



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Religious Confusions**

# Religion

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# **Religious Confusions**

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## **Religious Confusions<sup>1,2</sup>**

### **Section One: Foreign Thoughts and Foreign Tongues**

When I was in grade school, we citizens noticed a small building being built near downtown. The entire town of Lovington, New Mexico, was downtown as the town was too small to have an uptown. As the building went up, a sign was placed next to it advertising the place would soon house Catholics. Eyebrows were raised on suspicious foreheads: *What's this town coming to?*

One day, my First Baptist Sunday School teacher started his morning educational indoctrination of ten-year-olds into Christianity by mentioning this building. He spent the remaining time excoriating the Catholic faith. I use this swanky word now. Back then, I only knew he was executing a typical Baptist "hell-fire and brimstone" attack, this time on the Catholics. A few Sundays ago, he was ranting about Methodists.

#### **Holy Rolling**

In the past, he had also mocked what we Baptists called the Assembly of God parishioners: Holy Rollers. I attended the Assembly of God church as often as I attended the Baptist Church. It was down the alley, one block from our town home. The pastor, Reverend Vowell, never rolled holy-like, but he had a knack for exciting his parishioners. I loved the place, and was one of those aisle rollers. OK, I didn't roll on the floor, as some did, but I rocked and rolled a lot.

Imagine, dancing in a church---to piano music no less. Almost everyone were singing and shouting "Praise the Lord!...Hallelujah!" all to the beat and tune to festive music.

The Holy Rollers had a lot of fun during their service. When I was lodged in between mom and another big person at the First Baptist Church, I asked myself, "Why didn't I go to the Holy Rollers this morning?"

Reverend Vowell and his wife had four children with whom I played almost every day. I never caught religion from the reverend, but I did catch the Seven-Year-Itch from one of his kids. Talk about "hell-fire!" Try having your body swabbed with alcohol seven times a week. I would have converted to anything---even become a Methodist---to have avoided mom's daily alcohol baths.

#### **A Foreign Tongue**

Mom permitted me to attend any church in town, just as long as I told her my destination as I went out the door. She even permitted me to go to the Catholic Church after it had opened its business of saving souls. She attended a convent as a child, but chose to be a Baptist because of a Catholic Church rule against marrying a non-Catholic. This rule seemed self-defeating to me. The Catholic lost a contributor to the plate they passed around during the service.

While living in Lovington, I attended the Catholic Church only once. I never listened to much of anything the pastors said in any church. On this occasion, I did listen, but in confusion and amazement. The preacher was speaking in a foreign tongue, and it wasn't Spanish, which I

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<sup>1</sup> The conversations between Lou and me took place during the years of 1957 and 1958. At that time, I did not record conversations as I often do now (With permission of the person being recorded of course. I'm no NSA). Our dialogues are obviously not verbatim, but reflect accurately the tone and gist of our talks.

<sup>2</sup> The images of the two ghosts on the cover were taken from a site accessed by my keying-in "Pictures of Ghosts." Thank you for these images.

could recognize. Granted, a significant number of the parishioners that morning were of brown skin and of Latino descent. Nonetheless, in the middle of my hometown, I had made a startling discovery: A sizable population of its citizens were bilingual!

But again, it was not Spanish, a language common to the area. It was a real honest to god foreign language. I could have been in foreign country. I wondered how all these people knew this language? Where did they learn it?

I now introduce the first religious confusions example of this story. Upon returning home, I asked mom about this strange incident. She launched into a lecture that the priest (as he was called) used the language of the Catholic Church. She told me it was Latin.

“Latin? Where did all those people learn Latin?”

“Oh, they don’t know Latin.”

That meant they did not understand much of the sermon. As an adult, I liken it to an English speaking person going to a French film that has no subtitles. You look at the action, which in a French film might be enough to hold your interest. Even the Holy Rollers could have chanted their sermons in foreign verse, and I would have been entertained.

But there I sat, looking at semi-motions that were slower than a golf swing ritual, and all intelligible. I wondered why anyone would sit through a sermon Sunday after Sunday and not understand it? I placed a bet with myself that they looked at their watches a lot.

I also wondered how the Catholic Church had so many loyal followers. They couldn’t marry anyone but Catholics, which in Lovington cut down one’s shopping list considerably. They could not even understand what the priest was saying!

