The Impact of the Holocaust in America

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The Impact of the Shoah on American Jewish-Christian Relations

By Steven Leonard Jacobs

INTRODUCTION: FACT AND REALITY

That the Shoah is an historical fact with enormous implications, not only for Jewish life in the United States and in Israel but also wherever Jews reside (either by force or through choice) is self-evident. The Shoah also unarguably looms in importance due to its impact on present and future relationships among Jews and Christians, Israelis and Christians, Arabs and Jews and Israeliis, Muslims and Jews and Muslims and Christians. It is also clear that, even more than six decades after the fact, we have not as yet fully plumbed the Shoah’s historical data or even come close to fully weighing its significance. Indeed, this is well witnessed by the ongoing publication of books, monographs, articles and essays, documentary films and audio archives (not to mention the veritable flood of fictionalized interpretative work in all manner of genres). The horrendous years of 1933–45 continue to hold a vise-like grip on the imagination of those of us privileged to interact with the ones who survived, either by personal ingenuity, luck or accident. (Whether these survivors’ memories will begin to recede from historical consciousness once the last survivor has died—even though generations yet to be born will still be able to access historical artifacts frozen in time, including video and audio testimony—remains a serious and far too little explored issue in contemporary Shoah discourse.)

One particular arena in which the Shoah continues to assert a major influence is Jewish-Christian relations, particularly in the United States. The
revelations of what was done primarily to the Jews by the Nazis and their all-too-willing minions caused a dramatic self-examination on the part of some Christian clergy and some Christian intellectuals, as they simply could not escape the growing realization that two thousand years of a “teaching of contempt” and a labeling of the Jewish people as a “deicide people” had borne poisonous fruit. While Jews, too, at least in some circles, have wrestled with the theological implications of the Shoah, evolution in Jewish thought is far more subtle. It tends to be manifest in communal response to and strong political support for the State of Israel, observance of Yom Ha-Shoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) and/or active promotion of Shoah-related expressions in popular culture such as Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List*.

Returning, however, to the impact of the Shoah on Jewish-Christian relations, one simply cannot proceed without first examining the document understood to have opened the doors to a true dialogical encounter between Jews and Christians: the 1965 Vatican Declaration *Nostre Aetate* (“In Our Time”) that was published under the auspices of Pope John XXIII (1881–1963) and put into force by the Roman Catholic Church—and subsequently, related to pronouncements and actions. Before doing so, however, one must address serious concerns about the impact of the Shoah on Jewish-Christian relations already enumerated more than a quarter century before, as well as the unique reality of an American United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, where no battle of the Second World War was fought, no concentration or death camp constructed and no Jews were murdered.

“NEW DEBATES ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST”


For Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel, the very focus on the Shoah, as evidenced by the proliferation of both good and bad books, essays, monographs, television programs and films caused him to wonder whether or not any of them had a truly beneficial impact upon their audiences. One may note in this connection that the genocidal events in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina in the late 1990s largely failed to motivate and generate the kind of moral outrage and response which should have come from such increasing awareness of the
Shoah. On the other hand, the present public outcry against the ongoing genocide in the Sudan and Darfur may indicate that such awareness, however slow in coming, can develop if enough is persistently done to make people aware of such genocidal tragedies.

Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf of Chicago questioned the Shoah’s impact upon “the image and self-image of Jews and upon Jewish-Christian relations.” To be sure, the creation of and relative ease in gaining the funding for Holocaust-Studies chairs and programs in many American colleges and universities may be deemed in this context to be a positive step. On the other hand, this same focus on Holocaust in the academy has often been to the detriment of other foci in Judaic studies, and raises the concern that the only course non-Jewish students might ever take in Judaic studies would depict twentieth century Jews as simply a “victim people” without much concern for their broader cultural and religious heritage. Still as Rabbi Irving Greenberg, past chair of the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, for example, has opined, Holocaust courses and programs often effectively serve as “gateways,” leading the curious Jew and non-Jew alike to further investigate the Judaic experience in an academically credible and responsible manner.

