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Ralph Luther Moellering

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LUTHERAN-JEWISH RELATIONS AND THE HOLOCAUST

Ralph Moellering

Lutheran Paul Simon, a member of the U.S. Congress, has recently reminded us that "hate peddling" is a growing blot on our horizon. Anti-Semitism appears to be increasing rather than diminishing. Swastikas have been painted on synagogues. In a few instances violence and vandalism have occurred. The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan to which Simon refers has included recruitment campaigns in Canada.¹

Thirty-five years have elapsed since the end of World War II and the systematic program of genocide directed by the Nazis against the Jews. In 1978 nearly 120 million people watched all or part of a 9½ hour television series on the Holocaust. In connection with the dramatic presentation psychoanalyst Arnold Hutschnecker was interviewed on the NBC Today show and provoked a flurry of reaction when he accused Martin Luther of contributing to "simmering . . . anti-Semitic feeling (which) has existed in Germany for hundreds of years." While denying a simplistic cause-effect view of historical relationships linking Luther with the holocaust, General Secretary Paul Wee of Lutheran World Ministries called on Lutherans to repent of their "collective sins over against the Jewish community." William Lazareth, then serving as LCA Church and Society Director, commented that contemporary Lutherans are ashamed of the unchristian remarks which Luther made toward the end of his career and apologized for them.²

In general it must be admitted that Lutherans have an uneasy conscience and an

1. *Missouri in Perspective*, March 23, 1981.

2. Reported by LCUSA, April 21, 1978.

unenviable record in their contact with the Jewish people. Both blatant and latent forms of anti-Semitism have persisted in Lutheran circles.

LUTHERANS AND JEWS

Basically three categories may be distinguished in reviewing Lutheran evaluations of the Jews. First, there is a small fringe element which unabashedly criticizes or condemns Jews. These fanatics give credence to the accusation that there is an international Jewish conspiracy which is determined to undermine Gentile civilization and which is responsible for all of the corruption and depravity which contaminate us.³ Frequently these same individuals are convinced that Communism is the weapon forged by Jews to achieve world conquest.⁴ "Anyone who fights Communism but does not openly fight the Jews is a faker!", declared the Rev. Gordon Winrod, pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Little Rock, Arkansas.⁵ "Communism is merely the puppet — the strings to that puppet are being pulled and controlled by an international Jewish conspiracy" wrote the Rev. Alan L. Peck, Pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Sanford, Michigan.⁶ "The Jews plotted the first and second world wars" and are guilty of many vile crimes according to a Lutheran layman from Glendora, California.⁷

The second type of Lutheran (probably most numerous) is avowedly free of hostility toward Jews, but is conditioned by his religious training and social environment to be somewhat skeptical, if not suspicious about Jewish intentions. Subconsciously he or she retains a degree of animus or at best an ambivalent feeling. This person continues to be amused by cartoons or jokes which perpetuate unfavorable images and stereotypes. Lingering in the memories of such individuals may be those Lenten narratives which seem to blame the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ. Possibly they were taught (as I was in a Lutheran school) that the anathema "His blood be upon us and on our children" was a self-imposed curse that found its historical fulfillment in the persecution of the Jews. Many of the people in this category, however, would emphatically repudiate the strident and vicious anti-Semitism

3. The primary source for this allegation has usually been *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* purporting to be the secret minutes from the First Zionist Congress held at Basle in 1897 under the presidency of Theodore Herzl.

4. This was the tactic used by the infamous Gerald L.K. Smith in his publication, *The Cross and the Flag*, to which some Lutherans subscribed. Smith also circulated *The Key to the Mystery*, a 16-page pamphlet published in Canada which called the League of Nations "a Judaeo-Masonic invention" and which maintained that the Jews dominate the news media, the entertainment industry and banking.

5. In a letter written Nov. 23, 1962 and published as a leaflet. Gordon Winrod, son of Gerald Winrod (publisher of *The Defender* which espoused Biblical Fundamentalism and avid anti-Communism in a movement centered in Wichita, Kansas in the Forties and Fifties), refused church discipline and was defrocked. He continued to edit *For Christ and Country*, *The Winrod Letter*. In April, 1971 issue he wrote: "Jews are devils . . . Jews are the mystery Babylon harlot . . . Communism is the Jews."

