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CHAPTER SIX

Martin Luther and the Jews

Hans J. Hillerbrand

Introduction

The topic "Martin Luther and the Jews" is by no means new.¹ The topic has been explored extensively over the years, especially since World War II, recently with particular intensity in conjunction with the Luther anniversary of 1983. Understandably, the foremost contributors to the discussion have been Lutheran and Jewish scholars. In fact, there has been an official consultation between the Jewish Committee for Interreligious Consultations and the Lutheran World Federation on the topic of Luther's legacy.² There are those for whom Martin Luther is a singularly insightful interpreter of the Christian faith, and they are profoundly perturbed by his strident and obscene anti-Semitic pronouncements, even as there are, among those who—indirectly or directly—suffered the consequences of Nazi anti-Semitism, some who are similarly sincerely searching for explanations.

The real topic is certainly not so much "Martin Luther and the Jews" as "Germany and the Jews." 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 1945.³ Thus, at issue is not antiquarian scholarly interest but a most relevant contemporary question.

The connection between Martin Luther and Nazi totalitarianism was quickly made. Karl Barth asserted in 1939 that Luther's mistaken political ethics helped cause the rise of
Hitler; this view was popularized in William Shirer’s best seller *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich.* One of the first major statements connecting Luther’s anti-Semitism with Nazi totalitarianism came at the end of World War II with the publication of Peter F. Wiener’s *Martin Luther: Hitler’s Spiritual Ancestor.* The charges were broad and comprehensive and went beyond the strident anti-Semitic remarks of Luther’s later years. Luther’s treatment of the Anabaptists, his pronouncements on sexual morality, and his coarse language came under severe attack as a demonstration of the adverse impact of the German reformer on German mentality and history.

In my opinion, the broader context of Luther’s historical image cannot be ignored. Martin Luther has always had—but particularly in the late nineteenth century—a “bad press.” This has had to do not only with the notion of liberal Protestants that the reformer was medieval in his outlook, but also with the vitriolic attacks of late nineteenth-century papalistic Catholics, notably Denifle and Grisar, who argued the depravity of Luther as person and theologian. In a similar vein, Paul J. Reiter, a Danish psychiatrist, concluded that Luther was a textbook case of a manic depressive, who might have even suffered from an advanced case of epilepsy. Erich Fromm, in turn, viewed Luther as a classic authoritarian personality.

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3See Kremers, *Die Juden und Martin Luther,* esp. pp. 301ff.

4W. L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York, 1960) p. 236, “The great founder of Protestantism was both a passionate anti-Semite and a fervent believer in political authority.”

5There was a vehement response from the pen of G. Rupp, *Martin Luther: Hitler’s Cause or Cure?* (London, 1945). Recently, Rupp has summarized his point of view again: “Martin Luther and the Jews,” *Nederlands Teologisk Tidskrift* 31 (1977) 121–35.
Our topic can best be delineated by (1) summarizing Luther’s writings on the Jews, (2) reflecting on their meaning, and (3) speaking about their historical impact.

The Historical Record

There is scholarly agreement that the early Luther spoke thoughtfully and positively about Jews. He supported the humanist Johannes Reuchlin and his advocacy of the study of Hebrew, the deep concern being the advocacy of open discussion.\(^8\) Luther’s lectures on the *Book of Psalms* contain repeated references to the Jewish people, who were seen as a paradigm for human estrangement from God.\(^9\) Luther hoped for their conversion to Christianity, prayed for “Jews, heretics, and all people in error,”\(^10\) and counseled that “we should not treat the Jews in an unfriendly manner, for future Christians might be among them.”\(^11\) Only they, and not the Gentiles, have the promise that they will be forever “in Abraham’s seed.” In his tract *Concerning Married Life*, Luther wrote that “I may well eat, drink, sleep, walk, ride, buy, talk, and act with a pagan or Jew or Turk or heretic, even marry one.”\(^12\)

In his 1523 tract *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* Luther expressed optimism about the possibility of Jewish conversion to Christianity; but his main point was to stress that love must be foremost in all relationships, including Christian relations with Jews.\(^13\) On the common attitude of Christians towards Jews, he commented, “They have treated the Jews as if they were dogs and not human beings.”\(^14\) Or again: “We must receive them cordially, and permit them to trade and work with us. . . . If some are stiff-necked, so what? After all, we are ourselves not such good Christians either.”\(^15\) Luther’s attitude was un-

\(^{6}\)P. J. Reiter, *Martin Luthers Umwelt, Charakter und Psychose* (Copenhagen, 1941).


\(^{8}\)W. Maurer, *Kirche und Synagoge* (WA Br. 1,7; Stuttgart, 1953) p. 89.

\(^{9}\)WA 56, 46; 56, 199. See also the *Operationes in Psalms* (1519–21), for example, WA 5, 427: “Therefore we must condemn the fury of certain Christians who think that they please God by persecuting the Jews with fierce hatred.”

\(^{10}\)WA 7, 226.

\(^{11}\)WA 7, 600.

\(^{12}\)WA 10, 11, 283.

\(^{13}\)WA 11, 307ff.

\(^{14}\)WA 11, 315.

\(^{15}\)WA 11, 336.
doubtlessly influenced by his optimism about the persuasiveness of the newly restored gospel. Accordingly, in his *Short Form of the Ten Commandments*, he urged his readers to pray for the Jews who might be converted and who should not be unnecessarily offended by Christian quarreling or harshness.\(^{16}\) For Luther the basic issue in Christian-Jewish relations was simple, and very much what it had been all along: Jews should convert to Christianity. In so doing, they would appropriate their own scripture in its authentic fashion.\(^{17}\) To be sure, Luther’s tracts were an invitation to dialogue, but with a rather fixed notion of its outcome—namely, acceptance of the point of view presented, which was in general the standard stance of sixteenth-century religious colloquies.

