Teaching About Anti-Semitism

The rupture in the first century between Israel and the Christian Church has rightly been described as the first schism, indeed, the “prototype of schisms” in Christian history. Anti-Judaism is the oldest Christian heresy and, tragically, the most lasting. For centuries, and even in our own time, anti-Semites have used gospel passages, especially those about Jesus' Passion, to justify oppression of the Jews.

General Characterization and Definition of Anti-Semitism

Although Judaism's covenantal relationship with God is the very being of Jewish commitment, through the centuries it has evoked intense animosity and persecution from many Christians. Anti-Semitism is the denial of the Jewish community's mission to live its own existence and to witness to the covenantal relationship with God. From the religious point of view, anti-Semitism is a violent rejection of the people chosen by God to implement God's holy mandate.

The term anti-Semitism was coined in 1879 by the German Wilhelm Marr to designate the anti-Jewish movements of his time. As a doctrine, it has its earliest precedent in the policy of hatred and destruction adopted in ancient Egypt before the Exodus. Later, in the second century BCE, Hellenistic rulers denied Jews the right to live their religious life and persecuted those who were loyal to their own spiritual heritage.

Christian Anti-Judaism

The Christian confrontation with Israel evolved into an antagonistic stance very early in the Church's history. It took the form of the “teaching of contempt,” a systematic theology denying dignity and legitimacy to the Jewish people. Although Paul in Romans, chapters 9-11, reaffirmed God's election of the Chosen People and the eternal value of the Sinai Covenant (Exod. 20), later Christian theology overlooked these remarks, focusing instead on the
notion of collective Jewish guilt for the death of Jesus (Matt. 27:25) and the concept of Judaism as a form of evil (John 8:44).

Church fathers and ecclesiastical authorities denied any spiritual vocation to the Jewish people because they had refused to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and as a result, they considered Jews obstinate and intransigent. Over the centuries, as the political power and influence of the Church increased, the “teaching of contempt” expanded from a theoretical denial of Israel’s role to social discrimination and persecution.

Emperor Constantine’s edicts in the fourth century, following his acceptance of Christianity as the only true religion, imposed severe social restrictions upon Jews, forbade marriages between Jews and Christians, and carried out capital punishment upon Jews who transgressed his decrees. Jews were forbidden to publicly proclaim their faith, which left Christianity as the only missionary power and Christians as the only group able to grow.

Before Constantine there are numerous examples of amicable Jewish-Christian relations in some areas of the ancient world. But a simplistic Christian theology, combined with various social and political factors, ultimately made violence against Jews a daily reality.

By the second millennium, this anti-Jewish bias began to bear tragic fruit. In 1096 the First Crusade began as a Christian campaign to recover the Holy Land from the Muslim “infidels.” However, in the march toward Jerusalem, the Crusaders massacred Jewish communities in Europe, and the Crusades escalated the verbal attacks on Jews and Judaism in order to justify the carnage.

The Fourth Lateran Council required Jews to wear a distinctive mark on their clothing or a special hat. In the sixteenth century, ghettos that forcibly separated Jews from the general community were introduced in Italy. Throughout Europe, Jews were denied entrance to the artisans’ guilds, the professions, and agricultural work, and special taxes were levied against them. As a result, most Jews of Europe were poverty-stricken. One unpopular profession was, however, open to Jews: usury. The Jewish community was frequently caught in a tragic economic situation. Forbidden to participate in most aspects of a society, their role as moneylenders guaranteed Christian enmity and hatred. A rising Christian middle class, seeing the Jews as an economic threat, became their most implacable adversary.

Clerical anti-Semitism was expressed in preaching, especially in the Franciscan and Dominican orders. It reached a climax in the establishment of the Inquisition and in theological confrontations (“disputations”) sustained by the religious orders, secular rulers, and even bishops. The results of these disquisitions, in which Jews were forced to participate, often took the form of the burning of sacred books, such as the Talmud, forced conversions, and physical attacks on entire Jewish communities.

Beginning in the twelfth century, Jews were accused of desecrating the
Host and of using the blood of young Christians in the preparation of unleavened bread for the Passover. These outrageous charges, or “blood libels,” even when officially condemned by the popes, cropped up again and again and in the twentieth century were used in Nazi anti-Semitic publications.

