MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

Box 4, Folder 13, "Luther and the Jews", 18 May 1983.

3101 Clifton Ave, Cincinnati, Ohio 45220
(513) 221-1875 phone, (513) 221-7812 fax
americanjewisharchives.org

830518

LUTHER AND THE JEWS

Presentations by
Eric W Gritsch and Marc H Tanenbaum

A DIFFICULT SUBJECT

"What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? I shall give you my sincere advice

"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 razed and destroyed for they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues

"Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings 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 the following Whenever a Jew is sincerely converted, he should be handed one hundred, two hundred or three hundred florins, as personal circumstances may suggest With this he could set himself up in some occupation for the support of his poor wife and children and the maintenance of the old or feeble

"Seventh, I recommend putting a flail, an ax, 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 "

These excerpts from Martin Luther's treatise "On the Jews and Their Lies" underscore that "we have a difficult subject ahead of us," noted Executive Director Joseph A Burgess of the Division of Theological Studies, Lutheran Council in the USA, in introducing a discussion of "Luther and the Jews "

The discussion was part of the council's 17th annual meeting May 18-19, 1983, and, in the year of the commemoration of the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther, "one attempt to bring informed scrutiny to the vitriolic comments by Luther about his Jewish contemporaries and to raise and seek to answer questions about what Lutherans are doing and should do about these statements today "

Guest speakers were Eric W Gritsch, professor of church history and director of the Institute for Luther Studies, Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg, Pa , and Marc H Tanenbaum, national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee

Their presentations, somewhat condensed, are shared in this booklet Its publication and distribution are made possible by a grant from Aid Association for Lutherans

Gritsch, son of an Austrian Lutheran pastor, came to the United States in 1954 to study at Yale Divinity School and Yale University, New Haven, Conn , where he earned master of sacred theology, master of arts and doctor of philosophy degrees, doing his Ph D dissertation under the tutelage of Luther biographer Roland Bainton He has authored or co-authored six books, including "Martin, God's Court Jester Luther in Retrospect," published in September 1983 by Fortress Press

Tanenbaum has been described by Newsweek magazine as "the American Jewish community's foremost apostle to the Gentiles" and by New York magazine as "the foremost Jewish ecumenical leader in the world today " He started his career as rabbi of a Hebrew congregation in Washington, D C , and during 1954-60 was executive director of the Synagogue Council of America He has a bachelor's degree from Yeshiva University and a master's degree in Hebrew literature from Jewish Theological Seminary of America, both in New York City He is a founder and co-secretary of the Joint Vatican International Jewish Consultative Committee as well as a similar liaison body with the World Council of Churches

LUTHER AND THE JEWS: TOWARD A JUDGMENT OF HISTORY By Eric W Gritsch

There is hardly a more neuralgic topic in Luther research than Luther's attitude toward the Jews Luther's vitriolic outbursts against the Jews have caused pain along the nerves of many a Luther scholar and church body Lutheranism is particularly afflicted with the neuralgia which links Luther with Hitler, Wittenberg with Auschwitz and German Protestants with the most vicious anti-Semitism

Yet Luther's convictions about the relationship between the Christian gospel and Israel need to be presented in their historical context Otherwise the full weight of this evidence would be lost

Christian and Jew in the 16th Century

Christian-Jewish relations in the 16th century were decisively affected by an enduring anti-Semitism which advocated the segregation of Jews from Christians Popular medieval Christian propaganda blamed Jews for natural disasters, for the "Black Death" of the bubonic plague and for almost everything else that went wrong in medieval culture and society

In 1348, for example, German Jews were massacred by legal authorities as well as by lynch mobs in Frankfurt, Nuremberg and Augsburg Many Jews were expelled from German cities in the 1480s

Spain, France and England refused to tolerate Jewish settlements The Spanish Inquisiton of 1492 expelled a quarter million Jews, who moved along the Mediterranean coast to Italy, Greece, Turkey, Israel and Persia Many ended up in a large ghetto in Venice Some Spanish Jews, known as Marranos, succumbed to sociopolitical pressures and officially converted to Christianity but continued to adhere to Judaism in secret

The "wandering Jew" quickly became known as a usurer—even though large Christian business corporations practiced a more vicious usury "Usury" and "Jew" became synonyms, and usurious Christians were called "Christian Jews "

The medieval church supported the segregationist policies of the nations within the Holy Roman Empire The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 decreed that Jews were to be distinguished through a yellow patch sewn to their clothes In Germany, Jews were required to wear special hats Since Jews were known as "Christ killers," stories soon circulated of how they continued to kill Christ in the transubstantiated Host

In 1513 a German edition of a prescription against Jews appeared known as the "Hammer Against the Jews"—literally the "quiver of arrows of the Catholic faith"—to accompany the prescription against witchcraft issued in 1487 as the "Hammer Against Witches " Jews were to be exorcized of their faith and converted to Christianity Theologians condemned them for denying Old Testament prophecies about Jesus

Even the most tolerant humanists, like Erasmus of Rotterdam, had no place for Jews in what was perceived to be a Christian world Erasmus disliked the Jewish religion

because of its stress on externals and its legalism, he viewed Christianity as the liberation from a religion of laws and considered the Old Testament valid only until the time of Jesus In such a context he could say, "If hatred of the Jews is proof of true Christianity, then we are all exemplary Christians "