Luther’s major pronouncement on societal issues of 1520—his *Open Letter to the Christian Nobility*—included no references to Jews or the “Jewish question.” It would seem that for Luther the legal and social situation of the Jews in Germany and the Holy Roman Empire was not an important and ongoing concern. This attitude seems evident for the 1520s.

From the end of the 1530s onward, however, a different tone can be discerned in Luther’s writings. There is less optimism about the possibility of Jewish conversion; and there is greater concern about evidence of Jewish religious vitality. Luther’s most strident remarks about Jews come from the years immediately preceding his death, a fact that prompted Roland H. Bainton to remark that “it would have been better had Luther died before taking to the pen with these tracts.”\(^{18}\) The most infamous pronouncement was the 1543 tract *Concerning the Jews and Their Lies*, though it is important to keep in mind that this was not an isolated publication.\(^{19}\) There was, in fact, a string of such writings—the tracts *Concerning Schem Hemphoras and the Genealogy of Christ* and *Concerning the Last Words of David*, as well as Luther’s very last sermon, preached a few days before his death.\(^{20}\)

*Concerning the Jews and Their Lies* was, like many of Luther’s

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\(^{16}\)WA 7, 226.

\(^{17}\)WA 11, 315.


\(^{19}\)WA 53, 412ff.

\(^{20}\)The writings are found in WA 53, 579ff.; WA 54, 28ff.; and WA 51, 187ff. Luther’s sermon has an appendix entitled “An Admonition against the Jews.”
tracts, a polemical retort. A rabbi had written a forcefully argued tract against Luther's *Against the Sabbatarians*; he challenged Christians to convert to Judaism. Luther's response did not intend to be a "dialogue," but summarized for Christians the main tenets of the faith, as they pertain to the relationship with Judaism. Accordingly, Luther discussed such topics as circumcision, the Mosaic Law, the possession of Canaan, Jerusalem, and the Temple. The tract was a restatement of Christian tenets, foremost delineated in terms of a christocentric interpretation of the Old Testament. This meant the repudiation of the Jewish claim to be the sole chosen people and their rejection of Jesus' messianic claim. Luther's language was shocking, if not obscene. One example suffices: "Now, what ought we Christians do with this rejected and damned people, the Jews? . . . We have to practice a fierce mercy in hopes that we can at least save a few of them from the glowing flames. Vengeance is out of the question. Revenge already hangs on their necks, a thousand times worse than we could wish on them."21 As to particulars, Luther proposed such ruthless measures as the burning of Jewish books and of synagogues, and manual labor for all Jews.

The theological themes of the tract had been stated before. What was new was the sharpness of tone as well as the appeal to the political authorities to suppress the Jews. These years of Luther's life were characterized by outbursts of anger and vitriolic pronouncements on his part. His remarks about Anabaptists or the pope were every bit as vitriolic—and obscene—as those against the Jews. The Jews were not a separate category in Luther's polemic; they were an integral part of those who misinterpreted or falsified the true gospel. And that included the Catholics, the pope, the Anabaptists, even the Turks.22 Quite consistently, Luther's anti-Catholic tract *Concerning the Papacy in Rome Which Was Founded by the Devil*, of 1545, vies with the anti-Jewish pronouncements for abusiveness of style and content, even as his less formal remarks about the Anabaptists—less formal, I believe, because he did not view them as

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21WA 53, 522.
a real threat—expressed the same substantive unwillingness to tolerate them. The differences were minor. Luther did not call for the involvement of governmental authority to deal with Catholics, as he did with the Anabaptists and the Jews. His basic explanation was that Catholics affirmed the fundamental tenets of the faith even as they were law abiding and not revolutionaries. By the same token, one might suggest that Catholics enjoyed political power at least in some places, thus raising the specter of retribution.

The Interpretation

The explanations for Luther’s attitude toward the Jews have varied, his harshness eliciting universal condemnation and expressions of regret. In a thoughtful summary, Eric Gritsch has noted four lines of interpretation:\(^23\)

1. The basic difference between the young Luther and the old Luther. This point of view, which has echoes in other areas of Luther’s thought (puzzling since the “young” Luther of the 1520s was almost forty years of age), holds that initially Luther was a friend of the Jews, but, under the impact of sundry influences, turned into a fierce opponent in later years.\(^24\) Explanations vary. Political strategy may have played a role. Luther’s early declarations of tolerance had been strategic moves, made when he himself was very much in need of political support. By the late 1530s Luther and his cause had become somewhat politically secure. Luther could afford to be candid, outspoken, and show his true feelings. And he did.

2. Luther’s apocalyptic world view coupled with his conviction of the imminent end of the world. Since the end of the world was in sight, the time had also come for the conversion of the Jews.\(^25\)

3. Luther’s precarious health. From the 1530s onward, Luther was subjected to chronic physical pain, severe problems with kidney stones, gallstones, and depressions. Not only was he rendered incapable of sound judgment, his whole personality may well have changed.\(^26\)

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\(^23\)Gritsch, Luther and the Jews, p. 7.

\(^24\)The initial statement of this view was by R. Lewin, Luthers Stellung zu den Juden (Berlin, 1911).

