

THE JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE: ANOTHER LOOK

By Rabbi NORMAN LAMM

Reprinted from



RABBI NORMAN LAMM, who has travelled through several lands lecturing on topics of contemporary Jewish significance, is the Associate Rabbi of the Jewish Center in New York and teaches Jewish Philosophy at the Teacher's Institute of Yeshiva University. Rabbi Lamm is the founder and first Editor of "Tradition," the journal sponsored by the Rabbinical Council of America.

The Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Another Look

By Rabbi NORMAN LAMM

A NEW attitude seems to have crystallized in American Jewish leadership which reflects the fundamental position of Orthodoxy. Despite some protests—such as that of a writer in the American Jewish Committee's magazine who downgraded what he called our "ramparts psychology" and the "outbreak of Jewish self-respect"—there has been, largely, a disengagement from direct contact with Vatican officials, from pleading with them for a "good" Jewish statement. The pilgrimages to Rome have noticeably decreased—to the consternation of the travel agents and the relief of traditional Jews who possessed self-respect even before the "outbreak." There is evident a new awareness of the basic evangelical overtones and presuppositions of the draft schema on the Jews.

What cleared the air was the intervention of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, whose immense learning and undisputed Halachic authority lent cogency to his position, which was brilliantly conceived and articulately expounded in the last issue of "Tradition." Stripped of its philosophical prologomenon and exegetical epilogue

(superb reading in their own right!) the essence of his article is a formulation of elegant simplicity: Theological dialogue with Christianity is an absurdity, religiously unsound and spiritually untenable; and cooperation on the socio-cultural or secular level is clearly a desideratum. While Rabbi Soloveitchik cannot in any way be held responsible for any faults the reader may find with the present exposition, these lines ought to be read in the nature of footnotes to his thesis.

IT should be understood that "dialogue" is more than polite conversation, even more than a scholarly colloquium. It involves the *logos*, the fundamental commitment of faith. It is a profound confrontation in which everything is risked, in which the results always remain unforeseen, and from which the two partners in dialogue rarely emerge unchanged. It is because of the unique and intimate nature of the *logos*, the incommensurability of one faith commitment with another, that we hold theological dialogue to be an absurdity. Furthermore, the relation of Judaism to Christianity is not the same as the relation of Christianity to Judaism. Historically, Christianity arose from within the matrix of Judaism; historically again, Judaism of today stands in a direct and unbroken line of descent from

Since my article on "The Jews and the Ecumenical Council" appeared in the November-December 1963 of JEWISH LIFE, a number of significant events have taken place that deserve comment on these pages. I appreciate, therefore, the editor's invitation to set down some of the observations made in my symposium address.—Norman Lamm.

the Judaism that flourished long before the Christian era. In other words, no matter what our worldly historical involvements have been, Christianity is theologically irrelevant for the Jew, whereas the Christian must take a doctrinal stand, one way or the other, on Judaism and its role in the world.

Accordingly, when, for example, a distinguished Christian theologian like Professor W. D. Davis pleads for a dialogue with Judaism because he desires a re-emphasis on some of the Semitic and Judaic elements of Christianity at the expense of its Hellenistic and Roman roots, our answer must be a respectful declination. Our recorded history and the literary sources of our religion are open for investigation by any scholar. The Christian thinker may search them to his heart's content, in an attempt to define himself better in terms of Judaism as the origin of his own faith. But the reverse cannot take place. We have no special theological relationship to Christianity, nor can we have one. Our faith derives from sources and times which long antedate the advent of Christianity.

One further factor contributes significantly to this attitude towards Jewish-Christian theological dialogue. That is, the near-inevitability of an evangelical or missionary purpose on the part of the Christian partner in such a conversation. It is clear that no matter how elegantly or inoffensively such ideas are stated, they are very real, for to the Christian the function of "witness" is an integral part of his faith. With the exception of thinkers such as Niebuhr and Tillich, the overwhelming majority of Christian leaders, no matter how friendly to Jews, refuse to abandon their proselytizing efforts.

