

'Do Christians need a theology of Israel?'

By SYLVIA HART
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"Do Christians need a theology of Israel? The answer is yes," said a Roman Catholic priest to participants in a Jewish-Christian dialogue at Spring Hill Avenue Temple.

THE REV. EDWARD H. Flannery, director of the office of continuing education of the clergy in the Providence (R.I.) Catholic Diocese, spoke for more than an hour to local Christians and Jews, who are entering their sixth year of dialogue.

Flannery, who formerly was secretary for Catholic-Jewish relations of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, based in Washington, D.C., said his definition of Israel is "Israel as it exists, which is the state of Israel and its people, not some mythical or spiritual Israel."

HE SAID THE state of Israel actually "does not need theology or Scriptures to prove its validity or authentication."

Israel, he said, "is fully legitimated politically, juridically and morally. It was given title to statehood by the United Nations by a majority vote in 1948 ... in the area in Palestine where they (Jews) were a majority, a fact very little known."

At the same time, "an Arab state was created right beside it (Israel).... It was refused, and Arabs left Israel.... They were encouraged by their leaders to get out because they were expecting to be back when they had taken over the state of Israel so that they could have the whole two states to themselves. Five armies in 1948 marched on Israel to obliterate, and turn it into one large Palestinian state. That is how the Palestinian problem of refugees began. That is how the Israeli-Arab conflict began."

FLANNERY SAID THE greatest hindrance to Christians' having a theology of Israel is "the mere fact that we don't have a theology of Judaism upon which it builds because Judaism is the historical and spiritual matrix from which Israel as a state and people came."

"So at the moment you might say there's a

sort of theological vacuum or void which we're trying to fill in and which if we continue we will succeed at."

Christians in the past had a theology of Judaism, but it is "not one we can adhere to now. It was one of pure negation," said the priest.

He noted that in the past, Christians had a "witness people" theory, which means the Jews after Christ were to serve as witnesses to the truth of Christianity."

ANOTHER THEORY from history was a deicide idea that Jews "had been totally replaced by the church in the salvation plan of God. You might say our theology of Judaism was that they had no right to exist."

The deicide idea was condemned by the church, according to Flannery, and the "witness people" idea "is a fossil, a relic" of the past.

He cited the writings of the Apostle Paul in the Christian New Testament as contradicting the belief "that Judaism had been cast aside."

PAUL SAID THAT "the call of God to the Jewish people is irrevocable. That means it cannot be called back."

Said the speaker, "I recognize this is not a sufficient base for a complete new theology of Judaism, but I think it's one we need."

In speculating about "the last times," Flannery said he has "played with the idea" that Christians and Jews might return to an atmosphere such as that when Christianity began. "For a moment it was a Jewish-Christian religion where a person believed fully in the Torah (teachings of Judaism) and that Jesus was the messiah.... It's pure speculation.... Let's leave the final unity to God."

HE SAID, "I think the task before us today is to give an affirmation of Jews.... We can see Judaism as our historical progenitors, the womb from which the church came.... It's our mother faith."

Returning to his discussion of a basic theology of Israel on the part of Christians, he

said, "The completion of a new theology of Judaism will be, I think, the theology of Israel because we have found Israel is central to Judaism itself."

"It goes back to the beginning. In Genesis 12 God said to Abraham, 'I give you this land forever.' I don't use this for the foundation of the state of Israel. It doesn't need it."

NEVERTHELESS, THE beginning of Zionism was in the 12th chapter of Genesis. We

had to see all through the ages that attachment to the land was there."

Flannery said his view is that "Jesus is central to Christianity in the same way Israel is central to Judaism."

In "an essential theology of Judaism," he said, "the land comes in every time. Therefore, the completion of our new theology of Judaism will be a theology of Israel."



Mary Filben, a staff member of the Mobile Catholic Social Services and a coordinator of the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue, welcomes the Rev. Edward H. Flannery to the Port City. (Mobile Press Register photo by Ron Wheeler)