

PROS AND CONS OF JEWISH-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE

THE DEBATE on the merits of Jewish-Christian dialogue is flaring up again.

One objection, frequently heard before, is that exposure to Christian ideas will weaken the religious commitment of Jewish dialogue participants. But so far this remains unsubstantiated. Responsible agencies approach interfaith discussion with the idea that it should strengthen, not weaken, self-understanding (AJC makes the point in its *Guide to Interreligious Dialogue*), and that is what consistently does happen. Some rabbis call dialogue "the secret weapon of adult Jewish education."

Another widespread criticism is that open discussion of religious differences will only heighten antagonism. This apprehension, too, is contradicted by experience. The Christian participants normally come away from dialogue sessions with a new understanding of Jewish belief and history, as well as of the positions Jews take in contemporary affairs. Stereotypes are demolished, misconceptions corrected.

WHAT STANDS behind many of the objections to dialogue is, of course, the

old, agonizing question of conversion. Perhaps surprisingly, frank discussion has done more than any other method to dissuade Christians from their conversionary approach to the Jews. Increasingly, Judaism is recognized as a valid faith, rather than just an outdated precursor of Christianity.

Much ink once more is being spilled over who is and who is not competent to sponsor dialogue sessions. Certain critics want dialogues, if any, handled solely by the clergy, not by "incompetent secular organizations." (One of the ironies of the controversy is that Orthodox spokesmen employ categories that have no meaning in Judaism. Thus, the term "secular" implies a view of the world as divided into a

sacred and a secular sphere—a Christian, not a Jewish conception.) The "secular"—more precisely, lay or communal—groups assert dialogue is the business of whoever can handle it.

AJC's credentials for interfaith dialogue are beyond question. They include a staff of nationally recognized experts, plus more than 30 years of pioneering research, studies and experience. In addition, every interreligious venture is preceded by searching consultation with Orthodox, Conservative and Reform scholars. Thus equipped, AJC will continue to use dialogue as an effective instrument in its work for the security and equality of Jews everywhere.

Your comments will be welcome.

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knowledgeable discussants will wonder aloud about conflicts between Chicago's Archbishop John P. Cody and the vigorous Catholic Interracial Council at work in a city so hostile to Martin Luther King; will note similar conflicts between liberal Philadelphia Catholic laymen and Archbishop John J. Kron; will ask about disaffection on the part of some of the faithful in California James Francis Cardinal McIntyre's area.

More to the point, the unresolved dispute between Jewish organizations and Catholic spokesmen in New York over the tender issue of abortion laws will have to be discussed.

All of this, of course, with a proper regard for that section of the new Guidelines, reading: "A genuine respect for all participants in joint meetings."

Passover Feature

IN HONOR OF PASSOVER, WHICH COMMEMORATES THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBERATION OF THE ISRAELITES FROM EGYPTIAN BONDAGE, THE LAS VEGAS ISRAELITE WILL PUBLISH A SERIES OF FEATURES, THIS YEAR THE PASSOVER FESTIVAL IS INAUGURATED AT SUN-DOWN ON THE EVENING OF MONDAY, APRIL 24, AND ENDS ON TUESDAY, MAY 2.

Genuine Respect for All

By Robert E. Segal

The recent appearance of a new, official set of procedures for Catholics who want to build stronger bridges for Catholic-Jewish understanding should bring important insights to many in both faith communities.

Tentative dialogue up to now has revealed an honest curiosity on the part of many Catholics to learn more not only about Jewish teachings and ritual but about the Jews as a people through four millennia of aspiration, study, wandering, and martyrdom. This is all to the good, especially in view of the fact that a recent poll commissioned by the Catholic Digest reportedly shows a dismaying increase in Jewish suspicions about Catholic motives. (The poll indicates that since 1952 there has been a 14 per cent rise in the number of Jews who feel that Catholics look down on Jews.) Without much question then, an honorable exchange between informed representatives of the two groups will go far to point up the reasons for Jewish tenacity as a minority group in many lands and Jewish fidelity to liberal causes and their commitment to charitable deeds.

Publication of the official guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations by the Bishop's Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs will, at the same time, sharpen Jewish inquiry regarding the strong winds of change shaking Catholicism in many parts of the world.

Thus, some Jews engaging in frank exchange with Catholics now will want to learn more about the departure from the Church of England's brilliant and highly-respected theologian, Father Charles Davis. When Father Davis made his historic move a few weeks ago, he said he had failed to find "any adequate Biblical or historical basis for the existence of the Church as an institution." In his judgment, the Church had become more concerned with authority than with truth. Not long after Father Davis made his momentous move, Father Herbert McCabe, commenting upon the Davis affair, wrote in *New Blackfriars*: "The Church is quite plainly corrupt. We have lived with this truth so long that we have perhaps forgotten how scandalous and horrible it is: like people who live with

racial discrimination and slavery." Soon after, the Dominican Master General in Rome forbade Father McCabe to edit or write further for the prestigious magazine in which he had set loose his thunder.

Perhaps Jews who exchange views with Catholics in the months and years ahead will never be qualified to appraise such dramatic events. The question can be raised quite properly whether intramural Church differences should be on the agenda.

But there will be an honest and natural inquisitiveness regarding other Catholic actions. What is the truth about Spain, an aging dictator's province in which Jewish history has been laid out on a checkerboard of golden productivity and blackest expulsion? How long will Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani and like-minded, extremely conservative prelates be able to hold power in a Church through which the fresh winds churned by Ecumenical Council Vatican II blow so briskly? What are Jews to make of the recent Vatican message, directing Catholic bishops to discourage priests and seminarians from joining the Peace Corps?

The better-informed Jews who enter in the discussions may speak of their admiration for Milwaukee Archbishop William E. Cousins' stout defense of good communal works against the attacks of some Catholics who took paid advertising to complain that a part of those works might come under the heading of "civil rights." And they will applaud Msgr. Joseph Gallagher, executive editor of the *Baltimore Catholic Review*, for slapping down George P. Mahoney for running for governor of Maryland on an anti-Negro platform.

On the other side of the ledger, it can be expected that

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