THIS does not in any way minimize the achievements of the Vatican Council, nor does it imply lack of appreciation for the courageous humaneness of liberal Catholic churchmen. Anyone who is acquainted with the bitter experience of Jews throughout the ages at the hands of Christians who were convinced that all Jews bear the guilt of the crucifixion, will acknowledge that it required a great deal of moral strength in order to overcome 2,000 years of sanctified bigotry.

Nevertheless it would be wrong of us to assume that this new liberal tendency implies a decision by the Church to forego its efforts to convert the Jews to Christianity. It is perhaps more than an accident, and more than a result of inner political intrigue in the Vatican Council, that the draft on the Jews was approved while the draft on religious liberty failed. In other words, we are being "exonerated" from the charge of killing Jesus, but, as a religious community we have not yet been accorded our full right to an independent existence!

Anyone, therefore, who imagines Roman Catholic Church, are ready that Christianity, and especially the to accept Judaism as an autonomous faith with complete rights to its future existence, is living in a dream world. Interestingly, of the three draft statements on the Jews so far, the first contained nothing overt that might indicate a missionary motive. The second draft revealed the heavy hand of the Curia in making an explicit plea for conversion, in addition to restricting forgiveness for the crucifixion to modern days only. This was greeted by a bitter outcry among American Jews, who should have known better, but who in their naive-

te assumed the absence of the evangelical element as long as it was not openly mentioned. One recalls the alleged comment of one Protestant observer at the Council to another—"After all, you know, the Pope is a Catholic!" The third draft proposal strikes a compromise between the two previous ones. In other words, it contains the missionary element but in covert, disguised form.

EVANGELICAL COMMITMENT

CERTAINLY, when—as the most recent draft schema states—"the Church awaits that day . . . on which all people will address the Lord in single voice and serve him shoulder to shoulder," despite the fact that the statement comes from our Scriptures (Zephaniah), it is not meant to be understood in terms of Jewish eschatology. Our vision of the "end of days" is one in which all the world will abandon idolatry and turn to the One G-d, but each people according to its own idiom and its own inner nature. When the Christian repeats the above quotation from Zephaniah, he refers exclusively to an affirmation of Christian witness by all mankind: to him "the Lord" does not bear the same meaning as it does for us. In this the Catholic, or Christian of whatever denomination, is completely within his rights. Jews can have no quarrel with such efforts—provided they are open, undisguised, and accord with the methods of a free society. But we, in our turn, must refuse to engage in any conversation, whether or not we dignify it with the more fashionable term "dialogue," in which our own religious existence and rights are not axiomatically accepted as non-negotiable.

That the Christian partner in "dialogue" is, with the very few exceptions mentioned above, unconditionally committed to proselytizing the Jewish partner, is evident from the many sources at our disposal. The reader may be interested in a reaction to my previous article on this theme in JEWISH LIFE, in which I singled out this evangelical element as one of the probable causes of the Ecumenical Council's statement on the Jews. In the May-June, 1964 issue of the bimonthly periodical "Dialogue," published by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Sion in Canada, there appears an eminently fair summary of my JEWISH LIFE article. At the end of this summary, which tries to explain my position despite the fact that "some people have been surprised and a little indignant" over such Jewish reactions, appears the following statement:

With these considerations in view we must be prepared for articles like that of Rabbi Lamm, and should realize that though we may not *like* that attitude, it is, in the circumstances, an understandable one, even if it is not very conducive to dialogue. We should also try to show that our desire for better understanding is a sincere one, and *not a subtle cloak for sinister activities*, as is believed by some non-Christians. (Last italics mine.)

Now, I do not doubt that the writer's desire for better understanding is a sincere one. But I respectfully question whether there is not an equally sincere desire for converting Jews. It so happens that the religious order which publishes this periodical was founded in the 1840's by a French-Jewish convert to Catholicism, Marie-Theodore Ratisbonne, who established this particular order in thanksgiving

for the conversion of his brother, Alphonse-Marie. The two brothers together tried to convert the Jews of Strasbourg and clearly intended the order they founded to be a mission to the Jews.

