Antisemitism in America

– Today –

Outspoken Experts Explode the Myths

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Antisemitism in the Christian-Jewish Encounter: New Directions as We Enter the Twenty-first Century

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Rabbi A. James Rudin develops two approaches to the Christian-Jewish dialogue. On the one hand, the Christian religious sources of antisemitism—in fact, arguably the major taproots of antisemitism—have not as yet been fully examined. These sources of antisemitism persist even in the 1990s. In large measure because of the emotive power that drives much of religion, theologically based antisemitism has been hard to eradicate.

At the same time, Rudin reports, since the end of World War II there have been systematic efforts on the part of most national and international church bodies, and many Christian leaders, to explore and take steps to counteract antisemitism. The vehicles for these activities are examination of Christian Scriptural text, community and more recently seminary education, revisiting the liturgy, and exploration of theology. "There has been more progress in Christian-Jewish relations over the past twenty years than in the previous two thousand," Rudin said in 1985—commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the issuance of the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time") that rejected Christian antisemitism and defined a new relationship between Catholics and Jews—and this progress is most

evident in the repudiation of antisemitism, at least formally, by Christian bodies.

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Christian-Jewish relations in the United States are the most dynamic, robust, and ongoing of any in the world. And these extensive and intensive interreligious programs present a new and important forum for combatting one of the world's oldest pathologies, religious or theological antisemitism. While the issue of constitutional protections is addressed elesewhere in this volume, I offer a brief analysis of the American Constitution as a vehicle for explaining the extraordinarily positive Christian-Jewish relationships that exist today in the United States.

As a direct result of the religious strife in Europe, especially the Thirty Years War and the Inquisition in Spain and Portugal, as well as the excesses committed both in Great Britain and in the American colonies against religious dissenters and minorities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the framers of the Constitution of the United States, especially James Madison, took great care to provide specific guarantees for religious freedom and liberty.

The concluding clause of Article VI of the Constitution reads:

> . . . no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.

Immediately following the Constitution's ratification in 1787, ten Amendments were added—the "Bill of Rights." The First Amendment deals in part with religion:

> Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The third American president, Thomas Jefferson, was also an ardent champion of individual religious liberty. Indeed, it was Jefferson who first spoke of a "wall of separation" between religion and the American Government. In 1776 Jefferson wrote:

> The care of every man's soul belongs to himself. . . . No man has the right to abandon care of his salvation to another. No man has the power to let another prescribe his faith. . . . The essence of religion consists in the internal persuasion of belief.[1]

In 1808, at the end of his presidency, Jefferson wrote to a group of Virginia Baptist leaders:

> We have solved by fair experiment, the great and interesting question whether freedom of religion is compatible with order in government, and obedience to laws. . . . everyone [can] profess freely and openly those principles of religion. . . .of his own reason. . . .and inquiries.[2]

Constitutional guarantees, and more than two centuries of religious pluralism in the United States, have helped establish a strong foundation for religious liberty. They have also provided a legal mandate for positive interreligious relations in the United States, and have acted as a shield against official, government-sponsored antisemitism. But the Constitutional guarantees did not, and of course could not, end *religious* antisemitism.

This exceptional emphasis on religious liberty by the Constitution's framers and by America's early political leaders is especially impressive when we recall that there were probably only five thousand Jews in the United States in 1787, out of a total population of some three million, most of whom were Protestant Christians.

Jefferson, Madison, and their colleagues could easily have designated Christianity as the official religion of the United States, but they consciously chose not to do so. The founders of the American republic meant to separate the institutions of church and state and to prohibit the establishment of religion. In effect, they provided the Constitutional basis, if not the theological basis, for religious pluralism and positive interreligious relations, and at the same time they validated a pattern of religious acceptance and accommodation.

Under the law, no religious group can become the favored or "established church," and all faith communities in the United States are free to mount campaigns to win the hearts, souls, and purses of the American people. For Jews, this meant that from the

start, no one church or religious group could seize or control the organs of governmental power, establish itself as the official religion, and carry out campaigns of discrimination aimed at non-established religious groups, namely Jews and other minorities. The American model as advocated by Madison, Jefferson, and others, was of course a welcome change from the often bitter antisemitic Jewish history in Europe.

America has been a fertile ground for Christian-Jewish relations because it has no collective national memory of the Middle Ages, the Crusades, the Inquisition, the many religious wars of Europe, the Protestant Reformation, or the Roman Catholic Counterreformation. As a nation, there was no direct historical legacy from the dark and painful European past, a past often filled with bloody intra-Christian battles and anti-Jewish pogroms. This historical reality, often little noted on either side of the Atlantic, has had an extraordinary impact upon America's religious life, Christian-Jewish relations, and the presence of antisemitism.