Modern Anti-Semitism and Secular Ideology

Anti-Semitism mutated with frightening ease in the age of the Enlightenment (seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) and infected even the egalitarian reformers who brought about the emancipation of Jews from the ghettos. Elements of this new strain of secular anti-Semitism blended with older Christian anti-Jewish attitudes.

Modern anti-Semitism emphasized Jewish assimilation into the dominant, enlightened culture as a threat, and it also demeaned Christianity's Jewish roots. Other ominous elements included labeling Jews as a major threat to the progress of European culture, implying that Jews were incapable of being integrated into society.

While traditional Christianity always held out the possibility of conversion for Jews and with it full equality, the secular anti-Semitism of the Enlightenment dehumanized the Jews to the point where, by their very nature, they were seen as outside of the human family itself.

However, these essentially racist invectives had a precedent in Catholic Counter-Reformation Spain when, worried about the Jewish “taint” in the lineage of so many of their leading families through intermarriage with conversos (converted Jews), Spanish leaders developed the infamous “purity of blood” laws. But these laws violated the basic principles of Christian theology and were rigorously opposed by such figures as St. Ignatius of Loyola and St. Teresa of Avila, who was herself descended from a judeoconverso family.

By the nineteenth century, Jews were the victims of anti-Semitic abuse that came from many sides of the European ideological spectrum. To French ultraconservatives, including many clerics, the political emancipation of the Jews was a major symbol of all that was to be despised in modern liberalism.

German nationalists saw in the Jewish “non-Aryan” character a threat to the unification of the country. Radical secularists despised Jews for giving birth to Christianity, while the ancient Christian “teaching of contempt” continued to be propagated by Protestant and Catholic preachers alike.

Europe, religiously and ideologically divided, seemed, however, to have one point of unity: fear of the Jews, fear of their difference and, perhaps, of the universal itself.

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anti-Semitism was being widely exploited as a convenient political tool. Czarist Russia concocted the infamous forgery, The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, to justify its pogroms against Jews. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the English son-in-law of the
German composer Richard Wagner, based his popular racist philosophy on the Russian forgery.

In the welter of competing diatribes, curious anomalies in anti-Semitic demonology arose. One of the most enduring has been the self-contradictory image of the Jew as at once the archcommunist and archcapitalist. Nazism thus had a fertile field in which to sow its seeds of ultimate, genocidal hatred.

**Christian Responses to Anti-Semitism**

A few leading Catholic and Protestant figures such as Jacques Maritain and Karl Barth raised their voices to oppose the Shoah. But the leaders in the Christian community who bravely protested Nazism often did not do so because of maltreatment of the Jews, but because of the idolatry of Hitler-worship. Barth, Martin Niemoeller, and others wrote with regret after World War II that they did not recognize that what was happening to the Jews was, in fact, a severe problem for Christians.

Pope Pius XI’s 1937 encyclical *Mit Brennender Sorge* ("With Burning Anxiety") explicitly and vigorously condemned both the Nazi regime and its racist ideology of “blood and soil.” The führer himself was condemned for his "aspirations to divinity" and was described as “a mad prophet possessed of repulsive arrogance.” Sadly, not enough Christians showed their rejection of anti-Semitism in word and saving deed.

It was not, however, until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s that the Catholic Church officially committed itself to uprooting the “teaching of contempt” and cleansing itself entirely of its most ancient heresy. Subsequent documents, such as the 1974 Vatican Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration, Nostra Aetate (IV), the 1985 Vatican Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church, and numerous statements of both Protestant and Catholic authorities, have since been devoted to the problem, resulting in profound and beneficial changes in many textbooks and curricula.

Anti-Semitism has become part of the basic pattern of our civilization today. It can take many forms, from the blatant to the subtle. The former Soviet Union, in continuity with its czarist past, used anti-Semitism as a political tool in its propaganda, most recently in the form of anti-Zionism. Recent waves of attacks on synagogues and cemeteries throughout Europe and the Americas shows that this virulent virus is still active in our system. The role of the Church during World War II remains a pressing and controversial issue in the Catholic-Jewish agenda today.

