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The Jews and the Ecumenical Council

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By now everyone knows of the efforts of the Roman Catholic Church to rectify certain ancient wrongs it has perpetrated against the Jewish people. The Roman Catholic Ecumenical Council, called to discuss various internal problems in Christianity, was presented with a proposal concerning the Jews. In the *schema* on Christian unity, Chapter 4 (reproduced on p. 3) urged that the Church retract the old charge of deicide of which Christians had accused Jews for ages. It asked that the Jews be absolved of guilt for killing the central figure of the Christian religion. This proposal, as we also know, was not voted upon; it may possibly be brought up for consideration again next September.

My purpose is to analyze not the Catholic action as such, but rather the reactions of certain Jews, perhaps very many of them. And it is concerning these reactions, which in many cases are quite disturbing, and in some cases outrageous and scandalous, that I wish to register a complaint, and to offer several suggestions.

The complaint is that we have *over-acted*, occasionally to the point of compromising our principles and our dignity. And my suggestions are that we be cautious; that we exercise our critical faculties; that we not be overwhelmed by the torrents of publicity; that

we strive for a historical perspective; and, above all, that we judge men and events not by the shifting standards and ephemeral moods of the moment, but by authentic Jewish criteria—the eternal value of Torah and Tradition.

We Jews are a grateful people. The very name "Jew" implies gratitude: it comes from "Judah", and that name—in Hebrew, *Yehudah*—was given to her son by Leah because "this time shall I thank the Lord" (Gen. 29:35). It is this element of gratefulness that has made Jews so loyal, throughout these many years of our dispersion, to those countries which have offered us safety and freedom. It accounts as well for the many lasting contributions we have made to the science and the literature, the finances and the security, of benevolent regimes.

Yet, what is essentially a virtue can, under specific conditions, become a vice. The noble quality of thankfulness can be pushed to an extreme which is undesirable. We Jews have often suffered from this over-gratitude. For instance, Russian *maskilim* were so grateful to the Czarist regime for the liberal measures it enacted concerning the Jews in the 1860's that a wave of assimilation and intermarriage ensued. It took less than ten years for them to discover how bitterly wrong they were: in 1871 the same government conspired with criminal

elements to foment the infamous Odessa Pogrom. Some American assimilationist Jews are no better. Out of gratitude to America, they have imagined that one must become a 1000% American, and that "Americanism" requires abandoning all religion and culture that is not of the majority at the moment. So the Jewish heritage was considered "un-American", and the over-gratitude became utterly destructive.

We are noticing a similar phenomenon in the popular Jewish reaction to the Ecumenical Council. The reactions are, by and large, unreasoned, unbalanced, excessively emotional, wishful, and extravagantly grateful. Individually many of us experienced an outpouring of deep emotion to the churchmen gathered in Rome. Jewish organizations, especially those dedicated to harmonious intergroup relations and anti-defamation as the greatest good in the universe, kept their mimeograph machines working overtime. The spirit of euphoria gripped many a seasoned Jewish spokesmen, spilled over into the excerpts of sermons printed in the press, and was reflected in the writings of various Jewish columnists. One Reform clergyman in Florida marched his congregation into a neighbouring church; the proposed absolving of Jews from the guilt of deicide was evidently considered the trumpet-call signalling the end of all our old religions and getting together in one communion. The head of all Reform temples solemnly informed a convention that the spirit of

ecumenicism works both ways and that therefore we Jews must reciprocate by accepting the central figure of Christianity as "a positive and prophetic spirit in the stream of Jewish tradition". This same individual declared, in utter abandon, that "the mind is staggered and the heart enkindled simply by the prospects of the implications" of this proposed statement by the Council. To such an extent were minds paralyzed and hearts thrown into black confusion. And all of this—for a brief statement, and—irony of ironies!—which was never accepted even in principle.

So, in this mood of elation and gratitude, certain so-called Jewish leaders (in a demonstration of galuth-psychology that would never have been tolerated in the 2000-year history of the Jewish galuth) were prepared to bow low and offer for the taking all the treasures and sanctities of Judaism, in return for—nothing! Any kind of bartering or bargaining with religious principles is vulgar and degrading, how much more so a poor deal such as this.

But for those to whom these words are addressed it is unnecessary to berate such blasphemous people who have the temerity to call themselves "rabbis". It is more important to consider them as the extreme manifestation of an underlying current that prevails throughout the Jewish community, and to analyze that current.

