

1984.4a

January 15, 1984

To: all members of the Israel Study Group
Re: the Oberammergau Passionsspiel for summer 1984

At our last meeting (October 14-15, 1983) at Cathedral College I was commissioned by the membership to pursue the issue of anti-Judaism in the presentation of the Passionsspiel at Oberammergau. Dr. Eugene Fisher was also asked to help with the effort.

Most of the research -- from the perspective of American Christian scholarship on the Oberammergau presentation -- seems to have been done by Dr. Leonard Swidler, Editor of The Journal of Ecumenical Studies and Fr. Gerard Sloyan of Temple University. Both men are excellent scholars, identified by their pursuit of truth and justice and are also sensitive to the history of the presentation.

On August 20, 1983 the Rockaway Catholic-Jewish Council had sent a letter of protest to Archbishop Friedrich Wetter, the new Archbishop of Munich and a copy to Bishop Karl F. Fluegel, national coordinator of Catholic-Jewish relations for the German Catholic episcopal conference. No acknowledgement or response was ever received. The ISG agreed to pursue this matter through me and Dr. Fisher.

I spent time with Mrs. Judith Banki of the American Jewish Committee (she had authored a critical assessment of the 1980 presentation, The Oberammergau Passion Play 1980); correspondence was received from Dr. Swidler, and a response was made by Mr. Theodore Freedman of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. On November 4 the ADL made a statement to the press in which Freedman's protest to the mayor of Oberammergau, Herr Frank Hoffmann, was made public (NC News Service 20-11-4-83). A draft of a letter to be sent by ISG members was submitted for criticism to a group of priests and then to the membership of the Catholic-Jewish Relations Committee active in this Diocese. Some constructive suggestions were made. Dr. Fisher and Sister Celia Deutsch were both consulted on the draft and a tactic.

Our tactic at this time is to send this form letter to each member of the ISG reviewing briefly the steps taken to date and asking each of us to present our signature in support of the protest by the ISG.

Our calendar for this effort is as follows:

- January 15 -- mailing of this letter to you;
- February 15 -- return of all forms and signatures to me;
- March 15 -- text of our letter of protest with signatures and identifications should be in the hands of the Mayor, Herr Frank Hoffmann and the Director, Herr Hans Maier;
- April 7 -- our next meeting will take place in Newark.

If you are in agreement with this procedure, please sign the form after filling in the information requested for an identification of your person and your work.

ROCKAWAY CATHOLIC JEWISH COUNCIL

I express my best wishes to you for this year of grace and hope to hear from you in the near future. Cordially,

John J. Kelley, S.M.

References

- Banki, Judith. The Oberammergau Passion Play 1980. American Jewish Committee. 19 pages.
- Swidler, Leonard. "Guidelines for the Oberammergau Passionsspiel and Other Passion Plays," Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, prepared for 1980. 8 pages.
- Swidler, Leonard and Sloyan, Gerard. The Oberammergau Passionspiel 1984. Text in German and in English, with 28 recommendations of Swidler. Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith. 101 pages, \$5. Translation by Marianne Wokeck.
- Tanenbaum, Marc. "The Role of the Passion Play in Fostering Anti-Semitism throughout History," in Good Friday Worship, pp. 5-22. Detroit: National Institute for Catholic-Jewish Education, 1983.

Please detach the lower half of this page and mail it to me at your first convenience. Please use a typewriter or print, except for your signature.

*Returned
signed form
1/28/84*

1984.46

The Israel Study Group
144 Beach 111 Street
Rockaway Park
New York, USA 11694

To the Honorable Herr Frank Hoffmann,
Mayor of Oberammergau
To Herr Anton Preisinger,
Director of the Passionsspiel

Esteemed gentlemen,

As a group of Christian theologians we have been following with interest the concern for Oberammergau and the Passionsspiel that will take place there in 1984. From information made available to us from professional and competent Christian theologians who have been following the developments, we are very distressed that it would seem that the Passionsspiel continues the tradition of dramatic anti-Judaism.

Presuming this information to be accurate, we wish to express deep concern that the sad history of racism, and specifically of anti-Judaism, should continue in this setting. The problem deserves attention and remedial action at this time.

The Israel Study Group is made up of American Christian scholars who meet at the initiative and under the support of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. The group has been studying and writing about Israel and the Jews for more than a decade.

We are reluctant to call the Oberammergau issue to the attention of the secular news media, as we find that "trial by the press" is offensive to authentic religious sensitivities. We hope that this will not be necessary.

May we expect to hear from you on this matter, hopefully that you are taking appropriate steps to correct this dreadful injustice?

Respectfully yours,

1984.49

NC NEWS SERVICE

-3-

Wednesday, May 30, 1984

21-5-29-84

CATHOLIC PROFESSOR SAYS 'IMPROVED' PASSION PLAY STILL ANTI-JEWISH (670 — With NC photo sent 5-23-84)

By Tracy Early

MONTCLAIR, N.J. (NC) — The 350th anniversary version of the Oberammergau Passion Play shows some improvements but still carries an emotional anti-Jewish impact, according to Eva Fleischner, a Catholic specialist in Christian-Jewish relations who viewed the play's opening performance in West Germany May 21.

"I was absolutely wiped out," she said in an interview May 28. "Sitting there beside Jews, I thought this is how pogroms have been unleashed over the centuries."

Ms. Fleischner is a professor in the combined philosophy and religion department of Montclair State College and a member of the advisory board of the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. She went to Oberammergau, a Bavarian village near Munich, West Germany, as part of a delegation from the American Jewish Committee.

Ms. Fleischner said she was "pleasantly surprised" by the prologues in which groups speak somewhat in the manner of the chorus in ancient Greek drama, presenting the correct theological view that all humanity is responsible for the Crucifixion.

"But these texts are undone by what you see later," she said. "The Jews are shown as bloodthirsty villains."

Likewise, she said, only the villains in the drama are presented as Jews. "There is nothing that shows Jesus as a Jew."

In 1980 villagers voted to return to a 1750 version of the play by Benedictine Father Ferdinand Rosner, which had been used until Father Josef Daisenberger wrote a new script in 1850. Ms. Fleischner said the Rosner version had problems but was less objectionable because it was more symbolic. However, she said, villagers later reversed their decision and stayed with Father Daisenberger's version.

Two scenes — the condemnation of Jesus, with a priest leading the crowd in shouting "crucify him," and the crucifixion with priests mocking Jesus — were the worst, she said. But she said many anti-Jewish stereotypes were also conveyed subliminally.

Ms. Fleischner said she was disappointed to find the script still contained the line, "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matt. 27:25). She said that the fact a particular statement was found in the Gospels did not automatically justify its use in a passion play if it was liable to stir hostility to Jews.

The Gospels contain "anti-Jewish elements," she said, but these elements should not be used in ways that could suggest that the Jews alone are guilty of the death of Jesus or that they collectively must endure some divine punishment. The Oberammergau play, she said, takes those elements and dramatically magnifies them.

Objecting also that the play portrayed Pilate in too favorable a light, she said historical scholarship today knows Pilate as a brutal and bloodthirsty tyrant, and this knowledge should be used in portraying him.

Ms. Fleischner said she could not understand approval by Catholic Church officials for the current version of the passion play. She noted that Pope John Paul II received a delegation from Oberammergau on March 16, 1983, and commended their faithfulness to the vow of their ancestors, in gratitude for deliverance from a plague, to give a year of each decade to producing the passion play.

She also said the play had received approval from Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, when he was Archbishop of Munich, from present Archbishop Friedrich Wetter of Munich and from the committee of German Catholic bishops responsible for Jewish relations. And the printed text sold in Oberammergau carries the notation that it has been revised in accordance with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

"I can't understand that," Ms. Fleischner said of these marks of affirmation. In her judgment the play violates Vatican II teachings on the Jews and subsequent guidelines issued by the Vatican and the NCCB.

She said it would be preferable if church leaders did not include the play in guided tours and pilgrimages. But since many were already scheduled, she suggested tour leaders have sessions in which the participants would be alerted to possible misunderstandings.

END

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CATHOLIC NUN SAYS 'DON'T GO TO OBERAMMERGAU'

TORONTO, April 16 (JTA) -- A Catholic nun is urging people not to go to the West German village of Oberammergau in Bavaria this summer to see the "Passion Play." "To go would be to participate in a play more of prejudice than of piety," Sister Mary Jo Leddy of Toronto wrote in a column recently in the Toronto Star.

Oberammergau "has become a place of prejudice rather than of piety," she wrote. "Why? Because of the anti-Semitic content of the play produced there. Hitler himself recognized this. The play was a favorite of his. He believed the drama provided the religious underpinning for his racist anti-Jewish policies."

Ever since 1634, the people of Oberammergau have kept a promise made at the time when their village was threatened by a plague "to keep the tragedy of the passion (of Jesus) every 10 years."

Leddy, a member of a Catholic monastic order, Sister of Zion, who on May 3 will receive the Ida Nudel Humanitarian Award from the Committee for Soviet Jewry, Ontario Region, stated in her column:

"It has taken the murder of six million Jews for Christian theologians to recognize the implications of what has always been the dominant theme of the Oberammergau production: The evil Jews crucified Christ the good. Unfortunately, this play never ended when the final curtain fell. The next acts were played out in reality. The presentation of Jews as Christ killers has, throughout the centuries, served to legitimize the crucifixion of Jews -- by Christians."

