulation and spread of this evangelistic message has become in the last few years a preoccupation among younger Christians. The growth of the "Jesus Movement", the rise in evangelical seminary enrollment, and the accelerated pace of young people choosing church vocations, all testify to the fervor and spread of evangelism.

The last several years have witnessed a proliferation of major conferences on evangelism. Since the 1966 Berlin Conference, meetings have been held in the United States, Canada, Latin America, Africa and Asia. These sessions have brought together evangelists, pastors, educators and lay people to develop strategy for evangelism on a regional basis. The next major conference will be world wide in scope involving 3500 delegates in 1974, probably to be held in India.

Although evangelistic activity has chiefly been the concern of conservative Protestants there are growing indications that mainline Protestant bodies as well as Roman Catholics are coming to grips with the intensified interest in evangelism. ^{responding to} Thus the National Council of Churches has announced plans for the development of a new program unit called Evangelism/Celebration; the World Methodist Council last year adopted a global evangelism emphasis to culminate in a world conference in 1974; a world Baptist mission of Reconciliation is scheduled for 1973-75; the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian

Church voted to increase its evangelism budget from fifty to eighty thousand dollars; the major Reformed bodies in America participated in an evangelism conference in 1971 and the American Roman Catholic hierarchy voted to support a nationwide evangelistic effort organized by 100 Protestant groups for 1973. (There are an estimated 200,000 members in the Catholic Pentecostal Movement.)

Perhaps the two most outstanding evangelistic events planned for the next eighteen months are the International Student Congress on Evangelism (known as Explo '72) to be held in Dallas in June, and Key '73, a year-long effort that will undoubtedly attract immense interest in the general as well as religious media.

Explo '72 is a project of Campus Crusade for Christ, an international student movement with 3,000 staff members operating on 450 campuses, with a reported budget of 18 million dollars. Bill Bright, the President of Campus Crusade, is the chairman of Explo. Billy Graham has agreed to serve as Honorary Chairman. Explo is expected to bring 100,000 Christian young people to Dallas during the week of June 12-17. The delegates are to meet in 100 concurrent working sessions aimed at training them effectively "to witness Christ" on their campus or in their local area. Bright, in discussing the purpose of Explo recently, said, "Explo is a springboard to train thousands of college students and generate a movement for Christ which will sweep our country and the world. We are seeking to saturate the entire nation with the claims of Jesus Christ in 1976." Explo will gain

national visibility through nightly television services from the Cotton Bowl. The event will close on June 17 with an all-day festival keynoted by Billy Graham, and attended by a projected 250,000 people.* :

An indication of the surfacing of the ideology of "America as a Christian nation" at Explo '72 is to be seen in a recent statement by one of the most prominent leaders of the "Jesus People", the Rev. Arthur Blessitt of the Children of God. The 30-year-old evangelist said he "hopes to get President Nixon to make a public statement as to whether he is personally committed to Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior." Mr. Blessitt observed, according to Religious News Service, March 29, 1972, that Explo '72 plans, among other things, to send teams of Christians to witness during the national political conventions this summer and spoke of his hope "for a man who has a personal commitment to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord who will arise on the national political scene." He added that he expects Governor Reuben Askew of Florida, who will lead his state's delegation to Explo '72, would mention his commitment to Jesus Christ when he delivers the keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in July.

* Other movements in the "Jesus Revolution" include the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship; Young Life (1,300 club affiliates; Youth for Christ (represented in 2,000 American high schools), Teen Challenge; The Pentecostals (estimated 10,000 members); and the Catholic Pentecostals (who are committed to the Catholic Church). There are an estimated 600 Christian Communes across the country.

Even more important for its potential impact is the Key '73 evangelistic effort to be launched early next year. This program which has the active support of over 100 Protestant denominations cites its aim to "blitz" the continent next year with an evangelistic crusade, "to confront people with the gospel of Jesus Christ by proclamation and demonstration, by witness and ministry, by word and deed." Key '73 has been in the planning since 1967 when a small group of leading evangelicals met at a hotel near the Key Bridge in Washington, D. C. to share their desire for a major national evangelization campaign. The plans have been endorsed by the American Baptists, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodists, the three major Lutheran denominations, and the Anglican Church of Canada, among others. Key '73 is administered by an executive director on loan from one of the major Lutheran bodies and by a fifty member central committee. Its organization is somewhat loosely structured in that each denomination will decide the precise form of its participation. There will be, however, an extensive sharing of materials and resources. Following the pattern of the Graham organization's success, mass media will be emphasized.

