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Jewish-Christian Relations in the 1970's

A Protestant View

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Any foray into the thickets and undergrowths which characterize Jewish-Christian relations requires a willingness to risk. There is much we cannot see behind or through; there are bound to be serious and even prohibitive obstacles which will spring up unexpectedly; we do not know where the path we forge may lead. Yet we take the risk because we are impelled both by the dismal dimensions of much of the past and by times and moments of joyous interaction to seek to minimize the former and maximize the latter.

There can be no over-arching theory of Jewish-Christian relations. There is so much pluralism within both the Jewish and the Christian communities, and so much variety in the ways in which each interacts with each other and with multiform cultures throughout the world, that any attempt at grand generalization would be not only foolish, but perhaps perverse. Yet we can carve out vectors which comprehend certain extremely significant developments in Christianity and Judaism over the last decade. These contain the stuff and the strands of which the future will be woven.

A. The revolt against institutional bureaucracy

There has been much talk in recent years of the "new populism" which is surfacing in American life. Certain analyses would tend to limit this phenomenon to the extreme right and the extreme left. The fact is that certain important manifestations of this attitude are very prevalent right now in the vast American "center": a suspicion of structures, a move toward decentralization, a more confident localism, an insistence on determining destinies at the "grassroots" levels. This tendency shows every sign of burgeoning in the next few years, and it is having an extremely powerful impact on the life of the church.

There has been a heavy emphasis in Jewish-Christian relations over the last twenty years on communication with Christian leaders: leaders of denominations; National Council of Churches officials; seminary officials; prominent theologians. We have to face the fact now that much of the moral and intellectual prestige of such leaders with local judicatories, local congregations, and with the "Christian in the street" has seriously waned or even disappeared. A combination of theological insipidity and faddism; a "radical chic" approach to leftist activism and ethnicity; and a pre-packaged "Madison Avenue" approach to programming from the top down within denominational bureaucracies has drastically decreased the degree to which high-level leadership can be or is taken seriously. This is less true in Catholicism than Protestantism, and much less true among conservative Protestant groups. But it is a fact of life among the mainline "liberal" Protestant denominations.

Many denominational leaders would be surprised at the extent to which Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, or Rex Humbard have become normative prestige figures for people who cannot name even one of their own denomination's top personalities. Perhaps the evangelists have their own organizations, even bureaucracies -- yet a part of their attractiveness is that they deal directly with spiritual and ethical concerns without the apparatus and paraphernalia that goes along with position papers, public statements, etc. And they do not claim to "speak for others" in the way that has become so exasperating to many who disagree with their own denominational leadership.

Other strands are merging to create an increased emphasis on localism within the church. Although giving for the support of national bureaucracies and agencies has drastically decreased in many denominations, giving is actually up in many churches locally. More money is there for expenditure in local projects, educational programs, relief enterprises, etc. Far from "dying" as predicted by numerous Cassandras and proponents of mergers and alternate forms during the 1960's, the local parish church in many parts of the country is alive and well, or at least not seriously ill. Talented young men and women from seminaries continue to elect to serve in such congregations, particularly since the time when upheavals, financial problems and job shortages plagued the universities and thus made teaching much less attractive. Pastors continue to concentrate on Bible study, preaching, pastoral calling and counselling, community work, and help for the oppressed -- the mainstays of parish life and ministry for decades. Many of them are suspicious of and cynical about bureaucratic manipulation, nostrums and panaceas, and all-embracing statements and position papers. There is increasing evidence that even "continuing education" is moving away from seminaries -- pastors wish to unite with their peers for study and action in relation to classical disciplines and local problems, and are showing independence in developing such programs.

Nor may we ignore the flourishing of Pentecostalism and of various sectarian groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses. It is an article of faith for such groups that institutional structures are suspect -- they thrive on critiquing and attacking them, on riding the anti-bureaucratic wave. Local parishes are called upon to deal with them locally, which may mean incorporation, rejection, or an uneasy truce -- but in all cases means an affirmation of local responsibility and action.

