



A Call to Understanding:

An Interfaith Appeal on a Topic That Has Caused Animosity between Christians and Jews

February 24, 2004

Over the last four decades, there has been a revolution in relations between Christians and Jews. This change - dedicated to bringing an end to the teaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism - began with Protestant statements issued after the Holocaust, made giant strides at the Second Vatican Council in 1965, and has continued to develop until this day.

Notions that Jews were accursed by God because of their (alleged) guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus and that their covenant with God had been superseded by the Christian Church have been officially disavowed by many churches. A new willingness by many Christians and Jews to be mutually enriched by each other's traditions has replaced older habits of suspicion and avoidance. Those Jews and Christians who have entered into dialogue with one another have experienced deepened understandings of their own religious traditions as well as that of the other.

These historic changes are related to the growing Christian conviction that those Gospel passages which, in the past, have fueled misunderstanding and contempt for Jews and Judaism are best interpreted in the context of the times in which they were written. Contextualizing the Gospels has enabled a dramatically different view of what they say about the Jewish faith and about the relationship of Christianity to Judaism. A renewed respect for Judaism has developed among many Christians, with the result that profound new insights into Christianity have been gained as well.

Another consequence has been that both the Catholic and many Protestant churches have advanced significant reforms in how the story of Jesus' Passion is portrayed. For example, the world renowned Passion Play that takes place every ten years in Oberammergau, Germany has been steadily rewritten to remove the kind of characterizations, in the script and the staging, that have promoted contempt for Jews and Judaism for centuries. Similarly, in 1988, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops published "Criteria for the Evaluations of Dramatizations of the Passion," a document intended to encourage American Catholics to avoid distorted portrayals of Jesus' Passion that are inconsistent with doctrine and demonize Jews and Judaism. And only last month, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America issued recommendations designed to end "the libels [against the Jews] of former ages" and better enable presenters of the Passion story to unleash "...the power of the gospel ... to bring life from death."

With the approach of a season that is holy to both Christians and Jews, and in light of current concerns that Passion narratives could fan the flames of anti-Semitism, we the undersigned - Jews and Christians of faith - are joining together to affirm our common commitment to:

- Advancing the spirit of understanding and respect between Christians and Jews that has been emerging over the last four decades;*
- Respecting one another's faith convictions both in the many beliefs we share in common and in those beliefs we do not share; and*
- Ending any stereotypes about each other.*

The Jewish signatories urge all members of the Jewish community to join with our Christian friends in the ongoing work of building amity between our two traditions through dialogue and collaborative activities.

The Christian signatories also urge that those who intend to celebrate this holy period through a presentation of the Passion be guided by the following considerations:

- The Gospels tell the full truth about Jesus Christ, but they are not "histories" in the modern sense.*
- The four Gospels present four different Passion narratives. It is possible to select and combine elements from the different narratives to convey either a relatively benign or harsh view of Jews and Judaism.*
- Often Passion plays and other portrayals of the Passion have embellished the New Testament narratives with scenes and language that come from non-Biblical sources and serve to promote contempt and even hatred for Jews. Such enlargements of the Gospel story distort the meaning of the Gospels and undermine efforts to promote understanding and respect between Christians and Jews.*
- There is extensive information now available with which to interpret, understand and contextualize a Passion narrative. Those who convey the Passion have a responsibility to do their best to avail themselves of these resources.*
- An appreciation of the Jewishness of Jesus and his followers, the oppressive circumstances of Jews living under Roman imperial domination, and the rich diversity of Jewish life during Jesus' time are essential to understand the historical circumstances of Jesus' execution.*

Observance of these guidelines will encourage the spirit of respect and understanding that we Jews and Christians are committed to perpetuating.

Signed By:

*Philip A. Cunningham, PhD.
Executive Director
Boston College Center for
Christian Jewish Learning*

*Rabbi Michael Menitoff
President
Massachusetts Board of Rabbis*

*Reverend Dr. Robert B. Wallace
Interim Executive Minister
American Baptist Churches*

*Larry Lowenthal, Executive Director
Jim Kaufman, Chair
American Jewish Committee*

*Bishop Thomas Shaw
Bishop of Massachusetts
Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts*

*Robert Leikind, Regional Director
Ginny MacDowell, Chair
New England Anti-Defamation League*

*Reverend Dr. Diane C. Kessler
Executive Director
Massachusetts Council of Churches*

*Nancy Kaufman, Executive Director
Susan Calchman, Chair
Jewish Community Relations Council
of Greater Boston*

*Bishop Margaret Payne
Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
New England Synod*

*Reverend Nancy Taylor
Conference Minister and President
United Church of Christ,
Massachusetts Conference*