

American Jews and Vatican II 229

by Bernard McCabe

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When Pope Paul came to New York last October and said Mass in Yankee Stadium, before a congregation of 40,000 and a hidden audience of untold million television-viewers, he made a special point, no doubt because he was in the world's most Jewish city, of extending his blessing to 'the sons of Abraham'. The Mass he said was the Votive Mass for Peace, which has a Gospel beginning: 'Late in the evening that same day, the first day of the week, although the doors of the place where the disciples had gathered were bolted for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood before them and said: "Peace be to you!" (John 20.19-20). For days afterwards one could meet Jews saying: 'So that's what we mean, that's exactly what we mean'. Quite a few Catholics were bothered about it too (e.g. an angry Jesuit letter to *The National Catholic Reporter*: 'unthinking acceptance of scriptural readings chosen long ago by unskilled hands'). The incident with all its sensitiveness and misunderstandings on both sides, was typical enough of the atmosphere in which the 'Schema on the Jews' was received in the U.S.A.

Ever since the close of the second session the American Jewish press had given prominent space to articles and news reports echoing widely current rumours about the strength of the forces in or near the Vatican opposing a definitive statement on anti-Semitism. Everybody knew who was involved: the leaders of various Arab states, who followed the line that anti-anti-semitism favoured the nation of Israel, scriptural fundamentalists of various conservative tendencies, Uniate bishops, worried about their minority situation in Islamic societies. One of the clearest and best-informed articles on the whole topic appeared in *Commentary* (a monthly review sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, largely oriented towards Jewish affairs, but also generally regarded by American intellectuals as one of this country's very best journals of opinion). It was written by 'F. E. Cartus', evidently another of those pseudonymous insiders that the Council has thrown up.

Into this atmosphere came Pope Paul's Passion Sunday sermon, which seemed to go out of its way to stress the point that the Jews killed Jesus. The sermon was heavily criticized in the Jewish press -- 'a characteristic piece of official self-righteousness' as a commentator in the *Congress Bi-Weekly* put it, and seemed to add confirmation to the rumours that the Schema on the Jews was to be watered down.

Already in April the *New York Times* had carried a story from a European correspondent hinting that the whole Schema was simply to be dropped. In June these rumours were reinforced when the *Times* picked up a report to that effect in the (London) *Observer* and similar reports from the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and *Der Spiegel*. Although various denials of varying degrees of ambiguity came from the Vatican, naturally the American Jewish press was full of these stories. And the situation was not helped by lunatic fringe activities during the summer of 1965; for example, the *Jewish Daily News* reported the activities of a Mexican priest, the Rev Dr Joaquin Saenz y Arriaga, who had published a brochure insisting that the Catholic Church would never lift the deicide charge against the Jews, and stating openly that Catholicism would 'continue hating Jews until they accept Christ as the true Messiah'. As far as I know, however, no Jewish publication picked up the *Los Angeles Herald's* interview with Cardinal McIntyre on the subject. When he was asked about the Council's programme for better relationships between Catholics and Jews he replied: 'That's only an incidental point of the schema that is highly exaggerated by the media of communications. The problem is really to bring about a better understanding between the Jews and the Arabs'. (McIntyre, it will be remembered, went on record during the Father Dubay affair, a few months before the Watts insurrection, to the effect that there was no Negro problem in his archdiocese.)

Of course, as elsewhere in the world, the real scandal to the American Jews was that the proposal was being modified or debated at all. When we remember the wide currency of Gunther Lewy's excellent book on the Jews and the Catholic Church in Germany, full of what seems like irrefutable evidence of Catholic (and Vatican) complicity in their persecution, and the emotional impact of Hochhuth's play about Pius XII and the Jews, *The Deputy*, it is not surprising that American Jewish opinion was disturbed.

In the event the declaration was greeted politely by many spokesmen; Nathan Goldman of the World Jewish Congress had said in Israel that 'the Jewish people were moved and gratified' by the Council's action, Joachim Prinz of the American Jewish Congress echoed his words, welcoming the 'evident goodwill' behind the declaration, and Joseph Lichter of the very influential B'nai B'rith Anti-Defamation League noted with particular satisfaction the creation of a U.S. Bishops' Commission on Catholic-Jewish relations.