In short, every stratum of 16th-century society considered Jews the diabolical enemies of Christianity and a cancer in society As Bishop George of Speyer put it on April 4, 1519, when he ordered the total segregation of Jews from Christians in his diocese, "They are not human beings but dogs "

In the face of such hatred, since Luther led a movement against Roman Catholicism's tyranny, many Jews viewed him as a friend Some significant defenders of Judaism welcomed Luther as God's agent sent to destroy corrupt Rome before the end of the world

The Spanish Rabbi Abraham ben Eliezer Halevi advocated the apocalyptic notion that the time had come when God called on the world to repent and return to the fold of his people, the Jews Lutheran and humanist interests in the study of Hebrew and the impending schism in the Western church convinced Halevi that the Reformation was the God-sent event which would make Judaism the religion of the end

Other spokesmen of Judaism, such as Rabbi Josel of Rosheim in Germany, did not follow such apocalyptic lines of interpretation Josel, who had met Luther several times and communicated with other Protestant leaders, was respected by Emperor Charles V and had considerable influence on him Though not always treated fairly, Josel won enough friends and influenced sufficient people in higher places to avoid the persecution of the small Jewish community in 16th-century Germany Only a few hundred Jews were in all of Germany, with the largest community of 78 settled in Frankfurt

The Luther Evidence

Luther viewed his life vocation as that of biblical scholar and was called "a professor of Old Testament " Of the 32 years spent on biblical studies, he devoted only three or four to the study of the New Testament He was committed to the view maintained for centuries by Christian exegetes that the Old Testament had only one meaning a "prefiguration" (*figura*) and "foreshadowing" (*umbra*) of the New Testament, the authors of which are in the "faithful synagogue," as he put it in his first lectures on the Psalms in 1513-15

Christians, as members of the "faithful synagogue," were to Luther the "spiritual Israel" who continued to trust God's promise to the patriarchs Abraham, Jacob and Isaac that there will be a "new Israel" in a new world, a new creation brought about by the Messiah The Old Testament prefigures faith in Jesus Christ, the Messiah born of the seed of Abraham

In these lectures the young Luther laid the exegetical foundations for a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament Following Augustine's differentiation between the "letter" and the "spirit" in the interpretation of the Bible, Luther assumed with Christian hindsight that such passages as Psalm 77 1 ("I cry aloud to God") spoke of a spiritual bondage to sin, death and evil in the world The psalmist, therefore, already points to a spiritual Egypt, marked by the yoke of self-righteousness, from which the spiritual exodus of Moses liberated the ancient people of God Psalms and Exodus point to a final liberation by the Messiah, Jesus Christ

It took only one further step to argue, as Luther did in his lectures on Romans in 1515, that those Jews who linked spiritual liberation only to themselves as the exclusive people of God were self-righteous Indeed, God himself hardened their hearts

so that they, like Pharaoh (Exodus 14 4), would not let the divine promise of salvation go to others Consequently, when Luther interpreted Paul's declaration that "God shows no partiality" (Romans 2 11), he depicted Jews as the people who "wanted God to act in such a way that he would bestow the good on the Jews only, and the evil on the Gentiles only " He accused the Jews of an idolatrous partiality

Like many other biblical scholars, Christian and Jewish, Luther viewed his time as the end time—an apocalyptic age filled with trials and tribulations The storm and stress of the religious struggle with Rome only confirmed the notion that Christians would be beset in these last days by foes from within and without The pope and the Turks were such foes, according to Luther But like the first Christians, Luther expected Jews to turn to Christianity, just as Jewish apocalyptic notions expected the nations to assemble in the land of Israel

In 1516 Luther sided with the humanist John Reuchlin, who in a famous controversy with a fanatic convert from Judaism had advocated the study of ancient Hebrew The convert, John Pfefferkorn, had written crude, polemical tracts against the Jews Luther's long-time opponent, the Catholic theologian and churchman John Eck, called Luther a "Jew father " Adherents to the old religion and to the status quo were convinced that Luther's Reformation was synonymous with love for Jews and that Luther and his followers were the reincarnation, as it were, of these ancient embodiments of hostility to Christianity

At the Diet of Nuremberg in 1522 a rumor was circulated that Luther had denied that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he considered him merely the son of Joseph and that Luther had become a "Judaizer "

Luther's response was quick and to the point In the tract "That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew" published in 1523, he affirmed his commitment to the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament but defended the Jews who, like him, were being persecuted by the defenders of popish Christendom The Jews, he contended, "are blood relatives of Christ" and "we are aliens and in-laws", they "are actually nearer to Christ than we are", and they should be treated kindly Luther concluded that the Jews do need to be converted but "not by papal law but by the law of Christian love " This was the friendliest Luther ever got

Luther's own attempts to convert Jews proved unsuccessful In 1526 when three rabbis visited him and discussed issues of biblical interpretation, Luther accused them of abusing texts and escaping from their true meaning The encounter ended without mutual hatred But Luther believed rumors of Jewish plots and conspiracies against him and saw in them the confirmation of his conviction that Jewish hardened hearts were destined only to become harder

