

5-1-2001

## Martin Luther and the Jews

Egil Grislis

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

 Part of the [Practical Theology Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Grislis, Egil (2001) "Martin Luther and the Jews," *Consensus*: Vol. 27 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.  
Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol27/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact [scholarscommons@wlu.ca](mailto:scholarscommons@wlu.ca).

# Martin Luther and the Jews

Egil Grislis

*Department of Religion  
University of Manitoba*

With many other contemporaries, Luther shared a rather negative view of the Jews. In his writings, in fact, many passages sizzle with virulent hate. While the modern thesis “from Luther to Hitler,”<sup>1</sup> may be difficult to prove, it is undeniable that National Socialist propaganda made an extended use of Luther. For example, after the so-called *Kristallnacht* of November 10, 1938 (when Jewish stores in Berlin were violently smashed), the Lutheran Landesbischof Martin Sasse proclaimed that this had been a great gift on Luther’s birthday (Nov. 10).<sup>2</sup> And when in September, 1941, Germany forced all Jews to wear the Davidic star, on December 17 seven of the Lutheran Landeskirchen declared that already Martin Luther had recognized the Jews “as enemies of the world and the German Reich.” Going beyond Luther, the same declaration accepted the National Socialist view that baptism does not change biology, i.e., even a baptized Jew remains a Jew.<sup>3</sup> And Julius Streicher, the editor of the *Der Stürmer* on April 29, 1946, before the International Court of War Crimes in Nürnberg appealed to the writings of Luther and claimed that, were Luther alive now, he would also be accused of war crimes! Eventually Streicher was executed by hanging.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, Luther was thinking theologically and not biologically. Nor did he foresee the holocaust. Seeing the enormity of the latter, somehow it seems appropriate to try to remove Luther’s influence from that event, hence to find “good excuses” for Luther.<sup>5</sup> More creatively and realistically, precisely because on a good many occasions Luther’s hatred is so fierce, in order to honour Luther, it is necessary to distance oneself from Luther at this point. Yet the distancing is by no means easy.

While, indeed, it is not difficult to reject all of Luther's direct anti-Jewish statements, Luther's soteriological exclusivism is by no means easy to handle. Herein lies the great challenge to all admirers of Luther.

## I

At the beginning of the Reformation Luther had sounded several irenic notes. Notably, two were contained in the Ninety-five Theses, and condemned by Pope Leo X in the *Exsurge Domine*:

Thesis 33. "To burn heretics is against the will of the Holy Spirit."

Thesis 34. "To go to war against the Turks is to resist God, who punishes our iniquities through them."<sup>6</sup>

In 1523, it seemed, Luther attempted to offer a positive statement in regard to the Jews as well. The tract, *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*<sup>7</sup> had originated in self-defense. During the Diet of Nürnberg (1522), the Archduke Ferdinand had accused Luther of denying the virgin birth of Jesus and the perpetual virginity of Mary, as well as claiming that it was through Joseph that Jesus was of the seed of Abraham.<sup>8</sup> Annoyed that he needed to clear himself of such obviously false charges, Luther used the occasion to speak to the Jews and to explain to them that Jesus was the Messiah. In the process, Luther hoped to attract "some Jews" to the Christian faith.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, Luther expresses his empathy with the Jews who had fared so poorly under Roman Catholicism.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Luther's sympathetic comments are not selfless, since he is seeking the conversion of the Jews: "I hope that if one deals in a kindly way with the Jews and instructs them carefully from Holy Scripture, many of them will become genuine Christians and turn again to the faith of their fathers, the prophets and patriarchs."<sup>11</sup> In other words, by viewing the faith of the "fathers" as authentic, Luther acknowledges a christocentric understanding of the Old Testament, witnessing to the coming of the Messiah, that is, Jesus. In a way, the ancient Jews are not only equals, but even superiors, even at this time:

When we are inclined to boast of our position we should remember that we are but Gentiles, while the Jews are of the lineage of Christ. We are aliens and in-laws; they are blood relatives, cousins, and brothers of our Lord. Therefore, if one is to boast of flesh and blood, the Jews are actually nearer to Christ than we are, as St. Paul says in Romans 9p[:5].<sup>12</sup>

This nearness is, of course, a matter of faith, and not of nationality or race. At this time, however, as Luther sees it, this nearness does not help: the Messiah has come and the Jews had not acknowledged Him. Luther thinks that his argument is proven by the fact that in the 1500 years of Jewish exile, there have been no prophets, no kings, and no temple. Hence it is wrong to continue waiting for the Messiah.<sup>13</sup> Yet in this tract, so Luther acknowledges, he is not underscoring this fact:

If the Jews should take offense because we confess our Jesus to be a man, and yet true God, we will deal forcefully with that from Scripture in due time. But this is too harsh for a beginning. Let them first be suckled with milk, and begin by recognizing this man Jesus as the true Messiah; after that they will drink wine, and learn also that he is true God. For they have been led astray so long and so far that one must deal gently with them, as people who have been all too strongly indoctrinated to believe that God cannot be man.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, conversion to Christianity still remains Luther's goal. But he envisions to reach it by persuasion, and not by compulsion. In the meantime, Luther shows some concern for their economic well-being; namely, the Jews should be given the opportunity to earn their living in a variety of honest ways, and not be restricted to money lending.<sup>15</sup> Dutch Jews thought of Luther's tract positively, seeing it as a sign of a new day, and quickly sent it to their persecuted brethren in Spain. H. Graetz, a Jewish historian, comments: "That was a word, which the Jews had not heard in a thousand years."<sup>16</sup> Martin Stöhr evaluates similarly, and notes the contrast between Luther's friendly attitude and the violent expulsion of Jews from Portugal.<sup>17</sup>

