A JEWISH REACTION TO CATHOLIC POSITIONS IN VATICAN II

My talk is based on two texts: One derives from the recently promulgated Vatican Council *Declaration on Non-Christian Religions,* which asserted, among other things, the following.

> Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is thus so great, this sacred synod wants to foster and recommend that mutual understanding and respect which is the fruit above all of Biblical and theological studies as well as of fraternal dialogues.

My second text is derived from one of the basic works of Jewish tradition—*The Sayings of the Fathers* (of the Synagogue):

> The world is founded upon three pillars, upon *Torah, Avodah* and *Gemilas Chasadim.* The very foundations of the earth are reared on *Torah,* which in its broader meaning, is study or learning; on *Avodah,* which technically means worship, but can mean as well, service of the heart or service of the total person; and on *Gemilas Chasadim,* on righteous deeds, acts and works of charity.

The Fathers of the Synagogue, it seems to me, have suggested some fundamental approaches which might be considered appropriate for the advancement of objectives which the Fathers of the Catholic Church have proposed—the objectives of mutual knowledge and respect which all men of good will, living in the pluralism of America and in a growing interdependent world, must certainly share. In speaking of the tradition of *Torah,* of understanding, of knowledge, of information, indeed, of scholarship in this context of advancing Jewish-Christian relations, I should like to suggest something which has not been done before, at least to my knowledge, but which sooner or later should certainly be done. Perhaps some of you who hear my voice might consider this a worthwhile subject to explore yourselves.

Before the proposal, the problem. One of the great problems between Christians and Jews has been the breakdown in communica-

tion. We have been trained in virtually different universes of discourse and nowhere is this more clearly evident than in the ways, for example, in which we portray each other, in our history books, not just in the elementary and secondary textbooks but in the college and university and seminary levels as well. A Christian historian, for example, Father Philip Hughes, writing in his excellent study, *A Popular History of the Catholic Church,* describes the Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries as "holy wars" to free the Holy Land in Jerusalem from the infidels. "Never before," writes Father Hughes, "had Europe known such a vast and successful propaganda as the preaching of the First Crusade and its success is a most eloquent proof of the reality of the new reform Papacy's hold on the average man and of its popularity with him." In his *Popular History* edition, Father Hughes did not refer to the place of the Jews in the Crusades, not even once.

To Jewish historians writing about the same Crusades, scholars such as Heinrich Graetz, Marx and Margolis, Solomon Grayzel, the Crusades are described, in the language of one of these historians, as,

> A gory story of pillaging Jewish settlements, killing Jewish people, looting Jewish wealth. Such serious restrictive legislation as the humiliating garb, ritual murder charges, host desecration libels and confinement of the ghetto, were not the heritage of the Dark Ages but the heritage of the crusades.

As Father Edward Flannery, author of *The Anguish of the Jews,* has written: "Most Christians have torn out of their history books the pages the Jews have memorized." For the Christian who is raised on the tradition of history contained in Father Hughes' book, the Crusades will be forever seen as a noble, heroic and by and large holy undertaking. But no Christian who is raised on that version of the Crusades will ever understand the mind-set of his Jewish brother who has been instructed by his reading of the Jewish version of that period.

Two completely different mentalities are developing side by side. The Jew responds to this understanding of his history in the Christian West with a feeling of some vast, inchoate sense of his victimization and he responds, humanly, with resentment. The Christian who

knows nothing about this side of the history of the Jew in the West —the Crusades, the Inquisitions, the pogroms, the exclusions, the ghettos, the yellow badges of shame—often conclude that Jews who seem to get quickly nervous over outbreaks of anti-Semitism are strangely hyper-sensitive, even paranoid. And many Jews find it difficult to believe that Christians do not know anything about Jewish suffering of this magnitude in the past and conclude that Christians are being hard-hearted and insensitive—and the cycle of misunderstanding thereby proceeds apace.

And so I should like to propose that we face squarely into this issue as one of the major obligations posed by Vatican Council II. As one way of coming to grips with this problem, I should like to see Catholic, Protestant and Jewish historians sit down together and write a joint history, if not of the entire encounter between Christians and Jews across two thousand years, then of sections of it, perhaps as monographs, research papers, or background documents to be used in college and seminary courses—objective, impartial treatment of the Crusades, of the Spanish Inquisition period, of the portrayal of the Jew and Judaism in patristic literature, of the role and the place of the Jew in the Middle Ages in his relations with a Christian society, of what a trauma the French Revolution meant for the Church while for the Jew it meant the civic and political salvation of the Jewish people. The very process of creating such a body of literature will be greatly instructive for all who will be exposed to study, research and writing in this field. Such work, carried out by seminarians together, teachers, scholarly clergy, educated laymen, would help immeasurably to overcome the misconceptions and the misrepresentations that have accumulated across the centuries and which have contributed so much to the distortion of our relations even to this very day. The very least that we might hope for is that we will overcome our ignorances about each other's history books and what they contain.