Hunter College (New York) sociology professor John Murray Cuddihy understood the Shoah as manifesting a kind of secularist triumphalism—a “chosen peopleness” in reverse—that elevates, at least in Jewish eyes, the tragedy of the Shoah above those of other victim groups. This viewpoint raises a number of closely related questions, including whether the Shoah is best viewed and taught as *sui generis* and, thus, unique (e.g., the position of Professor Steven Katz of Boston University and many others within organized American Jewish communities); or whether it is more appropriately studied comparatively (while nonetheless being recognized as having unique elements—as is the case with all genocides), if we are to learn any enduring lessons from the Shoah.

For Christian theologians, who have gone farther in rethinking the problems of their own theologies when juxtaposed with the Shoah (without self-consciously reflecting Jewish thought), there remains, even today, a broad reluctance to raise critically challenging questions, lest the taint of anti-Semitism be associated with their work. At the same time, however, these Christian theologians (e.g., Rosemary Radford Ruether, herself highly critical of Israel; the late Roy Eckardt; Franklin Littell; and others) recognize only too well that no dialogue between Jews and Christians, of whatever denominational stripe, can occur without both the Shoah and the modern State of Israel being and becoming part of the agenda of conversation.
Hyman concluded her article by noting: “The issue for many Jewish community figures is to decide how the Holocaust is to be taught and commemorated and what lessons are to be derived from it. . . . In teaching the Holocaust, some critics stress [that] the lessons of the precariousness of Jewish destiny must be balanced by the concept of mutual dependence in the cause of human survival” (Sect. 6, p. 65, col. 1). As we will see, the Washington Museum of the Holocaust (discussed below) may very well serve to address these very concerns.

THE UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

Now more than a decade old (it opened April, 1993), the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC is one of the most popular museums in the country. Its exhibits attract numerous visitors, its seminars and lectures and research opportunities draw a wide range of scholars, academics, and others with interest in the Shoah. It is therefore arguably the flagship museum of its kind in the United States. Still, the museum has not been without controversies—ranging from leadership issues to memorializing other known genocidal tragedies, to the story of its original political creation. It is experienced ("seen" would seem too limiting a verb to capture the impact it has on its visitors) by more non-Jewish persons than any program or institution within organized American Jewish communities combined, and thus remains an influential factor in today's Jewish-Christian dialogical relationships.²

Edward T. Linenthal, professor of religion and American culture at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, whose 1995 book Preserving Memory: The Struggle to Create America's Holocaust Museum goes a long way towards explaining the museum's apparent success, captured its very essence in an article published only six months after its official opening:

The Holocaust is to be “inflicted” on the museum visitor as the narrative seeks to arouse empathy for victims, inform visitors about wartime America's role as both bystander and liberator, and ask visitors to ponder the power of a murderous ideology that produced those capable of implementing official mass extermination. No longer occupying American space, visitors undergo an initiatory passage through a Holocaust narrative designed, in part, to help them appreciate the virtues and frailty of American democracy and designed to instill an attitude of civic responsibility. They are to emerge from the exhibit
“born again,” chastened citizens, alert to the stirrings of genocidal possibilities in their own society and elsewhere.

The exhibit is also a place where the longstanding argument about the appropriate relationship between Jewish and “other” victims is addressed. While there is only brief mention of the Armenian genocide, the exhibition at least allows the possibility of reading the Holocaust as an event linked to previous—and future—genocides. There is an unresolved tension in the exhibit’s presentation of the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish victims. The inclusion of various “others” broadens the definition of the Holocaust beyond six million Jews but maintains a careful hierarchy of victimization by locating Jewish victims at the center of the Holocaust, with others situated in relation to the Jewish center. Depending on one’s perspective, the exhibit can be read as a major step toward inclusion of various victims—an expansion of the boundaries of Holocaust memory—or still too exclusive, with non-Jewish victims defined only in their relationship to Jews. (429)

Acknowledging, then, the accuracy of Linenthal’s insights, the key word here is “relationship.” Many of those who come away from this museum experience relate to Jews differently than they did previously. In many formally constructed dialogues between Jews and Christians, participants on both sides reference their own experiences in the museum and how those experiences have shaped the ideas, conceptions, orientations, etc., they bring to the conversation. And, while survivors are diminishing in numbers every day, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum may very well be the single most important factor in sustaining the presence of the Shoah in any encounter between Jews and Christians as well as other non-Jews. But it is a relatively newer phenomenon than the breakthroughs three decades before, those of the Roman Catholic documents initiated by Pope John XXIII (1881–1963), which laid the solid theological groundwork for real and sustained dialogue between Jews and Roman Catholics, and, by extension, between Jews and Protestants of various denominations. We now turn to a consideration of this important document.