6. In Vol. 3, No. 6 of his publication emanating from Sanford, Michigan, n.d. Pastor Peck quoted from *Common Sense* (Union, New Jersey): "the international Jews financed the communist revolution in Russia in 1917, set up communism and spread it over the world."

7. In a letter printed in *Christian News*, June 26, 1978.

of Winrod and his ilk. In some instances they would profess to have an evangelistic zeal for the conversion of the Jews.⁸ In relation to conflict in the Middle East they are usually reluctant to take a strong pro-Israel position.

Many Lutherans continue to insist that the Christian missionary enterprise, being universal in its scope, dare not omit the Jews or place them in a special category. The mandate is "to make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Full salvation is to be found exclusively in Jesus Christ who affirmed: "I am the way, and the truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by Me" (John 14:6). Accordingly, a movement like "Jews for Jesus" has been wholeheartedly approved by the Board for Evangelism of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Testimonials commending the work of the converted Jew, Steve Cohen, have been circulated in Canada in preparation for his tour through that country.⁹ Cohen is a member of a Missouri Synod congregation in New York City who is moving to Toronto, and who travelled over 30,000 miles in 1980 to witness to Jewish people about his professed discovery of *Shalom* in Jesus Christ.¹⁰

The third position to be found among Lutherans was almost non-existent until recent years. In part it is suspected of stemming from a guilt complex over the holocaust, as well as chagrin caused by our increased knowledge about the maltreatment of Jews by Christians over the centuries. More immediately and more directly it is an outcome of new Biblical research and interpretation. The mystery of persisting Judaism they find affirmed in Romans 9-11. "God has not rejected His people from whom He fore knew."¹¹ If the covenant once established with Abraham and Moses was authentic must we insist that it has lost its validity since the appearance of Jesus? Is it not possible to postulate a two covenant concept which allows that God may be preserving a relationship with His ancient people in a different way than He does with those who have discovered and subscribed to the New Covenant? Krister Stendahl, Lutheran New Testament scholar, concurs with this outlook and disparages Christian missions among Jews as insufferable arrogance.¹² Along with this reluctance to evangelize the Jews is usually found an eagerness for dialogue and a keen appreciation of the Jewish heritage. Cordial conversation and mutual sharing rather than efforts toward conversion are stressed.

Illustrative of this attitude which is gaining adherents among Lutherans is a presentation made by the bishop of the Episcopal (Anglican) Church's diocese of Newark, New Jersey in 1979. Bishop John Shelby Spong argues that Judaism is the parent of Christianity, and despite all opposition must persevere. If its unique

8. E.g. Tom Baker, "Evangelism to the Jews," *Christian News*, April 17, 1978: ". . . we do not apologize for our mission to the Jews. For the fact that Jews need Christ Jesus is a presumption of God Himself!" At the same time Pastor Baker pleads: "Let us ask God for forgiveness for those occasions when we demonstrated prejudice against God's chosen nation."

9. Ronald Fink, President of the Atlantic District, LCMS: "You will find [Steve Cohen] to be committed to our Lord, His Gospel and His covenant people." Erwin Kolb, Executive Secretary for Evangelism, LCMS: "I pray that he will be used by God to assist Christians in Canada in sharing the Good News that Jesus is the Messiah with the Jewish people of Canada."

10. According to J.A.O. Preus, President of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, in *Lutheran Witness*, April, 1981.

11. Romans 11:2.

12. In *Engage/Social Action*, a United Methodist magazine. Quoted in *Forum Letter*.

insights are blunted then Christianity will be impoverished and distorted. In his understanding there are three major themes rooted in Judaism that must be preserved and emphasized in Christian teaching. First of all, at the very heart of Judaism is the worship of a God who is actively involved in historical events. The God of the Exodus who guided His people through the wilderness to the Promised Land and displayed His sustaining power and vengeful judgment in their relationships with their enemies is never an abstract entity who can merely be contemplated. Faith in Him is not intellectual assent to propositional statements about His omnipotence or holiness. Rather, faith is a readiness to confront the future which God is devising. This kind of vibrant faith equips us to be daring and venturesome pilgrims, not yearning for security in an otherworldly piety, but actively coping with the mundane issues that determine human welfare. Secondly, Bishop Spong is convinced that Judaism provides Christians with safeguards against the intrusions of idolatrous inclinations. The insistence that God alone is supreme can help prevent us from elevating the written Word or the authority of the Church to the point where they are absolutized. Our thoughts and concepts — our creedal statements and theological formulations — at best can only approximate or symbolize Final Reality. We are fallible. Only God is ultimate.