Some of Luther's friends and supporters advocated a return to such Jewish laws as the preservation of the Sabbath Luther denounced these "Sabbatarians" as "apes of the Jews" in 1535 Convinced that Jews had organized a drive to convert Christians, he felt that stern anti-Jewish measures were in order So he supported Elector John Frederick's decree in 1535 which prohibited Jewish settlements in Saxony

The old established anti-Jewish ideology easily won Luther over, due in large measure to his frustration over the issue of Jewish conversion By 1537 Luther had concluded that the reconciliation between Israel and the Christian gospel was God's affair rather than the church's obligation In an open letter in 1538 to his friend Count Wolfgang Schlick, source of the rumors of Jewish plots against Luther, he vented his frustration "Since fifteen hundred years of exile, of which there is no end in sight, nor can there be, do not humble the Jews or bring them to awareness, you may with good conscience despair of them For it is impossible that God would leave his people without comfort

and prophecy so long "

The rest is sad history Luther did not stop attacking the Jews, even after he had concluded that one must despair over the question of Christian-Jewish relations He had drawn the same conclusion about the papacy, and he continued to vent his angry frustration about it In a 1545 tract he called the papacy "an institution of the devil "

As odd as it may seem in hindsight, Luther wanted to preserve the religious, cultural and political uniformity of Christendom during the last days of the world before Christ's second coming Consequently he supported laws which prescribed the death penalty for those who denied the dogma of the Trinity, who repeated Christian baptism, as Anabaptists did, or who rebelled against authority, as was the case with the Saxon peasants They were all seditious and deserved to be punished severely by the ancient laws of Christendom

Luther could not conceive of a pluralistic society in which people would live together and still have differing faiths or even belong to non-Christian traditions To Luther the papists were heretical, the radicals in his own camp were blasphemous and seditious, the Turks were a foreign military threat and the Jews were a fifth column within established Christendom All of them had to be opposed in one way or another

Toward the end of his life Luther became convinced that Jews must be totally segregated from Christians This is the basic thrust of his infamous 1543 tract, "On the Jews and Their Lies " After using a major portion of the tract to repeat the old arguments in favor of a Christological interpretation of the Old Testament, Luther followed through with a proposal for segregating the Jews

This proposal can be read as a prefiguration of Hitler's "final solution" synagogues and Jewish schools are to be eliminated, private Jewish homes are to be torn down in favor of communal, supervised settlements, Jewish literature is to be confiscated because it is blasphemous, Jewish migration is to be stopped, Jewish money is to be used for the support of converts, and Jews are to be put to manual labor

"Gentle mercy will only tend to make them worse and worse," Luther advised, "while sharp mercy will reform them but little Therefore, in any case, away with them!"

Many Christians and Jews expressed their deep shock over Luther's outbursts Among them was his friend Philip Melanchthon But Luther ignored them and, perhaps to spite them, published two more tracts, one "On the Shem Hamphoras [the name of the Lord exposed] and the Genealogy of Christ" and the other on "The Last Words of David "

In these tracts Luther disclosed how greatly he was influenced by the extremely successful anti-Jewish propaganda disseminated by Anthony Margaritha, a Jewish convert to Christianity Margaritha's popular work, "The Whole Jewish Faith (Der ganze judische Glaube)," presented a collection of gross anti-Christian polemics he claimed to be of Jewish origin, most of which turned out to be false The authorities of Augsburg finally expelled Margaritha after the Jewish community successfully proved that he was lying

Nevertheless, the deed was done and Margaritha was praised by the Christian establishment in Germany and elsewhere Luther had swallowed these anti-Christian polemics hook, line and sinker—then struck back with equally slanderous anti-Jewish polemics based on Christological interpretations of the Old Testament

"I am done with the Jews," he concluded the "Shem Hamphoras" tract Yet almost immediately he began the tract on David! In fact, Luther could not extricate himself from what had become his "bête noire"—literally "black beast " In his last sermon,

preached February 15, 1546, in his native town of Eisleben three days before his death, he rambled on about the end time's satanic forces, especially the Jews "If they turn from their blasphemies, we must gladly forgive them, but if not, we must not suffer them to remain " A pathetic epilogue indeed!

A Framework for Dialogue

In Protestant, Catholic and Jewish interpretations of Luther's attitude to the Jews, four major emphases can be clearly discerned

1. There is a basic difference between the young and the old Luther

This interpretation, quite popular in regard to other aspects of Luther's life and thought, depicts him as a friend of the Jews until 1523, when he was accused by Catholic opponents as a "Judaizer " Until then Luther expected a rapprochement between Christians and Jews, hoping for their conversion But when he heard of Jewish attempts to convert Christians and saw Jewish influences in his own camp, he advocated a radical program of segregation, thus joining the defenders of the status quo in the 16th century

2. Luther's anti-Jewish stance was fueled by a radical, apocalyptic world view

This interpretation, strongly advanced most recently by Heiko Obermann in his biography, "Luther Mensch zwischen Gott und Satan (Man Between God and Satan)," pictures a Luther who sees himself as one of the last voices in the wilderness of the end time His rediscovery of God's unconditional love in Christ was matched, so the interpretation goes, by a rediscovery of the biblical Satan who tempts believers to return to the power of self-righteousness through obedience to law, especially Jewish law The Jews, therefore, were to Luther the principal embodiment of Satan's work at the end time

