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Series C: Interreligious Activities. 1952-1992

Box 13, Folder 5, Borowitz, Eugene, 1966.

MEMO FROM ■ RABBI EUGENE B. BOROWITZ

Memo from

Jan 2, 1966

Dear Marc,

Thanks for your nice letter. Most of my pieces have not been of the kind that would have a place in your book. But I recently finished one for a symposium for Religious Education which may be of some special interest. I enclose a copy which I hope will be of interest to you. Best wishes for the new year -

Gene

CHRISTKILLERS NO MORE

Jewish Education and the Second Vatican Council

Eugene B. Borowitz

My father's formal Jewish education in the small Polish town in which he grew up included nothing directly related to Christianity. He learned his Hebrew alphabet; read his prayerbook in Hebrew and worked at translating the weekly portion of the Torah and the Prophets together with the traditional commentaries. Had he continued his studies or been a phenomenal student in those years before emigrating to America he would have studied the Talmud and Jewish codes. Though he might have found some references to Christianity had he covered enough of these materials, he would still not have come across anything directly treating of the Councils of the Church, their creeds, dogmas or decrees.

His informal Jewish education was far more effective than what he learned from books and teachers: it was unforgettable. He still remembers being taken by his mother into a basement and hidden there for two or three days while a pogrom raged outside. That traumatic experience or the possibility of it lurked in all the quiet references a growing boy heard about non-Jews and their attitudes toward Jews. How could his understanding of himself as a Jew not be shaped substantially by what the majority thought of him. Thus my father's education as a Jew in Europe cannot be understood

apart from the education which, informally to be sure but effectively nonetheless, the non-Jewish community gave him as to what, in all reality, it means to be a Jew.

My formal, childhood, Jewish education took place in a congregational school in Columbus, Ohio. I can recall many of my experiences during those years vividly. The joy of the holiday celebrations, the boredom of the English textbooks, the inadequacy of the instruction, the tedium of studying Hebrew in classes that seemed to make no progress, all remain quite present to me -- and incidentally make me wonder how they engendered in me, as they unquestionably did, the desire to learn more about a tradition which must be better, I knew, than the way it had been presented to me. But in all those studies, which began in early childhood and continued until I graduated from high school I recall no books or projects dealing with Christianity, Christian doctrine or the relationship of Judaism to Christianity. To be a Jew, particularly when one lived as a small minority amidst so attractive a non-Jewish culture (in those days one could say Christian culture), one had to know Judaism, its laws, its practices, its history. One could gain these essentials without ever discussing Christian doctrine.

My informal Jewish education was undoubtedly highlighted by an incident which occurred on the playground of my elementary school, the Heyl Avenue School. I do not remember the year or the exact sequence of events but I recall the critical details. They concern the usual boisterous, muscular play of boys aged 9 or 10 and the emergence of tension between me and another lad. One day high spirits led to a confrontation. To silence

me for good he flung his vilest epithet, "Christkiller." Someone started the fight -- I hope it was I -- and there was a black eye and tears. I do not remember whether I thought then that he or I had won. Now I know that in such a fight, while one may retain one's dignity, everyone loses. We never fought again; no incident nearly as physical ever recurred in my several brushes with anti-semitism; and while I have forgotten much of the anguish of that moment and many of the details, I have not forgotten the event itself. And what it did to set the quiet apprehensions and wariness of the non-Jew which were the dominant attitudes of my newly acclimating, immigrant Jewish community, may be easily imagined.

My daughters in their religious education in a predominantly non-Jewish suburb of New York have learned far more about Christianity in their synagogue school than did either my father or I. Their textbooks, some of which I helped prepare and edit, contains specific references to Christianity, particularly as it arose from Judaism and as it affected Jewish life in the Middle Ages. When they are older they will probably spend a year studying other religions and use the pioneer Jewish textbook in this field by Miller and Schwartzman. I had the great joy of reviewing the chapters of that volume which treat of Roman Catholicism with Father Gerard Sloyan and the chapters on Protestant Christianity with Dr. John Bennet. Our Reform Jewish Commission on Jewish Education could not be content to publish something descriptive of their faith which in all good conscience they could not say was reasonably accurate, though, of course, we made

our own Jewish evaluation of it. I have no reason to believe that there is anything in that volume or the other texts my children have studied which will need revision since the Second Vatican Council though some additional material on the mood of the Roman Catholic Church today would be desirable.