1984 Version Has Only Cosmetic Changes

During the last 20 years, Christian and Jewish groups "have labored long and hard to correct the distortions present in the Oberammergau production, and there has been some progress," Leddy wrote. "The 1980 production was less obviously anti-Semitic." But, she added, while the Bishops of Bavaria have expressed their desire to have changes implemented, "the producers of the 1984 play have made only cosmetic changes."

Concluding her column, entitled "Don't go to Oberammergau," Leddy stated: "The Oberammergau play is a significant example of a kind of popular Christian teaching which has resulted in the belief that the only good Jew is a crucified Jew. This teaching must change. It is not only a question of the justice which Jews deserve. It is also a question of the salvation of the soul of Christianity."

FOCUS ON ISSUES

1984 OBERAMMERGAU PLAY UNDER FIRE

By Arnold Ages

TORONTO, April 15 (JTA) -- A Jewish historian and a Jewish philosopher are both highly critical of the 1984 version of "Passion Play", which will be staged this summer in the West German village of Oberammergau. It will mark the 350th anniversary of the first production of the play by the villagers.

Ever since 1634, the people of Oberammergau in Bavaria have kept a promise made at the time when their village was threatened by a plague "to keep the tragedy of the passion (of Jesus) every 10 years." The dominant theme of the play has been that the evil Jews crucified Jesus.

Saul Friedman, professor of history at Youngstown State University, the author of "No Hope for the Oppressed" and "Pogromchik," and the author of a soon to be released book on the Passion Play, says the play, which is expected to be seen by more than 500,000 spectators this summer, will be substantially the same version presented in the village in 1980.

"On the scale of anti-Semitism, where Der Stürmer is 100 and the Sermon on the Mount is 0, I would put the 1980 play at 40," Friedman says. "But it is much improved over 1970 where the text was 70 in anti-Semitism."

Some Improvements In The Play Noted

While Friedman is not totally satisfied with the new expurgated version of the play -- which tends to portray Jews as the people of Judas, rather than Jesus -- he says that many of the improvements came about as a result of the good will of the people of Oberammergau. That good will has not gone far enough, however, he observes, since there are still distinctly anti-Jewish resonances in the latest version.

Friedman indicates that the village's former mayor, Ernst Zwink, one of the most helpful forces in the purging of the original text, has died and his death has removed some of the urgency of the text's revision.

Says Nazism Penetrated Oberammergau

In a preface to Friedman's new book, "Oberammergau," philosopher Emil Fackenheim, a professor at the Institute for Contemporary Jewish Studies, says that the 1934 version of the play belies the assertion made by many defenders of Oberammergau that Nazism never really penetrated the play. He states:

"We say the 1934 Nazi version because, contrary to all the apologies offered after 1945, to the effect that Nazism never penetrated Oberammergau, the spirit of Nazism is unmistakably present in the picture of money-greedy, plotting, bloodthirsty Jews, coupled neatly with the claim that now, anno 1934, Christians are redeemed from them and their machinations."

Fackenheim concedes that the 1980 "cleaned up" version (which will be the text offered this summer) has eliminated some of the more "overtly offensive expressions and ideas." But both Friedman and Fackenheim concur in their assessment of the real problem with the Oberammergau spectacle. The play shows no evidence of what Fackenheim calls "a fundamental meta-noia." This term has been inadequately translated

ed in English as "repentance." Fackenheim says in his preface: "The 1934 version of the Oberammergau damns the Jews explicitly. In the 1980 version this damnation is still implicitly present."

Eight Anti-Jewish Stereotypes In 1984 Version

In his book, Friedman identified no less than eight clearly anti-Jewish stereotypes found in the Passion Play, including avaricious money-lenders, vengeful opponents of Jesus, spiteful rabbis and pharisees, and Jewish mobs shrieking for blood.

Friedman also reports in his book that in discussions with Catholic theologians, he was told that it takes time for reconsiderations about Jewish culpability to be reflected in the popular consciousness. The results of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 has not yet succeeded in reaching totally the Oberammergau phenomenon.

In his preface, Fackenheim scores this apologetic tendency. "Just how long will it take for the ordinary Christian or German to take notice. And in the meantime, are new seeds of the old hatred being sown, for some future explosion -- and a new catastrophe for Christianity, no less than for Judaism and the Jewish people?"

An Outstanding Catholic Theologian

Fackenheim identifies one Catholic theologian in Germany who has spoken out on the need for Germans to realize what they have done to their Jewish citizens, Johann Baptist Metz. Even after the war Metz said that the Jews remained a vague cliché and that one's views were derived at best from Oberammergau."

Christians must at long last listen to Jews, says Metz. "This moral recollection of the persecution of the Jews touches lastly the relation of the people of this country to the state of Israel. In this respect we have no choice, and I insist in this point over against my leftist friends," Metz declares.

"After the Jews were carried in our most recent history to the brink of total annihilation, we should be the last people in the world to accuse Jews of an excessive desire for security.

"We should be the very first to claim that they defend their state, not because of "Zionist imperialism" but rather as a "house against death," as the very last place of refuge of a people persecuted for centuries."

Fackenheim concludes his preface to Friedman's new book on Oberammergau by suggesting that it is doubtful whether the play could really survive the kind of metanoia or repentance demanded by theologians such as Metz. The only possibility for the survival of the play, says Fackenheim, is if the following words of Metz are heeded:

"We Christians will never get back behind
Auschwitz. And we will get beyond it, not alone
and by ourselves, but only in togetherness with the
victims."

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1. What is the purpose of the study?
 2. What are the research objectives?
 3. What is the research methodology?
 4. What are the results of the study?
 5. What are the conclusions of the study?
 6. What are the limitations of the study?
 7. What are the implications of the study?
 8. What are the future research directions?
 9. What are the references of the study?
 10. What are the acknowledgments of the study?

Educating for
Brotherhood

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June 12, 1984

1984.4e
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TO: Christian Study Group on Judaism and the
Jewish People

FROM: Celia Lewis, program associate

REF.: Recent correspondence re Oberammergau

The enclosed correspondence between Jack Kelley and
Victoria M. Neumuller is being sent as a follow-up to the
material we recently forwarded. Included also are:

-- Jack Kelley's letter of April 19 to Ms. Neumuller,
which was inadvertently omitted from the memorandum
of May 30.

-- A copy of A Statement on Passion Plays, originally
issued in February, 1968 and redistributed by Gene Fisher
in the spring of this year.

OVER 50 YEARS OF COMBATING PREJUDICE

The Michigan Catholic Feb. 23, 1984

Guest Column

Fr. Oberammergau Passion Play anti-Semitic?

By HOPE BROPHY

Controversy continues to swirl around the quaint Alpine village of Oberammergau and its centuries-old Passionspiel, the most celebrated passion play of all time.

This summer, an estimated half million tourists will travel to the southernmost region of Germany, to view the day-long production. Since the script is written in German, at least half the audience will have to follow it in translation.

It is in the nature of a pilgrimage - a pilgrimage that has been made every 10 years since the 17th century. This year's production is an extra in the schedule (they're usually held only at the beginning of each decade). It marks the 350th anniversary of a vow made by the villagers to stage a passion play every 10 years, in thanksgiving for having been spared from a plague known as the Black Death that swept through Europe.

The Passionspiel has been described as an act of mystical excitement, a profound religious experience. But major Jewish groups claim that simplistic renderings of the passion narrative are a major cause of hostility toward the Jews, and have been through the centuries.

They assert that the Oberammergau drama has serious anti-Semitic and anti-Judaic features which they would like to see eliminated. Many Christian leaders have joined them in this effort.

Over the centuries, the passion play has been presented in at least five versions. The text was at one time so anti-Jewish that it was much admired by Adolf Hitler who considered it an affirmation of his own anti-Semitism, the tragic consequences of which are well known.

Since World War II, several revisions of the text have eliminated some of the

offensive passages. But results are far from satisfactory, according to two national Jewish agencies which have been in the forefront of the reform effort. The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Committee continue their negotiations with Oberammergau officials in an effort to get further changes made.

Critics point out that the play portrays the Jews as collectively responsible for the death of Jesus. This, in spite of the fact that the charge of deicide has been repudiated by statements of the Vatican Council and of major Protestant groups.

Another serious charge, made by both Jewish and Christian scholars, concerns the Jewishness of Jews. Their position is that the Oberammergau text fails to present Jesus as the practicing Jew that He was. Instead, it pits him against Jewish Law, which it presents as harsh and punitive, and the Jewish people as cruel and bloodthirsty.

In this respect, Dr. Leonard Swidler, a Roman Catholic professor at Temple University, and a consultant to the Anti-Defamation League, takes the position that "Passion plays should portray the events leading to the death of Jesus as a struggle among Jews, chief among them being Jesus. The struggle was all about the best way to be Jewish; about how to live according to God's teaching - the Law (Torah)."

Tickets for the 4,700 seat auditorium are eagerly sought and carefully apportioned - half to Germans, half to foreigners.

There are 34 scene changes, a chorus of 48 voices, a cast of 845 men, 188 wom-

en, 250 children - all residents of this picturesque Alpine village of woodcarvers, which has a population of 5,000.

Cast, chorus and orchestra practice much of each week from November until the play opens in May, and take part in more than 100 performances before the September closing. Time lost from work is reimbursed from ticket sales.

Fr. Alex Brunett, director of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs for the Archdiocese of Detroit, says: "I would never discourage people from attending the Oberammergau Passion Play. The overall history of this play with its pageantry, acting and color is certainly an experience that could deepen the faith life of the Christian believer. It can be a profound spiritual experience. At the same time, the passion play has also had a history of contributing to anti-Jewish sentiment."

