

VT-293 Transcription

Christopher Closeup panel discussion on

"Faith Without Prejudice." 1993.

JOHN CATOIR: *Faith without Prejudice*, this week on *Christopher Closeup*. I'm Father John Catoir. Join us.

M1: Slating *Christopher Closeup*. Program #H-378, "Faith and Prejudice." (inaudible) and have a good show, everybody.

JEANNE GLYNN: Is it possible to hate your neighbor and love God? Is it possible to praise God and dishonor your neighbor's beliefs? Crucial questions for today's world. Next on *Christopher Closeup*.

(music) [01:00]

M2: *Christopher Closeup*. A look at the people who are shaping tomorrow's world today.

CATOIR: Hello, welcome to *Christopher Closeup*. I'm Father John Catoir. Shouting mobs, war, bloodshed. How often do we hear about acts of violence committed in the name of religion?

GLYNN: Faith and prejudice. Two words. They sound incompatible, but in reality, they often go together.

CATOIR: As Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, the vast majority of Americans share what has been called the Judeo-Christian heritage.

GLYNN: Today's *Christopher Closeup* will examine that heritage. We'll talk about our differences, and we'll talk about what we have in common.

CATOIR: Our guests are respected religious leaders who are building bridges of understanding. [02:00] Dr. Eugene Fisher is Executive Secretary for the Catholic-Jewish Relations for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

GLYNN: Reverend David Simpson is the Director for Christian-Jewish Relations with the National Council of Churches.

CATOIR: Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum is National Director of Interreligious Affairs for the American Jewish Committee.

GLYNN: I'm Jeanne Glynn. Please join me in welcoming to *Christopher Closeup* Eugene Fisher, David Simpson, and Marc Tanenbaum. Gentlemen, what does the phrase Judeo-Christian tradition or heritage mean to you? Reverend Simpson?

DAVID SIMPSON: That's not an easy question to answer, because I think it's in the process of revolution and reconstruction right now. The phrase Judeo-Christian tradition means to me that we have a common heritage that comes out of the root in this Judaism as the parent religion, and that Christianity [03:00] and Judaism are intimately related to each other from the beginning and until today.

GLYNN: Dr. Fisher?

EUGENE FISHER: Two things. The phrase has a positive connotation which has to do with this sense of spiritual bonding, which is even more than just the origins in the past, but today Jews and Christians, the Church affirms very strongly, have a spiritual bond, a spiritual heritage, and a witnessing together to do for the world. On the other hand, the phrase -- and I'm sure Marc will pick up on this -- also can have an unfortunate tendency of people get the idea that Judaism and Christianity are somehow just one religion. I think we also have to preserve the uniqueness of the two, so we need also to talk about the Jewish tradition and the Christian tradition.

GLYNN: Rabbi Tanenbaum?

MARC TANENBAUM: I think that says it very well. It tends to emphasize what I think needs to be emphasized, namely that the bonds, the similarities which Jews and Christians affirm together, are in many ways far greater than the differences, [4:00] which have tended to separate them over the past 2,000 years. The belief in one god, reverence for sacred scripture, belief in the dignity of the life of every human being, common social responsibility. You find those themes in Judaism and Christianity as you find them in no other religion in the world. And so I think there is a Judeo-Christian tradition, which plays a decisive role in

the life of this nation, as well as the western civilization.

CATOIR: Could we pick up on some of those common things that we hold? Would there be any others? Could we elaborate in another other way on the things that are common to our heritage?

SIMPSON: Well I think that it is obvious that we both share the same god. A god who is loving and merciful, and a god who calls us to account for our collective and corporate wrongdoing, nationally, internationally, and personally.

FISHER: I'd like to emphasize too the shared liturgical tradition. [05:00] Christian liturgy -- and it's still true in Catholic liturgy today, with Hebrew words coming out, amen, alleluia -- is really based on Jewish liturgy, affirms the sanctification of the name of God, all of which goes back to the sense that both of our communities have of being people of God, in covenant with God. The god that Christians worship is not just any god, but specifically the God of Israel. And this comes out in our liturgical tradition and in our basic faith life, so that the relationship is more and unique. It's very distinct from that which Christianity and the Church would have with any other people. As we are people of God, so are we spiritually bound with the Jewish people as people of God.