But again and again behind the polite statements one heard the note of disappointment, not to say anger, at what had actually occurred. The critical storm was centred of course on the omission of the 'deicide' exculpation, and the substitution of 'deplore' for 'condemn' in the passage about persecution.

Cardinal Bea, commenting on the declaration, insisted that 'the substance of what we wished to express in the prior text by the word

[deicide] is found exactly and completely expressed in the new text'. But American Jewish reaction (echoed incidentally in the Jesuit *America*, the liberal Catholic *Commonweal*, the *National Catholic Reporter*, and quite a few diocesan newspapers) was unfavourable, to say the least. Four typical comments: Rabbi Israel Goldstein in New York, speaking at a Kol Nidre service, an occasion for remembering the martyrs of Jewish faith through the ages: 'Among them are hundreds of thousands of Jews who were martyred because of the charges of *deicide* levelled against the Jewish people in connection with the death of Jesus'. Rabbi Gittelsohn at a Reform Jewish Temple in Boston, in an address largely welcoming the declaration, called the choice vocabulary 'simply hedging', and noted that the Protestants had done much better: the World Council of Churches in 1961 had recognized that the responsibility for Christ's death belonged to 'our corporate humanity', and the Convention of Protestant Episcopal Churches had spoken similarly in the U.S., in 1962. Rabbi Balfour Brickner, of the Jewish Commission on Interfaith Activities remarked mildly that the word *deicide* ought to be retained 'if for no other reason than to indicate the Vatican's clear repudiation of those anti-Jewish sentiments expressed in previous ages by such Church theologians as St Justin, Tertullian, Origen, St John Chrysostom and even St Augustine'. A recent meeting of the Jewish National Community Relations Advisory Council noted that the idea of Jewish complicity in Christ's death was still there; 'there is nothing in the Schema to prevent a Christian from saying Jews are *deicides*'.

No doubt for many Jewish commentators the real problem was that the word *had* been there. A similar reaction came to the removal of the word 'condemn' in the statement on anti-semitism, which was finally formulated as follows:

. . . the Church, which rejects every persecution against any man, mindful of the common patrimony with the Jews, moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, deploras hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.

This powerful statement was welcomed as 'an admirable step forward'. Yet Jewish commentators remembered what the former draft had said:

The Council in her rejection of any injustice, is mindful of this common patrimony between Christians and Jews. Thus, the Council deploras and condemns hatred, persecution of Jews, whether they arose in former or in our own days.

Why was the word dropped? To 'deplore' remarked Rabbi Brickner, 'is to express regret; to condemn, especially when used in a Church document, carries the weight of prohibition'.

Leaving out 'condemn' was bad enough, even worse was the Schema's omission of any reference to the part the Church has

historically played in the innumerable tragedies that have befallen the Jews. 'The Church which rejects every persecution' sounded too bland. Where was the note of repentance, of atonement? It was remarked that 'there are Catholic dictionaries and encyclopedias in which the term anti-semitism is not listed'.

Yet the most ecumenically-minded of American Jews (largely members of the Reform Synagogue) persisted in their efforts to be enthusiastic about the Council declaration. They were notably pleased by the speed with which the American bishops responded to the passage (unchanged from the first draft) which called for dialogue:

Since the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is so great, the Council wants to foster and recommend a mutual knowledge and respect which is the fruit above all of biblical and theological studies, as well as of fraternal dialogue.

A sub-commission for Catholic-Jewish relations was set up very quickly by the U.S. Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs, and its chairman, Bishop Francis Leipsig, of Baker City, Oregon, issued an interesting statement in Rome, recognizing the Schema's 'minor imperfections' and 'weaker expressions than one could wish' but looking forward to 'the time when the Council's wish for more deepened' conversations with our Jewish brethren will be implemented'. Americans are good, once they have decided to do something, at simply going ahead and doing it, whatever the difficulties. And over the last year or two there has in fact been a good deal of dialogue going on at various levels both clerical and lay, between Catholics and Jews.