The question is : ought we feel grateful to the Roman Catholic Church for the

sentiments allegedly expressed in this Chapter 4 if it would have passed, or if it will later be voted upon favourably (and, despite all the assurances in the press, it is not at all that certain)?

My answer is : No ! Despite the fact that there are without question many sincere and genuine liberals amongst the Council members, the answer must be a categorical "No". We Jews will not owe the Church even one iota of gratitude, even if it finally does declare us innocent of the charge of god-killing.

First, there is the elementary rational principle that if someone strikes me and harasses me and persecutes me without reason, and then desists, I owe him no debt of thanks for stopping. On the contrary, he owes me an apology for abusing me unjustly. Only a subservient, obsequious, negative personality who has no self-respect will *thank* his tormentor for calling off his playful tortures.

With a few luminous exceptions, the record of the Church towards Jews is dark and dismal; Malcolm Hayes' "Europe and the Jews" is only one of several well-documented works on the history of the Christian practice of Antisemitism and persecution of our people throughout the ages into the twentieth century. If the Church will now remove the religious sanction of Antisemitism and withdraw the cruel, despicable charge of deicide—an accusation which would be a joke if it were not so tragic in its consequences—we will owe it nothing. No thanks are due to a religious

communion which has decided as late as 1963 to civilize its theology—and even this attempt has failed ! The Jew who is overcome with gratitude at this present occasion is the kind who, when confronted with Antisemitism, imagines that there must be something wrong with Jewishness that it should incur such hatred.

This brings us to a second point. Christian Antisemitism is not a Jewish problem, it is a Christian problem. Jews may be interested observers—but only from the outside. We have no right to interfere in the conversations of Christians, to suggest, to request, or to offer gratuitous advice. The charge of deicide—a barbaric, savage, atavistic relic of primitive paganism—is a blot on the conscience of Christianity. It does not present any moral problem for the innocent victim. Religious Antisemitism, the charge of deicide—these are a scandal to Christianity: If they will be removed by the Church, it will be cleansing its own soul, not ours.

A third point should be emphasized; we may perhaps have overrated Christian theology, and especially the accusation of deicide, as a source of Antisemitism. This malignant condition, we now know, has many causes, and none of them alone can explain all of it. Once, liberals thought that Antisemitism was the result of ignorance alone. But in that case how does one account for German Antisemitism, or the more refined kind that often infects the academic

community? Poverty has been blamed for the hatred of the Jew. It may explain many instances; but how does it account for the Antisemitism of the "country-club set?" So can Christianity alone not be blamed exclusively, for then how could we explain the Antisemitism of avowed atheists, of anti-Christians such as Nazis and Communists?

We ought not to forget the powerful insight of our Rabbis who declared that the Hebrew word for hatred, *sinah*, sounds much like Sinai: when the Torah was given to Israel at *Sinai*, that is when *sinah* towards the Jew came to the world. Put into modern terms, that would mean that when a Christian hates a Jew it is not really because he believes he *killed* his god; it is rather, on an unconscious level, that he cannot forgive him for having given *birth* to his god! The moral code of Judaism, which came to the world through Christianity, tried to control the unbridled passions of the pagan soul, and it is the irritation with this discipline and civilization which is manifested as Antisemitism. So that even if the deicide accusation is officially rescinded, it will not bring the millennium of inter-religious harmony and good will.

There is yet another reason for hesitating before embarking upon an unlimited expression of gratitude. Let us remember that when the Catholic Church was at its most powerful, when it wielded much greater influence over the minds and destinies of men, it never even considered reducing the charge of deicide

against what then were known as the "perfidious Jews". Today the Church is no longer as all-powerful as it once was. It is being undermined by the growing secularism in the Western world and by the official atheism of the Communist countries, and its expansion into Africa and Asia has been checked by the end of colonialism, the means by which the white man's faith was traditionally imposed upon the pagan natives. In our time the main threat to Jewish survival is no longer, as it once was, the Church. The real dangers are, rather, assimilation, the anti-Jewishness of the Communist countries, and the string of Arab states that encircle the State of Israel. It is only now, late in the day, that the Catholic Church has begun to rouse itself—and even then, it has turned around and gone back to sleep until next September!

A final point must be made. There is a supercilious religious note to the reported statement. As Jews, we must object to being "absolved" of the guilt of killing their god. To be "absolved" implies that one is guilty, but nevertheless he is being forgiven. But we Jews never were guilty, and we do not therefore beg forgiveness.

