

Warren's 'Who Speaks for the Negro?' Is a Review of Status of Anti-Semitism

One of the most distinguished novelists, literary critics, poets and essayists has written a powerful condemnation of race prejudice and a strong appeal for full civil rights for the Negro.

Robert Penn Warren, in "Who Speaks for the Negro?" published by Random House, demands total redemption "in our spiritual bankruptcy."

Describing his newest literary effort, in behalf of the oppressed black men, as being primarily a transcript of conversations, Warren's challenging question contained in the title of his book also is accompanied by answers, emphasized by his declaration that there is no reason to be appalled by Negro leadership.

Out of his recorded conversations emerge frank statements on many issues, including that of anti-Semitism.

In a sense there is cause for concern over the anti-Jewish attitudes that have been injected in some discussions over the Negro issue. But Warren's "own observation is that, by and large, both Negroes and non-Jewish whites in the South assume that a sympathetic relation exists between the Jew and the Negro. And in most places which I know, some Jew has given a basis for this assumption."

Thus, we are told in this volume that "basically the Negro is not anti-Semitic, and such anti-Semitism as he ordinarily expresses stems from his personal experience—I knew one once and he did so-and-so to me. The Negroes who make anti-Semitic remarks are those who have run into, say, a Jewish storekeeper or a Jewish landlord or a Jewish woman who is the boss of domestic servants. But I have met thousands and thousands of Negroes, and they have never forgotten, wherever they've been, the Jews who helped them—some Jews. Even in the deep South, you recognize the Jews have helped them—and remember Jews have been vulnerable in the South, too."

But there is a quotation in Warren's compilation from Lolis Elie: "I hate to think that Negroes can be anti-Semitic, but on the other hand, they would have to—some of them would have to be—for this is part of America. You have to hate something, you know, and if you don't, then you can't be American."

There are comments on self-hate, the Nazi era, their equivalents in the status of the Negro,

and there are quotations from novels by Negroes that contain the anti-Semitic tinge. Rev. Aaron Henry, for instance, told Warren that while the image of the Jew on the national level caused the Negroes to feel they could be counted upon, he added that "frankly, some of our oppressors are found in the Jewish community, which is a statement I am sorry to have to make." Henry said in Mississippi, Jews are more vulnerable to social pressure and he said after the white man might clobber the Negro into submission the Jew will be next.

The Warren work could have included conversations with Jews who have been and remain among the leaders in the civil rights struggle. By presenting all the facts the tension could have been reduced.

Under the circumstances, the quotations in Warren's excellent work do provide some cause for concern over the Negro anti-Semitic attitudes.

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