EVANGELISM AND "JEWS FOR JESUS"

One aspect of the significant increase in evangelistic activity has been the intensification of efforts aimed at converting Jews to Christianity. Most of these efforts have been conducted by long established organizations involved with Jewish evangelism, (American

Board of Missions to the Jews; Hebrew-Christian Alliance) but there have been indications of independent or off-shoot groups formed to evangelize young people, i.e. "Jews for Jesus." To date there has been no evidence to suggest that the major evangelical groups or personalities are directly involved in the campaign to win Jews to Christ although the possibility exists that such activity could occur, especially if the Jewish mission groups should succeed in attaching themselves to the major evangelistic events scheduled for the next several years.

There are an estimated 100-150 local and national organizations of Hebrew Christians. According to Christianity Today ("Turning on to Jeshua," Dec. 17, 1971), "Most mainline denominations have now quietly closed their Jewish evangelism offices but independent agencies continue to proliferate, and Jewish evangelism departments are still operated by Chicago's Moody Bible Institute and the Bible Institute of Los Angeles."

The Young Hebrew Christian Alliance (YHCA) was formed in 1965 to promote "Messianic Judaism." It claims several hundred members among young Jews who believe they are "completed Jews" by following the Messiah Jesus. YHCA and other Hebrew-Christian groups have sponsored Hanukkah parties, celebrating Jesus as the Hannukah Menorah, or Eternal Light of the World. In Philadelphia, they sponsor "The Hidden Matzoh" (The Afikoman), a meeting house at which groups of young Jews meet to sing, pray, and testify to Jesus as their per-

sonal Messiah. In San Francisco, Martin "Moise" Rosen of the American Board of Missions to the Jews heads the "Jews for Jesus" group. In New York's Columbia University, a "Jesus Week" was sponsored from April 30-May 5, 1972, featuring a series of lectures, films, multimedia presentations, and concerts for the purpose of "presenting Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." The planning Committee for Jesus Week included several Hebrew-Christians of the Alliance Jewish Fellowship and Beth Sar Shalom Hebrew Christian Fellowship.

In Miami, Shalom International produces training materials - including "The Five Jewish Laws" - to help those witnessing to Jews to use "the right terminology."



INTERGROUP AND INTERRELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS

A number of basic issues are raised for Jews - both as American citizens and as adherents of Judaism - by these developments which call for the most careful consideration:

1) Does the revival of "the new evangelism" pose a real threat of regression to early "Evangelical Empire" stage of American history which equated the Kingdom of God with Protestant republicanism (see *The Righteous Empire*, by the Rev. Martin Marty), and supported a Christian theocratic conception of American institutions? Do these tendencies threaten to erode the ground of pluralism, which made possible the liberal Christian understanding that the Jews are full partners in the American republic?

2) Do the Hebrew-Christian notions of "Messianic Judaism" and "completed Jews through Christ" represent a contradiction to the recently emerging Christian "theologies of Judaism" which view the Jewish religion as a living, permanent faith, a source of truth and value to its adherents, and not as "preparatio evangelica" - simply a stage along the way toward being supplanted by Christianity.

For Jews to speak of the Jewish roots of Christianity is to contribute to the enrichment of Christian self-understanding. For Christians to see their relationship to Judaism solely as one of fulfillment and supersession is in fact an act of negation of Judaism for the daughter faith denies the mother the right to an independent, self-determined existence by totally absorbing

Judaism within Christianity.

A number of major Christian theologians have clearly affirmed that, on the basis of the New Testament, the believing Christian must acknowledge the continuing validity of Judaism. While closely related to Christianity and enjoying a common patrimony with Christianity, Judaism is a religion possessing its own role and mission. The destiny of Judaism is not simply to disappear and give way to Christianity; Judaism continues to exercise a positive role in God's plan of redemption. How Christians and Jews are to find and explain their own complementarity within the universal covenant God has made with mankind through Sinai and Calvary is a matter of interpretation with which Christian and Jewish theologians still must grapple. We must look at both Christianity and Judaism as essential for the ultimate fulfillment of mankind. At the heart of the Hebrew Christian claim is the fundamental issue of Christology which Hebrew - Christians do not appear to comprehend at all from the perspective of Judaism. The issue has been stated forthrightly by Rabbi Jakob Petuchowski in his book, Heirs of the Pharisees:

"To consider Jesus as the Messiah may have been, from the point of view of the Synagogue, a factual mistake (in light of the absence of a fundamental change in the elimination of evil in history and other signs of the Messianic Age--MT). But it was not a religious sin. To consider Jesus as part of a divine trinity was another matter altogether. A 'Son of Noah' could believe that the one God had divine shittuph (associates) and still qualify as one of 'the righteous men among the nations.' A 'Son of Israel', however, was bound to such a radical form of monotheism that he was unable to distinguish between a monotheistic trinitarianism and a polytheistic tri-theism ...A Jew who believed in divine 'associates'

was simply considered an idolater, and could not enjoy, in the eyes of the Synagogue, the status accorded the Gentile Christian."