"In ways that are often very subtle, the play can portray the Jews in a classic posture of 'God-killers'. Anyone who will be experiencing this drama should take the time to clarify the difference between what is the authentic historical situation of Christ's death, and the dramatization of that event in such plays."

The Rev. James R. Lyons, director of the Ecumenical Institute for Jewish-Christian Studies, warns: "For Christians attending the Oberammergau Passion Play, it is extremely important that they recognize that the play fosters false stereotypes of Jews and Judaism, and often misinterprets the Easter event. It is an interpretive play about the Bible - it is not the Bible."



1984 4 8 16
April 19, 1984

Victoria M. Neumuller
Public Relations Pressdienst
8103 Oberammergau, Postfach 20
Bavaria, Germany

Dear Victoria Neumuller,

Your communication of April 13 arrived here April 19 and I wish to thank you for it, including Press Releases 4 and 6. I am pleased that you should respond promptly, though I am distressed that the material did not reach you until that date. We are grateful also for the express intention to bring the Play into conformity with contemporary Catholic thought.

I had understood that an ecumenical committee in Germany had given an approval to the Play as it was projected for this summer. If there is such an approval it would be good to have a copy of the statement on hand, even if in German. (Although I am not competent in German, I am able to make out the general sense of communications; if need be I shall ask for help in translation.)

I apologize that the communications from our end had been sent to persons who were no longer in office. Hopefully each of our current communications will be passed to the new Burgemeister Klement Fend and the Direktor Meier.

Now as to the substance of your letter and the Press Releases, I am sorry to say that they confirm what we have known from a year long study of the Play. In this country Catholic scholars, Protestant and Jewish scholars are agreed that the work as it has been projected for 1984 is not acceptable. In our judgment it does not conform to the spirit or teaching of the Second Vatican Council in Nostra Aetate.

In addition to the theological leadership of this country, the President of the American Association of Travel Editors, Mr. Jurgen Hartmann, on January 20 made a statement to the press for his Association not merely complaining about the Anti-Semitism of the presentation, but also suggesting a variety of ways in which the presentation might be brought into conformity with the gospels and the needs of our times. (I do not mention here the statements of the Mr. Theodore Freedman of the Anti Defamation League of B'nai B'rith or Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee, which are no doubt known to you. I am only surprised that you should ignore these statements in your response to the Israel Study Group.)

Hartmann's positive attitude is shown by his expressed hope, "By bringing the play into conformity with contemporary Catholic thought, Oberammergau can become a place of international understanding." He wrote this statement to Mayor Hoffman in January so you should have a copy of the full statement in your office.

I shall be communicating your material to officers of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. We shall be studying the situation as we try to determine what our next action ought to be in this sorry affair.

In Christ the Lord,

(Rev.) John J. Kelley, S.M.



1984.4 -

Jubiläumspassionsspiele OBERAMMERGAU 1984

pressedienst V.N./Gü. - 29.5.1984

Father
John J. Kelley, S.M.
Beach 111 th Street

Rockaway Park, NY 11694

Dear Father Kelley!

You probably have not seen the Passion-Play in Oberammergau nor have you been informed of the facts.

The Oberammergau-Passion-Play corresponds to the knowledge of the 2 nd Vatican Council.

Dr. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Congregation of Faith in Rome said: "The Oberammergau people should not be accused of showing anti-Semitism or inviting to hatred or persecution; their opponent was entirely different - The Black Death (Plague). The play is intended to be a prayer of the entire community. I therefore would like to request every one, especially also our Jewish friends, to refrain from the reproach of anti-Semitism which is foreign to the historical origin and the spiritual content of the play".

Dr. Friedrich Wetter, Archbishop of Munich made the same statements in his sermon on the opening-High-mass, May 19, 1984.

Quoting Rev. Dr. Dr. James Bentley, High Anglican Church in his Book, Penguin-Edition: "Part of the strength of the play, for Protestant and Catholic alike, is its biblical foundation." Those who made their vow in 1933, those who have fulfilled it ever since - Ferdinand Rosner, Othmar Weis, Alois Daisenberger and the countless others who have contributed to the play - regarded The Gospels as the supreme revelation of God (Page 86 + 87).

The Oberammergauers therefore kindly ask: "Please tell the truth".

"We want to keep our vow. We play what we read in the New Testament. We are eager to adjust to The Second Vatican Council".

Cordially in Christ
yours truly

(Victoria Neumüller)

Marianists

ST. JOHN'S HOME

144 BEACH 111 STREET
ROCKAWAY PARK, NEW YORK 11694
(212) 945-2800

June 4, 1984

Ms. Victoria Neumuller
Pressdienst
Jubiläumspassionsspiele Oberammergau 1984
Gemeinde, Postfach 20, 8103 Oberammergau
Germany

Dear Ms. Neumuller,

Thank you for your most recent letter dated May 29. I presume that this is a form letter which you are sending out to all persons or groups who have protested the present Play.

My letter must serve several purposes. First an update: On May 30 Mr. Elliott Wright of the NCCJ circulated to ISG members copies of our press release (May 7), my study and bibliography on the Oberammergau Passion Play and your press releases Nos. 4 and 6, and a copy of the letter to him from Dr. Gertrud Luckner. Since that material was sent, your letter of May 29 arrived.

I have been waiting for the copy of the Bildband which you mailed on April 27. Unfortunately it has not arrived and I had wanted to see whether it included a copy of the English text of the present Play. It would seem that no copy of the English text is included.

I would like to have you send on to me a copy of the English translation of the present Play. I shall be in Dublin, Ireland, on my way eventually to Oberammergau, so I ask that you mail it to me at: Marianist Community, St. Columba's, Church Avenue, Ballybrack, Co. Dublin, Ireland. I shall pay you for it when we meet, if that is agreeable to you.

My second request is that you obtain a ticket for me on either Sunday, August 19 or Monday August 20. I arrive in Munich on Saturday August 18 and leave on Friday the 24th. I could make any performance Sunday through Thursday. Again I shall hope to pay you when I see you if that is agreeable. If not, please send me the bill at the Dublin address and I can pay you from there.

I have been waiting for the promised book, but in view of the strong possibility that it has been stolen or lost or even destroyed and in any case will not arrive before I leave New York City, I think that it is appropriate that I respond to your communication at this time.

My response to your letter must necessarily seem inadequate to you, and possibly even disrespectful to the ecclesiastical authorities whom you cite in your letter. No disrespect is intended. My plea would be, try to see this question in the light of contemporary studies of the scriptures and of Judaism, without neglecting the fact that each of us (even professional study groups such as the ISG) speaks, writes and teaches from within his/her own bias. My opinion is strictly my own, yet I vouch to say that it is by and large also the opinion of American Catholic scholars and other Christian scholars who are represented by the letter of protest which was sent.

June 4 -p.2

It is interesting that your letter which brings Cardinal Ratzinger and Archbishop Wetter to the defense of the Play makes no mention of the issues raised by Sister Celia Deutsch and Rabbi James Rudin in their articles (copies of which I enclose in case they may not have been called to your attention). The question which is ultimately raised is whether any gospel play can be produced today if the social effect is alienation from that Gospel and from the people who espouse that Gospel. If that is the question, then the articles speak for themselves.

My own access to the Play is through history and writings which I have documented in my statement to the Israel Study Group (recently renamed the Christian Study Group on Judaism and the Jewish People; it will continue to be subsidized by the National Conference of Christians and Jews). Perhaps I should send you a copy of the Bibliography as it may put the entire question into an historical framework. While I have not had direct access to the present text, a text was available to me, with the changes for 1984 indicated. What disturbs me most is that no one in your office seems to realize the implications of the symbols of the Play which may not be part of the text. This symbolism would include the costumes, the horns on Jewish figures (We recall that Jesus is cited by John as saying, "You (Jews) are children of the /horned/ devil!" 8:44), the impact of mob, music and emphasis on the audience, etc.

The division within the Village community over the Play suggests that the issue is not as simple as your letter would make it out to be. The reason is that the traditional Passion Play is a tradition of Jesus against his own people, in a way which the gospel-writers themselves could not have known would be used against them 1900 years after the fact.

"Please tell the truth!" By all means. And the whole truth, e.g. that Pilate was a cruel and vicious murderer, who had crucified thousands of Jews. This Galilaean was just one more. Pilate was not the sympathetic but weak villain of Matthew's Gospel.

"Please tell the truth!" The truth is that one guard slapped Jesus -- there is no foundation for the vicious beating of the Savior by Jewish soldiers. What do the gospels say? John, who wrote last after the other evangelists and sometimes corrected some of the statements of the other evangelists, says that "one of the guards struck him" 18:22. Mark, Matthew and Luke have more imaginative versions of the abuse but none of them identifies the "guard" (in the singular) as Jewish.

This is but one example where the Play specifies ("Jewish guards") what the Gospels do not specify ("one of the guards"). It shows how difficult it is to give precision to the gospel texts. This exegetical difficulty is present in many aspects of the Play, but one can not guess this from the Play which after all is imaginative fiction. The difficulty is that the onus always comes back on "the Jews."

June 4 -p.3

Because my own opinions are personal and I am an unknown, I enclose for your benefit a copy of the Statement on Passion Plays which was released some years ago and which has been released again by Our National Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations (from Dr. Fisher's office).

