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REVIEW ARTICLE:

JEWES AND THE ECUMENICAL DIALOGUE

*The Vatican Council and the Jews** narrates the origins, development, and final crystallization of the statement on the Jews that forms part of Vatican II's "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions." The reader is led from the Christian awakening to Jewish World War II suffering to the convening of Vatican II and its resolve to produce a statement on the Jews: through the proposition of the various versions of the statement, and the political and religious pressures—both at the Council and outside it—that shaped the debate; and finally to the statement itself, which reflects, in confessional vein, upon the Church's debt to the people of Abraham and the preciousness of the Jewish people to the Church "for the sake of the patriarchs," and teaches that Jews ought not be described as a "people guilty of deicide." Rabbi Gilbert is a dogged chronicler, and his parade of prelates and Jewish spokesmen is a busy yet necessary element in the story; especially useful is the presentation in appendices

of the documents as debated, amended, and approved. Our author does not attempt a Jewish version of Xavier Rhyne's memoir, but if the reader does not arise entertained by this volume he is at least better-informed for his effort. It is rather the author's evaluation of the record—both the announced evaluation and that constituted by the very process of selecting facts and patterning their presentation—that calls for scrutiny, and that leads one to conclude that the book contains too many uncalled spades.

To extract from the Vatican record a message of ecumenical hope, and to see the "Declaration" as a genuine and substantive step towards a meaningful pluralism, is a legitimate — if arguable — reading. The bulk of the book, however, tells the story of how the "Declaration" came into being; or at least narrates the events that formed this process: and here the telling of the tale is distorted by stylistic and other devices. As we traditionally say, *mipnei darkei shalom*. Thus, events are often viewed through the

* Arthur Gilbert, *The Vatican Council and the Jews* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1969).

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prism of contrasting press-releases and are only rarely are they decisively evaluated by the author himself; this technique creates an effect of balanced reaction, which in turn convinces one that the act or opinion in question was at worst ambiguous, when in reality it was nothing of the sort. The book backs away from reality in its attempt to become an instrument of conciliation. For example, discussing Hochhuth's *Deputy* and its effects, Gilbert writes, ". . . the play seemed to compel its viewers . . . to be for or against the Pope, to condemn or defend the Catholic Church. It was this polemic aspect of the play that led to severe criticism in both the Jewish and the Catholic press. Fortunately, reactions to the play did not necessarily follow religious lines. Many Jews, however, wished that Catholics . . . could have admitted that the Church . . . had fallen short; and many Catholics wished that more critics and playgoers, whatever their feelings about the actions of the Church could have admitted that the play was . . . one-sided . . ."

Literary balance papers over a moral distortion, and no little double-talk. The Pope's trip to Israel is handled with kid gloves: the record of papal insults is recited, the papal pronouncement at Nazareth that "In the Old Testament it was fear . . . but for Christ . . . the motive is love," is introduced as a statement that "surprised his hearers," and is immediately followed by a paragraph of casual buffering: "It had been an exhausting day in Israel . . ." In this case, as in others, pungent criticism of

the Pope is left to Protestant or Catholic journalists. Generally there is a fear of real language as an emotional and destructive instrument. Rabbi Gilbert himself, in narrating the Pope's April Lenten homily of 1965, writes that the "Pope fell into the pattern of blaming the Jews collectively for the killing of Jesus . . ." Fortunate Fall! A different narrator might have chosen a more active, conscious, verb. In short, Rabbi Gilbert doesn't face up to the simple meaning of facts, especially with regards Pope Paul: the events themselves reveal him to be a faithful expositor of traditional Catholic doctrine (surely no crime!) utilizing, at times, methods of crude deviousness. "Cardinal Bea received instructions — allegedly from the Pope but in reality from Cardinal Gicogani . . . Cardinal Bea was outraged. Ascertaining immediately that the instructions had not been sent *directly* by the Pope but were a Conservative ploy . . ." (italics mine). Now what does this mean? The Pope had not sent the message *directly*; had he sent it *indirectly*? Had he sent it at all? A historian is supposed to illumine, not confuse, the issue.

These objections are of course not the proper instruments for an analysis of the document itself, the theological grounding of both its proponents and opponents, or the roots and prospects of the ecumenical movement. But since Rabbi Gilbert's primary concern is not with any of these things, but with the process of events and their interpretation (as the title of the book shows) one may conclude that though occurrences and expressions

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are faithfully recorded, their presentation is flawed by diplomatic excesses. The book strives to create an atmosphere, rather than to reflect one.

But if the theological and ecumenical questions are not primary concerns of Rabbi Gilbert, they are important secondary concerns; moreover, the events narrated of necessity stimulate reflection on these issues. While I cannot always agree with Rabbi Gilbert, perhaps not even usually agree with him, much of what he says merits thoughtful reaction and occasional warm consent.