We are told that the stigma for the crucifixion is now to be removed from us and our descendants and placed upon all of mankind. So let it be. The problem of how to distribute the blame for that event is one that is peculiar to Christian theology. As such we have nothing to

say about it. But from our own point of view *as Jews* we do not acknowledge guilt for that act *even as humans*. Our faith is firmly committed to the proposition that *ish be'cheto yumath* (Deut. XXIV-16), each man shall die only because of his own sin, and we therefore cannot conceivably accept even a diminished share of guilt for a deed perpetrated by a handful of people against a certain single individual about twenty centuries ago.

As Jews, we object to the whole focus of discussion being whether or not we are guilty. For to our mind the question is not: who will absolve *the Jews*. The question is: who will absolve *the Church* for its guilt in inspiring and sponsoring crusades and inquisitions, blood-libels and pogroms? The question is not: who is guilty for killing one Jew some 2,000 years ago; but who is guilty for allowing thousands upon thousands of Jews to be killed throughout the last 2,000 years?

This chapter in the *schema*—not yet adopted—is a beginning; that is true. But—even if it will be adopted—it is *only* a beginning. Repentance (*teshuvah*), according to Jewish teaching requires not only resolution for future proper conduct (*kabbalah*), but also, indispensably, confession (*vidui*). And the Church has expressed to the Jewish people neither apologies nor confessions nor regrets. Germany has done so; individuals do so when they offend a neighbour; nations do so in the course of

international conduct. But the Christian churches have not done so, and the Catholic Church does not do so now. There has been no sign that the Church is willing to concede that it has done wrong, even when such wrongs have been forcefully brought to public attention.

These words are not by any means said in an anti-Catholic spirit. On the contrary, I have often maintained that it is time we Jews began to rethink our heretofore “official” position on cooperation with other faiths, particularly the Catholic. Today all religions must work together against the common enemy, that all-prevalent secularism which threatens us all alike. Catholics and Jews can enjoy mutual benefits in cooperating in matters of public policy on many important issues. What has been said is, rather, an attempt to assert Jewish pride and dignity.

We Jews make no claim to being intrinsically, ethnically, better, than any other people. But neither are we any worse. And we must therefore not suffer from feelings of inferiority in the confrontation with other faiths. When Judah approached Joseph, whom he did not recognize as his own brother, the Torah writes, *va-yigash elov yehudah* (Gen. XLIV-18). And the *Baal ha-Turim* remarks that the last letters of these three words spell *shoveh*—“equal”. You may be a powerful Egyptian potentate, Judah hinted to Joseph, but I am your equal. That must be our position in

this confrontation; neither one of arrogance nor one of submissiveness, but: *shoveh*.

Our conversations—"dialogues" as we now call them—with other communions must not be carried on strictly in the terms of reference of the other faith. Nor can such matters be left to secularist Jewish organizations and leaders, for their understanding and appreciation of Judaism leaves so very much to be desired. We dare not, by default, assign matters of such moment for the future of Judaism to Jews whose loyalties lie elsewhere, and who are sometimes prone to consider religious principles as negotiable in diplomatic encounters. Our approach must be derived from the Holy Torah. We must proceed from the premise of Judaism: that the Jewish people is the *am segulah*, that we bear a sacred mission as the people of Torah—a claim that in no way denies any other persons or faiths their rightful place in the divine economy. We Jews have, since Abraham, been dedicated to the Almighty, and we have never abdicated that function, not even with the rise of Christianity. It is as religious people that we assert the common human dignity of all men. And it is that dignity which does not permit us to consider the end of an injustice as a "favor" to the victim.

There is, in the context of the religious dimensions of the problem, yet another factor that is disturbing to thoughtful Jews, and that ought to be

mentioned despite our inhibitions: the missionary element. Although some liberal Protestants have begun to eschew the ancient Christian goal of the conversion of the Jews, the Catholics have thus far not evinced any similar tendency to abandon their missionary efforts. But how can respectful conversations be conducted in an atmosphere charged with suspicion that one partner will not be satisfied with anything less than the total surrender of the other? It makes no difference to us whether the goal is physical oppression or spiritual submission; both are inadmissible. If anything, the latter is even more noxious: a body can survive when a hand or foot is amputated, but never when the head or heart is cut out.