All of this has tremendous implications for Jewish-Christian relations in the 1970's. It is at the most local and decentralized levels where the primary "action" is -- where matters are debated and discussed that define the "style" of a congregation; where pictures and images of those who subscribe to other religions are being developed; where Jewish and Christian history are taught and

learned; where the Bible is preached; where alliances and coalitions that face community problems and tensions are formed. It is pre-eminently here that the rabbi or Jewish congregant, the pastor or priest or Christian congregant will have the opportunity to work for good or for ill in areas of awareness, understanding, rapprochement, or cooperation. Programs or strategies developed from "above" or "outside" have an uphill battle before they even begin; programs or strategies which emerge locally, even if only a few persons are behind them, have a much better chance of success.

This is not to preclude the importance of the bureaucracy, even though it be relative and limited. There are dozens of channels through which animus can work to compound the problems in Jewish-Christian relations, or through which good intention and commitment can work to enhance relationships. And national structures are also important because of their attractiveness to and impact on the media. It is extremely important, however, to be selective about those channels and about working in them, and to realize that even if we had the most beatific of national structures, the local impact might still be miniscule.

#### B. The Strange Impotence of Knowledge

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Suppose/were to ask "What aspects of Jewish Christian relations should the average Christian know more about?" Certain main emphases would immediately come to mind: a) the Hebrew and Jewish life which constituted the Biblical period; b) those periods in history when frameworks for the relationship were set or reset (e.g. Constantinian period; the Crusades; the Expulsions; the Enlightenment), the characteristics of Jewish and Christian life at those times, and the forms antisemitism took; c) the Holocaust; d) the rise, survival, and flourishing of the State of Israel; e) Jewish understanding of law, festival, peoplehood, and land.

Although there are some Christians who possess a depth of knowledge of one or several of these areas, it is safe to say that the vast majority of Christians are ignorant or misinformed about most aspects of every single category. This is particularly ironic in light of the fact that the last forty years have seen very significant serious professional scholarship as well as responsible popular interpretive writing in every category by both Jewish and Christian scholars. Further, outstanding films, novels, poetry, plays, music and plastic art have been produced in relation to all these themes. And still further, numerous prophetic voices have called attention time and again to the fact that ignorance, misinformation, or wilful misinterpretation reigned.

Despite the massive growth of knowledge and perception relating to all these themes, not enough of that knowledge has had the impact which is needed on attitudes and understandings. Certainly anti-semitism is seen as "bad" -- the Nazis are seen as evil -- Israel is seen as essentially positive -- Jews are seen as "part of" America and of the world, deserving the same rights as anyone else -- but these generalized gut reactions usually remain just that -- inadequately examined, understood, and based. And they exist in uneasy truce with negative cultural and theological images of "the Jew" which continue to vie for dominance in America, and indeed tend to become normative in many other countries.

This is not a cry of "alarm", but rather an attempt to face soberly the problems which exist. We have a burgeoning of good scholarship and potent positive awareness in the arts and the media. There has been solid input by major Jewish organizations -- ADL, UAHC, AJC, SCA among others -- in enhancing sensitivity and promoting positive action. These advances must start to filter through more effectively in order that circumstances should become more positive rather than more negative.

### C. The Problem of Curriculum

A strong case can be made for the fact that the major log-jam exists in the area of "curriculum." The word is used not only to include books and educational formats, but also to comprehend educational environments and strategies.

And the problem exists on every level of education. Let us begin with the seminary -- Protestant or interdenominational. Very few of these seminaries in the United States have even one course on Jewish history, Talmud or rabbinics, Jewish life, antisemitism, the Holocaust, Israel. Although the strongest of cases can be made that Christianity cannot be understood or lived properly if at all without such courses, almost none exist. To be sure, there are outstanding individual teachers and professors, such as W. D. Davies, Krister Stendahl, Cort Rylaarsdam, whose lives and scholarly commitments have marked influence -- but this tends to be a personalized influence, which moves when the professor moves, leaves when he leaves.

One might aver that certainly in the Biblical departments one can depend on a positive "laying of foundations." This is no more true here than for any other field. Some professors may interrelate Hebrew history with Jewish experience and self-understanding in a very positive manner; but it can be, and often is taught with "objectivity" as simply a period of history, or is seen as prefatory to the fulfillment of the New Testament. Even then, it is much more likely that the Old Testament will be presented sympathetically than that the Judaism of the New Testament period will be.