**NOSTRE AETATE AND BEYOND**

The French-Jewish historian and intellectual Jules Isaac (1877–1963) wrote his monumental *Jesus et Israel*, published in 1948, but written while he was in hiding from the Nazis, and his much slimmer volume *The Teaching of Contempt*:
Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism, published after his death, though originally written in France in 1956 under the title *Genèse de l’antisémitisme*. His initial work found its way to the attention of Pope John XXIII (1881–1963), the former Monsignor Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who had witnessed to some extent Nazi perfidy firsthand during his years as Apostolic Delegate in Turkey (1935–44). Invited to meet this Pope in June 1960, Isaac is said to have challenged him to respond to the Shoah as the true “Prince of the Church” that he was. How much influence that meeting had on John’s convening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 and the resultant historic declaration it produced are unclear. *Nostre Aetate* is, however, a true high-water mark in Jewish-Christian relations; its very catholicity allowing Protestants to later join in this sea-change of relationships.

Proclaimed by Pope John’s successor, Pope Paul VI (1897–1978), on October 28, 1965, its full title in translation is “Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions,” and it consists of five “Notes”: (1) “what men have in common”—their community, origin, final goal, and quest for answers to “the unsolved riddles of the human condition”; (2) perceptions of the power of the Supreme Being by all humanity, acceptance by the Catholic Church of that which is “true and holy” in other religions, while affirming the Truth of the Christ, and an affirmative commitment to dialogue and collaboration; (3) “esteem for Moslems” and a commitment to overcome the past and work together for mutual understanding, social justice, moral welfare, peace, and freedom; (4) a spiritual bond to “Abraham’s stock,” the Christ’s “reconciliation” of Jews and Gentiles by “His cross,” the Jews’ non-recognition and non-acceptance of Christ at the time of his visitation, commitment to mutual understanding, respect, and fraternal dialogue, and, then, what Jews—and others—have seen and understood as the radical break with that past:

True, the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ (John 19:6); still, what happened in His passion cannot be charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today. Although the Church is the new people of God, the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God, as if this followed from the Holy Scriptures. All should see to it, then, that in catechetical work or in the preaching of the word of God they do not teach anything that does not conform to the truth of the Gospel and the spirit of Christ.

Furthermore, in her rejection of every persecution against any man, the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and
moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, de-
cries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against
Jews at any time and by anyone.

And, finally, (5) reproving “any discrimination between man and man or
people and people, so far as their human dignity and the rights flowing from
it are concerned.”

For Jews, such words found willing and heartfelt appreciation in the af-
termath of the Shoah; for Jews and Catholics now found that they were able to
enter—many for the first time—into sustained dialogue. Led, in part, by both
national and international representative organizations and their leaders, the
church rejected the lingering charge of collective deicide beyond the Roman
period (and further granted that even in that time it had limited application).
The church also specifically repudiated anti-Semitism in all its manifesta-
tions, thus initiating a message full of progress and promise. It would fall, however,
to two other important and significant documents to “translate” these historic
words into concrete actions.

On December 1, 1974, Johannes Cardinal Willebrands (1909–2006), presi-
dent of the church’s Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, issued
the “Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration
‘Nostra Aetate.’” Almost double the length of the original declaration and gov-
erned by a sense of pragmatic reality, it was divided into four parts after its
“Introductory Note” and “Preamble” and prior to its “Conclusion,” namely:
“Dialogue,” “Liturgy,” “Teaching and Education,” and “Joint Social Action.”
Summarizing and contextualizing its own text, the “Introductory Note” cor-
rectly realized these “Guidelines and Suggestions” served as “the Commission’s
first step toward the realization of religious relations with Judaism” and in-
vited “our Jewish brothers” to participate in this dialogical commitment. The
“Preamble” recognized not only the “persecutions and massacres of Jews” in
the Europe of the Second World War and a two-thousand year past of “mutual
ignorance and frequent confrontation,” but, equally, understood Nostra Aetate
to hold forth the promise of true dialogue and “better mutual understanding.”
It also asked Christians with the responsibility “to acquire a better knowledge
of the basic components of the religious traditions of Judaism” and “to learn
by what essential traits the Jews define themselves in the light of their own
religious experience.”

