

Holocaust Flashpoints in Christian-Jewish Dialogue

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On Thursday, September 25, 1941, a Lithuanian Catholic peasant woman, whose name we do not know, stood at the door of her cottage facing the darkness, waving her cross in front of her to prevent the devil from entering her house. Facing her was a Jewish teenager, Zvi Michalowski, naked, covered in blood and dirt, having just crawled out from under a pile of dead bodies that included his entire family. She would never have understood the sufferings of this boy because the Christians of Lithuania had never made any attempt to understand Jews, and he would never have understood the symbol of the cross because the Jews of Lithuania had never made any attempt to understand Christians. The boy knew enough about the woman's religion and superstitions to convince her that he was Jesus Christ risen from the dead, and she let him in and gave him food and new clothing, allowing him to survive and fight as a partisan against the Nazis and later against the enemies of the new state of Israel.

Christianity and Judaism confronted each other in the Holocaust, and the Holocaust has been a continuing factor as Christians and Jews take their first tentative steps in a historic move to become friends.

One issue that dogs us is the connection between Christianity and the Holocaust. In 1998 the Vatican made what Rabbi James Rudin calls an "astonishing statement," asserting that Nazism was "a thoroughly modern neo-pagan regime [whose] anti-Semitism had its roots outside of Christianity." That idea also persists in other Christian circles.

Most Jewish commentators see it very differently. They contend that there is a connection between Christianity and the Holocaust, and they base this on several relevant facts.

Number 1. The Holocaust took place in the heart of Christian Europe. In the 1930s and 1940s, most Europeans were baptized Christians. In 1939 Germans were 54 percent Protestant and 40 percent Catholic. Austrian, Sudeten, Polish, Lithuanian, and Croatian perpetrators and collaborators were almost all Catholic; Ukrainian and Belorussian collaborators were almost all Orthodox Christians. The Holocaust took place in the heart of Christian Europe.

Number 2. The bulk of the Nazi leadership was raised Catholic: Adolf Hitler, Heinrich Himmler, Josef Goebbels, Reinhard Heydrich, Rudolf Hoess, Julius Streicher, Fritz Thyssen, Klaus Barbie, and Franz Von Papen were all Catholics, as were the heads of many Nazi countries. Rudolf Hess, Martin Bormann, Albert Speer, and Adolf Eichmann had Protestant backgrounds. Most of the Nazi leadership were baptized Christians.

Number 3. The Nazis prided themselves on being enemies of "godless Bolshevism," and they professed admiration for Jesus, whom they tried to Aryanize. Five years into the Third Reich, a memorandum from Himmler to all SS leaders instructed: "In ideological training I forbid every attack against Christ as a person, since such attacks or insults that Christ was a Jew are unworthy of us and certainly untrue historically."

Number 4. Catholic and Protestant leadership in Germany and its occupied puppets supported the Nazi regime. Bishop Ivan Saric of Sarajevo declared that “The movement of liberation of the world from the Jews is a movement for the renewal of human dignity. Omniscient and omnipotent God stands behind this movement.” Many if not most Catholic and Protestant leaders supported Hitler, and while they would not have approved of genocide, they did approve of the assault on the Jews.

Number 5, and this is the most important one. For the better part of two millennia, Christians abused Jews and their religion. They accused Jews of deicide, the murder of the man who was God, and they accused Jews of murdering Christian children to get their blood, and they accused Jews of desecrating hosts. Based on those and similar accusations, they took actions which were repeated during the Holocaust. Medieval Christians isolated Jews from the surrounding society, and so did the Nazi Germans. Medieval Christians restricted the activities of Jews, and so did the Nazi Germans. Medieval Christians denigrated the Jewish religion, burning Torah scrolls and copies of Talmud, and destroying synagogues, and so did the Nazi Germans. Medieval Christians forced the Jews to wear distinctive clothing, and so did the Nazi Germans. Medieval Christians forced the expulsion of Jews from place after place, and so did the Nazi Germans. Medieval Christians tortured and killed Jews, and so did the Nazi Germans. There was one crucial difference—the killing of Jews in Christian Europe had never before been genocidal.