To put it in business parlance: America early on deregulated religion and by so doing has allowed hundreds of faith communities to exist in freedom. It is estimated that there are nearly 270 separate Protestant denominations alone in the United States, along with Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and a host of other religious groups.* This voluntary arrangement regarding religion has never been neat or efficient, but it has been relatively free of government interference or control.

But it has only been since the end of the Second World War, and the Holocaust, that positive Christian-Jewish relations and the active campaign against religious antisemitism has begun to accelerate in both quantity and quality. For example, in 1948 at its meeting in Amsterdam, and as a direct result of the Holocaust, the World Council of Churches (WCC), representing 325 Christian church bodies in 140 countries, publicly for the first time condemned antisemitism.

In 1965, the Second Vatican Council's declaration *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time"), adopted by the world's 2,200 Roman

*Indeed, it has been estimated that there are as many as 1,200 religions, sects, and faith groups in the United States. (Editor's note)

Catholic bishops, gave the Christian-Jewish encounter even greater impetus. This landmark statement declared that the death of Jesus "cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today." The Catholic Church, it went on, "deplores the hatred, persecution, and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source."[3]

Reflecting their commitment to improved relations with the Jewish people, the Vatican, the World Council of Churches, and two American church bodies, the National Council of Churches (NCC) and the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB), have all established offices on Christian-Jewish relations. The NCCB is composed of America's Roman Catholic bishops who lead the 58 million Catholics in the United States, and the NCC's thirty-two member denominations represent 48 million American Christians, both Protestant and Eastern Orthodox.

The NCCB's Christian-Jewish Relations Office began its work in 1967 and the NCC's office was inaugurated in 1974. Some American Protestant denominations have professional staff members who are also engaged in this effort, and several major U.S. Jewish organizations, including the American Jewish Committee, the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, have interreligious affairs departments. The range of interreligious cooperation is vast, encompassing numerous shared concerns: antisemitism, immigration and refugees, arms limitation, aiding the poor and the homeless, bioethical questions, religious liberty, human rights, racism, sexism, ageism, world hunger, AIDS, crime, drugs, preserving family life, and a host of other issues. There are Christian-Jewish associations in Israel, Latin America, and Europe as well.

Basic to all Christian-Jewish relations are three issues. First is the persistence of antisemitism among some Christians, and the long Christian record of the "teaching of contempt" toward Jews and Judaism that helped provide the theological climate for the Shoah, the Holocaust. The Shoah was the culmination of centuries of anti-Jewish teachings and practices.

The American Baptist Churches, a major Protestant denomination, has designated Yom Hashoah, the Holocaust Remem-

brance Day that is commemorated each April, as part of their official ecclesiastical calendars. In addition, some churches also observe the dates of November 9 and 10 in memory of the Nazi Kristallnacht pogroms in 1938.

Annual Holocaust commemorations are increasing in many American churches, and in April 1994 there was a formal and official Holocaust Commemoration Concert at the Vatican at which time Pope John Paul II spoke with eloquence about the evils of the Shoah:

> We are gathered . . . to commemorate the Holocaust of millions of Jews. . . . This is our commitment. We would risk causing the victims of the most atrocious deaths to die again if we do not have an ardent desire for justice, if we not commit ourselves, each according to his own capacities, to ensure that evil does not prevail over good as it did not millions of the children of the Jewish people . . . do not forget us.[4]

Many Christian leaders and scholars are actively addressing the issue of antisemitism, and are urging that all areas of church life be purged of anti-Jewish material. This includes teaching materials, textbooks, preaching aids, hymnals, seminary curriculum, and liturgy. The greatest advances have been achieved in religious textbooks and liturgy reform, but much more work remains in the vital area of seminary education.

