

A PROPOSED STATEMENT ON DIALOGUE

Because of the recent surge of interest in dialogue between the various faith communities, and because of certain partly misleading press reports, we feel it necessary to restate the attitude of our groups, representing the bulk of organized Orthodox Jewry in America, to the question of intercommunal dialogue.

We represent a peculiar religious community that has survived the most adverse vicissitudes in recorded history. Through national exile, social change, political suppression, and attempted genocide, we have remained alive to bear witness to the event at Sinai at which we were charged with the obligation to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). As the former, we have endeavored to bring other peoples to G-d; our means have always been indirect -- neither those of coercion nor even proselytization. As the latter, we have always strived to maintain our national identity and aspirations intact, and have resisted the inroads of assimilation, with greater or lesser success.

During most of the years of our exile we have had little opportunity to pay conscious attention to our priestly function towards the other nations. Whatever influence we have had in introducing the world to ethical monotheism and to the universal precepts of Torah, has been the result of example, of which we were often unaware, and of divine providence, which is inscrutable. We have usually had to devote our energies to safeguarding the integrity of our national

identity and historic faith against those who sought to diminish and destroy them both by hate and by love, by condemnation and by commendation.

As Orthodox Jews, we are committed to these same verities and loyalties today. The blessings of freedom and opportunity which we experience in the democratic countries of the Western world, and for which we are eternally grateful to Heaven, bring with them the danger that that which we preserved in adversity will be dissipated in prosperity. We consider it our historic mission to demonstrate that this shall not come to pass; that Judaism shall prosper and thrive in freedom even as it has under tyranny; that we shall emerge whole and undiminished in friendly encounters with other faith communities in our times even as we survived hostile confrontations with them in the past. Neither hate nor love, neither the fist of oppression nor the hand of friendship, shall draw the curtain on the drama of Judaism in the world.

We consider that our existence in comparatively large numbers in the United States is providential. We believe that we have a role to play and an obligation to discharge towards our fellow citizens in this land of liberty and cultural pluralism. We therefore welcome the opportunity to work together with men and women of all faiths for the greater good of our land and, indeed, the world. This is an aspect of the priestly function of our people.

While the great issues of the day are such that one may

approach them from different theological starting points, they are, nevertheless, non-theological in nature. The social, cultural, and moral problems therefore permit of cooperative attempts at solution by members of disparate religious orientations who wish to work together without bringing their respective spiritual commitments into question or even into discussion.

This opportunity for the various faith communities to work together for the common good of America and humanity does not present itself in every generation. We ought, therefore, take all precautions that it be not dissipated by abuse or neglect. It will be a deep source of regret to all citizens of our country if the creative use of our energies at this moment in the development of American pluralism should be frustrated by the introduction of extraneous and divisive issues which will make such worthy enterprise most difficult to achieve.

Such a side issue, which threatens intercommunal cooperation on the social and cultural levels, is theological dialogue between Judaism and other religions in our country. It is our firm conviction that theological dialogue dilutes the integrity of each faith, which is rooted in specific historical experiences as well as in the affirmation of abstract doctrine. The privacy and incommensurability of the faith commitment is such that to subject it to comparison and contrast presumes its lifelessness as an object of comparative study, and hence the suspension of commitment by one engaging in such studies.

Surely the proponents of dialogue do not seek to reduce it to seminars in comparative religion. Moreover, when ultimate commitments are submitted to dialogue, the uniqueness of each of the faiths is threatened. The call for common prayer between Jew and Christian, for instance, is precisely the kind of syncretism that is a foreseeable consequence of religious dialogue and that ought to be avoided under all circumstances. Our view in this respect has been defined for us by the prophet Micah (4:5): "For let all the peoples walk each one in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the Lord our G-d for ever and ever."

Our own religious conscience therefore prevents us from participating in or encouraging religious dialogues in which Jews are partners. We respect the fact that many Christians wish to rediscover their origins in a new study, more objective than in the past, of the Jewish sources of their faith. We applaud this new impulse, for it is a form of self-knowledge. However, the need for Christians to understand Judaism is not paralleled by an equivalent religious need of Jews to understand Christianity. While culturally all of us want to know more about the world in which we live, religiously Christianity is irrelevant to Judaism, which came to the world fifteen centuries before Christianity, and which has continued until this day. While certainly willing to assist any Christian scholars in their researches, we do not believe that the interests of the two faiths in each other's inner life and commitments are parallel and equivalent, and therefore

dialogue of a theological nature is implausible as well as inadvisable.

It is true that the distinction that informs our approach, that between theological dialogue on the one hand and social and cultural cooperation on the other, permits of occasional gray areas where it is difficult to determine which category applies. Nevertheless, we believe that the distinction represents a useful device.

But it is because of the fact that so many of the problems do fall in this intermediate area, and because a religious approach to the social and cultural dilemmas of our times does call for more and not less religious information and knowledge, that we deplore the attempt to involve the laity in dialogue, whether theological or social. Judaism has never recognized any fundamental difference between laity and clergy, but does distinguish between the informed and expert sage of the Law, and one who is inexperienced and therefore unqualified to give religious guidance. We believe the same distinction ought to apply to social and cultural dialogue: because of the sensitivities and subtleties involved, such dialogue should be left to religious leadership endowed with the scholarly competence necessary to ensure that such cooperative ventures achieve the desired results.

Furthermore, in order to make sure that such social and cultural dialogue be meaningful and not merely an exercise in superficial amenities, we suggest that one of the primary subjects for discussion be the State of Israel. To avoid the problem of Israel because of

its political overtones is to evade the major purpose of inter-communal socio-cultural dialogue. Furthermore, it is the Jewish concern for the welfare of the State of Israel, whether as an immediate reality or as part of its eschatological vision, that points to the peculiar nature of Judaism as more than a dogmatic faith structure, but as a historical experience.

We call upon our fellow Jews to practice moderation and restraint, and to refrain from theological dialogue with other faiths lest they implicate us in an enterprise to which we cannot assent in good conscience. The problems facing the Jewish community and especially those who seek the perpetuation of our sacred tradition are too many and too serious to fritter away our energies in vain controversies that cannot contribute to the perpetuation of Judaism and, through Judaism, to the betterment of humanity.

To the Christian communities we say: we appreciate the change of heart from the ago-old attitudes which have brought us so much grief through the ages, and particularly in our own time. But now is not the time to speak to us of your truths and your dogma, or to seek to pray with us. All we ask is a respite from, indeed a permanent cessation of, the hostility and antagonism that ^{have} ~~has~~ bedevilled us throughout so much of our history. All we ask that we be left free, in silence to regain the strength drained from us, to rebuild the physical and spiritual wreckage that have been wrought against us in our times. All we ask is that we be respected solely because we are

human, acknowledging our right to be what we are.

We are, Jews and Christian, still reeling from the cruel impact of the past. Let us work together to solve the immediate practical problems that confront all of us who believe that man is more than a psycho-physical machine. But we are each of us too shaken and disoriented to talk to each other about the fundamental metaphysical and theological assumptions of our existence.

Now each of us must look into his own collective soul and begin groping for a more genuine dialogue with G-d Himself, to Whom each of us is responsible and Who sometimes seems to have abandoned all of us. Any other dialogue is just a distraction.