Thirdly, we dare never forget our Jewish background because it illuminates the New Testament. Many of the episodes in the Gospels can be clarified by examining their Hebrew counterparts. Thus the story of the Ascension can be better understood in a nonliteralistic manner if we are aware of its antecedent in the account of Elijah's reception into heaven. The confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel becomes significant background for the narrative about the overcoming of all language barriers at Pentecost. The feeding of the 5,000 is elucidated by the description of the children of Israel nourished by manna in the desert. And so we are constantly dependent upon our Jewish roots if we are to maintain an accurate appraisal of our own faith. By engaging in a verbal exchange with our Jewish neighbours we gain indispensable correctives in expounding our own faith.¹³

As of 1981 it can be said that there is no unanimity among Lutherans in evaluating the role of the Jewish people, past, present, or future. Positions range all the way from suspicion and hostility to desire to embrace them as co-religionists.

THE INFLUENCE OF LUTHER

What is inescapable is that Lutherans have been influenced to a considerable degree (consciously or unconsciously) by the attitudes expressed by Martin Luther and his emulators. What is also undeniable is that the people who were responsible for the holocaust appealed to the revered German Leader to gain support for their nefarious actions. To gain popular approval for Jewish persecution the Nazis did not hesitate to make use of Luther.¹⁴ Occasionally political scientists or historians have attempted to trace an historical affinity between Luther's Reformation and the rise of

13. *Christian Century*, Sept. 26, 1979.

14. Theodor Fritsch quoted some of the most inflammatory statements in his *Handbuch der Judenfrage*.

Hitlerism.¹⁵ Sometimes Luther has been depicted as the precursor of modern anti-Semitism. Abram Lipsky wrote, "Luther's unbridled tongue tossed off phrases that still are a godsend to anti-Semitic ranters, and so long as the Prophet's words are cherished, so long, no doubt, will the stream of invective and abuse flow from this hallowed spring."¹⁶ Traditional Roman Catholic assaults on the Reformation were usually quick to expose the same "blight" in Luther's career.¹⁷

Appalling as it may sound Luther can be quoted as writing, "The Jews are veritable liars and vampires . . . A more bloodthirsty and vindictive race has never seen the light of day . . . This race has been possessed by Lucifer and all his angels . . . cursed be the vile race of Jews and cursed be their iniquity . . . It is our own fault that we have not annihilated them."¹⁸

How astounding, then, that the same Luther may be cited by an advocate of modern tolerance as writing what would seem to be the exact opposite, "I would advise and beg everybody to deal kindly with the Jews and to instruct them in the Scripture; in such a case we could expect them to come over to us. If, however, we use brute force and slander them, saying that they need the blood of Christians to get rid of their stench, and other nonsense of that kind, and treat them like dogs, what good can we expect of them? . . . If we wish to make them better, we must deal with them not according to the law of the pope, but according to the law of Christian charity. We must receive them kindly and allow them to compete with us in earning a livelihood, so that they may have an opportunity to witness Christian life and doctrine; and if some remain obstinate, what of it? Not everyone of us is a good Christian."¹⁹

Quite naturally any rational person will ask how it is possible to harmonize these two conflicting assertions of Luther. Was there a change in his attitude or was he guilty of forthright contradictions? In reality the total explanation is complex as a number of factors caused Luther to react as he did.

At the risk of oversimplification a terse summary may be presented.²⁰ In the earliest stages of his career the future Reformer was coldly theological in his analysis of the situation confronting the Jews. Luther did not participate in the Reuchlin-Pfefferkorn controversy which found the famous Christian humanist defending the Jews against vicious accusations made against them by an apostate from their own ranks. When asked for his opinion Luther replied that the Jews were abandoned to the power of their corrupt minds through the wrath of God, and so they were doomed to remain unregenerate. Their own prophets had foretold that they would be blasphemers. In his lectures on the Psalms (1513-1516) Luther complained about the "lies" in the Talmud and the refusal of the Jews to accept their Messiah. They are devoid of true wisdom when they grope in the darkness of their ancient

15. E.g. McGovern, *From Luther to Hitler* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

16. *Martin Luther, Germany's Angry Man* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1933), p. 274.