\(^25\)This argument is forcefully presented by H. A. Oberman, The Roots of Anti-Semitism, see esp. pp. 117ff.
4. The essential theological consistency of the young Luther and the mature Luther. Reading human history as sacred history, Luther saw the Jews as the chosen people who had rejected the Messiah, whose hearts God had hardened, and who were a pernicious influence on Christendom. They epitomized works righteousness, which meant that they were not reading their own scriptures authentically.

We may note yet another possibility explaining the change from the early 1520s to the early 1540s. Martin Luther was overpowered by his conviction that the gospel had been restored in his time and that it was within the reach of anybody, no matter how unlearned, to appropriate and understand it. No external authority, such as Church, council, or pope, was necessary, because the meaning of Scripture was simple and clear. Accordingly, Luther asserted in his famous declaration in Worms in 1521 that “his conscience was captured by the Word of God.” That also was the meaning of his objection to the comment that Emperor Charles V suppressed the reform movement because he followed his conscience: Luther insisted that this was impossible, because someone in error did not follow his conscience.27 It is assuredly a “poor excuse” if “someone has heard God’s word for fifteen hundred years and always says ‘I do not want to know it.’” He will certainly “pay for his guilt seven times.”28 Clearly, if the simple and self-evident gospel message was not accepted, something pernicious was at work.

Luther must be seen in the context of traditional Christian views of the Jews as well as sixteenth-century practice. Thus, Luther’s statements have antecedents in the sordid tradition of medieval anti-Semitism. It has been pointed out that there was nothing new in Luther’s statements, and, therefore, that tradition more so than Luther should be seen as the fateful legacy.29 If anything, then, Luther should be faulted for not breaking

26See on this point H. G. Haile, Martin Luther: An Experiment in Biography (New York, 1980).
27See W. Köhler, Dogmengeschichte als Geschichte des christlichen Selbstbewusstseins (Zürich, 1951) p. 55.
28WA 53, 526.
29See the remarks by Maurer, Kirche und Synagoge, pp. 103-04. In The Roots of Anti-Semitism Oberman makes the point that Luther was, in fact, more positive in his views than either Reuchlin or Erasmus. On Erasmus see G. Kisch, Erasmus’ Stellung zu den Juden (Tübingen, 1969).
away more from the traditional legacy. However, Luther no longer gave credence to such traditional allegations as Jewish ritualistic murder, well poisoning, or the desecration of the host. He called such allegations "fool's work." But he was not beyond gossiping—some of it quite vile—as, for example, in his Admonition against the Jews, where he observed that "if they could kill us all, they would truly do it, and, in fact, they do it quite often, especially those who pretend to be physicians."

Provocatively, Heiko A. Oberman has recently suggested that the Jewish question was a central theme in Luther's theology. On one level, it clearly was not. In terms of the sheer quantity of Luther's writings, the Jews do not rank prominently at all. Yet, on another level, it undoubtedly was. Luther was consumed with the dualism between God and Antichrist, between grace and law, faith and works, and in that setting the Jews epitomized what stood at the very heart of Luther's thought: what is God—and how can we know him? In this light, Luther's theological observations about the Jews may be subsumed under four headings.

1. The theological affirmation. No equality exists between Judaism and Christianity. The former has been superseded by the latter. Jesus is the Messiah, the end of the Law, and this means the centrality of gospel and grace. The Hebrew Scriptures must be interpreted christologically. As people of the Law, the Jews epitomize an erroneous understanding of God, namely, that of works righteousness. Scripture has been fulfilled; the prophecies of the Old Testament have occurred; the Jewish religion has no longer any reason to exist.

Since the repudiation of all forms of works righteousness formed the pivotal core of Luther's theology, his repudiation of the Jews—as a theological entity—was categorical. The Jews were exemplars of false religion, as were Catholics, Turks, and Anabaptists. However, if a Jew converted to Christianity, he or she was fully a Christian, and no longer a Jew. Luther acknowledged kinship between a baptized Jew and a baptized Gentile, even as there was kinship between an unbaptized Jew and an unbaptized Gentile.

30W. Bienert, Martin Luther und die Juden (Frankfurt am Main, 1982) p. 177.
31WA 51, 195.
By the same token, one must be cautious not to overstate the point. The Jews were not only a people adhering to a certain religion, but also a people. Or, to put it differently, to be a Jew meant to be a Semite. Thus, the attack on the one was an attack on the other. If, moreover, as was the case in Spain, the sincerity of the Jewish conversions to Christianity was doubted, it was easy to be anti-Semitic, even though the real issue was anti-Judaism.

2. The missionary impulse. Especially in his early writings Luther stressed the obligation to preach the gospel to the Gentiles and the Jews, arguing the solidarity of guilt, judgment, and grace, of all people, Jew and Gentile. Some scholars have argued that Luther’s call for conversion of the Jews in later years had, in light of his overwhelming sense of the imminence of the end of the world, no real practical significance.\(^{34}\) Still, the mandate “to preach the gospel,” which had been recently restored, was thereby prominently expressed. Luther’s strategy was to be friendly toward Jews and to accept them, so as to remove any barrier to the Jewish acceptance of Jesus. Luther also advised that Jesus should first be presented as Messiah, as foretold in Scripture, and only afterward as true God.

3. The view of history. For Luther the course of history vindicated his theological judgment about the Jewish people who had been unwilling to accept the Messiah. How could one understand the peripatetic homelessness of the Jews, and their chronic persecutions? Surely, he reasoned, it is because God had removed himself from them. The tensions between synagogue and church were for Luther not only a manifestation of specific tension, but also part and parcel of a larger struggle against the world in which the Church is engaged.

