

VT-889 Transcription

"Luther and the Jews." undated.

MARC TANENBAUM: When the United States Post Office recently issued a commemorative stamp honoring the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther, the respective responses of Lutherans and probably Protestants generally and Jews disclosed what profoundly contrary places [01:00] Luther holds in Lutheran and Jewish history and in contemporary perceptions. As I experience some of these responses, Lutherans tended to feel a sense of pride, an appropriateness and the honored bestowed by that commemorative stand. Jews, by in large, reacted either with disbelief or even outrage.

ERIC GRITSCH: Luther's life was dedicated to the principle "Let God be God," the gracious God who remains hidden even in his wrath. Nevertheless, he ended up trying to control a portion of the people of God, the Jews, whom we had called his "blood relatives." And so, Luther too, like, many others, violated that first commandment, and turned into a critic of the people of God called the Jews.

JOSEPH BURGESS: The theme for this evening is Luther and the Jews, and believe everybody here is aware of the fact that this year we celebrate the five hundredth birthday [02:00]

of Luther. I would like in order to give you a flavor of what we are concerned about here to read the seven recommendations which Luther made in 1543 in a writing called *On the Jews and Their Lies*, you'll find in the volume 47 of the American edition of Luther's works. I will read simply the lead sentence for these various recommendations. First, "to set fire to their synagogues or schools, and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them." Second, "I advise that their houses also be raised and destroyed." Third, "I advise that all their prayer book and Talmudic writings in which such idolatry, [00:30] lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, to be taken from them." Fourth, "I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb." Fifth, "I advise that safe conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews." Sixth, "I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping." Seventh, "I recommend putting a flail, and axe, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young strong Jews and Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow as was imposed on the children of Adam. [04:00] It's apparent,

I believe, that you see from these lines that we have a difficult subject ahead of us.

GRITSCH: The seven quotations indicate that this is a neuralgic issue. Neuralgia means that you feel the pain on the curves of your nerves, and we have historical bodies, not just churches, that are affected by the neuralgia of the question of Luther and the Jews. It is sometimes difficult to make proper distinctions even for historians between Hitler and Luther, Wittenburg and Auschwitz, German Protestants and vicious anti-Semites. But whatever the evidence is, any judgment must be made on sound, critical norms and with an unconditional commitment to substantiated evidence.

TANENBAUM: Only since the end of [05:00] World War II in the wake of a Nazi Holocaust have Lutheran leaders begun to confront the dark anti-Jewish side of the Luther legend, and have undertaken significant efforts to purge Lutheran teaching and culture of that destructive inheritance. And here I want to acknowledge with appreciation the strong moral leadership provided in the self-purification process by The Lutheran World Federation, particularly its committee on the church and the Jewish people, as well as the division of theological studies of a Lutheran council of the USA, and this evening is a further testimony to that

commitment. (inaudible) has been that progress in the past four decades. No person of conscience can remain content with such efforts in the face of the magnitude of the religious and moral challenge that the anti-Jewish writings of Martin Luther continue to represent.

GRITSCH: The medieval church supported the segregationist policies of the nations of the holy empire. For example, the Fourth [06:00] Lateran Council in 1215 decreed that Jews be distinguished through a yellow patch sown to their clothes. In Germany, they had to wear special hats. Stories of how they continued to kill Christ continued due to a worship attitude towards the Eucharist. There are best selling stories beginning in 1510 in Germany of how Jews would steal and kill Eucharistic hosts as a continuation of killing Christ. By 1519 most German cities had either expelled the Jews or relegated them to Jewish quarters, the so-called *Judenviertel*.

TANENBAUM: The peculiarly intense and unremitting hatred which in Christendom and only in Christendom, has been directed against Jewry above all other out-groups can be accounted for according to both Christian and Jewish scholars by the holy, fantastic image of the Jews, which suddenly gripped the imagination of the new [07:00] masses at the time of the first crusade. Indeed the dark ages of Jewish history

in western Europe date from the first crusade in 1096, which began and ended with a massacre.