I still wonder...somewhat...but my Catholic friends and Catholic wife tell me they can read along with most of the sermon, and today’s services are usually in the mother tongue of the congregation.

A few short years later, when I had developed an overriding, never ending longing for girls, I learned that Catholic priests were not allowed to marry. That rule completely perplexed me. It still does. It seems self-defeating: the loss of potentially more (little) Catholics.

### **More Fire and Brimstone**

Let’s return to the Baptist Sunday school and our teacher’s tirade against the Catholics. I had become puzzled about this man’s vitriol. In our Sunday school classroom, I recall a poster had been placed on the wall behind the teacher’s podium in front of the room. It showed a picture of Jesus sitting in a field of grass and flowers. He was surrounded by affectionate sheep. The poster proclaimed, “Jesus Loves.”

OK by me, as I was fond of lambs. But I could leave adult sheep to Jesus. To those big bucks on Dad’s ranch, I was a butting dummy. Still, the poster had an effect on me. It left a message that was inculcated into my memory that I hold today. I think the gentle and forgiving persona of Jesus as the most attractive aspect of Christianity.

I do not know if this man spent the remaining time on this diatribe. I became upset with his rantings. Being an impulsive sort of kid, I stood up from my pew. In what I am sure was a rather inarticulate response to this man’s invective, I yelled out: *Jesus teaches love.* (As I looked at the poster of Jesus loving his sheep.) *You’re preaching hate!*<sup>3</sup> ...or something to that effect.

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<sup>3</sup> I had a visceral hatred of bullies. As a woefully small child, I was subject to their taunts and blows. I once lashed out at a man at the Lea Theater. Upon my leaving---having seen Mario Lanza in “Caruso”---he asked if I liked the “sissy singer.” Forming a Clint Eastwood retort, I shouted back as I ran out the door, “You’re the sissy!” Maybe not so Clint-like, but I did have the last word in the matter.

In hindsight, I wish I had come back with a clever mock, such as, “You’re just jealous ‘cause you don’t know Latin.” But then, most Catholics did not know Latin either.

I scampered out of the Sunday school building. Angry, yet scared that I had upset an unspoken apple cart, I retreated to my escape: Except for mesquites and yucca, an empty pasture south of town. There, immersed in a deep funk, I sat down and wondered how my brothers and parents would react to my outburst. I also wondered how I would deal with my Sunday school teacher the next Sunday. Or more to the point, how he would deal with me.

I headed for home thinking I did the right thing that morning, but not confident enough to want to face possible criticism and corporal punishment. Mom and dad were keen advocates of the belt.

My brothers never brought the subject up. Being rather distant from churches and out-of-the-way from me (I was last and late to come along in a family of six boys), they did not know about the incident, or did not want to get into a religious fracas.

Courtesy of an evangelical Baptist grapevine that passed information through town faster than the speed of light and ordinary gossip, Mom had heard about my mini-mutiny at Sunday school. She asked me about it--a forerunner to her protocol of hearing the other side of the story before possibly not buying the other side of the story.

I related the story to her as accurately as a ten-year-old kid could. That is, a kid who was defending his delicate ass against a possible leather belt. I threw in the preacher’s shouting and his red face, his pumping his arms up and down in front of us. I threw in the poster of Jesus and its message, followed by the kitchen sink.

Mom sized me up and hesitated for a moment, likely deciding on her next action. She decided my corporal punishment would be a hug.

Jesus saves.

## Religious Confusions

### Section Two: Sighting Jewish People

I sighted the first Jewish person in my life when I was eighteen years old. At least, I think the meeting was my first encounter with a person of this culture and religion. The place where I was brought-up, the remote plains of southeastern New Mexico, was populated by Baptists, Methodists, and similar subsets of the Christian religion. I was not educated as to the looks and behavior of non-Christians, such as Muslims and Jewish people.

As mentioned in Section One, our Baptist leaders kept us up to date on the deficiencies of Methodists, Catholics, and Holy Rollers, but somehow kept the comments about the Jewish faith to themselves. Maybe they had the same handicap as I: they had never come across a Jew.