Jews ask what Christianity contributed to the Holocaust, and they answer: Three things: precedents in aggression towards Jews, profound contempt for Jews, and tens of thousands of collaborators plus scores of millions of bystanders. By any account, they conclude, those are major contributions.

Christian partners in dialogue ought not to consider it unreasonable for their Jewish partners in dialogue to connect the Holocaust to Christianity. At the same time, Jewish partners must recognize that a sea-change has taken place within Christianity since the Holocaust. This is not the same church that was around during the period of the Third Reich. In that church the mantra was that Jews were Christ-killers, guilty of deicide. In this church a majority of its members reject that notion, and the leadership has officially condemned it. In that church the Talmud was on the Index of Forbidden Books and copies of the Talmud were burnt. In this church Christians are being encouraged by their leadership to learn from Jewish readings of their scriptures and from the Jewish tradition, and in this church Rabbi Steve Silberman is invited to speak about the Bible at a Baptist church. In that church a prominent saint could refer to the synagogue as brothel. In this church two popes have so far been welcomed into synagogues, where they joined in prayer with their Jewish brothers and sisters, and in this church Christians are gathered with Jewish friends in Springhill Avenue Temple to hear a Christian speak. In that church the accepted theology taught that the covenant with the people of Israel had been superseded by a new covenant with the church, and Judaism was regarded as irrelevant. In this church that theology has been officially rejected by Christianity’s major denominations, and a pope, in an action of great respect for Judaism, has stood before the Western Wall and placed between the stones a prayer in which he referred to Jews as the people of the covenant. In that church Christians were

prepared to go to war for the sake of Christian control of the Holy Land. In this church the Vatican has officially recognized the State of Israel.

This is not the same church that was around during the period of the Third Reich. Rabbi David Rosen calls it the greatest revolution in human history.

The past now includes not only the Crusades and the Inquisition but also the 1964 resolution of the General Convention of the Episcopal Church rejecting the charge of deicide against the Jews and condemning anti-Semitism. The past now includes not only the teaching of St. John Chrysostom that God “has utterly abandoned” Jews because they “are in a state of dishonor and disgrace [and therefore] We must hate the Jews and their synagogue” but the past now also includes the establishment of the Center for Christian-Jewish Learning at Boston College and the Center for the Study of Christianity at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. The past now includes not only the expulsion of Jews, who were unwelcome in Christian towns, but also the welcoming of Rabbi Donald Kunstadt as a professor of Judaism at Spring Hill college. The past now includes not only the exclusion of Jews from many of Mobile’s social institutions but also over 35 years of Christian-Jewish dialogue. The past now includes not only the Holocaust but also the establishment of the Alabama Gulf Coast Holocaust Library by two Catholics, a Baptist, and two Jews. Be sure when you talk about the past that you include the entire past.

Both Christian and Jewish partners should be prompted by this to reflect on how we handle the past. If Jews want to do no more than dwell on the ugly past, there can be no dialogue, just as in the same way, if Christians want to simply forget the ugly past, there can be no dialogue. We need to talk about the past, and we need to search together for ways to go beyond it, to make sure that it is truly *past*.

What must be grasped by today’s Jewish community is this: You Jews have something that virtually no Jews have ever had. You have Christians who are willing to take you seriously on your own terms and talk with you seriously and with respect. No Jews have ever had that. It is an opportunity that must not be squandered.

The first Holocaust flashpoint in Christian-Jewish dialogue, then, is the matter of the Christian connection to and involvement in the murder of six million Jews. The second flashpoint is the role of the New Testament in all the killing of Jews, including the Holocaust. Once again it is the Vatican that contributes to this being a flashpoint in Christian-Jewish dialogue. In its 1998 Holocaust document, the Vatican identified “false interpretations” as the problem with the New Testament, implying that the text itself is in no way problematic. Christian scholarship is not adopting that position.

