

Different social issues cause various coalitions of Jews and Christians

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Jews, mainline Protestants, evangelicals and Roman Catholics today are selecting various social issues on which they can form coalitions for action, according to a Pennsylvania clergyman.

THE REV. William H. Harter, pastor of the Presbyterian Church of Falling Spring in Chambersburg, Pa., spoke to the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue in a dinner meeting at Spring Hill Presbyterian Church.

Harter earned a doctor of philosophy degree in New Testament with emphasis on the relationship between Judaism and Christian origins at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

TRACING SOME history of coalitions of religious groups in taking social action, Harter began with mainline Protestants and Jews.

He said that from World War II to about 1967 "there was a solid coalition between Jews and mainline Protestants on many social issues, a high level of unanimity and cooperation on many of the key issues of the day."

Some of the issues on which mainline Protestants and Jews often agreed were refugee assistance, the establishment of the state of Israel in the aftermath of the Holocaust in which millions of Jews were killed during the World War II era, civil-rights issues such as voting rights and public accommodations for black persons and busing of blacks to desegregate public schools, and economic issues such as support of minimum wages, child-labor laws and Social Security.

THE BEGINNING of a divergence between Jews and mainline Protestants generally is seen in 1967, according to Harter.

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Mobile Press Register photo by Victor Calhour

William H. Harter

A New York school teachers' strike in 1967 "was perceived as a Jewish-black issue because many of the teachers were Jews and a significant part of the community was black, and that was the beginning of the divergence of the coalition that originally had worked in the civil-rights arena," said Harter.

In reality, according to Harter, the New York strike was not a Jewish-black issue. "It had to do with neighborhood school boards, decentralization of authority in the school system, questions of working conditions and salaries." Nonetheless, the coalition began to break.

ANOTHER HAPPENING in 1967 was the Six-Day War in the Middle East, during which "many leading mainline, liberal Protestants failed to support Israel openly and publicly at a time when Jews felt Israel was under dire threat," Harter said.

Today, according to the speaker, Jews and mainline Protestants often disagree on the issues of affirmative action and quotas for minority groups.

JEW, HARTER said, often think of quotas in terms of Jewish history. Jews remember emigration quotas that existed in Europe before the Holocaust. Jews remember that universities at one time placed quotas on the number of Jews accepted. Jews remember problems in receiving access to private clubs and employment opportunities.

Thus today many black persons and white mainline Protestant leaders who support affirmative action and quotas for minority groups are in disagreement with many Jews.

TODAY, HARTER said, while many mainline Protestants support liberation theology, many

Jews do not. Liberation theology generally seeks freedom for oppressed peoples of the world.

Some of today's liberation theologies use "anti-Semitic rhetoric, and the Zionist oppressors are referred to," according to Harter.

Significant segments of mainline Protestant bureaucracies are applauding the Palestinian movement while viewing Israel as an oppressive state, Harter said.

"Israel is not understood as she should be — the result of a liberation movement which began in the middle of the last century and culminated in the establishment of the state of Israel," according to the speaker.

TALKING ABOUT Roman Catholics and Jews, Harter said that "it really was the case that not until the mid-1960s after Vatican Council II was there a great deal of corporate social action on an interfaith basis with Jews by the Roman Catholic community."

Today, Harter said, no "full coalitions" exist among religious groups in acting on social issues.

"You have today what might be called selective coalitions. You might find people together on American Indian rights but not on quotas. You might find people together on world hunger but not on bi-lingual education."

Among issues which "cut across all religious lines" is the helping of poor persons. "The victims and helpers are to be found across all religious lines."

JEWS AND Christians should be working together in developing programs of remedial reading, health clinics and daycare centers for children, Harter said.

He said new alliances have formed between many Jews and evangelicals.

"Part of the evangelical approach to the Jewish community is a holdover from the conversionist period when the idea was simply to convert Jews, and yet at the same time many of those churches were strongly pro-Israel out of a dispensationalist theology which saw the return to Israel as basically a preface to the coming of the end of days," Harter said.

NEVERTHELESS, he said, evangelical leaders increasingly are affirming "the Jewish people in its own right."

Harter specifically named the Sojourners, based in Washington, D.C., as an evangelical group not viewing Jews as people who must be converted to Christianity.

The various coalitions that are forming today among religious groups "may be a very healthy thing in many ways," Harter said.

THE SPEAKER talked about "tools" that Christians and Jews should bring to their discussion of social issues.

One tool is an understanding of the role of spirituality in social action.

Liberal, mainline Protestants must recognize "the danger of a lack of a sense of transcendence when we become too involved in doing good on one level and not keeping ourselves in touch with the source (God) of all doing good."

"Evangelicals, on the other hand, have had that kind of piety frequently in the past, but at times it has been disconnected from the actual transformation of the

society, which needs to go hand in hand with the piety."

HARTER SAID Martin Luther, the German who founded Protestantism in the 16th century, believed that "the healing love of God means the love of neighbor. When we're healed, justified, sanctified, we're loving our neighbors simultaneously to that."

In Jewish tradition, Harter said, "the mystical experience of the relationship with God is an incredible source of moral and spiritual energy, and a mitzvah ... is an act of social service which comes out of the experience of the presence of God."

A SECOND tool for social action, Harter said, is an understanding of peoplehood.

Protestants, who are broken into many denominations, do not always have as strong a sense of Christian peoplehood as they should, said Harter, and Protestants can learn from Jews.

For thousands of years "one civilization or another has attempted to remove, conquer, deter, surpass, assimilate, deny or subsume the vocation of Jewish peoplehood but unsuccessfully. Persistently the vision and the reality of Jewish peoplehood continues into our day."

ELABORATING ON the idea of Jewish peoplehood, Harter said, "The Torah, around which Jewish communal life developed, takes for its scope the whole of human life, its physical conditions, its personal conscious and subconscious motivations, its forms of thought and articulation and its social and political relations."

Thus Jerusalem for Jews is "a Jerusalem of roads and sewage and public health and intergroup relations and sports facilities and water supply and housing."

Christians, Harter said, need images rooted in everyday life rather than viewing Jerusalem only as "an apocalyptic hope and a mystical experience of future realities.... The Jerusalem to come must not be allowed to cancel out or subsume the Jerusalem that is."

CONNECTED WITH the idea of Jewish peoplehood, Harter said, is the state of Israel.

Many Christians, Harter said, have viewed themselves as "universalistic children of the Enlightenment who saw all people as chosen.... We saw the idea of election and of a particular land as ... a kind of idolatry of the land, too much elevation of something physical and material."

Historians of religion today, however, are finding that Jewish attitudes toward the land represent "a deep human need.... That the people need a land is a truth about most peoples, and it's also important to recognize the occupancy of the land as being not a right or an absolute but a gift. That is the classical Jewish perspective on the land of Israel," Harter said.

AFTER THE Holocaust, according to Harter, the forming of the state of Israel has reflected Jews' "profound hope and trust in mankind."

Harter said, "Israel's declaration of independence was not a Jewish withdrawal from a larger world. It initiated a greater Jewish involvement on even more levels with all the rest of the world."