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TSF BULLETIN
THEOLOGICAL STUDENTS FELLOWSHIP

NOVEMBER–DECEMBER 1985

Vol. 9, No. 2 $3.50

clues for the church to have understood that these teachings no longer applied after the "neither Jew nor Greek" issue had been settled.

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Points of Dialogue Between Evangelicals and Jews

by Marc Saperstein

Our task in solidifying communications between the evangelical and the Jewish communities is a challenging one. Traditional negative stereotypes of Jews and Judaism, which many liberal Protestants and even the Catholic Church have formally repudiated, still linger in some evangelical preaching and education; I have heard them in popular radio broadcasts. On the other side, there is something about evangelical Christians, especially those in the vanguard of the recently revived political activism, that makes many Jews uneasy. Partly it is the lingering suspicion, whether justified or not, that evangelicals view all Jews as highly desirable potential converts. But more important, I would guess, is the widely prevalent assumption among Jews that evangelicals treasure and work for a vision of America fundamentally different from that which most Jews share.

When Jews hear calls to make our country a "Christian nation" once again, we see a host of disturbing images. Our perception is that the evangelical goal is to remold this country into an America that would make Christianity normative and reduce Jews and others who are not "born again Christians" to the position of tolerated dissidents; an America that would see denominational religion intruding into public life to a greater extent than at any time in the past hundred years; an America where freedom of dissent would be radically stifled and restrictive standards would be imposed on literature and the arts; an America where millenarian speculation about an apocalyptic battle could inform our foreign policy; an America in which radical feminists, conscientious supporters of a nuclear weapons freeze, socialists, advocates of free choice on abortion, homosexuals, and even old-fashioned liberals would be branded as anti-God and denied legitimacy. For Jews, the vision of many evangelicals is a frightening apparition, and this often makes a calm discussion of the issues rather difficult. This is further complicated by some misperceptions of what we have in common. Let me touch on two of these.

One frequently hears the assertion made by evangelicals that one thing they share with Jews is a profound commitment to the Bible as the Word of God. Here I would sound a cautionary note. We must not forget that the Hebrew Bible is not the same as the Christian Old Testament, even though it may contain precisely the same books. The old stereotyped Christian reading of Scripture still lingers, contrasting the vengeful, zealous God of the Old Testament with the merciful, loving, gracious God of the New. This is certainly not an image Jews would recognize in the God of our ancestors.

Furthermore, the essential story of the Hebrew Bible as read by Jews is quite different from that of the New Testament as read by most Christians. For Jews, it is the story of the emergence and early history of people in a covenant with God, a people that won its land, built its Temple, lost both because of its failure to live according to the standards God expected, and, having experienced the traumatic catharsis of defeat and exile, was poised to return and rebuild. For Christians, this entire story is a preparation for things to come, essentially important not as history in its own right but as prefigurement and prophecy of a New Dispensation which would to a large extent make the old obsolete. We can be reading the same words, but what we read is not really the same.

And all too frequently, we do not even read the same words. For the Jew, the Bible is always the Hebrew text. While Judaism has never forbidden translation, as did Islam and for some time and for very different reasons the Catholic Church, no serious study of the Bible has ever been separated from the original Hebrew. By contrast, I frequently hear evangelicals quoting "God's Word" as if the text was originally uttered or revealed in King James English. Let us never forget that when we quote an English verse, we are not quoting the Bible; we are quoting one translation of the Bible.

This point is not mere academic pedantry. Translation always entails difficult and sometimes arbitrary decisions. A phrase in one language may have two possible meanings; the translator must usually render one at the expense of the other. What begins as multivalent and suggestive ambiguity emerges in translation as straightforward simplicity. This transformation is especially pronounced in translation from biblical Hebrew, which, as many of you know, has no punctuation, no indications where a quotation ends, hundreds of verbs with unclear subjects and pronouns with unclear referents, an imperfect tense that can mean you must, you may, or you will, and that omnipresent *vav conservive*, which can have at least half a dozen different meanings.

For the Jew, therefore, the Bible read and studied in Hebrew is a very different kind of text from that quoted in English by many evangelicals; it is fraught with ambiguities and obscurities, always open to new and legitimate interpretations, an open-ended text, the meaning of which may be ultimately elusive, which we are left to wrestle with and probe. We are not sure how to translate properly even the first sentence of the book of Genesis. This may be why in theological matters,

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Jews have traditionally had such a marked tolerance for diversity.

Where the Jewish community has tried to impose a measure of conformity upon its members, and this is primarily in the realm of behavior governed by Jewish law, the Bible has been understood and applied through a tradition of rabbinic interpretation. This is also frequently difficult for evangelicals to understand, but there is no model in traditional Jewish life for appealing directly to the Bible as a source of authority over others. *Sola Scriptura* is not a live option in the Jewish context, any more than the Supreme Court today could decide to throw out all the judicial decisions of the past 200 years and adjudicate each case solely on their direct reading of the Constitution. For the traditional Jew, the *meaning* of the Bible is largely open-ended, as I said, but the Bible *functions* as it has been understood by the rabbis over the past 2000 years. All of this, I take it, is quite different from the Bible of the evangelicals.

duction rates, average age, and intermarriage lead many to conclude that the number of Jews in the world will decline significantly over the next few generations. The very existence of a Jewish people 100 years from now is for us an agonizing question mark.