Norman Beck, professor of theology and classical languages at Texas Lutheran University, has identified all the instances of what he calls “defamatory anti-Jewish polemic” in the four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. There are, Beck says, some 40 verses of defamatory anti-Jewish polemic in the Gospel of Mark, including condemnations of the Pharisees as hard-hearted, rejecting the commandments, and plotting to destroy Jesus; some 80 verses of defamatory anti-Jewish polemic in the Gospel of Matthew, including accusations that the Pharisees are evil poisonous snakes, blind guides leading the blind, hard-hearted, and hypocrites, and assertions that the disciples of Jesus will judge the twelve tribes of Israel and that the house of Jerusalem is

to be forsaken and desolate, and the accusation that the chief priest bribed the guards to lie about their actions; some 60 verses of defamatory anti-Jewish polemic in the Gospel of Luke, including calling the multitudes poisonous snakes, accusing the Pharisees of having rejected the purposes of God, condemning the ruler of the synagogue as a hypocrite, and asserting that the house of Jerusalem is to be forsaken; some 130 verses of defamatory anti-Jewish polemic in the Gospel of John, including the accusation that God's word and God's love is not in the Jews, that none of the Jews do (what is written in) the Torah, that the Pharisees know neither Jesus nor the Father, that the Jews are thieves and robbers, that the Jews are people who steal and kill and destroy, that most Jews love the praise of men more than of God, and that the Jews are descendants of their father, the Devil; and some 140 verses of defamatory anti-Jewish polemic in the Acts of the Apostles, including numerous accusations that the Jews killed Christ and are plotting to kill Paul. This is 450 verses of defamatory anti-Jewish polemic before we even get to the letters of Paul, and it was Paul who wrote to the Corinthians that the Jews' "minds were hardened [and] whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds."

The New Testament has always been the foundation on which Christians justified their attacks on Jews. Now, we all know that there is material in everybody's scriptures that is tough to handle. The pious reader of the psalms comes across this in Psalm 137: "O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!" The book of Joshua records that "When Israel had finished slaughtering all the inhabitants of Ai in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and when all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai, and attacked it with the edge of the sword. The total of those who fell that day, both men and women, was twelve thousand—the entire population of Ai." It was not, however, Jews raised in the context of what we call the Old Testament who bashed children's heads against rocks but Germans raised in the context of the New Testament, and it was not Jews raised in the context of what we call the Old Testament who committed genocide but Germans raised in the context of the New Testament.

A literalist reading of the New Testament undoubtedly conveys a negative impression of Jews and Judaism, but we should reject a literalist approach to the New Testament, just as we must reject literalist approaches to the Old Testament, to the anti-Jewish writings of the Fathers, and to other texts. One cannot understand the Declaration of Independence without knowing something about King George III and the colonies. The Gettysburg Address achieves its full power only in the context of the Civil War. Texts never stand alone. The New Testament should not be made to stand alone.

Christian scholarship is opening up for us new perspectives on the first century of the current era, and it is becoming clear that the split between Judaism and Christianity did not take place overnight, did not take place simultaneously in every part of the Roman Empire, did not take place while any of the apostles was alive, and for the most part did not take place in the first century.

Scholarship has established Jesus firmly within a Jewish context, born of Jewish parents, circumcised, educated in Torah, observing Shabbat and Pesach and other holy days, and

accepting worship by sacrifice along with all the practices required by it, such as purification and support of the Temple and the priesthood.

Scholarship has also begun to demonstrate that Paul was not the father of anti-Judaism, Paul was not the inventor of the rejection-replacement theory, Paul did not repudiate the law of Moses, Paul did not argue that God had rejected Israel, Paul did not expect Jews to find their salvation through Jesus Christ, and Paul was not an apostate from Judaism or a convert to Christianity.