3. In his latter days, Luther was too ill to be his true self

This interpretation pictures Luther as the old priest-professor plagued by gallstones, kidney stones, depressions, severe headaches, angina pectoris and various psychosomatic conditions He was no longer capable, in contrast to healthier days, of making critical distinctions between fact and fiction when he read the charges leveled against Jews by fanatic Jewish converts His final outbursts against Jews, as well as against the papacy, should be dismissed as the fulminations of a sick mind

4. Luther's attitude never really changed

He stuck to the view, already clearly advanced in the first lectures on Psalms in 1513, that the Jews were the people of God who had received God's promise of an eternal relationship with him This promise was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and restoration of the old relationship with God and redemption from the sin of self-righteousness depended totally on complete trust in Christ Failure to convert the Jews, he concluded, must be the will of God Therefore, Christians and Jews were to be totally separated, if need be by force

This last interpretation is probably the most plausible But careful distinctions must be made between the 16th century and our own time in defining the anti-Semitism of Luther

Medieval and 16th-century Christian rejection of Jews was grounded in a theological anti-Judaism, rather than ethnic, indeed racist, anti-Semitism The latter is the result of anthropological and sociological speculations associated with non-religious attitudes toward nature and human nature in 18th-century Europe Its history is grounded in theories about a mythic "Aryan" race The names of Comte Arthur de Gobineau

(1816-82), Richard Wagner (1813-83) and Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1927) appear in the historical scenario of the origins of modern racism

So to call Luther the father of modern, or even German, anti-Semitism is not really appropriate When he feared religious pluralism and advocated cruel means to preserve cultural uniformity, be it in his opposition to rebellious peasants or to Jews who were unwilling to convert to Christianity, Luther was very much the son of a medieval Christendom But this does not exonerate him from the charge that he was a 16th-century anti-Semite He was

The question is 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?

Any dialogue about this issue must take into consideration three essential aspects of Luther and his history

First, neither Luther's life nor his work was dominated by the issue of anti-Semitism As priest, professor and reformer, Luther consistently wrestled with the Old Testament, but he did not single out Christian attitudes toward Jews as the principal issue To him the "gospel" was *the* issue—the cheering news that God's love for his people continued and was most clearly manifested in the man Jesus, thus linking Israel to Christendom as the one people of God who must live to proclaim the promise of God's unconditional covenant of love

Luther clearly communicated his basic stance in the significant tract, "Luther's Warning to His Dear German People," in 1531 He would risk war against pope and emperor if they reject the promise of the gospel summarized in the statement that one is right with God by faith and trust alone rather than by "good works" (Romans 3 28) Those who do not trust this gospel are worse than non-Christian Turks, heathen or Jews Christ must be glorified—even if the world goes to ruin over it

Second, Luther's "final solution" for the Jews must be seen in the context of a fast-moving reform movement threatened by various forces from within and without Moreover, such final solutions had been proposed earlier by others, such as the highly respected German Catholic jurist and humanist Ulrich Zasius in 1508

But Zasius, Luther and others were agreed it must be done in a legal and orderly way Luther opposed any and all mob action, in contradistinction to other reformers like Balthasar Hubmaier in Regensburg, who in 1519 incited a mob to expel the Jews Thus Luther called upon legitimate government, be it in church or state, when he demanded that measures be taken against the Jews—a rare stance in a time rampant with violence and deliberate lawlessness

To be sure, Luther shared anti-Semitic superstitions of the day He became as banal in his adaptation to the evil of anti-Semitism as everyone else was The problem with evil, of course, is precisely that it is so banal Fortunately, hardly anyone heeded Luther's advice in 1543 No great effort was made to convert his rhetoric into action

Third, Luther succumbed to the evil of anti-Semitism through a theological failure of nerve He so desperately tried to communicate God's unconditional love for Israel, as well as for the people of God called "Christians," that he could not stop moving from the proclamation of divine mercy to conclusions about God's wrath When faced with what he considered self-righteous Jewish stubbornness in the matter of conversion, Luther no longer let God be God One can know the hidden God with regard to his plans for the Jews, he decided God had rejected them and was in favor of their rejection in the world he created!

Lutherans should know better than most Christians that what makes and breaks the people of God is constant vigilance in obedience to the first commandment, "I am the Lord your God You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20 2-3) The serpent's way, so well expressed in the story of the fall, is always to tempt us "to be like God" (Genesis 3 5) The issue for Christians and Jews alike is vigilance against idolatory—against the desire to dominate and have control over others No one is safe from this temptation Anyone can become a fascist in the sense of either liking to be told what to do or enjoying telling others what to do History is full of such idolatrous incidents

Luther also violated the commandment to love the neighbor in need, to be "a Christ to the neighbor," as he liked to put it Tragically, his love for the Old Testament made him so jealous of the Jews—who claimed salvation without Jesus—that he turned into a harsh critic of Judaism and pronounced it the manifestation of God's wrath