Another area of study involves that of biblical and theological studies and is suggested by the Vatican Council declaration quite explicitly. The council fathers called for accurate interpretation in precise historical and theological terms of the role of the Jewish people in the crucifixion. The declaration declared, in these words:

"What happened in His Passion cannot be charged against all the Jews without distinction then alive, nor against the Jews of today." It added: "The Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures."

A St. Louis University study of religious textbooks used in parochial schools, conducted by Sister Rose Albert under the direction of Father Trafford Maher, has disclosed that, in a substantial number of textbooks and teacher manuals, and this has been true as well of sermons, liturgical commentaries and other forms of catechetical materials, the enemies of Jesus have frequently been identified as, quote, "the Jews," while his friends and followers, who were also Jews, are not referred to in those terms. Thus, in some of the textbooks that were studied, we find the following is written: "It was on the day that Jesus raised Lazarus from the tomb that the Jews decided to kill him. Nevertheless they were afraid of the people." But who were the people that the Jews were afraid of? Martians? They were Jews, other Jews. The historic truth is that Jesus scarcely ever spoke a word to a non-Jew. His whole milieu, the people with whom he lived, with whom he had his daily encounters, were all, friend and foe alike, Jews. And yet this tradition of selective interpretation of Scripture continues to this very day.

Now let me be very clear about one point. No informed Jew is asking Christians to revise the New Testament for the sake of good Jewish-Christian relations. Those who have any understanding of Scriptures are no more prepared to ask Christians to rewrite the Gospels than Jews would be prepared to accept any suggestions from non-Jews that the Torah or the Talmud be revised for reasons of good will. However, since present-day Jews are living descendents of the Jews who are referred to repeatedly in the Gospels, and in light of centuries of persecutions of Jews by people who called themselves Christians and who exploited some of these teachings to cover up their bigotry, what many Jews do raise as a question before the conscience of their Christian neighbors, especially biblical and theological scholars and students, is whether there are not resources in biblical exegesis and related scholarship that would enable Christian teachers, priests and the average Catholic parent to interpret in proper context and in its spiritual meaning those passages of the

New Testament which are most easily open to distortion. The need to prepare commentaries on the Scriptures, on the Liturgy and the para-liturgical materials that reflect this ecumenical spirit and the insights of recent biblical scholarship is, in my judgment, an imperative one.

I make bold to raise this issue in this form because I am greatly encouraged by the leadership already given in this direction by eminent Catholic scripture scholars and theologians. A very good case in point is the essay on "The Gospels and Anti-Semitism" by Father Dominic Crossan, that appeared recently in *Theological Studies,* the journal published by the Jesuit seminary at Woodstock College. Father Crossan wrote, and I quote,

> The often repeated statement that the Jews rejected Jesus and had Him crucified is historically untenable and must therefore be removed completely from our thinking and our writing, our teaching, preaching and liturgy.

One is heartened to find this point of view clearly and concretely reflected in such new textbooks and teacher manuals as the "To Live is Christ" series by Brother Frederick and Brother Albert, for Catholic high schools. The authors write in the teacher's manual:

> We must follow the example of our Lord upon the cross, who did not apply the term God-killers to the Roman powers, nor to those (Judas included) who brought him before the Romans, and certainly did not apply any blanket condemnation upon any group or nation because of the actions of a minority.
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> Rather we should think of the significance the Crucifixion has for us Christians: We should think of the love of God shown for us in this action and the promise of resurrection in union with that of Jesus. We should consider that, when we sin, we are turning our backs on the life work of Christ, and making his death useless in our regard: It is we who condemn him to martyrdom, then, in our own hearts.

Another dimension of this area of biblical and theological concern is that related to the conventional practice of making unjust and inaccurate comparisons between the Jewish faith and Christianity. Occasionally, gratuitous slurs against Judaism are introduced

to heighten the contrast to Christianity. In consequence, Judaism emerges as a legalistic religion, concerned solely with external observances, ritual, legalistic piety, devoid of love, mercy and compassion. For example, as one of the textbooks cited in the St. Louis study says: "The Jews believe that one should hate an enemy, but Christ taught the opposite." It might be noted that St. Paul's injunction, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him, contained in Romans 12:20, is a direct quotation from Proverbs 25:21, with which the Jews had something to do.

Also, in this style of teaching, the Pharisees, who for the most part, were saintly, devout and courageous men and on whose scholarly and moral interpretations modern Judaism rests today, are frequently described as inhuman, without true religious motivation. As the distinguished Jewish biblical scholar, Dr. Robert Gordis, has declared:

> Every competent scholar knows that the Old Testament conceived of God in terms of love as well as of justice, just as Jesus' God manifested Himself in justice as well as in love, for justice without love is cruelty and love without justice is caprice.