This does not mean that there are not problematic texts in the New Testament, but for the first time in the history of the church Christian scholarship is now confronting those texts, asking questions about anti-Judaism in the Gospels, and whether the Gospel of John is anti-Jewish and is John supersessionist? The answers the scholars give to these questions are neither final nor flattering. The important thing is that the questions are being asked, and being asked by Christians, not just by Jews. Once again, we are dealing with something that is unprecedented in Christian history.

Unprecedented actions are being taken not only by Christians but by Jews as well. For several years now some local Jews have been reading the New Testament with me – at their request. When I was taking Father John Pawlikowski to the airport, I told him about this and he said he had been told of that happening all over the country. I could not prove it, but I am pretty sure that that has never happened before.

Our discussion of the New Testament raises the question of how all of us should handle our sacred texts, and the first thing that becomes clear as we try to answer that question is that we must redefine our understanding of what it means to be sacred. Our sacred texts preserve for us a religious vision, and that is what they should be used for. Unfortunately sacred texts, all of them, have been used instead to oppress women, to divide communities, to justify wars and executions, to bash gays, to marginalize the poor. If we do oppress women and gays and various outcasts, we should not blame the sacred texts but rather our refusal to accept that God speaks in human language and writes in human script with an unmistakable human handwriting. If we fight and kill each other, we should not blame the sacred texts but rather our refusal to accept the fact that those texts exist for one purpose only, to inspire us with a religious vision which we will know has been grasped when all people are accepted and loved for who and what they are. Sacred texts do not give us all the answers but rather teach us to ask the right questions. Sacred texts do not give us a leg up on salvation but rather have the potential to save us from our self-centeredness and isolation. Sacred texts do not give us an advantage over others but rather have the potential for making us true servants of humanity.

I have said that we should read the text but we should also take into account how Christians are reading that text. But if we are going to ask Jews to pay attention to how we read our scriptures, then in the spirit of dialogue we should pay attention to how Jews read their scriptures. For too long we Christians have written off Jewish readings of their scriptures as irrelevant to us Christians. That position is no longer acceptable, certainly not within my Catholic tradition. To quote a 2001 Vatican document, “Christians can and ought to admit that the Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures from the

Second Temple period,” and they “can learn much from Jewish exegesis practiced for more than two thousand years.”

The problematic nature of the New Testament is the second Holocaust flashpoint in Christian-Jewish dialogue. The third flashpoint is Pope Pius XII, and in case you did not know that it is a flashpoint, be advised that when Pope Benedict XVI went to Jerusalem two years ago this month, he visited Yad Vashem, the Israeli institute for studying the Holocaust, but he offended many Jews when he refused to visit the museum at Yad Vashem because he objected to its presentation of Pius XII.

The questions that have been asked, and continue to be asked about Pius XII are legion: about his seeming indifference to Jews in France, Croatia, and Slovakia, about his failure to intervene in a timely fashion to help save the Jews of Hungary and Rome, about allowing himself to be influenced by his affection for Germans and their culture, about his failure to condemn the Holocaust or excommunicate Nazis, about his seeming indifference to Poles, Protestants, and Orthodox Serbs, about his being more concerned for an institution than he was for people, about his being unduly controlled by his worries about the fate of the city of Rome and the integrity of the Vatican, about his being too caught up in a diplomatic model of church, about his conviction that communism was worse than Nazism, about his compromising his principles so as to be accepted by both sides as an impartial mediator, about whether he was antisemitic or a coward or cold and uncaring, about his being driven by his desire not to break the concordat he had negotiated in 1933, about Vatican support for Nazi criminals after the war, about his shelving of a proposed encyclical that would have included a condemnation of antisemitism.

I offend some people simply by mentioning some of these questions, and now I will offend others by not responding to any of them. Instead I will focus on the need to put Pius XII in the larger context of the entire church. Pius XII was the head of a church that collectively turned its back on the Jews. The culpability or nonculpability of the man born Eugenio Pacelli is between him and God, but when you raise the specter of the church's culpability, that's us you're talking about. And the evidence is not flattering to us. In church after church, Christians either watched passively or contributed actively.

