

April 13, 1986

Earlier this week I was at a meeting at the offices of television Channel 13/WNET.

The meeting was called by the producers of the recent series Civilization and the Jews. They were embarking on a sequel, tentatively entitled Heritage: The Christians, and they had invited a few representatives of different Christian denominations to react to their tentative outline.

Two things amazed me about the conversation. The first was that the original series about the Jews had apparently been an enormous success in terms of the size of the audience it had attracted and the positive comment it had elicited. In these respects it had surpassed the producers' most optimistic hopes. It left them astonished by the hunger that apparently exists in their viewing audience for sensitive treatments of spiritual themes, and deeply awed at their responsibility for meeting this need in an excellent way.

The second thing that amazed me was the trepidation with which they apparently approached the development of a series on Christianity--a fear that they had that they would become embroiled in other people's quarrels. It was my turn to be astonished at this, astonished that professionals whose stock in trade it was to deal with controversies, from local neighborhoods, to national politics, to the Cold War, to feel intimidated by the squabbles of Christians among themselves. How ferocious are we, really?

I doubt the producers got very much reassurance on that score from the gathering. It was true enough that there was very little contention, and much support for the project, within the group. Yet one member offered the thought that doing the Jews was a lot easier than doing the Christians--there were far fewer of them, and they liked each other and tended to agree with each other, while we Christians are always at each other's throats. This astounding idealization of the Jewish community was voiced rather wistfully; yet I could not help remarking to myself that even a casual reading of the New York Times would reveal that Jews are the equal of Christians when it comes to bickering with each other over doctrines.

In the face of this concern of the producers that in dealing with Christianity they were assaying a subject laced with controversy and quarreling, it is interesting to reflect that according to the Gospels Jesus was quite impatient with nit-picking over doctrines. He certainly never defined his disciples as people who accepted doctrines A, B, C, and D, but rather he simply said that

his followers would be known by the mutual love they bore for each other!

Christians have, in recent decades, been slowly and uncertainly finding ways better to love one another. We live in a world overwhelmed by sounds of confusion and alarm, a world hungry for a spiritual message, for a saving word. Will our halting steps toward that practice of love which alone holds the promise of survival become certain and swift enough to overtake the dangers which loom?

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Possible Additional Comments:

Pope John Paul II's suggestion that Christians participate in a joint act of prayer for peace in Assisi in October of 1986. Tentativeness of suggestion. Friends' reaction.

New York Yearly Meeting follow-up to Benson/Seeger dialogue by a committee formed to follow-up the discussion "between New York Yearly Meeting and the New Foundation Fellowship." Lewis' request for my essay.