The Vatican Council and the Jews approves the moral courage implied by Catholic willingness to move beyond a primitive and fundamentalistic approach to the Gospels, and despite a sober historical recapitulation in Chapter 13 of "Catholic Teachings on the Jews and on Judaism," projects continuing movement in that direction. Catholic willingness to confront the meaning of its own doctrine is indeed admirable; traditional Judaism, for example, despite its less profound problematic in the area of pluralism and human dignity, has not had the courage to confront the major dilemmas posed by its doctrines (nor has it been forced to do so). Yet the question remains painfully open as to whether the "Jewish problem" of the Church is so easily exercised, and whether the mythological life of the Church is not inextricably woven of the knowledge of itself as a people who

accept Jesus, and a knowledge of a people who historically and continually reject him. As Arthur Davies's recent essay in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies** demonstrated, those Christian theologians who deal with the role of the Jewish people in the divine economy (and which Christian theologian can avoid this task?) have not really been able to effect a meaningful shift in their own thought. This task has been thus far beyond their powers because Christian scripture is in part—whether read from a fundamentalist or "symbolic" perspective—anti-Semitic. No learned, and pathetic, re-interpretation of Paul can make him something other than what he was. Cardinal Bea's rejoinder that "the harsh words were intended not as specific judgments but as prophetic admonitions . . . calling the people to repentance, and they therefore remain as admonitions to us Christians whenever we are forgetful of our calling," is admirable in intent, sermonically saccharine and ultimately threatening; his denying that "collective guilt" attaches to the Jewish people for the crucifixion, while admitting that "the condition of the Jewish people in the scheme of salvation" is not the same after the death of Jesus as before, splits hairs. The Church has not been able to admit, as Rabbi Gilbert points out, that the Gospels have been a cause of anti-Semitism: this omission reflects not only massive embarrassment, but a symptomatic — and perhaps morally praise-

* "The Jews in An Ecumenical Context: A Critique," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, Summer, 1968.

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worthy — refusal to look the source of the problem squarely in the eye; nor has the Church been able to swallow the fact and theological implications of a vigorous State of Israel. Rabbi Gilbert does note these difficulties, but I don't think he assesses them with the gravity and profundity they deserve. I do not intend to draw a hopeless portrait, but merely to call attention vividly to the difficulties, and to wonder whether one ought reasonably to expect that institution which is most committed to the mythological components of Christianity (rather than, say, its ethical ones) to lead in their dissolution. (Liberal Protestantism has, to be sure, found Israel a tough nut, too.) Perhaps the specifically religious etiology of anti-Semitism can be eliminated only by a thorough secularization (as disastrous as such a development may be from other points of view).

The mission impulse of the Church is also too easily dismissed by Rabbi Gilbert. "The Church exists by the mission as the candle exists by burning (Brunner)" is still accurate doctrine; it does not articulate an eschatological hope but a functional thrust. I do not wish to occupy the opposite extreme and maintain that every Christian theologian always has the conversion of the Jews up his sleeve; I do mean to underline the reality of the Christian prayer that all men come to Jesus and the Christian task of escorting them thence. This corrosive ambivalence as to the ends of ecumenical dialogue has been clearly pinpointed by Hindu and Muslim — indeed, by Christian — theologi-

ans; Jewish timidity, generated though it may be by sociological, psychological, and yes, genuinely religious, pressures, is unnecessary. Indeed, the dilemmas that Christian anti-Semitism and the Christian mission (two organically related doctrines) pose to the Vatican Declaration are quite properly dilemmas raised by the very confrontation in which the Church is engaged, and need not be the characteristic rejoinder of the Jew to the ecumenical invitation. He, for his part, may find many more interesting things to talk about.

The Jewish response to the deliberations at the Vatican does receive considerable attention in this book. Rabbi Gilbert aggressively defends the right of non-Orthodox individuals and organizations — largely the "defense organizations" — to speak as authentic Jewish voices to the Vatican; yet it is a nervous aggressiveness, and seems to disguise an uncomfortable defensiveness. (Considering the pronounced spiritual sterility of these bodies, one can't blame him.) One senses this, for example, in the triumphal description of Rabbi Heschel as one who "carried with him into an unprecedented audience with the Pope . . . the authentic credentials of American Jewish religious leadership"; in the surprisingly extensive notice of Orthodox attitudes and their rebuttal; and finally in the *apologia* for the Jewish "presence" at the Vatican. Rabbi Gilbert argues that this presence was a response to Vatican initiative and Vatican desire for information, and that in any case the Jewish representation was much less notice-

