NEW YORK, Sept. 20...Christian and Jewish religious leaders today joined with the head of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, a farmers' organization official, and a political analyst in denouncing recent extremist-group moves to stir up anti-Semitism among Midwestern farmers, warning that these actions posed a danger to the farmers and to democracy as well as to Christian-Jewish relations.

Issuing the warning, at a news conference at American Jewish Committee headquarters here, were Bishop Maurice Dingman, head of the Catholic Diocese of Des Moines; Rev. Donald Manworren, executive coordinator, Iowa Interchurch Forum; Rabbi A. James Rudin, AJC national director of interreligious affairs; Thomas Kelly, director, Kansas Bureau of Investigation; Dixon Terry, chair, Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, and Leonard Zeskind, research director, Center for Democratic Renewal.

Dr. David M. Gordis, AJC executive vice president, chaired the meeting.

The principal charge leveled by the conference was that several right-wing groups, preying on the fears of economically distressed farmers, were spreading propaganda alleging that "Eastern bankers" and an "international Jewish conspiracy" were behind the current rural economic crisis. The specific solutions offered by the six speakers varied, but all exhorted the Federal Government to move quickly to find answers to the farm crisis, and all called for programs to make farmers aware of the falsity and viciousness of anti-Semitic propaganda.

The two Christian clergymen at the conference also stressed heavily that those of the propaganda groups that claimed to be "Christian" were "in fact making a mockery of Christianity through their patently unChristian message of hate."

Added Rabbi Rudin, expressing AJC's view and the consensus of the conference speakers: "We pledge our continuing opposition to the destructive 'siren songs' of the radical right. We will not remain silent in the face of bigotry, and we urge all men and women of good will throughout our nation to join with us in a broad-based coalition of concern. The pernicious virus of hatred must not be allowed to spread."
Describing the tactics of some of the groups, Mr. Zeskind, whose agency monitors the activities of the Ku Klux Klan and similar bodies, said:

"Over the last five years the level of organizing activity by racists and anti-Semites has steadily increased. They have taken advantage of the crisis in rural America and used that crisis to put forward their own political agenda."

"They have used both the more flamboyant tactics of paramilitary training and hate-mongering," continued Mr. Zeskind, "as well as the established political tactics of base-building. Most successfully of all, they sell farmers a faulty understanding of legal procedures: they talk of what they call a 'Christian understanding of common law,' and go from there to a 'Christian understanding of the Constitution and civilization,' and before long, while convincing farmers that they are offering them a simple way out of their legal problems, they have moved on to talk of the impending 'Jewish destruction of Western and Christian civilization.'

"In this way they move down a slippery slope from simplistic legalism to out-and-out Nazism."

Mr. Kelly, detailing what the Kansas Bureau of Investigation has learned of specific groups, said that one of them, the Survivalists, "urges the stockpiling of weapons, food, ammunitions, and explosives in Survivalist bunkers, and some of their leaders urge their members to take violent action against Jews and racial minorities."

Another group, Posse Comitatus ("Power of the County"), Mr. Kelly continued, "has as its philosophy simply a broad spectrum of racial, ethnic, and government issues singled out by the extremist and hate groups and offered as a smorgasbord for bigots."

While the ideas of these groups are dangerous, Mr. Kelly said, "they have not been received with open arms by our communities, and we believe these beliefs and actions are repugnant to the vast majority of our farm and rural population."

Moreover, he continued, "our intelligence information in areas where there have been terroristic activities indicates that the people carrying out these activities among the farmers are seldom farmers themselves. We believe the members of our farm population are discerning individuals who reject extremist viewpoints for what they are."

Mr. Terry, a dairy farmer who is active in several farm organizations and was named by Esquire magazine as one of its "outstanding men under 40" in 1984, urged that the problem be attacked at what he considered its roots: the farmers' economic problems, and their isolation.

"Farmers across the country and particularly in the Midwest," he said, "are now facing a greater economic upheaval than any we have seen in more than half a century. Because of economic dislocation, the loss of farms, and the financial pressures that farmers and their families are under, there is an atmosphere of despair and hopelessness, and in this atmosphere many farmers are blindly grabbing at anything that seems to provide an answer for them."

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"They are thus ripe for the manipulations of right-wing groups which provide simplistic answers, conspiracy theories, and bogus legal practices that will supposedly solve the farmers' very serious difficulties.

"The problem is that these farmers have little or no contact with other segments of society or with mainstream media, and so they are prey to these manipulations."

Nevertheless, continued Mr. Terry, "although the right-wing threat in rural communities is the greatest it has been in a long time, I think the farmers' progressive movement has a much broader base, and the best hope for combating the right-wing anti-democratic movement lies with the more progressive forces.

"I think the best route for dealing with the anti-democratic groups is to deal with the real problems facing farmers, and to work to unite farmers with city workers, with minorities, and with other people in our society who are likewise facing problems and suffer from a lack of political power."

Also focusing on the farmers' plight, and suggesting both political and educational solutions, Bishop Dingman said:

"Desperate people will look for scapegoats. Farmers are desperate. Therefore they are psychologically and emotionally prey to the hatemongers who would blame the devastating farm crisis on 'Jewish bankers.' There is of course absolutely no truth to this charge, and the obvious solution is twofold: first, remove the occasion for the hatred by giving the farmers a just price for their produce, as called for in the 1985 Farm Reform Act (the Harkin bill); and secondly, engage in a strong educational program to dispel the notion of the so-called 'Jewish conspiracy of bankers' allegedly trying to take farms away from family farmers."

Also, continued Bishop Dingman, "we must unmask groups -- like the one that calls itself Christian Identity -- that make a mockery of Christianity by calling themselves Christian while spreading a patently unChristian message. The Christian faith is love for one's neighbor, and these groups engender only hate."

Sounding a similar theme, Reverend Manworren warned that "while the far right still represents a fairly small movement in the Midwest, it is a movement that must be taken in all seriousness," and he added:

"American rural life is undergoing momentous change which seems clearly beyond the control of individual farmers or even farm communities. The sense of helplessness, rage, and despair created by these changes makes people vulnerable to explanations that seem to fix blame and promise hope.

"But people of faith know that hope never lies in the cultivation of fear, hatred, suspicion, or scapegoating. Those strategies, which are the methodology of the far right, always lead to the destruction of community and thus the very resource necessary to a constructive future. Hope lies in the direction of a reconciled community that recognizes its common plight and its common future."

The American Jewish Committee is this country's pioneer human relations organization. Founded in 1906, it combats bigotry, protects the civil and religious rights of Jews here and abroad, and advances the cause of improved human relations for all people everywhere.

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