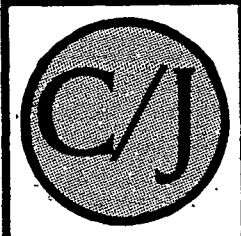


Mid-East Peace Freighted with Religion

By Frank Maurovich
(RNS Special Correspondent)

In no other so important political event in modern history has religion played such a determining, if not decisive, role than in the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

The historic signing of the accord marked another occasion when religion, in whose name so many wars have been fought and so much blood spilled, has become, belatedly perhaps but no less blessedly, a catalyst for peace.



Special

In 1972, for example, the World Council of Churches played a key role in promoting the agreement that ended the bloody 17-year civil war in the Sudan. The so-called "forgotten war" between Christian and pagan black southern Sudanese and the Arab Muslim northerners had cost an estimated half a million lives.

Last year, the military rulers of Argentina and Chile responded to the insistent offers of Pope John Paul II and turned to the Vatican to mediate a volatile border dispute that threatened to erupt into war between the two predominantly Catholic nations.

But these examples pale in comparison to the significance of the Egyptian-Israeli pact. The Middle East, where four wars have been fought in one generation, still threatens more than any other area of the world to touch off a superpower confrontation and ignite World War III. To the extent that the peace accord — as tenuous as it might now be — forestalls or avoids such a tragedy will the historicity of the March 26 treaty signing be marked and the role of the professing Muslim Anwar el-Sadat, Jewish Menachem Begin, and Christian Jimmy Carter be remembered.

The peace signing ceremony in Washington was filled with religious reference. Each leader quoted from the Holy Books — the Koran and the Bible. Each prayed for peace. President Sadat described President Carter as "armed with the blessings of God." Prime Minister Begin said that the American President's efforts "bore God's blessed fruit." With a hope for peace "for all the children of Abraham," Carter concluded by saying, "We pray God, we pray God together that these dreams will come true." The reverence carried over to the state dinner that evening and took precedence over normal protocol when Carter began the festivities by saying grace.

What made this faith dimension so remarkable is that it was the religious conviction of politicians, not the political contribution of churchmen, that sustained

the peace effort during 16 months of delicate and arduous negotiations.

The occasion, however, did not lack a certain religious incongruity, not the least of which being that these same leaders seem to regard arms at least as important as faith in promoting peace. The bulk of the \$4.5 billion to \$5 billion post-treaty aid package will supply F-16 fighter planes, tanks and armed personnel carriers to the two nations. Such an influx will undoubtedly set off an arms-buying spree in the other Arab nations and add to the \$55 billion that Israel and the Arab countries have spent on war materials since 1973.

While religious symbols were used to endorse the accord, they were also used to condemn it. Protesters in some world capitals prominently displayed posters of Ayatollah Khomeini, the Iranian Muslim leader. In Jerusalem, Palestinian women denouncing the treaty blocked the entrance to the El-Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount.

The interfaith service at the Lincoln Memorial, commemorating the peace treaty, was celebrated without the scheduled participation of Dr. Muhammed Abdul-Rauf, director of Washington's Islamic Center. Muslim protesters claimed that they had persuaded Dr. Rauf not to take part because his presence "might be misrepresented."

These are indications that, as the leaders of Egypt, Israel and the United States attempt to build a comprehensive Middle East peace on the precarious foundation of the present accord, religious symbols and arguments will continue to be key ingredients — both positive and negative.

The influence of the Muslim religion, commonly regarded as anti-Zionist, is hardest to predict because there is no organizational hierarchy in Islam, no leader of leaders. Ayatollah Khomeini is only one of many mullahs, or holy men. His prominence is due more to his early, outspoken opposition to the Shah, not to his position within Islam.

The Grand Sheikh of the Mosque of Al Azhar, who is the head of the Supreme Council of Islamic Research, composed of 50 prestigious religious scholars from 21 Muslim countries, has declared his "boundless support" for President Sadat's peace making efforts. But the Grand Sheikh is an Egyptian, and few Muslim leaders outside of Egypt agree with him — at least publicly.

The success of the peace accord hinges on solving the Palestinian question and control of the Old City of Jerusalem, where Christians, Muslims and Jews have some of their most sacred shrines.

President Sadat reported that at Camp David he and

Begin had been more than 90 per cent agreed on resolving the problem of Jerusalem. The Egyptian leader proposed that the city be ruled by a combined council of Israelis and Arabs as a united city. "I agreed at Camp David that Jerusalem shall not be divided by barbed wire," Sadat told reporters in Washington.

Assuming that some sort of combined council arrangement could be worked out, the key would lie in winning the acceptance of King Khalid of Saudi Arabia who is regarded as guardian of the Muslim holy places within his domain, Mecca and Medina, and, by extension, the Dome of the Rock and the El Aqsa Mosque on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. With the King's approval, other Muslim opposition seems unlikely.

