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The United Nations Racism Conference
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It is almost impossible to say something about the U.N.-sponsored Conference on Racism without offending someone. But I am not only going to do just that, with some trepidation, but to also say something about religious intolerance as well.

The Racism conference was not about "racism," at least not as we in America have understood the term for more than half a century. In the U.S.A., we have defined racism to refer to discrimination within a country against minority ethnic groups, usually by the majority ethnic group. That is what we mean when we refer to white discrimination against blacks or Chicanos or American Indians.

The main subjects of debate at the U.N. conference, by contrast, focused on armed conflict, such as in the Middle East, and past colonialism and slavery practiced by the European nations and (former) colonies against African peoples and nations. The conference thus treated racism as issues between nations, not as problems within nations. The conference essentially ignored present-day problems of racism within countries, such as those of minority discrimination in Japan, European and U.S. discrimination against foreign immigrants, and caste discrimination in India. And, since this is a column on religion, it should also be noted that not a breath was uttered about religious intolerance, even when it combined with racial differences.

The escalating conflict between the Palestinians and the Israelis provides a case in point. This decades-old undeclared war consists of two peoples living on and claiming the same territory. While the two sides nearly reached an agreement a year ago, which would have resolved many of their disputes and given more territory to the Palestinians, they failed. Since then, there has been an escalating tit-for-tat exchange regularly resulting in death or wounded victims. This conflict, however sad and horrible for both sides, is not racism, it's a war.

The grounds for this conflict, however, are both racist and religious. While conference delegates and the news media frequently pointed to the Holocaust,

Hitler's racist killing of six million Jews (half the world's Jewish population), as the main factor in the migration of Jews to Israel, the primary motivation came from Christian theology and centuries of its application.

Many of the New Testament comments about Jews, particularly those from Paul, assume that Jews will convert to Christianity en masse, once the truth of Jesus the Messiah is made known to them. The problem is that such were openly living within the various Christian empires, nations and cities of Europe. By and large they lived as foreigners, without legally-defined rights even within nations where they had resided for centuries. They were subjected to widespread discrimination and harassment, despite the success of a few individuals, and often were subject to mob violence. During the Crusades, the Christian crusaders killed, robbed and raped more Jews in Europe than Moslems in the Near East. So for centuries, European Christians largely failed to provide for Jews a place within European society.

So Hitler's Holocaust was simply the last straw. Although tens of thousands of Jews had migrated to Israel prior to World War II, the homeless conditions of nearly all Jews that had been living in the war area and the allies' inability to address their situation in many ways forced those Jews still alive to emigrate to the Israel.

So although we look at the Middle East conflict today and think "those Jews and Arabs just cannot get along," we need to remember that the reason for the conflict is that Christian Europe failed to make welcome the Jews that had lived there for centuries. In the end, European Jews were either killed or exported out of Europe; only a tiny fraction of Jews remain in Europe. Large numbers of Jews went to Israel and became the backbone of the new nation of Israel. But we should also recall that large numbers of them also came to America, where they were welcomed with other immigrants and became valuable members of our nation.