GRITSCH: Medieval sixteenth-century rejection of Jews was grounded in what I would call a "theological anti-Judaism," and not a biological ethnic racist-oriented anti-Semitism. That kind of anti-Semitism, based on race, comes after the eighteenth century, which is the cradle of modern anti-Semitism. The Aryan race was a myth developed in sociological and anthropological contexts; it's associate with names Count Arthur de Gobineau in the 1850s, with John Houston Chamberlain in Britain, and Richard Wagner in Germany.

TANENBAUM: Significantly, when the old (inaudible) prophecies were taken up by the masses in the later Middle Ages, all these fantasies were treated with deadly seriousness, and [08:00] were elaborated into a weird mythology. For just as the human figure of Antichrist tended to merge into the holy demonic figure of Satan, so the Jews tended to see -- to be seen as demons attended on Satan. In medieval drama, some passion plays, and pictures they were often shown as devils with a beard and the horns of a goat, while in real life, ecclesiastical and secular authorities alike tried to make them wear horns on their hats. Unless you think that this is a chapter simple out of the history books, go next

year to the Oberammergau Passion play, and there you will see the chief priests and the Pharisees parading across the stage with their hats with horns, in contrast to the Christians dressed all in lovely white linens. Like other demons, they were imagined and portrayed in close association with creatures which symbolized lust and dirt: horned beasts, pigs, frogs, worms, snakes, and scorpions. Conversely, Satan himself was commonly given Jewish features, and [09:00] was referred to as the "father of the Jews." The populace was convinced that in the synagogue Jews worshipped Satan in the form of a cat or a toad, invoking his aid in making black magic. This is not insignificant for some of the responses on Martin Luther toward the end of this period which I refer. The populace was convinced that in the synagogue the Jews worshipped Satan, and that perception seized the imagination of Martin Luther as well.

GRITSCH: It should be said from the beginning that Luther viewed his entire life and work as guided by vocation of a biblical scholar. Only 3 to 4 of 32 years were spent on the New Testament. Almost 30 years, almost day in, day out, were spent on the Old Testament. Luther's scholars called him, to use a modern word, a "professor of the Old Testament." That would be the job we would have to give him

in our seminaries. [10:00] As such, Luther was committed to a traditional, classic Christian view maintained for centuries. To quote the German scholar Heinrich Bornkamm, quote, "to find not only the shadows of the New Testament and the Old, but also to find the direct testimony, indeed the work of Christ already in the Old Testament," end of quote. Thus to Luther, as to everyone else in the theological circle that trained him and with which he associated, saw the Old Testament as a prefiguration and foreshadowing of Christ. And he regarded certain patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and others as what he called the "faithful synagogue," a phrase that had been used by other church fathers including Augustine. And the Christians, of course, were to be in another sense, the "new Israel," the continuation of the faithful synagogue, and the Old Testament prefigures faith in Jesus Christ the Messiah born of the seed of Abraham. [11:00] This view Luther held throughout his life.

TANENBAUM: Luther appropriated all of the Old Testament in the service of the new. He left us nothing. He believed that the Old Testament figures lived with faith in the coming of Christ, and therefore the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets were reckoned righteous through this faith in the Messiah. So Abraham became St. Abraham, and St. Isaac, and

St. Jacob, and St. Moses. And the Jews existed as in the tradition earlier of Eusebius, the bishop of the fourth century who wrote his massive work *Praeparatio Evangelica* that Judaism existed simply as a footstool in preparation for the coming of Christ. Once Christ came, you kick off the footstool, and it's lost its validity and its purpose. The Jews, Luther asserts in these lectures, suffer continually under God's wrath, and they are paying the penalty for their rejection of Christ. They spent all their efforts and self-justification, but God will not hear their prayers, [12:00] which we've heard more recently these days from a man in the South, in Oklahoma. Obviously not too original on his part.