In 1972 the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States numbering some fifteen million members, adopted a resolution condemning antisemitism. The resolution concluded:

> Southern Baptists covenant to work positively to replace all anti-Semitic bias with the Christian attitude and practice of love for the Jews, who along with all other men are equally beloved of God.[5]

In 1991 the Episcopal Church's General Convention adopted a resolution that deplored:

> anti-Jewish prejudice . . . in whatever form or on whatever occasion and urge its total elimination from . . . the Episcopal Church, its individual members, its various units.[6]

And the United Methodist Church at its 1972 General Conference adopted an extensive resolution on Christian-Jewish relations that included these sections:

> . . . Christians must also become aware of that history in which they have deeply alienated the Jews. They are obligated to examine their own implicit and explicit responsibility for the discrimination against and the organized extermination of Jews, as in the recent past [the Holocaust]. The persecution by Christians of Jews throughout centuries calls for clear repentance and resolve to repudiate past injustice and to seek its elimination in the present. . . .
>
> . . . the Christian obligation to those who survived the Nazi holocaust, the understanding of the relationship of land and peoplehood . . . suggest that a new dimension in dialogue with Jews is needed . . . in such dialogues, an aim of religious or political conversion, or of proselytizing, cannot be condoned . . . there is no tenable biblical or theological base for anti-Semitism.[7]

Pope John Paul II declared in 1985 that

> Anti-Semitism . . . has been repeatedly condemned by the Catholic teaching as incompatible with Christ's teaching. . . . Where there was ignorance and . . . prejudice . . . there is now growing mutual knowledge, appreciation, and respect.[8]

In 1987 both the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and the General Synod of the United Church of Christ (UCC) adopted important and potentially historic statements on Jews and Judaism. The UCC was the first major American Protestant church to affirm that "Judaism has not been superseded by Christianity," and that "God has not rejected the Jewish people." The UCC publicly acknowledged that

> The Christian Church has throughout much of its history denied God's continuing covenantal relationship with the Jewish people. . . . This denial has led to outright rejection of the Jewish people . . . and intolerable violence. . . . Faced with this history from which we as Christians cannot, and

must not, disassociate ourselves, we ask for God's forgiveness.[9]

The Presbyterian statement, in the form of a church study paper, made a similar theological point and specifically called upon Christians to "repudiate" the historic "teaching of contempt" for the Jewish people and their religious tradition. The statement also cautioned Presbyterians "when speaking with Jews about matters of faith to acknowledge that Jews are already in a covenantal relationship with God." The Presbyterian statement affirmed "the continuity of God's promise of land [Israel] along with the obligations of that promise to the people of Israel."[10]

Both the United Church of Christ and Presbyterian statements reflect the growing trend among many Christians to come to terms with Jews and Judaism on a theological level as well as on a personal basis. These two leading Protestant denominations have provided important building blocks to develop a new and deeper relationship with the Jewish people.

In 1971, the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., representing the three largest Lutheran denominations in the country, issued an excellent statement on Christian-Jewish relations, calling for mutual respect and understanding between the two faith communities.

Because Martin Luther's later writings are filled with particular hostility to Jews and Judaism, the Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the largest Lutheran body in the United States, in 1994 adopted a remarkable resolution that explicitly repudiated the anti-Jewish writings and teachings of Luther.

> In the long history of Christianity there exists no more tragic development than the treatment accorded to the Jewish people on the part of Christian believers. . . . Lutherans . . . feel a special burden in this regard because of certain elements in the legacy of the reformer Martin Luther and the catastrophes, including the Holocaust of the twentieth century, suffered by Jews in places where the Lutheran churches were strongly represented. . . .
>
> In the spirit of that truth telling, we . . . must with pain acknowledge also Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and

> violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews. . . . We reject this violent invective . . . we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations . . . we particularly deplore the appropriation of Luther's words by modern anti-Semites for the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people. . . . We recognize in anti-Semitism a contradiction and an affront to the Gospel . . . and we pledge this church to oppose the deadly working of such bigotry, both within our own circles and in the society around us. Finally, we pray for . . . increasing cooperation and understanding between Lutheran Christians and the Jewish community.[11]

This significant action by the ELCA represents an important trend that is currently underway within many Christian bodies. It may be impossible to amend or eliminate the anti-Jewish elements in the New Testament, the writings of the Church Fathers, and in other Christian teaching materials that have been used to foster antisemitism. However, those elements can be officially repudiated and placed within a historical context that greatly reduces their potential to influence negatively today's Christians.

The 1994 ELCA Church Council statement on Luther's teachings about Jews and Judaism is especially helpful in this area. The Lutheran statement acknowledged a special responsibility to improve Christian-Jewish relations because the Holocaust took place in areas of significant Lutheran influence in Europe.

Almost from the beginning of Christianity a clear separation existed between East and West. Over time Western Christianity became centered in Rome and spread to Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, Germany, and Poland. Eastern Christianity's center became Constantinople, the "second Rome," and it extended to much of Greece, the Middle East, Asia Minor, the Balkans, Romania, and Russia. Eastern Orthodox Christians did not accept the claims to spiritual primacy of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, and in 1054, there was a permanent break, "The Great Schism," between Western and Eastern Christianity.

