A Dialogue That Almost Died

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A new tone of optimism is being sounded in some recent reports on Christian-Jewish relationships. For instance, we have been hearing about a "decade of progress" in Jewish-Roman Catholic dialogue ever since 1975, when a Vatican commission issued "Guidelines and Suggestions" to implement the 1965 Vatican Council declaration Nostra Aetate. The new initiatives in Jewish-Evangelical conversations have been hailed as exceedingly heartening. Many and varied forms of dialogue between Christians and Jews are taking place on the local scene all across the land. Finally, the Fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches, held in Nairobi, avoided adopting a statement on the Middle East so offensive to the Jewish community as to cause the breakdown of conversations.

The above is, in my opinion, a basically correct picture of the present situation in Christian-Jewish relations. In the aftermath of the 1967 Six-Day War things looked bleak. It was a period of great stress and strain between the churches and the Jewish community. Obviously, there are still points of tension between Jews, Roman Catholics, and Evangelicals—on, for example, issues such as abortion, public funds for private schools, and the nature of Christian witness to Jews. But now there is a new climate of trust and mutual respect in which to deal with these sensitive matters.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of relationships between the Jewish community and the National Council of Churches (NCC) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). These relationships reached a very low point just prior to the Nairobi meeting in late fall 1975. It is no secret that a considerable number of concerned Jews and Christians (among the latter, some with a long record of distinguished service to the World Council of Churches) were prepared for the worst to happen.

Two months before the Nairobi Assembly, Dr. Philip Potter, General Secretary of the WCC, convened a consultation on the Middle East in Cartigny, Switzerland, with about fifty participants. This was done partly in response to the urgings of Middle East churches, who had felt for some time that they had not always been adequately consulted on Middle East concerns. There is also good reason to believe that the consultation was partly a tactical move to minimize the chances of an explosive situation at Nairobi.

The general tone of the consultation was hardly distinguishable from what can be witnessed at the United Nations, including some of the more outrageous language recently employed in the hate campaign against Israel. I had personally not been exposed to that sort of thing for thirty years.

After a four-day tightrope act we came up with a statement that said little that had not already been said in U.N. resolutions. The best thing about the consultation was that the worst did not occur. We stopped short of playing the U.N. game all the way.

The Cartigny document formed the background for the statement on the Middle East that was eventually adopted at Nairobi. In a generally positive report on Nairobi, Rabbi Arnold Wolf, the first Jew ever to be invited to a World Council Assembly, refers to this statement as "a model of mealy-mouthed compromise, but perhaps the best that could have been expected from a group where every view was heard except the Jews." That sums it up pretty well.

What accounts for this unhappy situation? There is no one simple answer. Rather, it seems that a whole variety of developments and decisions have slowly created an environment that is not conducive to a creative encounter. As other observers have pointed out, some of the developments reflect the complexities inherent in such organizations as the Na-
tional and World Councils of Churches. For example, the NCC maintains formal contact with several Jewish organizations. This tends to put relationships and the dialogue that may result from them into a bureaucratic framework. I am less familiar with the dynamics at work in the WCC, but I suspect that Geneva is not very different from New York in that respect.

Personal trust is obviously a crucial element when dealing with the sensitive questions involved in interfaith contacts. Personality problems are bound to be part of the picture, especially when participants interact within bureaucratic structures not untouched by a spirit of jealousy and rivalry.

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The past decade has been a difficult period in which to establish close Christian-Jewish ties. The issues related to the Middle East conflict are explosive enough to test even longstanding friendships. In addition, since 1967 a number of denominational and ecumenical bodies have undergone far-reaching reorganizations involving large-scale personnel changes. New relationships and new channels of communication had to be built at a time when a crisis atmosphere prevailed. In short, the circumstances have been far from ideal.

The establishment of the office on Christian-Jewish Relations in the NCC about two years ago, with the aid of a foundation grant, has greatly improved this situation. We have hardly begun to explore the real potentials of this office. At the moment, however, it is not known whether the denominations will assume financial responsibility for continuing the office when the grant runs out.

Another major factor is that a number of the member communions of the NCC and WCC have missions in Arab countries. This simple statement, even if one were to forget about the Arab-Israeli conflict, contains a story of incredible complexity. The interrelationships between Western churches and their missionary personnel, the often tiny local Christian communities, and the Arab rulers are among the most delicate in any mission situation in the world.