If anything has brought this lesson home to us, my friends, it is the race struggle which is presently convulsing our nation, which is based on a demand for justice as much as on brotherly love.

The last aspect of biblical and theological concerns that I would like to touch on deals with the problems of omission. Very often, a form of distortion appears in teaching or for that matter, in everyday discussion, either intentionally or under the influence of unconscious prejudice. For example, because of the general omission of the Jewish background of Christianity, many Catholics and other Christians are unaware of Christianity's deep roots in Judaism and in the Jewish people. Some passages in textbooks, for example, give the impression that the Bible did not exist prior to the Catholic Church. Here is a verbatim quote from one of the textbooks cited in the St. Louis study: "He inspired men whom he chose to write the smaller books which comprise it. There can be no doubt that the world must thank the Church for the Bible."

In such material and in history books, in books that are used in all ranges of education, there are few references to Judaism as a religion in its present form. After the birth of Christianity, Jewish religious practices, holy days, are described mainly in the context of the ancient past. The Catholic student, or the Christian student generally, is given the impression that Judaism as a faith ceased to exist with the founding of Christianity or with the destruction of the Temple. The Jews of later ages thus appear, by implication, as an irreligious people or as some weird phenomenon. What are Jews doing here, since in this view of the Old Testament, it has been fulfilled and the Jews have been superseded. The extreme secularized version of this attitude was expressed by Arnold Toynbee, who thought the Jews were a fossil of an ancient, Syriac civilization. Well, if we want to be rational people, we need to face the evidence of our senses. There are few Jews around who are fossilized and even fewer whom I know who regard themselves as Syriac vestiges.

If one wishes to understand the Jews as they understand themselves today, the People of Israel means the actual living Jewish people who became a people through the covenant made by God with Israel at Mount Sinai and who have been giving living witness to the word of God through centuries of devotion and piety and service, as well as through tragic suffering and martyrdom. This covenant has transformed the Jews into an eternal and permanent people, as the psalmist declared:

> My mercy will I not break off from him, nor will I be false to my faithfulness. My covenant will I not profane, nor alter that which has gone out of my lips. Once I have sworn by my holiness, surely I will not be false unto David. His seed shall endure forever and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established forever as the moon and be steadfast as the witness in the sky (Psalm 89).

Perhaps this is what St. Paul meant when he declared in the book of Romans that the calls and promises of God to the people of Israel are irrevocable—"for the gifts and calling of God are without repentance."

How does classic Judaism view the election of the Jewish people in its own terms? The noted scholar Hans Joachim Schoeps in his

study "The Jewish-Christian Argument" formulates this traditional view quite accurately in the following words:

> In all ages, the Jewish faith has viewed possession of the Torah as the guarantee of its secure election. For ages, the Jews have expressed their deepest understanding of themselves in the daily Benediction of the Torah: "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, our God, King of the Universe, who hast chosen us from among all nations and hast given us thy precepts." The *Pirke Abot* (Ethical Sayings of the Synagogue Fathers) relates the saying of Rabbi Akiba that the Israelites are called God's children, as was declared to them out of God's special love. And further: "Beloved are the Israelites, for a special instrument has been granted them. Out of special love, it was declared to them that a precious instrument had been granted to them, through which the world was created." For it is written in Proverbs 4:2 "For I give you good doctrine; forsake ye not my teaching." (III,18) One of the *Tannaim,* a mystic by the name of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, spoke of the nearness of God to his chosen people, the reality of the union of his *shekhinah* (Divine Presence) with Israel even after the destruction of the temple: "Come and see how beloved to the Holy One, blessed be his name, are the Israelites. Wherever they were exiled, the *shekhinah* was with them. So it was in Egypt (there follows a reference to I Sam 2:27), so it was in the Babylonian *gâlûth* (reference to Isa 43:14), so it was in the Edomitic (Roman) *gâlûth* reference to Isa 63:17. Even when they are finally delivered, the *shekhinah* will be with them, for it is written in Deuteronomy 30:3: 'The Lord thy God will turn thy captivity.' It is not written that he will bring it back, but will turn it back. This teaches that the *Shekhinah* of the Holy One (blessed be his name!) will return with them from the *gâlûth.*" (Megillah 29a)

This and many other doctrinal statements of the Talmud, or interpretation of the Midrash (usually verifying the suggested exegesis with suitably selected passages from Scripture), quite obviously must be viewed as replies to Christian polemic. Israel remains the people of God; the covenant cannot be nullified. Thus the scholars reassure the nation. At the moment, the nation is in travail, but, in the first place, the evidence of such travail is not an admissible argument, since it is historical impotence which can demonstrate