* * *

But there have been other Jewish reactions, in fact the Jewish community has been deeply split over the whole issue. It is significant that at a recent meeting of the Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, convened to examine the published Schema and issue a joint statement upon it, no agreement could be reached.

One large bone of contention has been the matter of Jewish participation in the Council. It is well known that the American Jewish Committee and B'nai B'rith sponsored something which has been described by hostile critics as a 'lobby' in Rome during the 'critical' months before the Schema was finally accepted. The Committee submitted a large file of Catholic text-books, liturgical extracts, passages from the early Fathers, which were anti-Semitic in tone; the B'nai B'rith presented a detailed study of the effect of Catholic teaching on anti-Semitism in America. These organizations worked in fact at the invitation of the Secretariat, but they ran into severe criticism from many Jewish groups at home. The spectacle of Jews 'lobbying' in Rome was itself distasteful to many – smacking of a stance particularly disliked by Jews, that of the 'beseecher'.

The words 'Jewish self-respect' have been much in the air in this context over the last two years. Rabbi Morris Kentzer of the American Jewish Committee met this criticism trenchantly recently:

It is an act of self-respect to stand side by side with (those American bishops and Cardinals who were fighting for the Schema) . . . we are declaring to the world . . . that this is the last time in Jewish history that we are going to stand idly by while our people are maligned and vilified. (N.Y. Times, October 29)

But many Jews took the line that anti-Semitism is a Christian problem. The whole business has nothing to do with the Jews, being simply a long overdue piece of house-cleaning that the Christians had better get on without making any more fuss. This attitude was dealt with very firmly by Milton Himmelfarb in *Commentary* last year:

Can it be that some Jews, and even rabbis, believe that anti-Semitism is a Christian problem – believe it that is, as something more than a tautology?

. In the United States the denial of justice to the Negroes is not a Negro, it is a white problem, but the Negroes suffer, not the whites. They are constantly aware of the problem, and we only occasionally. It was Negroes who had to demonstrate, North and South, before some whites started to demonstrate, too . . . Were they lacking in self-respect because their share of the Washington marchers was so disproportionate to their share in the American population?

Since Jewish opinion, nor surprisingly, has remained very sensitive about the Council's discussions, one could hardly expect expressions of 'gratitude' to be in order. Thus, the President of the American Jewish Committee has declared 'We receive this document not as an act of favour but as an act of Justice'. And more strongly, Dr Leo Pfeffer: 'We owe Christianity nothing. The Vatican Council is giving the Jews nothing'. Dr Pfeffer, a professor of Political Science at Long Island University, and a special counsel to the American Jewish Congress, quoted a remark of Cardinal Cushing's 'the Jews are getting what they want in Rome', as an example of the kind of wrong emphasis that 'lobbying' could produce. He was also concerned about political reverberations, suggesting that Cardinal Spellman and others were using Jewish interest and involvement in the Schema as a way of pressuring American Jewish organisations to support or at least relax their consistently strong opposition to federal aid for parochial schools.

There are some immediately sensitive doctrinal areas, too; the recurring question of the status of the New Testament, for instance. This is not a new problem, nor one peculiar to American Jews, but it happens that American Jewish biblical scholars in recent years have devoted a great deal of attention to criticizing the historicity of the New Testament accounts of the trial and death of Jesus (Paul

Winter in *On The Trial of Jesus*, for example). The impact of their studies on informed Jewish opinion has been considerable, and has perceptibly modified the reception given to a document which (naturally enough, it is recognized), accepts unconditionally the accuracy of the New Testament account. On another level, to many Jews, although they recognize that the Church could, through changing emphases, explications and interpretations, do much to modify the 'impossible ambivalence' of some New Testament references to the Jews, the Gospels, and notably of course St John's (heard in Yankee Stadium) seem irremediably hostile. To quote Milton Himmelfarb again:

The best declaration by the Vatican Council must fall short of removing the grounds for Jewish uneasiness, because the essential scripture of Christianity is the New Testament, which is ineradicably anti-Jewish. And even if Christians, with all the good will in the world, try to mute the anti-Jewish animus, it must constantly be reintroduced from what can be called New Testament culture.