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able and active than the Arab one. Both points are formally valid: yet one wonders what great stores of literarily unavailable Jewish information were necessary to enable the fathers of the Church to frame this statement on the Jews; one also notes that the demoralizing effect of the Jewish posturing upon American Jewry was hardly mitigated by the large number of Arab lobbyists at the Vatican. Finally, it does seem that the Jewish presence was in fact seen by the Christian community as self-serving, and more important, that the statement attempted to scratch a Jewish itch: Rabbi Gilbert himself "poured out his heart" upon hearing John Courtney Murray wonder "why Jews were so insistent on a statement specifically dealing with 'deicide'." Msgr. John Oesterreicher defended a revised statement by saying, "It meets many of the concerns of Jews today." Once again, Rabbi Gilbert shows himself aware of these problems, but he has so structured his book that issues are debated by opposing press-releases or news conferences (at times I felt I was reading about a religious ping-pong game) and when he does discuss these problems he dismisses them too blandly. One wonders, in fact, whether the "defense organizations" did authentically represent Jewish opinion during these years, or whether their leaders were acting out their own needs; it is curious that, despite the appetite for sociological surveys that characterizes the "defense establishment," no study was commissioned in 1959-1965 to find out just what the Jews

of America, say, thought about the Vatican deliberations and the statement on the Jews.* Thus, my skepticism about the Jewish presence at the Council, or the official Jewish response to it, is not an ideological but a very pragmatic one.

But while the content of the book, its analysis of specific events and even issues can be thus faulted, its challenge merits response. The Orthodox response to the ecumenical invitation has been: *a*) Jews do not need and ought not solicit forgiveness for the crucifixion—on the contrary, it is the Church that ought contritely beg forgiveness for millennia of anti-Semitism and persecution; *b*) the dialogue, even when not directly motivated by the mission, poses a religious threat to the weakly-rooted Jew; *c*) more profoundly, "The language of faith of a particular community is totally incomprehensible to the man of a different faith community . . . Each community is engaged in a singular gesture reflecting the nature of the act of faith itself and it is futile to try to find common denominators"; *d*) Orthodoxy does encourage cooperation among the different faiths in solving the social difficulties faced by the human community.

This multi-faceted but focussed response says, in effect, "No." Let us analyze its components. The last point made, that Orthodoxy encourages the "confrontation . . . at a mundane level," is on the face of it not only positive but also potent. For despite movements towards sacramentalisms of various kinds,

* Mrs. Lucy Davidowicz, in a personal communication.

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much of modern religion claims that the cutting edge of the God-man relationship resides in the man-to-man encounter, and that the Kingdom of God must in reality be built on earth. Hence, the Orthodox response would seem most meaningful. (To counter that this in effect acknowledges a dichotomy between "religion" and "life," and thus betrays the Jewish ethic, misrepresents with a banal cliché both "the Jewish ethic" and "life.") The reason that this component of the Orthodox response has not been taken very seriously is that Orthodoxy does not take it seriously: to put it another way, Orthodoxy felt no commitment to its social environment during those decades when the rest of American Jewry was pouring its idealism and resources into this environment, and now that American Jewry seems to be reassessing this commitment (perhaps not) Orthodoxy is not likely to take the lead. Thus, excluding areas of mutual self-interest (no sneer intended), Orthodoxy's desire to cooperate with Christians for communal melioration is a pose.

The remaining components (*a*, *b*, and *c*) are all negative. (*A*) is of course a limited response, referring as it does to the Vatican statement; as such it is sensitive and necessary, not "strident." But as we shall see, the psychological effects of this posture are diffused. (*B*) is an unknown quantity: how realistic a fear is this? My own inclination is not to dismiss it summarily—aside from the factor of personnel (most Christian clergy have a long training in which the value of bringing Jesus to all mankind is stressed,

and most human beings fear diversity) there are the sociological and psychological ones: Christianity does have a superb myth, of proved seductive efficacy, and the sociological and cultural situation is one, obviously, that puts the Jew at a disadvantage in both overt and subtle ways. (Contrast, for example, the Hindu response to ecumenicism and the Jewish one; or the Israeli response and the American one.)

Then there is (*C*). On the one hand it seems overly-Idealistic: does history verify the isolation-by-definition implied here? On the other hand, taking a different and pragmatic tack, is syncretism only an ancient corrosive—or is the modern world, media fusing mankind into a message of universalism, its natural spawning ground? Further serious discussion of (*C*) would also presuppose an analysis of the goals and ground-rules of the ecumenical dialogue. Yet I intend to dismiss the questions. For ecumenicism has not shown itself a profound enough option to warrant, thus far, discussion on that level.

