

Toward a Code of Behavior for Ecumenists

By EDWARD B. FISKE

In 1867 John Sholto Douglas, the Eighth Marquis of Queensberry, lent his noble name to a set of regulations that transformed the disorganized spectacle of prize-fighting into the modern sport of pugilism. Efforts are now being made to do the same for another disorganized phenomenon: ecumenism.

Ten days ago the American bishops of the Roman Catholic Church issued a set of "Guidelines for Catholic-Jewish Relations." The document encouraged contact between the two faiths at both official and "grassroots" levels and established groundrules such as the elimination of proselytism from the talks.

The ink had hardly dried, however, when the American Jewish Congress produced, in effect, a test case. It charged that a Passion play presented in a Catholic church in Union City, N. J., had a "crude and anti-Semitic atmosphere" that violated the new rules.

The controversy indicates how eager the leaders of all faiths are today to bring order into the saintly art of ecumenism.

The Problem

As interfaith contacts and cooperation increases, the various faiths are developing a vested interest in preserving past gains and assuring that conflict over issues such as abortion reform will not hinder future progress.

The problem was stated explicitly recently by the Rev. John

Courtney Murray, the prominent Jesuit theologian who heads the John LaFarge Institute, a New York-based Catholic organization that works in the areas of race relations and ecumenism.

The institute's interfaith board became concerned that probable conflict over the issue of state aid to parochial schools at next month's New York State Constitutional Convention could seriously endanger recent ecumenical gains.

In recent weeks, therefore, the institute has held a series of informal discussions between Protestant, Jewish and Catholic officials. The aim has been to use the debate to create new techniques for resolving conflicts rather than engendering new bitterness, and it is hoped that a set of groundrules for political action by the various faiths will emerge.

The discussions had hardly begun, however, when Catholics became embroiled with Protestants and many Jews over the unsuccessful attempt to liberalize the New York State abortion law. The bill would have permitted abortion not only when the mother's life is endangered but in additional instances, such as rape or when the mother's physical or mental health would be impaired by pregnancy.

The state's Catholic bishops vigorously opposed the bill, and one of them, the Most Rev. Edward J. Maginn of Albany, said that its support by the Episcopal Diocese of Albany was "neither Christian nor reasonable."

Three weeks ago Protestant and

Jewish leaders in New York City issued a statement charging that the Catholic Church had a right to its opinion on abortion but that it had adopted a "harsh and unbending posture."

"We do not feel, for example," they said, "that the cause of ecumenism is best served by attributing to us the advocacy of murder and genocide."

The issue set at odds two liberal journals that normally agree on social questions. *Commonweal*, a lay Catholic weekly, published an editorial stating that the issue was essentially whether the fetus is a human being or not. It said the choice was between no abortion at all or no restrictions at all.

View Is Criticized

Christianity and Crisis, an independent Protestant journal, attacked *Commonweal* on the grounds that it had oversimplified the issue and ignored other moral considerations such as the quality of the mother's or the child's life.

Commonweal retreated a bit in a subsequent issue and admitted that its critics had a point. The editors reaffirmed their opposition to a change in the law but pledged to "re-think" their position and to give more consideration to the views of those who see moral ambiguities.

Without saying so, they had, in effect, accepted a Guideline.

The suggestions for Catholic-Jewish relations issued by the Bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs went

a long way toward easing the fears Jews have of interfaith encounters.

The document noted that the United States has the largest Jewish community in the world and that the Church in this country thus has "a historic opportunity to advance the cause of Catholic-Jewish harmony throughout the world."

Among the specific recommendations were the following:

(1) A commission should be set up to encourage dialogue in every diocese where there are Jews.

(2) The two faiths should engage in common prayer "whenever it is feasible."

(3) The story of the Crucifixion should be presented "in such a way as not to implicate all Jews of Jesus' time or of today in a collective guilt for the crime."

(4) Catholic texts should contain "a frank and honest treatment of the history of Christian anti-Semitism."

Others have devoted themselves to similar lists. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, a prominent Orthodox theologian has suggested a set of rules that reflects the desire of most Orthodox Jews to restrict interfaith discussions to "non-religious" subjects.

The Rev. Joseph R. Estes, a Southern Baptist mission official, has drawn up some guidelines for Baptist-Catholic talks. They say the belief that all Christians must become Baptists is just as dangerous as the notion that all Christians must "return" to Rome.