My daughters' informal education offers much more room for change and improvement. Not that my wife and I, or our Jewish friends, or our Jewish community have inculcated such negative attitudes toward Christians that due to the actions of Vatican Two some substantial compensatory change is in order. If anything I think, over the years, we have gone far out of our way to cultivate respect and understanding, not only for our Christian neighbors, but for all men in a world of United Nations. (If we worry about our teaching concerning other faiths, therefore, it is rather that we have made our children so open-minded that they may believe we think it makes no difference what one believes and more specifically, whom one marries!)

But we are not the only educators of our children. One day as I was planting in our garden I heard a conversation between my two eldest daughters and one of their friends from up the street. They were playing on the swing set some distance away. So while I did not catch every word and could not go closer without making them selfconscious, I heard enough. My girls were then, I think, 7 and 5. Their friend was 6 and had just finished her first few weeks in our local Roman Catholic parochial school. She asked in all friendliness why my girls had "killed God." The phrase was so incomprehensible to my little ones that their first level of retort was that they hadn't killed God but found Him, since the Jews gave One God to the

to the world. When the inter-religious semantic confusion was cleared and Jesus became the topic of discussion my girls insisted that the Romans had done it -- though where they had learned this with the oldest only in the second grade I still have no idea. That historical assertion brought the discussion to a stalemate. The girls continued to play while I made my way to a chair to meditate on the mysteries of Jewish existence.

Since that day neither of the girls involved has ever mentioned the incident. Should they read this account I sincerely doubt that they will recall its having taken place. But that evening at dinner they both asked me numerous questions about the death of Jesus and my wife, whom I had told of the discussion, and I exchanged several significant glances during the conversation. I do not know whether they have ever run into any such overt anti-semitic incidents since that day. They have certainly never mentioned any to me. But while they have been welcomed in their overwhelmingly Christian schools, girl scout troops and neighborhood, they have also been taught a certain sense of limit, a certain realistic definition of what it means, socially, to be a Jew. In their continuing education about their Jewishness who can judge how determinative that incident on the swings will prove to be?

I have permitted myself these personal references because I believe they illustrate quite concretely the hopefulness and the problems of Jewish Christian relations over the past few generations and thus the existential reality of Vatican Two's effect on Jewish education.

For the Jew of the United States anti-semitism has been a changing phenomenon and one that has, with some setbacks, steadily changed for the

better. What was in my father's generation a matter of life and death had become in my childhood an occasional blow and to my daughters a series of remarks. Today sociologists regularly report that most American Jewish adolescents cannot recall ever having experience anti-semitism. With the economic expansion and social openness of the post World War II era, anti-semitism has become increasingly less manifest, but only the few would go so far as to say it does not remain potent if latent. And, it should be added, that since we American Jews are all the children of immigrants give or take a few generations, we somewhere must recall that had not some forebear had the courage to trek across the ocean and were democracy not the incredibly magnificent achievement it is, we too might have been Hitler's victims. The outer growing security, plus the decreasing inner apprehension as the non-Jewish world makes its professed democracy more real, these shape the reality of Jewish living today with greater potency than any textbook or curriculum.

So if we inquire how the Second Vatican Council may have an effect on Jewish education we may answer quickly. Formally, it will have none. The decrees on revelation, the liturgy, the laity, seminary education, the church, are of no direct concern to formal Jewish education. Even where it teaches comparative religion it does not have sufficient time to go into such depth as to allow for treatment of these issues. Nor is it reasonable to assume that the decree on non-Christian religions will call for changes in Jewish texts or teaching. Jewish children still need to know, among many positive things in Jewish history, the tragic facts of murder,

pillage, segregation and Inquisition which mark the relation of Christians with Jews until modern times and without which modern anti-semitism for all its non-religious character is inexplicable. To be sure, teachers should be expected to indicate that in the late twentieth century the Roman Catholic Church indicated that anti-semitism is incompatible with its doctrine, properly understood, but that is no reason for removing from the textbooks what is, on the whole, an un-hysterical, even gentle treatment of those ancient sad days. (The 30's gave rise to a continuing cry in the Jewish community that children should not be traumatized in their Jewish education by being exposed too much to the suffering of Jewish history. The text books and the tone of Jewish educational materials still reflect this roseate view to such an extent that how to teach children about the holocaust under Hitler has become a major methodological problem.)

