
“Toward Better Understanding”: The Rise of the Interfaith Movement in America and the Role of Rabbi Isaac Landman

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During the 1920's an interfaith movement promoting “better understanding” between Christians and Jews began to coalesce in the United States. The establishment of the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ) in 1928 was the culmination of nearly a decade of work by interfaith activists and marked the coming of age of the interfaith movement. Today, the ideals and activities of the interfaith movement are a normative part of religious life in America. Will Herberg maintained in his famed sociological study, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, that “Interfaith is the highest expression of religious coexistence and cooperation within the American understanding of religion.”¹ Yet, despite this and other accolades, little attention has been paid to the development of the interfaith movement and its complex historical and philosophical roots.

This study will attempt to examine those roots, as well as the history of interfaith in the United States until World War II and the career of one of its outstanding advocates, Rabbi Isaac Landman. The tremendous expansion of interfaith after the Second World War, the impact of the Holocaust, interfaith's close links to cold war politics, and, later, to the civil rights movement, are important developments in the interfaith movement which require separate analysis. The general decline of the interfaith movement in recent years is another important topic deserving of study but beyond the scope of this paper.²

Interfaith: The History of an Idea

Although the word “interfaith” is widely used in contemporary religious discourse, it probably was not coined until the turn of the century and did not come into popular use until the 1920's. A host of other terms, such as “good will,” “better understanding,” “inter-

group,” “inter-religious,” “tri-faith,” and “brotherhood,” also vied for public acceptance. The *New York Times Index*, for example, did not include “Interfaith” as a reference category until 1930. “Interfaith” also did not appear in standard English-language dictionaries until *Webster’s Third International* (1955). In short, the slow acceptance of the word “interfaith” stands in marked contrast to the rapid rise in popularity of the movement which it came to represent.

Interfaith activists realized that they needed a term to differentiate the interfaith idea from ecumenism. The word “ecumenism,” derived from the Greek *oikoumenikos*, meaning “of or from the whole world,” primarily came to stand for pan-Christian unity. Interfaith, on the other hand, was to involve the many varieties of Christianity as well as non-Christian traditions, especially Judaism. “Interfaith” quickly obtained popular acceptance and became the catchword for two different understandings of the idea it denoted. The radical position, held, for instance, by the young Isaac Landman, was that the interfaith movement was both an attempt to reconcile differing religious beliefs and the harbinger of a new universal religion supposedly envisioned by the biblical prophets. The radicals eagerly lifted the rhetorical questions of the prophet Malachi out of their original context and asked, “Have we not all one father? Hath not one God created us?” (Malachi 2:10). On the other hand, the moderate and dominant view of interfaith called for a nonsyncretistic program of peaceful coexistence and cooperation. Traditionally minded detractors of interfaith often confuse the intentions of the moderate interfaith activists with those of the radicals. Others, however, maintain that true dialogue (or trialogue) is impossible and, therefore, reject both approaches to interfaith.

Although interfaith has been anachronistically traced back to the universalistic teachings of Israel’s ancient prophets, it is in fact a child of modernity. The roots of the interfaith movement can be traced back to the sustained intellectual attack, especially by deists, against supernaturalism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which directly resulted in a weakening of traditional religion in Western Europe and America. Later, another key intellectual factor in the development of the idea of interfaith was Immanuel Kant’s separation of “morality” and “religion.” According to Kant, one could be a good person without being religious at all. In sum, religionists of many different stripes were forced together to fend off a common enemy—secular humanism.

The idea of “emancipation,” and the emancipation of the Jew in particular, was another prerequisite for any notion of interfaith. With the breakdown of corporate society, a new tolerance for social and religious diversity emerged. Jews, for instance, were enfranchised as citizens, first in America, then in Western Europe. In the United States, the juxtaposition of Jew and Christian as equals before the law of the land was matched by the deistic-Jeffersonian idea that all religions are equal in the eyes of the Constitution.³ In his famed correspondence with several Jewish congregations and a Masonic lodge in 1789 and 1790, George Washington wrote that “the liberal sentiment towards each other which marks every political and religious denomination of men in this country stands unrivaled in the history of nations.”⁴ The idea of America as the land of religious liberty and tolerance continued to find expression on numerous occasions throughout the nineteenth century.

