

# Commentary

CHRISTIANS AND JEWS. The withdrawal, some years ago, of Catholics from participation in the Council of Christians and Jews, was widely misunderstood, and if, as now seems possible, the Church is to be once more represented on a body that exists 'to combat all forms of religious and racial intolerance and to promote mutual understanding and goodwill between Christians and Jews', that will be welcome evidence of her abiding mission of reconciliation.

But difficulties of a serious sort must remain if issues of an essentially political order are to be merged in aims that relate to a religious and moral tradition that transcends them. In his recent lecture to the Council on 'The Final Solution', Dr Abba Eban, Minister of Education and Culture in Israel, spoke movingly of the tragedy of European Jewry, evoked afresh in the trial of Adolf Eichmann. The cold record of senseless annihilation marks a chapter of iniquity without parallel in human history, and it is right that our consciences should be aware of the dimensions of that evil. But when Dr Eban goes on to speak of the 'international consequences' of the tragedy, he speaks—and necessarily—as a representative of the state of Israel. 'One of the impulses that led to Israel's establishment was an awakening of the world's conscience to the necessity for an independent domain of Jewish freedom', he remarks. Israel represents 'an act of minimal retribution for the holocaust', and 'the civilized world must decide whether it can stand by and add to its burdened conscience another weight of international negligence and sin'.

It is hard indeed to separate two issues that inevitably have come to be so intermingled, but justice demands that the attempt be made. The wretched history of the Balfour declaration and its consequences is an episode of which few people can want to be proud. The promises—on the one hand to provide a Jewish national home, and on the other to preserve the rights of the Arab population who for long centuries had lived in Palestine—were irreconcilable from the start, and good intentions were marred by the calculations and lack of candour that the aims of war might seem to justify. And when the holocausts of the German camps gave fresh impetus to the idea of a Jewish state that would henceforth be free from fear, a world-wide emotional response—and massive American support—gave permanent form to Israeli

claims that had little ground in international agreement and none at all in history. The British mandate was abandoned, Israel proclaimed itself a sovereign state, and the Arabs invaded from every side. The tenuous armistice of 1949 left Israel with more than half again of the land assigned to her by the United Nations plan of 1947. Jerusalem remains divided, and Arab maps make no mention of Israel at all. In the meantime countless Arab refugees, kept alive by the United Nations and many voluntary organizations, are the permanent evidence that this is an armistice and not a peace. To many of them their proudest possessions are the keys of the houses they have lost. Resettlement and rehabilitation are meaningless terms to them when all they seek is to return to what was theirs.

Any identification, therefore, of the Jews (in the sense that the Council intends) with the state of Israel and its aims as a political power must create a difficulty for those who seek justice not simply for the Jews but justice as such. The judgment of Professor Toynbee in Volume VIII of his *Study of History*, is a severe one but it needs to be remembered. 'If the heinousness of sin is to be measured by the degree to which the sinner is sinning against the light that God has vouchsafed to him the Jews had even less excuse in 1948 for evicting Palestinian Arabs from their homes than Nebuchadnezzar and Titus and Hadrian and the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition had for uprooting, persecuting and exterminating Jews in Palestine and elsewhere at diverse times in the past. In 1948 the Jews knew from personal experience what they were doing, and it was their supreme tragedy that the lesson learnt by them from their encounter with the Nazi German Gentiles should have been not to eschew but to imitate some of the evil deeds that the Nazis had committed against the Jews'.

A realization of what the Jews suffered under the hands of Nazi tyranny, the sense of outrage that must accompany the shocking evidence of the Eichmann trial, cannot be used to mask a political cynicism that has no roots at all in the sacred history of the Jewish people. That is why it is necessary to resurrect a painful past if only to reveal quite clearly that the Israeli Government can claim no title to project its political aims on the cause of mutual understanding between Christians and Jews. That it should seek to do so is intelligible enough: the memory of the Jewish tragedy is too deep to be easily set aside. But to pray for the peace of Jerusalem is not simply to pray that Israel should prevail: it is to pray that justice be done and that the rights of men be respected.

THE BRIDGE. In the United States the tradition of 'the three faiths' is sometimes bewildering to the European, accustomed to water-tight religious categories. The 'pluralist' assumptions of American life should in many ways make the work of religious co-operation much easier, and the yearbook of Judaeo-Christian Studies which Dr John M. Oesterreicher publishes under the title of *The Bridge* is a good example of this work at its best. The fourth volume to appear (Pantheon Books, \$4.50) is an admirable anthology of studies in the religious tradition of Judaism, as well as of 'perspectives' and 'surveys' that give an account of incidents and writings that make for reconciliation. Notable is the statement of the German bishops on the Eichmann trial, and the prayer they ordered to be said in all the Catholic churches of Germany on Sunday, June 11th, 1961. 'We confess before thee: Countless men were murdered in our midst because they belonged to the people from which comes the Messiah, according to the flesh. We pray thee: Lead all those among us who became guilty through deed, omission or silence, that they may see their wrong and turn from it. Lead them so that they examine themselves, be converted, and atone for their sins. In thy limitless mercy forgive, for the sake of thy Son, that limitless guilt no human atonement can wipe out'.

*The Bridge* provides the ideal example of what reconciliation must mean: deep penitence and an even deeper understanding. The causes of bitterness cannot be easily forgotten, and the legacy of hatred is real. But, once more, the need for mutual respect and knowledge must not be prejudiced by political aims, however persuasive they may appear to be. 'We come from the Father; we shall return to the Father'. Such were the Pope's words when he greeted representatives of the United Jewish Appeal in October, 1960. Dr Oesterreicher comments, 'In greeting his visitors, "I am Joseph, your brother", Pope John spoke as a man, for Joseph is his own first name. At the same time, he spoke in the name of Christ, for to the Fathers of the Church, Joseph, loved, humbled and raised, is a type of Christ'. Nothing less than a brotherhood that springs from the sense of all men alike being sons of the same heavenly Father can bridge the gulf of separation.