

# A Rabbi Comments on Christian Unity Efforts

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The formation, by the editors of this group of essays, of a title for my contribution, is quite correct. Jews are not directly involved in the ecumenical movement.

Ecumenism is a movement of reconciliation and reunion among Christians, an attempt to resolve the "scandal of separation." Yet, somehow it was felt that a Jewish response was in order, was, indeed, called for. And this implies some sense of relationship between Jews and Christians, some relationship, however vaguely grasped, between Jewry and ecumenism. And this is true as well, even to the extent that in practical usage, when not using the word in an exactly technical sense, Christians and Jews alike, speak the word "ecumenism" or "ecumenical" to describe the growing range of relationship between Christians and Jews today.

## More Than Neighbors

What are the sources of this relationship? First of all there is a purely sociological basis. Jews, at least in North America, live in close contact, and perhaps closer social, economic and political intercourse with Christians than ever before. We relate to one another in a large range of activities and issues, and in the confrontation together of challenges, and the achievement of goals, in our communities.

Because of the revival of interest in theological issues there is mutual interest in what is happening in one another's realms of religious thought. Even deeper than this is the historical relationship Judaism bears to Christianity. The central figure in Christianity was a Jew, born and bred in a Jewish milieu. The Hebrew Bible is sacred to both faiths.

Above all, we experience together the conditions that helped to produce the ecumenical movement itself. Among these are the challenges of tremendous social change in our time, as well as the massive material problems of human beings, and the danger of pagan values in our technologically advanced and powerful society. These have caused the exponents of Judaism and Christianity to examine the substance of their faith and to draw closer to one another for united response.

Therefore, a Jewish response to the ecumenical movement is entirely in order. But in this is so, I must underline that I am expressing a single Jewish response. Representing no group and no doctrinal formulation, I speak as an individual from my own understanding of the Jewish tradition and situation.

## Three Basic Factors

What are those aspects of the ecumenical movement to which I respond? I will concern myself with three.

First and foremost is that principle which is absolutely necessary in order that the ecumenical idea exist at all. It is the principle of respect for the conviction of others. It is the principle of the sanctity of the individual human conscience.

In the ecumenical movement many Jews see a decisive shift from a quite different historical standpoint. For example, it was the position of the Roman Catholic Church prior to this time that "Error" does not have the same rights as "Truth." "Error" was considered to be the doctrine of other groups and "Truth" the doctrine of the Church. This was, of course, a point of view followed by other groups as well. For a Jew, the entire concept of ecumenism is the recognition that no single group is the sole possessor of Truth; that truths are to be found in many doctrines of many peoples. For me, as for many Jews, the central significance of Vatican Council II and

in general the spirit of the entire ecumenical movement is the following statement that emerged from the Vatican Council: "Nothing that is true and holy in other religions is scorned by the Catholic Church. Therefore, the Church admonishes her sons that they converse and collaborate with

the followers of other religions, in order to serve... indeed, those spiritual and moral goods as well as those socio-cultural values that have a home among men of other religious traditions." This is the only principle upon which that motto of ecumenism, "dialogue," can be based. Even though the concept of dialogue is basic to the philosophy of that great twentieth-century Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, still the concept of dialogue is a controversial issue in the Jewish community. Some Jews are opposed to dialogue.

When Jews and Christians engage in dialogue today, as Philip Johnson has put it, thousands of years of history are looking over their shoulders, and much of it unpleasant. When Jews were engaged in "dialogue" during most of the Middle Ages, it was a situation in which the cards were stacked against the Jews. The ultimate goal of that kind of "dialogue" was either the conversion of the Jews or their humiliation. Even victory for the Jews in that "dialogue" was dangerous.

The principle of the sanctity of the human conscience strikes most Jews as the greatest meaning and hope of ecumenism because Jews throughout most of their history have been a minority group defending a different point of view, a dissenting position, a marginal viewpoint, and a way of life not shared by the majority.

Because it has endured so much in the defense of conviction, Jewry has great reason to respond favorably to a movement within Christianity in which respect for the beliefs of others is a central principle. Even today, very few Jewish adults have been spared the experience of an anti-Semitism which has religious origins or components. For many Jews, remembrances involving "the separation of brothers" still unfortunately remain. Remaining in the memory of many Jews is the remembrance of the predominant silence among Christians about the Nazi attack on the Jews. Few, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Christian theologian, were willing to risk even loss of position to speak in behalf of Jews.