Unfortunately, Luther's friendliness did not continue, as may be seen from his response to Josel of Rosheim, 1537. Supported by the Strassburg reformer Wolfgang Capito, Josel of Rosheim had asked for Luther's intercession with the Elector of Saxony, in order to obtain the permission to travel through Saxony. Luther rejected the request on the grounds that his formerly friendly attitude apparently had been abused: instead of accepting Jesus Christ as their Messiah, the Jews had been "strengthened in their error and become more wicked."<sup>18</sup> The reasons for such judgement are not very clear. Was Luther responding in accord with the Elector's policy, spelled out in a mandate of August, 1536, which prohibited Jews from travelling through Saxony? Or was Luther irritated by the news, received already in 1532, that in Moravia Jews had been successful in persuading some Christians to accept circumcision, the

Mosaic law, including the observation of the Sabbath?<sup>19</sup>

The latter had provided Luther with the occasion for a tract *Against the Sabbatharians*, 1538. Here Luther notes that the Jews “have already seduced some Christians, so that these have allowed themselves to be circumcised, and now believe, that the Messiah or Christ has not yet come, and that Jewish laws must remain eternally and be accepted by all gentiles.”<sup>20</sup> Without a friendly note, the entire tract expresses frustration and hopelessness. Luther charges that the Jews no longer rely on the Scriptures, but merely follow the teachings of their rabbis – which Luther, with scorn, compares to Roman Catholic dependence on the pope and tradition. Luther’s conclusion sounds definitive: God “has forsaken them, and they can no longer be God’s people.”<sup>21</sup>

In 1543 Luther writes an even more hostile statement, entitled *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen (Of the Jews and Their Lies)*. Luther warns that “these miserable and accursed people” continue to lure Christians away from their faith.<sup>22</sup> Here Luther sees no hope even for a dialogue, not to speak of conversion which he views as “impossible.”<sup>23</sup> Some of Luther’s arguments, already familiar, are now delivered with condescension and scorn, e.g.: “Listen, Jew, are you aware that Jerusalem and your sovereignty, together with your temple and priesthood, have been destroyed for over 1,460 years?”<sup>24</sup> The continuous exile of the Jews Luther regards as an evidence of the “ruthless wrath of God.”<sup>25</sup> This motif of the awesome wrath of God reverberates throughout the entire tract. Occasionally, however, Luther shows some compassion: “To be sure, I am not a Jew, but I really do not like to contemplate God’s awful wrath towards this people. It sends a shudder of fear through body and soul, for I ask, what will the eternal wrath of God in hell be like toward false Christians and all unbelievers?”<sup>26</sup> Ordinarily, however, Luther offers only words of warning: “Therefore be on your guard against the Jews, knowing that wherever they have their synagogues, nothing is found but a den of devils in which sheer self-glory, conceit, lies, blasphemy, and defaming of God and men are practiced most maliciously and vehemently....”<sup>27</sup> As denunciations continue, no theologically valuable insights emerge.<sup>28</sup> Some of Luther’s comments seem to be intended to provoke further hatred. Thus Luther claims that Jews “call Jesus a whore’s son, saying that his mother Mary was a whore,”<sup>29</sup> who conceived Jesus during her menstrual uncleanness and therefore gave birth to a mentally deficient or even a demonic child.<sup>30</sup> Luther also repeats the malicious gos-

sip that Jews had often poisoned wells and murdered Christian children, "in that way secretly cooling their wrath with the blood of Christians."<sup>31</sup>

In the concluding portion of his tract Luther offers several suggestions as to what should be done with the Jews. In the introduction of these Luther observes: "We cannot extinguish the unquenchable fire of divine wrath, of which the prophet speaks, nor can we convert the Jews." Consequently the Jews should be dealt with "severe mercy" (*scharffe barmhertzigkeit*) in order "to see whether we might save at least a few from the glowing flames."<sup>32</sup> At first, Luther offers seven steps:

1. Luther proposes to "set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury or cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them."<sup>33</sup> Near the end of this tract, Luther expands the suggestion, proposing that "all who are able to toss in sulphur and pitch" should do so. Luther in addition wishes that "it would be good if someone could also throw in some hellfire."<sup>34</sup>

2. "I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed."<sup>35</sup>

3. "I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them."<sup>36</sup> The second set of proposals even adds "also the entire Bible."<sup>37</sup>

4. "I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb."<sup>38</sup>

5. "I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews."<sup>39</sup>

6. "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 safe-keeping." Upon their conversion, individual Jews would receive from one to three hundred florins "as personal circumstances may suggest."<sup>40</sup>

7. "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..."<sup>41</sup>

Luther's second set of advice continues in the same vein, but introduces two more items:

3. The Jews should "be forbidden on pain of death to praise God, to give thanks, to pray, and to teach publicly among us and in our coun-

try."<sup>42</sup>

4. Also, "they be forbidden to utter the name of God within our hearing...."<sup>43</sup> These last two suggestions follow from Luther's conviction that any expression of Jewish faith is the denial of truth and blasphemy. Moreover, Luther admits: "I firmly believe that they say and practice far worse things secretly than the histories and others record about them...."<sup>44</sup>

Finally, Luther offers a totally outrageous solution. Jewish scholars and leaders would attend a conference which would last for eight days and during which time they would have to persuade Christian leaders of the truth of the Jewish faith. Should the Jews be successful, "we would all on the self-same day become Jews and be circumcised. If they failed, they should stand ready to receive the punishment they deserve for such shameful, malicious, and venomous lies."<sup>45</sup>

In the last analysis, Luther is obviously more concerned with the goals rather than the methods, namely, to "be rid of the unbearable, devilish burden of the Jews, lest we be guilty sharers before God in the lies, the blasphemy, the defamation, and the curses which the mad Jews indulge in so freely and wantonly against the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, his dear mother, all Christians, all authority, and ourselves."<sup>46</sup>

Luther's last anti-Jewish tract is entitled *Vom Schem Hamphoras and vom Geschlecht Christ*, also written in 1543. This is a rambling exposition of an old legend, filled with hate and obscenities. It contributes no new insights, unless these be the following two. One, Luther draws a close parallel between Roman Catholics and the Jews, both are possessed by the devil.<sup>47</sup> Two, Luther calls attention to the sculpture of a sow, embedded high in the wall of the city church of Wittenberg.<sup>48</sup> It portrays, in ridicule, two Jewish children feeding on the milk of the sow, and a rabbi, lifting the tail of the sow.

