

THE CHURCH, THE SYNAGOGUE, AND THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

The position of Judaism in the ecumenical movement is controverted among both Christians and Jews. There is a Christian opinion which would restrict the term "ecumenical" to strictly inter-Christian encounters which seek Christian unity, and another which would include in its scope every rational effort at reducing tensions and promoting mutual understanding. Perhaps a thumb-nail sketch of the term might help us to decide the question. The word ecumenism, as we know, derives from the Greek *oikoumene* and means the "whole civilized world." In its first application in Christian history it meant "all-Catholic"; whence, for example, the expression "general ecumenical council." In 1910 when Protestants launched the movement toward the union of Christian churches, they more or less pre-empted the modern use of the word and it came to mean "all-Christian." Since then, reverting to its etymological meaning, the term has taken on a still wider meaning. We now speak of the "ecumenical age" or the "ecumenical spirit," by which is meant an attitude of collaboration or the habit of amicable discussion between any groups aimed at reducing tensions, solving mutual problems, and enlightening fellow conversants about one another's ideology. There seems to me no difficulty in using the word in this third and wider sense and including in its ambit our conversations and formal dealings with Jews.

Indeed there is actually a special obligation incumbent upon us to include Jews in our dialogues. Following the lead of Pius XII, John XXIII, and Paul VI, the Vatican Council has called for conversations with all men of good will. But we are tied to Jews by a double bond, a bond of guilt and a bond of affection. The bond of guilt tells of our anti-Semitism; the bond of affection, of our Judaic roots. Because of these bonds the dialogue with Jews should occupy a prominent place in our ecumenical efforts.

But then, is it certain that our efforts will always be well received? There is controversy among Jews also regarding the ques-

tion of Jewish-Christian conversations. A certain Orthodox opinion will have none of it. Orthodox Rabbi Soloveitchik of Yeshiva University, moreover, would always limit the dialogue to the pursuit of purely social goals. Professor Berkovitz of Hebrew Theological College in Skokie, Illinois, believes that an embittered past renders any dialogue with Christians impossible for at least another hundred years and, furthermore, sees little value in them at any time.

But there are many Jewish scholars who are confident that a fruitful theological exchange with Christians is not only possible but should be pressed forward with urgency. A good example of these, together with their Catholic counterparts, could be found among the participants of the Latrobe Conference of last year, among whom was also Rabbi Tanenbaum, and the results of which have been published in *Torah and Gospel*. In that encounter Jewish and Catholic scholars lived together for three days and explored many issues on a theological level with considerable success.

I might refer here to the altogether special view of Professor Marcus Barth. Professor Barth believes that it is imperative for Christians to involve Jews in an intrinsic way in the Christian ecumenical movement. His position is a challenging one. Yet I believe that he has skirted around some of the difficulties by redefining the aim of the ecumenical movement. For him this aim is no longer the pursuit of Christian unity but rather unity in the service of the one true God. Perhaps his chief contribution to our discussion is not his re-definition of ecumenism but rather this new avenue that he has opened up.

It is the thesis of this paper that the ecumenical movement admits of degrees and that Jews can participate in many of them. Its purpose is to probe some of the limits and the possibilities of this participation. In general, three main issues will be examined: 1) the exclusion of Judaism from a strictly Christian ecumenism; 2) the obligation incumbent on both the Church and the Synagogue to assess and revise their concept of the other, particularly with regard to the notion of Israel; and 3) the possibility that Catholicism and Judaism may seek in each other, insights, truths, and even correctives which might lead to mutual enrichment.

As to the first, I can assume that no Jew aspires to enter into the

final chamber of Christian ecumenism, in other words, into the pursuit of Christian creedal unity. He can be no more than academically interested in inter-Christian distinctions, and the Christian could have no more than an academic interest in expounding these to him. Indeed one of the first requisites of genuine dialogue is that it be kept free of proselytizing. The suspicion which some Jewish spokesmen entertain concerning Christian sincerity on this point seems to me to place them outside the pale of true ecumenism.

