

ECUMENICAL EVENTS

A Theological Symposium on Faith and Culture

A scholarly symposium was held at Hellenic College/Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Brookline, MA, April 23-25, 1990, in honor of Archbishop Iakovos's thirtieth anniversary as primate of the Greek Orthodox Church of North and South America. He has done more than anyone else to bring Orthodoxy into the twentieth century and into the American mainstream, as well as having been a leading promoter of cooperation among Christian communions.

In his keynote address, the Rev. Dr. John Romanides (theology professor, University of Thessaloniki) emphasized that the cure for culture is to be transfigured by the Holy Spirit. Noting that Orthodox Christian culture replaced the Hellenic civilization of the Roman Empire, he was very critical of the Carolingian succession of the Western Roman and Byzantine empires. He concluded that self-interest and the pursuit of happiness have dominated Western civilization. A cultural transformation is needed to return us to a level of selfless love.

Metropolitan George Khodre (Lebanon) discussed "The Presence of God in Cultural Realities," noting that the church does not belong to any one social structure, nor does the Holy Spirit "set up a superculture more refined than that which we experience in a so-called Christian nation." The home for Orthodox culture is the "desert." There is constant dialogue between culture and church because the people of God are in the world and are part of humanity. The Logos made flesh and the economy of the Holy Spirit continually sanctify nature. Fr. Emmanuel Clapis addressed "Theological Language in Cultural Context," struggling with the issue of naming God from the Orthodox perspective. He sought to project the patristic God-language as genderless, transcending the modern masculine-feminine debate, as he pointed out the apophatic way of absolutely avoiding naming God's essence and attributing to God such feminine images as the mother's love and nurture of children. Fr. Stanley S. Harakas discussed three contemporary Orthodox positions on faith and culture: (1) that of Michael Askool, who sharply divides the cities of God and of humanity, with the church as the new order opposed to the worldly city; (2) that of George Khodre, who espouses the "universalist" approach to culture, that the church is part of the world and not mutually exclusive of it; and (3) his own "church and culture" position, which is "integrative/wholistic."

A panel of Dr. George Bebis, Dr. Kyriaki FitzGerald, the Rev. Dr. Alkiviadis Calivas, and Fr. Nicholas Kastanas discussed the "Spiritual, Pastoral, and Liturgical Challenges in Cultural Realities." Calivas emphasized that Orthodoxy must bring the concerns and insights of its unique tradition into mainline discussion "about the nature of our society and the meaning and purpose of all existence." "The Critical Task of Orthodox Theology" was discussed by the Rev. Michael Fahey (Roman Catholic), Prof. Geoffrey Wainwright (Protestant), and the Rev. Gennadios Limouris (Greek Orthodox). The Rev. John Meyendorff stressed Orthodoxy's pluralistic nature, as is evident in the early church where different languages and traditions coexisted. In the early church this pluralism was not a means for ethnic separation but a means of spreading the Christian gospel. These papers are to be published.

George C. Papademetriou,

Hellenic College/Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology, Brookline, MA

B'nai No'ach: The Reappearance of the God-fearers in Our Time

The first International Conference of the "Children of Noah" (B'nai No'ach) was held in Ft. Worth, Texas, April 28-30, 1990. Its results were historic in that it brought together Jews and gentiles, not for ecumenical dialogue but as part of singular faith. Technically, the rabbis involved

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insist that the concept is neither new nor another religion but a form of "Judaism for gentiles," with full support in Jewish law.

According to rabbinic tradition, all non-Jews are "children of Noah" and, as such, subject to a special universal Noachide covenant. Made with Noah after the Flood, this covenant is prior to and separate from the Torah covenant made at Sinai with the "children of Israel." Accordingly, all humankind is obligated to follow the "seven Laws of Noah," traditionally enumerated as the prohibitions of idolatry, blasphemy, bloodshed, sexual sins, theft, and eating flesh (or blood) from a living animal, along with the obligation to establish legal systems to administer justice. Jews, functioning as the chosen priestly people and a "light to all nations," are obligated to teach the gentile world those portions of Torah applicable to non-Jews (Ex. 19:5; Is. 42:1-6). Those gentiles who turn to God and shun these sinful practices are said to "have a share in the world to come." They have become *yirei shamayim* ("fearers of Heaven," i.e., of God); in the Land of Israel they are called *ger toshav* ("the stranger that dwells among you"). These Noachides are not proselytes or full converts to Judaism; they remain gentiles, but with a special attachment to God, Torah, and Israel.

Many scholars of ancient Judaism and Christianity believe something akin to this rabbinic concept of the "Noachide" existed in the Greco-Roman period. The oft-expressed generalization that non-Jews in the Roman Empire tended to be anti-Jewish is unfounded. It is well established that large numbers of gentiles were attracted to Judaism and became proselytes or full converts. There is also evidence that many gentiles were attracted to Judaism, attended the synagogues that dotted the Roman Empire, but pulled back short of full conversion. Such "semi-Jews" or "Jewish sympathizers" worshipped the God of Israel and observed various Jewish customs and laws. The Book of Acts refers to such gentiles as "God-fearers" (*phoboumenos* or *sebomenos*).

In subsequent centuries, Jewish sources have further expounded and elaborated the concept of the Noachide. Generally, both Muslims and Christians have been considered Noachides, as long as the latter have avoided the tritheism sometimes associated with popular Trinitarianism (making Jesus a second deity, separate from God). Orthodox rabbinic opinion has held, with Maimonides, that Noachides must accept the seven laws not only on their own merit ("natural law") but also as divinely revealed precepts of Torah, mediated by the teaching mission of Israel.