We find a more commendable frankness in the words of Pope Paul when he announces that the purpose of dialogue is an "apostolic" endeavor. . . . "Even before converting the world, nay, in order to convert it, we must meet with the world and talk with it." In the same spirit, a leading Catholic layman implores his "Jewish brothers" not to take offense at his allusion to conversion. "My sole point is to stress here that the Church, not tolerating the notion of an exclusion of the Jews, accords them a place of honor, longs to share with them its very household." ("Encounter" [Kansas City, 1965] p. 10.) In other words, the Catholic's love for the Jew is so overwhelming that he cannot rest until he has convinced the Jew to share his Catholic faith.

IT should not be thought that this evangelical motivation is peculiar to the Catholic world. It is shared, and perhaps more pronouncedly so, by the Protestant world. Thus, a Lutheran theologian pleads for a continuation of Protestant missionary efforts towards the Jews not, in this instance, out of love for the Jews who so sorely need conversion, but out of concern for the Christian, who needs the very act of missionizing in order to define himself better:

[The] mission to the Jews is today—and perhaps has always been—of greater and more fundamental significance for the Church and her self-understanding, rightly understood, but

also for the preservation of her Christianness in the literal sense of the word, than for the Jews themselves. It can only be hoped that the intellectual leaders of Judaism can be won over to seeing and understanding this, the more so since it cannot remain hidden from them what the consequences would be for Judaism if the basic messianic structure of Christianity were to be lost. ("Lutheran World," July, 1964 p. 295).

The same writer, in the same article, is quite frank in stating that a "dialogue" in which the Christian partner is forbidden to witness to his faith is a conversation which at the outset disadvantages the Christian, (*ibid.* p. 294). And another Lutheran theologian certainly has this writer's sympathy when he argues against the obfuscation of the missionary intent of conversation with Jews by the use of semantically more elegant but deceptive terms such as "dialogue":

That the "approach to the Jews" takes place in "cooperation" and "dialog" and not in "mission," can in no way diminish the importance of the apostolate in the Church. . . . When exchanging "modern" words for more modern words, the necessary and elementary words like "proclamation," "concessions," "witness" must be kept as expressions of the decisive fact that the Church always meets Jews and gentiles with a specific mandate, as well as with a specific promise. (*ibid.*, p. 278).

Now, Christians are completely within their democratic rights in pursuing their evangelical missions, provided their methods are not coercive or deceptive. But certainly, by no standards can any self-respecting Jew be expected to engage in this kind of "dialogue."

JEWISH REACTIONS

GIVEN this kind of information, which ought to be available to Jewish leaders who presume to speak in the name of our community and our faith, it is pertinent to inquire how these Jewish leaders have reacted to the overtures by various Christian Churches. Many, as has been stated, have evinced a new restraint and an increased awareness of the dangers of theological dialogue. But in some cases, unfortunately, the exact reverse has been true. It is painful to have to subject to public criticism fellow Jews who, in our opinion, have failed in such a highly sensitive and consequential area. But it is precisely for this reason that such exposure becomes Jewishly and morally obligatory.

Perhaps the most outrageous of all Jewish reactions to the first draft schema of the Ecumenical Council was the public announcement, widely publicized in the press, by the president of the national Reform congregational organization, who offered to reward the Vatican for its "absolution" of the Jews from the crime of deicide by, in turn, accepting Jesus as a historic figure in the tradition of Jewish prophecy. Even large segments of the non-orthodox Jewish world were scandalized by the *sh'mad* implied in this statement, and by the theological shallowness and religious vacuity in offering to trade dogmas and doctrines.

The author of this announcement, clearly hurt by the public outcry, has since published a book presumably designed to clear his name. In it, however, instead of an apology or retraction, we find injury compounded by insult. While the Reform leader

unambiguously asserts, in this book, that he did not have in mind any acceptance of Jesus in a theological sense, he yet pursues even more radically his theme of accepting the historical person of Jesus as an authentic Jewish figure. The reader will please excuse me for burdening him with the following passage which will no doubt prove offensive to his sensitivity; but it is necessary to read it in order to understand the incredible assimilation of all facets of Christianity, short of theological commitment, to which certain Reform leaders are subject:

For while, admittedly, there is no lack in Israel of prophets true and brave "who preached righteousness in the congregation," still there are aspects of Jesus' character and career which, in the words of [Reform] Rabbi Hyman Enelow, were "unequalled in human history." What conceivable objection could there be—other than long-smouldering prejudice, however justified it may have been—to including the majestic sentences of the Sermon on the Mount among the other post-Biblical readings in our synagogues? Are not some of the down-to-earth, homely parables of Jesus of inestimable value as moral instruction for our children and youth? Why—because of all the aforementioned desecration of the life of Jesus by virtue of the libel concerning his death—must we put ethical and spiritual blinkers on our religious-school children by depriving them of the exalted teachings contained in the tale of the Good Samaritan, which we so scrupulously excise from our curriculum and Jewish heritage? I would teach such moving stories and utterances diligently unto our children along with those of Moses and Hillel. I would even dare to show non-Christological pictures of Jesus' life and martyrdom in our

religious schools, as we have made exciting filmstrips of other heroic Jewish figures. I would use similar techniques to give our own children dramatic visualization of the true Jesus, both as a positive example of moral rectitude and as an antidote to the fictitious one imbibed with the jibe of "Christ Killer." Thus, I would call a halt to those who shrink in terror or smile superciliously at the mention of his name. (Maurice N. Eisendrath, "Can Faith Survive?", p. 202).

Our Sages would have commented:
afra b'fumei d'hahu gavra!

ANOTHER Reform figure, a professional in Jewish-Christian relations, in an address to the Lutheran World Federation in Denmark last May, is inevitably led to a position which borders on relativism and indifference. He thus glibly applies to the differences between Judaism and Christianity the words of the Rabbis which seek to contain both the opinion of the schools of Hillel and Shammai within the context of Halachic Judaism: "Both schools are the words of the living G-d," (Arthur Gilbert, "The Mission of the Jewish People in History and in the Modern World," p. 27). The same writer, despite all his attempts at countering the Christian motif of proselytization in dialogue, falls prey to it and himself assumes a Christian idiom in his dialogue:

Jews teach a complacent church, too concerned with its institutional welfare, that the crucified Christ cannot be confined to the church. Rather He (*sic!*) is with all those who suffer because of the sins of mankind. Jews have borne the penalties of Christian apostasy from their Christ. The prototype of the suffering servant in contemporary

history has been the Jewish people. (*ibid.* p. 30).

It is particularly this type of unconscious assimilation of Christian terminology and insidious absorption of Christian forms of thought against which Rabbi Soloveitchik warned when he wrote, "However, if the debate should revolve around matters of faith, then one of the confronters will be impelled to avail himself of the language of his opponent. This in itself would mean surrender of individuality and distinctiveness." ("Tradition," *loc. cit.* p. 25).

Even more recently, the new fad of "dialogue" has attracted hangers-on who have succeeded in making a tragedy-comedy of the entire enterprise, thereby bringing the whole notion of dialogue into disrepute. Press reports of this past November 23rd tell of "a number of programs being initiated by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations Department of Interfaith Activities to follow up the adoption of the Catholic Church's Ecumenical Council of a declaration absolving the Jewish people of deicide and condemning anti-Semitism." We are further told that under the guidance of the director of the department "a number of person-to-person dialogues have been arranged between Christians and Jews. . . . In Long Island, representatives of Reform congregations and of the Episcopal Church are discussing the theme of worship and goals and methods in the respective Reform and Episcopal liturgies. Other confrontations have been scheduled with Protestants and Catholics in Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and in the southeastern section of the United States."

How can any serious thinker or sincere believer of any faith even contemplate such a horrendous caricature of religion? One can only be embarrassed by such undignified gimmickism, reducing the sublime to the ridiculous and the cosmic to the comic. Here the whole idea of dialogue has been reduced to its ultimate absurdity: a pretentious conversation in which we exchange what we do not know for what we cannot believe.

SOCIO-CULTURAL DIALOGUE

NO, in matters of faith and ultimate commitment the only authentic dialogue is that between G-d and man. Conversation on such matters between members of faith communities as disparate as Judaism and Christianity represents a distraction from and not a contribution to the great dialogue.

