

Earl Raab

January 9, 1978

A MATTER OF ETIQUETTE

A Jewish San Franciscan recently bought a scraper in Sears Roebuck. He was startled to find in the package a "Message from the President" of the tool factory, which carried a parable in two suggestions.

The first suggestion was that the material to be scraped should not be rotten or corroded. "There is no amount of scraping or painting that will produce an excellent job if you knowingly gloss over the hidden inner effects."

The second suggestion was a "spiritual application" of the above. "Have you ever noticed how some people try to reform their lives simply by glossing over the surface, trying to fool others with a thin veneer of phoniness? . . . It would take very little spiritual scraping to reveal the inner rottenness."

Therefore, for a thorough spiritual cleansing, the manufacturer recommended: "Why don't you turn your life over to Jesus Christ today and discover the abundant life that He has promised to those who believe and trust in Him. Feel free to write me for further information and literature concerning the Christian faith."

Our purchaser felt that it was bad enough that he had to scrape, without being evangelized in the bargain. As Jews always have, he turned to his Rabbi, who consulted with the JCRC.

What, after all, was the situation? No laws had been broken. The government was not

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involved. A private manufacturer has the legal right to include Christian messages with his tools. A private merchant like Sears Roebuck has the legal right to distribute such messages. And that is the way it should be. For the government to pass laws regulating the expression of religious belief in the private sector would require major surgery on the First Amendment, and the probable removal of a large chunk of religious liberty from the body politic.

On the other hand, there was something unwholesome about the episode. It is not as though Jewish faith is threatened by such a religious commercial. Luther once said that "it is as easy to convert Jews as to convert the devil himself;" and there is an old Bulgarian proverb which is just as flattering on the subject: "If you would baptize a Jew, it is necessary to hold him under water for ten minutes." And the scraper manufacturer's message was undoubtedly directed at least as much to "fallen-away Christians" as to Jews. Nevertheless, it is a breach of pluralistic etiquette to force one's sectarian attentions on another.

Yes, there are certain rules of etiquette in pluralism. You can promote your sectarian belief in a newspaper ad; or even in a special interview; but it would be in bad taste for a general newspaper to editorialize to that effect, or to slip an evangelistic aside into a news story. You can hand evangelistic leaflets to people on the street, but it would be in bad taste for a telephone repairman to try to save your soul while he is fixing your phone.

It is often the case that good manners have an important social function. They protect sensitivities, common privacy, and, in this case, the general climate of pluralism.

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Laws that would attempt to finely tune such manners would inevitably destroy privacy and pluralism. And if we need laws for such manners, it is already too late.

So the etiquette of pluralism must constantly be built and repaired by education and vigilant reminder. In the case of the marketplace, such etiquette is effectively backed by the economic fact of pluralism. So when a sorrowful contact was made with Sears Roebuck on the matter of the scraper and good manners, the reply from their national headquarters was swift: "Not only are we embarrassed, but these leaflets were introduced into the cartons without the knowledge of the distributor. Please accept our apologies. The matter has been corrected and the tool company has been contacted and the leaflets removed from all cartons in stock."

When a Talmudic Rabbi wrote, "Beautiful is the study of the law combined with good manners," he did not even know about the future delicate requirements of the American society.