The emancipation of the Jews demanded that Judaism be recast as a “religion” in order to allow for the enfranchisement of Jews as citizens of the modern state. This external need to reformulate Judaism as a “creed” resulted in internal redefinition. Reform Judaism and Neo-Orthodoxy were both, in part, responses to the new conditions of emancipation. The Reformers not only met the definitional requirements of emancipation but also accepted many Christian customs and theological categories as models for their own internal revisions. In time, the philosophical idea of the equality of religions was reinforced by an abundance of similarities in actual practice. Some interfaith activists later believed that (Reform) Judaism and (liberal) Christianity would continue to converge until they become indistinguishable from one another. Joseph Krauskopf, senior rabbi of the Reform Congregation Keneseth Israel in Philadelphia, prophesied to this effect in 1901:

Obsolete forms and meaningless rites are crumbling away. Offensive doctrines are disappearing. The Judaic Jesus is slowly regaining his lost ground. The ethics of Judaism are supplanting the Gnosticism of Paul. When the Jew shall have completely cast away his obstructive exclusiveness and ceremonialism, and the Christian his Christology, Jew and Gentile will be one.⁵

The idea of a basic commonality among all religions received the aura

of scientific validity during the nineteenth century. First, geologists and then archaeologists and scientific textual critics contributed to the demystification of Sacred Scripture and helped transform much of the Bible into a species of human literature. Religionists, inclined to accept these scientific findings, were forced to seek abstract principles as a new basis for their beliefs and actions. In this regard, the ground was being prepared for them by other members of the scholarly community. Late in the nineteenth century, American and European universities began to establish chairs in comparative religion. The work of numerous historians of religion, anthropologists, psychologists, and sociologists all pointed toward a universal basis for religion in the human experience. The interfaith movement began in this environment of limited belief in divinely revealed truth and high confidence in human potential as the road to salvation. Others, however, remained unimpressed with arguments for nonsupernatural religion, and like the Ethical Culturalists completely divested themselves of the yoke of the past, instead developing their own universal "religion of duty" based on Kantian principles.⁶

Several factors conditioned the emergence of an interfaith movement in the United States. Born during the late nineteenth century, the idea of interfaith was a subcategory of the same religious liberalism that gave rise to the social gospel movement and classical Reform Judaism. Dedicated to moral activism, it was inevitable that the social gospel movement would focus some of its energy on religious intolerance in America. In fact, the institutional groundwork for the interfaith movement was laid when the Federal Council of Churches, itself strongly influenced by the social gospel, attempted to counteract the Ku Klux Klan's virulent anti-Catholicism during the 1920's.

Whereas liberal Protestants often had to seek out Catholic support for the interfaith movement, Reform Jews supported it eagerly. Indeed, Reform Judaism, during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, boldly advocated its own version of "liberal theology."⁷ The close relation of Reform Judaism to the interfaith movement is best understood in the context of Reform's doctrine of "mission" as defined in the Pittsburgh Platform of 1885. Reform's "mission" was not only a reaction to Christian missionaries but also a triumphalistic doctrine mandating interfaith activity. The opening sentence of the "First Plank" recognized the idea of the basic commonality among all religions: "We

recognize in every religion an attempt to grasp the Infinite One and, in every mode, source, or book of revelation held sacred in any religious system, the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man.”⁸ The “Sixth Plank” explicitly links Reform’s “mission” with the need for extensive interfaith cooperation: “We acknowledge that the spirit of broad humanity of our age is our ally in the fulfillment of our mission, and therefore we extend the hand of fellowship to all who cooperate with us in the establishment of the reign of truth and righteousness among men.”⁹ In short, interfaith played a central role in the messianism which animated classical Reform Judaism in America.

The interfaith movement in the United States must also be seen as a double-edged expression of consensus Americanism. Interfaith simultaneously represents the melting-pot ideology as well as the cultural pluralism of Horace Kallen and others. In the former, radical interfaith serves as a way of creating a unified Anglo-national culture in America. In the latter, moderate interfaith augments the thesis that there is strength in diversity. The interfaith movement first appeared when these two views of America collided. The tension between these two views has never been fully resolved in the American mind and helps explain some of the dynamics of the interfaith movement during the last several decades.