However, having denied the possibility of any theological dialogue between Judaism and any other faith, we must now emphasize the converse: The very real need for a socio-cultural dialogue with Americans of other creeds. It is essential to realize that we live in the kind of country where vital interests overlap. The legitimate concerns of the Jewish community and of other faith communities are accordingly so juxtaposed that it is necessary to discuss their relationships on a secular or social or political level. We orthodox Jews have usually left such activities to the Reform or secular groups. Suddenly, however, the problems of a world in crisis and ferment have overwhelmed us, and the complex issues of the surrounding world are thrust upon us. But while we have been delinquent in the past in press-

ing our case and offering our cooperation with other faiths in the larger context of American public life, we no longer may sit aside and introvertedly ignore the great world outside us. It is about time that we got into the stream of world affairs; the waves are rough, the water is cold, and the currents are powerful, but it is bracing, and we must take the plunge.

This dialogue, this two-way conversation, requires, above all, complete honesty, a "radical frankness." Sometimes such conversation will hurt; but good health sometimes requires a bitter pill.

I believe it is important to mention examples of this exchange in both directions: from the Jew to the non-Jew, and from the non-Jew to the Jew.

FIRST, as part of the ongoing socio-cultural dialogue with the Roman Catholic world, I would press the Catholic Church to explain its stand on the State of Israel. One need not be a political Zionist to see in the State of Israel an act unprecedented in Jewish history, and a consolation, however, inadequate, for the frightful losses which our people sustained in World War II. Jews throughout the world bear the scars of two thousand years of Christian civilization, and we cannot accept with equanimity the negative attitude of the Church towards Israel. We must say it openly. It is not enough to "absolve" Jews from the crucifixion. In the name of that act, millions of Jews have suffered not only crucifixion but every form of death that the evil genius of man can devise. I do not believe that it is too much for us to expect from the Catholic

Church not only "absolution" but also contrition. The Lutheran Church was moved to express precisely that sentiment. At the meeting of the Lutheran World Federation this past May in Logumkloster, Denmark, that Church issued a document in which, among other things, it stated:

"Christian" anti-semitism is spiritual suicide. . . . No Christian can exempt himself from involvement in this guilt. As Lutherans, we *confess our own peculiar guilt*, and we *lament with shame* the responsibilities which our Church and her people bear for this sin. We can only ask *G-d's pardon and that of the Jewish people*. ("Lutheran World," July 1964, p. 267; italics mine.)

I do not believe that any Jew alive today has the moral right to extend pardon to anyone in the world for what has been done to our people. But at least we may expect that the pardon be asked. One might have hoped, especially in light of the revelations of the unhappy role played by the Vatican during the War years, and, even more, in view of the present Pope's profound resentment of the criticism of his predecessor who was Pontiff during that period, that such an attitude would be forthcoming from Rome.

Instead, the State of Israel is today recognized by all the West, by most Communist governments, and even by some Moslem countries—but not by the Vatican.

OF COURSE we recognize the Church's concern for the Catholics living in Moslem countries. We are aware of many delicate political considerations. We are even aware of the fact that the Vatican, in its inner

deliberations about the "Jewish problem," has pondered less worthy considerations, such as the Vatican investments and Italian foreign markets (for more on this see Michael Serafini's "The Pilgrim," pp. 90, 127, 199-200, and 213).

We may be aware of these things; but can we morally accept them? This, let us remember, is a post-Auschwitz era. We live in an age when Hochhuth in his "The Deputy," and a number of careful historians since, have exposed the moral bankruptcy of a church giving undue weight to such items in the face of high moral demands. We can no longer accept such excuses. Israel is a land to which fled the refugees from German fury and Christian silence. As an act of historic justice, Israel must be recognized by the Church. And, as an act of contrition, Israel must not only be recognized but helped and encouraged.

BUT the socio-cultural dialogue cuts the other way too. The American Jewish community must learn not only to give criticism, but to accept it as well. It must learn that the non-Jewish world has every right to question our underlying axioms and purposes.