Intriguingly, this view of history so expressed by Luther,


\(^{34}\)To have pointed out the difference between the early and the later Luther in this regard was Lewin’s major contribution. The most thorough analysis of the issue is by M. Stöhr, “Luther und die Juden,” Evangelische Theologie 20 (1960) 157-82. An insightful statement is “Martin Luther und die Juden,” W. D. Marsch and K. Thieme, eds., Christen und Juden (Göttingen, 1961) pp. 115-40, recently reprinted in Kremers, Die Juden und Martin Luther, pp. 89-108; see esp. 98, “Zwanzig Jahre später hat sich sodann das Bild völlig gewandelt.”
runs counter to the reformer’s “theology of the cross,” that is, to the affirmation that God’s presence and work in history is always “in hiding,” always contrary to appearance and experience. Thus, the seemingly simple lessons of history are not at all the authentic ones. The most obvious conclusion to be drawn from Luther’s “theology of the cross” surely would be that sub contrarie the suffering and persecution of the Jews testify precisely to a diametrically different reality, namely to their eternal election.

Still, Martin Luther argued, in line with the Christian tradition, that Jesus, who came as the Messiah of Israel, was rejected by his people. Accordingly, God concluded a new covenant with a new “Israel,” while the stubbornness of the old Israel perpetuated the Law which was fulfilled, in fact, through the fulfillment of the promise—the coming of the Messiah. Israel appears as the manifestation of God’s judgment and grace, even as God’s working in history manifests the stubbornness of the Jewish people and the synagogue. There is no more promise for Israel. God is silent. Israel experiences the silence of God, which is his wrath. Luther noted: “And thus the wrath of God has come over them, about which I do not like to think, even as I have not been happy writing this book. With anger and sarcasm I had to remove the terrible insight from my eyes as I wrote against the Jews.”

In his later writings Luther appears to have abandoned the notion of the permanence of Israel’s eternal election. No longer is theirs a promise, Luther writes, in which they can find comfort.

4. The charge of blasphemy. Ironically, Luther shared with all Christian theologians of his time the notion that there could be no place for dissenters in Christendom. When Luther received word of alleged Jewish missionary efforts among Christians and about Christians who sympathized with Judaism, he concluded that the solidarity of the cohesive Christian society was challenged. Luther fully accepted the medieval concept of the “Corpus Christianum,” the notion of the identity of the religious and civic community, the former imposing its will on the latter. Theological claims for truth were sustained by governmental authority. Therein lies Luther’s medieval legacy.

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35WA 53, 541.
36WA 53, 447.
which was of such fateful consequence for all dissenters, especially Anabaptists and Jews.

It is true enough that the Luther of the early years of the Reformation seemed willing to see society as a marketplace of ideas. In those years this was also an existential sentiment—after all, Luther’s own cause was at stake—even as it grew out of his conviction that the clarity and simplicity of the Word of God, freely preached, would inevitably lead to its acceptance. The free exchange of ideas was thus bound to have only one possible outcome, the acceptance of the gospel by all. Luther’s denunciation of civil liberties for the Jews paralleled his denunciation of religious and civil liberties for the Anabaptists, whom he preferred to be hanged or incarcerated, and for whom he conceded no place in a Christian society.

The discrepancy between the early and the later Luther is evident here. In his early pronouncements, Luther certainly viewed the Jews as enemies of the gospel. By 1543 he had declared the Jews to be enemies of society as well. The Jews were a mortal danger for the Corpus Christianum, no matter how much Luther eased the stridency of the worst of medieval anti-Semitism.

The Legacy

The legacy of Luther’s thought in the centuries since the Reformation is every bit as important as that thought itself, if not in fact more so. Thus, a recent analyst of Jewish-Christian conversations has noted that “Hitler’s program was but the crown and pinnacle of a long history of hatred toward the Jew, participated in (if not initiated by) those whose duty it was to teach their children the truths of Christianity.”37 Here is indeed the crux of the matter, which transcends the antiquarian interest in the theology of a historical sixteenth-century figure. The question is how Luther’s influence can be traced through subsequent centuries.

One may argue that the line from the sixteenth to the twentieth century is not easily drawn, and that the roots of twentieth-century anti-Semitism lie in the nineteenth century. Luther’s influence must be seen in a complex fashion.

To begin with, Martin Luther’s institutional legacy—the Lutheran Church—was only one of several institutional embodiments of the Protestant Reformation; in fact, in the broader European context, it was by no means the most significant one, with Calvinism being able to lay claims to primacy of importance. Indeed, even in Germany Lutheranism never ruled supreme, since Catholicism continued to be, through political developments and vicissitudes, a vital force. Prussia, that growing reality in German affairs from the late seventeenth century onward, was considerably influenced by the Calvinist tradition. Moreover, until German unification under Bismarck, “Germany” was anything but a homogeneous entity. It was an artificial whole, politically no less than culturally, with strong elements of particularism, notably in Prussia, Bavaria, and Austria. None of these embodied a Lutheran ethos. Importantly, however, Lutheranism in nineteenth-century Germany participated in the surge of Germanic nationalism, which saw the Protestant Reformation as the epitome of the German spirit and Luther as the quintessential German.

The question of Luther’s historical impact must also be related to the development in countries, other than Germany, where Lutheranism ruled supreme. Did Luther’s anti-Judaism cast its shadow also over the Scandinavian countries and their political and cultural systems, instigating intense anti-Semitism in Northern Europe? One would be hard pressed to provide a positive answer. The seedbed of nineteenth-century anti-Semitism was Catholic Austria rather than Lutheran Scandinavia, a reality that suggests that more was involved in the late nineteenth century than Luther’s theological influence.