The political realities of the past decades have increased the pressures on the churches. Add to this the internal divisions within the churches on questions related to the Middle East and it becomes clear why they have not been able to play a significant role in the conflict—despite the fact that many warm relationships have been built with the peoples in the region over a long period of time. It took a great deal of effort just to avoid the appearance of partisanship, at least at the level of official pronouncements. Hence the strenuous efforts to produce statements that must, above all, seem "evenhanded."

This brings us back to the bureaucratic or structural question. It is well known that Arab-Christian emissaries, some of them with close ties to the PLO, are engaged in a heavy commuting schedule between the Middle East and New York, and that they have many contacts in the mission agencies of the churches. They thereby have regular opportunities to make their voices heard on political questions relating to the Middle East. The Jewish community has good reason to believe that its views are not well represented at these high ecclesiastical levels.

At the same time, materials of a biased nature are regularly mailed by groups such as Americans for Middle East Understanding, which have offices at 475 Riverside Drive but are not directly related to the NCC or any particular denomination. This apparently has caused confusion in local churches, where such literature is received. Small wonder that our friends in the Jewish community sometimes question who is speaking for whom.

Propaganda per se is not a dirty business in which only the advocates of one viewpoint on the Middle East engage. Nor should the churches deal exclusively in ethereal spiritualities far removed from the social-political facts of the real world. The point, however, is that in a process supposed to produce evenhandedness, the voice of one of the interested parties is usually absent. When that happens, dialogue is in danger of being turned into a monologue through which one party bestows its moralizations upon the other. This can only lead to frustration.

A further complicating factor is that Third World concerns in general have loomed large in NCC and WCC deliberations during the past decade. The growing role of Third World Christians in the ecumenical movement has introduced fresh dynamics into the already complex picture of interfaith cooperation. All this could have meant exciting new possibilities for Christian-Jewish dialogue. For instance, the Councils of Churches could have become the meeting ground where Jews and Third World people gained a deeper understanding of each other's history, struggles, and aspirations. The purpose would not be to involve Third World people in a guilt trip because of the past involvement of Western Christians in persecutions of the Jews. Rather, it might be hoped that people who have in common a long history of oppression could help us all catch a vision of a better tomorrow.

By and large this has not happened. Sometimes Third World concerns came sweeping into the ecumenical movement on waves of revolutionary rhetoric. That in itself should not have posed a serious obstacle to a creative encounter. After all, in many Jewish circles the exploration of radically new approaches to socioeconomic organization is hardly taboo. What happened, however, is that during the sixties a stance of hostility toward the State of Israel became fashionable; it was one of the marks of a true radical. The eagerness with which
some ecclesiastical bureaucrats (usually in the name of justice and liberation!) conformed to this fashion constitutes one of the less edifying chapters in recent church history. While the “New Left” of the sixties begins to look somewhat old hat in the seventies, one can still meet people in ecumenical departments who seek to prove their progressive stance by decrying “imperialism” at the mention of Israel.

For some people the charge of imperialism was soon no longer enough. In the U.N. the move to equate Zionism with racism followed. How could one be sure that this slogan too would not become part of the current ecumenical parlance? Could it be that reckless rhetoric would carry the day in Nairobi, straining the relations between the Jewish community and the ecumenical movement to the breaking point? Such were the questions raised during the closing months of 1975. In the light of past experiences some of us did not consider these questions at all unreasonable.

To the great credit of Dr. Claire Randall of the NCC and of Dr. Philip Potter of the WCC, at a critical moment in history they did not hesitate to speak out with courage and clarity. Their emphatic No! to the U.N. resolution on Zionism left little doubt that, as far as they were concerned, there are boundary lines between truth and falsehood that for conscience sake one dare not cross. To those who say that the statements they issued would never have been voted by the ecumenical bodies they head, I can only say that where there is integrity of leadership there is hope for the future. Perhaps the dialogue between the Jewish community and the conciliar movement will yet find its way out of ideological bondage and move into the more promising land of a common prophetic faith. A renewed focus on fundamental perspectives of faith would, I believe, be the best thing that could happen for the future of Christian-Jewish dialogue.

