On the Dialogue and on Israel

Richard Cushing

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This is the major part of an address by Richard Cardinal Cushing to the congregation of Temple Mishkan Tefila in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts, on October 1, 1969. On that day, the congregation gave him its annual Good Neighbor Award.

GOOD Neighbor—I like the simplicity of the phrase and the precious concept which it represents. The ancient book of our Fathers says: "Love thy neighbor and be joined to him with fidelity" (Ecclus 27:18).1 There is a golden thread that runs through the biblical Testaments, Old and New, which directs, advises, counsels, and commands all of us in our relations with our neighbors. It can all be summed up in the phrase: Good Neighbor. How little we would have of division and violence, of hatred and acrimony, of war and suffering, if only we could be good neighbors. Tonight I come to invite you to be my good neighbor as I wish to be yours.

But however well disposed we are, there seem to be always some elements that threaten to stand in the way of our highest aspiration. We are human beings and there are moments when weakness or fear, pride, or some sort of evil draws us away from our ideals and permits less perfect ones to replace them. We have to be constantly on our guard lest our own frailty betray us; we have to work without ceasing at making ourselves good neighbors one to the other. I would like to offer a few reflections this evening on this subject as it relates to our traditions and to suggest some ways in which we might with happiness and profit face the future together.

Some commentators have suggested that we are entering a period during which religious understanding between Christians and Jews is likely to come under severe strain. They usually give two reasons for this—one of which is connected with the missionary nature of the Christian Church, and the other the varying fortunes of the State of Israel. I would like to suggest tonight that neither of these, in my judgment, need divide or separate us from our neighbors, but they both call for new efforts to back our relations.

It is probably a journey of progress, but difficulties still remain. We are religious people, and we love each other, and we love Israel, whether in church or temple. It is always a rare event a gesture of warm friendship to know each other with respect and affection. More than relations, and we have to be good neighbors.

We cannot, however, get back our destination. We have to learn the things of the past, and be open to new ways of thinking. The Judaeo-Christian spirit has preserved the word of God for us, as a sacred heritage. The father is also our spiritual father, in the psalmist, is one of the heroes of our faith. Bethlehem is a journey of love, and all the apostles, fishermen and women, and heroes of our faith lie at the very heart of the history of the human race and an inspiration to all.

The road before us is full of conversations and of truths to be edifying in the light of reason. Scholars all scratched the surface, and now we encourage this of common knowledge Christians will benefit. We have a few people, especially a richness in wh
both call for new understanding which will improve rather than set back our relations one with the other.

It is probably fair to say that we have reached a plateau on our journey of progress toward total understanding between Christians and Jews. It is no longer strange, for example, for us to visit together, whether in church or synagogue, or to be invited to be part of social and religious programs. My presence here tonight would have been a rare event a decade ago; now it is no more than a neighborly gesture of warmth and friendliness. In short, we have already come to know each other, and to live and labor side by side in mutual respect and affection. This has been an important advance in our relations, and we are grateful to God for making it possible in our lives.

We cannot, however, rest here as if we had somehow arrived at our destination. We simply must get to know each other better, we must become more familiar with each other's traditions, we must learn the things we have in common as well as the things that separate us. Actually, we share the great and inspirational patrimony of the Bible, where the story of the Jews as recorded in the Old Testament is a sacred and blessed part of our own tradition. Abraham your father is also ours. Moses, the lawgiver, is one of our saints. David, the psalmist, is our poet too; and the long line of prophets are sacred heroes of our faith. Even in the New Testament, the child born in Bethlehem is a Jewish child. Mary, His Mother, is a Jewish maiden; and all the apostles on which He founded His Church were Jewish fishermen and working people. There is so much that is Jewish that lies at the very heart of our faith, so much that is our common history and an inspiration to all of us.

The road before us, however, must point in the direction of new conversations and dialogues, especially among those who are knowledgeable in the history and meaning of the separate religious traditions. Scholars already have begun some of this, but they have scarcely scratched the surface; very much more remains to be done. We should encourage this on both sides, so that we can build up a treasury of common knowledge in which Jews will better know Christians, and Christians will better know Jews. Of course, this will be the work of a few people, especially at the beginning, but it will soon flower into a richness in which many more can be asked to participate. It must
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not be—or even thought to be—a missionary venture, an effort at proselytism on either one side or the other. It should be the meeting of friends who wish, by knowing each other better, to become even more intimate friends.

