

The Times, They Are A' Changin'  
The Future of Jewish, Christian, Muslim Dialogue in the US

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March 15, 1995  
Detroit Roundtable  
Clergy Dialogue Group

Preparing this talk has caused me great concern for two reasons. First I do not feel qualified to speak to this group. I have not felt this inadequate since 1984 when I was asked to speak to the Naval Reserve unit about US policy in Lebanon just after 241 marines had been killed. I realized that those in my audience had made a decision somewhere along the way that they were willing to give their lives for their country. I, in contrast, had never been in the military. You spend your lives grappling with the issues you want me to address. How can I tell you about things you deal with on a daily basis?

I am also concerned that you have given me only 30 minutes to speak. Professors are programmed to speak for 50 minutes, even when they have nothing to say. This may be a problem.

I should also warn you about how I was trained. When I was a doctoral candidate a goal of our professors was to implant a computer chip in our brains. In the graduate student lounge someone put up a sign that summarized our training: "If you can't punch it into computer, it's literature and to hell with it."

If I completely agreed with that approach I would not be here today, but it certainly trained me to look for those things I can measure. Whatever I say will be shaped by this.

#### The Environment for Dialogue

The environment in which we operate is very important. Yesterday I looked up Richard Niebuhr's famous study of religion in America. He says that just before the civil war our largest religious groups were Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists. Then came Lutherans, Disciples of Christ and Episcopalians. No Catholics. Some of you may remember in the 1960s when the head of the Presbyterian church was on the front page of Time magazine because Presbyterians were the fastest growing denomination. These assumptions are no longer true.

The NORC General Social Survey (1990) says American religious identity is now the following:

Evangelical Protestant	35%
Roman Catholic	25%
Mainline Protestant	23%
Black Protestant	9%
Jewish	2.5%
None	7.5%

According to the pamphlet I just picked up, the Roundtable has existed for fifty years. That early ecumenical dialogue was based on certain assumptions about the social environment. If we read the classic studies of religion from the 1950s and 1960s (Herberg, Allport, Lenski) we find the following assumptions:

Mainline Protestants were center stage and growing.  
Catholics were seen as ethnics: Irish, Poles, Italians.  
Jews were those who associated with the Jewish religion.  
Evangelicals were marginalized and stayed in churches.  
There were no Muslims.

Today there is a new reality with new assumptions.

Mainstream Protestants are declining in number. They are politically marginalized. Their opinions don't count.  
Evangelical Protestants are stronger and are growing. They are center stage and are politically influential.  
Catholics are growing, but not from their old ethnic base. Their current growth is in the Hispanic community, a reality not adequately reflected in the hierarchy.  
Muslims are growing, both by immigration and among American converts, many of them Black.  
Jews are declining in number. Jewish energy today centers less on religion and more on community security issues such as Israel and memory of the Holocaust.

#### NINE POINTS

I do not have profound insights to offer about what is happening in our country, but let me offer nine points. I think of these points less as truths than as hypotheses for discussion. In some cases, I hope you will tell me they are not true.

POINT ONE: I recently read the Muslim scholar Al-Afghani who wrote a century ago. He said it is natural for humans to think their own religion is correct and the religion of others is flawed or incomplete. I think that is true in our own country and it tells us something about this Roundtable.

I suspect most of you are out of step with your faith communities. Most likely your congregations know what you are doing and tolerate it, but most members do not consider it important. Others fear you are compromising some fundamental principle.

And if you go beyond your own congregations, most in your broader faith communities probably have little to do with dialogue. I suspect you can think of persons invited to join this dialogue who refused. I suspect (correct me if I am wrong) that their congregations are growing more rapidly than yours.

What I am saying is that you in this room are marginal and cannot deliver your base. The implications of this reality are very significant.

POINT TWO: None of us exist in a vacuum. We are not able to define ourselves. Others define us. This is surely a shock to people who spend their lives trying to define their faith.

I remember when I lived in Africa that Kenyans called me a European. I kept telling them I was not European but American, but they didn't seem to get the point. After all, I was white and was a part of "European" culture. To them, the distinction between one country or another was minimal. It was also a great shock to a Black colleague who grew up in Harlem to discover that he was considered white. And why not? Was he not also a part of the same cultural/political configuration as I was?