In making use of such scurrilous material Luther was not original. He had sought to enhance his limited knowledge of Judaism from thoroughly negative medieval sources: e.g., Nicolas of Lyra (1270-1349) had written a tract, printed in 1497, entitled *Concerning the Faithlessness of the Jews*. Luther also relied on Paul of Burgos (1351-1435), a Jewish convert to Catholicism, who eventually became an archbishop and wrote against his former faith. Luther also made use of Salvagus Porchetus from Genoa, who had written the *Victory over the Unbelieving Hebrew*, published in Paris, 1520. Luther's major source, however, was Antonius

Margarita, a convert and subsequently a professor of Hebrew in Vienna. His main publication was *The Entire Jewish Faith*, 1530, published in Augsburg.<sup>49</sup>

Obviously, Luther cannot be simply excused on the grounds that he happened to have relied on thoroughly unreliable sources. Luther's entire approach demands serious questioning.

## II

Here scholarly opinions are a multitude. The following major approaches can be noted. First of all, there has been the National Socialist eager exploitation of Luther, already referred to at the beginning of this paper. There on a wide spectrum we encounter mere propaganda pieces which do not deserve attention, patriotism gone blind, and attempts to re-interpret Christianity in the perspective of National Socialism.<sup>50</sup>

Among several overviews, Johannes Brosseder appears to have offered the more insightful historical account. He notes that many of the key issues have already been identified from the beginning of the Reformation to 1911, that is, before the rise of modern Luther scholarship. In Luther's defense it is said – gently and with tact – that Luther's most outspoken statements against the Jews originated in his old age.<sup>51</sup> Even when there was agreement with Luther's basic position, it was nevertheless admitted that Luther greatly overstated the case in urging persecution. Luther's zealotry, however, is excused, on the grounds that he has reacted against some sporadic conversions to Judaism, sought to honour Christ, and was disappointed when Jews were not responding to his message and converting to Christianity. The harshness of Luther's language is attributed to the remains of medieval ideas in Luther's mind, as yet unexpurgated (since the Enlightenment's idea of tolerance had not yet emerged). Only occasionally Luther's intense hatred is singled out for critique or regret. It is also observed that in his writings against the Jews Luther had one-sidedly spoken of God's judgment, and neglected the positive role of grace. At the same time, there were also continuous attempts to defend Luther on totally pre-ecumenical grounds: Luther is said to have recognized the evil nature of the Jews and rightly understood that Christianity and Judaism cannot co-exist. Near the end of this period there already appear several proto-Nazi racial insights. Throughout this period it is generally accepted that Luther's attitude,



while generally constant, had gone through two phases. Initially Luther's position had been relatively benign; hostility grew only with time and eventually became harsh and irreconcilable. On the whole, even when at times Luther is criticized, his attitude toward the Jews is not seen as an essential flaw in Luther's theology which demands radical revision.<sup>52</sup>

The next period, from 1911 to 1945, as Brosseder sees it, provides a more careful exposition of several of the key insights. At the same time, due to the Holocaust, criticism of Luther is now joined with serious regret and repentance.

A decisive role for the period is played by the 1911 publication of the study by the Jewish scholar Reinhold Lewin.<sup>53</sup> He notes several stages in Luther's development. Till 1521 Luther merely reflects the age old medieval prejudices. Then, particularly in 1523 with the tract *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew*, Luther embarks on a missionary approach. Subsequently, beginning with 1537, Luther becomes convinced that the Jews are opponents to Christianity. Hence follows Luther's violent opposition against them. Lewin's periodizing soon emerges in three versions:

1. Before 1519 Luther's position was still medieval and Catholic, between 1519 to 1526 Luther took a positive stand, and then, influenced by the Peasant War, Luther turned increasingly negative.

2. While Luther's basic theological position remains constant, after 1543 Luther returns to an outspokenly negative medieval perspective.

3. Even though justification remains the centre of Luther's theology, he has not been able to sustain this centre in the later years of his life, particularly in his anti-Jewish statements.<sup>54</sup>

The periodization has been attractive not only to Protestants, but also to Roman Catholics,<sup>55</sup> with appropriate qualifications. The list includes even the National Socialist Julius Streicher, publisher of the notorious *Der Stürmer*. Streicher exploits the developmental scheme with coarse brutality, along with attacks on the Talmud, along with the claim that Luther was the greatest hater of the Jews. Streicher's own mentality is well expressed in the formula: "He who knows the Jew, knows the devil."<sup>56</sup>

The American Finnish scholar Armas Kristen Ejnar Holmio, while accepting Lewin's approach and rejecting the National Socialist slander,

offers what he regards to be a positive defense of Luther: Luther's late anti-Jewish writings are essentially missionary tracts. Respecting this intent, Holmio nevertheless distances himself from the form which it took. Here Brosseder's critical comment is in place: Luther does not in any way indicate that his writings after 1543 have a missionary intent!<sup>57</sup>

Martin Stöhr, while noting Luther's theological development, nevertheless offers a harsh judgement on Luther's writings near the end of his life. Here Luther is in effect offering a concrete agenda for a *Kristallnacht*.<sup>58</sup>

The background of the Holocaust is also noticeable in the otherwise laudatory life of Luther by Roland H. Bainton. Accordingly, while initially positive, Luther turns critical when attempts at conversion are not successful. While irritable in the latter part of his life, Luther is not a racist. Nevertheless, Bainton records his own candid wish that Luther had died before the composition of his anti-Jewish tracts.<sup>59</sup> Bainton's observation has subsequently found a wide echo in Luther scholarship.<sup>60</sup> It is a very wise comment.