What is more, the impact of the Christian religion on European society since the sixteenth century must be seen in the context of the dramatic theological and intellectual changes that occurred over the years, particularly since the eighteenth century. Christianity in 1600 differed dramatically from Christianity two hundred or three hundred years later. Two crucial developments influenced the change. Chronologically, one occurred in the seventeenth, the other in the eighteenth century. The former related to what is called the “Age of Confessionalism,” that is, that period in European History in which emerging autocracy succeeded in combining even more political power (including that over the church) in the hands of the
ruler. Clearly, the legacy of Martin Luther and the Reformation was reinterpreted to sustain such enhancement of political power.

The second element, the Enlightenment, challenged—even though it did not completely remove—a great many of the traditional Christian dogmas on which the edifice of anti-Semitism had been built. The influence of the Enlightenment on the dissolution of traditional Christian dogma was, of course, truly revolutionary. To a considerable extent, theological orthodoxy vanished—and with it the most blatant traditional points of disagreement between Judaism and Christianity. The questioning of Jesus’ divinity, the repudiation of his miracles, and his new role as a purveyor of universal religious truth, removed a great deal of the traditional scandalon that had hovered over Jewish-Christian relations, even though Enlightenment Christianity still included the foil of the superstitious religion of the Old Testament. Lessing’s fable of the three rings, representing the three world religions, heralded the possibility of a new chapter in Jewish-Christian relations, for, according to the fable, the three rings were identical in appearance, even though one was genuine and the two others were not. No one could know, therefore, which of the three was authentic. The classic Christian claims of theological superiority were dismissed as empirically irrelevant.

At the same time there were other elements of importance for the relationship of synagogue and church. German Pietism offered a new approach to the relationship between Judaism and Christianity in that it bestowed little importance on theological doctrine or even on the role of Israel in salvation history. The individual’s acceptance of Jesus as savior was the most importance point of the Christian religion. What mattered, in other words, were conversion and the individual’s religious experience. To hate Jews was unchristian. The positive qualities of the Jewish religion were praised. In this context Lutheranism underwent change, as the staunchly theological Luther and his fierce pronouncements

39Maurer, Kirche und Synagoge, p. 56.
(including those against the Jews) were found in many ways an embarrassment. One preferred to see Luther as the discoverer of freedom of conscience against the tyranny of the Dark Ages, as the exponent of the enlightened conscience, of toleration, of a universal religion of moral precepts.

The opening of the ghettos in the eighteenth century had exposed the Jewish tradition to very much the same Enlightenment currents, even as in the seventeenth century Spinoza's biblical criticism had affected both Christian and Jewish theology. Thus, both religions underwent change and, in so doing, tended to become more alike. Enlightenment Christianity and Enlightenment Judaism became more alike and increasingly indistinguishable.

This process continued into the nineteenth century, despite the conservative anti-Enlightenment reaction during the early decades of that century. Reform Judaism emerged in Germany, prompting, for example, the synagogue in Augsburg to abolish the observation of the ceremonial law in 1875. Jewish conversions to Christianity could easily be seen as a move from one affirmation of ethical monotheism to another.⁴⁰

By 1900 Christianity had been deeply modified for almost two centuries. Luther and the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century were seen through the eyes of the Enlightenment. This was the case even among those whose theological orientation was (in the language of the day) "positive," that is, conservative. Immanuel Kant and the ideals of the Bildungsbürgertum dominated the German scene.

At the same time, two new developments began to make themselves noticed. Although unrelated to each other, they converged to bear on our topic. One was the rise of modern anti-Semitism; the other the rise of modern Luther scholarship. The latter meant a rigorous analysis of primary sources and an appreciation of Luther's theological affirmations. At least initially the image of Luther as German liberator from foreign influences lingered on. Moreover, those facets of Luther's

⁴⁰A more detailed account of the history of the Jews in Europe in the nineteenth century needs to point out the slowness of the process of legal equality for Jews; the persistence of pogroms not only in Russia but Germany. See, for example, H. G. Kirchhoff, "Judenheit und Judenschutz: das Progrom des Jahres 1834 in der Stadt Neuss," Almanach für den Kreis Neuss (1985) 15–28. There was a conservative Jewish reaction against modernism. Neither, however, significantly alter the picture.
thought that had been ignored because they did not harmonize with the Enlightenment perspective were given attention. Thus, Heinrich Graetz, author of a monumental *Geschichte der Juden*, took note of Luther’s tirades against the Jews and condemned them vigorously.41

Among the complex causes for the surge of nineteenth-century anti-Semitism, one is relevant to our topic. Emancipated Jews tended to be liberal since the ideology of liberalism had profoundly affected them. Its ideals had opened the gates of the ghetto and provided steady assimilation of Jews into the larger society. These Jews stood on the other end of the spectrum from those who bewailed the shortcomings of modernity and took a decidedly conservative stance. Not surprisingly, most Protestant leaders in Germany were politically conservative.42 Pointedly, the *Realenzyklopädie für Theologie und Kirche* noted around the turn of the century that “one felt the Jews’ undue importance, sensed the racial difference, and resented their aggressiveness.”43