Finally, interfaith is also closely linked to the rise of the modern city in the late nineteenth century. Jewish and Christian urban elites, moved by the spirit of civic reformism, were concerned about intergroup relations among city dwellers. They saw interfaith as a program enabling various sectors of an urban society to join together for the common good. During the 1920’s interfaith quickly gained the majority of its adherents from the middle class living in the “Zone of Emergence” in which a wide variety of issue-oriented clubs and organizations flourished. Moreover, interfaith provided many naturalized and second-generation Americans, anxious to distance themselves from the Old World ways of their parents yet mindful of the role of religion in American society, with a sense of high purpose and dignity in their public lives.

Interfaith: The Formative Years, 1893–1928

In honor of the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus’ discovery of America, an Exposition was held at Chicago in 1893 including the

World Parliament of Religions. The World Parliament of Religions not only included Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic representatives but also Annie Wood Besant (Theosophy), Swami Vivekananda, and members of Bahai.¹⁰ This unprecedented exercise in comparative religion was organized to demonstrate the “unique” American tradition of religious tolerance in order to offset the anti-Catholicism of the American Protective Association. Nearly a half century later, the Temple of Religion at the New York World’s Fair of 1939–1940 attempted to recreate a similar forum. However, by this time the interfaith movement already had an organizational structure (NCCJ) and a well-developed agenda geared to the fight against Nazism.

A year after the World Parliament of Religions was held at the Columbian Exposition, a series of events began to unfold that ultimately led to the establishment in 1908 of the Federal Council of Churches (FCC), a coalition of many important Protestant denominations and the leading institutional champion of interfaith (or “goodwill”) activities. The evolution of the FCC began in 1894 with the establishment of the Interdenominational Open and Established Church League. Promoting the concept of Christian unity, or ecumenism, the work of this League was soon strengthened by that of the Religious Education Association and the Church Peace Union. In 1905 a new pan-Christian coalition, the Interfaith Conference on Federation, was formed. Three years later, the Interfaith Conference became the FCC. In 1924 the FCC sponsored a Goodwill Committee, led principally by Dr. Samuel Cadman, to combat the Ku Klux Klan. However, the sectarian nature of the Goodwill Committee was quickly recognized as detrimental to the larger goals of interfaith. The call for a totally nonsectarian interfaith organization was finally realized in 1928 with the establishment of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

Protestants were not alone in working on interfaith programs. Several Jewish organizations were also actively promoting interfaith ideas before 1928. Most important were the American Jewish Committee, B’nai B’rith, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis. Soon after the formation of the FCC’s Goodwill Committee, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, the professional organization of Reform rabbis, created a parallel group. The CCAR- and FCC-sponsored committees met and prepared joint statements on interfaith. “We

realize," the two committees declared, "that we best reveal our fellowship by practical cooperation in common tasks and it is our endeavor to formulate a program by which to realize the high purpose of noble endeavors of mutual goodwill and helpfulness."¹¹ Although the committees were not officially joined by any Catholic organization, several Catholic groups and publications supported the idea of interfaith, including the Calvert Association, the Knights of Columbus, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and *Commonweal*.

Interfaith was problematic for American Catholics during the 1920's because of the Vatican's emphatic repudiation of the movement. Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical on "Fostering True Religious Unity" (*Mortalium Animos*) in 1928. He declared that it was not permissible for Catholics "to take part in these ecumenical assemblies," and if Catholics gave "such enterprises their encouragement or support," they would be giving countenance to a false Christianity "quite alien to the one Church of Christ."¹² By definition, the Catholic Church believed that it alone represented (Christian) ecumenism. The inclusion of non-Christian traditions was entirely another matter. The interfaith movement was initially perceived by Rome as another radical tendency in American religion that was both heretical and syncretistic. Years later, however, at the last meeting of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the Church acknowledged the "spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews" and endorsed mutual research and public dialogue programs.¹³

