

'Resurgence' of anti-Semitism



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On the final day of its meeting in New York last month the National Council of Churches was behind schedule and not in any mood to pass superfluous resolutions. But no one dared suggest cutting the one on anti-Semitism.

Jewish-Christian relations in the United States, especially the historic alliances between Jewish leaders and the liberal Christians of the National Council, have been strained all year. The cause is the latter's growing receptiveness to the Palestinians' complaints against Israel, part of what many American Jews now see as intertwining anti-Zionism and anti-Jewishness.

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It was no surprise, therefore, that the largest of the Christian ecumenical organizations took time at its meeting to deplore "the resurgence of anti-Semitism." The harried delegates, representing some 40 million Protestants and Orthodox Christians in 32 denominations, voted to remind the world that they "abhor anti-Semitism and racism" and "are committed to oppose them."

SIGNIFICANTLY, this was the same meeting at which they held firm to a controversial policy statement on the Middle East that was two years in the preparation. The statement recognizes Israel's right to "continue as a Jewish state" within secure borders but it also calls on the Israeli government to enter into negotiations with the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Is anti-Zionism a cover for anti-Semitism?

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A few days before, a group of Catholic and Protestant theologians had been mobilized in New York by the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith to "rally behind Israel and the Jewish people, who are endangered by ruthless acts of violence."

The "statement of concern" adopted by this interfaith group said in part: "We are troubled by Christian leaders who ask the Jewish people to brush aside the most ominous threats of the Palestine Liberation Organization as mere rhetoric." To negotiate in any way with the PLO is unthinkable, goes the argument, because the PLO is by its very nature committed to "Israel's annihilation."

Once again, the lines were drawn.

WHATEVER THE TRUTH or extent of "the rise" of anti-Semitism in the United States, a growing chorus of speeches and resolutions has been warning about something much more subtle than spray-painted swastikas, certainly more subtle than the Oct. 3 synagogue bombing in Paris.

Even in its widely denounced forms, such as the Southern Baptist Convention president's insistence that God "does not hear" the prayers of Jews, what is now being alleged is an anti-Semitism of the mind.

Not everyone — Jews as well as non-Jews — agrees that it is anti-Semitism at all.

No part of the country is immune from sporadic outbreaks of vandalism and other lawlessness linked to bigotry. Jews are moving to the Sunbelt in large numbers along with the rest of the population, and this has led to a rise in apprehension about possible anti-Semitism, if not the overt acts themselves, in the South and Southwest.

Rabbis have expressed concern about accelerating intermarriage among employees of corporations

moving away from traditional centers of the Jewish population.

Still, it is in such centers that the most visible anti-Semitic incidents continue to occur, such as last year's overturning of 300 headstones in Mount Hebron Cemetery in Queens, N.Y., and the egg-throwing confrontation last month between neo-Nazis and counter-demonstrators near Skokie, Ill.

Skokie, where many Holocaust survivors live, was to be the site in 1978 of the most hotly debated anti-Semitic demonstration in recent years. After a small band of Nazis won their succession of legal battles to obtain a parade permit there, however, the demonstration was canceled.

THE IMPORTANCE of such incidents in an accurate overview of the nation is not easy to measure. One of the complications is that the successful assimilation of Jews into the mainstream of American life makes the old alarms about anti-Semitism seem anachronistic.

Internal threats to "Jewish identity" aside, it is difficult to imagine an ethnic minority of 6 million people closer to the center of power and influence in a total population of 220 million.

Another complication is that political and economic crosscurrents inside and outside the Jewish community are muddying the edges of what once was clear anti-Jewish sentiment in many quarters.

A complex political question keeps getting in the way. In its simplest terms, it is this: Can a person challenge Zionist policy without being anti-Semitic and, conversely, is a person who is "pro-Israel" necessarily pro-Jewish?

Fundamentalist preachers of the "Christian New Right" are as fervently pro-Israel as they are pro-Pentagon. Last month, Prime Minister Menachem Begin gave an award to the Rev. Jerry Falwell of Moral Majority for his public support of a militarily strong Israel.