The principle of respect of

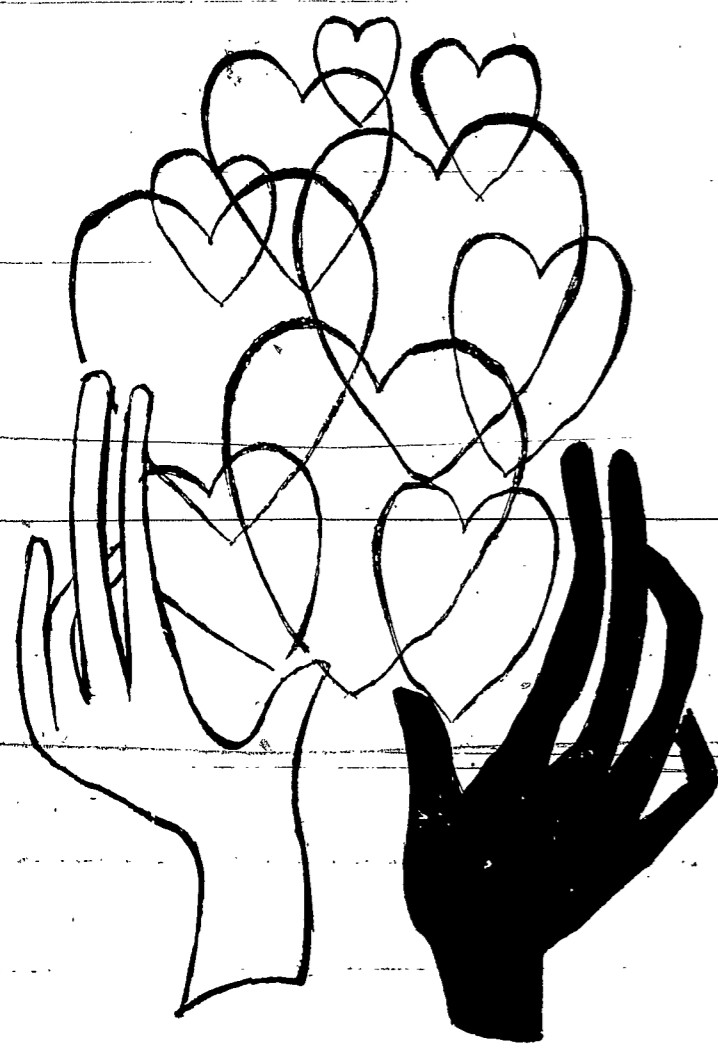
what is holy to others as an essential aspect of ecumenism is important to Jews finally in terms of their respect for Christianity itself as a commitment.

For many Jews the essential meaning of the crucifixion itself is that Jesus was put to death by Roman authority because of his convictions. He was put to death because he uttered a message, the Kingdom of God, which was a threat to the greed of those in power. A Jew feels that at those times when Christianity, when Christian authority joined in the persecution of Jews for economic, political, or social reasons or in the defense of the power of its own institutions, this was a betrayal of the message and ministry of the Master and Teacher of Christianity.

If some Jews, therefore, are wary about theological dialogue with Christians, it is because they do not think that the principle of respect for the sanctity of the beliefs of others is yet firmly enough rooted; that the purpose of dialogue is still conversion or polemics. If others are enthusiastic about dialogue, it is because they believe an entirely new basis has been established for conversation and relationships.

For the first time in a long time, many Jews and Christians feel that they are able without offense to discuss doctrines held by one another, and to disagree openly without scandalizing their opposite numbers and without modifying the reality of their own point of view. The great Jewish scholar, Nachmanides was forced in 1263, as a result of "dialogue" with an apostate, Pablo Christiani, to leave Spain at the age of seventy. The direct result of that particular debate as with

(Continued on Page 4B)



"There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name without a change of heart," said the world's Catholic bishops at the Vatican Council. Plans and projects, great though they may be, will all come to naught unless there first be an interior renewal in the heart of individual Christians. All our efforts, therefore, toward bridging the chasms which separate people of different races, different creeds, different nations — must begin for each of us, as the Council stated, with prayer "to the Holy Spirit for the grace to be genuinely self-denying, humble, gentle in the service of others."

## Catholics, Baptists To Study Faith, Freedom

De Witt, Mich.—(NC)—Representatives of the Catholic Church and the American Baptist Convention have launched a study into two areas of particular interest to Catholics in the 1960s—the relationship of religious freedom and ecclesiastical authority and the role of the laity in the life of the Church.

The study was launched at the end of an April 3 and 4 meeting of delegates from the American Baptist Convention and the U.S. Bishops' Commission on Ecumenical Relations.

It was the first official contact between the two religious bodies, although leaders of the two groups, Bishop Joseph Greer of Reno, Nev., and Dr. Robert G. Torbet of Valley Forge, Pa., executive director of the American Baptist Convention's Commission on Christian Unity, had held private talks for more than a year.

The next meeting will be held

in a year. In the meantime, however, a planning committee will discuss and assign members to study three areas of future consideration:

—The nature of Christian freedom in relationship to ecclesiastical authority.

—The role of the congregation in the total life of the church.

—The relationship between believers' Baptism (adult Baptisms practiced by Baptists) and the sacrament of Confirmation (administered to Catholics as they become adults).

In a statement issued at the end of the meeting, the delegates said:

"It is anticipated that the three topics under discussion will lead to a fruitful probing of the meaning of religious liberty which is of concern to both American Baptists and Roman Catholics in our day."



## Learning About Our Neighbors

A series of eight Sunday evening talks was held at St. Patrick's parish, Elmira, to learn about "Our Neighbor's Faith." Rabbi Sidney Goldstein was one of the speakers. Participating churches, besides St. Patrick's, included Grace Episcopal, Holy Trinity Lutheran, North Presbyterian, Hedding Methodist, Trinity Episcopal, Park Congregational and First Baptist of Elmira. Father Otto J. Vogt arranged the series. Raymond Carter was moderator at each discussion program.



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## A Minister at Catholic Rite

Oakland, Calif.—(RNS)—Rev. Alden A. Read, a United Church of Christ minister, officiates at the wedding of his son to a Catholic girl in St. Augustine's Catholic church in Oakland. The couple are John Read, 22, and Marie Emmekeppel, 21 of St. Callistus parish in El Sobrante, Calif. Present at the rite was Father John Ritzkus, C.S.P., of the Newman Center, University of California in Berkeley (center). Special permission for the unusual marriage ceremony was granted by the Vatican.