I also remember in my Kenya days that whenever a white government--South Africa, America, France--did something outrageous to Black people, I felt obligated to let everyone know I did not support that action. I was forced into defensive repudiation. It is not an uncommon pattern.

All of you know of those in your faith communities whose approach is characterized by militancy, hostility, and aggression. Whether or not you like it, they speak in your name, even if you reject them. To those on the outside, the distinction between you and them is minimal, your denials notwithstanding.

Muslims today are asked about terrorism, as if they were responsible for what someone in Algeria was doing. Jews and Christians have militant elements who attack others in the name of the community. You spend much of your time on damage control, disassociating yourselves from non-mainstream elements. I am sorry to tell you that to a large extent, you will fail.

POINT THREE: Secularism is no longer the norm.

For some decades the dominant classes in America believed there should be separation of church and state, that people should keep their religious views private but not bring them into the public arena. When John Kennedy ran for President in 1960 he promised that if there was ever a conflict between his religious faith and his public obligation he would resign. Amazingly, this assertion of non-faith was reassuring to many Americans, as if faith could be reduced to a colorful Irish ethnicity devoid of content. For someone in the Islamic world to say "I promise I will not allow Islam to have any influence over my behavior in office" would be an act of political suicide. It would be perceived as a shameless commitment to paganistic wickedness.

The new ecumenical assumption that dominates American dialogue is that religious values should be at the center of society. This is openly articulated by those from the Evangelical community, but it is also shared by Orthodox Jews and Muslims.

Is this Evangelical, Jewish, Muslim convergence a bizarre quirk or is it of historic significance? Ask yourself a question: Is it possible that someday there will be a new Roundtable made

up of those who accept this religious principle? Will Southern Baptists, Lubavichers, and Muslims come together to promote faith? Before you laugh, think of the present Christian-Jewish-Muslim Roundtable in historical context. And what does it mean that Catholics and Lutherans sit at the same table? Is either of those dialogues less bizarre than what I just suggested?

I was at a conference on Religion in Politics recently and presented a paper on religious thinking in America. Later I was in the lounge talking to other professors. One asked my religion. I told him Presbyterian. His response fascinated me: "No. I don't mean that. I mean before. You have to be Evangelical or Catholic because they are the only ones who think religion counts."

POINT FOUR: Our society is exceptionally intolerant of those who believe in prophecy and have religion central to their lives.

To realize what this statement means, we should think of how earlier generations of Americans viewed the world. I have a copy of the original Webster's Dictionary, dated 1847. In his introduction to the book, Webster begins with the Book of Genesis. He sincerely believed that if we did not understand the Creation Story, we could not understand English vocabulary. I ask you to consider what we would think today if Webster's International Collegiate began with a discussion of the Creation Story.

I teach a course on Religion and Politics, a course that focuses upon comparative political systems. I tell students that in most of the world, religion is the dominant political paradigm. It is the way people think and shape their lives.

Those of us who were brought up in secular thinking cannot understand this. We sputter to find enough insulting words to describe those who think religiously. We are reduced to name calling: extremist, bigot, intolerant, fundamentalist.

We need to recognize that it is not they who are out of touch, but we. When the Soweto Uprising occurred in South Africa in 1976, the leader of the opposition party stood in parliament and critiqued government policy by quoting from Saint Paul. The parliament spent the next three days discussing Saint Paul and the implications of his teachings for public policy.

We Americans are going through major political changes right now, including massive cuts in public expenditures. So far, no member of Congress to my knowledge has discussed this in terms of the Bible. Most of our legislators would be incapable of a sustained debate based on the teaching of their own faith. I also have trouble imagining the Majority or Minority leader standing in Congress, holding an open Bible, and saying "I would like to read the words of Jesus from the Book of Matthew and suggest that we use these as guidance for our vote." If this ever happened, it would featured on every evening news show and would be the topic of a stormy debate on Crossfire and Nightline that very night. I suspect some of your denominations would express concern.