17. E.g. Brophy in "Luther, Hitler, and Chaos," reprinted from *Hibernia* (March, 1946) in *The Catholic Mind* (July, 1946).

18. Translated by M. Sasse, *Martin Luther and the Jews*, from W.Z., LIII, 443, 477-478, 552.

19. Translation in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, from W.A., XI, 336.

20. For a full treatment of the subject see Ralph Moellering, "Luther's Attitude Toward the Jews" in *Concordia Theological Monthly*, December 1948, January and March, 1949.

ignorance, rejecting newly revealed truth. Arrogantly they cling to their errors, suffer persecution at the hands of their enemies, and will eventually be consigned to everlasting perdition.²¹

Presumably Luther mellowed during his confinement at the Wartburg. In his commentary on the *Magnificat* he states that the grace of God will result in the conversion of some Jews. He begins to advise a more cordial approach on the part of Christians.²² In 1523 his first major writing concerning the Jews appeared, *Dass Jesus Christus ein geborner Jude sei*. This treatise, applauded by both Jewish leaders and the admirers of Reuchlin, was widely disseminated. Luther admonishes the Gentiles to treat the Jews sympathetically. In the past, he concluded, the Jews had been proffered only a perverted version of Christianity. He is optimistic about a more favorable response when they are privileged to hear the pure Gospel. He advises a tactful approach and expresses contempt for the unfounded suspicions of Christians.²³ In 1537 Luther could write to Josel von Rosheim: "My writing has served the welfare of the whole of Jewry."²⁴ The validity of that assertion seems to be substantiated by the sudden cessation of persecutions.²⁵ In Lutheran territories like Hesse and Brandenburg they enjoyed unprecedented freedom. Even the Jewish historian Graetz concedes that Luther's favorable writing on the Jews contained more positive words than they had heard for a thousand years.²⁶

Regrettably this magnanimous tolerance was all too ephemeral. Already in 1536 John Frederick, the Elector of Saxony, banished the Jews from his land and Luther declined to take up cudgels in their behalf. Luther felt compelled to reassure Christians who were upset over Jewish propaganda which maintained that the Messiah had not yet come and that therefore the Jewish Law must remain binding permanently.²⁷ Increasingly he became pessimistic about the prospect of winning many Jews for evangelical Christianity. He tended to interpret their resistance as blind obduracy and resented what he regarded as offensive arrogance. During this time he was also inclined to give more credence to superstitions and calumnies which had arisen in the Middle Ages about Jewish versatility in the occult arts. Rumors reached him about their proficiency in magic, about well poisoning, about kidnapping Christian children, and about Jewish doctors who killed their Christian patients.²⁸

Toward the end of his life Luther became so exasperated over what he believed to be the obnoxious behavior of the Jews that he almost abandoned hope that they

21. W.A., III, IV; See also Reinhold Lewin, *Luthers Stellung Zu den Juden* (Berlin: Truwitzsch und Sohn, 1911), pp.3,4.

22. W.A., VII, 606f.

23. W.A. XI, S.L.A., XX, 1792-1821.

24. S.L.A., XX, 1826 ff., No. 49.

25. The Jews had been driven out of Nuremberg in 1498, Noerdlingen in 1506, Regensburg in 1519, and Rottenburg in 1520. Not until about 1536 was there a fresh outburst of violence against the Jews.