CATOIR: We also have the sacredness of the human family. We share that, and then the rights of man coming from God, not from the state. We have so many things across the board that we share.

FISHER: Our whole moral tradition [06:00] is based on the Hebrew (inaudible, overlapping dialogue) --

CATOIR: Ten Commandments.

GLYNN: May I ask you, all three of you officially are involved with interfaith relationships. How did that come about? You could have chosen other ways. Rabbi?

TANENBAUM: Well I have what for me is a captivating story. It would take longer than this program to tell it. I'll try to be brief as I can. I was born the child of Russian-Polish-Jewish immigrant parents who came to this country from the Ukraine. My first exposure to Christianity as a child came through a story my father told me, of how when he lived in a small village in the Ukraine, on a Good Friday found his family confronted by a Russian Orthodox Church, that after the Passion liturgy, became so inflamed about the theme that the Jews killed Christ that they descended on his father's house [07:00] , took my uncle out, and caused him to drown in a lake before the entire village, saying that this is what we do to Jews, because they are Christ-killers. Well I was told that story by my

father when we lived in Baltimore when I was three, four years old. And to me, my early experience, Christians and Christianity were the enemy. They were the people who killed my uncle and killed my people. My involvement in Jewish-Christian relations was an act of conversion for me personally. I had to find out for myself what is it that could lead a faith, which defines itself as a faith of love, of redemption, of healing reconciliation, to have people within that church who could feel that they're good Christians, and at the same time, hate Jews and murder Jews. So as I grew older, I began studying the history of Jewish-Christian relations, and the source of what became known as the "teachings of contempt" against Jews. And later on, I began meeting [08:00] real Christians, live Christians, after I came out of the Jewish parochial school system, where I had no contact with Christians. And I began to find some loving, wonderful people. People who were as disturbed about anti-Semitism as I was, and who were determined to make changes in the life of the Church, so that the Church in fact would become a church of love and reconciliation, rather than a church of hatred and alienation. And friends like David Simpson and Gene Fisher, and thousands of others like them, in this country and abroad, have led me to realize that Santayana's phrase

"History does not have to be a hitching post to the past, but a guiding post to the future." It's possible to change. And of course Pope John XXIII and Vatican Council II has been a radical transformation, a life of all of us, and thank God for that.

GLYNN: Gene, how did you become involved in the --

FISHER: Excuse me. My background is not quite as dramatic, [09:00] but in a sense possibly as profound. My entrance into it was through the medium of Hebrew Scriptures, which is the course of studies I was pursuing. And in that, I ended up at New York University's Institute for Hebrew Studies, and found myself as a lone Christian in classrooms full of rabbis and Jewish scholars.

TANENBAUM: Why should we be the only ones in exile?

FISHER: Yeah. But it was a very profound experience for me. I discovered in the second class that the debates that we had in the Catholic tradition over Scripture and its inspiration, and who was author of what, are very much the same as within the Jewish tradition, and began participating in those kinds of debates, and found myself entirely enriched with the notion of the tradition that I had studied, looked at from a Jewish point of view. For me, 1492 had -- growing up in Catholic school system -- meant only discovery [10:00] of America by Christopher Columbus.

I found out also that in that same year, that was the year that Jews were expelled from Spain, so that Columbus's ships would probably have passed the ships with thousands of Jews crammed into them as refugees from Spain. And this second level view on the tradition that I had learned both spiritually enriched it with shared Scripture understandings that I gained from it, that I hadn't been aware of, and also made me see the other side of it, the side that Rabbi Tanenbaum grew up with. So that it was a double kind of experience.

GLYNN: And Reverend Simpson?