Luther's attitude toward the Jews illustrates the fragility of faith in a world plagued by suffering, evil and death Despite pioneering insights into the universality of God's love, Luther turned the "good news" of this love into "bad news" for Jews and others whose hearts seemed to him so hardened

Given Luther's own view of Israel and the Old Testament, there really is 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 as their Messiah 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 polemical argument and cultural legislation The long history of Christian anti-Semitism calls for repentance, not triumphalist claims of spiritual superiority

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 tolerant solidarity with others

LUTHER AND THE JEWS: FROM THE PAST, A PRESENT CHALLENGE

By Marc H Tanenbaum

When the U S Postal Service recently announced approval of a commemorative stamp honoring the 500th anniversary of the birth of Martin Luther, the respective responses of Lutherans and Jews disclosed what profoundly contrary places Luther holds in Lutheran and Jewish history and in contemporary perceptions Lutherans tended to feel a sense of pride, an appropriateness, in the honor bestowed by that commemorative stamp Jews reacted with either disbelief or outrage

The German Catholic scholar Joseph Lortz in his book, "The Reformation in Germany," writes of an analogous problem in Catholic-Lutheran relations He uses the term "bilateral confessionalism" to describe the existence of a "Luther legend" among Lutherans and many Protestants, "the preconceived sympathy for the hero of the Reformation" expressed in "sentimental and uncritical praise of Luther," and a Catholic legend of Luther which has assumed in the past "an antagonistic and adversary position" expressed in "hatred of the disrupter of church unity and a condemned archheretic "

"It was from the first Luther legend that Reformed polemic, as well as the Catholic reaction to it, acquired its churlish tone throughout the centuries," Lortz adds "And for the same cause, for 400 years right down to the present day, historical study of the Reformation has been largely unable to arrive at accepted conclusions Here as everywhere, bilateral confessionalism—i e , a one-sided attitude of antagonism—has proved its fundamental fruitlessness "

If bilateral confessionalism has been a problem in the Catholic-Lutheran encounter, it has nothing less than bedeviled the Jewish-Lutheran encounter over the past 400 years Only since the end of World War II, in the wake of the 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

Welcome as has been the progress in Lutheran-Jewish relations in the past four decades, no person of conscience can rest 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 But if we concentrate our entire attention on Luther's anti-Judaic polemic alone, we could be diverted from the far more fundamental spiritual and human threat Put simply, that threat is the pervasive tradition of the demonologizing of Jews and Judaism that has existed in Christendom from the first century until our present age

What have been the major features of that Christian tradition for Jews and Judaism? In what ways have Martin Luther's teachings been related to that 1500-year-old legacy he inherited? What was Luther's "contribution" to that anti-Judaic culture? What was its impact on the response of German Lutherans in the face of the Nazis' barbarous assault against the Jewish people? And finally, what can we learn from this soul-searching for our life together today?

The Middle Ages and the Jews

The problem of understanding the medieval attitude toward the Jew is necessarily complex Just as today, a variety of factors operated during the Middle Ages to complicate Christian-Jewish relations These included

- The anti-Jewish tradition stemming from the gospels themselves
- The dogmatic enmity of the church fathers and the Constantinian Church, underscored by the religious and cultural non-conformity of the Jewish people within an essentially unified and totalitarian civilization
- Economic rivalry and the sometimes strategic economic position of Jews spread throughout the Diaspora
- The gradual evolution of new social balances of power and the political struggle it entailed, especially in Germany, where the Holy Roman Empire ceaselessly sought to impose imperial domination over the fiercely independent princes
- The emergence of a national spirit which eventually dissolved the medieval unity of European Christendom

Christendom's hostility toward the Jews reached its apogee in the period of the Crusades The rising menace of Islam with the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and the spread of heresies—Scriptural, anti-sacramental and anti-clerical—that marked the 11th and 12th centuries called forth the greatest energies of the church to combat its enemies from within and without Crusades and inquisitions were among the most powerful instruments for preserving the threatened unity of Christendom

Inevitably such a period of social and religious stress, especially noteworthy for a marked intensification of zealotry and fanaticism, also witnessed a heightened antagonism for the Jews, the most notoriously "heretical" and non-Christian force in Europe living in the midst of a citadel whose security was being threatened from every side The antagonism was not new, but the form and intensity it assumed as a result of the stressful circumstances of the period were

The peculiarly intense and unremitting hatred directed against Jewry in Christendom—and only in Christendom—can be accounted for, according to Christian and Jewish scholars, by the wholly fantastic image of the Jews which gripped the imagination of the masses at the time of the first Crusade in 1095-99 The Crusade began and ended with a massacre

"The men who took the cross, after receiving Communion, heartily devoted the [first] day to extermination of the Jews," wrote the historian and philosopher Lord Acton They killed about 10,000 Jewish people

When Godfrey of Bouillon, in the summer of 1099, succeeded after a heroic assault in capturing Jerusalem, he spent the first week slaughtering its inhabitants The Jews were shut up in their synagogue, which was then set on fire According to the Roman Catholic historian Malcolm Hay in his book "Europe and the Jews," Godfrey wrote to the pope, "Learn that in the Porch and in the Temple of Solomon, our people had the vile blood of the Saracens up to the knees of their horses " And then, said Hay, "when they thought the Savior had been sufficiently revenged, that is to say, when there was hardly anyone left alive in the town, they went with tears to worship at the holy sepulchre "