Aarne Siirala, a Canadian Finnish scholar, develops and enriches Lewin's thesis by accenting the historical context of Luther's life and thought, namely, the harsh reality of anti-Judaism in theory and praxis. At the same time as Luther began to emerge with a more positive approach, he encountered the awakening of Judaism and was not able to accept this fact. In the ensuing confrontation, especially during his old age, Luther returned to the medieval anti-Jewish perspective.<sup>61</sup> At the same time, argues Siirala (following Heinrich Bornkamm, Holmio, and Wilhelm Mauer), Luther can only be understood in terms of his theology. Yet even that is not uniform. Siirala calls particular attention to the signs of deep tension in Luther's doctrine of the church. From the hidden church of the years of the Reformation, the church increasingly becomes an institution.<sup>62</sup> The recognition of Luther's context, and the various fissures in his thought, point to the future handling of this difficult topic.

At the same time Brosseder has appropriately called attention to those theologians who have recognized a positive centre of Luther's theology. Here both Wilhelm Walther<sup>63</sup> and Erich Vogelsang<sup>64</sup> point to Jesus Christ. Walther underscores: "One's attitude toward Christ is decisive!" Formulated somewhat more abstractly, Walter Holsten<sup>65</sup> and Wilhelm Mauerer<sup>66</sup> point to the doctrine of justification as the standard by which Luther identifies authentic Christianity and saving faith. Since justification in Luther's perspective is a gift of grace, given to the sinner before any

merit or even desire, Luther's use of justification as a dogmatic measure in rejecting the Jews can be seen as a contradiction of his own faith. Put in another way, as Karl Kupisch has done, it was the somewhat broader context of Law and Gospel which in this instance blocked Luther's mind and led to the rejection of the Jews.<sup>67</sup>

The most recent approaches to Luther begin to emerge most clearly in a volume of essays edited by Heinz Kremers. Although the key issues are the same which have already been identified, there are several new and more clearly and even more powerfully formulated accents. Here it is also clear that the terrible, dreadful reality of the Holocaust has been finally confronted, if not always fully absorbed. Several contributions are especially outstanding.

To begin with, as already suggested by Siirala, the borders of the Holocaust have been extended to include the entire history of the Western world. Ben-Zion Degani, with dispassionate clarity, records the presence of anti-Jewish thinking as a "normal" stereotype,<sup>68</sup> from the Roman age to the present, enhanced by the idea of the collective Jewish guilt, developed already at the end of the second century.<sup>69</sup> During the Crusades the Jews began to be seen as the very worst enemies of Christ.<sup>70</sup> This perspective reached its height in the fifteenth century.<sup>71</sup> The age of the Reformation, though divided by many conflicting insights, shared the hatred of the Jews.<sup>72</sup> Obviously, Luther cannot be expected to be understood in isolation from such views. Hence one is not to be surprised when Luther numbered the Jews together with all the other enemies of Christ, such as the Turks, the heathen, the papists, and the fanatics.<sup>73</sup> To say this is not to deny that Luther had more positive concerns as well; but the anti-Jewish stand overshadowed them.<sup>74</sup>

Even though the learning of the Hebrew language and the appreciation of the Hebrew mode of thinking was significant for the development of Luther's theology,<sup>75</sup> there were, as pointed out by Stefan Schreiner, distinctive limits to Luther's Hebrew learning. While Luther learned Hebrew better than Greek, he did not learn it very well and always needed to depend on secondary sources.<sup>76</sup> And what is even more significant, Luther had virtually no first-hand authentic knowledge of Judaism.<sup>77</sup> As Ernst L. Ehrlich has pointed out, Luther's approach to Judaism – as to all other world religions – was determined by traditional Christology. Whoever did not subscribe to it, in Luther's view, denied Christ and was godless.<sup>78</sup> In addition, here Luther greatly relied on medieval anti-Jewish sources.<sup>79</sup>

Ehrlich offers a significant scholarly guess: when the medieval view of the Jews was secularized, it could be re-stated in terms of race and biology, as was done under the National Socialists.<sup>80</sup> Strictly speaking, Martin Stöhr is, of course correct, that Luther himself did not think in terms of race and biology.<sup>81</sup> But some of his perverting admirers did.