Anti-Catholicism, on the other hand, was the leaven in the bread of the American interfaith movement. Following World War I xenophobia swept many sectors of American society. Communists, immigrants, and, most of all, Catholics were the objects of contempt and derision. The revivification of the Ku Klux Klan was particularly alarming to the liberal Protestant and Jewish communities.¹⁴ Several organizations were formed to counter the KKK's racist and anti-Catholic propaganda. For instance, the American Committee on the Rights of Religious Minorities was organized late in 1920. Anti-KKK protests lodged by the FCC were echoed in the pages of the *American Hebrew*. The unifying effect of the Klan's hate campaign on the interfaith movement continued well beyond the heyday of the KKK. The need for a single independent interfaith organization was clearly perceived by John Herring, secretary of the FCC's Good-Will Committee, in 1926. A

Permanent Commission on Better Understanding Between Christians and Jews in America, organized in 1927, foreshadowed the establishment of the National Conference of Christians and Jews a year later. Like the Permanent Commission, the NCCJ was primarily an opinion-making organization. However, the NCCJ quickly developed a full program whereas the Permanent Commission convened only on an ad hoc basis. The Commission's only major action was a declaration on the blood-libel incident at Massena, New York, in 1928.¹⁵ No doubt ever existed that the NCCJ would supersede both the Permanent Commission and the Good-Will Committee of the FCC to become the premier representative of interfaith ideals in the United States.

*“Better Understanding”:
The Interfaith Activity of Rabbi Isaac Landman*

Among the many champions of the interfaith movement during the 1920s was Rabbi Isaac Landman (1880–1946).¹⁶ Born in Sudilkov, Russia, Landman came to the United States in 1890 accompanied by his mother. His father, Louis Hyamson Landman (1858–1922), emigrated in 1887, moving to Cincinnati, Ohio. Initially, Louis Landman peddled tinware in Kentucky. He eventually prospered, returned to school, and became an eye specialist. Isaac Landman enjoyed a comfortable childhood in the Queen City. He enrolled at the University of Cincinnati and the Hebrew Union College, and obtained both his B.A. and rabbinical ordination in 1906. During his student days, Landman witnessed many fundamental changes at HUC. Foremost were the death of Isaac M. Wise, the founder of the institution, and the appointment of Kaufmann Kohler as president. Kohler, the author of the Pittsburgh Platform, was determined to recreate the Hebrew Union College in his own image.¹⁷ His opposition to Zionism and neo-Hebraic literature and his affirmation of Reform Judaism as a rational religion deeply impressed the young Landman, who left the Hebrew Union College firmly committed both to the lofty religious liberalism of President Kohler and to the principles of Americanism.

Landman spent the first ten years of his rabbinate in Philadelphia. As assistant to Joseph Krauskopf at Keneseth Israel, Landman published several popular and educational works, including a biography of the Italian cabalist and poet Moses Hayyim Luzzatto (1707–1746),

quickly rose through the ranks of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, and promoted a variety of Jewish agricultural projects.¹⁸ In 1916, when the American Army was mobilized along the Mexican border, Landman was appointed as a chaplain by Secretary of War Newton D. Baker, who later (1929–1937) served as the Protestant co-chairman of the National Conference of Christians and Jews.

In 1917 Landman accepted an offer to become the senior rabbi of Temple Israel at Far Rockaway, New York, where he remained until 1928. Landman's eleven years at Temple Israel were busy and productive ones. In 1918 he replaced Philip Cowen as the editor of the *American Hebrew* and quickly transformed the traditional-leaning weekly into a springboard for his own pet ideas and projects. The following year he attended the Paris Peace Conference as the representative of the UAHC-CCAR joint delegation and fought for the inclusion of a clause on universal religious liberty. Landman's participation at the Peace Conference left an indelible mark on his consciousness. He also distinguished himself during these years by his "two-fisted" attack against the Ku Klux Klan and Henry Ford. In 1922, Landman argued before a House Committee in Washington, D.C., against House Resolution 22, which gave American approval to "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people." His outspoken anti-Zionism gained him the dubious sobriquet of "Landman Effendi"—a Turkish title of nobility.¹⁹