As the relationships between the ecumenical councils and the Jewish community became increasingly bureaucratized and politicized, theological concerns had an ever more difficult time getting on the agenda. When important faith perspectives are systematically ignored, any interfaith dialogue is soon bound to lose its soul.

I am not suggesting that ecclesiastical bureaucrats are by nature atheological creatures, or that we escape the perplexing political realities of the Middle East by taking flight into theological abstractions. The political realities are inseparable from moral issues, and the question of justice for all people in the area must not be evaded. What I am suggesting, however, is that under all sorts of pressures the ecumenical councils have avoided dealing with fundamental biblical questions, and that may well prove a ruinous route for councils of churches to take.

For instance, how should we view Israel in the light of the biblical witness? That has become a particularly problematic question for the ecumenical movement, not only because of wide divergences of opinion among its members, but also because in the politicized atmosphere in which we operate (and to which, let it be said openly, our Jewish partners in conversations have greatly contributed) any word of witness may soon be drawn into the ongoing propaganda war.

The extent to which politics has preempted theology in the ecumenical movement’s approach to the question of Israel becomes strikingly clear when one compares the statement on the Jews issued by the U.S. Catholic bishops during their meeting in November, 1975, with the document on the Middle East that came out of the WCC Nairobi Assembly a few weeks later. It is like moving in two different worlds. The one has a basically pastoral and biblical orientation; the other has a political and public relations quality about it.

Nostra Aetate, in the section on the relationships of the Church to the Jewish People, had called for “fraternal dialogue and biblical studies.” Since Vatican II a resurgence of theological reflections on Israel has indeed taken place in Roman Catholic circles. But the U.S. bishops, in a tone of urgency, ask for greater efforts. “There is here a task incumbent on theologians,” they write, “as yet hardly begun, to explore the continuing relationships of the Jewish people with God and their spiritual bonds with the people of the New Covenant and the fulfillment of God’s plan for both church and synagogue.”

It is fascinating to see how the bishops give a foretaste of the things they would like to see happen by including a few of their own observations on the crucial chapters 9-11 in Paul’s letter to the Romans, as they urge the faithful to more fully appreciate the Jewish roots of their religious beliefs. By contrast, I note in a WCC news release from Nairobi that a professor from Pakistan engaged this world assembly in an argument on the question of substituting the term “military gangsterism” in a statement deploring “terrorism.”

A review of the reports from the five WCC assemblies held thus far tells an interesting story in itself. In 1948, the year of the birth of both the State of Israel and the World Council of Churches, the participants declared about Christian-Jewish relationships that “in God’s design our destiny is linked together with theirs.” Concerning the State of Israel, the churches appealed to the nations to deal with this problem, not as one of expediency, but rather as a moral and spiritual question. How far removed all that seems from the present era of oil politics!

At the 1954 Assembly in Evanston, Illinois, the churches, in their own demonstrations of expediency, felt much less inclined to talk about Israel in terms of “God’s design and our destiny,” despite the fact that the central focus of the assembly was on hope. Some of the theologians present (among them Berkhof, Boegner, Hromadka, Niemoeller, Stitler, and Torrance) decided to issue their own statement on “The Hope of Israel.”

The section under the letter “I” in the index to the reports of the New Delhi, India, meeting (1961) ends with “investment portfolios.” Israel is no longer mentioned, although there are still two references to anti-Semitism. The Uppsala, Sweden, Assembly in 1968 limited itself to a reference to the New Delhi references, although the WCC Faith and Order Commission had published an important study document on “The Church
and the Jewish People” during the previous year. Apparently, with the assembly meeting shortly after the 1967 War, this so-called “Bristol Statement” had become a political liability and discussion of it was avoided. We have already referred to what happened at the Fifth Assembly in Nairobi during the closing weeks of 1975.

The Dutch theologian Hendrikus Berkhof, for many years a member of the Central Committee of the World Council of Churches, has shown how time and again theological discussions on Israel have been thwarted for nontheological reasons. His article entitled “Israel as a Theological Problem in the Christian Church,” published in the Journal of Ecumenical Studies (Summer, 1969), contained an urgent appeal to the ecumenical movement to change its course on this matter. Such pleas have remained, for the most part, unheeded.