In Part I, “Dialogue,” the church committed itself to a respectful rela-
tionship with its dialogue partner—in this case, the Jews—while, at the same
time, it remained cognizant of its own responsibility to “preach Jesus Christ to
the world.” Mutual openness was encouraged by Jews and Catholics meeting and studying together the very differences that the fundamental convictions of each present, for example, as they both pursue “the struggle for peace and justice.”

In Part II, “Liturgy,” the church recognized the links between the two traditions and the centrality of the Bible for both. Significantly for the church, “the New Testament brings out the full meaning of the Old, while both Old and New illumine and explain each other.” Priests should take particular care that text-based homilies not distort the meaning(s) of the text itself, “especially when it is a question of passages which seem to show the Jewish people as such in an unfavorable light.” Catholic commissions “entrusted with the task of liturgical translation” must be particularly aware of these responsibilities.

In Part III, “Teaching and Education,” several facts were brought to the attention of the church’s Catholic audience: (1) the same God is the God of both the Old and New Testaments and the old and new Covenants; (2) Judaism at the time of Christ and his apostles was a “complex reality”; (3) the Old Testament and Jewish tradition should not be set against the New Testament with the former concerned only with justice, fear and legalism and the latter appealing to love of God and neighbor; (4) “Jesus was born of the Jewish people, as were his apostles and a large number of his first disciples”; (5) “what happened in his passion cannot be blamed upon all the Jews then living, without distinction, nor upon the Jews of today”; (6) “the history of Judaism did not end with the destruction of Jerusalem, but rather went on to develop a religious tradition . . . rich in religious values.” The arenas where this information was to be addressed were catechisms, religious textbooks, history books, and mass media. Research into problems bearing on Judaism and Jewish-Christian relations at Catholic colleges and universities was welcomed as was collaboration with Jewish scholars.3

In Part IV, “Joint Social Action,” the call was for collaborative work for social justice and peace locally, nationally and internationally.

The “Conclusion” reminded the reader that the local bishops would know best how to implement these “Guidelines and Suggestions,” and that the commission itself was only established approximately five weeks prior, on October 22, 1974.

The “Guidelines and Suggestions” were followed approximately eight years later—in response to the comments of Pope John Paul II on March 6, 1982, to delegates at a conference studying the relations between the church and Judaism—with “Notes on the correct way to present the Jews and
Judaism in preaching and catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church,” again by the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, Johannes Cardinal Willebrands, President.

Longer still than either of the first two documents, after its “Preliminary Considerations and Conclusion,” it was divided into six parts: “Religious Teaching and Judaism,” “Relations between the Old and New Testament,” “Jewish Roots of Christianity,” “The Jews in the New Testament,” “The Liturgy” and “Judaism and Christianity in History.” In addition to quoting relevant sections of both Nostre Aetate and the “Guidelines and Suggestions,” the “Preliminary Considerations” emphasized Pope John Paul’s commitment that such presentations be done “not only in an honest and objective manner, free from prejudices and without any offences, but also with full awareness of the heritage common” to both.

Part I, “Religious Teaching and Judaism,” urged the “organic integration” of Jews and Judaism into the catechesis to better understand certain aspects of the life of the Church. It further stressed the need to balance Jewish and Catholic ideas between “the two economies of the Old and New Testament” in terms of promise and fulfillment, continuity and newness, singularity and universality, and uniqueness and exemplary nature. It further emphasized the bond between the two, rejecting anti-Semitism, but also declaring that “Church and Judaism cannot . . . be seen as two parallel ways of salvation.”

Part II, “Relations between the Old and New Testament,” understood the election of Israel clearly in the complete fulfillment and election of Jesus Christ in terms of announcement and promise (cf. Heb 4:1–11), recognizing, also, that there is “a Christian reading of the Old Testament which does not necessarily coincide with the Jewish reading.” Significantly, the text went on to note:

> It is more clearly understood that the person of the Messiah is not only a point of division for the people of God but also a point of convergence (cf. Sussidi per l’ecumenismo of the diocese of Rome, n. 140). Thus it can be said that Jews and Christians meet in a comparable hope, founded on the same promise made to Abraham (cf. Gen 12:1–3; Heb 6:13–18).