In a chapter contributed to Kremers' volume, Heiko A. Oberman sums up some of his earlier insights.<sup>82</sup> With regret, Oberman notes that previous Luther scholarship had unduly isolated Luther from his historical context. And precisely this context, reminds Oberman, was intensively hostile to the Jews.<sup>83</sup> Accordingly, following general precedent, Luther listed the Jews along with heretics, heathen, and sinners – none of whom would be saved. Subsequently Luther added the Turks to the list.<sup>84</sup> This key perspective Luther then retained for the rest of his life.<sup>85</sup> Yet Luther also retained traditional Christian insights, among them the role of love: "If the hatred of Jews, heretics, and Turks would make a person a Christian, then with all of our rage we would be the greatest Christians."<sup>86</sup> Hence "we should not seek to convert heretics by the fire of being burned at the stake, but only through the fire of love."<sup>87</sup> But as Luther's own life nears its end, his eschatological views harden, and he sees no hope for the Jews. In having rejected Jesus Christ as their Messiah, they are hopelessly lost. Here Oberman does not defend Luther; with insight and compassion Oberman describes the situation: "Any attempt to deal with the Reformer runs up against this obstacle. No description of Luther's campaign against the Jews, however objective and erudite it may be, escapes the horror: we live in the post-Holocaust era. Under the spell of nightmarish terror, it is difficult to peer through the shadows of history, making clear judgments, passing a just sentence, as we grope the way along the path, between aggressive accusation and apologetic explanation!"<sup>88</sup>

Returning now to Kremers' volume for a reference to one more key contributor, we may note a somewhat similar conclusion by Pinchas E. Lapidé. He lists various sixteenth century Jewish authors and their initial hopes in Martin Luther.<sup>89</sup> Eventually, however, Luther's intransigent hostility becomes clear. Nevertheless, Lapidé still wonders: "How could so many hopes of love lead to such dark hatred?"<sup>90</sup> Lapidé ends his chapter by remaining of two minds. He lists the positive and then the negative sides of Luther, both in equal number;<sup>91</sup> the light and the darkness remain together.

What more can be said? Perhaps not, but in addition to many reflections, three interpreters add particularly poignant insights. E. Gordon Rupp, a Methodist scholar and the dean of British Luther research, offers a painful conclusion with which he intends to lead to penitence: "But, as we follow Luther through the years, we find a signal instance of how we become like what we hate. We see a growing obstinacy, a hardening of the heart, a withering of compassion, a proneness to contemptuous abuse – the very things he thought were the marks of judgment on the Jews."<sup>92</sup>

Secondly, the noted historian Hans J. Hillerbrand quickly identified the central issue: "We are primarily jolted by the haunting question of whether Luther helped mold German thinking so that the way was prepared for the Nazi ideology that prevailed between 1933 and 1945."<sup>93</sup> Or, even more poignantly: "Does the path from Wittenberg lead to Auschwitz?"<sup>94</sup> In a way, Hillerbrand diffuses the question by appealing to a wider perspective. The sixteenth century does not simply lead into the twentieth, which had many sources even for anti-Semitism.<sup>95</sup> Nevertheless, Hillerbrand, rightly, does not exempt the church from its responsibility: it was one of the sources for anti-Semitism!<sup>96</sup> Hillerbrand concludes: "When all is said about Luther and his flagrant anti-Judaic pronouncements, it remains that the real failure was not so much that of the reformer of the sixteenth century as that of his followers in the twentieth century. A genuine understanding of the Christian gospel should have opened the eyes of his followers to the realization that, throughout its history, the greatest failing of Christianity has been its surrender to prevailing political and intellectual structures." Then, Hillerbrand adds: "The irony is, of course, that Martin Luther had repeatedly warned against such falsification of the gospel."<sup>97</sup>

Finally, as is appropriate, the last word belongs to the greatest Luther interpreter of this generation, Martin Brecht. He writes:

His opposition to the Jews, which ultimately was regarded as irreconcilable, was in its nucleus of a religious and theological nature that had to do with belief in Christ and justification, and it was associated with the understanding of the people of God and the interpretation of the Old Testament. Economic and social motives played only a subordinate role. Luther's animosity toward the Jews cannot be interpreted either in a psychological way as a pathological hatred or in a political way as an extension of the anti-Judaism of the territorial princes.. But he certainly demanded that measures provided in the laws against heretics be employed to expel the Jews – similarly to their use against the

Anabaptists – because, in view of the Jewish polemics against Christ, he saw no possibilities for religious coexistence. In advising the use of force, he advocated means that were essentially incompatible with his faith in Christ. In addition, his criticism of the rabbinical interpretation of the Scriptures in part violated his own exegetical principles. Therefore, his attitude toward the Jews can appropriately be criticized both for his methods and also from the center of his theology. Luther, however, was not involved in later racial anti-Semitism. There is a world of difference between his belief in salvation and racial ideology. Nevertheless, his misguided agitation had the evil result that Luther fatefully became one of the “church fathers” of anti-Semitism and thus provided material for the modern hatred of the Jews, cloaking it with the authority of the Reformer.<sup>98</sup>

Appropriately for a careful historian, Brecht first of all evaluates Luther by the standards of his own day. Luther did not believe in pluralism and coexistence; he viewed his own theology as the one and only true faith. For him compromise or tolerance would have meant betrayal. Though commonplace today, these cannot be fairly demanded from Luther. At the same time, Brecht has a place for criticism: Brecht knows that Luther was not fair to the rabbinical exegesis and criticised Judaism with serious disregard for the centre of his own theology. And Luther’s proposed violence lead to “evil results.” Let there be no doubt about it: these are very serious charges! At the same time, it also should not be doubted that Brecht has not assailed Luther’s entire theology. In fact, the greatness of his theology, even its contemporary relevance, emerges with joy. Hence, in a way, Brecht may be seen as reminding all Lutherans to take their heritage seriously. Luther’s theology is biblical, profound, and relevant.

### III

But each generation must offer its own confession of faith. While ours, on the one hand, cannot ignore the Holocaust, and must learn how to live in repentance and love, we must also, on the other hand, reflect seriously on pluralism, coexistence, and faiths other than our own. “Luther and the Jews” is for Lutherans an inevitable subject matter, yet for the sake of future it does not belong exclusively in the past. Somehow, it must be related to our views of these other religions as well.