My encounter occurred on the day I left Lovington to attend college at the University of New Mexico in the giant city of Albuquerque---giant in the mind of a rural ignoramus. Albuquerque had four movie theaters. It had a downtown, a midtown, and an uptown. Appropriately, the movie theater uptown was called the Highland.

This first Jewish sighting was made because I had seen a movie back in Lovington in which I noticed Jewish people (men as well as boys, as I recall) always wore a hat or one of those funny looking caps.

I had just arrived at the UNM campus and was checking in at my dormitory. Standing in line in front of me was a boy wearing Jewish head gear. I had sighted my first Jewish person.

We struck up a conversation. His name was Lou. He was from New York. I had never met anyone who lived in New York. A Jew and a New Yorker, all in one day. Two birds with one stone.

I was interested in Lou. To me, he was a rather exotic creature: a New York Jew, one I had seen only in the movies. As we made our way to the registration desk, we chatted about New York and New Mexico. It was as if two boys, one from Saturn and the other from Jupiter, were feeling each other out about their respective universes.



During this time, I kept looking at Lou's cap. He frequently eyed my boots and western belt buckle. My hat was similar to the one I am wearing in this photo. (Even cowboy hats go out of style.) Finally Lou asked me, "Are you a cowboy? I've never met a cowboy before."

I was as exotic to him as he was to me. The thought never occurred to me that I was a cowboy. I doubt it ever occurred to anyone from Lovington's ranches. It was a way of life. I was a boy. I lived in the summer on a cattle ranch. I rode horses and milk pen calves. The latter drill was to get me into shape for someday riding broncs or bulls.

I said, "Yes," and then asked, "Are you Jewish?" He said, "Yes."

Two aliens met. We were religious extraterrestrials to each other who were destined to become friends. During our Freshman year, as we became closer and as we learned about each other's culture, Lou liked to call me "cowboy." I called him "Yankee boy."

You may have noticed I have not often used the word "Jew." I have not, because for most of my life, I was under the impression this noun carried negative connotations. If one said, "He's a Jew," the phrase seemed jarring to me. In contrast, "He's Jewish," seemed more...well, religiously correct.

I was not completely ignorant about the subject of Judaism. In my hometown, I occasionally heard comments, such as, "He tried to Jew me down." There was another, "That

bank charges more than a Jew does for loan.” Negative? I thought so. But try this: “He tried to Jewish me down.” Or, “That bank charges more than a Jewish person does for loan.” And, “He’s a New York Jewish person,” just doesn’t fit.

In my later and somewhat wiser years, one of my Jewish friends informed me the word Jew, used unto itself, was perfectly acceptable. Harvey said, “It all depends on the context in which it is used. It also depends on the tone in which it is uttered.”

Besides, the word “Jewish” is an adjective and cannot stand alone. Sorry Jewish persons, but saying, “I’m Jewish.” is incorrect use of the English language.

### Protection from Heaven



After I had met Lou, after we became acquainted, after we began to talk about religions, I asked Lou why he always had his cap on his head, even indoors, as seen in the photo to the left. I told him cowboys never wore their hats indoors (except in Hollywood movies and at bar counters in a saloon). He replied that he had taken up the practice because the males in this family had worn them for many generations. These men held to a custom of covering their head at all times. Lou said he would likely stop wearing his *kippah* (also called a yarmulke, kipa, or kippa) as time went on. But he would wear it when he visited his parents.

I observed, “Seems a bit impractical. You don’t need a cap when you’re indoors.”

“The Talmud directs Jews to do so.” Lou later read a quote to me about head covers from the Talmud. I had forgotten it, so I went on line and re-discovered it. Lou had quoted this passage, “Cover your head in order that the fear of heaven may be upon you.”

I replied to Lou, which brings forth religious confusion number two of this story, “I find our religions irritating. Why do Baptists and Jews fear heaven? Why are we taught to dread a paradise and the same time look forward to going there? It’s contradictory and confusing. It’s like Chicken Little running around shouting ‘The sky is falling. The sky is falling. But don’t worry, that’s the location of heaven.’ ”

Jew Lou, “Ha! You’ll be even more confused when you hear this: Jews are not supposed to walk more than four cubits with their heads uncovered.” (Depending on the specific Jewish denomination, as I learned later.)