In Part III, “Jewish Roots of Christianity,” Jesus’ Jewishness was emphasized in terms of his complex relationship to “the law” (i.e., Halakha, though the Hebrew word itself was not used) as well as to the Pharisees. Regarding the latter, it fully noted:
An exclusively negative picture of the Pharisees is likely to be inaccurate and unjust (cf. Guidelines, Note 1; cf. AAS, loc. cit., p. 76). If in the Gospels and elsewhere in the New Testament there are all sort of unfavorable references to the Pharisees, they should be seen against the background of a complex and diversified movement.

Part IV, “The Jews in the New Testament,” recognized the long and complicated editorial work and process by which the New Testament came into being, and with it a negativism with respect to “the Jews,” as well as an awareness that the majority of the Jews alive during the Roman period did not accept Jesus as their messiah. Following the declaration, “Declaration on Religious Freedom,” which was also promulgated during Vatican II, this document equally rejected coercive conversion, the very antithesis of true dialogue. On the “delicate question of responsibility for the death of Christ,” it aligned itself with both Nostre Aetate and the “Guidelines and Suggestions,” understanding that the Christ “freely underwent his passion and death,” and, therefore, rejected any presentation of the Jews as “repudiated or cursed by God.”

Part V, “The Liturgy,” re-emphasized the liturgical bond that exists between Christianity and Judaism, the former drawing upon the latter, especially, by example, in the Passover celebration.

Part VI, “Judaism and Christianity in History,” reaffirmed that the history of the Jewish people did not end in 70 CE, that the Jewish people’s “permanence” is not a “living argument for Christian apologetic” but remains evidence of its chosenness. It also included, for the first time, a comment about the State of Israel: “The existence of the State of Israel and its political options should be envisaged not in a perspective which is in itself religious, but in their reference to the common principles of international law.”

Finally, on March 16, 1998, Cardinal Edward Idris Cassidy (1924– ), now president of the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, published, at the express request of Pope John Paul II (1920–2005), “We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah,” the first time the Shoah and Christian-Jewish relations were fully addressed in the same document. As is well known, this pope, himself of Polish origin, had close personal friends within the Jewish community of his youth and saw Nazi crimes in his native country during his own seminary days and training for the priesthood. Longest of all these documents, it began with a Presentation by Cardinal Cassidy, including a letter from the pope, dated March 12, 1998, and was itself divided into five parts: I. “The tragedy of the Shoah and the duty of remembrance”; II. “What we must remember”; III. “Relations between Jews and Christians”; IV. “Nazi anti-Semitism and
the Shoah”; and V. “Looking together to a common future.” Cardinal Cassidy’s “Presentation” historically contextualized the document itself, and the pope’s letter of encouragement was, in part, a plea and a prayer for reconciliation and healing.

Part I of “We Remember” set its own historical context and recognized the Shoah as the Nazi regime’s attempt to exterminate the Jewish people as “a major fact of the history of this [twentieth] century.” For the Church, then, the duty to remember this tragedy remains “the moral imperative to ensure that never again will selfishness and hatred grow to the point of sowing such suffering and death.”

Part II acknowledged the incapacity of words to truly convey the enormity of the Shoah, while its European setting “raises the question of the relation between the Nazi persecution and the attitudes down the centuries of Christians towards the Jews,” characterized in Part III as a “tormented one.”

In Part III, the pope himself is quoted from a 1997 address rejecting “erroneous and unjust interpretations” of the New Testament which led to mob attacks and feelings of hostility towards Jews. Continuing with, perhaps, a particularly Catholic reading of European history, the document saw the end of the eighteenth century as subject to a “false and exacerbated nationalism . . . more sociological and political than religious.” Equally, it saw the Nazis’ use of pseudo-scientific racism coupled with extreme nationalism, which the church already condemned in 1931 and later repudiated in Pope Pius XI’s (1857–1939) encyclical letter of 1937 “Mit brennender Sorge” (“With deep anxiety,” which never explicitly mentioned either the Jews or Nazi anti-Semitism as such). Part III condemned National Socialist racial ideology as well as those who, theologically, were intent on severing connection between the Old Testament and the story of the chosen people, the Jews.