The Rev. M. G. (Pat) Robertson, another leader among conservative television evangelists, who helped organize last spring's "Washington for Jesus" rally, said in Dallas less than two months ago:

"I believe it is the shared belief of the majority of evangelical Christians in the U.S. that the possession of all of Jerusalem by the nation of Israel is of utmost significance in the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy."

THE PLURALISM of Jewish attitudes is demonstrated when Falwell's award and Robertson's speech are placed alongside an urgent plea from Rabbi Alexander M. Schindler, president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.

Rabbi Schindler linked "the chilling power of the radical right," specifically Falwell and his Moral Majority, to what he called "the most serious outbreak of anti-Semitism in America since the end of World War II."

The rabbi said that today's anti-Semitism, manifested by a new boldness in the Ku Klux Klan and a total of 144,000 votes for Nazi or Klan candidates for public office (who lost) in Michigan, North Carolina and California, is symptomatic of "a struggle for the character and soul of America" fomented by increasingly influential political conservatives among the Christian fundamentalists.

"It is not a battle that Jews alone can win," he said.

Hyman Bookbinder of the American Jewish Committee raised concerns about a Jewish shift from the left to the right.

"As Jews," he said, "we must stand for the needy and disadvantaged, no matter what else we stand for. Too many Jews are saying 'enough already'" — regarding social legislation.

Natalie Gordon, a Jewish leader, commented on tension between blacks and Jews arising from claims that Russian Jews hired by the New York Transit

Authority took jobs needed by other minorities.

She referred to "historical anti-Semitic canards" that blame Jews for black unemployment and observed that "during slow economic periods throughout history, the Jewish people have been the scapegoats of general social anger and frustration."

THE PROBLEM has many sides.

Occurrences in two Baltimore men's clubs illustrate the transition from a simpler anti-Semitism to something harder to define. Both clubs have virtually no Jewish members.

In the first, there was a dinner recently. One of the members had a Jewish guest. Another member at his table launched into a long "Jewish joke." Suddenly, in the middle of it, he stopped, realizing that the guest might be offended. He had gone too far to pull back, though, so he said lamely, "I think you'll like this one," and forged ahead. The joke fell flat, needless to say, and there was acute embarrassment all around.

The embarrassment, if not the joke itself, was a pale vestige of the old anti-Semitism, a less than vivid survival from an American society that had to be changed by laws like Maryland's "Jew Bill." Finally passed in 1826, the legislation ended a Christian test for public office, prompting a newspaperman of the time to herald "a new era." A century and a half later, few doubt that the new era is still maturing.

But the other slice of Baltimore club life goes to the heart of the present chapter in the history of American anti-Semitism. A respected civic leader was expounding at lunch recently, not palely but vividly, what he believes are the injustices and foolhardiness of American foreign policy in the Middle East. And the unfairness of his being tagged as anti-Semitic — by anyone anywhere — because he is perceived as anti-Israel incensed him.

Is his attitude cause or effect, and of what? Is it related to the recent convening of law enforcement officials in New York to plan an offensive against the "greater frequency" of swastika daubings, cross burnings and synagogue desecrations?

Listen to what David Silverberg of the Baltimore Jewish Times has to say:

"Though the Jewish people may not like it, there is now in the world a concept called anti-Zionism. Jews may know what it masks, but the constant repetition of that word and its reiteration to a generation that does not know, or barely knows, the Holocaust means that it must be dealt with on its own."

"WHAT ARE MOST SIGNIFICANT about anti-Jewishness, anti-Semitism and anti-Zionism are not their differences but what they have in common: that 'anti' which precedes their name. They are all negative. They all, in the end, kill Jews.

"And the realization of that cold, hard fact is the first step toward an effective response."

Tom F. Driver, a theology professor at New York's Union Theological Seminary, writing in the liberal magazine *Christianity and Crisis*, says he is "deeply troubled" by "a rising anti-Semitism today among people who are very religious and very nationalistic ... most especially by the recurrence of anti-Semitism among Christians and its recent rapid growth among them."

He says the threat posed goes beyond the Jews to other minorities in this country. "That is why," he writes, "it is important to deal with anti-Semitism in right-wing evangelical Christianity and to search out its roots."