Admittedly, here we cannot rely on Luther in any overarching way;

yet there are some fragmentary insights which may serve as good clues. At first we shall note that “sola scriptura” for Luther and us does not always have the same meaning. There are passages which, almost, scream at us, notably that Jesus’ own standards for salvation were not doctrinally strict and exclusive. In the New Testament we meet: the Good Samaritan, the Roman centurion, the Syrophenician woman, even the repentant thief on the cross – all who believed but whose theology remains unknown to us.<sup>99</sup> In the Early Church by the second century there emerged the idea of the Cosmic Christ.<sup>100</sup> Based on John 1:1 ff., it was realized that Christ’s saving presence far antedated the actual incarnation. All morally upright people participated in his salvation and thus were Christians. Justin Martyr did not even hesitate to call Socrates a Christian. Although Luther knew the writings of Justin Martyr and may on occasion have been influenced by him, Luther generally relied on the ancient dictum by Cyprian that “outside the church there is no salvation.”<sup>101</sup> Luther’s reformation writings, as has just been noted, similarly regarded as lost all those who are not “in Christ.” The list, at times, was long, and included the Jews, the Turks, the Anabaptists, the heretics, and the papists. The Catholic theory of invincible ignorance generally played no noticeable role in Luther’s theology.<sup>102</sup>

While with the Renaissance humanists of his age, Luther valued the primary sources over tradition, for him the normative role of the “fontes” was limited to the Bible. If Petrarch could observe that most of the time Cicero wrote like Paul the Apostle, and Huldreich Zwingli, the Swiss reformer, could be convinced that the virtuous heathen were saved – Luther was soteriologically conservative. But even Luther could on very rare occasions admit some exceptions. Luther could state that Cicero “and men like him” may be saved,<sup>103</sup> or that Cicero was in paradise.<sup>104</sup> For such exceptional statements there was a wider rationale; namely, in some very mysterious way the Holy Spirit was active within the entire pagan world. Ordinarily the pagans erroneously called this presence to be “good luck.” But some pagans knew better: “The very wisest among them, like Cicero, say it is a divine inspiration; and they conclude that no one has ever become a great man through his own powers, but only by a special secret inbreathing or imparting of the gods.”<sup>105</sup>

While such affirmations were offered seriously, they were relatively rare. As a rule Luther was not concerned with world religions as such. Therefore as a rule Luther concerned himself with the proclamation of

the saving Gospel of Christ – hence he offered inviting challenges to faith rather than provided excuses for paganism. But on occasion the salvation of the unbeliever became a problem in the present. In *A Letter to Hans von Reichenberg* Luther recorded the problem: “Whether God can or will save people who die without faith?”<sup>106</sup> Here in terms of human compassion it seems reasonable that God would save all people. But Luther immediately refutes just such reasoning: “If God were to save anyone without faith, he would be acting contrary to his own words and would give himself the lie; yes, he would deny himself.” At the same time, with obvious caution, Luther is prepared to conjecture: “It would be quite a different question whether God can impart faith to some in the hour of death so that these people could be saved through faith. Who could doubt God’s ability to do that? No one, however, can prove that he does do this....”<sup>107</sup> Still, faith is necessarily active in love. Luther affirms this insight on numerous occasions and with force, e.g.:

A Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbor. Otherwise he is not a Christian. He lives in Christ through faith, and in his neighbor through love. By faith he is caught up beyond himself into God. By love he descends beneath himself into his neighbor.<sup>108</sup>

Of course, love cannot force the neighbor into faith and thus into salvation. Still, a loved neighbor does not remain unaffected. In his *Sermon von den Tauben und Stummen* (September 7, 1522) Luther acknowledges that the deaf and the mute cannot be reached by ordinary communication. Nevertheless, the deaf and the mute person is reached as he is unconditionally accepted by his neighbours,<sup>109</sup> who faithfully intercede for him:<sup>110</sup> “The poor man just lies there, he cannot either speak or hear. But those who have brought him to the Lord are able to speak and to hear.”<sup>111</sup> Of course, Luther knew that God does not grant all requests in prayer. Christ’s own prayers in Gethsemane were not answered.<sup>112</sup> But the point is that God *could* have granted the request – and in this instance of the deaf and mute man God does just that. Hence, according to Luther, the proclamation of the word is wider than preaching, and theologizing; it includes intercessory prayers as well.<sup>113</sup> In this instance “it means that the believers carry the deaf person to God; similarly, so also the preachers deliver the sinner to God. Then God responds and effects the transformation.”<sup>114</sup> But all such transformations, i.e., conversions, are miracles. And miracles cannot be performed *ex opere operato*; they are not within human power to enact. Consequently two insights emerge. On the theoretical level, salvation is available widely, as widely



as the outreach of intercessory love. We shall shortly return to this valuable insight.

But at the moment we shall turn to a practical level on which we find Luther. As in his mature theology Luther has distanced himself from double predestination, he will not ordinarily attribute unbelief to a divine act of will (unless it be an instance of God's subsequent wrath for a sinful refusal of grace). Rather, Luther seems to think in terms of the medieval definition of human error. If a person is teachable but just happens to be ignorant at this time, then, for example, the denial of the Holy Trinity is not heretical but merely heterodox. But the unteachable and stubborn is a heretic – and hence guilty and therefore unforgiven and damned.