Baptist U, “What’s a cubit?”

Jew Lou, “Four cubits is about four meters.”

U, “How many feet is that?”

Lou, “You’re hopeless.”

I didn’t know the metric system? So what? I wasn’t planning a trip to the rest of the world anytime soon. “Look Lou, don’t make fun. Can’t you see the inherent contradiction? The Bible is full of them, too. You’d think God would be a little less vague and a little more consistent.”

“God didn’t write the Bible, cowboy. People did. Besides, some Jews wear the yarmulke, not because of Chicken Little or the fear of God, but to honor God.”

We left it at that.

### Jewboy?

After a while, after we became friends, Lou sometimes referred to me as “shepherd.” I had told Lou our ranch ran around 1,500 head of sheep, which must have left an impression on



my Yankee buddy. I didn't bother to confuse Lou by explaining that a cattleman did not take kindly to being called a sheepherder.

I likely did not, because I did not think myself as a cowboy or a sheepherder. When I was on the ranch in the summer, my job was hoeing weeds, slopping the pigs after our meals, gathering eggs from surprised hens in the morning, acting as a gofer during cattle brandings and sheep shearings, and painting miles-upon-miles of corral fences. I liked to be called cowboy, but I did not fancy being tagged as a sheepherder. It wasn't as glamorous as cowboy, the conqueror of America's southwest.

Think of it this way, calling me a cowboy was akin to calling a lowly oil-well pipe fitter an oilman.

I thought the nickname of "Yankee" was too flippant for my friend. And Lou was also not aware that the word, when uttered by a supposed cowboy, was not complimentary. I used it on Lou as a gentle jibe.

One day, while we were debating which of Albuquerque's four movie theaters we would honor that night, I offered, "Lou, I'm renaming you. I've been thinking of a name that fits you better. So, I'm cowboy to you, and you're Jewboy to me."

Lou stared at me for a few moments. Then he responded, "Cowboy, you really are hopeless. But you don't know, do you? Jewboy is an insulting word. It is used in different ways, but it's never complimentary."

"Enough said, you'll remain 'Yankee boy.' "

Lou then came up with a jewel, "Say, how about naming me Louboy? We make fun of Jewboy, and throw everyone's timing off."

"Such as?"

"Cowboy, anyone who knows I'm a Jew and would use the word 'Jewboy' behind my back or in front of me...they'll pick up the message."

In hindsight, I suppose Lou was a fan of Jewish satirists. "I guess I see your point. Let's compromise. I won't call you a Jewboy, but only if you will not call me a sheepherder."

"OK, cowboy, how about sheepboy? It goes with Louboy."

"Louboy, especially *not* sheepboy! That might be interpreted that I play around with sheep."

Lou, "Play around with sheep?"

"You're hopeless, Lou."

"Say cowboy, let's hit the Kimo. *The Searchers* is playing there.

"John Wayne? I should have known. Let's go Louboy!"

Conflict resolution 101.

## **Religious Confusions**

### **Section Three: Multiple Saviors**

Believer or not, have you ever been just a bit confused about the concept in the Christian faith that deals with the trinities, three realizations of God? How about the idea of a Jew creating Christianity? I have, as recounted in this piece.

Returning to my times in my hometown, I cannot recall anyone in Lovington disparaging Jews, at least in my naïve eyes. I came to the conclusion that the Jews, whoever they might be, were adept with handling their money. Having very little of this commodity, I could not help but admire them.

There was one recurring negative theme about the Jews that I heard during my youthful Baptist days. It dealt with the issue of who was responsible for the death of Jesus. Oblique comments came from our pastor during his Sunday sermon that led me to think the Jews had something to do with it.

But I was, again, a confused ten-year-old. I was told that Jesus himself was a Jew. So, what was going on? Why should we Christians have taken it personally that a Jew killed another Jew? It was as if a Sunni had killed another Sunni, and the Shias became upset.

Of course, I didn't know about Sunnis or Shias at that time in my life. I'm trying to make a point by using another religion. But as I learned more about the Jewish Jesus, I came to understand that Jesus was no ordinary Jew. As my Baptist teachers taught me, he was my savior! He was my path to the Pearly Gates.