This then, constitutes the environment to which pastors and priests -- the future leaders of local congregations -- are exposed. It would seem beyond question that strategies need to be developed that will help remedy this crucial gap in seminary education.

The same is true for denominational Christian Education curricula. Gerry Strober's recent study has shown conclusively that despite the Glock-Stark study, Jules Isaac's work, Vatican II, and innumerable other publications and critiques, the same negative labels, mythologies, images, and interpretations of Biblical texts abound in Christian education materials dealing with Jews. The mainline liberal denominations\*in revising and correcting such materials. And certain crucial areas such as the historical manifestations of antisemitism, or the Holocaust, or the State of Israel, are rarely even touched. Here if anywhere the bureaucracy has extensive influence over local congregational attitudes; here, if anywhere, an organized systematic challenge must be presented to denominational leaders by both Christians and Jews; here, if anywhere, the right kind of educational materials, if developed, might stand the chance of having a very significant impact on attitudes.

Another area where curriculum is of utmost importance is in local school systems (public and parochial). Our younger citizens are rarely exposed to an adequate understanding of the negative dimensions of the Jewish-Christian relationship over the years, or of the Fascist and Nazi periods and the Holocaust. Part of the reason for this is the incessant ahistoricity of the American experience, which gravely affects educational approaches; part of the reason is the tendency to gloss over negative historical performances for which we are responsible. Yet while we have become suddenly more than prepared to recognize past misdeeds toward Indians, blacks, Chicanos, "the South," Southern and Eastern European ethnic minorities, and "third world" peoples, there is no concomitant recognition of what has characterized the experience of Jews in the history of nations and cultures. While avoiding avant-garde "bandwagon-mounting," it would seem that the time has come to address ourselves to public and private school Social Science and English departments, and to university teacher-training programs to assert the crucial importance of adequate treatment of these matters.

Approaching the sources and structures of educational policy in order to work on changing curricula from the top down will have limited impact unless it is supplemented by a conscientious, and to some extent methodical approach within communities. There are many possibilities for such an approach. The largest adult education turn-out in recent years in a influential upstate suburban church was in response to a program given by a Jewish resident of the community on Jewish festivals and holy days. One visitor to Israel may touch the lives of a dozen congregations with films or slides. A Passover Seder can be a transforming experience for a Christian family. A viewing of "The Shop On Main Street," "Night and Fog," or "The Garden of the Finzi-Continis" may be worth ten thousand words of exhortation.

\* have tended to be less responsive than some "conservative" denominations

A very small group of committed persons, Christians and/or Jews, in any local community or neighborhood could with effect systematically examine Christian Education curricula, the local public school offerings, university courses or extra-curricular activities, and urge constructive changes. Combined study groups dealing with Biblical texts, Hellenistic-Jewish literature, or Rabbinic materials could be organized with clergy, Sunday School teachers, university people, interested lay persons. The possibilities for activity on the local level which would increase sensitivity and responsiveness to problems and possibilities of Jewish-Christian relationships are virtually limitless. The prestige of even one local person who is committed to greater respect and understanding carries much greater impact than a printed directive or denominational circular. The problem of curriculum exists and must be attacked at bureaucratic levels, but it will finally be resolved (and perhaps solved?) at the most decentralized levels.

#### D. The Problem of "Dialogue"

Mentioning local activities which might be of a joint nature inevitably raises the thorny question of "dialogue." Here no Christian can advise Jews what to do; there are intimate personal, family and community dimensions which, if expressed in terms of "reserve" are, it goes without saying, to be respected and honored. We are well acquainted with the fact that some forms of dialogue which have been entered into with all good intention have made matters significantly worse. It is also the case that Christian groups have often sought and entered dialogue with poor or dubiously mixed intentions.