GRITSCH: By the time the Diet of Nuremberg came around, one of the first great German assemblies dealing with the matter after Luther had been condemned, rumors were circulated that Luther had gone Jewish, that he denied that Jesus was born of a virgin, and that he considered him merely the son of Joseph. Luther had become a Judaizer. Now Luther got angry about this as he usually did, and he never left any question unanswered. Luther does theology only when a question is asked, and whatever question it is, he answers it in his own way. So he wrote a treatise called *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* in 1523. And once again affirming the

old position, Christ in the Old Testament. He contended, however, that Jews should be left alone. They are, quote, "the blood relatives of Christ." Quote, "we are aliens and [13:00] in-laws. They, the Jews, are actually nearer to Christ than we are," he said. And finally, he concluded, "let not the popish law take care of them, but Christian love." I quote, "we must receive Jews cordially, permit them to trade and work with us, that they may have occasion and opportunity to associate with us, that they get to know our Christian life. If some of them should prove stiff neck what of it? After all, we ourselves are not all good Christians either," end of quote. Now this was the friendliest Luther ever got.

TANENBAUM: Twenty years later in 1543, Luther published his harshest and most notorious attack on the Jews on the Jews and their lies. An intervening period as Dr. Mark Edwards notes, Luther had written one (inaudible) on the Jews in 1538 against the Sabbatarians, which was aimed at halting Jewish proselytizing among Christians.

GRITSCH: His own attempts to convert Jews were unsuccessful. He met rather consistently with rabbis, [14:00] he mentioned those things in sermons in 1526 for example, he met three rabbis and had an exegetical conversation. They disagreed, but parted in a very friendly manner. But rumors of Jewish

plots against Luther and the reformation continued, particularly from the east from what is now Czechoslovakia then called Bohemia. He even heard that someone was sent to kill him, put poison in his food, and this was to be some rabbi who had been sent to this, presumably by the Catholics. When he furthermore heard that there were attempts on the Jewish side to infiltrate Christianity by such things as introducing the Sabbath, he found out there were Sabbitarians in his own group, he was ready by 1535 to strike back. He called Sabbitarians the "apes of the Jews" in his lectures on Genesis. He was convinced the Jews had organized a drive to convert Christians. And so he supported for the first time [15:00] the decree of his own Prince John Frederick in 1536, which prohibited Jewish settlements in Saxony. He also refused the request of his former correspondent, Rabbi Josselmann Rosheim to arrange for safe passage. In a letter in 1537, he declared he was no longer going to be manipulated by Jews for their own freedom. And he was heard to say at table -- table talks are not always safe with Luther but they are evidence, that they injure people in body and property. And so the old established anti-Jewish ideology easily won over Luther once again. And by 1537 he had concluded that the reconciliation between Israel and the Gospel would be

impossible, and he wrote an open letter to his friend Count Wolfgang Schlick in Czechoslovakia that gives you the final conclusion of those years. Quote, "since 1,500 years of exile of which there's no end of sight, nor can there be. Do not humble the Jews [16:00] or bring them to awareness -" namely to Christianity. "You may with good conscience despair of them, for it is impossible that God would leave his people without comfort in the prophecy so long." Thus, Luther's conclusion.

TANENBAUM: Luther rejected angrily the argument that the Jews were an indispensable financial resource to governments. The benefit failed to (inaudible) the blasphemy of the harm done by Jews. It was the duty of secular authorities, Luther insisted, to implement these recommendations. It was the duty of the ecclesiastical authorities to warn and instruct their congregations about the Jews and their lies. Dr. Mark Edwards summarized the significance of these treatises in an interesting way. He writes, "It is these remarks and the general vulgarity and several of the treatises that make these treatises so notorious and so offensive. Neither the vulgarity nor the violence is unique. Luther's attack on papal opponents are at least as vulgar. So too are his attacks on the Turks and Islam. What is unique, or at least different, is the relative

helplessness [17:00] of these particular targets of Luther's wrath. Catholics could take care of themselves and give as well as they got. The Jews were in a totally different situation. They were at the mercy of their Catholic or evangelical rulers. And if these rulers chose to heed Luther's harsh recommendations, there was precious little that Jews could do to protect themselves. It is not Luther's fault that very few evangelical rulers followed his advice. He must bear responsibility for the attempt, Edward says, even if it was largely unsuccessful.