The "ecumenical dialogue" is a serious possibility in two arenas: the academic and the communal. The academic arena, though by no means a protected environment (as the Harvard attempt showed), is oriented towards "objective" (?) understanding, and its investigations in depth will presumably be guided in this direction. I suspect, in any case, that academicians have not bitten very fiercely into these investigations, despite their commitment to do so; there seems to be an acknowledgment of their intimacy, and a care lest doors that ought

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be opened delicately be burst by bulls in the china shop.

It would seem to be different in the community arena. There, the gift of tongues descended. Doubtless, many earnest men and women confronted both themselves and their religion anew in the wash of self-confession, and so met their neighbor as well. Yet ecumenicism that focusses on ecumenicism has no place, really, to go; lacking the thrust and discipline of theological or academic investigation, it becomes a blind alley.

Thus far the Orthodox response. There still remain, though, two crucial points to be made, which, I believe, are more significant to the Jewish people than its response to the ecumenical dialogue, and in any case ought to precede it. There is, first, the deep (if not pressing) need to first objectively and non-apologetically probe the traditional Jewish stance towards a pluralistic world and towards the humanity of men and its claims, and then to interpret our own reality in the light of that stance. I suspect that most of us would find that posture in need of re-thinking: the cliches are barren and misleading. I do not mean to be negative alone; I also wish to express the belief that the well-spring of Torah will be adequate to this task. But it is no longer enough to cite Me'iri for his broadmindedness, or to scurry about in the self-satisfaction of saving a gentile's life on the Sabbath.

Second—and here I depart the rarified, abstract world of the paragraph preceding—we ought seriously consider the image of the

non-Jew in Orthodox pedagogy and folk-culture.

I do not intend to forego an ounce of Jewish pride and selfhood; I question, though, whether this pride need be bought with defensiveness and hostility. All the pieties about *benei Noah* and the possibility of their spiritual and person integrity are not as potent as the expletive, *goy*. (In this connection, I remember the reply of Justice Silberg of the Israel Supreme Court, when asked — I believe by a non-Jew — whether the Hebrew word for gentiles was derogatory: "It depends how you pronounce it: If when saying *goyyim* you accent the last syllable, it is not; if you accent the first, it is!") Must our self-identity be so dependent upon our rejection of the humanity of the non-Jew?

Any change in attitude on these lines confronts two cruxes of national pedagogy: attitudes towards the Church and towards individual Christians. There is no need to become any less relentless or passionate in our identification of the Christian sources of anti-Semitism in either the past or the present, or less judgmental about Christian structures that strike us as pathological. But—if I may press into service some Maimonidean (but not Rosenzweigian!) theological perspective — Christianity has meant more than persecution of Jews, and its religious and moral performance cannot be dismissed, no matter how heinous its role in Jew-killing. It may be that Jewish pride and resentment must counter the obvious historical Christian conquest of the Western world with a condemna-

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tion of Christianity's worthlessness, and that our own self-identity is bolstered by our total rejection of the "other"—but maybe we ought move beyond this.

What follows from this, of course, is a similar question about the person of the other—not the other who is identified as human, or simply man: with him we have had no immediate attitudinal problem. I mean the other who identifies himself as "Christian man." If my preceding paragraph has merit, we must then proceed to say that a man may be good and decent precisely because he is a Christian; and in that case one must, in all honesty, acknowledge his Christianity as a force making for good. Again, this realization is affected but not destroyed by our acknowledgment that Christianity has often been a force for evil, and still retains these seeds.

I am quite aware that an immediate response here would be citation of Christian silence before, during and after the Six-Day War, and the current willingness of WASP America to buffer itself from black demands by sacrificing Jewish interests. "Even a paranoiac has real enemies," as they say. Yet I wonder whether moral outrage is the proper reaction here, given the pressures of self-preservation. Nor

am I impressed with the so-called criminality of Christian silence on Israel: most people and most bureaucracies are concerned with their own needs, and not those of others, and Christians and their organizations are — despite their claims — quite human. The naiveté of Jewish shock at Christian silence shocked me more than the silence itself. Have our *gedolim* said anything about Biafra? Or more to the point, said anything about South Africa? The analogies don't fully hold, I know. In short, Christian inhumanity is not proved by Christian unwillingness to involve itself in the affairs of other men. Nor, to be sure, is Christian humanity proved thereby. But, once again, I wonder whether our judgment of the totality of non-Jewish life ought to be made on the basis of its posture towards Jews; or, on the other hand, perhaps to do anything else is a sign of effete intellectualism.

Perhaps these kinds of problems can in fact be worked out only in a flourishing State of Israel, a place where — forgive the cliché — the people can live in a situation of national self-confidence and spiritual poise. There the Jewish response to the Christian phenomenon need be neither immediate hostility, on the one hand, nor insecurity sublimated to conciliation, on the other.