**An Outline for Four Classes**

1. General characterizations of ancient anti-Semitism
a. The Jewish people: a people of God witnessing to the covenantal relationship
b. Anti-Semitism as a state ideology: the Egyptian example (Book of Exodus)
c. Hellenism: a totalitarian attempt to deny the right to be different
d. Roman anti-Semitism: the denial of monotheism

2. Christian anti-Judaism
   a. The confrontation of rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity
   b. The “teaching of contempt”: denying Israel’s role in God’s design
   c. Emperor Constantine and state religion: Christian triumphalism and Jewish alienation
   d. Theological polemics, the Inquisition, and the Crusades

3. Modern anti-Semitism and secular ideology
   a. The French Enlightenment and the Jews
   b. Emancipation, assimilation, and extremist ideology
   c. The rise of modern racist theories
   d. Nazi ideology and the Christian “teaching of contempt”
   e. New forms of anti-Semitism (“polite” anti-Semitism, anti-Zionism, etc.)

4. Christian responses to anti-Semitism
   a. Intellectual responses to Nazi ideology: German Christianity and the support of Hitler by many in the Nazi Christian church; the indifference of most Christians to the fate of the Jews, the complicity of many, the courageous few; Jacques Maritain; Karl Barth; Pius XI, *Mit Brennender Sorge*, 1937; etc.
   b. Post-World War II statements on the Jews by the Christian Churches
   c. Theological and educational tools and efforts for combating anti-Semitism
   d. Reactions to current waves of attacks on synagogues and cemeteries, Holocaust deniers

Teaching About the Holocaust (Shoah)

Introduction

Why study the Shoah rather than some other more recent or more relevant instance of inhumanity and social evil? It is studied because of the uniqueness of the event. Not only were 6,000,000 Jews murdered by Nazi Germany and its sympathizers between 1933 and 1945, but the scope, method, and manner of the process of enslavement and death itself offer theological and social challenges that are raised in no other place in history. Nowhere else has racial genocide been so integrally woven into the ideological fabric of the state as it was in Nazi Germany between 1933 and 1945.

The Nazi intention was to destroy every Jewish man, woman and child...and this annihilation was to be something systematic, unrelenting and total. It would ultimately have the complete physical elimination of the Jewish people from the face of the earth as its objective. That intentionality qualifies the Holocaust as something different from anything else that has happened in human history. . . . [F]or those of us who are Christians, this event cries out for special attention because it contains so many implications about the Christian tradition. (Dr. John K. Roth)

It was the attempt to destroy the root, and I really think that ought to give pause to anyone who takes Christianity or Islam seriously. (Rabbi Herman E. Schaalman)

The Shoah is a peculiarly contemporary experience that was possible only after the development of racist theory. All the institutions and systems of modern society, including religion, education, science, law, and medicine were involved. It is always necessary to recall that what Hitler did was legal according to the laws of Nazi Germany and he received strong backing from the German elites.

The technological efficiency of the Shoah is frighteningly awesome because of its ability to totally mobilize a society for mass murder. Bureaucratic memos debating the lethal efficiency of poison gas compared to bullets have been found in Nazi archives. Major corporations entered carefully worked-out bids on contracts to the government to build and install gas chambers and crematoria.

Corporations constructed factories near the death camps to exploit the slave labor of the prisoners. Human beings, especially Jews, were viewed as "surplus population" or "vermin." Efficiency experts developed studies to calculate how much food would produce certain death over a precise period of
time. These grim facts raise serious ethical questions in the context of our escalating technological revolution today.

The Shoah raises serious questions about God, religion, and Christianity. Christianity and Christians have been scarred because many critics charge that both the Christian tradition and the church failed during the Shoah. For many Christians the challenge is not to abandon the tradition and the institution of the church, but to renew by transforming the Shoah experience of superiority, power, and triumphalism into an attitude of healthy humility and genuine repentance.

The goal of C/JEEP is for teachers and students to remain spiritually sensitized, and not become inured to horror, violence, and evil. The goal is not merely to list horrors and atrocities, though they are often indescribable, but to help clarify the underlying challenges to our religion and our own society raised by the Shoah.

The C/JEEP goal is to begin the process of recognizing the limits and dangers of the human condition, to encounter the dynamics of radical evil, to provide a structured environment in which teachers and students can grapple honestly with and analyze the amalgam of historical, political, economic, psychological, and religious issues that helped create the Shoah.