To be noted is the quiet but noticeable change in the Vatican stance on the Jerusalem issue. Early in his reign, Pope Paul VI called for internationalization of the city. But Pope John Paul I, responding to a letter of congratulations from Israeli President Yitzhak Navon, addressed the papal letter to the "President of the State of Israel, Jerusalem, Israel," the first Pope to acknowledge the state of Israel and the Jewish nation's capital. Pope John Paul II vigorously and without qualification praised the new peace pact. Some observers, prematurely perhaps, predict that the Vatican will use its influence with Christian Palestinians to take part in the negotiations.

Such cooperation may help solve the more serious religious-political question which, in the words of the Camp David framework, is "the resolution of the Palestinian problem in all its aspects." President Begin, who with many Jews, regards the West Bank, or Samaria and Judea, as part of the biblical Eretz Israel (land of Israel), has vowed that Israel would never permit the establishment of a Palestinian state on the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

But not even all of Israel's religious leaders agree with the Prime Minister. Sephardic Chief Rabbi Ovadia Yosef has declared that Jewish Halachic Law permits withdrawal from territories for the sake of peace. On the other hand, the Chief Rabbinical Council of Israel, led by militant Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi Sholomo Goren, has asked fervent Jews to implore the "Lord of Hosts to pre serve the territorial integrity of the land of Israel."

Time will tell whether religion which has contributed so much to the present pact will cement or disintegrate it in the uncertain days ahead. But the hopeful sign is that Sadat, Begin and Carter have shown that peace is possible. That in itself may be no guarantee, but it is a blessing that portends well for the future.

John LaCroix

An Odyssey in Faith

By John Dash

Picture this: a wealthy man, with more money than he "could ever spend," no family responsibilities, following the sun from Canada to Key West each year. Dr. John R. LaCroix had achieved the pinnacle of success in his profession and had retired.

But for the soon-to-be Father John LaCroix, that kind of life is worth less than nothing.

At the age of 67, John LaCroix will be ordained this June by Cardinal Edward Flahiff as a Basilian priest. Among those who will lay his hands on the new priest's head will be Father LaCroix's son, Father J.R. Steven LaCroix.

A telephone interview with the doctor was undertaken on a tip from Father Karl Belsch, a longtime member of the Aquinas Institute staff who now travels out of

Rochester as director of vocations for his order's Eastern Region.

Back in 1969, at the age of 57, Dr. LaCroix was General Surgeon for an 1800-bed hospital in Hamilton, Ont.

Around Christmas time of that year, his life fell apart. "Within six weeks, I lost my wife, my practice and my health." His wife died and his own ill health forced his resignation from the hospital.

It was at that point, he said in a telephone interview recently, that he began "travelling from Holiday Inn to Holiday Inn," along the sun trail.

With cash in his pocket, "and a bottle for the night," at each stop, "I discovered that I was going from nothing to nothing. I didn't talk to anybody. I was just about mad."

"Pity the retired active man," he exhorted.

Significantly, though, because his son is a Basilian priest, home base for the doctor was St. Joseph's house, a retirement facility in Toronto for Basilians.

And while there, "I got to thinking, why not study for the priesthood? I always had the itch for the priesthood, since I was 12; and celibacy? — there's something about physiology that alters a bit at my age."

He said that he gave his money to his children, "\$5,000 tax-free a month," and began what he considers "a marvellous experience."

Once his decision to study for the priesthood was made he "came away overjoyed. At last I was doing God's will," though he cautions that he had "always lived a useful life."

He said that he always treated his patients equally

and that he "went to Mass; but I wasn't doing anybody any good."

LaCroix prays that God's "vocations will come to those these days with some sap in them." He said that "indolence is the greatest sin — the greatest."

John LaCroix didn't only decide to pursue the priesthood. He will be ordained a Basilian priest. He will take vows of poverty and obedience to his superiors, neither of which is required (though often lived) of the diocesan clergy.

He said that he has discovered, "the vows make you free."

The greatest act of freedom, he said, "is to love God. Otherwise we're slaves. The vows make a man free."

Truly free, not an "echo of the cant of Liberty."

Diocese Receives Reimbursements For State Services

Last week the U.S. Supreme Court allowed \$20 million in reimbursement funds to be paid private schools in New York State for their costs in complying with state required testing and attendance reporting. For the Diocese of Rochester, according to Sister Roberta Tierney, director of General Education, this means a payment of \$350,000.

This reimbursement, for the academic year of 1976-77, will be allotted elementary and secondary schools for their expenses incurred by personnel services used for the state mandated processing of attendance, tests and reports.

"We're hoping the payments will come before the end of the academic year."

Sister stated.

This could be the first of three such reimbursements as there are three academic years, in which the schools paid for processing state requirements, still outstanding. Sister, who met with Gordon Ambach, commissioner of Education, last week in Albany, sees no reason why these added reimbursements (which could mean \$1 million dollars for the diocese) won't be forthcoming.

In freeing the reimbursement funds for private schools, the high court did not decide the constitutionality of such payments but just refused to continue a lower court order barring disbursements.