Landman's religious liberalism brought him into direct conflict with Zionism. In the aftermath of World War I, Landman was deeply suspicious of any species of nationalism—except for Americanism, which he believed to be different. Jewish nationalism was to him particularly bothersome. To Landman, Zionism represented the worst aspects of Jewish particularism and epitomized the problems of Jewish secularism. He maintained that the relationship of ethnic and religious components in the shaping of the modern Jew was problematic and could only be resolved through the minimalization of the former and the maximalization of the latter. Believing as he did that Zionism violated the true universal essence of Judaism—the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man—he spurned the movement.²⁰ His equation of Zionism with racism, today a propaganda ploy exploited by anti-Zionist organizations and nations, grew out of Landman's understanding of the "Eastern" Haskalah, which glorified the Jewish *volk*, or

people, at the expense of the rational ideals of "Western" Haskalah.²¹

Landman's anti-Zionism is a key to his own Jewish identity. Born in Russia and displaced by the pogroms, Landman found security in the highly Americanistic classical Reform Judaism of his day. As an *Ost-jude* (Eastern European Jew), Landman took the highroad to success by aligning himself with the (German) elite element in Reform circles. Moreover, one can detect in Landman's anti-Zionism a rebellion against his father, Louis H. Landman. In 1920, Louis, by then a trained eye specialist, went to Palestine to set up a free trachoma clinic. While vacationing in Cairo, Egypt, he took ill and died. Although the exact nature of the impact of his father's tragic death remains a matter of conjecture, Landman's theoretical opposition to political Zionism never diminished.

Political Zionism and interfaith were based on antithetical ideas in the mind of Isaac Landman. In rejecting an ultimate expression of Jewish particularism, Landman fully endorsed a program which heralded Jewish universalism. Religion, not politics, was for him the road to salvation. While the rabbi at Temple Israel, Landman, although not an original or profound thinker, worked out a philosophy of interfaith and succeeded in developing a program around its ideals.

Landman's sermons and his writings in the *American Hebrew* are filled with his optimistic faith in the concept of interfaith and his vision of "universal religion." On Sunday morning, January 4, 1924, Landman outlined his belief in the ultimate convergence of Judaism and Christianity in a sermon entitled "What Christians Ought to Know About Judaism."

I do not believe with those who say that religion is not for the melting pot. The idea is an unwise figure of speech at best, and I believe that religion, science, and the newer understanding of man to man and man to God, a religion in the hope of the quest for knowledge and for truth, which for generations back, has come to be a part of the life of this nation and of other nations, are increasing and making greater demands upon all the teachers for light and for truth. Religion must melt away. It must suffer the dross to be thrown into the pot, and the pure elements in it passed through the fire and will be still more purified, and bring man that hope, for which he has been searching, especially since the great recent calamity [World War I] that has come upon mankind.

Religion will eventually, if it is to be worked out in a nation like ours, composed of many men, of many origins, of many different beliefs, the religion, as it will work itself out in this nation will blot off all that is local and temporal of misapprehensions, both in Christianity and in Judaism, and in God's own time, many centuries hence perhaps, will be born that universal religion, first conceived by the prophets of old . . . which will bind all men into the hoped for and prayed for brotherhood under God's fatherhood.²²

However, the *American Hebrew*, not the pulpit, was Landman's primary means of communication. Landman claimed credit for the idea of "better understanding" and believed that the American Good-Will Union (1920), the FCC's Committee on Good-Will, the Joint Commission on Good-Will (FCC and CCAR), and even the American Christian Fund for Jewish Relief (1925) all derived their inspiration, in no small way, from his vision of interreligious cooperation. This vision was repeatedly outlined in the *American Hebrew*.

Providence had great things in store for Landman. On April 15, 1927, the Jewish Passover and the Christian Easter coincided. To mark the occasion, Landman gathered together nine distinguished leaders: three Jews, three Protestants, and three Catholics. Henry Morgenthau, former American ambassador to Turkey, Irving Lehman, judge of the Court of Appeals of the State of New York, and Dr. Stephen S. Wise, rabbi of the Free Synagogue of New York and acting president of the Jewish Institute of Religion, represented the Jews. The Protestant delegation included Rev. Dr. S. Parkes Cadman, president of the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, Dr. W. H. P. Faunce, president of Brown University, and Dr. Roscoe Pound, dean of the Harvard Law School. Victor J. Dowling, presiding judge of the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court of New York, Father Francis P. Duffy, president of the Rainbow Division Veterans' Association, and Martin Conboy, Esq., the Knight Commander of the Order of St. Gregory the Great, were the Catholic emissaries of goodwill. Together these nine individuals made up the Permanent Commission on Better Understanding. President Faunce was appointed chairman, Conboy was made vice-chairman, and Landman acted as secretary. The program of the Permanent Commission was intentionally limited. Its true purpose was symbolic. Landman wrote in the *American Hebrew* on April 15, 1927:

The purpose and objective of this Commission, therefore, is to be solely opinion-making. It will have no power, nor will it have any desire to act in any other capacity. It will have no permanent officers and will call itself into session only when it receives an appeal to redress a group wrong. It will determine for itself whether a protest from a particular group comes within its purview. But when it has investigated painstakingly, and when it has spoken after careful and unbiased deliberation, the whole nation will listen and accept its pronouncement as the enlightened voice of the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish population, on the broad grounds of American humanity.²³

For weeks after the announcement of the Permanent Commission, Landman reprinted scores of press comments unanimously applauding the Commission and the ideals of interfaith. The *New York Times*, according to Landman, even went so far as to suggest that Easter and Passover be permanently fixed on the same date: "It would tend to give wider recognition to the part of religion in the life of the nation, to call special attention to what all monotheistic faiths have in common, and to teach an understanding and tolerance which would prevent such emergencies of misrepresentation as the Commission on Misunderstanding [*sic*] is organized specifically to meet."²⁴

More than a year passed, however, before the Commission was called into action by its secretary. On Saturday, September 22, 1928, two days before the Jewish Day of Atonement, Barbara Griffith, a four-year-old girl, disappeared in the town of Massena, New York. "Due to the ignorance and gullibility of the Mayor and a state trooper," Landman reported in his book *Christian and Jew: A Symposium for Better Understanding*, "a rumor spread that the Jews probably kidnapped the child for ritual purposes."²⁵ The situation in Massena was resolved by 4:30 p.m. the following day when the child was found and all the appropriate apologies were made. However, a storm of protests quickly gathered and blew across the land. On October 5, the Permanent Commission issued its "pronouncement." The statement included both a brief history of the notorious blood libel and a call for the forces of enlightenment to blot out the medieval anachronism.

The Massena incident, therefore, moves the Permanent Commission on Better Understanding to urge our fellow citizens throughout the

nation, in the interest of true religion and of our common devotion to our native country, to prevent the spread of this libel on the Jews, to destroy it by the ridicule it deserves, and forestall its recurrence by enlightenment, lest ill-will and religious enmity spread among our citizenry and discord disrupt our national life.²⁶

Ironically, the self-appointed role of the Commission had actually been supplanted before the Massena incident occurred. During the summer of 1928, another interfaith group, the National Conference of Jews and Christians (later to be called the National Conference of Christians and Jews), was established in New York City. The brazen anti-Catholic rhetoric which marred the presidential contest of 1928 finally moved the FCC leadership to set up a nondenominational goodwill watchdog organization. Roger W. Straus, a successful business executive and son of the esteemed Oscar Straus, represented the UAHC, and Newton Baker, a former secretary of war, served as the co-chairman. A Catholic co-chairman, Professor Carlton Hayes, did not join the NCCJ until 1930. The NCCJ envisioned a broader program for itself than that of the Permanent Commission. The Conference adopted three goals:

1. To analyze and allay prejudice arising among religious groups in the United States;
2. To establish a basis of cooperation for common ends while insuring the right of individuals and groups to differ;
3. To immunize the public mind and emotions against propagandas of misinformation and hatred by developing mutual understanding and appreciation.²⁷

Landman, of course, had no problem endorsing these objectives. Allowing the Permanent Commission to die of inactivity, he quickly associated himself with the NCCJ and actively participated in its programs. At the first function of the NCCJ, a seminar held at Columbia University (January 30 and 31, 1929), Landman helped to arbitrate in a particularly tense exchange between a Catholic and a Protestant. The issue at hand was whether or not the Catholic Church believed itself to be the one true religion in the world. At the propitious moment, Landman spoke up and reminded the assembled group that their real "problem is to agree to disagree agreeably."²⁸ Everyone laughed and the

program continued. So did the work of the NCCJ. By 1931, one hundred thirty-four roundtables had been organized to promote interfaith.