I know there are those who feel that we cannot discuss purely religious questions together without either giving offense to one another or putting in danger the purity of our beliefs. I appreciate that this is a danger that we must consider, but not one that is insurmountable. We have come a long way in the last dozen years, and during that time we have built up a trust that is both deep and strong; it will stand us in good stead as we go forward together. Tonight I encourage those among you who are in a position to make decisions in this matter, to make them with a generous heart and put your confidence in the God we both love and serve.

On the second point, we have been told by some observers that just as long as the Middle East remains unsettled, Christian-Jewish dialogue will be strained and ultimately fruitless. While all of us hope and pray for a quick and lasting peace between Israel and her Arab neighbors, we should not allow these difficult days to slow down our progress toward understanding. I think it is true that many Christians have not even yet come to the comprehension of the way in which Jews in all parts of the world look upon the State of Israel. It is not just a homeland for the persecuted and the oppressed, it is not just a refuge for a people the world has abused—it is for the Jews the fulfillment of prophecy, the return to the promised land, the realization of the divine Covenant, the answer to the prayers of generations of the chosen people. When it is seen in this light, so much that is otherwise hidden becomes clear, so much that is incomprehensible becomes full of meaning. Of course, only a portion of the Jews of the world will settle in Israel, but some part of every Jew belongs there; some portion of his heart watches and waits upon its fortunes.

Christians in our country, and Christians everywhere, must learn of the relationship of these people with their land. They must come to see it not just in terms of politics and foreign policy, not just in terms of geography and development, not just in terms of humanity and humanitarianism—they must see it in terms of the Covenant, the prophets, and the total history of the Jewish people. This is why we see the message of Jesus as one of love and compassion, for this is the essence of the Covenant, but we must see it in the light of the historic events that produced it, and in the light of the promises of the prophets.

Tonight I encourage all of you who have been told that this dialogue is impossible to put aside your fears and misgivings, and to realize that just as the fruit of the successful dialogue will be worth the effort, so will be the effort itself.
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we cannot put off efforts for progress in understanding—because we need them now; we cannot wait upon a better day in the future we cannot foresee—because there is work to be done today.

Israel is a part of world history, it is a state that here and now exists; we must insure its permanent place among the family of nations. To do this—to insist upon this—is not to deny the legitimate rights of any other people; it is not to take sides, it is merely elementary justice. No human situation is so complex that solutions are impossible, no quarrel among states is so permanent that efforts toward its settlement are too much for human endeavor. We must believe this, and our actions must reflect our beliefs. Christians and Jews together, Arabs and Jews together, can build a future on this earth which will stand against the ages, but we can never do it apart. The three great religious traditions have so much to contribute in this as in so many other ways, if we will only direct them toward that peace in which they can flourish and enrich the world.

Tonight we meet in a temple with the beautiful name Mishkan Tefila. This in itself should say something to us of the way to proceed in the days ahead. This temple is called literally "a house of prayer," a name which should fit perfectly every building dedicated to the worship of God. But buildings are only a small part of our future, it is people who determine the course of history and by their lives design the destiny of man. We ourselves must become "men of prayer," men who seek His guidance and ask His help.

In our present world, many people shy away from the idea of prayer, they call upon the Lord only in moments of crisis, only when every human effort fails, only in times of danger and extremity. This is not the tradition of your people or of mine. The beautiful history of the Jewish people as recorded in your sacred books is a history of constant preoccupation with God. Who can forget the psalms of praise and glory which have become the legacy of the entire human race? Who can forget the power of the prophets who so often called their people back when they strayed from virtue's path? You are by every tradition a people of prayer. So are we.

Let us not be afraid as we face the difficult days and the uncertain nights to turn together toward a merciful and loving God who has not forgotten His promises to His people. The poet tells us that "more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." We can
believe this both as Christians and Jews, and we can make it part of our life. Tonight, in this house of prayer—this Mishkan Tefila—let us dedicate ourselves anew to that spirit of prayer which was the hallmark of our fathers in ages past. In this way we can deserve and receive together the abundant blessings of the living God.