I may, if he will permit, refer here to certain fears which Rabbi Tanenbaum has expressed concerning a centripetal force in Christianity which might end in a super-church and in a pan-Christian exclusivism that would imperil pluralism. I do not consider his fears warranted. All Christian churches must reckon with the clearly expressed will of Christ "that all may be one," that all His sheep be "in one fold," as recorded severally in the Gospels. I would not speak here of a super-church but of a single church, more or less loosely or tightly constituted. It is understandable that on this point Jewish historical memories should induce a certain uneasiness. The single Church they knew in the Middle Ages was in a sense a super-church which did indeed lead to exclusivism. But history must repeat itself only for those who do not understand it. I am optimistic enough to believe that the ecumenical movement is an irreversible process. It is perhaps best for us to restrict our ideal of pluralism to economic, social, and cultural spheres and not for its sake to canonize religious divisions. I make, you see, a distinction between religious pluralism as a practical necessity and as a goal ever to be sought in itself. Ancient Judaism dreamt of universal unity, as did Christianity after it, and as do most who are committed to what they consider the *summum bonum*. I am convinced, for all this, that any unity that Christian ecumenism may produce is not one that any Jew has to fear. Its very dynamics will enhance the Jewish-Christian bond. The experience of the Middle Ages is there to warn us, not to serve as a model.

My second point, which space limitations insist that I merely hint at, concerns revisions Christianity and Judaism must make *vis a vis* each other. What the Jewish revisions might be I leave to Jewish ecumenists. Some very interesting ones have already been

suggested by Rabbi Tanenbaum, Rabbi Samuel Karff, Maurice Eisendrath, and others. I shall content myself, on the Christian side, hardly more than to re-enunciate the principle, which has been stated by the Vatican Council's *Decree on Ecumenism* and in Pope Paul's *Ecclesiam Suam*. In these documents it is acknowledged that God's truth and grace overflow the visible boundaries of the Church and that the spiritual and moral values of other religions should be appreciated. The day is past for Catholics to see in differing faiths nothing but error, heresy, and evil. If the Church does not see in non-Catholic religions the complete way to salvation for all men, it does see in them nonetheless ways of grace and truth for their own sincere members and as a manifestation of goodness and true value in a world where the real forces of evil are all too clearly discernible.

The foregoing principles need to be applied to Judaism more perhaps than to other faiths if for no other reason than that in the past it was the most denigrated and maligned of all and because, according to St. Paul, "God does not repent of His promises" and "for the sake of their fathers they (Jews) are most dear." (See *Rom* 9-11) The Jewish people, in other terms, even after Christ remains a people of election. Thanks to the reassertion of this Pauline tradition by the Second Vatican Council the tradition of contempt for Jews, of which Professor Jules Isaac wrote, must be transformed into one of special affection.

A difficulty arises, of course, with respect to the concept of Israel, which the Latrobe Conference took up by a juxtaposition of papers but without a true confrontation of views. Jews take strenuous exception to the notion that they are the *Old* Israel and that their's is the *Old* Testament, which were nothing but a preparation, a prefiguration of Christ, of the Church, a *praeparatio evangelica* in the terminology of the Fathers. Their chagrin is understandable. The difficulty is real however. Recently a prominent Jewish spokesman voiced his protest against the Christian habit of seeing Judaism as a preparation for Christianity. I pointed out to him that in denying the Christian the right to see Israel as a preparation for Christ he is actually destroying the very foundations of Christianity, which he has not a right to do, ecumenically speaking. I attempted to make the point that his objection could only be to Christians seeing Israel

as *nothing but* a preparation for the Church. It is perhaps in this way that a compromise on this difficult question can be sought. The Christian would seek the roots of his Christian faith in the Judaic heritage and see present-day Judaism as a living reality. The Jew, meanwhile, would allow the Christian theological severance from Judaism and also the belief that for Christians Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism. There is a major task here for Christian biblical scholars, historians, and apologists to present Israel and the Old Testament in a positive light, and the Judaism of the post-biblical era as well. In this task help should be sought from Jewish scholars who are capable of presenting the view from within. This is another task which should engage the best talents of Jewish-Christian dialogists for years to come.

Perhaps the most promising avenue of approaching Jewish-Christian ecumenism centers about our third issue: Can Christians and Jews acquire in their dialogue truths or insights, or at least new emphases, which would not only lead them to a better understanding of the other but to a positive enrichment or purification of their own faith? Have we advanced far enough in our discussions to take this direction? It is Jewish-Christian ecumenism in high gear. Again I defer to Jewish spokesmen to answer for Judaism, and merely offer a few suggestions that may contribute toward a Catholic answer to the question. Already Father Gerald Sloyan has boldly stated at the Latrobe Conference:

Perhaps the least apprehended truth is the basic Jewishness of Christianity, the latent Christianity of Judaism, and the near impossibility of speaking of the two in terms of a relation. When there is a condition of identity, the word "relation" has no place; when one regards two things in relation, he thereby assumes them to be distinct, disparate.