That we are not yet ready for this encounter became evident during the great national debate before, during, and after the Supreme Court decision concerning prayer in the public schools. At that time, the respected Jesuit journal "America" issued a bold challenge to the Jewish community which seemed to enrage every element of American Jewry. The wording of the editorial, it is true, was extravagant and unkind. The im-

plied threat, if such it was, was unworthy, disgraceful. But the resentment it incurred was far in excess of what it deserved. Essentially the editorial stated a very real and fundamental question: Who are you Jews? What do you represent? Are you a religious community, or are you merely a group of people, ethnically united, who mouth the usual stereotyped liberal sentiments characteristic of your class? What has happened to your much celebrated uniqueness?

That was a legitimate question. One may, to this day, be in favor of or against the recital of prayers in the public schools. That is irrelevant to our discussion. What is germane is the fact that the challenge was a reasonable part of the dialogue, but our response was not. Indeed, it seems that very few of the majority decisions of the American Jewish community today are predicated upon Jewish principles or derived from genuinely Jewish sources. One need not expect every public position of American Jewry to sound like a *t'shuvah* to a Halachic query. Yet certainly we ought *occasionally* to sound like people with at least general religious concerns, if not those of a unique covenanted community. In essence, therefore, the major burden of the Christian statement to the Jews in dialogue is: By what right do you speak as Jews, in what way are you Jewish, and in what manner may we regard you as a "faith community?," to use Rabbi Soloveitchik's felicitous term.

JEWISH SPOKESMANSHIP

THIS is, I submit, a valid criticism to which we are exposed. We

have suddenly become a community of experts in constitutional law. We have put our faith much more in the courts than we have in our religious traditions. I subscribe as well, therefore, to the following passage from an address by a prominent Catholic layman to which reference has been made earlier:

One cannot blame you for constantly glancing over your shoulder at history and the terrors it has held for you. . . . And no citizen, with a regard to his own rights, should ever suggest that you do not have the *right* to resort to the courts. But too many free books, too many brotherhood plaques, and too many litigations aimed not at broad protection but at the scintilla of offense, the improbable potential of disturbance, the full dotting of the partially dotted "i" of the law, will only operate to diminish good will and to destroy opportunity. Protectionism and perfectionism are often very different things. ("Encounter," p. 16).

It is true that the dividing line between what we have called theological dialogue and socio-cultural dialogue is sometimes ill-defined and quite vague. It is precisely for this reason that I would encourage knowledgeable Jewish leaders, steeped in Jewish life and learning, to be the moving spirits in the socio-cultural dialogue. Too many of the uninformed and under-committed have heretofore presumed to speak on behalf of Jews and Jewry. If we orthodox Jews are going to live within history, if we are going to participate fully in the fate and destiny of the United States, and at the same time protect our most vital interest by refusing to engage in a fruitless and meaningless and dangerous theological dialogue, then it must be our

best leaders who will represent us and the entire Jewish community in the confrontation with the non-Jewish community.

THIS does, I fully realize, present a point of departure from usual orthodox policy in this country. Some orthodox figures, steeped in the *Austritts* tradition of Frankfurt Jewry, have already declared against this socio-political confrontation. But it is called for, I believe, both by the times in which we live as well as by the great Torah tradition to which we are totally committed.

Of course, it should not be thought that "dialogue," in the social and political sense, necessarily means an exchanging of challenges or demands. The illustrations I have chosen are of this nature simply because they

are examples of some of the great problems that confront us, and which demand treatment in good will and honesty. But there are many other areas in which religious communities can meaningfully cooperate, to their mutual benefit, within the context of American cultural pluralism.

In order, therefore, both to restrain our fellow Jews from the perilous theological dialogue in which some of them are engaged and to encourage an open and frank socio-cultural dialogue with the non-Jewish communities, orthodox Jewish leaders must become active as never before in general and in Jewish communal life.

We must no longer by default leave the area of inter-group relations to those least committed to Torah and the Jewish tradition.

PUBLISHED BY

UNION OF ORTHODOX JEWISH CONGREGATIONS OF AMERICA

84 FIFTH AVENUE

•

NEW YORK, N. Y. 10011