

THE TEMPTATION TO SUPPRESS-OBSCURE DIFFERENCES IN INTERFAITH DIALOG:

THE CASE OF R. MARSTON SPEIGHT

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After being with this hyperirenicist (hyper to be irenic toward Muslims) yesterday, I must unburden & debrief myself before going on to the stated tasks of today. He's such a kindly soul, for whom love means more than truth, that I find it hard to be critical of him; but because his behavior is so offensive to truth, I must--for love minus truth is sentimentality.

1 Sentimentality, according to the great Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner, is what you have to have if you're going to carry on Jewish-Christian dialog with the intention of bringing Christians & Jews closer together. "Honest dialog would drive us further apart," for our differences would become even more glaring. Once we understand our overlap, what we agree on, the next intellectual task--*fides quarens intellectum*, each seeking to understand the other's faith--is to confront, & assess the weight or importance of, our differences. Then we (1) leave it alone (which results in the superficial community of "agreeing to disagree") or (2) contend (which is very apt to produce intellectual contentiousness as the dominant mood of the relationship). Neusner fears that real dialog, revealing to Jews & Christians that they are blasphemers each to the other, will worsen Jewish-Christian relations. (The crux: Christians blaspheme [in Jewish eyes] when we affirm the incarnation, & Jews blaspheme [in Christian eyes] when they deny it.)

Am I, then, against Jewish-Christian dialog? No, only against excessive expectations therefrom. And very against what I've so often seen, viz theological dishonesty in Christians who overstrain themselves to be kind to Jews (which Jews rightly hate, & even fear)...Intellectual dialog, however, isn't the only occasion for the coming together of Jews & Christians. When we come together for the annual Hashoa-Holocaust Remembrance Day, we use an evolving liturgical language which, while it won't bear intellectual analysis, helps bind us together in sorrow & hope--such as, five days ago on Cape Cod, "Together may we be the children of the God of the Covenant."

2 In the meeting yesterday, Speight had only one hand-out, a piece of Muslim propaganda, a Qur'an tract (similar in style to many Gospel tracts), "Islam Explained" (Islamic Center, Box 962, Elberton, GA 30635; "in consultation with Dr. David Kerr, Professor of Islamic Studies, Hartford Seminary...; distributed through the Office for Christian-Muslim Relations of the National Council of Churches..."; "The publisher [Abdul Jalil, Chairman of the Center] takes sole and entire responsibility for the content of this document, and requests that those who wish to enter into dialogue or require additional copies, should contact him.") Though he claims to be a Christian, he trotted out all the old Islamic attacks on the Christian faith (reinforcing the tract), & never got around to the Christian responses. When challenged after an hour as to what the meeting was for, he said his aim was "to accentuate the things we [Christians & Muslims] believe together." (That is the exclusive purpose of his GOD IS ONE: THE WAY OF ISLAM (Friendship Press/89): "The keynote of this book" is "what Christians had [ie, have] in common with..." (p.1; publisher's blurb: "Readers will be astonished to discover how closely Muslims and Christians resemble one another in their devotion to one God.")

3 Astonished I am, to discover a professed Christian doing the work of an Islamic missionary. Saying "The Muslims see their faith as the continuation & fulfilment of Judaism & Christianity," he said nothing during his lecture or the long Q/A session following to disabuse his audience of that Muslim conceit. He's not a sharp thinker & perhaps hasn't noticed that he's brainwashed himself out of Christianity into another religion....I must leave $\frac{1}{2}$ of p.2 for the address, so I'm limited in comments space:

(1) Asked about Christian/Muslim differences, he mentioned (1) "metaphysics" (a word he said with a slight sneer) in the Christian doctrine of Jesus Christ, & (2) the Qur'an. Both his tract & his speech said in effect: Since we all believe in one

& the same God, what's there to fight about, really? Observe here the same cavalier treatment of Christian theology one so often finds in inauthentic Christian-Jewish dialog. The same crux: Christians blaspheme in setting Jesus the Second Person of the Trinity above Muhammad "the seal [last & highest] of the prophets": Muslims blaspheme in denying the incarnation (Allah has come in the flesh, & they prefer to model their lives on an Arab who showed up six centuries later!). What we face here is a betrayal of classic Christianity; both Christians & Muslims who listen to this pseudoChristian hyperirenicism are being deceived.

(2) Unfairly, but to be expected of a propagandist, Speight compares the best of Islam (call it Islam on paper) with the worst of Christianity (call it Christianity in skin, actual Christians yesterday & today). Challenged with the reality that actual Muslims live way below the Qur'an, he blamed--you guessed it!--the West, colonialism, or even the Christians. Eg, he claimed Islam is more tolerant of Christianity than vice versa. But what about Muslims? Sam. Zwemer (a teacher of mine in seminary, 1937) founded thirty hospitals in Saudi Arabia, then was forbidden ever to enter the country again because he got caught handing out a Gospel tract in Cairo! And our military in the Gulf right now must keep their Bibles covered & let no cross or Star of David show.

(3) The tract & Speight try to put a liberal, ecumenical face on Islam. It wasn't spread by the sword? But throughout Islamic history the sword has been used in Muslim lands to prevent the spread of any other religion. Why not? Isn't Islam, as the tract says, "the reaffirmation of the ancient yet living truth of all religions," with Allah "the greatest and most inclusive of the Names of God"?

(4) I asked why he'd not, for balance, distributed a Christian tract explaining Christianity to Muslims, & he said he didn't know of one, & I suggested he write one--but is he any longer close enough to classic Christianity to do so?

(5) He brushed off any questions on Jews, Israel, the Mideast messy reality. I would not do so in my encounter with a Muslim missionary (Thinksheet #781)....Formerly a Methodist missionary in Muslim lands, he's now against converting Muslims.