26. In his *History of the Jews*, (Philadelphia: the Jewish Publication Society of America, 1894), Vo. IV, p. 471.

27. In *Brief wider die Sabbater an einer guten Freund*, S.L.A., XX, 1828-1861.

28. E.g. S.L.A., XXII, 1582, No. 20; XXII, 1588, No. 35. For a full exposition of the medieval conception of the Jew see Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1943).

would mend their ways, and felt obligated to take his pen in hand and warn his fellow Germans about their reprehensible activities and their slanderous assaults on Christian verities. In 1543 he composed the disquisition which has given so much sustenance to anti-Semitic agitators and so much embarrassment and distress to his own spiritual descendants. In reality this lengthy writing entitled *Von den Juden und ihren Luegen* consists mostly of an extensive exegetical treatment of Old Testament passages whose Messianic intent is understood differently by Christians and Jews. At certain points in his polemics, however, Luther becomes vehement and vicious. For instance, in castigating their practice of usury he complains that the Jews are incurably avaricious. He has heard that they are schooled in hatred against the *Gojim* by their parents and rabbis. He fears that their evil impulses are dictated by the devil.²⁹

What are the Christians to do with this iniquitous and depraved race of Jews? Responsibility rests with those who are aware of the Jewish danger. To ignore their taunts and maledictions would be a sin of omission. What Luther prefers to label a "*scharfe Barmherzigkeit*" must be put into operation. He then advocates a definite program of forcible restriction and stern punishment:

1. "Fire should be put to their synagogues and schools; all parts which do not burn should be covered and hidden with earth to prevent any human being ever setting eyes upon one single stone or any of the cinders. This shall be done in the name of our Lord and in glorification of all Christianity, to show God that we are good Christians and that we have never knowingly tolerated nor approved the public falsehoods, the maledictions and blasphemy of His Son and of His Flock . . .
2. "Their dwellings should be destroyed in like manner, inasmuch as they practice the same wantonness there as in their synagogues. Instead, they may be lodged in garrets or barns, similar to the gypsies. This will show them that they are not the masters in our country, as they boast, but that they are foreigners and our prisoners;
3. "To confiscate all their prayer-books and Talmuds in which such idolatry, malediction and blasphemy are taught;
4. "To categorically forbid their rabbis to continue their teaching;
5. "Jews should not be granted the privilege of safe-conduct and the right to use the highways.
6. "Their usury should be forbidden; all ready money, gold and silver jewelry should be confiscated, for all their possessions have been stolen from us by their usury;
7. "Young and healthy Jews and Jewesses should be equipped with flails, axes, mattock, spades, distaffs and spindles and should be compelled to earn their living by the sweat of their brows. It is intolerable that they should make us work and toil to enable them, the so-called Chosen People, to sit at the fire-side in idleness . . ." ³⁰

When one initially hears or reads this hurricane of invective (especially if it is de-

29. W.A. LIII, 412-553; S.L.A., XX, 1860-2029.

30. W.A. LIII, 522 ff. Translation by M. Sasse, pp. 10-12.

tached from the context of theological disputation in which it appears) one might imagine that it is a prelude to the holocaust and that its author (in modern guise) would sanction the atrocities of the Nazis. While nearly all contemporary Lutherans would unequivocally disavow Luther's proposals as abhorrent, and while many Lutherans would agree that his diatribe against the Jews is the worst blot on his career (an unpardonable blunder!), yet they need not agree that he is a sixteenth century Hitler. Luther did not want to instigate private vengeance. There were to be no pogroms — no malevolent Jew baiting. These drastic measures which he recommends are not to be executed in a spirit of malice. Nowhere does he endorse physical torture or extermination. But a harsh castigation is unavoidable, if Jews are to be jarred loose from their false sense of security that is harming their own welfare. With St. Paul Luther is willing to say: "My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved" (Romans 10:1). When he sees the Jews persisting in what he calls their damnable unbelief, he is moved to intercede for them with the prayer: "O God, heavenly Father, turn your wrath away from them, let it be enough, and let it come to an end, for the sake of your dear Son. Amen."³¹

What should be accented in any summary of Luther's attitude toward the Jews, and what differentiates it sharply from most types of modern anti-Semitism, is that for him the decisive factor was religious conflict. His most strident writings against the Jews were intended to refute and stop what he regarded as blasphemy. The urge to exalt Christ and defend Him against what he was persuaded were insidious attacks prompted Luther to write what he did. What must be recognized, too, is that our modern conceptions of religious pluralism and tolerance for all kinds of dissent were unknown and inconceivable in Western Europe during the period of the Reformation. It struck Luther as shameless audacity when the Jews dared to circulate pamphlets in opposition to the official religion of the realm.