Under such circumstances, we cannot see these groups as contributing toward Jewish survival. With very few exceptions, their agenda does not reflect that of the Jewish community as a whole. They are not involved in the causes of Soviet Jewry, Jewish education or philanthropy; their only cause seems to be the winning of new converts. And their natural loyalties and affinities appear to us to be with evangelical Christians, not with Jews. Given the choice of marrying an evangelical Christian or a non-messianic Jew, most would feel that they have more in common with the Christian. They themselves may believe that they continue to be Jews, but their children will not be. And that for us is a critical touchstone.

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A second area that evangelicals frequently think of as something we share in common is what might be viewed as the overlap formed by the intersection of our two circles: the Messianic Jews, Jews for Jesus, Hebrew Christians, or any of the other half dozen names by which these groups are known. I hope that no readers will take offense if I attempt to articulate the Jewish perspective on this issue.

I concede that the Jewish position may not be the most rational or consistent. Given the enormous theological diversity readily tolerated in Jewish life, given the fact that a self-proclaimed atheist who never sets foot in a synagogue can be an honored member of the Jewish community, given the fact that there has been a radical rethinking of long-standing traditions (on the role of women, for example) in the Reform and Conservative movements, why should the acceptance of Jesus as Messiah and Savior place an individual beyond the pale of Jewish pluralism? Yet the consensus among Jews is undeniable, and there are few issues today on which it is so strong: the acceptance of Jesus is not a fulfillment of Judaism or even an authentic option within it, but as much a violation and abandonment of Judaism as the repudiation of Jesus would be for Christianity.

How might this consensus be explained? First, there is the power of historical memory among Jews. It is impossible to eradicate the psychic legacy of 16 centuries in which Christians, often backed by the power of the state, exerted various kinds of pressure on Jews to renounce their "blindness" and accept the "true faith"—the legacy of generations of Jews who could have made things so much easier for themselves by succumbing to these pressures, yet refused, sometimes at the cost of their lives. Too much has happened in the relationship between the two communities over the centuries for Jews to consider dispassionately the merits of a compromise version that would somehow have the best of both worlds. Nineteen hundred years ago, Jewish Christianity may have been a real option, but from our perspective, history has long since rendered it obsolete.

Second, the Jewish people today are fighting a demographic battle for their very survival. There are still fewer Jews in the world today than there were in 1939. Statistics about repro-

Finally, there is the problem of tactics that are not always above deception. Publicly disseminated leaflets assert that the only requirement is to accept Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, whereas most of these believers hold to a rather high Christology totally alien to Jewish sensibilities. Instruments of Jewish ritual life—the ram's horn, the matzah—are exploited in a way that even non-religious Jews find highly offensive. It is particularly unfortunate when much of the information about Judaism available to evangelical Christians emanates from these circles, rather than from sources the Jewish community would recognize as authentic. I am certainly not questioning the right of these groups to find their own religious way, or the right of the evangelicals to count them among their own. But they are not a source of commonality between evangelicals and Jews; they are an irritating source of friction.

The issue of Israel is far more complex, and there is considerably less consensus on this among Jews. On two matters there can be little argument.

First, the state of Israel today remains an almost ultimate concern of world Jewry. While the Jewish people and religion were able to survive almost 1900 years in exile without a state of their own, the loss of Israel today, so soon after the Holocaust, would be a trauma from which the entire people might never recover. Therefore, any religious group that could not support the right of Jews to sovereignty over one tiny portion of the earth's surface, or support the threatened state in times of national emergency, could not seem to be an appropriate partner for authentic dialogue. If you hesitate and waver over my brother's right to survive, what is there to discuss?

Second, as a whole, evangelical Christians have been more supportive of Israel, both politically and economically, than either the liberal Protestant denominations or the Catholic Church. Jews recognize this and appreciate it. Figures such as the late G. Douglas Young, a proud Zionist and an eloquent and tireless defender of Israel against the calumnies of its detractors, have been respected, admired and loved throughout the Jewish community. The bleak realities of world politics, in which tiny democracies struggling to live in peace are cast in the role of villains, while "third world" oppressive dictatorships are idealized as heroic, make it clear that evan-

gelical support of Israel in the United States is critical and cannot be casually dismissed.