In the eyes of crusading people, Professor Norman Cohn of Britain's University of Essex writes in his landmark study, "The Pursuit of the Millenium Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Total-

itarian Movements," the smiting of the Muslims and the Jews was to be the first act in that final battle with the prince of evil himself Above these desperate hordes as they moved about their work of massacre there loomed the figure of the Antichrist As the infidels were allotted their roles in the eschatological drama, popular imagination transformed them into demons

But if the Saracen long retained in the popular imagination a certain demonic quality, the Jew was portrayed as an even more horrifying figure Jews and Saracens were generally regarded as closely akin, if not identical But since Jews had been scattered throughout Christian Europe, they came to occupy by far the larger part in popular demonology, and for much longer—with consequences, Cohn states, that have extended down the generations to include the massacre of millions of European Jews in the 20th century

Based on his detailed historic and theological studies, Cohn asserts that "official Catholic teaching had prepared the way" for establishing the demonic image of the Jew which dominated the imagination of large parts of the Christian masses in the Middle Ages and beyond

Malcolm Hay similarly declares "The machinery of propaganda was entirely in the hands of the church officials Preaching, chronicles, mystery plays and even ecclesiastical ceremonies were the principal agencies available for the dissemination of hate Preachers dwelt with a morbid and sometimes sadistic realism upon the sufferings of Christ, for which they blamed all Jews of the time and all their descendants For many centuries the bishops of Beziers preached a series of sermons during Holy Week, urging their congregations to take vengeance on the Jews who lived in the district Stoning them became a regular part of the Holy Week ceremonial "

Even in the second and third centuries theologians were foretelling the Antichrist would be a Jew of the tribe of Dan Born at Babylon, he would grow up in Palestine and would love the Jews above all peoples He would rebuild the temple for them and gather them together from their dispersion The Jews, for their part, would be his most faithful followers, accepting him as the Messiah who was to restore the nation And if some theologians looked forward to a general conversion of the Jews, others maintained that their blindness would endure to the end and that at the Last Judgment they would be sent, along with the Antichrist himself, to suffer the torments of hell for all eternity

In the compendium of Antichrist lore which Adso of Montier-en-Der produced in the 10th century and which remained the stock authority throughout the Middle Ages, Antichrist remained a Jew of the tribe of Dan but became more uncanny and sinister Now he is to be the offspring of a harlot and a worthless wretch Moreover, at the moment of his conception the devil is to enter the harlot's womb as a spirit, thereby ensuring that the child will be the very incarnation of evil Later his education in Palestine is to be carried out by sorcerers and magicians

When the old eschatological prophecies were taken up by the masses of the later Middle Ages, all their fantasies were treated with deadly seriousness and were elaborated into a weird mythology Just as the human figure of Antichrist tended to merge into the wholy demonic figure of Satan, so the Jews came to be seen as demons attendant on Satan In medieval dramas and passion plays they were shown as devils with a beard and the horns of a goat, while in real life, ecclesiastical and secular authorities alike tried to make Jews wear horns on their hats Like other demons, they were imagined and portrayed in close association with creatures which symbolize lust and dirt—horned beasts, pigs, frogs, worms, snakes and scorpions

Conversely Satan himself was commonly given Jewish features and was referred to

as "the father of the Jews " The populace was convinced that in the synagogue Jews worshiped Satan in the form of a cat or a toad, invoking his aid in making black magic Like their supposed master, Jews were thought of as demons of destruction whose one object was the ruin of Christians and Christendom

Hatred of the Jews has often been attributed to their role as moneylenders and usurers But the fantasy of the demonic Jew existed before the reality of the Jewish moneylender, which Christendom helped produce by refusing to allow Jews to engage in any gainful economic, civil and military functions

Luther's Place in Medieval Anti-Semitism

That demonology which had fixed the image of the Jew as Antichrist dominated the medieval world into which Martin Luther was born in 1483 As Joshua Trachtenburg says in his study, "The Devil and the Jews," to the medieval mind in which Luther was nurtured "the Jew was not human, not in the sense that the Christian was " He was the devil's creature, a demonic and diabolic beast "fighting the forces of truth and salvation with Satan's weapons And against such a foe, no well of hatred was too deep, no war of extermination effective enough, until the world was rid of the menace "

Given that reality, that Luther as an orthodox Christian, a former Augustinian monk, could have passed through a period of philo-Semitic sympathy for Jews is all the more remarkable Earlier in 1510 during the controversy over the banning of Hebrew books that rocked Europe, young Martin Luther had sided with the great Christian Hebraist, John Reuchlin, uncle of Philip Melanchthon, over against the fanatic Dominican and former Jew, John Pfefferkorn

Luther's treatise, "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," was greeted in 1523 with enthusiasm by Jewish readers throughout Europe In it he hoped that he might "entice some Jews to the Christian faith" and wrote the following "For our fools, the popes, bishops, sophists and monks—the crude asses' heads—have hitherto so treated the Jews that anyone who wished to be a good Christian would almost have to become a Jew If I had been a Jew and had seen such dolts and blockheads govern and teach the Christian faith, I would sooner have become a hog than a Christian

"For they have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs and not men They were able to do nothing but curse them and take their goods When they were baptized, no Christian teaching or life was demonstrated to them Rather they were only subjected to papistry and monkery When they saw that Judaism had such strong scriptural support and that Christianity was nothing but twaddle without any scriptural support, how could they quiet their hearts and become true good Christians?"