Parenthetically we might note that the religious histories of both Germany and North America in the second half of the nineteenth century manifested a clash between “modernist” Christianity and a conservative reaction. In both places the attack upon Christian modernism was not confined to theology, but embraced an attack upon modern civilization as well. In North America the clash led to the emergence of Fundamentalism, with its affirmation of Americanism and America’s manifest destiny as features relevant to our topic.44 In Germany the clash led to a similar development through the affirmation of a German destiny and the denunciation of all those who were thought to be culprits of modern perversity. The political activities of the Prussian court chaplain (and rabid anti-Semite) Adolf Stöcker serve as telling illustration for the late nineteenth-century German situation. Interestingly enough, Stöcker’s anti-Semitism had no recourse to Luther nor did he accuse labor

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43*Realenzyklopädie für Theologie und Kirche* 9:510.
44See G. M. Marsden’s *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth Century Evangelicalism* 1870–1925 (New York, 1980).
unions and socialism—the evils of the modern world—of being Jewish, even as the Jews were not denounced as the negative element in society.\textsuperscript{45} There were probably few outright anti-Semitic clergy in Lutheran ranks, but many, being conservative as well as nationalist in orientation, made the easy identification of liberalism, democracy, labor unions, and socialism as essentially Jewish. In turn, Martin Luther became the progenitor of German values against foreign perversion, and his hostile pronouncements against things foreign were readily quoted.\textsuperscript{46} The recent study of Robert P. Erickson on the German theologians Gerhard Kittel, Paul Althaus, and Emmanuel Hirsch, all of whom embraced in one way or another Nazi notions, points out the import of this conservative mentality.\textsuperscript{47}

All the same, a comprehensive assessment of nineteenth-century German Protestantism, published by the eminent church historian Reinhold Seeberg in 1900, included a lengthy section on the emancipation of women and the challenges connected with it, but said nothing about Jewish-Christian relations, a telling indication that the author did not see this issue to be important.\textsuperscript{48} On the other hand, there are also clear indications that in this context Luther was viewed as star witness for anti-Semitism, prompting a concerned Lutheran pastor, Eduard Lamparter, to identify Luther, together with Adolf Stöcker, as the foremost negative influence in this regard.\textsuperscript{49} It is worth noting that Adolf von Harnack, the eminent figure in German Protestantism at the turn of the century, had no place for the semitic roots of Christianity and argued that the Old Testament should be removed from the Christian Bible, a theological rationale that could be easily turned into the general prejudice that Judaism was inferior.\textsuperscript{50}


\textsuperscript{46}Two examples may suffice: K. O. v. d. Bach, Luther als Judenfeind (Berlin, 1931), and E. Vogelsang, Luthers Kampf gegen die Juden (Tübingen, 1933), the latter particularly important because Vogelsang was an insightful Luther scholar. E. Schaeffer, Luther und die Juden (Berlin, 1917), stressed Luther’s positive views of Jews.

\textsuperscript{47}R. P. Erickson, Theologians under Hitler (New Haven, 1985).

\textsuperscript{48}Re. Seeberg, Die Kirche Deutschlands im neunzehnten Jahrhundert (Leipzig, 1903).


\textsuperscript{50}H. J. Kraus, Geschichte der historisch-kritischen Erforschung des Alten Testaments (Neunkirchen, 1956) p. 351.
Religion and Society

In recent years historians have paid increasing attention to the convergence of popular religion, superstition, and folklore in the creation of the Zeitgeist (spirit of the time). Thereby, historians focus on what in general parlance is called the "common man," in other words the reading habits, the value systems, the intellectual principles of the common people in a society. Such intellectual history "from below" deals with sources different from those relied upon in traditional intellectual history. It takes, for example, the enormous popularity of the novels of Karl May in late nineteenth-century Germany as an indication that those books shaped German society as much as did the official Christian religion, which the people had already begun to desert.

In this context it becomes clear that a popular anti-Semitism existed in late nineteenth-century Germany and that it was nurtured, both formally and informally, by a number of sources. Clearly, the Christian religion was one of those. That the "Jews" had murdered the savior could be heard from pulpits each Easter season, and certainly not from only Lutheran pulpits. Language contributed to reality. The Jewish neighbor living across the street had the same appellation as did the "Jews" of the New Testament. Thus, language provided kinship across the centuries and condoned the concept of collective guilt.

The topic "Luther and the Jews" thus takes us to the question of the influence of religion in the emergence of modern consciousness. Did the legacy of negative Christian—specifically Lutheran—attitudes toward the Jews contribute to the emergence of blatant anti-Semitism at the beginning of the twentieth century? Was there, despite the changed environment of four centuries, a tradition of theological anti-Judaism enunciated by Luther and the Lutheran tradition? Does the path from Wittenberg lead to Auschwitz?

Lutheranism and the Lutheran church in Germany were unprepared for the challenge of Nazi racial ideology. Part of the explanation lies in the way nineteenth-century theological

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31See U. Tal, Christians and Jews in the Second Reich (1870–1914) (Jerusalem, 1969 [in Hebrew]).
reflection reinterpreted Lutheranism and embraced an identification of Christianity and Germany that epitomized the former as profoundly in harmony with the German "spirit." The Christian church in Germany, both Lutheran and Catholic, did not have the resources to deal effectively with Nazi political and social ideology. The embarrassing declarations of German church leaders in support of Nazi racial statutes are too well known to require restatement here.52

Did the problem lie in the understanding of Luther, or in Luther himself? Luther's own failure is clear and evident. It lay both in his theological and his political perspectives. Theologically, Luther echoed the traditional Christian notions of the christocentric interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures and the reading of salvation history through the eyes of the Apostle Paul. In particular, the convergence of Luther's understanding of salvation history and his eschatology deprived him of a full understanding that if the Hebrew Scriptures are the "Old Testament" the eternal election of Israel (in keeping with Rom 9–11) is even more clearcut. Luther was unable to understand society in any other way than as Christian society. In such a Christian society truth was orthodox Christian truth, alternate notions were labeled blasphemous and had to be suppressed. There was no place for religious dissenters in sixteenth-century society, be they Jews or Anabaptists. Luther also echoed a notion widespread (though by no means universal) in traditional Christian theology, namely, to state the key elements of Christian dogma against the backdrop of a blatantly negative repudiation of the religion of the Old Testament, rather than in positive terms (as done, for example, in the Apostles' Creed).