What shall I say in conclusion? I can only say that I am grateful that I am not in your position as promoter of the good news about the Play. All of us have some frustrations in life, but I fear that you may be in a losing cause as time goes on, and you have more and more communications about the situation. You may need to take some definite public action. Permit me to offer a prayer for your peace of mind and for your wellbeing.

As of June 13 Sister Celia Deutsch will assume the function of Coordinator of this project. (314 Sackett St. (Rear House), Brooklyn, New York City 12121. Phone: 212-643-0153) She has copies of all our communications and will be reporting to the Israel Study Group in the fall on the situation in Oberammergau. (I shall be in Ireland from June 14 through August 17, then in Munich from 19-23, and then going to East Africa.) If there is reason to contact me there I can be reached at: Marianist Community, P.O.Box 50504, Nairobi, Kenya. Phone: 559625.

May I hear from you during my time in Ireland, please?

In Christ,

John J. Kelley
Fr. John J. Kelley, S.M., Ph.D.

Enclosures:

articles by Sister Celia Deutsch
by Rabbi James Rudin
Bibliography
Statement on Passion Plays

Copies to: Sister Celia Deutsch
Dr. John Townsend
Mr. Elliott Wright

My phone in Ireland 858301.

Received your mailing and hope to respond to it.

1984.4h
4/84

Saul S. Friedman, The Oberammergau Passion Play: A Lance
Against Civilization. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University
Press, 1984. Pp. 270 + xxx/

"For over three hundred years," Friedman states, "Jews have been portrayed at Oberammergau as the Volk der Gottesmorder" (p. 110). In his study of the history and present text of the play, Friedman stresses "the link between the anti-Semitic staging of the Passion and the ovens at Dachau" (p. xxiii), only a short distance away. His argument, I believe, is a strong one which deserves the careful and compassionate attention of all Christians, not the least among them being the townfolk of Oberammergau itself, who control the play in its entirety.

Friedman's approach is thorough, though not without certain flaws. The volume yields a wealth of information on the development and changes in the play over the centuries, giving insight into its historical and social context and its role in the development of antisemitic attitudes among those who attend. The tercentenary presentation, which Adolf Hitler attended and is described in detail, is praised as a major element of Nazi propaganda, "Never," Hitler stated, "has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed" (p. 117). Also detailed are the 1950 revival (largely paid for by loans from the U.S. government), the Rosner alternative, and the 1980 version, which instituted a number of helpful but, in the opinion of many, insufficient changes toward improving the text's portrayal of Jews and Judaism in the first century.

The positive side of Friedman's work, then, is its thoroughness of detail in presenting the text of the play in context. This allows for a rather complete

view of the play itself, as well as an overview of the wide range of opinions of its many critics and defenders. Certain flaws of approach, however, may allow those wedded to the present text to avoid the central concerns Friedman seeks to raise.

Friedman's insistence, for example, on the profit motive and, indeed "cupidity" of the Oberammergau townsfolk in resisting change in what is for them an important tradition, for example, is judgmental at best and merely clouds the issue of the integrity of the drama itself, which is after all the real issue involved. Likewise, Friedman takes as negative to Judaism any reference in the text to a "new covenant." This again is something of a red herring in the discussion. The problem is not Christianity's claim to covenant, as one might presume from Friedman's presentation, but any implication that the Jewish covenant has been abrogated and, worse, an unhistorical depiction of the events of Jesus' last days which unfairly places Jews and Judaism in a negative light. The notion of a new covenant in itself is part of the Christian self definition and, properly understood, in no way invidious but rather an effective sign of what Jews and Christians share in common. I am not, finally, quite sure about the accuracy of Friedman's off-hand allegation that Hitler was "trained as a Catholic" (p. 117). If so, it is a training that had remarkable little effect, given the thousands of Catholic priests and millions of Catholic laity the Nazis summarily slaughtered. Here, as in other places in the text, Friedman's own rhetorical flair tends to get away from him.

Despite such serious flaws and earnest overstatements, however, Friedman's challenge is one that needs to be met honestly by Christians today. The

Oberammergau Passion Play exercises considerable influence, not only on those who attend (the majority of whom are American Christians, Protestant as well as Catholic), but also through its numerous imitators in this country and around the world. It is not as some would say, a problem that belongs only to the Oberammergauers, but a universal Christian phenomenon. Responsibility for the world-wide impact of the Play is a product of its success. The town simply cannot validly disassociate itself from that responsibility.

Nor is it a problem from which the Catholic Church as such can disassociate itself by pointing to the townsfolk. It is a play conceived by Catholics and put on in a distinctly Catholic, not to say ecclesial context. Responsibility to the truth does not end at the Church door. Responsible Catholic as well as Jewish scholars have made well balanced and moderate suggestions for improving the drama and ridding it of the anti-Jewishness of its past. These deserve careful consideration.

Eugene J. Fisher, Washington, DC

Books

The Same Old Tune

The Oberammergau Passion Play: A Lance Against Civilization.

Saul S. Friedman.
Carbondale: Southern Illinois
University Press. 256 pp. \$22.95.

Literature on the Oberammergau Passion Play, in the form of articles, letters to editors and statements by church bodies, continues to proliferate. Until now, however, we have not had an up-to-date, complete study of the play's historical and contemporary background. This book by Saul Friedman, professor of history at Youngstown University, is a welcome and valuable addition to the literature on a controversy that shows no signs of abating.

Controversy surrounding Oberammergau is nothing new, whether focusing on the play's artistic qualities or on its alleged anti-Semitism. In the post-Auschwitz age, the charge of anti-Semitism needs to be examined with great care; indeed, it is the central focus of Friedman's book. The author is familiar not only with most of the literature on Oberammergau, but also with some of the leading figures involved: residents of Oberammergau, Bavaria (where the play has been presented every 10 years since the early 17th century), members of the Bavarian Roman Catholic Church and Jewish and Christian scholars in the United States. He presents a comprehensive study of the historical background, including the critical Nazi period, as well as an analysis of the attitudes of villagers and church leaders in Bavaria today, the changes made in the text up to and including the 1980 presentation, and the problems which, in the view of the author and a number of prominent Jewish and Christian critics, still remain.

A fundamental question underlying all passion plays, including Oberammergau's, is the extent to which anti-Jewish elements are found in the

Gospels, since they provide the basic outline for these plays. A widely held view among contemporary scholars is that the Gospels reflect the hostility between the young church and 1st century Judaism from which it arose. Today many consider the "teaching of contempt" which resulted from this early conflict to have been a major contributing factor to Western anti-Semitism, and to have helped prepare the soil for Hitler's attempted genocide of the Jewish people.

The awakening to this link between Christian anti-Judaism and the Holocaust has been the chief factor in the efforts of the Second Vatican Council, as well as other church bodies, to purify Christian teaching of anti-Jewish elements, and to make clear Christianity's rootedness in Judaism. Since Oberammergau is located in the heart of Catholic Bavaria (though it is not technically under ecclesiastic jurisdiction), any evaluation of its passion play today must be made against this background; it is one of the merits of Friedman's book that it does so. An essay on the New Testament roots of Christian anti-Semitism appears at the beginning of the book, and frequent references are made to contemporary scholarship on Christian anti-Semitism.

The people of Oberammergau, as well as high church officials in Bavaria, have claimed that the passion play is now in line with Vatican II's philosophy. Is this claim justified? Friedman's answer is negative, though he describes with considerable sympathy the efforts made in recent years to eliminate the play's anti-Jewish features. Comparing the 1980 version with that of 1934 (the tercentenary year, when Hitler visited Oberammergau and enthusiastically endorsed the play), he indicates that progress has indeed been made: one of the most anti-Semitic "living tableaux" is gone, and there are repeated statements (in the introduction to the text, as well as in

the lines spoken by the chorus) that humanity as a whole is responsible for the death of Christ. According to Friedman, notwithstanding these improvements major problems remain. Chief among them: the failure, in staging and costuming, as much as in the text itself, to portray Jesus as a Jew, rooted in his people's traditions; the continued whitewashing of Pilate, whom history knows to have been a corrupt and cruel tyrant; the portrayal of Judas as devoured by avarice—a particularly dangerous feature, Friedman notes, since for centuries Judas has been popularly identified by Christians with the Jewish people as a whole; the retention of the blood curse from Matthew 27:25 and the almost entirely negative portrayal of the priests and Pharisees.

I fail to see how anyone who has seen or read the play can disagree with the justice of these criticisms. A popular argument goes: "But these things are found in the Gospels themselves." It appears to me that the obvious answer to this statement is that the current passion play is a combination of selections from the Gospels and outright dramatic invention. Under these circumstances, the villagers' insistence that "We must be faithful to the Gospels" has little credibility. More serious, I believe, is the tendency to dismiss criticism—especially from Jews—as exaggerated and even phobic. Any Christian portrayal of Jews in the latter part of the 20th century, in Oberammergau or elsewhere, must take Jewish criticism with the utmost seriousness.

In only one respect do I find myself on the opposite side of the fence from Friedman: his rather lengthy objection to the use of the term "New Covenant" in the play. His criticism is based on the theory that this term only reinforces Christianity's claim to replace an outmoded Judaism. To abandon this term does not seem to me to be either a realistic solution or particularly sound theologically.

Other ways must—and can—be found to prevent any invalidation of Judaism, avoiding any attack on Christianity, for the concept of covenant is as central to Christianity as it is to Judaism.