These two facts make a third one somewhat puzzling: that there is some ambivalence among Jews about the evangelical position on Israel. I cannot analyze this in depth, but these are some of the factors involved. First, many Jews remain distrustful of evangelical motives in their support of Israel. To welcome this support while ignoring the eschatological belief-structure undergirding it strikes some Jews as either cynical or naive. Second, there are suspicions about the links between evangelicals and American oil interests, raising the fear that in a time of critical choices, the economic pressures behind the anti-Israel position will win out. An example of this is the vote of most Congressmen supported by the Religious Right on behalf of the AWACS sale to Saudi Arabia.

Third, many Jews have a sense that evangelicals are not truly concerned about Israel as a reality, but about Israel as a doctrine. The Holy Land tours are of immense economic value to Israel. But when they are limited to the Sea of Galilee, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, and the old City of Jerusalem, overlooking all that the Jewish people have accomplished in that land in the past 100 years, is it truly Israel that they are seeing? Finally, at a time when there is considerable dissent both in Israel itself and within American Jewry about policies taken by the Israeli government, the uncritical support of hawkish positions expressed by some evangelicals, often because of their understanding of eschatological doctrine, is not perceived by all Jews as helpful. All these are issues that deserve to be explored fully in dialogue.

Our perception is that the evangelical goal is to remold this country into an America that would make Christianity normative and reduce Jews and others who are not " born again Christians" to the position of tolerated dissidents.

I would also argue that both Jews and evangelicals need to work together today to define the proper role of religion in public life. There is a danger that the vigorous involvement of evangelicals in the public realm may push Jews into arguing that religion should confine itself to the church or synagogue and not mix into matters that are none of its business.

In my judgment, this would be a serious mistake. While not all Jews would agree, I, for one, am not prepared to abandon the principles of religous social action, or to confine religion in an isolated enclave removed from the great social issues of our time. I defend the right, even the need, for religious people of all confessions to speak out publicly from the perspectives of their faiths. I believe it is entirely proper for religious leaders to urge their people to participate in the political process in order to translate deeply-held values into actuality. Indeed, I would argue that the voice of genuine religious commitment is sometimes desperately needed as a principled critic of a state that claims too much for itself, or cares too little for its people.

However, I argue that when we do so speak out from a religious tradition, we should do so with toleration and respect for the views of others, remembering that we do not have God in our pockets, and that we might possibly be wrong in our understanding of what God wants of us. All of us, Jews and Christians, liberals and conservatives alike, are faced with the task of interpreting and extrapolating from complex traditions, and trying to discover in the accumulated wisdom of the past some light for the present. This is a critical task, but it is one that requires both conviction and humility—a task that is more properly addressed by the art of religious persuasion than by the exercise of religious power.

Perhaps the most important challenge we face in addressing such questions is not to demonize each other, and not to be overly eager to apply the biblical imagery to the world around us by identifying antagonists in an apocalyptic battle between good and evil. We stand only to lose by thinking of each other as the enemy, rather than as sincere human beings, whose perspective on the issues of our day we should try to understand, and may even be able to respect.

This is not always easy. In addition to fundamental political differences, the religious differences are serious, and they should not be underestimated. Jews facing evangelicals will recognize that many of you find your biblical faith committing you to an understanding of Judaism as a religion superseded by the coming of the Messiah, a religion that can provide no salvation or eternal hope for its adherents. This is a harsh judgment for Jewish ears, for we know that the doctrine of Judaism as superseded has in the past spilled over into the assumption that the Jew is expendable.

Evangelicals facing Jews will recognize that here is a group that has heard the "Good News" and rejected it, not out of blindness or perversity but out of the firm conviction that our role in God's covenant requires no redefinition, that we are expected to live up to our duties as Jews, and that we anticipate no new truth to invalidate our way of life. This reality may challenge certain deeply held Christian beliefs.

As Martin Buber once said to a similar audience, "Premessianically, our destinies are divided. To the Christian, the Jew is the incomprehensibly obdurate man, who declines to see what has happened; and to the Jew, the Christian is the incomprehensibly daring man, who affirms in an unredeemed world that its redemption has been accomplished. This is a gulf which no human power can bridge. But it does not prevent the common watch for a unity to come to us from God, which, soaring above all of your imagination and all of our . . . replaces all the creedal truths of earth by the ontological truth of heaven which is one.

"It behooves both you and us," Buber continued, "to hold inviolably fast to our own true faith, that is to our own deepest relationship to truth. It behooves both of us to show a religious respect for the true faith of the other. This is not what is called 'tolerance;' our task is not to tolerate each other's waywardness, but to acknowledge the real relationship in which both stand to the truth. Whenever we both, Christian and Jew, care more for God himself than for our images of God, we are united in the feeling that our Father's house is differently constructed than all our human models take it to be."*

Whether because of the vagaries of historical circumstance, the limitations of human understanding, or the mysteries of Divine Providence, our respective communities have walked widely divergent paths for 1900 years.

No one would suggest that the paths can or even should today be united. But perhaps we can ensure that they will lead us in the same direction.

*Martin Buber, "The Two Foci of the Jewish Soul" in *The Writings of Martin Buber*, ed. Will Herberg, (Cleveland, 1956), p. 276.