As Luther throughout his life confronted more and more opponents, it appears that he more readily looked at the human practice rather than the divine potential of intercessory love. In the final analysis, Luther did not deny the omnipotence of divine mercy in response to authentic, interceding love. Luther did, however, more often than not, look at the concrete results. Here, quickly, he applied the doctrinal standard of ecclesial and hence traditional Christology. According to such logic, Luther regarded his contemporary Jews as lost. And wherever Luther encountered other religions, his judgement was equally clear – and pointed to damnation. In refusing to follow Luther here, we may find some solace in those other statements of Luther, that is, in his occasional readiness to see salvation outside Christianity. Perhaps even more helpful are the occasions where Luther acknowledges his own ignorance and trusts God to offer an appropriate solution. Familiar to Renaissance humanism, the notion of a *docta ignorantia* (learned ignorance) had on occasion a wide appeal, although it does not seem to be popular today, at least not among theologians. More than all such considerations, Luther's understanding of intercessory love may very well be his most relevant insight for theology today. Of course, if such intercessory love is viewed as an *ex opere operato* act, and hence a way of forcing others to accept *our* faith and theology – it betrays the substance of love and overlooks the ever-present mystery of God's own ultimate choices. But authentic love lives in the presence of God, where his will and not ours is done. If religious exclusivism is authoritarian and self-righteous, while religious inclusivists are all too ready to declare unity where its reality is not fully known – a faith seeking love and thereby mutual understanding might offer a better way. Some clues for such an approach find support

in Luther's writings.<sup>115</sup>

But what are we to say about Judaism, today, after the Holocaust? – This is a special case. Of course, it is possible to distance oneself, individually, from that dreadful act. But religious institutions, and culture even more so, has a certain continuity. While church leaders may denounce anti-Semitism, it is not in their power to change the minds of their entire constituency. Western culture, even in North America, continues to reek of anti-Semitism. In such a climate, I suggest, it is odious, insensitive, and irresponsible to meditate – or even worse, to declare – that the covenant with Abraham and the faith of the Jews is salvific. Even if we were exempt from Matthew 7:1, which I doubt, it is totally inappropriate for Christians now, after the Holocaust, to evaluate Judaism! Existentially far more appropriate may be the plea that we, the Christians, after the Holocaust may be saved with our kind of Christianity.

Thus the problem of “Luther and the Jews” remains – for our shame, for our challenge, and also for our hope, that some day we may be able to reach beyond it.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Peter F. Wiener, *Martin Luther: Hitler's Spiritual Ancestor* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1945), with a spirited and learned response by Gordon Rupp, *Martin Luther: Hitler's Cause or Cure?* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1945). Cf. Also Heiko A. Oberman, *The Impact of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994) 75-78. More recently the debate has been continued by William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960) and Uwe Siemon-Netto, Foreword by Peter L. Berger, *The Fabricated Luther: The Rise and Fall of the Shirer Myth* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995). For further literature, cf. Brosseder and Kremers below.
- <sup>2</sup> Pinchas E. Lapide, “Stimmen jüdischer Zeitgenossen zu Martin Luther, 171 in Heinz Kremers, ed., *Die Juden und Martin Luther: Martin Luther und die Juden: Geschichte, Wirkungsgeschichte, Herausforderung* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1985).
- <sup>3</sup> Ernst L. Ehrlich, “Luther und die Juden,” 86 in Kremers.
- <sup>4</sup> Martin Stöhr, “Martin Luther und die Juden,” 89 in Kremers.
- <sup>5</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) xi and 102.

- <sup>6</sup> Hans J. Hillerbrand, *The Reformation: A Narrative History Related by Contemporary Observers and Participants* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1964) 83.
- <sup>7</sup> *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Weimarer Ausgabe (subsequently WA) 11:314-336; *Luther's Works*, American Edition (subsequently LW) 45:119-229.
- <sup>8</sup> WA 11:314:1-5; LW 45:149.
- <sup>9</sup> WA 11:314:28; LW 45:200.
- <sup>10</sup> WA 11:314:31-315:1-9; LW 45:200.
- <sup>11</sup> WA 11:315:14-16; LW 45:200.
- <sup>12</sup> WA 11:315:25-29; LW 45:201.
- <sup>13</sup> WA 11:325:25-36, 326:1-2; LW 45:215 and WA 11:330:23-30; LW 45:220.
- <sup>14</sup> WA 11:336:14-21; LW 45:229.
- <sup>15</sup> Ehrlich, 75 in Kremers. For further reflection on the economic situation, cf. John W. Kleiner, "Martin Luther and the Jews," *Consensus: A Canadian Journal of Theology* 19/1 (1993) 109-126.
- <sup>16</sup> Stöhr, 93 fn. 11 in Kremers.
- <sup>17</sup> Stöhr and Albert H. Friedlander, 291 in Kremers.
- <sup>18</sup> WA, Briefe 8:90:1-2.
- <sup>19</sup> Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther: The Preservation of the Church 1532-1546* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 336-338.
- <sup>20</sup> WA 50:312:9-12.
- <sup>21</sup> WA 50:313:1-5 and 50:336:15-16.
- <sup>22</sup> WA 53:417:3; LW 47:137.
- <sup>23</sup> WA 53:417:20-24; LW 47:137.
- <sup>24</sup> WA 53:418:9-10; LW 47:138.
- <sup>25</sup> WA 53:418:15; LW 47:138.
- <sup>26</sup> WA 53:418:29-32; LW 47:139.
- <sup>27</sup> WA 53:446:9-12; LW 47:172.
- <sup>28</sup> E.g., Luther speaks of a "boshafftige, hallstrarrige volk (Wa 53:443:6) and notes that "kein blutduerstigers und rachgyrigers Volck hat die Sonnen je beschienen" (443:1). He also writes of the "böse huerisch Volck" (442:9) and declares: "Der Teufel hat dis Volck mit allen seinen Engeln besessen" (447:20), and addresses the Jews as "verdampften Juden" (478:27).

