

Of late, especially in the wake of the recent Supreme Court decision on prayer in public schools, the Jewish religious community has been urged to reconsider its traditional policy on church-state relations, lest it align itself with secularistic elements. To open the discussion on this highly sensitive and delicate issue, TRADITION has invited two prominent thinkers to offer preliminary statements, which, it is hoped, will precipitate more exhaustive discussion of the subject in our next issue. Professor Michael Wyschogrod, a member of the Editorial Committee of TRADITION, teaches philosophy at Hunter College. Rabbi Louis Bernstein, spiritual leader of the Young Israel of Windsor Park, is a graduate of Yeshiva University where he is a member of the faculty. He serves as Treasurer of the Rabbinical Council of America and Editor of the *R.C.A. Record*.

SECOND THOUGHTS ON *AMERICA*

Rarely has the response of the American Jewish community, known for its chronic inability to unite on almost any question, been as unanimous as when it took up the challenge unexpectedly hurled at it by the Jesuit periodical *America*. Suddenly, as a bolt out of the blue, one of the most authoritative voices of American Catholicism could be heard warning its "Jewish friends" of the resurgence of anti-Semitism that might result from the position taken by several large national Jewish organizations on the church-state issue, particularly on the recent Supreme Court decision banning the non-denominational prayer recited in one of New York State's school districts. By taking the position it had, the American Jewish community, according to *America*, was in danger of alienating itself from the mainstream of American life which objects to the removal of all references to God from various vital areas of national life. The

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anti-Semitism resulting from such an alienation was the source of *America's* concern, a concern it felt fit to share with its "Jewish friends."

The replies elicited by this broadside were swift in coming, clear, and inevitable. Coming as they did from the affected Jewish organizations as well as *America's* sister journal, *Commonweal*, a periodical edited by Catholic laymen, these replies had a catholicity of origin that added to their inherent cogency. It was pointed out that if indeed the position taken by the Jewish organizations did produce a measure of anti-Semitic resurgence in the Catholic community, this was a problem to be fought by the responsible moral spokesmen of that community instead of cause for the Jewish community to re-appraise its point of view. After all, had not the Catholic Church, on any number of occasions, taken stands which foreseeably produced anti-Catholic feeling without being dissuaded on that account when it felt itself morally in the right? Furthermore, was it not the right of any group in America peacefully to advocate its standpoint before the competent judicial tribunals of the nation without having to fear extra-legal retaliation? Finally, the Jewish groups were by no means the only ones taking the position in question; many Protestant groups were no less vehement in their insistence on a strict interpretation of the first amendment. Underlying much of the response, though perhaps never fully articulated, was the thought that to invoke the threat of anti-Semitism, a psychosis that led in the recent past to the greatest crime in human history, was, at the very least, a lapse of taste of massive proportions. This was particularly obvious to that part of the informed Catholic and Jewish public which had not yet recovered from the heart-rending record of moral failure documented in the recently published study by Gordon C. Zahn entitled *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars*. With the content of this book still clear in mind, it was particularly depressing to hear talk of anti-Semitism from American Catholic circles.

And yet it is difficult to escape the feeling that there is something incomplete about the affair. While it was clearly out of place for *America* to couple what it had to say with the theme

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of anti-Semitism, we must not permit this lapse of good judgment to detract from the substantive issue underlying the debate. As I see it, this issue is: has the time come for the American Orthodox community to re-evaluate its stand on the church-state issue? I would answer this question in the affirmative.

Let us first refer to the matter of federal aid to private schools. This issue was recently debated eloquently and knowledgeably in the pages of TRADITION and it is therefore unnecessary for me to recapitulate its details. But the very fact that it was debated, where previously it was simply taken for granted that Jewish opinion is unanimously opposed to such aid, indicates that a re-examination of this problem is taking place in informed Jewish circles. We must be quite clear on one point: as Orthodox Jews, we have a right to guide our thinking on these matters by considerations of self-interest, at least to a considerable extent. And what is more, we need not be ashamed of this because this is one of the presuppositions of the democratic process; each individual, as every group in society, takes into account his interests and from the inter-action of the many self-interests, the interest of the nation emerges. Now, what is our interest in the matter of education? Orthodox Jewry knows that the survival of Torah Judaism in this country is inextricably tied to the fate of the day-school movement. Just like the Catholic community, we realize that to educate a generation true to its faith, we cannot supplement the child's public school education with afternoon instruction and expect to produce someone conversant with his tradition and loyal to it. This is such a basic truth, that no one even remotely acquainted with Torah scholarship can question it. This being the case, it is clear that the continued existence and expansion of the Jewish day schools is essential to the believing Jewish community. Up to the present, the heavy financial burden for this enterprise has been borne by the parents directly involved and others for whom the survival of Judaism in this country is of some concern. Nevertheless, it is common knowledge that any number of these *yeshivot* have been involved in a continuous life and death struggle with the bill collector, in many cases being unable to pay their faculties for months on end. It is not surprising