The best-known gentile exponent of the Noachide religion in our time was Aime Palliere in France (1887-1949). Born and baptized a Catholic and raised for the priesthood, he spent his adult years in the study and teaching of traditional Jewish texts. Openly declaring himself a "Noachide," he promoted the concept as the proper religion for humankind. Publications discussing this concept have appeared in recent years, but no sociologically significant movement has promoted a version of Torah faith among gentiles as distinct from standard forms of Christianity or Islam.

In the week before the Ft. Worth conference, rabbis and Torah scholars from Israel and the U.S.A., together with gentile representatives, hammered out a program to create B'nai No'ach study groups and congregations. The formal proposal was wired to the Chief Sephardic Rabbi of Israel, Mordechai Eliahu, who immediately gave his approval and formal blessing to the efforts. He has since taken the proposal to his Ashkenazic counterpart, Rav Abraham Shapiro.

The conference was organized by Vendyl Jones, former Baptist minister, archaeologist, and director of the Institute of Judaic-Christian Research in Arlington, TX. For over a decade he has promoted Torah study for gentiles according to the B'nai No'ach concept and helped organize dozens of groups around the U.S. who regularly study formally with Orthodox rabbis and Torah scholars. Typically, such groups study the weekly *Parashah* and *Haftorah* portions, based on standard Jewish sources. The seven laws of Noah are seen as topical headings, under which an elaborate set of theological and ethical concepts are organized. Jones's 1989 appeal to the rabbinic community to set up an international B'nai No'ach organization resulted in the Ft. Worth conference, where over 300 non-Jewish delegates officially registered as participants in this newly formed movement. They accepted the proposal from the rabbis, acknowledged Eliahu's blessing, and pledged themselves to faithful observance and study of the Torah as applicable to gentiles.

Interviewing many of the non-Jewish participants, I found most were from Christian backgrounds. Some seemed committed to B'nai No'ach as their expression of faith, while others saw their Torah study as a way to deepen the "Hebraic" aspects of their Christian identifications. Participation requires only a sincere desire to study and observe the Torah as applicable to gentiles. Two former Baptist ministers—David Davis of Athens, TN, and Jack Saunders of Cohutta, GA—lead actual congregations of B'nai No'ach. Coming under Jones's influence, they and their Baptist congregations had begun studying with a local Orthodox rabbi, Michael Katz. Over a period of years, they have dropped their Baptist affiliation and many standard Baptist doctrines.

An international committee, headed by Rabbi Yoel Schwartz in Jerusalem, will provide rabbinic input to the groups. As practical matters (prayers, liturgy, etc.) are clarified, the concept might eventually be presented more officially to the Union of Orthodox Rabbis in North America and similar organizations elsewhere for input and approval. Other groups exist in England, France, Holland, Belgium, and Nigeria — unconnected to the efforts of Jones and others in the U.S. Jones foresees B'nai No'ach "yeshivas," where gentiles would come for intensive Torah study, as well as B'nai No'ach "synagogues," separate from but allied with local Jewish congregations. The gentile leaders of the movement are strongly committed to the requirement that B'nai No'ach teachers be fully observant Jewish rabbis and Torah scholars. What these efforts might mean to Reform, Conservative, or other branches of Judaism remains to be seen. One surprising aspect of this development is the range of Orthodox groups of different persuasions who are cooperating in the effort.

James D. Tabor, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC

I.C.C.J. Young Leaders Conference

The annual Young Adult Leadership Conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews was held in Jerusalem, July 3-10, 1990, with interfaith activists from twenty affiliated national organizations participating. They met with Mayor Teddy Kollek and with the ecumenical Christian village of Nes Amim. These conferences seek to encourage and stimulate young adults (18-35 years of age) who are active in Christian-Jewish relations to become responsible leaders for the next generation of interreligious dialogue. While the formal theme was "Interfaith in the Land of Faiths Striving for Peace: The Roots of Justice, Power, and Love in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," the topic of conversation outside the formal program was how to maintain and improve interfaith dialogue in a dramatically changing world.

Yishai Eldar, Israel Interfaith Association, Jerusalem, Israel

Societas Oecumenica Meets in Dublin

The Societas Oecumenica (European Society for Ecumenical Research), true to its policy of trying to recognize the more marginal areas of Europe, held its biennial conference in Dublin, Republic of Ireland, August 24-27, 1990. Theological papers by Gennadios Limouris of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission and Italian theologian Bruno Forte showed, from the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic points of view, respectively, how the Holy Spirit belongs intimately to the life of the church and is integral to a fully developed trinitarian theology. Anglican bishop John V. Taylor, in the keynote address, opened up the perspective of the Spirit's operating beyond the boundaries of the visible church and leavening the plurality of inculturations that characterizes Christianity today — extending his perspective to include the cosmos itself. Christine Lienemann-Perrin, a Reformed theologian from Switzerland, examined the role ascribed to the Holy Spirit in such social-crisis situations as South Korea and South Africa, bringing out the tension between event and institution and calling for an intercultural dialogue on the Holy Spirit.

Reports on the work of ecumenical institutes from all over Europe are a regular feature of Societas conferences; special highlights on this occasion were discussions of recent developments in Central and Eastern Europe and the Irish conflict. Many aspirations of then-East German Christians who have had to come to terms with socialism have still not been lived out and may well enrich subsequent discussion of the Christian approach to apparently triumphant capitalism. The German church was at least on the right side this time. In Poland, the Catholic Church has great difficulty reconciling itself to political pluralism, and the small Protestant churches (favored by the Communist Party as a counterweight to Catholic influence) now have difficulty in finding a role for themselves.

The British Ambassador to Ireland, Sir Nicholas Fenn, gave a forthright but nuanced account of the Irish conflict, insisting that it is neither in itself religious (though denominational religion