In Lithuania, Catholics tortured and killed Jews in at least forty communities even before the German army arrived. In a Lithuanian city the size of Mobile, with a population of 400,000, there would have been 131 people helping to save Jewish lives.

In Poland, a 1938 headline in a Catholic newspaper read: “If we don't declare war on them, the Jewish rope will strangle us.” In a Polish city with a population of 400,000, 73 people would have helped save Jewish lives.

The president of mostly Catholic Slovakia was Monsignor Josef Tiso. Slovakia willingly deported its Jews to Auschwitz, and Monsignor Tiso was hanged after the war as a war criminal. In a Slovakian city with a population of 400,000, 62 people would have helped save Jewish lives.

In mostly Catholic Hungary, the Hungarian people made some thirty-five thousand denunciations against the Jews in the first six weeks following German occupation. After the last Jew had been removed from the town of Veszprem, the residents were invited to a

thanksgiving ceremony that took place at 11:30 A.M. in the Franciscan Church. In a Hungarian city with a population of 400,000, 32 people would have helped save Jewish lives.

In France, the Vichy government's anti-Jewish measures were met by silence on the part of the church, a fact which the French bishops acknowledged in 1997, when they called that silence a sin. In a French city with a population of 400,000, 32 people would have helped save Jewish lives.

In Ukraine, the Orthodox people of Khmelnika held a thanksgiving service after its 229 Jews had been killed. One priest is reported to have said in a sermon: "Dear merciful people... do not give a piece of bread to a Jew... whoever knows about any hiding place of a Jew, look for him and inform the Germans." In a Ukrainian city with a population of 400,000, 23 people would have helped save Jewish lives.

In Austria, the populace, ninety percent of whom were Catholics, enthusiastically destroyed Jewish property during Kristallnacht and yelled catcalls and obscenities as the Jews were being deported. In an Austrian city with a population of 400,000, 5 people would have helped save Jewish lives.

In Italy, Cardinal Adeodato Piazza, the patriarch of Venice, insisted on the removal of dozens of orphaned Jewish children from their hiding place in a diocesan seminary. In an Italian city with a population of 400,000, 4 people would have helped save Jewish lives.

In Germany Archbishop Konrad Gröber of Freiburg joined the S.S. in 1933 as a "promoting member," and had to be forced to relinquish his membership in 1938. The papal nuncio's monsignor-secretary was a member of the Nazi party. Catholics were as fully engaged in Holocaust-related activities as the rest of German society, and among the S.S. nearly one-fourth were Catholics. In a German city with a population of 400,000, 3 people would have helped save Jewish lives.

In Romania, when the military and gendarmerie began their killing of Jews, the local priests helped them by identifying the fugitives hiding in the vicinity of their villages. In a Romanian city with a population of 400,000, 1 person would have helped save Jewish lives.

It is very unfair to place all the burden of the church's response on the back of Pius XII. Our obsession with Pius XII springs from the mistaken notion that history takes place from the top down. What we should be much more concerned about is the corporate failure of the church as a whole. Popes live and die, but the church we still have with us, and we should be talking not about the silence of Pius XII but about the silence of the church headed by Pius XII. Consider this: The last two popes have struggled mightily to impose on Catholics an anti-birth control perspective, and they have largely failed. That failure should tell us that if Catholics during the pontificate of Pius XII had been adamant in maintaining faithfulness to their Christian principles, even an antisemitic pope could not have prevented them from working to save Jewish lives. Pius XII was the tip of a morally indifferent iceberg.

My first thoughts on the entire Pius XII matter concern the protection of institutional interests. Pius is accused of placing the good of an institution before the good of people. But if Catholic partners in dialogue defend every policy or action of the Church or the Vatican at all costs, no matter what lives are stepped on in the process, aren't they doing precisely what Pius XII

is accused of doing? And if Christian partners in dialogue defend the literal text of every single verse of the Bible at all costs, no matter what lives are stepped on in the process, aren't they doing precisely what Pius XII is accused of doing? And if Jewish partners in dialogue defend every policy and action of the State of Israel at all costs, no matter what lives are stepped on in the process, aren't they doing precisely what Pius XII is accused of doing? Would that Pius XII were the only one to have ever placed the good of an institution before the well-being of people!