Another season at Oberammergau has just come to a close (due to the play's 350th anniversary, it was presented well before the next scheduled showing, in 1990) and was, by all accounts, the best attended ever. Since Friedman's book was written prior to 1984, the question may be asked: What of Oberammergau 1984? Does the new text warrant the title page inscription stating that it is in the spirit of Vatican II?

Once again there is disagreement. Study groups sent to Oberammergau by the American Jewish Committee and the Anti-Defamation League, as well as a number of individual Christian theologians, continue to see dangerous anti-Jewish elements in the passion play. The U.S. Bishops' Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations again warns against anti-Jewish elements in the play. Others find in it nothing but the pure preaching of God's love for the world.

As one who attended the opening performance of the 1984 season, this reviewer may be permitted to add her reactions to the others. There is no question in my mind that, despite undoubtedly sincere efforts to meet criticisms of the play, the results leave a great deal to be desired. It seems to me most of Friedman's criticisms of the 1980 version still apply to the 1984 text.

There is absolutely no justification for retaining the blood curse after Vatican II, which explicitly and at long last rejected the ancient myth that the Jews are cursed by God. Nor can the argument of "dramatic tension" excuse the scene in which Jesus is condemned to death, a scene I can only describe as bloodcurdling. As I sat through it, I thought: "This is the sort of thing that unleashed pogroms in times past." Even if no pogroms have come out of Oberammergau—though Friedman presents some shocking evidence about the way the village treated Jewish refugees during and after the war—and even if one does not overhear anti-Semitic remarks from people leaving the theater, scenes such as this are utterly

reprehensible in 1984, and no less dangerous today than in the past.

One can only hope that a combination of continued pressure on Oberammergau by Christian and Jewish critics (including church authorities), and goodwill on the part of the townspeople, will finally make the passion play the "hymn of reconciliation" many have long claimed it to be, rather than a continued source of anti-Semitism.

Eva Fleischer

Eva Fleischer, a Catholic theologian and a member of the U.S. Bishops' Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations, wrote "The View of Judaism in German Christian Theology Since 1945" and edited "Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?"

Renaissance Man

Beyond Samba: Selected Essays & Editorials, 1928-1955.

A.M. Klein. Edited by M.W. Steinberg and Usher Caplan. Buffalo, New York: University of Toronto Press. 542 pp. \$35.00.

Short Stories. A.M. Klein. Edited by M.W. Steinberg. Buffalo, New York: University of Toronto Press. 344 pp. \$35.00.

Thousands of new books are published each year, quickly pushing old ones off bookstore shelves and out of our minds. That is a great loss, for books that often take a lifetime to create should have a life expectancy of more than a season or two. Therefore, one must greet with joy the republication of works by the late Canadian writer A.M. Klein. There has been a revival of interest in Klein—10 years after his death, and 30 years after his retreat into silence—in Canadian and American literary circles. First came a biography by Usher Caplan, then a reissue of Klein's poetry, a film tribute, several master's and doctor's theses about him—and, most recently, these collections of editorials and short stories. As a result, a new generation of readers has the opportunity to meet a fascinating and multitalented intellect.

I don't know anyone else who wrote English the way Klein did. In Hebrew literature, the only parallel would be Nobel Prize winner S."

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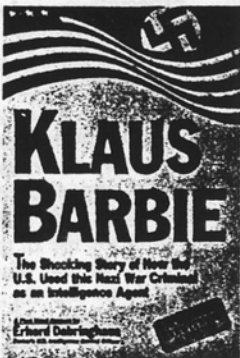
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FATHER JACK WILL TALK

Probing Passion Play

Outside attempts to structure the Passion Play at Oberammergau into a more acceptable mold in this era of sincere ecumenism will be outlined by Father Jack (the Rev. John J. Kelley S.M.) on Sunday afternoon, June 3, in St. Francis de Sales R.C. Church, Beach 129th street and Rockaway Beach boulevard, Belle Harbor.

The sponsor, the Rockaway Catholic-Jewish Council, is inviting everyone to the lecture and discussion.

Father Jack is scheduled to speak at two o'clock. The discussion is scheduled to last until five o'clock.

According to Jesse H. Putzer and Maurice Wade, co-chairmen, the topic has been given the title "the Situation at Oberammergau."

Father Jack, say the co-chairmen, "has done extensive research on the Passion Play at Oberammergau, Germany, given every 10 years, this being its 350th anniversary.

"The play has been severely criticized by both Jewish and Christian clergymen and



FATHER JACK KELLEY

laymen as depicting distortions of the true intent of the gospel narratives—making for alienation rather than reconciliation between the two faith groups."

Father Jack, they continue, is "a devotee of Christian-Jewish amity and friendship for many years," and he "will carefully outline attempts made from the outside to structure the play.

There is no charge for attendance.

Coffee and cake will be served.

THE WAVE, ROCKAWAY BEACH, N.Y., SATURDAY, JUNE 2, 1984 - Page 2

1984.4K

SECRETARIAT FOR CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS
Seton Hall University, South Orange, N.J. 07079.

A STATEMENT ON PASSION PLAYS

(The following Statement on Passion Plays was issued from the office of the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations on February 28, 1968. It was signed for the Executive Committee by the following members, in consultation with the Board of Consultors of the Secretariat: Msgr. George G. Higgins, Msgr. John M. Oesterreicher, Sister K. Hargrove, Rev. Edward H. Flannery, Rev. John B. Sheerin, and Msgr. Bernard F. Law.) *J. Reimerd Spring 1984*

Lent, more than any other liturgical season, draws the attention of Christians to the sufferings of Christ. In this holy season the Church calls its faithful to relive these sufferings, especially in its Holy Week Liturgy. In many places it is customary to supplement the Liturgy by pious practices, among which have been passion plays. Though not as popular as in the past, these pious representations of Christ's passion are still produced in a few places. Their primary purpose is to stimulate religious fervor, but, when they are carelessly written or produced, they may become a source of anti-Semitic reactions. Need we say that such reactions are foreign and injurious to true Christian piety and to the intent of the Sacred Scriptures as well as offensive to our Jewish brothers? In the past, simplistic and erroneous interpretations of the sacred writings have occasioned the accusation that the Jewish people of all time bear unique responsibility for the death of Jesus. History is witness to the injustices and hatred experienced by them because they have been considered guilty of Christ's death and thus an accursed people. What we say here, it may be added, is equally applicable to sermons and teachings on the passion of Christ.

In its Statement on the Jews, the II Vatican Council has dealt with this problem and urged that "all see to it that nothing is taught in catechetical work or in preaching the Word of God that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ." The Council, further, has reminded us that "what happened in His (Christ's) passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, or against the Jews of today." The Council Fathers make St. Paul's assurance their own: "Now as before God holds Jews most dear for the sake of their fathers." In consequence, the Statement continues, "the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures." "The Church," it concludes, "has always held, and holds now, that Christ underwent His passion and death freely because of the sins of men and out of infinite love"

Fidelity to these principles is expected of all members of the Church. A particular responsibility, however, rests upon writers and producers of passion plays, preachers, catechists

and educators, because it is easy to portray Jews, even inadvertently, in such a way as to misrepresent or exaggerate their role in the Passion.

In depicting the Passion, it is possible, for example: 1) to conceal the fact that Jesus is a Jew and that His friends as well as His enemies in the drama are Jews; 2) to create the impression that most Jews of Jesus' day willed His death, failing to show that the secrecy surrounding much of Jesus' trial was motivated by the large following He had in Jerusalem; 3) to change the "crowd" before the governor's palace into a screaming "mob," as representing all Jerusalem, and indeed all Israel; 4) to depict Pilate, whom historiography has shown to have been a ruthless tyrant, as an innocent and kindly bystander; 5) to highlight those texts of the gospel narrative that are amenable to misinterpretation by uninformed audiences, such as: "His blood be upon us and upon our children" (Matt 27, 25).

It is also possible, in the characterization, type-casting and costuming of passion plays to have the Jewish enemies of Jesus appear and behave in a manner that would seem to cast an aspersion on the Jewish people. A sample of this device may be seen in certain plays which by means of caricature strive to display Jesus' enemies as unattractive figures and His followers as handsome and appealing types.

Passion plays, and sermons and teachings on the Passion, involve more than a question of Catholic-Jewish relations. Indeed, they involve the very concept of an authentic Catholic spirituality. Christian pastors and educators are bound to preach and teach Christ crucified, but in so doing must never divert the eyes of the faithful from the love and victory of Christ to the deeds of men, be they Jews or Gentile. Rather must they try to increase in the hearts of their audiences a greater love of God and of men, reminding them that those who played a part in the Passion drama were, in the Christian view, representatives of all of us.

Update on Passion Plays: 1968-1984

By Dr. Eugene J. Fisher, Secretariat for
Catholic-Jewish Relations, National
Conference of Catholic Bishops

In February 1968 a statement was issued from the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) which drew attention to passion plays as a possible source of anti-Semitic reactions. This was reiterated in 1970. The original statement, with list of signatories is attached.

Here, it is my purpose personally to reaffirm the 1968 statement, and to update its principles with reference to more recent teachings of the Church, specifically the December 1974 Vatican "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration, Nostra Aetate" and the November, 1975 Statement on Catholic-Jewish Relations issued by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. These two documents clearly frame the manner in which the gospel passion narratives are to be understood and portrayed in dramatic form. The 1975 American bishops' statement is explicit on this point:

There remains the continuing task of ensuring that nothing which in any way approaches the notion of Jewish guilt should be found in any Catholic medium of expression or communication. Correctly viewed, the disappearance of the charge of collective guilt of Jews pertains as much to the purity of the Catholic faith as it does to the defense of Judaism. (NCCB, Nov. 20, 1975).