Byzantine rulers such as Justinian (527–565) closely linked church and state, and a rich mixture of faith and culture emerged.

The rise of Islam in the East placed exceptional pressure on Eastern Orthodoxy, and in 1453 Constantinople (Turkish name Istanbul) fell to the Muslims.

More than three million Orthodox Christians, mostly Greek and Russian, live in the United States, along with other Orthodox communities including Arab, Serbian, Coptic, Armenian, Ukrainian, Rumanian, Syrian, and Albanian churches. And even though Eastern Orthodoxy is the majority Christian expression in modern Israel, most American Jews know little about the Orthodox churches or the long and complex Jewish history that took place within the Byzantine Empire. While most of the Jews who lived in Byzantium were Sephardic, many American Jews of Ashkenazi background trace their family roots to countries with large Orthodox Christian populations, such as Russia, Romania, Ukraine, Serbia, and Bulgaria.

As in the West, the record of theological antisemitism is a mixed one. Bulgaria saved much of its Jewish population from the Nazis during World War II. At the same time the record was extremely dismal in Russia, Romania, and Ukraine, all centers of Orthodox Christianity, even under Communism.

But it would be an error to irrevocably link Eastern Orthodoxy with antisemitism. In 1993, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomaios I, the spiritual leader of Orthodox Christians, sent a warm personal greeting to an international conference of Orthodox Christian and Jewish leaders that was held in Athens, Greece. The patriarch, who resides in Istanbul, declared that Orthodoxy "has never encouraged racist ideas and theories . . . such as the persecution and genocide of people who belonged to a different culture or worshipped God in a different way."[12]

In 1568 an earlier ecumenical patriarch, Metrophanes, also condemned attacks against Jews, declaring, ". . . do not oppress or accuse anyone falsely; do not make any distinctions or give room to the believers to injure those of another belief."[13]

All too often future Christian clergy receive little or no accurate instruction about Jews and Judaism, the Jewish roots of Christianity, the Shoah, modern Israel, or the continuing pathology of antisemitism. Christian seminaries render a grave disservice to their students by omitting or giving short shrift to these critical subjects.

Of special concern in any analysis of theological antisemitism are performances of "Passion plays" that often foster potent anti-Jewish portraits and attitudes. Passion plays are dramatic presentations depicting the life, trial, and death of Jesus. Traditionally sponsored by churches or religious communities, these plays are increasingly often strictly commercial productions.

The National Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued guidelines warning that Passion plays can convey harshly negative images of Jews and Judaism. The world-famous Oberammergau Passion play, performed every ten years in Bavaria, Germany, has been the subject of numerous critical studies by both Christian and Jewish scholars.

But of equal concern are the many Passion plays performed annually in the United States. These plays attract large audiences including Sunday school students and Christian educators. The plays are dramatically powerful sources for reinforcing antisemitic attitudes and stereotypes. This is particularly true since the plays are frequently understood by audiences as the "gospel truth." That is to say, they are biblically accurate rather than the product of the sometimes vivid imaginations of the various playwrights. Because of these issues, many Christian leaders in the United States have been deeply involved in analyzing Passion plays, and in seeking the removal of all anti-Jewish dramatic material from them.

Old negative antisemitic stereotypes of Jews as a people "cursed and punished by God" remain embedded in Christian teaching and preaching along with the image of the exiled "wandering Jew." Scholars have identified a variety of unchallenged and uncorrected dualism at work within many churches: the Christian "God of love" versus the Jewish "God of wrath"; the "New" Testament versus the "Old" Testament; the "New Israel" (the Church) versus the "Old Israel" (the Jews); liberating Christian "grace" versus suffocating Jewish "law"; the loving "people of Jesus" versus the deceitful "people of Judas." All these false comparisons often transmit to Christians a highly negative image of Jews and Judaism that contributes to religious antisemitism.

A second central issue, following antisemitism, in the contemporary Christian-Jewish encounter is the nexus of mission, witness,

conversion, and proselytization, all of which are fundamental themes in Christianity. Many Christian-Jewish conferences have grappled with these themes and some useful definitions and clarity have emerged. The Christian mission to the Jews, that is, the active campaign to convert Jews to a particular form of Christianity, is perceived by most Jews as the ultimate form of theological antisemitism.