- 29 WA 53:514:18; LW 47:257.
- 30 WA 53:516:35-36; LW 47:260.
- 31 WA 53:520:12-14; LW 47:264.
- 32 WA 53:522:32-36; LW 47:268 and fn. 173.
- 33 WA 53:523:1-23; LW 47:268.
- 34 WA 53:536:23-25; LW 47:285.
- 35 WA 53:523:24-29; LW 47:269 and cf. WA 53:538:1-13; LW 47:287, 288.
- 36 WA 53:523:30-31; LW 47:269.
- 37 WA 53:526:30; LW 47:286.
- 38 WA 53:523:32-37, 524:1-5; LW 47:269.
- 39 WA 53:524:6-17; LW 47:270.
- 40 WA 53:524:18-33, 525:1-30; LW 47:270.
- 41 WA 53:525:31-32, 526:1-6; LW 47:272.
- 42 WA 53:536:34-37; LW 47:286.
- 43 WA 53:537:6-7; LW 47:286.
- 44 WA 53:538:30-36, 539:1-8; LW 47:288.
- 45 WA 53:539:30-34, 540:1-7; LW 47:289,290.
- 46 WA 53:527:15-31; LW 47:273-274.
- 47 WA 53:593-594.
- 48 WA 53:600. In regard to the Jews, Luther died unrepentant. To his very last sermon, preached in February 15, 1546, Luther added *An Admonition against the Jews (Vermahnung wider die Juden)* which continued his previous attacks, cf. WA 51:148-196.
- 49 Ehrlich, 83 in Kremers.
- 50 For an excellent overview, see Robert P. Ericksen, *Theologians under Hitler: Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, Emanuel Hirsch* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985). For additional references, see Brosseder and Kremers.
- 51 Johannes Brosseder, *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden im Spiegel seiner Interpreten* (München: Max Huber Verlag, 1972) 45.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 45-101.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 112-113, cf. *Luthers Stellung zu den Juden* (Berlin, 1911; reprinted Aalen:Scientia Verlag, 1973).

- 54 Ibid., 292.
- 55 Ibid., 120, 154.
- 56 Ibid., 182-184.
- 57 Ibid., 266, cf. Armas K.F. Holmio, *Martin Luther: Friend or Foe of the Jews* (Chicago: National Lutheran Council, 1949) 8-31.
- 58 Brosseder, 279.
- 59 Ibid., 371, cf. Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York & Nashville, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950) 379.
- 60 Hillerbrand, 130; Aarne Siirala, "Luther and the Jews," *Lutheran World* 11,3(1964) 353, Neelak S. Tjernagel, *Martin Luther and the Jewish People* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1985) vii.
- 61 Brosseder, 281.
- 62 Ibid., 283-284.
- 63 Ibid., 116.
- 64 Ibid., 181.
- 65 Ibid., 126.
- 66 Ibid., 270.
- 67 Ibid., 271.
- 68 Kremers, 3.
- 69 Ibid., 5.
- 70 Ibid., 9.
- 71 Ibid., 12.
- 72 Ibid., 15.
- 73 Ibid., 37.
- 74 Ibid., 38.
- 75 Ibid., 57.
- 76 Ibid., 65.
- 77 Ibid., 71.
- 78 Ibid., 73.
- 79 Ibid., 83.
- 80 Ibid., 86.
- 81 Ibid., 103 and Oberman, *The Impact* 102.

- <sup>82</sup> Oberman, *Roots and Impact*.
- <sup>83</sup> Kremers, 136-139.
- <sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 141, 142.
- <sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.
- <sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 149.
- <sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 150, 151.
- <sup>88</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *Luther: Man between God and the Devil* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989) 292.
- <sup>89</sup> Kremers, 174-175.
- <sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.
- <sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 183-185.
- <sup>92</sup> *Martin Luther and the Jews* (London: The Council of Christians and Jews, 1972) 22.
- <sup>93</sup> "Martin Luther and the Jews," in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *Jews and Christians Exploring the Past, Present and Future* (New York: Crossroads, 1990) 127.
- <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.
- <sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.
- <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.
- <sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.
- <sup>98</sup> Brecht, 350-351.
- <sup>99</sup> Lk. 10:25-37; Matt. 8:5-13; Mk. 7:24-30; Lk 23:40-43.
- <sup>100</sup> *First Apology*, chap. 46 Library of Christian Classics, 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953) 271-272; cf. also *Second Apology*, chaps, 8 and 10.
- <sup>101</sup> "Salus extra Ecclesiam non est, Epistle 73, Patrologia Latina 3:1169A.
- <sup>102</sup> It was known in the Middle Ages, but was included in the Catholic magisterium only by Pius IX, cf. Henricus Denzinger and Adolphus Schönmetzer, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum* (Barcelona: Herder, 1973), 35 ed., paragraphs 2865-2867. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1994), paragraph 1735, page 371 explains: "Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertance, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments and other psychological or social factors."

- <sup>103</sup> WA, Tischreden, 372, number 626, quoted by Philip S. Watson, *Let God be God!* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1950) 93, note 96; cf. WA, TR 3:697-698.
- <sup>104</sup> WA, TR 5:413, nr. 29-31.
- <sup>105</sup> WA 51:244:21-27.
- <sup>106</sup> WA 10/2:322:4-5; LW 43:51.
- <sup>107</sup> WA 10/2:325:3-11; LW 43:54.
- <sup>108</sup> WA 7:69:12-15; LW 31:371.
- <sup>109</sup> WA 10/3:305:9-30.
- <sup>110</sup> WA 10/3:306:10-12,19-21
- <sup>111</sup> WA 10/3:308 :12-30.
- <sup>112</sup> WA 10/3:310:1-3.
- <sup>113</sup> WA 10/3:311:5-6.
- <sup>114</sup> WA 10/3:311:15-17.
- <sup>115</sup> For my earlier attempts to reflect on this problem, cf. "Martin Luther and the World Religions," *Word & World: Theology for Christian Ministry* 18/2 (Spring, 1998) 143-154.