EDITORIAL

The Uniqueness Of Christian-Jewish Dialogue In The United States And Canada

By Eugene J. Fisher

The "point" of this editorial (for all editorials need a viewpoint, or else they must be consigned to "news features") is relatively simple, namely, that the Christian-Jewish dialogue as it exists in the United States and Canada affords a unique opportunity for dialogue between our two worldwide religious communities and that, for this reason, it should receive special priority along with the full commitment of resources which such a priority entails. It will be noted at the outset that I risk the charge of chauvinism in limiting this statement to the North American scene. To this I can only respond that brief editorials need sharp focus if they are to shed any light on enormously complex matters and that, being a North American, this is the reality I know best. It is my hope that none of the comparisons I make will be considered invidious. For it follows that if the North American dialogue is unique, so too are the others.

The North American setting for dialogue is unique, first because half of the world's Jews live in the United States and Canada. Only Israel has such a complete and active Jewish community. In Israel, however, the roles are reversed, and it is the Christian community which forms the minority (which provides its own uniqueness, of course, but that is a subject for another time). Because of the size and sense of security of the Jewish communities here, a type of dialogue occurs that is possible between Jews and Christians nowhere else in the world, that is, a full dialogue or engagement between our two traditions that encompasses all levels of our communal lives, from the parish level to the level of national organizations. Jews and Christians here interact not only through their official religious representatives, but also across the entire spectrum of social classes and activities, "secular" and "social" alike.

This observation brings us to the second point, which is that only in North America does the dialogue have such deep communal roots. Here the academic dialogue is simply one phase of an ongoing relationship that sees the two communities, side by side, forging a common social agenda, often enough, perhaps in tension, but always in tandem by the very nature of the structure of the society in which we live. Here alone is there a sense of shared historical experience (and thus of common need) which gives flesh even to the most abstract discussions between us). This is especially true, I might add, for my own tradition, Roman Catholicism. Roman Catholics and Jews have had remarkably similar experiences on these shores. Both were immigrant communities entering a society whose ethic was largely formed beforehand by the original, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon culture which dominated society (this is true generally, despite the obvious and important exceptions of places such as Québec and Louisiana). Moreover, our immigrant patterns were remarkably parallel. Again with significant exceptions such as the Irish, we tended to come to this continent from almost the same areas in Western and Eastern Europe during the same periods of history.

As immigrants, Roman Catholics and Jews were equally nullified as "foreigners," and together they bore the brunt of American nativist movements. Jews and Roman Catholics, along with blacks, were excluded from the same business associations and neighborhoods, and were kept from joining the inner circles of the dominant economic enterprises such as banking. As distinct communities, Jews and Roman Catholics coped with discrimination in similar ways, namely, by forging together the labor unions and by using education as a means of upward mobility (both Roman Catholics and Jews in the United States are well above the norm in educational achievement and disproportionately represented in professions such as law). Both communities suffered the loss of ethnic identity and cultural distinction. Both were enthusiastic supporters of "self-help" programs such as hospitals and immigration and refugee services. Both

are still suspected of maintaining "foreign" allegiances -- Roman Catholics to their countries of origin as well as to the Vatican, and Jews to the State of Israel. Given such realities, it is no wonder that the National Conference of Catholic Bishops announced the establishment of a Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations and issued guidelines for the Secretariat almost before the ink was dry on the conciliar decree Nostra Aetate.

In the United States and Canada, then, dialogue is anything but a "top-down" affair. Indeed, here it is rather the opposite. Local dialogue groups are often well advanced even of official statements, and thus they perform the service of testing and validating ideas in concrete fashion. The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, for example, sponsors two committees--a priest-rabbi group and a "respect life" group. The former group has prepared a set of brief commentaries on the lectionary readings to assist congregations in avoiding misunderstandings, and it has recently issued a statement of reflection on the nature of covenant and on ways in which our two traditions can view one another religiously. In Memphis, a major program was instituted during this past Lent to educate Roman Catholics with regard to the meaning of the gospels of Matthew and John taken in their historical setting. Since these two gospels contain some of the most blatant anti-Jewish polemical strands of the New Testament, this program of adult education will predictably strike at the roots of traditional theological antisemitism. In Philadelphia, the Office for Religious Education is developing a remarkable curriculum guide for Roman Catholic teachers. The guide will suggest concrete ways of integrating proper Jewish-Christian understandings into curricula at all age levels. Holocaust curricula are also being implemented across the country in both public and parochial schools.

Such local efforts establish a dynamic context within which the more formal dialogue can move forward. Academic courses in Jewish studies can be found on campuses throughout the country. Groups of Christian scholars, such as the Israel Study Group sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews, allow theologians the opportunity to share and criticize one another's work in the field. Jewish agencies such as the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee cooperate with Christian bodies in producing a wide range of solid, useful materials for educators, seminaries, and local dialogue groups. Finally, a recent meeting between representatives of the Synagogue Council of America and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops was hosted by Notre Dame University. The meeting considered the topic of "Religious Traditions and Social Policy" and provided the most intensive, and certainly one of the most revealing, official exchanges on a topic of mutual interest that has ever been held between Roman Catholics and Jews anywhere.

From this wealth of contacts, a sense of hope and urgency emerges. Hope, because only a few years ago, such activities and events would have been considered impossible by all but a tiny group of dedicated ecumenists. Urgency, because the short span of improved relations, set against two millenia of hatred, seems frighteningly fragile and extremely vulnerable. Antisemitism, after all, remains deeply enmeshed in the Christian conscience, from liturgical formulae to the thought of the greatest theologians. I should like to conclude by indicating two signs of that fragility, if only to add a dash of realism to this otherwise positive picture of the Jewish-Christian dialogue today. The first deals chiefly with Protestantism, the second with Roman Catholicism.

Among Protestants, an ambiguous understanding of universalism continues to bedevil Protestant-Jewish relations and is reflected in "even-handed" pronouncements on the Middle East by bodies such as the Palestine Human Rights Campaign and even the National Council of Churches. Such statements all too often appear to sacrifice the particularity of Jewish existence to "universal" Christian norms about what constitutes a "just peace." As other commentators have already noted, such statements tend to reflect a continuance of the traditional Christian refusal to deal with Judaism on its own terms, judging

Judaism to be religiously flawed because it does not "measure up" to Christian standards. In fairness, it should be pointed out that Daniel Berrigan's anti-Israel war cry delivered to an Arab audience a few years ago still represents the single most violent Roman Catholic example of the same phenomenon. The tendency to view any and every "liberation" movement of the Third World as an absolute good which can morally justify any means, including terrorism, is a flaw that has vitiated the integrity of some (not all) liberation theologians, especially in the United States (the "band-wagon" effect of pro-PLO and anti-Jewish sentiment in the black community which was expressed in the wake of U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young's resignation is an indication that even in the black churches many of the old antisemitic stereotypes persist).

On the Roman Catholic side, the persistence of the "abortion-as-the-new-Holocaust" equation also reveals a startling lack of proper understanding. Although some analogy or other might be drawn between certain Nazi cruelties and the practice of abortion (if, that is, one accepts the basic moral argument against abortion), no just analogy could ever be made to the Holocaust itself, that is, to the practice of conscious, societally-planned genocide on racial grounds alone. Such insensitivities show that we Christians still do not understand Jews or the Jewish experience very deeply and can all too easily slide back into the "teaching of contempt" in our attitudes. Clearly, the Jewish-Christian dialogue has just begun.

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