SIMPSON: I suppose that my story is somewhere in between Gene and Marc's, but certainly a bit more on the personally level, I cannot identify and have the kind of experience, the profound experience, that Marc came out of. But my story is one that is a journey into a painful discovery on my part, of the extent to which [11:00] anti-Semitism is very much alive and well in the churches. I spent a number of years of my career as an activist in the Civil Rights Movement, and I was always deeply touched by the commitment and the leadership of Jews in that movement in the '60s and the early '70s. And at a point later in my career, working with a small community in Connecticut, we were asked to do some workshops on anti-Semitism as a part of an interfaith

organization that I was directing. And I was instantly confronted with a tremendous amount of defensiveness that I found both within myself as well as within other members of the Christian community. And that experience opened my eyes and my mind in a very profound way, and it changed my life. I discovered my own anti-Semitism, and was willing for the first time to share it and to try to understand what it meant. And from that point on, I began to direct and specialize, if you will, my own vocational interest, and [12:00] began a discover process of the kinds of things that the Church needs to look at, in terms of its history of anti-Semitism and the kinds of things that it can do to correct it. And that's what I got me where I am now, and just one kind of anecdote about that. When I was first very involved in it, and had been sort of taken up, totally consumed by this intrigue of the fact that anti-Semitism is so alive and well in this country, I remember riding back from a meeting a friend of mine in a car. And at the end of a long discussion that we had had on something that was completely different, he looked at me very seriously and he said, "You know what the problem in the world is? It's the Jews. We have to get rid of them." And I thought he was joking. And I found out he wasn't. And I was stunned, and I was silent. And it was 1981.

CATOIR: That's frightening.

SIMPSON: And it is frightening. And it's alive and well, and it is a vocational challenge to me that will continue to be both very exciting and very painful, [13:00] but very necessary.

CATOIR: Can we explore this mystery a little bit more? The question of intolerance, especially in people who acclaim to be believing people, and therefore commit themselves to a loving God who asks them to be loving to their neighbor. I was touched by your story, Rabbi Tanenbaum, and Dave Simpson also mentions that there was anti-Semitism in his heart. You mentioned that Christians were enemies at one point in your life. A lot of people have this ambiguity in their faith life. Why is it there? What can we do about it?

TANENBAUM: Well I think it is a complicated issue on an individual basis. I mean psychology has made it very clear to us that every individual struggles with the conflict between love and rejection. It's clear that the problem of bigotry and anti-Semitism is not the problem of the Jews, it's the problem of the bigot, [14:00] just as the problem of racism is not the problem of blacks, it's the problem of the whites who harbor hatred for the difference of color. There's a theory by Erich Fromm, the great psychoanalyst who passed away, that group narcissism plays a very crucial

role in group hatred. Namely, that groups can be as narcissistic as individuals are, namely become so self-centered that they see anything of value, of dignity, associated with themselves, and find it necessary to empty the person outside of oneself of value, not being able to relate and in a human, empathic way with another person. And therefore there's always a superiority-inferiority contrast, which the person needs in order to feel important. And group narcissism has played a role in all of our communities. And it's not only Christians. Jews have had that as well. Muslims have that today. We see that in Iran. They feel themselves [15:00] as being the center of the universe. They have a monopoly on salvation. And if you're not part of Ayatollah Khomeini's movement, you are subject to extermination, of destruction. Therefore, the important thing at the outset is to recognize that kind of dynamic that goes on, and the degree to which religious teaching reinforces that, or serves as a corrective for that. And I would say the most important development, certainly in my lifetime, was the role of Vatican Council II, which I had privilege to attend.

CATOIR: You were the only rabbi present, as I recall.

TANENBAUM: Well I was in a sense an unofficial observer. I was a guest of Cardinal Shehan of Baltimore, who was then

head of the bishops' committee on ecumenism, and then was invited by Cardinal Bea to attend some of the sessions. But the most important thing that happened to me was a recognition that Vatican Council II, which brought together 2,5000 council fathers from all over the world, and the attention that it paid on the problems of the sources of certain traditions of Christian teaching that led to anti-Semitic attitudes had to be faced, and then had to be uprooted from [16:00] the tradition of the Church, if the Church is ultimately to really present itself -- in reality, not just in proclamation -- as a Church of love and healing. And Vatican Council II began a revolution in relationships. And since 1965, I think greater progress has been made in facing the sources of anti-Jewish teaching in the whole Catholic Church, as well as in the Protestant community. More progress has been made over these past 20 years than over the past 2,000 years. I think that's no exaggeration.

GLYNN: Part of the mystery that you referred to is how people of any religion, with any self-love as a group or as an individual's, can tolerate prejudice in the life of faith. How are the two reconciled?