In much of Jewish thought and collective experience, the Christian mission and missionaries are inextricably linked with antisemitism since the paramount aim of such missionary activity is the literal elimination of both Jews and Judaism from the world scene. In any study of antisemitism, it is important to recognize that aggressive Christian missionary efforts aimed at Jews represent an attempt to end Jewish life in the world.

"Mission" is a shared religious term that is usually interpreted in different ways by each faith community. Jewish self-definition includes the mission to spread the message of the one God, ethical monotheism, to the entire world. "On that day the Lord shall be One and God's name shall be One" (Zechariah 14:9). Jews are to be a "light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6), but the Jewish mission has historically been free of coercion and religious "triumphalism," a term meaning that one particular religious tradition has gained spiritual victory and domination over all others.

Jews have historically experienced the Christian mission in highly negative, antisemitic ways. For centuries, Jews were the victims of forced conversions, medieval disputations, expulsions, and death at the hands of those Christians who sought to "bring the Jews to Christ." For over a thousand years in Europe the Jews were an oppressed minority within a Christendom that did not permit religious freedom as we know the term today. European Jews lived, until the Enlightenment, in social, economic, and religious conditions that were humiliating and crushing.

Even in modern times the Jewish people are often confronted by coercive Christian missionaries who see Jews solely as candidates for conversion, and view Judaism as an incomplete religion. Because of this long historical record of Christian contempt and hostility toward Jews and Judaism, the term "mission," whatever its earliest theological roots, is universally regarded by Jews as an

antisemitic attack upon their sacred history, and upon a perfected and authentic religion.

The "religious right" is active once again in the United States, and is led primarily by evangelical Christian leaders, many of whom actively seek the conversion of the Jewish people to their particular brand of Christianity. It is the classic Christian "mission."

Although the religious right's agenda is mostly political, some of its leaders are, as the manifesto of the Coalition for Revival's manifesto asserts, "working to Christianize America and the world."[14] Although it is sometimes hard to cite explicit antisemitic statements in the carefully crafted rhetoric of the religious right, many Jews and Christians perceive the presence of traditional religious antisemitism within the movement. For example, the Rev. Pat Robertson, a prominent religious right leader, has written:

> The liberal Jews have actually forsaken Biblical faith in God, and made a religion out of political liberalism. . . . If someone attacks abortion-on-demand or asks for prayer in the schools, the liberal Jewish community reacts as if this stand were somehow anti-Semitic. They have anti-Christian liberalism intermingled with Judaism to such a degree they can't distinguish anymore.[15]

Indeed, the call for a "Christian America" by the religious right is understood by many to be a form of classic antisemitism because such an America would exclude Jews from full participation in the society. The establishment of a "Christian America" would not only fly in the face of the fundamental principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, it would also contradict more than two hundred years of shared history, legal precedents, and a tradition of religious pluralism. As articulated by some religious right leaders, a "Christian America" would violate the American commitment to both democratic government and religious liberty, and would be a clear signal that non-Christians, including American Jews, are less than full citizens.

At the same time, leaders of the religious right are strong public supporters of Israel. Much of that support is based upon spe-

cific Christian theological doctrines involving apocalyptic and "End of Days" theology prophecies.

Fortunately, a growing number of Christian theologians are repudiating the dark antisemitic side of Christian history and teaching. These theologians are publicly repentant for Christianity's past injustices against Jews, and increasingly, they emphasize the Jewish roots of Christianity.

The late William S. LaSor, professor of Bible at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, a leading evangelical institution, has written:

> Just as I refuse to believe that God has rejected this people (Romans 11:1), and that there is no longer any place for Israel in God's redemptive work or in the messianic hope, so I refuse to believe that we who were once not his people, and who have become his people only through grace, can learn nothing from those who from of old have been his people.[16]

In 1973 Dr. Billy Graham, the leading Christian evangelist of the twentieth century, publicly criticized the excesses of the key 1973 Christian evangelistic campaign. Citing the New Testament book of Romans, Chapters 9–11, Graham declared:

> I believe God has always had a special relationship with the Jewish people. . . . In my evangelistic efforts, I have never felt called to single out Jews as Jews. . . . Just as Judaism frowns on proselytizing that is coercive, or that seeks to commit men against their will, so do I.[17]

Today many Christians see "mission" and "witness" in a different light than in centuries past. They now make a distinction between the two: mission is usually insensitive and coercive, but witness is the living out of one's faith without attempting to proselytize or convert another person. For such Christians, witness is free of hidden agendas or subliminal messages: "You are my witnesses, says the Lord" (Isaiah 43:12).

