

(from p. 55)

To the Editors: In "Jews and Christians—Beyond Brotherhood Week" Henry Siegman criticizes the Vatican (1) for taking ten years to issue, in January, 1975, the "Guidelines for the Implementation of *Nostra Aetate* No. 4" on Catholic relations with Jews; (2) for not dealing (within the Guidelines) with the theological dimension of the Jewish relationship to the land of Israel; and (3) for not recognizing (apart from the Guidelines) the State of Israel. A few comments on these criticisms.

General causes of Vatican slowness aside, other reasons surely include the fact that the treatment of relations is only one part (part 4) of that document, and that development in these relations could not fail to be viewed in the Vatican in the light of similar progress in relations with Muslims (part 3). I pass over the setback to Jewish-Catholic relations caused by the gaffe involving Cardinal Shehan of Baltimore and a "working paper" on Jewish-Catholic relations that was released mistakenly to the press as a Vatican document. But other specific reasons include, first, the rigidity about Israel of some Jews and of some pro-Israeli Catholics (involved in Jewish-Catholic relations) and, second, political conditions touching the State of Israel. On this rigidity I will restrict myself, for the most part, to conditions in the U.S.

Anyone involved in U.S. Jewish-Catholic discussions in the last ten years is aware of the very great sensitivity (and blindness) that have existed on questions touching the land, the State of Israel and the Palestinians, and of the attempts, by both Jews and pro-Israeli Catholics, to use religious discussions for Israeli political purposes.

Several years ago I attended an elaborately prepared series of discussions on the Arab-Israeli conflict and Jewish-Christian relations. Under optimum conditions for openness (privacy, small numbers, selected participants and speakers and ample time) it took two sessions before the decision could be made to invite a Palestinian speaker. Later one of the participants, who visited other U.S. cities and spoke of this series and Palestinian participation in it, was told repeatedly: Maybe you can do it in Cambridge, but not here.

I submit that this sensitivity (and the

political motivation) has inhibited freedom, and this diminished freedom has slowed development. To ignore this reality is naive. (The title of the new Vatican Commission on *Religious Relations with Jews* is significant.)

Rabbi Siegman's triumphalism about Israel's "decent and humane" record of treating its minorities only allows him to admit that that treatment is "in need of improvement." How can a Jewish spokesman, so innocent of reality, expect to talk fruitfully on this subject with a Vatican official, who can know from abundant sources and over decades just how bad that treatment has been? (See the remarkable Christmas, 1970, letter of Archbishop Joseph Raya of Galilee.)

The best single recent commentary on this situation I know of is indirect, an article not by a Christian but by an Israeli Jew, retired General Mattityahu Peled. "Exposed to American Jewry during a recent three-week lecture tour in the United States, General (Res.) Peled writes of his disappointment with the American Jewish community, which he finds, as a whole, supporting the most intransigent views in Israel on the Arab-Israeli conflict, in the belief that this is expected of it, and oblivious to the fact that Israel is not monolithic politically and that the hard line taken by the Israeli Government is seriously challenged within Israel. The uncritical acceptance of Israel's official policy and the assessment of any disagreement with, or criticism of, that policy as betrayal or even anti-Semitism is unworthy of the liberal tradition of American Jewry" (*New Outlook*, May-June, 1975).

Peled quotes observers as viewing these attitudes as resulting from the October, 1973, war. Personally, I feel that the situation, at least in some respects, has improved rather than deteriorated since then.

Regarding Jewish ties to the land and recognition of Israel, it is naive to expect the Vatican to say much unless it is free to express its reservations, in view of both the truth and the political realities. But would Jews accept such reservations?

Would the Vatican, were it to speak about Jewish ties to the land, be silent about Palestinian Arab ties to the same land? Would such silence be conscionable? If the Vatican were to discuss these ties, what might it say and what might the Jewish reaction be inside and outside

of Israel? Could the Vatican say that Palestinian Arab rights, including self-determination, were violated, first, by the call, since Herzl's time, for the establishment, against the wishes of the Palestinian Arabs, of a Jewish state and, secondly, in succeeding years, by the historical implementation of the proposal for a state that would be essentially Jewish? If some Israeli Jews acknowledge that Zionism involves the dispossession of Arabs, yesterday and today, will the Vatican ignore this situation when many of the persons affected belong to its oriental churches?

Further, would the Vatican fail explicitly to apply to Palestinians the right, upheld in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to return to their land? But were the Vatican to treat these questions, what an uproar there would be!

Another point. Any Vatican declaration considering ties to the land based on the Bible might appropriately take up and criticize the "fundamentalist" interpretation of Scripture by Jews and Christians in general, and, specifically, its use as a justification for the dispossession of Arabs from their land today. The refusal by many Jews within Israel since October, 1973, to accept withdrawal from the occupied territories is based on religious grounds. In connection with the Jewish settlements in the territories, Bernard Avishai writes of the cult of the land these settlements have engendered, "a spiritual élan heavily laden with vulgarized religious mysticism and messianic righteousness In its most strident form, this political feeling has now found a political voice in Gush Emunim.... It proclaims, for example, that occupying and settling the West Bank are not merely tactically necessary but must be celebrated as unifying 'Eretz Israel'" (*New York Review of Books*, October 30, 1975). How could the Vatican speak favorably about Jewish ties to the land without expressing frank and solid reservations about their application in the occupied territories?

Regarding Vatican recognition of Israel, if such recognition were not to be delayed until a peace settlement, what Israeli boundaries should the Vatican recognize? Only those set by the U.N. partition plan? If not, on what grounds? Should the Vatican, in accordance with the overwhelming opinion of the international community, consider Israeli

annexation of East Jerusalem as invalid and Israeli subsequent actions as null and void? If so, what would Jewish reaction be? We already have some idea in the Jewish response to something much less—*L'Osservatore Romano's* criticism some years ago of Israeli housing construction in East Jerusalem.

Suppose the Vatican were to take up in a public document the injustice by which Palestinians (some belonging to the Catholic Church) from areas within Israel who never left Israel, were declared "absent-present" and were deprived of their land. Suppose the Vatican were to publicly admonish (as Pope Paul did privately during Mrs. Golda Meir's visit to the Vatican) the Israeli Government for the mistreatment of Palestinians living under its control. Suppose the Vatican were to raise questions about the basic difficulty of non-Jews in a Jewish state and declare, as the Catholic bishops of the Holy Land did in their December 15, 1971, letter to the Catholic bishops of the U.S., that "an effective solution cannot be reached by a unilateral conception which would necessarily lead to domination by one ethnic group."

To sum it all up, the Vatican, by avoiding touchy subjects on which it would have had to express "harsh" judgments, has spared Jews much anguish, something of which, I suppose, Rabbi Siegman is too intelligent and politically alert not be keenly aware.

A final point. It would be misleading to imply that the French statement, which Rabbi Siegman praises so much and which drew much adverse criticism, represents the French episcopal conference.

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To the Editors: Rabbi Siegman's voice is gentle and discerning. Small wonder that his piece in the December issue has been praised by several churchmen as a thoughtful analysis of some aspects of the new encounter of Christians and Jews. His observation—"Nostra Aetate marked a turning point in the history of the Catholic Church and the Jewish people"—is a case in point. That it is framed by statements less discreet, less sensitive, is a pity but does not gainsay its judiciousness. Ours is an impatient age. Though the issue is not a



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