FISHER: I think essentially, or at least for Christianity, as for Judaism, as also for Islam, the prejudice is really

destructive of the essence [17:00] of the faith in God that we share. When Jesus, who was not a bad Jewish teacher, was asked what's the greatest of the Commandments, he linked together love of God with love of neighbor, which is very much a part of the Jewish tradition. It's a very good answer, so that you can't do one without the other. I think one of the things that happened historically is that because Jews and Christians, as people of God, are so close, that it became very much a family quarrel, kind of who's closest to God within the family. And you know that there's nothing more bitter than a breakup within a family. And I think that's part of it. And part of the healing today is the reconstruction of the family.

TANENBAUM: Can I make a Jewish kibitz on the very important thing that Gene just said now. Jesus's affirmation of love of God and love of neighbor, based on the Book of Leviticus -- there's a rabbinic commentary that says, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." You must first learn to love yourself before you're able to love your neighbor. [18:00] And frequently hatred of the Other emerges out of people who don't love themselves. They project the shadow of their own self-hatred onto the Other and scapegoat the Other for that which they dislike in themselves. And what churches and synagogues can help people to do is to understand the

personal preciousness of one's own self, one's own life. If one is really at peace with oneself, one does not need a scapegoat out there, on whom to vent one's own personal internal rage against oneself. So that this is a role we play together, creating a community of care and love and compassion to help people relax with themselves, to accept themselves in order to be able to accept others.

CATOIR: On the basis then of what you're saying, prejudice isn't -- obviously it's not limited to anti-Semitism. What other kinds of prejudice do you experience, David Simpson, in the churches?

SIMPSON: Well obviously there's been a tremendous amount of racial prejudice in our [19:00] country and around the world that is still very much alive and well. I continue to be amazed that the most segregated hour is at 11:00 on Sunday morning in this country.

CATOIR: In the churches, you mean.

SIMPSON: In the churches. That perhaps is my own personal agenda, because of my history of being involved in it. But I find that there continues to be a certain amount of -- perhaps even increasing -- intolerance today in this country, of persons of any faith, of any political conviction, of anything that is different than myself. And I think it is very much related to what Marc just said

about one's own sense of self-confidence or self-insecurity. If we do not really feel confident and strong in how we feel about ourselves, we need to find somebody else who is not as good as we are, in order to make ourselves seem OK. And I think that that is a continuing tragedy in the human drama. [20:00] And it just keeps repeating itself over and over again. And we continue to find new scapegoats. I am particularly worried right now in our society, because of events that are happening internationally that there is a rise of anti-Semitism in this country, and that we are finding the scapegoats again, and that the Christian community must be extremely careful about the extent to which we understand that the Jesus who taught us to love our neighbor is a Jesus who was born, lived, and died a Jew, and was saying that to us, and we need to continue to remember that and hear that.

GLYNN: Now we've been talking faith, prejudice. Gene, you wrote a book called *Faith without Prejudice*. In this world that Dave refers to, of turmoil everywhere, how do we achieve faith without prejudice?

FISHER: Well I think the way to achieve it is to understand and practice our traditions authentically. There's been, especially between Jews and Christians, [21:00] almost 2,000 years' worth of encrustations of misunderstandings

that have grown up around that. And we have to get beneath those. And we have to begin to understand that Christianity is spiritually related to Judaism, that the Church relates to the Jewish people in a manner of dialogue, in a manner of respect and mutual esteem. All of these terms are just simply right out of the recent statements of Pope John Paul II, who said very strong things about the necessity for the Church to understand its own identity, for the Church to be in dialogue with Jews. So once we take this kind of a stance, we have to do it not just with our heads but with our hearts. And we have to, as Catholics, meet with Jews. We work with them, especially in the Catholic tradition, since we are immigrants and ethnics together, and live very much similar lifestyles and patterns. We have to go out and sit down with Jews and dialogue and talk. [22:00]

CATOIR: We have about four minutes left. We'd like to hit on some of the positive things that are being done in Catholic-Jewish or Christian-Jewish relations. Rabbi Tanenbaum?