The third critical theme in Christian-Jewish relations is the State of Israel. The emergence of Israel in 1948 has compelled Chris-

tians and Jews to examine themselves in a new light, as they seek possible theological meaning from the rebirth of the Jewish state in the Middle East. As a result, Israel must be at the center of any meaningful Christian-Jewish encounter.

One of the positive results of the Christian-Jewish dialogue has been a commitment by members of both communities to work for the security and survival of the State of Israel. Jews have prayed for thousands of years: "Next year in Jerusalem!" The verse "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning" (Psalm 137) forms a central commitment of Judaism. The words "Zion" and "Jerusalem" appear hundreds of times in the Bible.

Many Christians understand and even share in the redemptive meaning of Israel. Along with Jews, they are aware that Israel, like any other nation-state, is not free of imperfections and defects. Yet many Christians are deeply stirred by the rebirth—some might even say the resurrection—of a democratic Jewish state and by the specter of Jews from 120 countries "returning to Zion."

The Rev. Edward H. Flannery, one of the architects of Christian-Jewish relations in the United States, who served as the first executive secretary for Catholic-Jewish relations for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, has declared:

> In view of the ceaseless persecutions visited upon Jews so often by Christians throughout the centuries, and because of their scattered state throughout the world, it is the Christian, above all, who should rejoice at the upturn in the Jewish people's fortunes in our time that has brought them back to their ancient homeland. The return to Israel can only be seen as the righting of a historic wrong.[18]

In 1980 the National Council of Churches (NCC), representing thirty-two Protestant and Eastern Orthodox denominations, adopted a policy statement on the Middle East that still remains the NCC's most authoritative position on the subject. The statement affirmed Israel's right to exist as a "Jewish State," while it also recognized the Palestinians' right to self-determination.

The National Council of Churches warned against the temp-

tation to scapegoat Israel by employing a "double standard" when judging Israel:

> The NCC . . . recognizes the need to apply similar standards of judgment to all countries in the Middle East in questions of human or minority rights, and to resist singling out only one nation for particular focus without due recognition of other continuing human rights problems throughout the region.[19]

The NCC also clearly recognized that ancient theological antisemitism exists within some Middle Eastern churches, and is being used for contemporary political purposes:

> . . . the theological differences that still exist within the Christian community over . . . the continuing role of the Jewish people . . . some theological positions, when combined with the political dynamics of the area could be understood as what the West would call anti-Semitism . . . seeds of religious alienation can be carried through the churches themselves.[20]

A prominent Evangelical scholar, Professor Marvin R. Wilson of Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, has described his own understanding of the State of Israel:

> . . . the remarkable preservation of Israel over the centuries and her recent return to the land are in keeping with those many biblical texts which give promise of her future. But my concern and support for Israel only begins with predictive prophetic texts; it does not end there. The more relevant prophetic texts . . . are those which speak to Israel's present situation by calling men and nations to practice justice, righteousness, kindness, and brotherhood in their dealings with one another.[21]

On the last day of December, 1993, representatives of the Vatican and Israel signed an accord in Jerusalem that opened the way for full and formal diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the Jewish state that were established in June 1994. This welcome event ended decades of controversy and removed a

major impediment to Catholic-Jewish relations throughout the world.

In 1987, on the eve of Pope John Paul II's trip to the United States, the Vatican had publicly declared that there were no theological barriers to full relations with Israel. The Vatican ruled out religious antisemitism as a possible obstacle to such relations. Instead, the Holy See insisted that diplomatic relations with the Jewish state was a strictly political matter between two nation-states.*

The accord signaled the normalization of relations not only between the two signatories, but also between Roman Catholics and Jews throughout the world. By its action, the Vatican sent a clear signal to Israel's enemies that the Roman Catholic Church recognizes Israel as a permanent and legitimate member of the international family of nations.

These general themes—antisemitism, the Holocaust, mission and witness, and the State of Israel—are central to Christian-Jewish relations. But it is also important to discuss how Christians and Jews actually relate to one another.

There are millions of people of faith who live behind the various pronouncements and declarations on antisemitism and interreligious relations. How do people really encounter one another? And what are the implications of these encounters for antisemitism?