In 1928 Landman left Far Rockaway and became the full-time editor of the *American Hebrew*. At the same time, he began planning for the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, a monumental project which finally came to fruition in 1939. Interfaith provided Landman with a basic editorial policy in organizing and editing this work, which might have been just as appropriately named the *Universalistic Jewish Encyclopedia*. The economic dislocations of the 1930's delayed the completion of the project for more than a decade. In the meanwhile, Landman continued to press his case. *Christian and Jew: A Symposium on Better Understanding* was issued in 1929. Landman invited thirty-five interfaith activists to write short pieces in praise of the movement. As editor, Landman wrote the Foreword and the final three essays, "Better Understanding in the Bible," "The Permanent Commission on Better Understanding," and "First Public Pronouncement of the Permanent Commission."

Landman returned to the pulpit in 1931 when he became the rabbi of Beth Elohim in Brooklyn. During the 1930's Landman became increasingly involved in Jewish adult education and established the Academy of Adult Education in Brooklyn in 1931. The CCAR invited Landman to be the keynote speaker at its 1933 convention. Before his peers he summed up his philosophy of Judaism.

In a word: to reintegrate our racialists and nationalists into the synagog [sic], Eastern and Western Haskalah must meet and be fused in American Israel through vigorous educational policies and processes that extend from childhood to mature adulthood, stressing this as fundamental: that Judaism is spiritual in origin, social in purpose, ethical in intent, and cosmic in aspiration.²⁹

The crowning achievement of Landman's career and his greatest contribution to interfaith was the publication of the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* (1939–1941). In the Preface to the multivolume work, Landman traces the origins of the project from his experience at the Paris Peace Conference to the organizing of the Permanent Commission to the success of the NCCJ. "From the very outset," Landman noted, "leaders of our [interfaith] Movement envisaged the need for a single printed source dealing with Jewish history and Christian-Jewish

relations in comprehensive, scientific and concise form.” Everett R. Clinchy, director of the NCCJ, prepared a thirteen-page article for the encyclopedia, entitled “Better Understanding Between Christians and Jews,” in which Landman is the first name to appear among the various architects of the interfaith movement. Louis Minsky, head of the Religious News Service (an agency of the NCCJ), wrote the article on the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Although the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* pales in scope and depth before the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901–1906) and is hopelessly outdated by the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (1971), it remains a valuable storehouse of information, particularly in the area of American Jewish history, and a living monument to the idealism of its editor, Isaac Landman.

Landman remained at Beth Elohim until 1942. He remained active throughout his brief retirement: teaching, counseling, and promoting the various ideals he had been championing since 1906. On September 3, 1946, he died in New York. The idea of interfaith, although radically changed by the struggle against Nazism and, later, by the establishment of Israel, lived on.

The Interfaith Movement Emerges

Landman readily acknowledged that the NCCJ and not his Permanent Commission became the most influential “fountainhead of inter-religious fellowship” in the United States. The NCCJ popularized interfaith and developed interfaith programs across the country. Although successful from the outset, the blossoming of the NCCJ did not really occur until 1933. Responding to the rise of Hitler in Germany, three religious leaders (Everett Clinchy, Father John E. Ross, and Rabbi Morris Lazon, who wrote *Common Ground* in 1938) made a 9,000-mile trip together to promote interfaith. Three years later, twenty-five goodwill trips toured the United States and became a model for chaplaincy programs during World War II. In 1934 the NCCJ formed its own Press Service, which was reorganized as the Religious News Service in 1937. Perhaps the single greatest accomplishment of the NCCJ was its sponsorship of Brotherhood Day, celebrated for the first time on April 29, 1934. After the war, this program was enlarged to Brotherhood Week (1947), which continues to this day on an annual basis. The NCCJ also developed numerous cooperative

programs, including seminars, institutes, and dialogue programs.

The organization and professionalization of the interfaith movement prior to World War II certainly must have pleased the early champions of the cause. Landman, who was fond of Victor Hugo's apothegm that "there is something stronger than an army, and that is an idea whose time has come," believed that interfaith would eventually triumph over religious factionalism. Although his name is now largely obscured by time and his anti-Zionism fossilized in history, Landman's contributions in the area of American Jewish-Christian relations have proven as enduring as the interfaith movement itself.