TANENBAUM: Well the work that has been going on with the bishops' committee that Gene Fisher has on Catholic-Jewish relations, the work that David Simpson's been doing with the National Council of Churches, are really landmark developments. The kind of examination, for example, of the

teaching about Jews and Judaism in Christian textbooks, the uprooting of anti-Jewish attitudes, which existed for so long. The work that we're doing in the American Jewish Committee in looking at how we teach about Christians and Muslims and others, and uprooting unfair representations, stereotypes. Works going on in liturgy. I would say the most dramatic work that I find, where we really recognize our commonality, living our values, is the work that we're doing together in areas of humanitarian, social justice work. Catholics, Protestants, and Jews working together to relieve the suffering [23:00] of the Vietnamese Boat People, the Cambodians, the Haitians, civilians in Lebanon. Working together in Africa, Asia, Latin America, to relieve human suffering. I think there we recognize how much we see the image of God together as we relieve human suffering and help save lives. And we need to do more of that, in this country as well.

CATOIR: I enjoyed the fact that all of you are friends. When we came together in the green room and talked, there was a good camaraderie between you. Were there any other projects that you --

SIMPSON: I just would like to mention a couple of things that I think are real high priorities, and it's been reinforced for me in the conversation that we've had today. one of the

programs that our agency is working on in cooperation with Marc's agency is a training program for Sunday school teachers. And I think that if I look back at my own anti-Semitism very quickly, there was a seed that was planted, that was based on a misunderstanding of the teaching of a little child, about the birth, life, and death of Jesus. And I think that if we can correct and eradicate that [24:00] continued misunderstanding that happens so often in the teaching of little children in Sunday schools across the country, we would move a great deal in the right direction. And one other thing that we are working on that I think is increasingly important for Christians is a Holocaust commemoration program that we are doing in conjunction with the US Catholic Conference, and with a number of national Jewish agencies, that brings home for us the reality of a second look at Christianity in what we call a post-Holocaust area. I read a poster the other day, and I don't remember exactly what it said. But it said something to the effect that I became free when somebody loved me. And I grew, and I grew, and I grew. And I grew until I was able to love another person into freedom. And I hope that that is the essence of what our Christian-Jewish work is all about today.

GLYNN: A constant discovery. I think we have about 20 seconds each. Have any of you, either of you, all of you, made a discovery about a faith, your own, someone else's, in this work? [25:00]

FISHER: Obviously about each other's. One of the things I would like to emphasize too, in terms of this discovery, is that to do this whole revolution that's going on within Christianity and re-understanding, and going back to the roots of our faith -- we have to realize that the tendrils of anti-Semitism, misunderstanding are all through our entire tradition. So when one speaks about changing and updating and renewing -- is the proper term -- our teachings and understandings, it involves the liturgy; it involves our understanding of Scripture; it involves basic catechesis from kindergarten all the way through. And it involves primarily meeting people, and the enriching happens in the encounter. So that that's the way to do it.

CATOIR: Thank you very much, Dr. Eugene Fisher. We're very pleased to have all of you. Marc Tanenbaum, Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, and Reverend David Simpson, thank you for our work in ecumenism, and for this *Christopher Closeup* visit.

SIMPSON: Thank you.

FISHER: Thank you.

TANENBAUM: Thank you.

CATOIR: Thank you. Jeanne?

GLYNN: Prejudice. The greatest stumbling block [26:00] to a life of faith. Well all of us here today hope that this program will serve to remove some of those stumbling blocks. Starting today, starting with you. And the Christophers would like you to have your free copy of Father Catoir's book about the world's great religions. It's called *The Way People Pray*. Send your name, address, and ZIP code to The Christophers, New York, NY 10017. I'm Jeanne Glynn. Father Catoir and I would love to hear from you. So write for *The Way People Pray*. We'll send along your free copy. Our address again, The Christophers, New York, NY 10017. Father Catoir?

CATOIR: Thanks, Jeanne. The God who created all of us loves us all, Protestant, Catholic, and Jews alike. And all the world's major religions urge us to love one another as the Father loves us. The words may vary, but the message is the same. The Talmud teaches, [27:00] what is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. That is the entire law, and all the rest is commentary. The New Testament puts it this way. Treat other people exactly as you would like them to treat you. This is the essence of all true religion. Thank you for being with us. Peace. Shalom. God bless you. Thank you.

(music)

M2: This program has been brought to you by The Christophers,
New York, NY 10017. It's better to light one candle than to
curse the darkness.

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