There is also the need to detect and respond to similar developments today. This teaching, especially in Catholic schools, must focus on the most implacable system ever devised for the destruction of human beings. Obvious questions spring to mind.

How were people able to maintain their sense of integrity and religious belief in the face of such horror? How were the survivors able to emerge from the camps and build new lives and even a new nation, Israel, for themselves and their children? What enabled simple, ordinary people to risk their lives and the lives of their families to save, not only their neighbors, but also complete strangers?

It is essential that the Shoah be taught with depth, and not simply as another item in a history text. A quick, superficial treatment is almost as harmful to students as totally neglecting the subject. Casual remembrance inevitably sends a message of indifference.

Fortunately, annual Holocaust commemorations are increasing in many American churches, and in April 1994 there was a formal and official Holocaust Commemoration Concert at the Vatican, at which time Pope John Paul II spoke with eloquence about the evils of the Shoah:

We are gathered ... to commemorate the Holocaust of millions of Jews ... This is our commitment. We would risk causing the victims of the most atrocious deaths to die again if we do not have an ardent desire for justice, if we do not commit ourselves, each according to his own capacities, to ensure that evil does not prevail over good as it did not for
millions of the children of the Jewish people... do not forget us.

Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, the spiritual leader of 250 million Orthodox Christians, visited the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in October 1997 and declared that the Nazi attempt to destroy the Jewish people was an “icon of evil,” and he called the Museum an “icon of hope.” These are important statements because of the great importance Orthodox Christians place upon icons as revered objects of faith and spiritual values.

During the same Holocaust Museum visit, the ecumenical patriarch also said: “We respect the role of Israel as a guarantor of the Jewish people’s existence” following the Shoah.

Underlying Questions to Pursue

How much can we rely on the culture and religious values of Western civilization, especially Christianity? The Shoah was conceived and carried out by one of the most “advanced” cultures in the world, many of its perpetrators being college graduates, scholars of theology, medicine, law, and science, artists and writers. If Western civilization failed to prevent the Shoah, what good is it?

The mass murders took place in the presumably Christian nations of Europe. Most perpetrators saw themselves as good Christians, Catholics, Protestants, and Orthodox Christians. The Christian churches of Europe, with rare exceptions, did little or nothing to confront or deter the Nazis and their collaborators.

No one, including the leading Nazis, was excommunicated from the church. Along with the anti-Jewish teachings of Christianity which many scholars believe help pave the way for Hitler, the almost universal silence of the churches must also be faced by every Christian.

What does it mean to be a post-Shoah Catholic—a Catholic moved by what happened at Auschwitz and what didn’t happen within the churches?

A Suggested Outline for Six Classes

1. The Jews and Judaism in Europe: the Last 2,000 Years
   a. The history of the Jewish communities from the early establishments in the Roman Republic to the twentieth century.
   b. The medieval Jewish experience: Inquisition and disputations as part of the Jewish-Christian encounter.
   c. From the ghetto to citizenship: the French Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the process of Jewish integration into European nations and societies. The role of anti-Semitism as part of that process. The Dreyfus case in late nineteenth-century France.
   d. A national messianic hope: Theodor Herzl and the rise of modern
There is a plethora of films and videos about the Holocaust. The following suggestions are only a portion of what is available. More detailed information is available from the various Holocaust memorials and museums that exist throughout the United States and Israel.

Videos About Rescuers

In teaching about rescuers it is good to:

(a) illustrate the difference between rescuers, bystanders, and perpetrators. The Nobel laureate and Holocaust author, Elie Wiesel, indicates that the threat of indifference to evil is worse than the evil itself, because indifference permits evil to grow, flourish, and survive. Indifference to evil places a bystander on a par with a perpetrator of evil.

(b) draw attention to the need to remain sensitized and not inured to horror, violence, and evil.

(c) emphasize that opposition to evil often requires solidarity with others. It is very difficult to “buck the current” alone.

Shadow on the Cross (60 minutes)

All or portions of this excellent two-part video can be used with older students or with faculty to effectively convey the interrelationship between the Jewishness of Jesus, the development of anti-Judaic teachings in Christianity, the Nazi use of these negative sentiments in their anti-Semitic efforts, the perpetration of the Holocaust, and Christianity’s gradual realization of the violent consequences of two millennia of anti-Jewish teaching.