Luther concluded the treatise with the following comments and recommendations

"Therefore, I would request and advise that one deal gently with them and instruct them from Scripture Then some of them may come along Instead of this we are trying only to drive them by force, slandering them, accusing them of having Christian blood if they don't stink, and I know not what other foolishness So long as we thus treat them like dogs, how can we expect to work any good among them? Again, when we forbid them to labor and do business and have any human fellowship with us, thereby forcing them into usury, how is that supposed to do them any good?

"If we really want to help them, we must be guided in our dealings with them not by papal law but by the law of Christian love If some of them should prove stiffnecked, what of it? After all, we ourselves are not all good Christians either "

To understand why Jewish leaders in Germany and elsewhere perceived this Luther as a thunderbolt of light illuminating their otherwise darkened medieval landscape

is not difficult In light of this essay and for other more fundamental reasons, both Christian and Jewish scholars have observed that the Protestant Reformation has had Judaic inclinations the zeal of Christian scholars for the study and use of the Hebrew language, a revolt from the complex and arid system of Catholic scholasticism to the seeming simplicity of Jewish teaching and dogma, and the effort to recover for the Bible its former centrality in Christian life, to name a few

The papist enemies of Luther lost no opportunity to brand him as a Jew and as a Jewish patron His doctrines, especially with reference to his polemics against idolatrous images and the worship of relics, won for him the title of "semi-Judaeus" or "half-Jew " In one instance he said of the Jews "They are blood relations of our Lord, therefore, if it were proper to boast of flesh and blood, the Jews belong to Christ more than we I beg, therefore, my dear papist, if you become tired of abusing me as a heretic, that you begin to revile me as a Jew "

By the 1530s the central issue for Luther was the proper interpretation of the Messianic passages in the Old Testament Highly concerned about the impact of rabbinic exegesis which denied Christological interpretations, Luther appropriated all of the Old Testament in the service of the New He left us nothing

The Jews, Luther asserts in his first lectures on the Psalms given during 1513-15, suffer continually under God's wrath and are paying the penalty for their rejection of Christ They spend all their efforts in self-justification, but God will not hear their prayers Neither kindness nor severity will improve them They become constantly more stubborn and more vain Moreover, they are the active enemies of Christ They blaspheme and defame him, spreading their evil influence even into Christian hearts As for Jewish efforts to interpret Scripture, these, Luther asserts, are simply lies They forsake the Word of God and follow the imaginations of their hearts He concludes that to extend tolerance to those who hold such views would be quite wrong for Christians

Luther's Impact on Modern Anti-Semitism

In his 1543 treatise, "On the Jews and Their Lies," Luther rails against the Jews for nearly 200 pages in his powerful, lusty style, with a torrential outpouring of passion and hatred that makes the diatribes of his predecessors seem languid "Know, O adored Christ," he writes, "and make no mistake, that aside from the devil you have no enemy more venomous, more desperate, more bitter than a true Jew who truly seeks to be a Jew "

Luther concludes his treatise with a series of recommendations to secular authorities on how to deal with the Jews [see the introduction, "A Difficult Subject," for the list] The duty of the secular authorities was to implement his recommendations, he insisted, and the duty of ecclesiastical authorities was to warn and instruct their congregations about the Jews and their lies

As has been noted by Lutheran theologian Mark Edwards, neither the vulgarity nor the violence of these remarks is unique, comparable to his attacks on papal opponents and Turks What is unique is the relative helplessness of these particular targets of Luther's wrath Catholics could take care of themselves and give as well as they got The Jews were at the mercy of their Catholic or Evangelical rulers and could do precious little to protect themselves

Although Luther's savage texts enjoyed only a limited circulation during his lifetime and the next few centuries, his protective authority was invoked by the Nazis when they came to power, and his anti-Semitic writings enjoyed a revival of popularity

"A line of anti-Semitic descent from Martin Luther to Adolf Hitler is easy to draw,"

writes scholar Lucy Dawidowicz in her classic study, "The War Against the Jews, 1939-1945." "Both Luther and Hitler were obsessed by a demonologized universe inhabited by Jews 'Know, Christian,' wrote Luther, 'that next to the devil thou hast no enemy more cruel, more venomous and violent than a true Jew.' Hitler himself, in that early dialogue with Dietrich Eckhart, asserted that the later Luther—that is, the violently anti-Semitic Luther—was the genuine Luther."

Dawidowicz continues: "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 provenance can be traced back to Haman's advice to Ahasuerus. 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," Dawidowicz concludes, "was the bastard child of the union of Christian anti-Semitism with German nationalism." This union had corrosive effects on the conscience of millions of German Christians, leading the majority of the German nation into blind obedience to a murderous state.