A caveat is in order. Considering the formidable bulk of Luther's writings, particularly those dealing with Jews and Judaism, the strident parts are not very prominent. Indeed, in comparison with the extremes of medieval Christian anti-Semitism, Luther's pronouncements were moderate. Luther dissociated himself from the medieval notion of the Jews as "murderers of God," even as we need to keep in mind that expulsion, recommended by Luther for the Jews, was the nor-

52See Kremers, Die Juden und Martin Luther, p. 317; a statement by German bishops of December, 1941, declared that "haben deshalb jegliche Gemeinschaft mit Juden- christen aufgehoben."
native way of dealing with any religious dissenters at the time, as was embodied, for example, in the Peace of Augsburg of 1555.

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. Yet that is precisely what happened both before 1933 and afterward. Once again, all religious persuasions—not only Lutheran—became handmaidens of political interests and goals, no matter how vigorous the voices of those who spoke up in protest. Once again, history was abused to provide rationalization for political ends. Luther's theology became a proof text for Nazi racism.

The irony is, of course, that Martin Luther had profoundly and repeatedly warned against such falsification of the gospel. His followers, who should have known best, listened least.

Much has happened since Luther's death in 1546. Even those who still share Luther's vision of the Christian gospel see many things differently than he did. They no longer believe that the earth is flat or hold the devil responsible for bad beer. The concept of truth has undergone change, and wise sages of both the Jewish and the Christian tradition have reminded us that the real threat in our time has come from those who deny that men and women have an eternal destiny.

Those who affirm such a destiny have become fewer in number. Some of those continue to affirm Christian superiority, but even they seek to delineate this without offense to those who believe differently. Others have found in the Bible that God may have made more than one covenant, and that those who affirm the one covenant, and those who affirm the other, share a common yearning for a creation that is healed of imperfection and graciously brought to perfection.
DISCUSSION

BEKER: Oberman’s recent book links apocalyptic with anti-Semitism. But you seemed dubious about this, Dr. Hillerbrand. Could you explain how, for Oberman, Luther’s apocalyptic world-view, coupled with the conviction of the end of the world, found expression in anti-Jewish sentiment?

HILLERBRAND: Oberman starts with the statement that Luther’s attitude toward the Jews is a central problem or issue in his theology. Secondly, in comparison with the key group of Luther’s contemporaries, most notably Reuchlin and Erasmus, Luther is more warmly disposed toward Jews than they are. By immediately focusing on Luther’s “The Jews and their Lies” treatise, one does not appropriate what historically is important, namely, the larger matrix of Luther’s contemporaries as well as the whole of Luther’s observations. And then Oberman identifies the Calvinist tradition—a sort of urban reformation—as a key source for the emergence and formulation of principles of toleration which, by the eighteenth century, did significantly change the place of Jews in European society. The argument is that the Reformation in its totality was in fact a new and positive chapter in Jewish-Christian relations, even though Luther may not have been as forceful and lagged behind the Calvinist tradition. The eschatological part of Oberman’s argument runs this way: Luther was convinced that the last days were at hand; the gospel had been fully restored; and the Jews remained—in these last days—stubborn about accepting this gospel. All this is related to his sense that salvation history was now at the sixth day, now about at the end.

BEKER: What does that mean, the sixth day?

HILLERBRAND: Luther’s view of history saw all of history moving in 1,000-year stages, which, in allusion to the creation story, he called “days.” There were to be six of these. And during the sixth sequence of 1,000 years will take place the second coming of Christ.

SICKER: You give the four standard reasons for explaining Luther’s change. Do you think one is any more telling than the others?
HILLERBRAND: The first one. I do believe that there is a change over time in Luther. And the change has to do, first of all, with a clear diminishing of his interest in or optimism about Jewish conversion. The attitude is different. That 1542 tract on “The Jews and Their Lies” was not addressed to Jews; the “Jesus Christ was Born a Jew” treatise of 1523, however, was. The later tract was addressed to Christians and was to solidify their faith against counter-proselytizing.

SIKER: Is there much evidence that counter-proselytizing was a major problem in the beginning of the Reformation churches?

HILLERBRAND: I don’t think so, and the scholarly consensus would agree with that. But Luther talks as if it was a major issue. There is an intriguing analogy to the Anabaptist threat, because the evidence is that in general the Anabaptists were a small, fringe group. And while Luther didn’t want to pay as much attention to them as he paid to Catholics and to Jews, still he talked as if—certainly after Muenster in 1535—there were Anabaptist revolutionaries behind every bush and that political authorities had to guard themselves because otherwise there would be a revolutionary upheaval of society.

SIKER: Why do you think Luther exaggerated that so much?

BEKER: For political reasons.

HILLERBRAND: You might say that Luther always tended to exaggerate. But political reasons were crucial in as much as Luther felt that he had to rebut all those who threatened the cause of reform and weakened it against the Catholics. Let me get back to my point, which I think is pivotal for understanding Luther. And that is that he was so convinced, so profoundly convinced, that his premise on the simplicity and clarity of Scripture was correct that anything he perceived as a challenge to that premise sent him into an emotional tailspin.