Furthermore, it would seem that there was an irreconcilable and inevitable conflict between Luther's effort to convert the Jews and the adamant determination of the Jews to cling to their traditions and realize their own aspirations. Luther met with experiences similar to those of his predecessors and successors. Reluctantly he had to admit that the gulf between the synagogue and the church remained unbridgeable.

By no stretch of the imagination was it a race-and-blood theory that motivated Luther to write as he did. He had words of praise for the Jewish patriarchs, prophets, and kings. He does not dispute the Jewish claim that they were the Chosen People of God. He does object when they flaunt their heritage before the Gentiles. Racial superiority, haughtiness, and self-glorification were precisely the characteristics which Luther presumed to find among the Jews and to which he vigorously objected. But his critique was not limited to one people. The Greeks and the Romans are chided for the same reason.³² No one was more outspoken than Luther in rebuking the Germans for their sins and shortcomings. It is incorrect and

31. Included in his writing, *Concerning the Jews and their Lies*. See footnote 29. Less than two months later Luther completed a second writing directed against the Jews, *Vom Schem Hamphoras* which also concluded with a prayer for their conversion. Jewish scholars are inclined to omit mention of these prayers or to minimize their significance by impugning Luther's motives.

32. cf. S.L.A., XX, 1865.

absurd to assume that the racial anti-Semitism of the Nazis can be correlated with Luther's position.

Then, too it should be mentioned that the ill-tempered commentaries on the Jews that Luther composed did not have an adverse effect on all of his colleagues. Philip Melancthon and Andreas Osiander did not agree with the older Luther's Jewish policy. In fact, the general attitude of the Lutheran Reformation, despite Luther's vituperations, remained quite favorable.³³ All in all the record of the Lutherans was better than that of their Roman Catholic antagonists.³⁴

LUTHERANS IN NORTH AMERICA

Attitudes among the theologians and pastors in North America were largely shaped by their reading of Luther and the experience of the Lutheran Church in Germany. Suspicion and skepticism about Jewish intentions were prevalent. Nonetheless, whenever the evangelical urge came to the foreground there was talk about saving the souls of the estranged kinsmen of Jesus Christ. As early as 1884 the Missouri Synod was stimulated to think in terms of a missionary outreach to Jews in New York City, and in 1894 work among the Jews was undertaken in the Twin Cities of Minnesota. For the most part, these ventures met with meagre success. The judgment became commonplace that Christ was, indeed, a "stumbling block" among His own people. Jewish opposition to attempts to convert members of their community to Christianity were often interpreted as a deplorable repetition of Luther's unpleasant experiences.³⁵

What became characteristic of much of the Lutheran population in North America was a general aversion toward the Jews, so that when reports were heard about their mistreatment in Germany there was no outcry of moral indignation or expression of sympathy. Otherwise enlightened and tolerant gentlemen seemed to have a blind spot in relation to the Jews. When Paul Lindemann made his annual trek from St. Paul, Minnesota to the New York City office of the *American Lutheran* (the journal of which he was editor) he was usually prompted to recount his impressions, which sometimes included some disconcerting observations about the Jews. After his return home in 1931 he wrote, "Predominant in the seething multitude are, of course, the descendants of Abraham eager and arrogant, engrossed in their chase after the elusive dollar. Judging by the female representatives of Israel the paint and cosmetic industry is not sharing in the prevalent business depression . . . The renewal of experiences with the rush-hour subway crowd is rather enjoyable, but . . . our mid-western and middle aged spirit of placidity . . . asserts itself, and the arro-

33. cf. Armas K.E. Holmio, *The Lutheran Reformation and the Jews* (Hancock, Michigan: Finnish Lutheran Book Concern, 1949), p. 158.

34. John Eck, Luther's Roman Catholic opponent at the Leipzig debate of 1519 was extremely anti-Jewish. Some of the post-Reformation Popes issued edicts against the Jews.