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Notes

1. Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, N.Y., 1960), p. 259. N.B. The title of Herberg's study is *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*; that is, the title is composed of one word, not three: this is a remarkable expression of "interfaithism."

2. The decline of interfaith has multiple causes. Among them are the waning of American liberalism at present, the rise of interest in ethnicity, alarm over intermarriage in the Jewish community, and "leakage" in the Catholic Church.

3. The First Amendment to the Constitution states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

4. Quoted in Morris U. Schappes, *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States: 1654–1875* (New York, 1971), p. 87.

5. Joseph Krauskopf, *A Rabbi's Impressions of the Oberammergau Passion Play* (Philadelphia, 1901), p. 216. On this matter, see also Benny Kraut and Francis E. Abbot, "Perceptions of a Nineteenth Century Religious Radical on Jews and Judaism," in *Studies in the American Jewish Experience*, ed. Jacob R. Marcus and Abraham J. Peck (Cincinnati, 1981), pp. 90–113.

6. On Ethical Culture, see Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati, 1979).

7. On liberal theology, see Sydney Ahlstrom, "The Golden Age of Liberal Theology," in *A Religious History of the American People* (Garden City, N.Y., 1975), 2:224–249.

8. Sylvan D. Schwartzman, *Reform Judaism Then and Now* (New York, 1971), p. 214.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 217.

10. Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 2:307, 554, 562, and 565.

11. Everett R. Clinchy, in *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Better Understanding Between Christians and Jews."

12. Quoted in Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life* (New York, 1973), p. 406. Interfaith was also opposed by conservative Evangelicals and by Orthodox Jews.

13. Naomi W. Cohen, *Not Free to Desist: The American Jewish Committee, 1906–1966* (Philadelphia, 1972), p. 462.

14. On the Ku Klux Klan, see D. M. Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan* (1965); K. T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City* (1967); and A. S. Rice, *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* (1961).

15. Released to the press on October 5, 1928. For the text, see “First Public Pronouncement of the Permanent Commission,” in *Christian and Jew: A Symposium for Better Understanding*, ed. Isaac Landman (New York, 1929), pp. 371–374. On the Massena incident, consult Saul S. Friedman, *The Incident at Massena: The Blood Libel in America* (New York, 1978).

16. For a short account of Landman’s life, see *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Landman, Isaac.”

17. Michael A. Meyer, “A Centennial History,” in *Hebrew Union College–Jewish Institute of Religion: At One Hundred Years* (Cincinnati, 1976), pp. 49–84.

18. Landman was executive secretary of the National Farm School from 1906 to 1911 and helped found Clarion, Utah, in 1911 with the aid of Jacob Schiff, Julius Rosenwald, and Simon Bamberger.

19. Naomi Cohen, *American Jews and the Zionist Idea* (New York, 1975), pp. 28 and 159. Also, I. Landman, *American Hebrew*, April 18–21, 1922.

20. I. Landman, “Preface,” *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*. On Landman at the Paris Peace Conference (1919), see *American Hebrew*, May 23–July 11, 1919. “A number of those present at the Peace Conference [1919] returned to the United States disillusioned, with grave misgivings over the future of our [Jewish] brethren. We realized, but vaguely at first, that the type of political and racial propaganda furtively and openly disseminated in Paris could well be exploited to make the Jew the scapegoat of misconceived peace pacts.”

21. I. Landman, “Keynote Address,” *CCAR Yearbook* 43 (1933): 139.

22. I. Landman, “What Christians Ought to Know About Judaism,” typescript, January 1, 1924 (Landman Papers, American Jewish Archives, Boxes 3080–3083). See *Manuscript Catalog of the American Jewish Archives* for further holdings on Landman.

23. *American Hebrew* (1927), 120:795.

24. *Ibid.*, 120:890.

25. Landman, *Christian and Jew*, p. 371.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 374.

27. *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, s.v. “National Conference of Christians and Jews.”

28. James E. Pitt, *Adventures in Brotherhood* (New York, 1955), p. 29. *Adventures* is an attempt to write the history of the National Conference of Christians and Jews. Pitt is not a trained historian and the book has serious shortcomings, to say the least. However, it is the only full-scale synoptic treatment of the NCCJ.

29. Landman, “Keynote Address,” p. 134.