BEKER: That’s very interesting. I was wondering, in a similar vein, when he heaps together Catholics, pope, Anabaptists, Turks, and Jews, whether they are all in the same pot. I was wondering to what extent the Peasant’s War was really a terrific challenge to Luther’s own standing—and to what extent the Peasant’s War was befriended by the left-wingers? I would have thought that, perhaps for the sake of his immediate polit-
ical security from the princes, he made not just a theological judgment but also a political judgment with respect to the Peasant War, which he perceived as a real threat to him personally. And then he threw all these other groups in the same pot. Wouldn't this hostility towards the right-wingers be deflected and spilled over against the Jews? Weren't they all part of the same waterfall, so to speak? So he lumps all these groups together—Catholics, pope, Anabaptists, Turks, and Jews. These vitriolic comments against the Jews, are they simply part of the generally vitriolic relationship that constituted a challenge to him, not so much the Jews themselves as perhaps the left-wingers?

HILLERBRAND: I think each one of them is in fact pars pro toto, and the common denominator is a form of religion that is law and not grace. And there was, therefore, in Luther's eyes, kinship between Jews and Anabaptists, between Anabaptists and Catholics, and even between Anabaptists and Turks. I think that's it. It's no coincidence that during the last years of Luther's life he made these terribly obscene pronouncements not merely against one group but against all of them. There is the tract concerning "the papacy founded by the devil," with its terribly obscene woodcuts. In fact, Luther was more ruthless with respect to the treatment of the Anabaptists, in saying they should be hanged because they were revolutionaries. When asked about similarly ruthless comments or suggestions to the authorities about what they should do with Jews, he went no farther than expulsion, which was the standard way of dealing with Jews at the time. It is all cut from the same cloth.

Getting back to some of the comments made earlier, I interpret Luther in the context of his sense of ultimate failure, not externally. Externally he had political support; the churches had been officially recognized which preached the gospel the way he had interpreted it. But in terms of what he had thought, namely, that once the gospel of grace were put on the table everybody would join ranks—that had not taken place. And I think Luther could not deal with it.

CHARLESWORTH: Dr. Hillerbrand, I have two questions. First, is it an irony of history that when Germany under Bismarck was unified, and when the focus on Luther became more clear, his anti-Jewish statements were then put in a wider
context, and that these phenomena may have given rise to a growing anti-Judaism in Germany?

HILLERBRAND: I would put it a little differently. First of all, German anti-Semitism in the Bismarck period is relatively pale as compared to that in Austria and France, not to mention Poland late in the nineteenth century. That raises some rather interesting questions. In German anti-Semitism, Luther played a minor role. It was the Luther who was seen as the epitome of things German rather than the Luther who wrote some tracts against the Jews that was important. What happened was that there was greater scholarly preoccupation with Luther, in the course of which sources became available that had not been available before. And by the time of the outbreak of World War I, there was clear recognition of Luther’s anti-Semitic frankness. So we don’t have to wait until 1933 for this explicit recognition of Luther’s role. In fact, there is, one might say, a type of latent progression from the turn of the century to 1933 in how Luther is viewed. There were some Lutheran clergy who in 1917 established a society for the understanding of Judaism, with very pro-Jewish concerns. Still, when, nurtured by quite different sources, anti-Semitism became a political reality for Germany, Lutheranism simply could not deal with it.

CHARLESWORTH: That touches on my second question. In light of the perception of Luther’s revolting anti-Jewish statements, have Lutherans had more trouble coming to grips with the question of the Jew, or has that recognition been more of a catalyst? Do Lutherans in light of Luther have more difficulty than Methodists in light of Wesley in coming to grips with the ramifications and perplexities of being Christian?

HILLERBRAND: There is a dual legacy. Frankly, this question occurred to me in writing the paper: what do Swedish or Finnish Lutherans think and feel about this? The problem becomes intense when you talk about Germany because it involves a twofold burden, namely, a progenitor whose shadow falls so formidable on the religious side, but also the other shadow of being German, that is, being part of a society that allowed this awful thing to happen. So, the answer is that, beginning with a reinterpretation of Romans 8, Lutherans—
and certainly German Lutherans—have been in a state of reflective penance since 1945. But they assuredly were not between 1933 and 1945. You know that even the Confessing Church had a great deal of negative legacy to work through.

BEKER: I think it's a mistake to look at Germany in a vacuum. I think that the measures taken, of course, were horrendous. But the soil for what happened in Germany was spread very widely over western Europe. Although the Dutch were very pro-Jewish, still the whole rise of the National Socialist Party in Holland was preceded by a very heavily anti-Jewish climate. I just want to ask, would it be correct to say in retrospect that the Holocaust happened not simply in a German vacuum in an otherwise pro-Jewish climate but in a general anti-Jewish climate moving through western Europe—France, Belgium, Holland, and so on?

HILLERBRAND: In my judgment, much water went over the dam between 1540 and 1900. And, more basically, I am doubtful about how influential theological ideas are in society, anyhow. But, be that as it may, it is clear that when disaster began in Germany in the late 1920s, the Lutheran church had nothing with which to meet the challenge.

PRIEST: I would agree with you that theological ideas don't play much of a role, but they are, in my judgment, a powerful force for legitimating conclusions arrived at on other grounds, but then sanctified for those people who still take religion seriously.

HILLERBRAND: I would say in that sense Luther, as "the German" speaking against foreigners, is probably a greater influence for our topic and a greater legitimizing force than Luther the explicit "anti-Semite."