35. When Nathaniel Friedmann, who conducted the Lutheran mission to the Jews in New York City during the 1930s, told about his conversion from orthodox Judaism he recalled the "blasphemies" he had learned about the Christian religion from the Talmud. See his article "To The Jews First," *Walther League Messenger*, April, 1933, p.466. cf. Isadore Schwartz, "Obstacles to Our Jewish Mission," *Ibid*, February, 1934, p. 344.

gance of our sometimes odoriferous Jewish fellow-travellers becomes irritating.”³⁶

Early reactions among North American Lutherans of German extraction to Adolf Hitler were usually ambivalent (“he may be taking some wrong actions, but he is doing much good for the improvement of the economy and the welfare of the people”), and sometimes outright laudatory (“he is establishing a bulwark of defense against the spread of godless Bolshevism, he is rectifying the vindictive blunders of the Versailles Treaty, and he is achieving emancipation from Jewish financial domination”). The editor of the *Walther League Messenger*, the renowned Lutheran Hour speaker Walter A. Maier, wrote favorably of the patriotic revival when Hitler came to power and discounted all reports of anti-Jewish atrocities as fabrications comparable to the false propaganda disseminated during World War I.³⁷

The ex-corporal from Austria did not lack admirers among Lutheran scholars in North America with an unconcealed anti-Jewish animus. After reading *Mein Kampf*, Dr. E.G. Sihler, a linguist at John Hopkins university and a son of one of the founders of the Missouri Synod, acclaimed it as a book of “analytical keenness,” almost worthy of an Aristotle. Hailing der *Fuehrer* for his success in rallying the masses and unifying the nation, Sihler listed twelve merits in National Socialism. Rather than being the proponent of paganism, Hitler is the savior of Christianity. If drastic measures have been required to implement progress in the Third Reich it is the demoralizing influence of the Jews that has made them unavoidable. Most of the ills that have beset Germany can be traced to the shameful conniving of the Jews that gained them unfair advantages.³⁸

What emerges from any investigation of German North American Lutheran opinion concerning this historical period is not that they were enamored by the Nazi ideology (few were really familiar with it — Sihler is exceptional) or even that they yielded to anti-Semitic temptations (they were rarely or never audacious racists subscribing to theories of “Aryan” superiority), but rather that fifteen and more years after the signing of the Armistice they were piqued by continued anti-German sentiment in their communities. Lutherans of German vintage were psychologically disposed to feel a “secret delight” that the *Vaterland* had recuperated from its defeat and was “turning the tables” on its enemies with a new display of military might and industrial growth. One can even detect an undertone of subtle revenge directed against those who had been eager to heap ignominies on everyone of German descent.

To provide a complete picture of Lutheran viewpoints it should also be mentioned

36. *American Lutheran*, June, 1931, pp. 5.6. cf. *Ibid.*, September, 1932, p.5. “Almost without exception [the crowds] are descendants of Abraham, standing about in voluble groups, emphasizing their emphatic statements with all the expressive gesticulations of which their race is master.”

37. “Pogroms or Propaganda?” *Walther League Messenger*, May, 1933, p. 523. Maier seems to have been influenced by Pastor Hans Kirsten of Hannover, editor of *Junker Joerg*, a German youth magazine. Kirsten’s undisguised admiration for Hitler was given uninhibited expression in his intermittent commentary on the German scene prepared for *Messenger* readers. Only slowly did Maier revise his early estimate — until finally he was compelled to agree that Nazism was unacceptable. By the eve of World War II he had unreservedly repudiated anti-Semitism. cf. his article, “The Anti-Semitic Shame,” *Walther League Messenger*, February, 1939.

38. “The New Leadership of Germany,” *Ibid.*, January, 1934, pp. 270, 271.

that in most sectors of North American Lutheranism disenchantment with Hitler came rapidly during the late Thirties and criticism of his actions became increasingly pronounced during the war years. *The Cresset*, published by the Lutheran university at Valparaiso, Indiana, repeatedly expressed apprehension about the fate of the Jews under the cruel regime of Hitler. Many of the ingredients which had gone into the formulation of the Nazi *Weltanschauung*, it was pointed out, clashed directly with Christianity. "Swastika against the Cross" had become the tragic truth.³⁹ Even with this bitter realization, however, no one in their wildest nightmares in 1939 or in the early Forties anticipated the horrible spectre of Dachau and Auschwitz.