I, became confused again. It would have been as if I were a Shia, and a Sunni killed another Sunni who happened to be my savior. Still, the problem remained: If I were a Shia, what was a Sunni doing being my savior? It seemed to me that my religious faith should have chosen a member of my church to take on this role. This savior would at least know the ropes of my religion. Rack up religious confusion number three.

I pause in this story and ask you to keep in mind that these confusions came from the mind of a child. These seeming anomalies may be common sense to you, but they were mysterious to me. Even more, we were taught in Sunday school that Jesus was the founder of Christianity, but that he was a Jew. That's akin to John the Baptist founding the Catholic Church. Rack up religious confusion number four.

We were taught that, because of his death, he would, "wash away our sins." How could Jesus wash away my sins before I was even born and had no sins to wash away? Religious confusion number five.

And if Jesus did die for my sins, what kept me from sinning all I wanted when I came along a few centuries later? The more sins the better. Jesus took care of them two thousand years ago. Rack up religious confusion number six. ...And I could hardly wait to join a college fraternity.

These sorts of problems, vague and ill-defined, made me wary of religion. Especially with the Baptist pastors shouting down from their pulpit that I was destined for hell if I did not accept Jesus as my savior, and of course, join the Baptist Church.

### **Paganism and the Holy Three**

I had a problem with this savior idea. We kids were taught that God was our savior. Then how could Jesus, the mere son of God (I knew a lot about the lowly status of sons) also be our savior as well? One Sunday, I posed this question to my (another) Sunday school teacher. She

responded with an explanation that I had three saviors, and that each one was a God. Religious confusion number seven.

How can that make sense to a child? One could ask how it makes sense to anyone, but that topic is for someone else to explain. (I am keeping my welcome mat out at my relatives' Baptist and Methodist homes.)

She then threw in a ringer: She informed me there were three Gods: God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost.<sup>1</sup>

I had heard the pastor speak of the Holy Ghost a few times. I never paid attention to this phrase because I never paid attention to his sermon. I was too busy looking at the progress the congregation had made in singing the hymns whose song titles were posted at the front of the church, near the pastor pulpit. *Three songs to go; two songs to go, one song to go. ...I'm outa' here!*

I only knew the word ghost meant a creepy thing covered in a sheet, one that ventured out at night and especially on Halloween. Around that time in my life, I saw a movie depicting a ghost as a dead person; an evanescent, disembodied creature; scary as hell.

And I was being instructed to honor and obey God as a Holy Ghost? It made no sense to me. Perhaps the only saving grace at that time was the cartoon character, Casper, the Friendly Ghost. I liked to think Casper was like the Holy Ghost, or the Holy Ghost was like Casper, whichever came first; that Jesus had the countenance of Casper, or vice versa; that God had the countenance of Casper, or vice versa. Thus, religious confusion number eight.

Later in my life, I read about pagans and the practice of paganism. The dictionary defines paganism as the worship or belief in multiple deities usually assembled into a pantheon of gods and goddesses, along with their own religions and rituals.

I asked myself, *What then, is the Holy Trinity?* Later, I studied religions and read books on explanations of why reverence for God, Son, and the Holy Ghost is not a form of paganism. Able scholars and irritated relatives put me to intellectual shame for my even thinking about the subject.

I was comfortable with the idea of God. I was comfortable with the teachings of Jesus. I might have been more comfortable with the idea of the Holy Ghost if the word Ghost had not biased my ten-year-old mind. But three Gods? I could not get my mind around this concept.

I left Lovington, New Mexico, a few years after I stopped attending the Baptist Church, my favorite Holy Roller church, and for that matter, all churches. Even as an older teenager, I was unable to overcome some of the reservations I formed as a child. Habits die hard. So do beliefs.

But my loved ones and relatives back in New Mexico will be relieved to learn that I have returned to religion. I've founded my own religion. Uh oh. That is blasphemy to a large segment of the American population. Don't pull out the welcome mat cousin. Hear me out. And for my other readers, including non-relatives, read the last section of this story next week. I'll make the case that most of us practice our own religion---at least partially.

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<sup>1</sup> I learned later that a "Triune God" was manifested as "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; each person itself being God." This quote is from Millard J. Erickson (1992). *Introducing Christian Doctrine*. Baker Book House. 103.