Landmark Films, Inc., 3450 Slade Run Drive, Falls Church, Va. 22042 (1-800-342-4336)

Schindler’s List (195 minutes)

Student and faculty viewing of this Oscar-winning film, with adequate preparation and, if possible, with follow-up discussion with a Holocaust survivor, is an excellent component when studying the Holocaust.

Zenger Video, 10200 Jefferson Blvd., P.O. Box 802, Culver City, Calif. 90232-0802 (1-800-421-4246)

Au Revoir les Enfants (103 minutes)

Weapons of the Spirit (38 minutes)

One or both of these videos can be an effective introduction to a unit or series of classes on the Holocaust. Both focus on the experience of children in wartime France.

Au Revoir les Enfants is the story of a rescue effort in a Catholic boarding school, while Weapons of the Spirit tells of the Protestant village, Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, which hid 5,000 Jews, many of them children, during the Shoah.

Au Revoir les Enfants: Orion Home Video, 1888 Century Park East, Los Angeles, Calif. 90067 (1-800-282-2576)

Weapons of the Spirit: Zenger Video, 10200 Jefferson Blvd., P.O. Box 802, Culver City, Calif. 90232-0802 (1-800-421-4246)

Raoul Wallenberg: Between the Lines (85 minutes)

Friends, family, and former staff members tell of this Swedish diplomat’s efforts in 1944 to confront the Nazi destruction of Hungarian Jewry while working to save thousands of lives.

Zenger Video, 10200 Jefferson Blvd., P.O. Box 802, Culver City, Calif. 90232-0802 (1-800-421-4246)

Books About Rescuers

Nechma Tec, When Light Pierced the Darkness: Christian Rescue of Jews in Nazi-Occupied Poland

Tec studied those who risked their lives to save Jews in an attempt to find a sociological pattern, to determine what characteristics these people had in common, whether they were related by class, religion, or other factors.

John J. Michalczyk, ed., Resistors, Rescuers, and Refugees: Historical and Ethical Issues

This text focuses on the historical issues of Christian rescue of Jews, resistance to Nazi oppression, and the plight of the refugee in light of current problems. The
essays reveal that the Shoah was not only a Jewish tragedy, but was also an epic human tragedy as well, one that has indelibly scarred the collective soul of twentieth-century society.

Michael Phayer and Eva Fleishner, *Cries in the Night: Women Who Challenged the Holocaust*

The story of seven Catholic women who defied Hitler and the Nazis during the Shoah by saving Jews. Motivated by compassion and a sense of justice, the women also strongly desired that their church take up the cause of the Jews. This book raises awareness that people's willingness to risk their lives for others in the midst of human degradation denies the inevitable supremacy of evil.

Samuel and Pearl Oliner, *The Altruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe*

An in-depth sociological study of why gentiles risked their lives to save Jews during World War II.

**Videos About Ethical Issues Raised by the Shoah**

*Nazi Medicine: In the Shadow of the Reich* (60 minutes)

This excellent documentary studies the step-by-step process that led the medical profession in the Third Reich down the unethical road to genocide. It provides the historical basis for many current dilemmas in bio-ethical work and graphically traces the evolution from the eugenics theories that were prominent in the United States in the 1920s and early 1930s to the final sentencing of the Nazi doctors at the Nuremberg war crimes trials.

It forces viewers to reflect on how civilization must not tolerate such heinous crimes against humanity, particularly in light of the advanced technology currently being used in contemporary medical and research practices.

This video can be used effectively with the *Medicine, Ethics and the Third Reich*, edited by John J. Michalczyk, who is also the producer of the video.

First Run Features, 153 Waverly Place, New York, N.Y. 10014 (1-800-488-6652)

*Nuremberg: Tyranny on Trial* (50 minutes)

This video examines the historic war crimes trials from accusations through evidence, verdicts, and executions. It explores the significance of the trials, which were the ultimate test of new principles governing the laws of nations.

From the Nuremberg proceedings the charge "crimes against humanity" became synonymous with radical evil and the worst actions of human beings. The video can be used to analyze the meaning of justice and mercy, especially as it relates to efforts to deal with war criminals today.