Since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, there have been more positive Catholic-Jewish encounters than there were in the first 1,900 years of the Roman Catholic Church. Since 1965 many important and far-reaching Catholic statements have been promulgated. Catholic bishops in Latin America, the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Switzerland, Germany, and Brazil (the country with the world's largest Catholic population) have all issued strong statements going beyond *Nostra Aetate* in calling for improved relations with Jews, and these

*A more likely explanation for the Vatican's reluctance to normalize relations with the State of Israel was the concern of Rome for the well-being—indeed the fate—of Christian communities in Arab lands. (Editor's note)

statements have included sharp condemnations of all forms of antisemitism.

Until the liberating force of the Second Vatican Council and *Nostra Aetate,* the Catholic Church was locked into a self-imposed ghetto, a barrier against the modern world. The council broke down those walls, or, to use Pope John's striking imagery, the Church opened a window to the world.

Both Jews and Catholics suffered because of this self-imposed ghetto. Jews often suffered with the loss of their lives because of antisemitism whereas Roman Catholics often suffered a spiritual deprivation. Victim and victimizer—both suffered, albeit in very different ways.

It must always be remembered that prior to the Second Vatican Council, most Christian-Jewish dialogues were Protestant-Jewish in nature. Indeed, I can testify to my own experience as a young American Jew growing up in Virginia. In those years, the 1940s and '50s, a Presbyterian or Episcopalian minister spoke in my family's synagogue once a year, and our rabbi, himself a German-born refugee from Nazi antisemitism, spoke annually in a neighboring church.

Although Virginia, as part of the American South, was filled with many evangelical Protestant churches, our rabbi rarely if ever exchanged pulpits with them. But it was this Protestant-Jewish relationship, tentative as it was, that constituted almost all of what passed for Christian-Jewish relations in those years. This fact should not be devalued or underestimated, but rather the pioneering effort immediately after World War II should be remembered with deep appreciation in the ongoing struggle against antisemitism.

And it must always be recalled that Protestants, in whatever denomination or faith community, remain the Christian majority in the United States. And while Jews are regularly engaged in programs and encounters with Roman Catholics and increasingly with Muslims, it was the Protestant community that was an early innovator in interreligious work in America.

American Jews and members of "mainline" Protestant churches—those bodies affiliated with the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches such as the Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, the Presbyterian

Church, the American Baptist Churches, the United Church of Christ, and the Disciples of Christ—are somewhat similar in their socioeconomic status within American society. Until recently, if you asked the "average Jew"—assuming there is such a person—precisely which Christian church or group that person knew the best, the answer would often be a Protestant group.

But a strange thing is happening in "mainline" Protestant-Jewish relations in the United States. The top-level leadership of some Protestant churches maintains a tepid to cold attitude toward the State of Israel, but the "grass roots," millions of regional and local Protestants, remain strongly supportive of the Jewish state.

This bifocal approach on the part of Protestants vis-à-vis Israel is replicated in other sharp intra-Protestant differences involving many theological, sexual, social, and cultural issues. A few years ago some leadership elements within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) proposed a statement on human sexuality that took radical new positions. But at the Presbyterian General Assembly the statement was bitterly attacked by the rank-and-file membership, and the sexuality declaration was not passed. There are other such instances, although on different issues, within many of America's leading Protestant churches.

On the other hand, as a direct result of Professor Reinhold Niebuhr's teaching during the 1940s and '50s at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, most mainline Protestant churches have abandoned active conversion campaigns specifically aimed at the Jewish community. And such churches generally do not formally participate in mass evangelistic campaigns that are usually sponsored by other, more theologically conservative Protestant churches.

To turn the coin over, Jews find enormous support for Israel among evangelical leaders as well as from those in the church pews. Evangelicals represent the single largest Christian body of support for Israel. That support is, of course, warmly welcomed by both American Jews and Israelis, and one clearly remembers that in 1980 the Israeli prime minister, Menachem Begin, presented a major award to Dr. Jerry Falwell, a prominent Evangelical leader.

At the same time, many within the evangelical community

have not followed the Niebuhrian lead and abandoned Jewish evangelism, and in a bizarre twist, some of the same evangelicals who publicly support Israel with fervor are sometimes also directly involved in missionary activities aimed at Jews. Some evangelical churches even grant free space and moral support to the deceptive "Jews for Jesus" and other so-called Hebrew Christian groups.

The situation is nuanced: almost all American church bodies have publicly condemned and repudiated antisemitism. However, if American Jews seek strong public support for Israel, they will turn first to the large evangelical community. This community, estimated to number some 50 million people, still seeks to convert Jews. This is a legitimate Christian activity considered an act of antisemitism by most Jews.