The Vatican Guidelines affirmed by our bishops add several important interpretative keys to approaching the New Testament readings. These keys, of course, should be seen as determinative of how the passion accounts may be authentically presented. They begin by urging extreme care not to "distort their meaning, especially when it is a question of passages which Christians, if not well informed, might misunderstand because of prejudice," the Vatican Guidelines mandate "an overriding preoccupation to bring out explicitly the meaning of a text while taking scriptural studies into account," giving the indiscriminate use of the terms "the Jews" in John's Gospel and "the Pharisees" as examples.

Obviously, it is not sufficient for the authors and producers of Passion Plays to reply to responsible criticism simply by appealing to the notion that "well, it's in the Bible." The questions of how certain passages or scenes from the four gospels are selected and what is communicated through this selectivity are crucial to the integrity of the interpretation offered in a given dramatization.

Here the Guidelines provide some explicit guidance on what should be the spirit and tenor of such presentations:

- The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition founded upon it must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor (cf. Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:34-40).
- Judaism in the time of Christ and the Apostles was a complex reality, embracing many different trends, many spiritual, religious, social and cultural values.
- Jesus was born of the Jewish people, as were his Apostles and a large number of his first disciples... Christ, in many instances, took his stand on the teaching of the Old Testament... [and] also used teaching methods similar to these employed by the rabbis of his time. (Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, December 1, 1974).

Stereotypy and misinformation concerning the richly vital and complex reality of first century Judaism have no place in Passion Plays that would be authentic to the spirit of the gospels. St. Paul's admonition, as cited by the 1975 NCCB Statement, is as pertinent today as when it was first set down centuries ago:

Paul warns his fellow Christians against showing contempt for the Jewish people by reminding them that they (Christians) are wild branches grafted unto the olive tree to share its life. 'Remember that you do not support the root: it is the root that supports you' (11:18). And he invites his listeners to a love of the Jews, since they are 'still loved by God for the sake of their ancestors' (11:28). (NCCB, Nov. 20, 1975).

It is this spirit of God's love for the Jewish people, not any form of scapegoating or blame-casting, that should permeate any depiction of the Passion today.

Eugene J. Fisher and Leon Klenicki

Parish Passion Plays: What Do They Teach?

1. Historical Background

The Passion play was a relatively late development of medieval religious drama. By the time it appeared (the earliest extant text is from the thirteenth century), most other forms of medieval drama—morality plays, mystery plays, and the great Corpus Christi cycles depicting the whole of the biblical history of salvation—were already well developed.

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* theorizes that the relative lateness of the development of Passion plays “may very well mean a reluctance to imitate in a fictional manner the awesome mystery of Christ’s sacrifice, especially since the Mass as the central act of the liturgy was itself the actual continuation of that sacrifice.” Given the subsequent history of the plays, many today would judge this initial hesitancy on the part of our medieval ancestors to have been well placed. For the Passion play’s history appears, in retrospect, to have been intimately connected with the spread of the “teaching of contempt” against Jews and Judaism that reached its height (depths?) just in the period when Passion plays gained widespread popularity. No single factor, it may be said, did more to establish the deicide charge of the collective responsibility of the Jews for the death of Jesus as an integral part of Western Christian culture than the Passion plays.

It is important, then, to understand the historical context of the origins of Passion plays in order to evaluate their role in Christian-Jewish relations. Scholars agree that the period of the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries represents a turning point (and not for the better) in Christian attitudes toward Jews and Judaism. While the Patristic age saw the development of the anti-Judaic theology so powerfully distilled—for example, in the fulminations of Saint John Chrysostom—recent scholarship has noted that this theology existed in the context of relatively amicable relations between the Jewish and Christian communities as a whole.

Thus, Robert L. Wilken’s *John Chrysostom and the Jews: Rhetoric and Reality in the Late Fourth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) notes that the great preacher’s diatribes were precipitated by his growing concern over the fact that so many of his own Christian congregants were increasingly attracted to the ritual and lifestyle of the synagogue. Chrysostom’s remarks, despite the inflated rhetoric typical of the period, were aimed not so much at the suppression of Judaism as at convincing his fellow Christians to attend church rather than the synagogue. Even as late as the ninth century there are records of bishops complaining that their people persisted in going to the rabbis for blessings on their fields. So Christians in general must have viewed Jews and Judaism positively in those periods.

However, the jolt of the rise of Islam and its continuing threat, despite the Crusades, to the survival of the Church, precipitated the development of a new self-image within Christendom, one less tolerant of the religious “other.” The Fourth Lateran Council in the thirteenth century mandated new repressive legislation against the Jews. The ghetto and distinctive clothing were enforced. Gradually, as Jeremy Cohen brilliantly recounts in his *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), the notion that “error has no rights” replaced earlier notions of the proper nature of a Christian society. Where Augustine and papal legislation had acknowledged the right of Jews to be Jews in a Christian society, contenting themselves with proscribing any possibility that Jews could proselytize among Christians for converts, the new view sought a society of “one nation, one faith” and began to include Jews in the category of “heretics.” It was under this latter rubric that copies of the Talmud were seized and publicly burned.

Great catastrophes overtook the Jewish communities of Europe in this period. The Crusaders massacred tens of thousands of Jews despite the pleadings of the popes and

ISSUES—B

PACE 15

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bishops that they get about their proper business—the freeing and protecting of the Holy Land for pilgrims. Jews were accused in the fourteenth century of having caused the great plague and again Jews were massacred. By the sixteenth century, Jews had been forcibly expelled from England, Spain, most of Germany, much of France, and their numbers limited even in Italy. The bulk of European Jewry now lived in Poland and Eastern Europe, which would remain the center of European Jewish life until the Holocaust.

This period, which Rev. Edward Flannery has called the “centuries of woe,” also saw the progressive “demonization” of the Jews, as outlined so powerfully in Joshua Trachtenberg’s *The Devil and the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publications Society of America, 1983). Jews were depicted in medieval art as evil sorcerers and devils with horns. Jews were accused of incredible ritual atrocities such as desecrating the Host or killing Christian children. Though such “blood libel” charges were rigorously denounced by the popes for the falsehoods they were, the popular imagery of Jews as connected with the devil flourished, even finding its way into the art of the great medieval cathedrals—such as the infamous *Judensau* recently scrawled on the Cathedral of Regensburg.

2. Development and Nature of the Passion Play

The tradition of the Passion play developed in the midst of the ugliest period of Christian mistreatment of Jews. It was a period which saw increasing violence perpetrated against Jews. The escalation of violence was, in turn, rationalized by an escalation of verbal rhetoric and charges against Judaism, which in turn precipitated further violence in a vicious cycle of destruction.

It would seem that the Passion play both reflected and became a part of this tragic cycle, especially on the popular level where it served to confirm in the people’s mind the central tenet of the teaching of contempt—the decide charge. Passion plays developed not only as part of the larger movement of medieval religious drama, but out of the liturgy of Good Friday itself, out of the dramatized “homiletic” readings of the Passion narratives.

The only extant texts of Passion plays in Latin, the *Benediktbeuren* manuscripts from thirteenth-century Germany, already include two lyrical compositions originally attached to the Good Friday veneration of the cross.

These are forms of the lyrical *planctus* or “lament” of the Blessed Mother sung by a cleric after the unveiling of the crucifix. The lines of the *planctus ante nescia* are typical: “Oh the zeal, Oh the crime of this hateful race [of Jews] and Oh the animal-like hands of those crucifying you. . . . What crime, what shameful thing this barbarous people commits. He is made to suffer chains, beatings, wounds, spittings, crown of thorns, though he is innocent. . . . Oh blind deplorable race, repent!”

Scarcely less inflammatory are the images of the alternate lament of Mary, the *flete, fideles animae*:

He who is innocent is condemned by a damnable people, fulfilling what is necessary. . . . Men of blood rage against the Lord of salvation with iniquitous zeal and all the while they feign virtue. (*Carmina Burana* manuscript 265/4b, 278ff.)

It is no wonder, then, as Léon Poliakov reports in *History of Anti-Semitism* (New York: Schocken Press, 1974, p. 130), that cities such as Frankfurt and Freiburg had to order special measures in the fifteenth century for the protection of the ghetto during the production of Passion plays, or that in 1539 the performance was cancelled in Rome, “for it had been regularly followed by the sacking of the ghetto.”

3. Passion Plays Today

Given this history, it is no wonder that so many of the Passion plays currently produced in Europe and the Americas continue to be accused of stereotyping Jews and Judaism and falsely portraying the biblical accounts. A recent survey by the American Jewish Committee of six major Passion plays annually produced in the United States for large audiences revealed that five of the six continue all the worst elements of the medieval tradition, and often even embellish on those traditions with anti-Jewish stereotypes of more recent vintage. (The sixth play, the only one performed under Catholic auspices, is currently under revision, and there are hopes that it may serve as a model for other Passion plays.)

The Oberammergau *Passionsspiel*, whose audiences are primarily American Christians, is a case in point, though by no means an isolated case. The *Passionsspiel* has undergone only modest revisions since it was hailed by Adolf Hitler who, as late as 5 July 1942, stated: “. . . never has the menace of Jewry been so convincingly portrayed. . . . There one sees Pontius Pilate, a Roman



Ron L. Prondzinski

racially and intellectually superior, there he stands out like a firm, clean rock in the middle of the whole muck and mire of Jewry."