Now, 36 years later, it cannot be said that all of the disclosures about the extermination camps and the plethora of literature appearing on the holocaust have produced a collective guilt consciousness in the Lutheran Church, nor is there evidence of widespread contrition.⁴⁰ Belatedly, however, at least some Lutherans have responded with admissions of culpability and have resolved to help promote safeguards against any repetition of such gruesome crimes. Sensitivity has been especially keen among campus serving clergy.⁴¹ Unprecedented Lutheran-Jewish dialogues were initiated in the late 1960s by Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. Published materials used in Lutheran Sunday Schools and other educational agencies have been reviewed with the intention of deleting offensive and inaccurate statements about Jews. Even in areas where an evangelistic thrust has been inaugurated, special efforts have been made to be cordial and considerate rather than imperious or contemptuous.

The ghastly historical record of the persecution of the Jews culminating in the holocaust, with Christian participation or complicity, is indisputable and ineradicable. Little consolation can be derived from remembering the minority of Christians who have been defenders of the Jews, or the "Confessing Church" in Germany which produced its martyrs in resisting the machinations of Hitler and his henchmen. The heroic and sometimes sacrificial acts of individual Christians do not exonerate the majority of Christians and the leaders of their institutions from the reproach of remaining silent or indifferent when Jews have been threatened and assailed.

We cannot attempt to penetrate the inscrutable mystery of how and why God permitted the holocaust to occur. What we can profess is that God was not defeated by the atrocities at Belsen and Buchenwald, nor will His ultimate purposes be

39. *The Cresset*, May, 1938.

40. Several explanations have been offered to exonerate German Lutherans: 1) the claim that the "silent majority" were not aware of the fact that the Jews were being murdered. Most Germans were "naive" enough to believe that the Jews were being relocated or deported, which might be common practices during any war; 2) the reality that the German Lutheran Church was controlled by the State. Both pastors and people were brainwashed by an incessant barrage of propaganda to believe that many Jews were enemies — ruthless profiteers and exploiters. Other attempted forms of escapism have been: 1) to give credence to "revisionists" like Arthur Butz, a professor at Northwestern University in Illinois, who has written in *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century* that the extermination of six million Jews by the Nazis is a myth; and 2) to take refuge on the thought that the destruction of the Jews is not the only horror story in this century, e.g. the crimes of Stalin and genocide in Cambodia under Pol Pot (an estimated 500,000 to two million people killed in a country with a total population of only seven million).

41. E.g. A.R. Ahlstrom, "The Link Between Words and Ashes" in *The Circle*, January, 1975.

undercut by the failures and complacency of the church. What we can affirm is that we should seek solidarity with Jews in combating the demonic forces of our time which would dethrone God and usurp His role as Lord of history. In sober and penitent reflection on Auschwitz we must rethink the relationship between church and synagogue.⁴²

Does the repudiation of anti-Semitism compel us to reject all distinctive Christian doctrines and abandon the Gospel? Will full endorsement of the New Testament invariably and inevitably cause antipathy toward the Jews?⁴³ Some disturbed Christians have assumed that these are valid contentions.

Many of us, however, are persuaded that Christian affirmations, when chastened and perhaps even modified in some instances by the recollection of the holocaust, need not be subverted or diluted. If an authentic and vital form of Christianity had been dominant in Germany from 1933 to 1945 (if secularism had not undermined the historic faith) would the people not have been less prone to succumb to the distortions and mendacities of Nazism? It can be argued that Joseph Goebbels was so successful in inculcating his racial theories and other illusions into the minds of the German people precisely because an ideological vacuum had arisen following the steady decline in church attendance and commitment to Christian beliefs. There is no assurance that being less Christian will make us less susceptible to hate mongers and racial bigots.

If we are convinced that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" we cannot fail to be ambassadors for that Good News. But we can share our faith in a spirit of love and humility. All the while, we can retain the highest appreciation for the covenant which God made with Abraham and Moses, recognizing that God may be using the Jewish people to rebuke the unChristlikeness of much of Christendom, and perhaps agree with John Strietelmeier that "for those who have never effectively heard of the consummation of [their] covenant, there is still acceptance by the God who so often described Himself as a God of steadfast love."⁴⁴

42. For a commendable beginning see Wolfgang Zucker, "Thirty Years After the Holocaust: a Mid-rash for the Church", *Lutheran Forum*, September, 1975.

43. cf. Gregory Baum, *Is the New Testament Anti-Semitic?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1965).

44. In *The Cresset*, October, 1972.