Rather than discussing the "yes" or "no" of dialogue, it may be fruitful to probe some of the unexamined presuppositions lying behind the "yes" or the "no" which may be uttered. One of those presuppositions may be that Jews are "safer" when in dialogue with mainline Christian liberals than with conservatives or fundamentalists; that somehow those liberals are more open to "other perspectives." This presupposition may have been shattered by the listless or antagonistic response of most "liberals" to the plight of Israel and the agony of Jewry in 1967. Yet I am not sure the full conclusions have been drawn. The fact is that there are all forms of liberals -- some very open, some very intransigent and doctrinaire; and all forms of conservatives -- some very open, some very intransigent and doctrinaire. The last ten years or so have seen a real "loosening up" of attitudes toward historical and critical scholarship in some major conservative circles -- one need only glance at the trend of articles in Christianity Today for proof. There are growing segments of opinion in many of the more conservative and evangelical bodies which regard Jewish peoplehood and the Israeli experience in a very positive light, and which, though they have not lost the flavor of "triumphalism", have jettisoned many of its oppressive dimensions. Continued developments may well be possible in these quarters, and certainly should be encouraged.

It is important to remember that the actual theological climate within the mainline denominations has always been more conservative than the leadership and "theological-intellectual" climate might indicate. The political and social events of recent years have encouraged a shaded veering to the right. The popularity of Billy Graham (who himself continues to move to the left) and other big-name evangelists, the rise of Pentecostalism, the appeal of the Jesus movement, and the abdication of much of liberal theological thought as it moved into the "death of God", incomprehensible jargonism, and the celebration of contemporary epiphanies have all contributed to that veering. Thus if Jews are considering entering into dialogue at local levels, that dialogue will in a significant majority of cases take place with Christians whose actual location on the spectrum is center or right of center.

Another presupposition which at times lies behind the decision for dialogue is that one must be as amenable as possible, glossing over differences while stressing points of contact. Such an approach has probably caused more demise of fruitful dialogue than any other single factor. It is precisely because the religions are different, because their cultural effluents are different that dialogue may be deemed important. Nothing should be done to minimize the fact that at the end as well as at the beginning of the conversations or explorations the same differences will likely prevail. Recognizing and accepting those realities could well be part of the covenant which should define whatever dialogue takes place.

A further consideration might be the examination of whether, in the light of the restructured and restructuring religious landscape of the 1970's, we should rightfully view the religions as being essentially at odds, or able to afford properly to be at odds. The worship of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is being attacked radically by alternative religious expressions: drug experience, the occult, modern forms of gnosticism, pagan culture-religion, the deification of technology, inter alia. Developing a unified, if pluralistic, critique and approach to this competition may be of utmost importance.

We also need to ask whether there are not forms of dialogue equally or more significant than trading theological concepts or "religious" perceptions. Sharing family life, help of the poor, prayer, political activity, the defense of dissent may be seen not merely as forms of vague "togetherness", but as vehicles for the expression of Jewishness or Christianness. Such forms may be consciously chosen as strategies preferable to conversation.

#### E. Dealing Directly with Anti-Jewish Bias

While we may be prepared to differ radically in theological perceptions or Biblical interpretation, and still remain in conversation, there are certain criteria which must be insisted on if fruitful relations are to exist. The existence and the expression

of anti-Jewish bias, of antisemitism must be pinpointed, defined and condemned wherever and whenever it occurs. For Christians and Christian groups to maintain credibility as partners or conversants, readiness to act with integrity in such matters is a sine qua non.

These criteria must be applied at all levels -- echelon and local. If it is the case that leadership in denominational bureaucracies, or the mission establishments, or Christian education, or religious journalism is demonstrating anti-Jewish bias, that leadership must be challenged and called severely to task with every intellectual and political tool which is available. It is no secret that conclaves of antisemitic ideology function constantly under various cloaks in both liberal and conservative structures. Attacks on Israel, on Jewish peoplehood, on Jewish self-understanding result; positions favorable to Jews are undercut or modified. Christians and Jews must work together to conquer and eliminate these forms of animus.

Manifestations at the local level are likely to be both more blatant and more subtle. The blatant manifestations have to be faced courageously; the subtle manifestations smoked out, called by name, and worked on both with short-range and long-range strategies.

Christians cannot legitimately seek for response from Jewish neighbors unless their commitments in these regards are clear-cut.

#### F. Conclusions

The signs point to a decade of local self-assertion, of retrenchment, of increased conservatism, of greater interest in past and roots, of the declining power of religious bureaucracy. There is no a priori reason why any of these should preclude greater Jewish-Christian amity and understanding, or a chipping away at the power of the demonic nemesis of antisemitism. They may even serve to provide the environment in which the goals we seek can be advanced. Be-ezrat ha-Shem!