Hitler's comment reveals the way in which a pious practice, intended to achieve a valid spiritual end, can unwittingly serve another purpose. Despite the patient efforts of Catholic scholars such as Franz Mussner, Leonard Swidler and Gerard Sloyan, and Jewish organizations such as the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee, observers report that little has been done in Oberammergau to bring about the changes in the play necessary to remove its anti-Semitic elements. Such changes are outlined in *The Passion of the Jew Jesus* by Leonard Swidler and Gerard S. Sloyan (New York: Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, 1984).

4. Staging the Passion in the Parish

It is possible, of course, to depict the Passion in a way which authentically evokes the events of Jesus' death and resurrection without triggering the anti-Semitic image of

Jews as "Christ-killers." To do this, one has to begin with a reasonably secure knowledge of what the gospel accounts actually say with reference to Jesus' Passion. This is not so automatic as may appear at first blush, since we carry so many preconceptions with us from the past when we approach the text. There is always the danger of projecting anti-Semitism into Passion plays.

For example, most Passion dramas tend to have "the Pharisees" as major actors in the event, even though they do not appear in the gospel accounts themselves (except in the Gospel of Luke, where their role is trying to warn Jesus of the plot against his life!). Likewise, the holding of a formal Sanhedrin trial (recounted only in Matthew and Mark) is very doubtful, and is mentioned in neither Luke nor John. Finally, the image of Pilate as a well-intentioned, even benign ruler that one sees in most Passion plays is historically erroneous. In fact, Pilate was a bloodthirsty tyrant who crucified hundreds of Jews. A historically sound scenario based upon a reconstruction of the evidence from all four gospels is conveniently sketched by Raymond Brown in his brief article, "Why the Accounts of Jesus' Death Differ" in *St. Anthony Messenger* (April 1984), pp. 37-40: "Pilate had to have known beforehand about the arrest of Jesus and perhaps had even commanded it."

Helpful popular summaries of the scholarly literature can also be found in the relevant sections of Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *A Christological Catechism: New Testament Answers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982); John T. Pawlikowski, *What Are They Saying About Christian-Jewish Relations?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980); and Eugene Fisher, *Faith Without Prejudice* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).

An excellent text based directly on the Passion narratives themselves, yet taking into account the results of modern biblical scholarship, has been developed by John Townsend for the Christian Study Group of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Entitled *A Liturgical Interpretation of Our Lord's Passion in Narrative Form*, it can be highly recommended for parish and catechetical settings.

Another model, quite different in tone, can also be recommended. Catherine de Vinck's "A Passion Play" (Alleluia Press, Box 103, Allendale, NJ 07401) is a poetic version that centers on the essential meaning of the Christ Event for the Christian. It is highly evocative and moving, especially for college age or adult audiences.

ISSUES—B

PACE 15

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5. Guidelines for Passion Plays

In 1968, the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement giving general guidelines for the evaluation and performance of Passion plays based on the principles of the Second Vatican Council. This was updated in 1984 with reference to the 1974 Vatican guidelines for Catholic-Jewish relations and the U.S. bishops' own statement of November 1975. Catholic theologian Leonard Swidler has worked this material into the form of a list of eight handy "guidelines," which we excerpt here (though without Swidler's discussion of each). The full text is available from the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (823 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017).

- a. The play should avoid creating the impression that most Jews of Jesus' day willed his death, or that Jews as a people are responsible for it.
- b. The play should avoid depicting Pilate—who history shows was a ruthless tyrant and a perverter of justice—as an innocent and kindly bystander.
- c. The play should not speak of the "old" testament or covenant. God's covenant with the Jewish people has never been revoked by God. The Jews remain "people of God."

- d. The play should not give exclusively to enemies of Jesus recognizably Jewish or Hebrew Bible names.
- e. The play should not give the impression that most of Jesus' enemies were Pharisees, or that all Pharisees opposed Jesus (e.g., Nicodemus).
- f. Jesus and his followers should look and act like the Jews they were, and his opponents should not be cast as ugly stereotypes of Jews.
- g. The play must not depict Jesus as opposed to the Law (Torah).
- h. The play should not leave us with thoughts of suspicion or feelings of disdain for Jesus' people, the Jews. Rather, it should make Christians grateful that we have been led to the one true God, the God of Israel, through the Jew, Jesus.

Dr. Eugene J. Fisher is executive secretary for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. **Rabbi Leon Klenicki** is in charge of Jewish-Christian relations for the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

Oberammergau

1984.4^m

NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS
BISHOPS' COMMITTEE FOR ECUMENICAL AND INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS
SECRETARIAT FOR CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS

1312 MASSACHUSETTS AVENUE, N.W. • WASHINGTON, D.C. 20005 • 202-659-6857

March 8, 1984

Rev. Robert A. Mitchell, S.J.
President, University of Detroit
4001 W. McNichols
Detroit, MI 48221

Dear Fr. Mitchell:

As an alumnus and former U. of D. adjunct faculty member, I would like to express my concern regarding the announced U. of D. Alumni Association trip to see the Oberammergau Passion Play (U. of D. Today, Winter, 1984). While the play has undergone some helpful changes in recent years, the studies I have seen (for example that by Catholic theologians Fr. Gerard Sloyan and Dr. Leonard Swidler of Temple University) reveal it to be still largely problematic in its depiction of the events of Jesus' passion and death. The enclosed article from the Michigan Catholic surfaces some of these problems. These problems, as the article points out, can lead to confusion and even anti-Jewish sentiment among Catholics if those attending are not carefully prepared for the production.

While it would of course be best if Catholic organizations did not sponsor such trips in these delicate circumstances, I can well understand the difficulties involved in trying to cancel an alumni trip once announced. However, if the organizers were to provide those going with materials on the play that would ensure that the distinction, in Fr. Alex Brunett's apt words, "between what is the authentic historical situation of Christ's death and the dramatization of that event in such plays," is clearly understood. Such an effort, small as it may be, would at least do something to alleviate the problem in my opinion.

This effort should doubtlessly be coordinated with Fr. Brunett's office of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs of the Archdiocese. If you are willing, please let me know. Materials prepared by Dr. Swidler are available through the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (write to Mr. Ted Freedman, (823 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017, tel. 212-490-2525). A helpful booklet has also been prepared by Ms. Judith Banki of the American Jewish Committee (165 East 56th Street, New York, NY 10022, tel. 212-751-4000).

Rev. Robert A. Mitchell, S.J.
March 8, 1984
Page Two

If there is anything I can do to assist in this process, please do not hesitate to write or call. Thanking you for your consideration and, through you, wishing all the best to my friends at U. of D., I remain

Yours in Christ,

Eugene J. Fisher
Dictated by Dr. Fisher
-- and signed in his absence/lm

EJF:lm
Enc. (1)

bcc: Dr. Len Swidler
Ms. Judy Banki
Mr. Ted Freedman
Fr. Alex Brunett



Office of the President

4001 W. McNichols Road, Detroit, Michigan 48221

Telephone: (313) 927-1455

April 4, 1984

Mr. Eugene J. Fisher
National Conference of Catholic Bishops
Bishop's Committee for Ecumenical
and Interreligious Affairs
Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations
1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20005

Dear Mr. Fisher:

Thank you for your recent letter regarding the upcoming alumni trip which includes the Oberammergau Passion Play. We will communicate with both the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith and the American Jewish Committee requesting the materials they have available. We will then share this information with our travelers.

This particular trip was scheduled over a year ago and we have found a high level of interest among our alumni. As a Jesuit University we see the Passion Play as a unique opportunity to bring people closer to the life of Christ. At the same time, we had no intention of promoting situations that distort the scriptures, so we will attempt to enlighten our travelers about the liberties taken for the purpose of dramatization.

Again, Mr. Fisher, I appreciate your taking the time to bring this to our attention.

My prayers and best wishes.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Robert A. Mitchell, S.J.".

Robert A. Mitchell, S.J.
President

RAM/mj

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Office of the President

THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE OF CHRISTIANS AND JEWS, inc.

71 FIFTH AVENUE • SUITE 1100
NEW YORK, N. Y. 10003

(212) 206-0006

August 20, 1984

TO: Members of Christian Study Group on Judaism and the
Jewish People

FROM: Jacqueline Wexler, president

On behalf of the whole NCCJ, I want to thank the Study Group for the work you do both for us and for the enterprise of interreligious relations. I especially want to thank you for the attention you have given over the past year to the Oberammergau Passion Play. Your statement, and the background and process material prepared by Father Jack Kelley, were extremely important in calling attention to the anti-Semitic aspects of the 1984 production.

At your last meeting in April, ¹⁹⁸⁴ the Group proposed that NCCJ convene a group of Christian and Jewish leaders concerned about Oberammergau to share ideas about strategies for the future. We called such a meeting for July 27, 1984. It was attended by representatives of the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League and the National Council of Churches. Eugene Fisher was unable to attend. Sister Celia Deutsch chaired the meeting for the Group.

The session was most instructive, indicating both agreements and disagreements on strategies among the various agencies concerned about Oberammergau and potentially paving the way for significant cooperation in approaching the 1990 production. A two-prong approach emerged: 1) Increased attention among Christian theologians and ecclesiastical bodies to the anti-Semitism of Oberammergau in particular and passion plays in general, and 2) discovery of how Oberammergau is "marketed" in the U.S. (an estimated 60 per cent of the audience is English-speaking) with an eye toward enlisting travel agencies and tour sponsors in the educational effort needed to make changes in the text and production.