(*Commentary*, September 1964)

Another immediate obstacle to enthusiasm has been the effect of the first draft's apparent emphasis on the ultimate conversion of the Jews. Many comments reflect uncertainty about the complete good faith of Catholic invitations to dialogue. Thus Rabbi Emmanuel Rackman, addressing the Commission on Jewish Affairs Conference on the first draft of the Schema last year: 'Until it is recognized that I am an absolute equal, whose Jewishness the other party to the dialogue is as anxious to see conserved as I am, it is not dialogue'. Although the passage in question has disappeared it is still a common Jewish reaction to see the Schema as a conversion-ploy. For instance, when the Schema says: 'nevertheless God holds the Jews most dear for the sake of the Fathers; his gift and call are irrevocable', first of all that 'nevertheless' is painful, but also the question is raised, how far is the Church prepared to recognize the eternity of God's covenant with Israel? Rabbi Brickner, commenting on the phrase 'the Church is the new people of God', reminds his readers that there still exists within the Church's teaching the belief that she has entered upon Israel's inheritance, displacing Israel as God's chosen. (He also quotes St Paul: 'What advantage then has the Jew, or what profit is the circumcision? Much every way: chiefly because that unto them were committed the oracles of God'.)

Dr Brickner is a Reform Rabbi, and the passages just quoted are from an admirable letter addressed to various Jewish and Christian organisations which in fact recommends dialogue on such issues as these. But Rabbi Rackman, whom I have also just quoted is a former president of the Rabbinical Council of America, an Orthodox group. Amongst the Orthodox Jews, a large community in America, the Schema has been received much more dubiously. The outstanding American Orthodox Rabbi is the brilliant and formidable Dr

Joseph Soloveitchik. This patriarchal figure has, while recognizing the sociological value of Jewish-Catholic discussion, consistently opposed Jewish participation in theological dialogue with Catholics. The Schema he says, is 'evangelical', an appeal to the Jewish community to embrace Christianity. Commenting on the first draft he objected to Judaism being presented within the framework of Christianity at the Council – the portion dealing with the Jews had no place in the section on Christian unity. Commenting on the revised draft, he spoke out more strongly: the Schema, he says, presents unchanged the typical Christological view of the historical mission of the Jews being exhausted in the *Praeparatio Evangelica*. The Jew has forfeited his covenantal status and his very relationship with the biblical past because he rejected Christ. The Church expects the Jew to reactivate his role as a historic being, emerge from historic anonymity, and realize his destiny, by ceasing to exist within the framework of a separate community:

Those who are perturbed now should have realized before that the theological 'Dialogue' was bound to become a theological monologue on the part of the Church, which is not ready to depart from her basic interpretation of Jewish history . . . The Church is within her rights to interpret our history in her own theological-dogmatic terms. We are the ones who have transcended the bounds of historical responsibility and decency by asking for a theological document on the Jews as 'brethren' in faith, instead of urging the Church to issue a strong declaration in sociological-human terms, affirming the inalienable rights of the Jew as a human being.

Rabbi Soloveitchik, who was addressing the Rabbinical Council of America, ends with an appeal for 'a moratorium on theological dialogues and pilgrimages to Rome'.

Non-Orthodox Jewish critics allege that attitudes such as this stem from the outmoded Orthodox view that Judaism can only survive behind ramparts, that the Jew depends on the hostility of the world to preserve his identity. It is ironical enough that one large effect of the Schema has been to precipitate fierce dissensions within the Jewish community (Catholics will recognize this familiar effect of Council decisions). The problem of how to react to Vatican II has been assimilated to the larger problem which afflicts so many American Jews who can no longer regard themselves as being involved in a deeply-rooted autonomous culture – the problem of Jewish identity in modern American society.