If these same American Jews seek coalition partners in the Protestant community on a host of social justice issues, including gun control, sexual equality, pro-choice on abortion—what is generally called the "liberal agenda"—they will turn instinctively and historically to the mainline Protestant churches, which have often been highly critical of Israeli policies and actions.

A word about the black Protestant churches in the United States. Twenty years ago there was a strong movement among many Protestants to form a large "United Church." There was much enthusiasm for bringing the various mainline churches into union. But there was also strong opposition to such a proposal, and the black churches especially were wary of a "megachurch" that might mean an end to their distinctiveness. The proposed United Church never became a reality, and the black opposition was a key factor in the outcome.

The black churches then and now represent the one universally trusted institution in the entire black community. The church remains with its people in America's inner cities. And, as was the case with the synagogue in much of pre-1939 Eastern Europe, the black church remains a central political, cultural, and social focus of the community. It is no accident that so many black civic and political leaders are ordained ministers. Jesse Jackson, John Lewis, Benjamin Chavis, Ben Hooks, Andrew Young, and Carl McCall are notable examples.

And the black church, despite its many problems, still remains the one place where blacks can be totally "at home" with their own traditions and style of worship; again the analogy with the synagogue is obvious. For Jews, the most direct means of relating to the 23 million–plus black Americans on almost every issue is through the church.

Jews and blacks have each been a "victim people." In a twist of history, Jews, victims of antisemitism, and blacks, victims of racism, are bound together in the shared agony of victimization.

While blacks, quite understandably, favor a liberal social agenda, the black clergy is generally theologically conservative and male-oriented. So as with everything else in life, things are never as simple as they might first appear. Yet, positive black Protestant-Jewish relations are essential to both communities.

There is one special area in the battle against antisemitism that needs an extraordinary effort from both Jews and Christians, and that is the development of a "theology of pluralism." Because much of religious antisemitism is based upon a triumphalistic Christianity, a theology of pluralism would radically change that centuries-old Christian self-perception. A theology of pluralism would compel many Christians to reexamine the ancient canards against Jews and Judaism that have historically been employed to discredit the religion of the "Elder Brother," that is, of Judaism. An intense debate is currently underway in many Christian churches centering on this critical question of religious pluralism.

Because of the singular history and tradition of American society, Jews and Christians live together in a pluralistic society in this country. Yet that pluralism, which has been a hallmark of the United States, is like a tender, frail plant that needs constant nurturing if it is to survive and grow stronger.

Dr. Martin E. Marty, a distinguished scholar of religious history and a Lutheran, has correctly warned:

> Now the West is uncertain. All kinds of forces are filling the vacuum. . . . Here [in the United States], not many get killed, but they hate each other. The lucky thing about America is we live in such a mixed-up pattern. In the rest

> of the world, groups are mostly on one side of the hill or the other. It's not hard to see who to shoot.
>
> Here, you don't know where to shoot. Shoot a feminist, it might be my wife. Shoot a Hispanic, it might be my foster daughter. Shoot a Jew, it might be my colleague. Shoot a gay, it might be a best friend. . . . The rest of the world never made the move to our style of rationality.[22]

A significant step would be for Jews and Christians to plumb the spiritual depths of their traditions in order find the theological foundations for religious pluralism. It is not enough that we live together as faith communities; rather, our faiths must sustain and anchor our shared existence in a pluralistic setting. Unless that happens, the cruel winds of antisemitism, religious bigotry, and extremism, combined with economic turbulence, could spell disaster for the interreligious efforts that have already shown such promise. Our best and most creative theological minds are urgently needed for this critical task.

Former French president Charles de Gaulle, speaking in another context, once summarized his country's situation when he declared that "France does not have permanent friends; it has, instead, only permanent interests." Substitute the words "Jewish people" for "France" and one has an accurate description of the current state of Christian-Jewish relations within the United States. One fact clearly emerges from this general overview of antisemitism and Christian-Jewish relations: there is today a strong commitment within both communities to strengthen the existing relationship.

The Christian-Jewish relationship has already borne rich fruit as well as controversy, and the future will be no different. Jews and Christians will come together on shared concerns, especially the efforts to oppose antisemitism, while of course remaining fully faithful to their unique religious traditions.

They will also differ, not only over theological tenets, but over a host of other concerns as well. Yet they have both come too far to abandon the dialogue at this late date. The English poet Robert Browning, in his poem "Rabbi Ben Ezra," wrote: "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be." The toxic impact of religious antisemitism will be eradicated as the dialogue matures and deepens.

NOTES

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