The NCCJ has made a long-term commitment to both the scholarly and practical work associated with efforts to "clean up" Oberammergau. To do that, we need the sustained work of the Study Group on the first of the two-prongs mentioned above. We need your efforts in theological and scholarly assessment, including such tough problems as the implications of any and all passion plays on Christian-Jewish relations. The more practical prong rightly belongs to our professional staff. It is our intention to provide a "communications network" for all agencies and organizations which market Oberammergau.

Can you as individuals and as members of the Study Group continue to serve as the NCCJ "research and development" unit in monitoring

and initiating scholarly concern for Oberammergau? I do not want to be interpreted as attempting to set your study agenda which must always be broad and flexible, but I believe the Group is well equipped to include the sustained interest in Oberammergau, especially in light of your recent work. We need you.

Our National Program Office would serve as your secretariat in data storage, coordination and information sharing. It could also keep up with the various initiatives, statements and study proposals emerging from both Christian and Jewish organizations.

We are taking steps to investigate the "marketing" of Oberammergau in North America, and feel this should be done now while information on the 1984 experience is fresh. We will likely do this research with a part-time graduate student.

I would want to leave to the Group the decisions about the process you would use in continuing a focus on Oberammergau.

On another, but related matter, you will want to know that NCCJ has assumed sponsorship of Paul van Buren's Center on Contemporary Theology to be located at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem.

The first group of seminar participants -- 10 from North America, five from Europe and five already studying in Israel -- will convene in mid-October, spending two months in cooperative study with students and fellows of the Institute.

NCCJ is extremely pleased to sponsor the new center. We believe that what Paul and David Hartman are doing represents a true cutting edge in Christian-Jewish relations.

One additional item: The National Program Office has asked me to invite you to set a two-day rather than a one-day meeting for your Spring session. We feel that one day, actually a part of a day, may be inadequate. The budget has been adjusted to reflect this possibility. Of course, your time is a consideration and you must make the decision.

NEWS COMMITTEE

FROM THE

ajc THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

Institute of Human Relations, 165 E. 56 St., New York, N.Y. 10022, (212) 751-4000

The American Jewish Committee, founded in 1906, is the pioneer human-relations agency in the United States. It protects the civil and religious rights of Jews here and abroad, and advances the cause of improved human relations for all people.

MORTON YARMON, Director of Public Relations

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PRESS ROOM: VERTES SUITE, 4TH FLOOR

FOR RELEASE AFTER 11 A.M.,
THURSDAY, MAY 3, 1984

NEW YORK, May 3....A prominent Christian leader today strongly reaffirmed earlier Vatican and American Catholic statements warning against the inclusion of anti-Semitic "stereotyping and misinformation" in Passion Plays.

Dr. Eugene J. Fisher, Executive Secretary of the Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, made his remarks at a news conference held during the American Jewish Committee's 78th Annual Meeting, which continues through Sunday at the Hotel Waldorf-Astoria here.

At the same conference, Rabbi A. James Rudin, AJC National Director of Interreligious Affairs, reported on a new study of six Passion Plays produced in the United States. The key finding of the study, said Rabbi Rudin, was that all six productions contained "pernicious anti-Jewish stereotypes that are seen by hundreds of thousands of Americans."

Outlining official Catholic statements on dramatizations of the Passion, Dr. Fisher noted that NCCB's Secretariat for Catholic-Jewish Relations had issued documents in 1968 and 1970 "drawing attention to Passion Plays as a possible source of anti-Semitic reactions." Moreover, he said, the Vatican, in its 1974 "Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration, *Nostra Aetate*," lists principles for the depiction of the Passion. In 1975, Dr. Fisher continued, the American bishops also made this point:

"There remains the continuing task of ensuring that nothing which in any way approaches the notion of Jewish guilt should be found in any Catholic medium of expression or communication. Correctly viewed, the disappearance of the charge of collective guilt of Jews pertains as much to the purity of the Catholic faith as it does to the defense of Judaism."

- more -

NOTE: For a review copy of "Passion Plays in the United States," write Morton Yarmon, American Jewish Committee, 165 East 56th Street, New York, NY 10022

Howard I. Friedman, President; Theodore Ellenoff, Chairman, Board of Governors; Alfred H. Moses, Chairman, National Executive Council; Robert S. Jacobs, Chairman, Board of Trustees
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The Vatican Guidelines, said Dr. Fisher, "urge extreme care not to 'distort [the] meaning [of New Testament accounts of the Passion], especially when it is a question of passages which Christians, if not well informed, might misunderstand because of prejudice.'"

Stressing his "personal reaffirmation" of these statements, Dr. Fisher maintained that it was "obviously not sufficient for the authors and producers of Passion Plays to reply to responsible criticism simply by appealing to the notion that 'well, it's in the Bible,' [since] ...the interpretation offered in a given dramatization [will depend on] ...how certain passages or scenes from the four Gospels are selected and what is communicated through this selectivity."

The NCCB statement on Passion Plays, Dr. Fisher said, specifically cautions against:

- * Concealing "the fact that Jesus is a Jew and that His friends as well as His enemies in the drama are Jews";
- * Creating "the impression that most Jews of Jesus' day willed His death, failing to show that the secrecy surrounding much of Jesus' trial was motivated by the large following He had in Jerusalem";
- * Changing "the 'crowd' before the governor's palace into a screaming 'mob,' as representing all Jerusalem, and indeed all Israel";
- * Depicting Pilate, "whom historiography has shown to have been a ruthless tyrant, as an innocent and kindly bystander";
- * Highlighting "those texts of the Gospel narrative that are amenable to misinterpretation by uninformed audiences...."

Quoting St. Paul's admonition to his fellow Christians to "Remember that you do not support the root [Judaism]: it is the root that supports you," Dr. Fisher said: "It is this spirit of God's love for the Jewish people, not any form of scapegoating or blame-casting, that should permeate any depiction of the Passion today....Stereotypy and misinformation...have no place in Passion Plays that would be authentic to the spirit of the Gospels."

Discussing AJC's report on six American Passion Plays, Rabbi Rudin said that American dramatizations were "sometimes overlooked because of the wide attention given to the Oberammergau production in Germany, which will begin four months of special performances later this month."

"Often based on the Oberammergau model," Rabbi Rudin continued, "the American plays attract large audiences every year who believe that what they see on the stage is historically accurate and theologically sound. Such, however, is not the case. Contemporary scholarship has given us new and important insights about the Jewish community in the first century. In addition, deep mutual respect and genuine interreligious understanding have developed between Christian and Jews in recent years, but, unfortunately, the American Passion Plays are like wild weeds growing in a garden of religious pluralism."

Calling on Christian leaders to "give serious attention to the crucial problem raised by the six productions -- the harsh anti-Jewish images and themes

that are transmitted to Passion Play audiences," Rabbi Rudin expressed "particular concern that many Christian groups, including councils of churches and local churches, often sponsor these productions without being aware of their anti-Jewish content."

"We hope that this study will alert Christians of good will to the severe problems raised by the Passion Plays," he said.

The AJC study, written by Samuel Weintraub, the agency's Harry Sudakoff Interreligious Intern and a rabbinical student at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, focused on the Black Hills Play of South Dakota and Florida; the Val Balfour Play of Richmond, Virginia; the Great Passion Play of Eureka Springs, Arkansas; the Word of Life Fellowship Play of Schroon Lake, New York; the Fall City, Washington, Play, and the Holy Family Passion Play of Union City, New Jersey, all of which are produced annually. Anti-Jewish themes found in all six productions, said Mr. Weintraub, are these:

- * "The Jewish antagonists of Jesus--and by implication all Jews--are depicted as degenerate, loathsome, almost subhuman creatures. The Jewish priests in particular are often portrayed as hateful and bloodthirsty leaders of a corrupt religion."

- * "The Jewish people who gather before the Roman Governor's palace in Jerusalem become a 'mob' clamoring for the death of Jesus. They gleefully welcome his death and are portrayed as being collectively responsible, for all generations to come, for the crucifixion."

- * "The Passion Plays either deny or obscure the thoroughly Jewish background of Jesus and his apostles. Indeed, many Plays place Jesus as a lonely rebel standing against his people and his religion."

- * "The most damaging perversion of history is the usual characterization of Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor who ordered Jesus' execution. Pilate, whom responsible historians have described as a ruthless tyrant, is portrayed as a weak and indecisive man who was unfortunately swayed by Jewish pressure to crucify Jesus."

- * "The use of the New Testament is often one-sided, highlighting those verses with real or potential anti-Jewish impact. Generally, the American Passion Plays neglect those New Testament passages which suggest more positive images of Jews and Judaism."

- * "The Plays have a dangerous tendency to sever the story of Jesus from its historical connection to the Jewish community of the first century. The Plays also fail to present the realities of the brutal Roman occupation."

Another speaker at the news conference was Faith Mesnekoff, Interreligious Affairs Chairperson of AJC's Greater Miami Chapter, who reported on a recent production of the Black Hills Passion Play that she and a Miami AJC delegation had witnessed.

The Harry Sudakoff Interreligious Internship was established in Mr. Sudakoff's honor by George and Arlene Hecht of Sarasota, Florida, to underwrite research and study projects in the area of Christian-Jewish relations.

The American Jewish Committee is this country's pioneer human relations organization. Founded in 1906, it combats bigotry, protects the civil and religious rights of people here and abroad, and advances the cause of improved human relations for all people everywhere.

* * * * *

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