Although the church could have influenced Hitler in the first months of 1933 while he "had still to feel his way with care," writes Richard Gutteridge in an essay on "German Protestantism and the Jews in the Third Reich," the "vast majority of the church leaders and the clergy serving under them was eager to enter into the new order and to make their positive contribution there. On Easter Day, to give an example, Protestant churchgoers throughout Bavaria were told from the pulpit that the new state was reintroducing government according to God's laws and that the glad and active cooperation of the church was advocated in the task of creating a genuine 'Volksgemeinschaft' in which the cause of the needy and oppressed would be promoted. There was a paucity of concern as to what would be the fate of the Jews and others who would be treated as outsiders. It was widely felt that if certain Jews found themselves at a disadvantage, it was a fair readjustment of balance. It would be regrettable if there were cases of violent and cruel treatment, but after all, a revolution had taken place. Excesses were unavoidable, but things would surely settle down."

Gutteridge documents a number of protests from individual church leaders and then states: "The church as a whole kept silent. No bishop, church government or synod spoke out in public at this time on behalf of the persecuted Jews. Hitler and his associates had good reason to be satisfied that the church would not make overmuch trouble."

Our Present Challenge

Forty years after the Nazi Holocaust many church leaders have begun to confront this past in all its awfulness and face its moral challenge. It is a positive and hopeful sign.

We might all take heart from the messages issued in recent months by major Lutheran bodies. The Lutheran World Federation's Fourth Consultation on the Church and the Jewish People called for a purging by Christians among themselves "of any hatred of the Jews and any sort of teaching of contempt for Judaism."

The consultation further stated, "In his later years [Luther] made certain vitriolic statements about the Jews that Lutheran churches today universally reject. We regret the way in which Luther wrote has been used to further anti-Semitism. This matter will be the subject of considerable attention." Among themes suggested for such

discussions are the Christian understanding of the validity of the Old Covenant and the implications of such understanding for the theology of mission, the question of mission-dialogue, the Torah and its relation to the New Testament, what Christians and Jews can do together in service to the world, the meaning of the Messiah for Jews and Christians, and the meaning of "Dikaiosune" (justice or righteousness) for Christians and Jews

We might find especially moving these words from a statement issued by the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD), a group of regional Lutheran, Reformed and United churches in West Germany, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Adolph Hitler's assumption of power January 30, 1933

"We cannot simply dismiss our history and forget about it Things which are repressed are bound sooner or later to reassert their power

"Today we again repeat, unreservedly, the confession of guilt made immediately after the war by the members of the EKD council then in office 'Through us endless suffering has been brought to many peoples and countries We accuse ourselves for not witnessing more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously and for not loving more ardently'

"To the older people in our midst we say Please do not close your minds to the truth of what happened To the younger generation we say Do not stop facing up to this truth You are not responsible for what happened then, but you are responsible for how these events affect our further history

"To the politicians we add a word of warning Be mindful of your responsibility Injustice and want, the burden of unemployment and an unjust peace settlement were the breeding ground in which the National Socialist Party thrived The selfishness and disunity of the democratic parties brought Hitler to power This is why it is essential to preserve social peace and also why the common commitment to a democratic, constitutional state must stand above all argument, however necessary

"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 This is why hatred must have no place among us, whether it be of external enemies, foreigners or other classes, groups or minorities

"Lastly, to our own parishes and congregations we say Resist the heresy of believing in salvation of this world Hitler's victory was also a victory for heresy In the words of our predecessors at the end of the war we too acknowledge that 'our hope is in the God of grace and mercy that he will use our churches as his instruments to proclaim his Word and to make his will obeyed among ourselves and among our whole people'"

Martin Luther was a deeply committed Christian seized by a vision of God trying to bring about salvation In the process he manifested his many gifts as a man of no small achievement translator of the Bible, even helping to establish the German language, writer of magnificent essays, fighter against the domination of the papacy and an arid scholasticism in a freeing of conscience with which Jews identified

The task for us in this irenic time, this age of pluralism and growing dialogue, is to try to approach the issue of Luther and his teachings with something of the same method by which many Christians and Jews today approach the cumbersomeness of their inherited tradition Our task always is to separate out the essential teachings of the faith which are healing and redemptive, productive of love and mutual respect,

and simply to repudiate that of the past which is no longer relevant or appropriate and was a historical response for another time

A fundamental principle of the Lutheran Reformation was that papal infallibility was not a Lutheran doctrine And if the pope in Rome is not to be infallible, should infallibility then be transferred to Martin Luther?

If there's anything that should characterize the observance of the 500th birthday of Luther, I feel it should be the determination to face the bad in past tradition and to replace it by building a culture filled with caring, understanding and—above all—knowledge of one another, not as caricatures and stereotypes, but as we are, committed Jews and Christians

---

LUTHER AND THE JEWS: A VIDEO DIALOGUE

The presentations on "Luther and the Jews" by Eric W Gritsch and Marc H Tanenbaum are available on a 29-minute, videotaped version from the Office of Communication and Interpretation, Lutheran Council in the USA

The video cassette is for sale at $30 or on loan for a $5 handling fee

Please indicate the video format desired

Order by writing or calling the Lutheran Council as indicated below

---

Lutheran Council in the USA
360 Park Avenue South
New York NY 10010
212/532-6350