## **Religious Confusions**

### **Section Four: Multiple Meats for Multiple Religions**

I have one more story to tell you about my youthful religious confusions, although this story took place during my friendship with Lou when I was a young man attending college, the boy you met in Section Two.

During the first week or so of our first semester at the University of New Mexico (UNM), Lou and I had made our way through the dorm's cafeteria line for our dinner. We sat down to begin our meal. I had chosen fish for my meat. So had Lou. Neither of us had chosen pork chop.

I started the episodic discussion. "Why do they have these pork chops on the menu?"

My dining mates, including Lou, looked up from their munching.

I was an upset imbecile, "It's an insult! Porks' for breakfast only. ...Fish! At least give us a choice of meat. Where's the steak? Where's the chicken?"

I had never eaten pork for lunch or dinner. It just was not done in our family. Bacon. Ham. Pork chops. All breakfast food.

Fish? OK, as long as it was fried catfish. This stuff on my plate was not fried. I could tell. I could see the fish's skin. White and wet-like, it was creepy -looking. Where was the corn flour?

My friends remained silent. In hindsight, they likely were taken aback by my sudden outburst, or they were reluctant to enter into a debate dealing with insolent ignorance

But not Lou, "Cowboy, you don't eat pork for dinner, we Jews never eat pork."

Cowboy, "Why not?"

"Don't remember, something about not chewing the cud. Mostly tradition, I guess. How about you?"

"Don't know. Mostly habit, I guess."

The next time pork was offered for our cafeteria dinner, cowboy broke with habit, and Louboy broke with tradition.

The next year, Lou did not attend UNM. In spite of my excelsior company, he stayed back east. My friend Harvey, after reading this story, offered that Lou did not return because there not enough Jews in Albuquerque to keep him company. I failed to mention to Harvey, and I will later, that northern New Mexico has a rich history of Jews settling there. Lou often mentioned that he missed the greenery of the east coast.

We lost contact. Actuarially speaking, Lou is likely dead. But I carry his thoughts and his friendship with me over fifty years later.

That next year, I pledged into the Sigma Chi Fraternity at UNM. There, we Sigs actually voted in two eastern Jews into our brotherhood. I still recall our debates in the Sig's sacred, secret meeting room. Sitting in a cathedra of supposed brotherhood and tolerance, I was perplexed that the topic was even an issue. But by that time in my life, I was not *completely* perplexed.

I had picked up on the fact that a lot of Christians did like Jews because (a) they believed the Jews killed Jesus, (b) the Jews did not think Jesus was genuine and was even a damaging sort of person (try that one out on a Southern Baptist!), and (c) Jews did not eat like normal people. One of our brothers made reference to *where would it stop?* That is, if we admitted one Jew, there would be others. Something akin to, "There goes the neighborhood," for African blacks

migrating into the sanctified turf of European whites. Besides, he reminded us there was a Jewish fraternity just across the street.

In spite of their spiritual and cultural deficiencies, both Jews were admitted into our fraternity. One boy was named Lou, the other was named Mike. Lou was not the friend of my Freshman year, but he was a fine person, and one I wish I had stayed in touch with. I hear Mike is living in northern New Mexico. I hope to catch up with him someday.

All three of these Jewish people, Jews named Lou, Lou, and Mike, gave me insights into a different religious and cultural world. I benefited from learning about Judaism. Mankind has benefited from Judaism's existence.

I no longer practice a formal religion. I've created an off-shoot. If I did adhere to an accepted creed, the Jewish faith would be toward the top of my list to practice. (I would alter the Jew's uncharitable dispositions toward Jesus. [Thus forming yet another religion...it never stops.] The Jews claim he was a false messiah, but he was a good man and meant well for what he tried to do.)

That said, the top of my list is my own religion. It is not a formal creed that is practiced down the street. It is mine, my own.

I'd bet my last beer and Nicene Creed that many Christians, Jews, Muslims, *et al* have the same view that I have, however close to the vest it may be held. Many humans have their own views of their holy books and their holy people.

Anyway, religious confusions or not, if we humans would give one another a bit more slack about our religious practices, many of our problems would simply disappear. We would have to conjure up other another reason for conducting our intramural wars.