In addition to a general sense of uneasiness at the possibility of missionary elements in the total picture, there are a number of particular features that are disturbing. For one thing, the inclusion of the chapter on the Jews in a *schema* on Christian unity has never been adequately explained. According to press reports, many Council members objected to the chapter on the same grounds. Why, indeed, should the withdrawal of the deicide charge or the condemnation of Anti-semitism be considered in the context of Christian unity?

None of the reasons presented thus far is very persuasive. Some are vaguely disturbing. Thus, one of the leading members of Cardinal Bea's Secretariat on Christian Unity, a Jewish convert to

Catholicism (one of two * such on the Cardinal's staff—a fact not at all reassuring to those who fear a hidden missionary attempt), Msgr. John M. Oesterreicher, mentions a number of explanations. Most prominently he writes of a dimension of the relationship between Christian and Jews which is rooted "in a history which they mysteriously share, the history of salvation.....Stranger still, the redemption of the world and the glories as well as the failures of the Israel of old are wedded to one another", (The Catholic News, December 19, 1963). One cannot escape the feeling that this affinity, so "strange", and "mysterious", which he purports to find between Judaism and Christianity is a reflection of his own spiritual biography and his desire to have others of his former co-religionists emulate it.

Lest we be accused of reading too much into such statements, let us quote the same individual in a book he wrote on propagating Catholicism amongst Jews:

Whether we will or no, we are missionaries at all times.... We will win (the Jews) if we move on the height to which we are called. We

* Father Baum and Monsignor Oesterreicher, two members of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity, are Jewish by race, and were chosen as consultants of the Secretariat because they would be able to guide it in its discussions on the larger unity which must include Jews—(Editor).

may find a door also in our daily contacts.... again, in visits to Jewish acquaintances, particularly to the sick—many a Jewish conversion begins with an act of kindness on the part of a Christian, with the conquering impression of selfless love.

Such approaches, we read further, ultimately must bear fruit. "We sow in hope, and others may reap our sowing. Indeed, there is no other missionary work which has so sure an outcome as that to the Jews, to which is given the greatest promise". (The Apostolate to the Jews, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 82-83).

In the absence of any other convincing explanations as to what the "Jewish problem" is doing in a discussion on Christian unity, the missionary explanation looms large indeed.

Moreover, even if some other adequate interpretation will be forthcoming, the proselytizing dimension remains a powerful deterrent to happier relationships which, we hope, will ultimately prevail. Consider the following passage from the conclusion of an article by Edward H. Flannery (in Oesterreicher's "The Bridge", Vol. III, p. 324) entitled "Theological Aspects of the State of Israel":

All the authors I have cited.... have in one way or another suggested that the present state of Israel may be a stratagem of divine providence to drive Israel into a "blind alley of grace".

An "ingathering of exiles" without Messiah will always be an abnormal situation for all Jews who adhere to a modicum of Jewish tradition. The disillusionment springing from this situation can only grow with time....No less may those Jews whose life is not fed by Israel's religious tradition find themselves at the end of their resources....In either case, the men and women in the state of Israel will face a dilemma...We may then think that God wished to bring a representative cross section of the Jewish people to the Holy Land in order to bring it there face to face with the great question of the Messiah. Israel's restoration to the land of promise, even though under secular auspices, may thus be a distant preparation for her final encounter with grace.

In other words, the Catholic theological embarrassment occasioned by the emergence of an independent Jewish state is now to be resolved by converting not individual Jews, but the "representative cross section of the Jewish people" who are citizens of the State.

American Jews fare no better than Israelis as prizes for Catholic proselytization. Writing in December 1948, the same Msgr. Oesterreicher cites figures that demonstrate the shift of Jewish population centers from the Old World to the New, and declares that

the burden of bringing the Glad Tidings to the Jews rests chiefly on

American Catholics.....Because the United States has become the center of the Jewish world, it must therefore be the heart from which will surge a new effort to bring Christ to the Jews, to bring the Jews to the Christ. (The Apostolate to the Jews, p. 68)

Most instructive in this regard is how the same author (*ib.*, p. 72f.) approaches the problem of Jewish resistance to Catholic missionary efforts as a result of experience with Christian Antisemitism:

Above all, many a Jew still remembers his childhood shock when another child called him "Christ Killer!" This makes him ready to believe that the Church teaches that the Jews and the Jews alone are to blame for the Crucifixion....We can scarcely conceive the misinformation and ignorance on things Christian on the part of Jews, an ignorance which is invincible only so long as we do not try to conquer it. But when the authentic voice of the Church enters their loneliness, then the cloud of misunderstanding may be lifted.

