

Jewish Community Institutions and Education in Interfaith Efforts

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This study sought to assess a diverse cross-section of Jewish institutions in the United States, Israel, Australia, England, Canada, the Council of Latin American Organizations, South Africa, and France. In most countries with significant Jewish populations four different kinds of organizations were contacted: schools, religious organizations such as synagogues or rabbinical schools, community welfare and fundraising organizations, and defense organizations.

The result of my research with the myriad of worldwide Jewish organizations was alarmingly small. In most organizations the individuals I spoke with reported that almost nothing is being done to educate Jews of any age as to Catholic attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. In day school, Yeshiva and supplementary education, there is a noticeable lacuna in the curriculum relating to contemporary changes in Catholic attitudes as reflected in *Nostra Aetate*.

On the community level, the leaders of many communities have mostly perfunctory meetings with leaders of other religious or ethnic communities to discuss shared values and exchange holiday greetings. These meetings are seldom focused exclusively on the Catholic community and rarely discuss substantive issues of antisemitism and the articulation of new Church teachings outlined at the Second Vatican Council. Out of all of the respondent organizations only 6.5% of them are engaging in a program to educate their communities as to the vastly changed attitudes of the Catholic Church. **74% of organizations are doing no intergroup work at all.**

This means that most of the contemporary Jewish population, save for Jewish leaders, has no formal education or up-to-date information regarding the Catholic Church or any other religious group. The remaining 18.5% of organizations and schools engage community leaders in intergroup relations, which may or may not include Catholic groups, but are certainly not exclusively devoted to the dissemination of the changed attitudes of the Vatican towards Judaism and the Jews.

The following outline more clearly displays the different categories of involvement:

I. Organizational Findings:

Each organization was asked to describe the extent to which they are engaging in educating Jewish individuals about Catholicism and specifically the Vatican's views about Jews and Judaism. The results from these organizations fall into four categories: Non-Engagement, Non-Catholic Inter-group affairs, Leadership Engagement, and Active Communal engagement.

- 1) Non-Engagement: Most groups did not engage in any specific intergroup issues. Most of these were primarily schools and outreach programs whose number one goal was to build Jewish identity. This means that students in the 21st century are still being taught versions of Catholic belief that has tainted the last 2000 years of Jewish-Catholic history. One respondent in this category said, they "were more concerned with young Jews learning

about Jewish culture and religions, than to spend time teaching them about other religions.”

- 2) Leadership Engagement: Though many communities do not educate their members as to Jewish-Catholic history and the evolving relationship between the two groups, they do involve communal leaders in this level of interaction. The community leaders involved generally are rabbis, educators and organizational leaders and their counterparts from the Catholic community. Most of these interactions are meetings that match leaders from each of the two communities that serve similar community functions. The content of the meetings seems to range from discussing contemporary political, social and religious issues upon which the two groups either agree or disagree. There is a particular focus on the shared values between the two religious communities and many human rights issues.
- 3) Non-Catholic Intergroup Affairs: Outside of the United States, intergroup affairs addressed by the Jewish community seemed to focus more broadly on Christian-Jewish relations or Muslim-Jewish Relations. Work pertaining to Catholics in particular was not popular, with only one country that we surveyed conducting any particular program. This was in Argentina where the population is mostly Roman Catholic. In other countries, such as Australia and Great Britain, meetings between Muslim and Jewish leaders were more popular than any other individual group.
- 4) Active Communal Engagement by these organizations is defined as employment of a comprehensive educational approach to teaching community members about Catholicism and its approach to Jews and Judaism. There were only a handful of organizations, from the ones we contacted, who engaged in this kind of full-scale effort. Most notably they are: the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League. Their programs include full-scale curricula geared for community leaders, laypeople and students.

II. Denominational Findings

Different denominations also approached the topic somewhat differently.

1. Within the Orthodox community the spectrum included teaching aids to help teachers educate students in the event that they ask about Christianity. This “Dah Mas Lh’ashiv” approach (Know how to answer) was popular among schools that subscribed to Torah U’Mesorah publications where the one-page teaching aid was located. In other Orthodox schools that call themselves Modern Orthodox, the topic of other faiths is covered in a historical context within a World History class. The extent to which the students learn about contemporary issues between Catholics and Jews is at the discretion of the teacher, so that students in the same school with different teachers will be presented with entirely different approaches to the subject.
2. In the Conservative community most educators I spoke with who oversee supplementary education, feel that the limited time they have was better served teaching students about Jewish identity. Within the day schools of the Conservative movement some interfaith

activities do go on, but they are not standardized as part of the educational curriculum from the United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism.

3. The Reform's community approach within education focuses more on common values regarding social justice issues and is closely tied with programs stemming out of their Religious Action Center. There is one program being in formulation for college campuses which is a joint venture of their Keshet College Programming office and the RAC. This program will aim to bring Jewish student leaders together with student leaders of other denominations.

III. Geographical Findings

1. **United States:** In the United States there are a few organizations engaging in full-fledged educational initiatives within their communities. The American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League are the two organizations with substantive educational programming that target many different age groups within the community. In Chicago there is also a Jewish High School that has an exchange program one day of the year with a non-Jewish high school so that each group of students can learn about each other. (This program is not exclusively designated to Catholic students)
2. **Israel:** In most educational institutes in Israel, much like in the United States, very little formal education is being disseminated to students about the Catholic Church and its relationship vis-à-vis the Jews. In one popular religious high school the topic gets covered insofar as it relates religious beliefs that may compete with Jewish values. In a religious teacher's college, the prospective educators have no courses dealing with interfaith issues or dialogue.
3. **South Africa, Australia, England, Canada and France** all reported similarly structured programs. A representative in each country responded that they are focusing their efforts in other places. They have no programs with Catholic leaders specifically, rather they are engaging in interfaith dialogues with Muslim leaders. These programs are focused almost exclusively on religious leaders with the general Jewish populations having limited exposure, save for one formal program in an Australian high school which incorporates some interfaith volunteer days for its students.
4. **Latin America:** Latin America has thriving interreligious group programs, largely because the predominant religion in South America is Roman Catholicism. The Jewish community representatives take part in many ecumenical discussions with the President of the Rabbinic Seminary also serving as the vice-president of the Argentine Council for Religious Freedom. Most of the interfaith activities there do center predominantly around the Catholic Church because they are a majority in the country and are the exclusive state-sponsored religion (though Venezuela has complete religious freedom).