My final thoughts on the Pius XII matter concern the issue of canonization. Canonization in the Catholic Church says three things about a person. It says that the person has practiced heroic virtue, the person is therefore worthy of imitation, and the person can intercede for us in heaven before the throne of God. Let's look at each of these points in connection with Pius XII.

Did Pius XII practice heroic virtue? Most Jews and many Christians think that Pius acted uncourageously at crucial moments during the arrest, deportation, and murder of Jews. Perhaps the opening up of all the Vatican files on Pius will help settle the issue, but I find it hard to believe that there is some smoking gun out there that will completely reverse the general Jewish lack of respect for Pius as a practitioner of heroic virtue.

Is Pius XII worthy of imitation? No human being is worthy of imitation in everything they do. Consider David, the king of Israel, a saint in the Catholic Church whose feast day is December 29. I suspect that the Bathshebas and Uriahs of this world would not want us to imitate St. David in everything he did. If Pius were canonized, that would not mean that we would have to imitate him in everything.

You know, the Talmud has something to say about saints and saintliness. It speaks of what it calls "the foolish saint," and it defines the foolish saint as "one who would see a woman drown without going to her rescue because of the rule forbidding a man to look upon a woman" (Soṭah v. 21b). Note that the Talmud does not say that the man is not a saint, but rather that he is a foolish saint. One perspective, then, would be to say that Pius XII was a foolish saint because he saw Jews drowning without going to their rescue because of a perceived rule forbidding a pope to take actions that might hurt the Church. We would, then, imitate Pius as a saint but not imitate him insofar as he was foolish.

Can Pius XII intercede for us before the throne of God? Jews may not care what we believe on this score, but it makes a difference to me, because as a Catholic, I would be asked by my Church to regard Pius XII as someone who can help me in my struggle here on earth. So I need to take this seriously, and I am prepared for the possibility of a Pius XII canonization with my very own special prayer to a St. Pius XII. It goes like this:

"Holy man of God, Pius XII, I ask you to plead with God for all the help we need to overcome antisemitism. Ask the God of Abraham and Sarah to bless our efforts at dialogue so that the unfriendly breach between Christianity and Judaism will be permanently and irrevocably healed. Ask the God of Isaac and Rebekah to open our eyes and ears to the message of love and understanding found in both the Tanakh and the New Testament. Beseech the God of Jacob and Rachel to give us courage to fight against all discriminations and all genocides. As you face Jesus, whose execution was a result of Roman antisemitism, beg him for the help we need to act courageously and selflessly in defense of the lives of our Jewish brothers and sisters. Amen."

After years of studying the Nazi assault on the Jews, I have become convinced that the Holocaust did not have to happen. Indeed, the whole history of Christian anti-Jewish thought and action did not have to happen. Wouldn't it be nice if we could start over and do it right this time! I think that is what we are trying to do in Christian Jewish dialogue, to start over, at least symbolically. So in that spirit, I am going to start my talk over.

One evening in the early months of 1942, a poor Polish Catholic peasant sat in his small farm home when suddenly there was a knock at the door. Opening the door, the man saw standing there David Nassan, stark naked, covered in blood. David had been rounded up with all the other Jews in town and taken to a cemetery. They had been told to undress, and when they did, they were shot one at a time. When David's turn came, he was slightly wounded, but pretended to be dead, and at night, all alone, he had wound his way from underneath the many dead bodies. The farmer's wife wanted to give him her husband's only set of good clothes and send him on his way, but the farmer thought differently. A deeply religious Catholic, he was convinced that this was the work of God, that God had sent this Jew to him because he wanted his life to be saved. At great peril to his life and that of his family, he hid David in his home for 27 months and saved his life.

Baruch atah Adonai. Blessed are you, O Lord.