fared under both of them. The well known episode in which the Chofetz Chaim refused to continue riding in the carriage whose driver was not crossing himself before the crucifixes that abound on the Polish highways testifies to the conviction of the Torah-true Jew that for the Christian, adherence to his tradition is of the utmost importance. Let us be quite frank about the matter: the Jew, with considerable justice, has his reservations about the way he has been treated in the Christian West. It is difficult to forget a history of over a thousand years of intermittent persecution and extermination. This is something for which understanding in Catholic circles must grow as more and more Catholic writers devote themselves to this history of moral failure, a process which has already begun. It is therefore almost understandable that large segments of Jewish opinion look for Jewish security in a secular, humanistically oriented world, one which has broken once and for all with religiously divisive commitments. But surely the believing Jew cannot accept this. The security of all mankind, as of the Jew, is to be found in a world in which God rules and in which all men have a sense of living under His judgment. The temporary and superficial toleration that the Jew enjoys in a completely secular, God-less world is no more than skin-deep. The price he is obliged to pay for it is the abandonment of his own faith, sooner or later. And even at that, the atheistic world turns on him with blind fury because it knows full well that the mere existence of the Jew, regardless of what he professes, is a proclamation of the sovereignty of God. It is therefore, in my view, short-sighted for the Jewish community to seek its security in a secularized America.

The argument is advanced that the insistence on keeping religious references out of governmental affairs, in schools and elsewhere, is not motivated by anti-religious or secularistic intentions, but the very contrary. It is said that religion best flourishes when the state is kept out of its affairs and when each denomination is left to go its own way. That there is considerable validity to this claim cannot be denied. Here again, our thoughts turn to the history of state religion and the associated persecution of deviant denominations, so vividly depicted

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in our history books. But is there not a strong element of living in the past in much of this? Ought we not to be reminded of the French generals of the second World War who insisted on fighting that war with the weapons and strategy of the first World War? There is nothing as dangerous as fighting the wrong war and, at this stage in history, to fight the religious wars of past centuries seems to me clearly to be fighting the wrong war.

Again, let us look at this from the Jewish point of view. The danger that threatens us today in this country is not forcible conversion to Christianity or even persecution at the hands of the Christian churches. Our danger, and a mortal peril it is, too, is secularism, the disappearance of the word "God" from the minds and tongues of millions of Jews. There must be hundreds of thousands of Jewish youngsters brought up in homes in which the name of God is never mentioned, in which the notion of prayer is as unknown as human sacrifice or voodoo incantations. It must be pointed out, painful as it is to be reminded of it, that in this respect the Jewish population of the country is in worse shape than any other group. Both my own personal observation and a number of "scientific" studies indicate that the Jewish collegiate population has a significantly more negative religious orientation than the rest of the collegiate population. This is equally true of the adult population which, for instance, has a considerably lower synagogue attendance rate than the church-going rate of the non-Jewish population. It would undoubtedly be a piece of outstanding folly to think that this situation will be corrected by a short, non-denominational prayer recited each morning in the public schools. But would it not be equally foolish to suppose that such a prayer has no effect on the Jewish child who, but for it, may never have heard a prayer recited at all? Through this prayer he does, after all, come across the notion of dialogue with God, of invoking His guidance and taking seriously His presence. It is quite likely that here and there, in the minds of some sensitive youngster, the religious dimension may take root and develop, leading, with the help of God, to an ever deeper involvement in the faith of Israel. Those who have observed the operation of the released hour program in the New York City schools, a

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program that in its time was strongly opposed by some of these same secular Jewish organizations, know of many Jewish children, from completely assimilated homes, who were drawn to Judaism through it, and are now competent, knowledgeable, and faithful Jews. Such opportunities must not be missed.

For these reasons, I think that the Orthodox community should begin making its own voice heard in these matters. When the interests of Jews and Catholics coincide, we must act accordingly. In this respect, the interests of religious Jews and religious Catholics coincide with that of America, whose interest it is that her people lift their voices to the Heavenly Father Who is the Judge of all nations.