A & E Home Video, Box HV, 235 E. 45th St., New York, N.Y. 10017
Zionism in 1897.

2. Germany and Nazism
   a. The post World War I Weimar Republic in Germany and the collapse of democratic rule and institutions.
   b. The seductive appeal of ideological totalitarianism, which is a central feature of Nazism.
   c. Nazism and the "Jewish Question": Anti-Semitism as the guiding principle of Nazi ideology and public policy.

3. The Shoah: 1933 - 1945
   a. Nazi ideology and the Jews: the philosophy of the "Final Solution."
   b. The reality of the concentration and death camps: methods of selection, transportation, mass murder and finality.
   c. Jewish resistance against the German army and the Waffen SS in the camps, the Warsaw Ghetto, and other places.

4. After the Horror and Destruction: Reflection and Concern
   a. Christian responses to Nazism and Nazi persecution.
   b. Christian responsibility and culpability: Church anti-Semitism and the "teaching of contempt" for Jews and Judaism.
   c. Theological questions after Auschwitz: Was God silent? Was the power of God limited? Where was God?
   d. The significance of the establishment of the State of Israel.

5. Holocaust Denial: An Assault on Truth and Memory
   a. Education's responsibility to maintain fidelity to the notion of truth that is based on the belief that accurate knowledge and sacred memory are among the keystones of civilization.
   b. The danger of an intellectual environment that cannot distinguish between freedom of speech and the negation of an ultimate historical reality.
   c. The efforts of Holocaust deniers in America, including their presence on college campuses.
   d. How to refute deniers without dignifying them through the debate process.

6. Ritualizing Collective Repentance, Memory, and Reconciliation
   a. Set aside time to remember, pray, and repent through songs, readings, symbols and prayers.
   b. Class visits to centers of Holocaust remembrance in such cities as Washington, D.C., New York, and Los Angeles.
   c. Class participation in annual Holocaust commemorations in churches, synagogues, and public areas.
d. Class visits by Holocaust survivors who relate their personal stories to the students.

Reconciliation

Vatican Council II and After

_Vatican Council II._ Called by Pope John XXIII who, as apostolic nuncio in Bulgaria and Turkey during the Nazi period, saved thousands of Jews from deportation and death. Even before Vatican II, as the pope he removed the objectionable words “perfidy” and “perfidious Jews” from the Good Friday liturgy. During his pontificate a dramatic shift in the Church's attitude and thinking about Jews began to take deep root.

It reached greater maturity under Pope Paul VI and the Vatican II promulgation of _Nostra Aetate_, No. 4. Of this definitive new step Cardinal Johannes Willebrands has said: “Never before has a systematic, positive, comprehensive, careful and daring presentation of Jews and Judaism been made in the Church by any Pope or Council.”

_Subsequent Vatican Documents._ To enable the new vision of _Nostra Aetate_, No. 4 to develop and mature through experience and dialogue, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews issued: (a) Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration _Nostra Aetate_, No. 4 (1974); (b) Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church (1985). A third formal document on anti-Semitism and the Shoah is currently being prepared.

In 1987 Cardinal Willebrands committed the Vatican’s Commission on Religious Relations with Jews to undertake a self-scrutiny of anti-Semitism and the Shoah from the universal perspective of the Holy See. This commitment was publicly ratified by Pope John Paul II on September 11, 1987 during his visit to Miami, Florida, and the Commission's work on the text began in 1990 at an international meeting in Prague with Catholic and Jewish leaders.

At that meeting, Cardinal Edward Cassidy, president of the Commission, and Cardinal Willebrands's successor, acknowledged in the name of the entire Church a sense of responsibility that Catholics everywhere must articulate as “repentance” for the past. He used the Hebrew word _teshuvah_ (turning) to speak of this communal repentance.

_Efforts by National Church Leaders._ Local church leaders throughout the world have responded from their own national and historical vantage points with documents understandably quite different in tone and substance. In this context it is important to note some of the statements made on the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz in January 1995.
Auschwitz faces us Christians with the question of what relationship we have with the Jews and whether this relationship corresponds to the spirit of Christ. Today the fact is weighing heavily on our minds that there were but individual initiatives to help persecuted Jews. Christians did not offer due resistance to racial anti-Semitism. Many times there was failure and guilt among Catholics.