And yet this very type of dialogue happens in almost every country in the world almost every day.

#### MUSLIMS

I think I should make a few points about Islam. Islam is of growing significance in our country and you are to be commended for incorporating Muslims into what was originally defined as a Protestant-Catholic-Jewish group.

POINT FIVE: Islam is here to stay.

Last fall I spoke at a conference at the University of West Virginia. It was organized by professors with help from the local Muslim community which, in that area, was mostly Pakistani and North African Arab. I delivered my talk in the morning and was told that I would also be on a panel in the afternoon. The panel would have five members, with me the only non-Muslim.

When the panel met, the four Muslims were all African-Americans who had converted to Islam from Christianity. I don't know if this shocked the local Muslims or not, but it certainly reflects a reality. Here in Detroit we are attuned to those Muslims who are Arab immigrants, but some people overlook the fact that nationally only 17% of Muslims are of Arab origin.

Most of you know that PBS recently ran a shameful attack on Islam, suggesting that it was inherently violent. The makers of the film were trying to target Arabs more than Muslims, but the effort backfired. Strong reactions to the film came from within the Black community where the plurality of Muslims are found.

The fact is that Islam in America is here to stay. And like Catholicism and Judaism before it, Islam has a historic task. It must make itself into an American religion. A hundred years ago Catholics were seen as immigrants with foreign values, foreign leaders, and foreign ways. Jews were seen in a similar way. The leaders of those communities had to convince other Americans AND their own people that they were fully a part of American culture and history. They did this by absorbing American values and practices. I know that local Muslims are working on this. The trick is to adapt without compromising anything essential.

POINT SIX: We have a false view of Islam and its origins. Today we draw a dichotomy between the Christian West and the Arab/Islamic world. This may be logical based upon clashes over the past few hundred years, but it is not historically accurate.

At the time of Mohammed, the lands that first received Islam (Syria, Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine) were part of the Western/Christian world. Islam emerged in the heart of Christian and Jewish civilization and saw itself itself as a Judeo-Christian reform movement. To Muslims, Islam did not reject but corrected and fulfilled previous revelations. It accepted and embraced all Jewish and Christian prophets. Today we seem to miss this point.

POINT SEVEN: There is a pattern to how we look at each other. Of the three religions, any two critique the third in a similar way.

Muslims and Jews think Christians have compromised monotheism by an improper focus upon a righteous individual. Christians and Muslims think Jews are trapped in a sectarian past. Jews, they say, fail to acknowledge subsequent interventions by God in human affairs by revelations and prophecies. Christians and Jews think Muslims have followed a man, have rejected fundamental texts, and have deviated from true faith into politics.

I am not sure of the significance of this observation but it is decidedly different from the perception that Judeo-Christian values are on one side and Islamic values on the other. The reality is more complex than that.

POINT EIGHT: All three religions suffer from the fact that they are associated with a territorial or cultural base. This reality generates parochialism and makes it difficult for the religions to function in a universal mode. Christianity is associated with Western Europe and the North Atlantic cultural and political system; Judaism is associated with the state of Israel, its welfare, and its policies; Islam is associated with the Arab world and the political problems of its countries.

This creates exceptional problems for those who do not identify with the political positions of their homeland leaders. Christian Palestinians in Jerusalem, to take one example, constantly try to disassociate themselves from American policy and the pro-Israeli, anti-Palestinian statements of Christian Zionists. The Jewish communities of the Arab world are often blamed for what Israel does. And Muslims in America are blamed for the actions of HAMAS.

I mentioned earlier that we cannot define ourselves. Point Eight repeats that observation from a different perspective.

POINT NINE: If there is anything we can be sure of, it is that politicians want to be re-elected. There are now three to five million Muslims in America. The largest bloc of these are African-American. Domestic political factors will change the reality of dialogue. Sooner or later someone running for President will realize that there are a bloc of Muslim voters in a toss-up state and will start talking about our "Abrahamic values" rather than our "Judeo-Christian values." Like Jimmy Carter becoming the first President since Truman to speak of Palestinians rather than Arab Refugees, this will be a moment of some significance.

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