It should be stressed, however, that the groundwork for a genuine dialogue on these issues has already been laid by the WCC’s own Faith and Order Commission and its Committee on the Church and the Jewish People, which jointly produced the “Bristol Statement.” This study raises challenging questions that cry out for serious ecumenical consideration. However, after the report had been duly accepted and recommended for further study, the WCC itself proceeded to ignore it.

A similar situation prevails in the National Council of Churches. In 1973 its Commission on Faith and Order received “A Statement to Our Fellow Christians,” which was based on a study document entitled “Israel: People, Land, State.” This statement was to be transmitted to member churches of the Council with the understanding that it “does not carry either approval or endorsement by the Commission,” that it “represents a stage in a process,” and that it “is the responsibility of the signatories.” Very little has been done since to move on to further stages in the process.

A recent incident was revealing. Some months ago an encounter took place at the Interchurch Center in New York between members of the Jewish Defense League and representatives of WCC-related churches. This meeting followed a brief “occupation” of the World Council offices a few weeks earlier, and some preparations had been made to deal with various eventualities. Suddenly, one of the young Jews remarked: “Everyone knows your position on such issues as gay rights, but could you please tell us what you believe about God’s promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob?” That, one might assume, is the kind of question World Council people would love to discuss. In fact, it was the last question we had expected and were ill-prepared for it.

There is a profound urgency in the present situation...an urgency beyond the need to find a solution to the tensions in the Middle East. Before we go out to solve the problems of the world the church had better get in touch with its own soul. The encounter with Judaism could be crucial to that happening.

Robert McAfee Brown recently wrote: “I think we must immerse ourselves ever more fully in what Judaism is, if we are to understand what Christianity might become.” I am deeply convinced that in the encounter with Judaism the Church’s own future is at stake. The Christian Church in general, and the ecumenical movement in particular, will experience new health as they rediscover the dimensions of meaning to be found in the Hebraic thought-world.

The Roman Catholic bishops, in their pastoral message of 1975, call attention to the fact that early in Christian history a de-Judaizing process was set in motion that robbed believers of basic insights into their faith. This de-Judaizing process, which has never really been overcome, has had a devastating effect on the life and witness of the Church.

This is an ecumenical issue of the first magnitude. The true nature of oneness will be understood more fully when the Church enters into the confession of Israel: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” Unity lies at the heart of Israel’s faith, at the center of its view of God and its vision of the future. When, as a result of the de-Judaizing process, the Church severed itself from those roots, the forces of dualistic thinking rushed in to fill the vacuum that was created. They are still tearing the life of the Church apart today.

The National and World Councils of Churches are in deep trouble. The crisis goes much deeper than the question of cash reserves. There is a shortage of theological vision. The trouble is not just that the ecumenical movement tries to be politically relevant, although it is true that a prophetic critique will rarely produce popularity. A far deeper problem lies in the fact that a de-Judaized Christianity will always be incapable of handling the historical dimensions of existence. It will either be spiritualized or it will be secularized. In either case, it will cease to be moved by that most powerful vision: the kingdom of God.

That loss is the real tragedy of all the lost opportunities in Christian-Jewish dialogue. There is so much that Christianity and Judaism have to offer each other. In a biblical-ecumenical vision they belong together. As long as the ecumenical movement fails to see this, it will be little more than a well-meaning effort to organize the forces of ecclesiastical fragmentation; it will fail because of lack of vision.

It is unlikely that in the immediate future the ecumenical movement will find something new to say about the Middle East situation. Therefore, it might be well to spend some time taking a hard look at the way it has handled Christian-Jewish dialogue. We need new approaches—some of them requiring, if not rearrangements in the ecclesiastical structures, at least a clearer recognition of the unique nature of this particular dialogue. As this is written, these very questions are being raised with key representatives of the ecumenical movement and the Jewish community. That is encouraging.

It is not enough, however, to avoid a breakdown in relationships; a breakthrough is needed in which, after honest self-examination on both sides, a way is found to move beyond slogans and suspicions to a common search for moral and spiritual truth. Tensions will remain; there is no painless way to deal with the issues involved in this dialogue. What is needed above anything else right now is a new level of trust, and of the compassion that will enable us to understand each other’s agonies.