Which leads me to that big group who are most aware of this problem, and whose views have so far not been noted in this letter – the 'secularized' Jews. Writing in a recent issue of *Commentary* about the current tendency in American novels, from Saul Bellow's *Herzog* down, to 'sentimentalize the Jew', to ascribe to him the fruits of involvement in an especially rich culture which in fact he no longer

really has, Robert Alter comments on the Jew's diminishing identity¹ – a diminution most notable in the intellectual, 'whose role as an outsider in American life has generally dwindled into an affectation or a stance of pious self-delusion'. Rather heavily over-stated, perhaps, but Mr Alter's diagnosis makes it easier for me to renounce the impossible task of assessing 'secular' Jewish reaction to the Schema. I can only report that casual inquiries have met with responses varying from indifference or simple ignorance through mild sarcasm ('I see by the papers that you have absolved me. Gee thanks a lot') to what I suppose is the commonest reaction, a guarded approval, tempered by a large dash of scepticism (for which again the prolonged delays in the Council are partly responsible). It is not irrelevant that it was hard to find any good Jewish jokes about the matter. Most affairs about which Jews are genuinely concerned throw up some of those sardonic, self-deprecating commonsense reassessments we associate with Jewish humour. The only one I was told has its interest, though: two old ladies in Brooklyn – 'So what's new Rachel?' 'So now it wasn't us. Was the Porto-Ricans.'

Deicide. It's worth remarking that for many American Jews whether religious or secular the debate on this word is not merely an academic matter. No amount of pious protests can obscure the fact that anti-Semitism is still a reality. Two Jews in my immediate circle tell me they had the word 'Christ-killer' thrown at them in their childhood; one of them last year gave as his reasons for moving out of a predominantly Irish and Italian neighbourhood the fact that his young sons are being insulted at school as Jews. James O'Gara, of *Commonweal*, writing a few months ago in the *Anti-Defamation League Bulletin* made the point: 'I am not suggesting that every American Jew has been called "Christ-killer!" I *am* suggesting that enough Jews have been called "Christ-killer" to make this a significant fact in our relations.' (Perhaps I should add, in the unlikely event that any English Catholic reader should bask in moral superiority over this issue, that a close school-friend of mine published a few years ago what to my knowledge was a very restrained account of the gross anti-Semitic bullying he received at the hands of a master in his English Catholic school. Also, one wonders how many Catholic bookshelves still hold a copy of Father Denis Fahey's odious book *The Mystical Body of Christ in the Modern World*, with its wholesale attack on International Jewry. I saw a copy the other day, rubbing shoulders with *Mein Kampf*, in the offices of the Jewish Community Service in Boston. It was dated 1952, and still had in an appendix the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. I wonder if Browne and Nolan still keep it in print.)

¹The *New York Times* Literary Supplement advertises a six-volume series entitled *How To Be Jewish* 'For those who have forgotten, for those who never really knew, for those who know but can't put it into words for their children, here is how to be Jewish . . .'

American Jews who welcome the Schema point out again and again, reasonably enough, that it all depends on how its spirit is carried out – in schools, in seminaries, in the pulpit, in the revision of texts and text-books (a report from Quebec last April: *My Third Reading Book* a reader for seven-year olds, which has an illustration ‘depicting a Jewish father placing his child in an oven for attending a Roman Catholic church’, will not be used next year). The Schema on Religious liberty apparently became known at the Council as ‘the American Schema’, and certainly the American Church has lost no time in responding to it. But there’s a great deal to be done. ‘If it was so difficult for the cardinals in Rome to formulate an opinion,’ I heard one rabbi remark, ‘what’s it going to be like for a curate in South Boston?’ Another recalled that the Council of Trent four hundred years ago had implicitly asserted that the Jews were not to be blamed for the crucifixion of Christ, who ‘had died voluntarily’, but where was Trent’s effect to be seen? He might have added that one of the strongest statements advanced in favour of the Schema during the Council debate this year came from the archives of the Holy Office:

The Apostolic See, moved by charity, has protected the Jewish people against unjust persecution; and as it disapproves of any hatred or dissension among people, thus it once again condemns this hatred of a people that were at one time the Chosen of God, this hatred that is commonly called anti-Semitism.

That statement was issued in 1928.

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