God's love; in the second place, there is not the slightest causal relationship between the misery of the nation and the crucifixion of Jesus, although presumably it is related to the punishments threatened in Scripture, if the people break the ordinances of the covenant and sin obtains the upper hand. In this other event, the Torah has promised, "the Lord shall scatter thee among all peoples, from the one end of the earth even unto the other end of the earth." (Deut 28:64)

Starting with the ninth chapter of the Epistle to Barnabas and running through all patristic literature is the assertion on the part of Christian writers that Israel has been rejected by God because of the sin of the golden calf. If this is true, Israel replies: "If I appear so reprehensible on account of this single offence, how reprehensible must you be!" (*Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* on 1:6, and elsewhere) But such verdicts are not man's to deliver, for no man knows God's decree. And the Christians do not have the right (so the rabbis assure us repeatedly), by means of their allegories, to interpret Scripture contrary to the sense of the words in order to "prove" the *rejection* of Israel, and in this manner claim the election for the Church. What is revealed is revealed, and God is a God of truth. It is written in the Torah: "And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God." (Lev 26:44)

That is the point: punishment, yes—but not rejection. The *galuth* is perhaps even a blessing for Israel; it assures the eternity of the nation. That suffering would come upon Israel was predicted by the prophet Isaiah: "I have tried thee in the furnace of affliction." (48:10) The destruction of the temple and the dispersion among the Gentiles have their point of origin in the election, and are compassed within the divine plan. This all came about "*umippene hataenu* ("on account of our sins") and will endure until, at a future time, our destiny will be altered by divine mercy. If now the scoffers come and ask, Where is then the power of God, seeing as he does not punish the persecutors of Israel?, Rabbi Joshua ben Levi (*Amora* of the first generation, about 320) answers:

> This is his power, that he restrains his wrath and remains patient with blasphemers. These are his terrible deeds; for without the terrible deeds of the Holy One (blessed be his name!), how could Israel continue to exist among all the nations of the world?

(*Yoma* 69b) In regard to the sufferings which afflict the Israelites here below: as repayment for the afflictions sent by God, they have promised to them in return the divine precepts, the Holy Land, and the world to come (*Mekiltah* on Exod 20:3). Knowing this, the same Joshua ben Levi could even dare to say, "Not even a wall of iron can effect a separation between Israel and its Father in heaven." (*Pesahim* 85b) And this deep conviction is paraphrased by another passage: "Even were all the nations of the earth to join together to put an end to God's love for Israel, they could not do so." (*Shemot Rabbah*)

Jews are heartened to find a number of Christian scholars who are beginning to understand and to reflect this basic tradition of Judaism, both present as well as past.

Father Gregory Baum, writing in *the Ecumenist* of May-June 1965, has begun to point the way:

> . . . the apostle tells us, that the Jews of the Synagogue remain dear to God for the sake of the fathers (cf. Rom 11:28). Their election stands. Why? Because God is faithful, his gifts and call are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). His election cannot ultimately be undone by human decision against it. This scriptural theme is invoked in the conciliar text.
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> What does this mean for the understanding of the Jews of our day? Giving this Pauline theme its weakest possible meaning, it asserts that God continues to be present and to address Jewish believers in their synagogue services. The testimonies of God's mercy in the past as celebrated in the synagogue worship remain a way of divine action, for "his gifts and call are irrevocable." We have here the answer to a question crucial to the Jewish-Christian dialogue. What is the present synagogue worship before God? Is the Christian forced to regard present Jewish worship as an empty form, as words and gestures without meaning? Or is he able to acknowledge in Jewish worship the presence of the living God? The conciliar text answers this question by its adoption

and use of the Pauline theme. God remains present in his gifts to Israel.

Father Henry Renckens has written in his recent book, *The Religion of Israel:* "Christianity would be unthinkable without Judaism" and "The old Israel is a work of the Holy Spirit, as is the new." "If we take the Church and Holy Scripture seriously," Father Renckens adds, "then we are bound to take Judaism and its literary activity down to this day seriously." Msgr. John Oesterreicher has recently stated it another way:

> It is simply not true that because the synagogue did not accept Jesus as the giver of a new life, she is a dead tree carrying dead leaves. God's grace is at work in the synagogue. The worshipping community of Israel is alive to Him.

The challenge of Jewish-Christian relations is then for the Jew to come to grips with that which God must have intended in the emergence of Christianity out of the soil of the Holy Land, to come to grips with the holiness and sanctity that is found in the lives of so many of the new Christians with whom we have our being today. For Christians, it is to come to know Jews and Judaism in their full, living, present-day reality as a living, worshipping community, striving to be ever the banner of God's fidelity, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

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