Clearly, the removal of the deicide accusation is a means of lowering Jewish resistance to the "authentic voice of the Church" and conversion to Catholicism. *This stratagem comes from the pen of the same Msgr. Oesterreicher who now speaks on behalf of the proposal to the Ecumenical Council absolving Jews of the guilt for the crucifixion.*

Certainly, sensitive Jews, whose loyalty to Judaism is not predicated upon anti-Antisemitism, cannot be blamed for exercising considerable reserve towards the deliberations of the Council. It would do well for Catholics to appreciate (and former Jews are not the most suited for this sensitive educational task) that we Jews want to speak with them about matters of mutual interest without always feeling that our souls are on the block, that any display of friendship on their part is necessarily a means to a "higher" end: *shemad*, or conversion of Jews. Such apprehensions inevitably inhibit free and easy relationships in mutual respect.

But if not gratitude, what then should our reaction be? Let us take as example the conduct of one of the most Jewish Jews of the last centuries, a man whose every action is a Jewish teaching: the late Rav Kook, first Chief Rabbi of the Holy Land. When he was Rabbi in London, in 1917, the famous Balfour Declaration was issued by the British Government. A celebration was arranged in Albert Hall, and it was attended by representatives of the Crown. At that occasion, Rav Kook addressed the audience, and said:

I did not come to thank the English people for the declaration that it gave us; I came rather to congratulate it with the blessing of *mazal tov* on its great merit in being the one nation to grant us the Declaration.... It is the unique pride

and glory of your nation to have lent aid and support to the people of the Torah.... On this day do I congratulate the people of England—on their being among the supporters of the people of Torah.

That is what our attitude should be. If the text does not offend our religious dignity; if it is written in the proper spirit; if it is passed; if it is *not followed by a missionary drive* designed to capitalize on the good will; and if it *does not attempt to compromise by one iota the political and territorial integrity of the State of Israel*—such as by insisting upon the internationalization of Jerusalem—then, while we shall not offer any *thanks*, we shall be glad to offer our Catholic friends our *congratulations* for coming to terms with their conscience.

The congratulations we refer to are not meant as perfunctory gestures. We are not and ought not be unaware of the great courage needed to revise ancient teachings and modify time-honoured prejudices by a religious communion noted for its conservatism. There are many noble spirits and men of good will in the Catholic Church, inspired by the luminous example of the late Pope John XXIII. To them we want to offer not the extravagant sycophantic homage of Jews who have long lost any real contact with Judaism, but the hand of friendship as fellow human beings who worship the Almighty, each in his own way and with equal devotion and sincerity, and without any attempt at conversion or "soul-snatching".

We are anxious for that time to come. Meanwhile, let us exercise common sense and restraint. Let us be moderate in all we do and temperate in all we say. Above all, let us at all times act in accordance with Jewish dignity and self-respect.

"The Lord shall reign over all the earth; on that day shall the Lord be One and His name One".

(From "Jewish Life", New York - November-December 1963 - pp.6 - 13).

The Ecumenical Council: Their Problems and Ours

By Justin Hofmann

Jewish interest in the Roman Catholic Ecumenical Council has centered mainly on the decisions affecting Catholic-Jewish relations. The order issued by Pope John XXIII to delete the term "perfidious" from the prayer referring to the Jews in the Good Friday liturgy was widely greeted as a genuine gesture of good will. Of even more far reaching consequences are the proposals formulated by Cardinal Bea and his associates which are designed to clear the Jews of the accusations of "Christ killer". This accusation of nearly two thousand years standing has probably contributed more than any other single factor to the rise of Jew-hatred. Its elimination from Roman Catholic theology and, consequently, from Catholic teaching in the schools and churches, may be expected to help lift the terrible scourge of Anti-semitism from future generations. The importance of such a development to the

Jewish community can hardly be over-estimated.*

But Jewish interest in the Ecumenical Council extends to matters other than those affecting Catholic-Jewish relations. Some of the internal issues of the Church which have confronted the Council in Rome have a measure of fascination for Jews as well. One of the most urgent of these is Catholic dogma and its interpretation. For at least the past two centuries and probably longer, Catholic theology has not undergone any major changes of formulation. Thomism, the philosophic-theological system of Thomas Aquinas, is still the official teaching of the Church. But considerable

*This article was written prior to the termination of the second session of the Ecumenical Council, which adjourned without taking final action on the proposal to which the author refers. - Editor J. L.