Not a few of them got involved in the ideology of National Socialism and remained unmoved in the face of the crimes committed against Jewish-owned property and the life of the Jews. Many times there was failure and guilt among Catholics.

Extermination, called Shoah, has weighed painfully not only in relations between Germans and Jews, but also to a great extent in relations between Jews and Poles, who together, though not to the same degree, were the victims of Nazi ideology. Seeing the Nazi extermination of the Jews, many Poles reacted with heroic courage and sacrifice, risking their lives and that of their families. Unfortunately, there were also those who were capable of actions unworthy of being called Christian. There probably isn’t a Polish family that hasn’t lost someone close at Auschwitz or at another camp. [The only way to guarantee that the hatred symbolized at Auschwitz will not have the last word] is to educate future generations in the spirit of mutual respect, tolerance and love. (Polish Catholic bishops)

[American Catholics recall] the tremendous sacrifices made by the generation which defeated Hitler. But as Americans and as Catholics we also recall with humility and a sense of regret the opportunities that were lost to save lives. Our spirit in remembering the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz must be one of repentance and resolve to build a world where never again will such evil be possible. [Remembering the 1945 victories of the Allies] at such tremendous cost in human lives must not mask the evils perpetrated during the war itself and the moral lessons still to be learned by the human community from those terrible events.

[Among the memories is that of] the bitter enforcement of the draconian immigration laws of the period, restrictions which kept this country from becoming the asylum for Jews, Catholics and others that it should have been and should now be. Today we see again bitter debates over immigration policy. (American Catholic bishops)

On September 30, 1997 the Roman Catholic Church in France, speaking through the nation’s bishops, formally apologized to the Jewish people for its silence in the face of French collaboration with the German occupiers during
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the Holocaust.

Tens of thousands of French Jews were deported to death camps during World War II, and many of them were rounded up by the Vichy government, which closely cooperated with the Nazis. The French bishops used extraordinary language in their apology to the Jews:

... The Catholic Church ... knows that conscience is constituted by memory and that no society, no individual, can be at peace with himself if his past is repressed or dishonest. The time has come for the Church ... to acknowledge the sins committed by its sons, and to ask forgiveness from God and from man ... It is important to admit the primary role ... played by the constantly repeated anti-Jewish stereotypes wrongly perpetuated among Christians in the historical process that led to the Holocaust ...

Today, we confess that silence was a mistake. We beg for the pardon of God, and we ask the Jewish people to hear this word of repentance. We beg God's forgiveness and ask the Jewish people to hear our words of repentance.

John Paul II's Visit to the Great Synagogue in Rome, April 1986. During this memorable first visit by a pope to a place of Jewish worship, Pope John Paul II, declaring "You are our beloved brethren and, in some way, I might say that you are our older brother," reaffirmed that "The Church condemns the hatred, the persecutions, and the manifestations of anti-Semitism perpetrated against the Jews at any time and by any person."

On Holocaust Remembrance Day, April 7, 1994 at the Vatican, in the presence of the chief rabbi of Rome and the president of Italy, Pope John Paul II hosted a solemn concert commemorating the Shoah. This was an act of great historic significance, given the history of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity.

Efforts by Protestant Christian Leaders

Among various Protestant efforts it is significant to note the 1994 Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America:

In the long history of Christianity there exists no more tragic development than the treatment accorded the Jewish people on the part of Christian believers. ... Lutherans ... feel a special burden in this regard because of certain elements in the legacy of the reformer Martin Luther and the catastrophes, including the Holocaust of the twentieth century, suffered by Jews in places where the Lutheran churches were strongly represented.

Luther proclaimed a gospel for people as we really are, bidding us to trust a grace sufficient to reach our deepest shames and address the most
tragic events. In the spirit of that truth-telling, we who bear his name and heritage must with pain acknowledge also Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews.

As did many of Luther's own companions in the eighteenth century, we reject this violent invective, and yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations. In concert with the Lutheran World Federation, we particularly deplore the appropriation of Luther's words by modern anti-Semites for the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people in our day.