GRITSCH: Luther's position against Jews was not generic. He did not hate everything the Jews. Rather, he saw that they had betrayed the faithful synagogue, that they as the people of God couldn't continue as Christians did. And so he supported all the anti-Jewish legislation and the traditional anti-Jewish measures that were proposed for centuries. [18:00] He also did this with regard to Anabaptists, those who were in favor of a second baptism, or those who denied the Trinity. There were Christian laws against that. The death penalty was imposed since the fifth century. The papists were radical, the radicals were blasphemous and seditious, the Turks were a foreign military threat, and the Jews were a fifth column within

established Christianity, and they all had to go in one way or another.

TANENBAUM: It is essential to understand that Jewish historiography, Jewish historians regard Luther's anti-Jewish polemic as fateful for Jews down to our own time. Thus in her classic study the war against the Jews from 1939 to 1945, Dr. Lucy Dawidowicz observes the following: "A lot of anti-Semitic descent from Martin Luther to Adolph Hitler is easy to draw. Both Luther and Hitler were obsessed by a demonologized universe inhabited by Jews. No Christian wrote Luther, that next to the devil though hast no enemy more cruel, [19:00] more venomous and violent than a true Jew." Hitler himself in that early dialogue with Dietrich Eckart asserted that the later Luther, that is the violently anti-Semitic Luther, was the genuine Luther. Luther's protective authorize was invoked by the Nazis when they came to power, and his anti-Semitic writings enjoyed a revival of popularity. To be sure the similarities of Luther's anti-Jewish exhortations with modern racial anti-Semitism and even with Hitler's racial policies are not merely coincidental. They all derive from a common historic tradition of Jew hatred whose providence can be traced back to the second and third century. But modern German anti-Semitism had more recent roots than Luther and grew out of

a different soil, not that German anti-Semitism was new. It drew part of its sustenance from Christian anti-Semitism whose foundation had been laid by the Catholic Church and upon which Luther built. It was equally a product of German nationalism. "Modern German anti-Semitism," [20:00] she writes, "was the bastard child of the union of Christian anti-Semitism with German nationalism." That synthesis of Christian anti-Semitism and German nationalism had corrosive effects on the conscience of millions of German Christians, leading the majority of the German nation to blind obedience to a murderous state.

GRITSCH: The term "anti-Semitism" itself as far as we know may have appeared in the 1870s, perhaps in 1879, when a German named Wilhelm Marr founded the first League of Anti-Semitism. Thus, it is not really appropriate to call Luther the father of modern anti-Semitism. Luther was the son of a medieval Christendom, when he feared religious pluralism and advocated cruel means to preserve cultural uniformity. But the thesis that he was a child of his time and should therefore be excused also does not really fly. He was, [21:00] in the end, a sixth century anti-Semite from this theological point of view, and we should flatly acknowledge this. But this is the main question: why did Luther not develop the same critical attitude toward rampant anti-

Semitism that he did toward the rampant deformation of the church, which in turn caused a radical deformation of society? That's the critical question. So for the sake of a dialogue I suggest three steps. First, historically it is clear that anti-Semitism did not dominate Luther's work and work. As priest, professor, and reformer, Luther consistently wrestled with the Old Testament, but he did not single out Christian attitudes towards Jews as the principle issue. The issue for Luther was the Gospel. Those news about Christ who linked Israel with the rest of the world. Secondly, Luther's so-called Final [22:00] Solution for the Jews must be seen in this context of urgent exhortation in the midst of a fast-moving reform movement, which he felt was threatened from within and without. Thirdly, one could say critically of Luther that the evil of anti-Semitism represented in some sense a failure of theological nerve. He so desperately tried to communicate God's unconditional love for Israel as well as for the people called "Christians," that he could not stop moving from the proclamation of divine mercy to conclusions about God's wrath. Suddenly the usual distinctions so brilliantly maintained with great sagacity in the midst of storm and stress disappeared from Luther's vision. When faced with what he considered self-righteous Jewish stubbornness on

the matter of conversion, Luther no longer let God be God. Indeed he got all caught up in answers he so stubbornly warned against. A student once asked him what did God do before he created the world; Luther said [23:00] he created hell for people who raised this question. But on the Jewish question he couldn't that it is a mystery.