3. Should Jews oppose conversion campaigns by Christians directed at Jews, and vice versa? Here, too, the views of Rabbi Petuchowski are instructive:

"We admit that the wholehearted Jew and the wholehearted Christian have no need to convert each other to their respective faiths; they would, indeed, be untrue to their divine calling were they to do so. But our world is not populated by wholehearted Jews and Christians. It is inhabited by the religiously uprooted, the spiritually destitute. Not every offspring of Jewish parents actualizes his Jewish potential. Not every pagan born into a Christian household does, in fact, become a Christian. The world is full of only nominal Christians and nominal Jews. The Synagogue has a primary obligation to win over the nominal Jew to a full acceptance of the 'yoke of the commandments,' just as the Church has a primary obligation to lead the nominal Christian to Jesus, and through Jesus, to the Father. But addressing himself to the mass of agnostics, atheists, and religiously uprooted, one cannot always discriminate and distinguish between those of Jewish and those of Gentile origin. Church and Synagogue, in entering the marketplace of ideas, must offer and describe their wares to all comers, must answer the queries of all questioners. And it may well happen that, here and there, the Jewish answer will appeal to the nominal Christian, just as the Christian answer may appeal to the nominal Jew. Of course, Jews consider a wide occurrence of the latter alternative as highly unlikely. Why should the twentieth century be more propitious for the Christian mission to the Jew than the last nineteen centuries have been? But theoretically the possibility of a limited kind of "two-way traffic" must be granted."

8) Is there a possibility that the evangelism campaigns with their emphasis on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus may provide new occasions for negative and hostile portrayals of Jews in the Crucifixion of Jesus?

That such a possibility exists is evidenced by the controversy over the stereotyped views of the role of the Jewish people and the high priests of Israel in the Broadway rock musical, Jesus Christ Superstar. (See analysis by Gerald Strober). To anticipate this eventuality, this writer communicated such concerns to Dr. Billy Graham, who had repudiated the "deicide" charge during a sermon at his Charlotte Crusade on March 1972. In reply, Dr. Graham wrote on April 18, 1972:

"I appreciate your encouraging comments concerning remarks I made in Charlotte. I have made a point of doing this in every sermon that I preach concerning the death of Jesus Christ.

I shall most certainly see that this emphasis is made in the forthcoming EXPLOR '72."

5) Do not the conversions of young Jews to Jesus constitute a judgement on the failure of Judaism, the Synagogue, Jewish education, and the Jewish home to communicate meaningfully Jewish ideals and values to our own young people?

This issue will have to be faced far more seriously, systematically, and imaginatively than has been done thus far. "A failing which is thine do not attribute to others," is a valid Talmudic insight for this instance. Precisely because such conversions have resulted in a sense of crisis in a number of Jewish communities and homes should they be looked upon as an opportunity to reform and renew the entire Jewish life-style as it relates to our young people.

SUGGESTIONS

With issues as complex and profound as these, it would be foolhardy even to suggest that a clear-cut plan exists for coming to grips with what is essentially the situation of the Jew in the diaspora. But perhaps these "starting points" may be in order as a way of beginning to approach these serious challenges:

- 1) Seek to place the question of "Evangelism and the Jews" on the agenda of Jewish community relations councils, rabbinic boards, local synagogues and temples, AJC chapters with a view toward initiating a serious, informed discussion and education program on the issues outlined in this document.

2) Appropriate Jewish representatives who are prepared to deal with these issues on the basis of adequate study and information should seek to place these concerns on the agenda of interreligious and Jewish-Christian institutes and dialogue groups. (Such a discussion has been arranged with the staff of the National Council of Churches.)

3) Jewish scholars, skilled in addressing interfaith groups, should be invited to discuss these issues in a constructive spirit with local Christian or interfaith ministerial associations.

4) Carefully-written and balanced articles on these issues should be placed in appropriate Christian and religious periodicals and journals with a view toward sensitizing the Christian community to Jewish concerns.

5) Radio and TV programs involving the most competent and informed Jewish spokesmen should be used.

6) Special attention should be paid to Jewish youth on the university campuses with whom these issues might be discussed directly from the perspectives of Jewish tradition.

Finally, we would very much appreciate if you would keep us informed of any developments in your community relating to these issues, both in terms of evangelical activity and Jewish programmatic responses.



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