Grieving the complicity of our own tradition within this history of hatred, moreover, we express our urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people. We recognize in anti-Semitism a contradiction and an affront to the Gospel, a violation of our hope and calling, and we pledge this church to oppose this deadly working of such bigotry, both within our own circles and in the society around us. Finally, we pray for the continued blessing of the Blessed One upon the increasing cooperation and understanding between Lutheran Christians and the Jewish community.

Christian Liturgical Yom Hashoah Commemorations

At the time of the year, usually in late April, when the Jewish community commemorates Yom Hashoah, an increasing number of Christian communities, especially in North America and Great Britain, gather to liturgically ritualize their collective repentance for the past and their personal and collective responsibility for the future.

Yad Vashem's "Righteous Among the Nations" Program

Yad Vashem, an Israeli institution created in Jerusalem to commemorate and perpetuate the memory of the 6 million Jewish victims of the Shoah, also honors "The Righteous Among the Nations" who risked their lives to save Jews. Since 1962 a commission headed by an Israeli supreme court justice has been charged with the duty of awarding the title "Righteous Among the Nations" to rescuers, living and dead, after carefully considering all the evidence relevant to the rescue stories.

Initially, a tree was planted for each rescuer along the Avenue of the Righteous at Yad Vashem. The "Righteous Among the Nations" have their names placed on the Wall of Honor at Yad Vashem, and they also receive a certificate of honor and a specially minted medal bearing their name.
Reconciliation Through Art: The Chagall Windows in St. Stephen’s Church in Mainz

In 1973 the parish priest of St. Stephen's Church in Mainz, Germany, approached the artist Marc Chagall, “the master of color and the biblical message,” with the request to design stained glass windows for the apse of St. Stephen’s—windows which were to be a visible token and a sign. Beautifully designed by the Jewish artist, the work was completed and inaugurated during Holy Week of 1979.

Reflecting optimism, hope, and the sheer joy of being alive, Chagall intended the windows to be a token of friendship between France and Germany, a pledge of international understanding and peace following the Shoah. By working in a Christian church in Germany, Chagall wished to create a visible token of the bond between Jews and Christians. His central window, “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” along with the other five windows, are meant to reveal that belief in one God is the indissoluble bond of unity between Jews and Christians.

The Life and Work of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin

American young people need and look for exemplars and heroes who inspire and who can be imitated. Instead of reaching into the past to illustrate the importance, the beauty, and the joy of the relationship between Jews and Christians, we can look to Cardinal Joseph Bernardin who died in Chicago in November 1996.

Shortly before his death Joseph Bernardin declared: “I am Joseph your brother.” I sincerely believe this from personal relationships and from theological truth. I have tried, as a brother, first to listen to my Jewish friends. From this I have deepened my appreciation for the Jewishness of Jesus, my Savior. And I have also been able to speak of the genuine love that the Catholic church has for the Jewish community. If any of this has helped to heal past resentment and division, I am grateful.”

The day before Bernardin’s funeral an unprecedented event took place in the Chicago cathedral where the cardinal lay in state as a group of Jewish leaders and friends gathered to offer words of tribute and respect. Rabbi Byron Sherwin of Spertus College said:

... we remember and mourn our friend, our brother, our Cardinal, who has gone to olom she-kulo shabbat, to the eternal world of Sabbath peace ... We, in the Jewish community, have been the beneficiaries of Cardinal Bernardin’s achievement in being the perfectly righteous man, in being a jewel from God’s treasure chest. He reached out to us with the words of the biblical Joseph, which were the same words spoken by Pope
John XXIII to the Jewish community. The words: I am Joseph, your brother. Our brother, he was. Our friend, he was. Throughout his life, our defender he was as well. Attacking and condemning prejudice and anti-Semitism in all its forms, while affirming the fraternal links between our two faiths, and our two communities.

When we were together in Israel we went to Yad Vashem, the national memorial to the Holocaust. The cardinal was shaken and deeply moved by what he saw there. Later that day, we discussed that visit and I said to him, “Had there been more people like you there and then—during the Holocaust—there would be more people like me, more Jews, alive today . . .”

May all those whom he loved, and may all those who loved him, find comfort and inspiration in the great work of art that was his life of beauty, meaning, and holiness . . . Rest in peace, Joseph, our brother, our friend. Rest in peace. Shalom.