TANENBAUM: Forty years have passed since the end of the Nazi Holocaust. It is a positive, even hopeful sign that many church leaders for most among them the Lutheran churches in Germany as well as in the United States have begun to confront that past in all of its complexity above all in all of its awfulness, and to face its moral challenge. We might all take heart from the message issued by the Lutheran World Federation, which called for a purging of all sources of anti-Jewish teaching in Lutheran churches as well as in Christian culture and society generally. And we might find it especially moving to here these final closing words from a statement issued by the Counsel of the Evangelical Church in Germany, [24:00] a grouping of regional Lutheran-reformed and united churches, and the Federal Republic of Germany which declared on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Adolf Hitler's assumption of power on January 30th, 1933 the following: "To all our fellow citizens we say do not allow yourselves to be

persuaded again into a new hate. Hitler's rule was based on hate. That is why hatred must have no place among us, whether it be of external enemies or of foreigners or other classes, groups or minorities. And lastly, to our own parishes and congregations we say, 'Resist the heresy of believing in salvation in this world. Hitler's victory was also a victory for heresy. We cannot remember this day without giving thanks to God, who in his goodness and mercy has brought us through the disasters of our people and who wants to forgive our guilt.'

GRITSCH: We should [25:00] say finally that the movement that bears his name, Lutheranism, is by no means no (inaudible) by Martin Luther. He was the first to recognize this. He refused the term "Lutheran" for his movement in 1522. He called himself a "poor, stinking maggot fodder" and he was not humble about it. Lutherans should know better than most Christians what it makes, what it takes to break the people of God. What it means to be vigilant, and what it means to obey or not obey the first Commandment, "I am your God, you shall have no other God." There's always the serpent's way, so well expressed in the story of the fall which tempts us to be like God, Genesis 3:5. And the issue for Christians and Jews alike is vigilance against idolatry, against the

desire to dominate, to have control. No one is safe from this temptation.

TANENBAUM: After all, the Lutheran reformation was based on a fundamental principle that papal [26:00] infallibility was not a Lutheran doctrine. And if the pope in Rome is not to be infallible then should that infallibility be transferred to Martin Luther? He was a deeply committed Christian seized by a vision of God. He tried to bring about salvation. In the process, he manifested his gifts, but as a mortal human being and as a child of the Middle Ages, he also manifested the conditioning of that theological world as well as its popular culture.

GRITSCH: So Luther turned some good news into some bad news for some people, including the Jews. But given Luther's own view of Israel in the Old Testament, there is really no need for any Christian mission to the Jews. They are and remain the people of God even if they do not accept Jesus Christ. [27:00] Why this is so only God knows. Christians should concentrate their missionary activities on those who do not yet belong to the people of God, and they should court them with a holistic witness in word and deed rather than with (inaudible) argument and cultural legislation of which the world is so full. A final word. Luther may not be of much help to post-Hitler Christians on the Via Dolorosa

toward better Christian-Jewish relations. But as long as anti-Semitism survives among Christians, Luther cannot take the lion's share of the blame. We honor him best when we search our own hearts and cleanse our own minds from at least those evils which prevent us from living in (inaudible) and solidarity with others.

TANENBAUM: In effect, we're doing here what Roman Catholics and Jews have been doing since Vatican Council II, acknowledging a much longer tradition of mutual alienation and hostility. And we've come to recognize that our task [28:00] is to face some of the bad of the tradition of the past and seek to replace that by working together to build a good culture filled with love and respect and caring and understanding and above all knowledge of one another as we are, not as characters and stereotypes. And I think if there's anything that should characterize, at least from my point of view, this observance of the 500th birthday of Martin Luther, it ought to be a saying of a great philosopher that "history ought to be looked at not as hitching post to the past, but as a guiding post to the future." And I hope and pray this evening will be a contribution to the realization of that maxim. Thank you.

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