The critical question then is how will the Second Vatican Council's decrees, and particularly the one on non-Christian religions, effect the informal education of Jews, that is to say that unplanned and unprogrammed but very definite introduction to the nature of Jewish identity which the non-Jewish world gives the Jew, thereby substantially effecting his self-image as a Jew. How can anyone hope to know the answer to that question? Surely there are grounds for faith that what has swept through much of the Church on the highest level will one day reach into most parishes and their institutions, if not in the remaining years of my daughter's youth then in their children's lives. And when one realizes what the past ten years have

done to transform what once seemed like an immovable, or paralyzed institution, then there may be some confidence that the next ten years will see conciliar decrees become personal deeds.

But there must be doubt as well as to how much the old traditions of Christian anti-semitism can be overcome. The very fact that the Jews are included in a document dealing with all non-Christian religions seems to show little appreciation of the uniqueness of the Children of Israel as the recipient and bearer of God's revelation in history. If it is explained that the document does indeed take cognizance of this uniqueness but it was more politic in the working out of the Council documents to include the Jews here, then it is just those politics which give one pause in agreeing that this matter has been settled once and for all as definitive doctrine. The decree does not say so but it is clear that the Church is remorseful at what befell the Jews in recent decades and therefore for all the sorry history of medieval times which led up to it. For that sentiment and good will one must be grateful. Yet this ~~era~~ of good feeling gives rise to the nagging possibility urged on by the experience of two millenia (with the last 30 years the worst) that this document is therefore only the expression of the spirit of this chastened age and that the now latent anti-semitism of Christianity may yet reassert itself.

Let me adduce another personal experience to illustrate this Jewish ambivalence. It derives from one of the most profoundly moving "ecumenical" experiences I have had, the Catholic-Jewish Colloquy which took place at St. Vincent's Archabbey, Latrobe, Pennsylvania last January.

When one of our sessions was ended early so that the Catholics present could attend a special mass, several of us expressed interest in attending and were invited to do so. The mass, the first I had attended which used English, was a breathtaking experience. The congregation, about 200 seminarians, sang many of the responses in antiphony to a choir, both groups using music composed by members of the Abbey. In contrast to the static masses I had attended or seen before this was a dynamic service with constant interaction of priest, choir and congregation; of Latin and English, of movement, sign and silence. How familiar to the Jewish heart was the recurring psalm "It is good to give thanks to the Lord... Tov l'hodot ladonai..." Even the gospel reading of the day struck a special echo in the Jewish ear "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them... whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven..." * And the evident piety and devotion of the men participating in this service could not fail to stir those of us who were merely observers.

Yet all this warmly felt appreciation could not overcome another emotion. This mass was in celebration of the saint's day of John Chrysostom. The great Jewish student of the Church Fathers Louis Ginzberg wrote of him, "His sermons ... Adversus Judaeos... mark a turning point in anti-Jewish polemics. While up to that time the Church aspired merely to attack the

* Quoted here from the RSV. The Abbey was using the new Confraternity version which has not yet been published.

the dogmas of the Jews ... with Chrysostom there began the endeavor which eventually brought so much suffering upon the Jews, to prejudice the whole of Christendom against the latter, and to erect hitherto unknown barriers between Jews and Christians. " And Malcolm Hay, who goes on to quote some of the saint's utterances says of him, "The violence of the language used by St. John Chrysostom in his homilies against the Jews has never been exceeded by any preacher whose sermons have been recorded."

Perhaps while rejoicing in the sainthood of Chrysostom the Church can surmount his attitude to the Jews. While rabbis do not normally have the rank of saints there are numerous rabbinic utterances which Judaism would not identify with its noblest doctrine. Yet John Chrysostom illustrates well the question which the future poses. Who speaks truly for the Church? More important, what will the future acts of Roman Catholics and the Protestants who have been influenced by the Second Vatican Council teach the Jews? That is hardly a question for a Jew to answer but only, with some hope, to wait and see.