Is this mere hyperbole? Has it any basis in fact or in potentiality? These questions open a vast area before us, and I shall merely broach an answer to them. First as to facts. We know that our central act of worship, the Mass, can be recognized as in two parts, in what we used to call the Foremass and the Canon and which we now call the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The first of these is largely a derivative of the praise-thanksgiving service

of the Synagogue known in the Hebrew as *berakah*; and the second, of course, of the *Chaburah* meal or Passover with its unleavened bread and cups of wine.

Then there is the concept of the People of God which we find in the New Testament to be sure, but for whose origin and pristine meaning we have to resort to the Old Testament.

There is no need to go further into the well-traversed ground of our liturgical indebtedness to Judaism; it has been competently done by many others.

I should rather attempt to break some new ground by inspecting what possibilities there are for finding new contributions from Judaism. I might start by a historical reference. Anyone familiar with the first four centuries of our era is aware of the de-Judaizing process that went on. By the end of the first century the Church and Synagogue were in full conflict and as the Church gained the ascendancy a de-Judaization of a severe sort took place. One recalls the difficult efforts made to separate the calendar of Easter from that of the Passover and to effect the change from Sabbath to Sunday worship. One recalls the practice of the apologists of the time to denigrate the Old Israel, so-called, in order to enhance the New Israel, the Church. The Church was not only seen as built on the Old Covenant but upon its ruins. Judaism after Christ was considered completely repudiated by God, unfaithful from the beginning, an evil contagion, and the like. A definite trend toward Marcionism could be found in several of the early apologists, who lost the Pauline tradition of Israel's special place in the Christian perspective entirely from view. An actual Judaeophobia emerged which reached its high point in St. John Chrysostom, who in order to discourage the faithful from consorting with Jews or indulging in Jewish practices attempted to blacken the Synagogue in terms so vile as to shock the modern ear. Jews were called pigs, goats, devils; their Synagogues, brothels and habitations of Satan, and so on. The background of the matter lay in an intense rivalry still going on in the fourth century in competition for the pagan soul. The Synagogue held a strong appeal not only for the pagan populace but for Christians too, with the result that considerable "Judaizing" was prevalent in many places. By "Judaizing" was meant frequenting the Synagogue, indulging in Jewish

religious practices, asking rabbis to bless the fields, use of Jewish amulets, and the like.

I do not wish to belabor this picture, but simply to ask if because of the zeal for de-Judaizing the Church of those days the process was not carried too far. And if it was, is it not possible to ask whether in a certain sense the Church can and should be re-Judaized today. Christianity has often been seen, on the cultural level, as an amalgam of elements deriving from Greece, Rome, and Israel. Some believe that it is in the proper harmony and balance of these elements that Catholicism is at its healthiest. But has not the Greco-Roman element predominated? Do not our tendency toward juridicalism and legalism and our multiplication of devotions stem from the Roman heritage, and our scholasticism and rationalization of dogma, from the Greek? Has not, on the other hand, the Judaic elements in our faith been slighted, even eliminated over the centuries? Has this, in turn, created an imbalance in the Church, an imbalance which, I might say, the Second Vatican Council has tried to correct?

I cannot give here anything like a complete inventory of the qualities of the Judaic heritage which belong to a full concept of the Catholic tradition, which exist at least *de jure* in it. Let me mention quickly a few.

1. From the severe monotheism of Judaism cannot a Christian gain a greater sense of the transcendence and majesty of God? Is not this sense the antidote to an excessive anthropomorphism in religious devotion?

2. Is not the prophetic principle so amply exemplified in Judaism a corrective of our juridicalism and institutionalism?

3. Is not the concept of secularity upon which the Death of God theologians have stumbled and fallen found more fully developed in Judaism? Has not, contrariwise, an excessive otherworldliness overtaken Christianity which has offended the modern soul?

4. Cannot Jewish insistence on the goodness of the natural order act as a counterforce against the temptations of Manicheism, Jansenism, and Puritanism that has always beset the Church?

5. Would not the Jewish sense of social justice, learned from the prophets of old and from bitter experience, do much to defeat the

blight of selfish individualism that have, despite our Encyclicals, marked much of modern Catholic life?

And so forth. These are difficult questions and their answers are not easy. And there are many more. It would seem, in any case, that the global answer to them is affirmative. We Christians have much to learn not only from the Old Testament but from the Judaism of today. It should be no small part of our ecumenical agenda to find out to what extent this is true.

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