Continuing in Part IV, the church understood National Socialist ideology as fundamentally anti-Christian, and any linking of historic anti-Jewish behaviors on the part of Christians, must, therefore, be examined “on a case by case basis.” While acknowledging that not all did what they could to save the Jews, and thus failed as Christians to behave properly and righteously, the document does address the still contentious issue of Pius XII’s (1876–1958) own involvement, by citing in note 16 the thanks expressed to him by Dr. Joseph Nathan of the Italian Hebrew Commission on September 7, 1945; that of Dr. A. Leo Kubowitzki of the World Jewish Congress on September 21, 1945; and the telegram of Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir at the pope’s death in 1958.

Looking to the future in Part V, the document reiterated the church’s
sorrow at the failure of “her sons and daughters in every age,” which it viewed as an act of repentance (Hebrew *teshuva* used in parenthesis), and it further vowed to do all within its power to see that the Shoah was never repeated. It called for a future devoid of both anti-Judaism and anti-Christianity.

**GOING FORWARD IN DIALOGUE**

With its foundation now firmly established—and the Shoah fully realized as the precipitating event—Roman Catholics and Jews entered a period of active and sustained dialogue that has not abated. Having opened doors to dialogue, both Catholics and Jews saw such conversations not in exclusivist terms, that is, only between themselves, but also viewed the continuing dialogue as a means of presenting opportunities for expanding conversations to various Protestant clergy and laity and Jewish denominational movements as well. Thus, today, Jewish-Christian dialogues in the United States are likely to include Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Lutherans (the American branches of which have formally repudiated the anti-Semitism of their founder Martin Luther), Episcopalians, some Baptists, and some few fundamentalist and/or evangelical representatives, Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist Jews, and some few Orthodox Jews as well. Wherever these dialogues take place throughout the United States, one can be assured that, in addition to informational discussions regarding rituals, holy day practices, and contemporary “hot button issues” (e.g., abortion and homosexuality), both the State of Israel and the Shoah are part of the conversations. By extension, the participation of non-Jews at *Yom Ha-Shoah* commemorative events has also become prominent. Whether the Shoah will be sustained in the foreseeable future and beyond as a major topic for dialogue and meaningful shared commemoration, is very much an unresolved and, thus, debated question.

**AN UNSCIENTIFIC SURVEY, AND YET . . .**

As part of this initial assessment of the impact of the Shoah on American Jewish-Christian relations—quite possibly part of a future, much larger project—a brief survey was constructed of seventeen questions in the areas of Jews and Judaism, Jewish-Christian relations, the Holocaust, and its impact and implications. Several pastors of large congregations from a master list of more than forty churches in both Tuscaloosa and Huntsville, Alabama, were selected and their representatives readily agreed to be interviewed. Large church clergy
were specifically chosen because their congregations would, most likely, have a large number of adult and youth education programs where the impact, if any, of the Shoah might potentially be realized. As stated in the Informed Consent Document signed by all participants:

The study . . . will involve a series of interviews with working Christian clergy—from fundamentalist to moderate to liberal—as they relate their own work “in the trenches” to the realities of the Holocaust/Shoah in a post-Holocaust/Shoah world. The intent will be to address a basic issue in modern religious America: How has Christian thought and work been altered by the impact of the Holocaust/Shoah?

Approximately six (6) representative clergy of the following denominations have been invited to participate: (1) Baptist, (2) Roman Catholic, (3) Episcopal, (4) Lutheran, (5) Methodist, (6) Presbyterian.

All told, eight interviews, each lasting approximately one hour in length, were conducted: three Baptist (moderate and conservative); two Presbyterian (moderate and conservative); one each, Methodist, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic. (Time constraints prevented the author from establishing a connection with a representative Lutheran clergyperson.)

Without any claim to overall scientific validity, due both to the relatively small sampling and the geographic focus on Southern clergy, nonetheless, a consistent pattern of responses revealed the following:

1. As a group, these clergy did not necessarily regard themselves as particularly knowledgeable about either Jews, Judaism or the Shoah apart from their rather formidable knowledge of “the scriptures” (Hebrew Bible/Old Testament) and personal reading. One of the seven noted that an undergraduate course in German history by a particularly outstanding professor had addressed specifically the Shoah, and, even now, resulted in his continuing interest in its story.

2. As a group, these clergy expressed, to a greater or lesser degree, familiarity with the source documents of their particular denominational communities regarding Jewish-Christian relations, but could not concretize the proposals and/or resolutions contained within these documents in specific examples within their own congregations.

3. As a group, these clergy all used stories of the Shoah as sermon illustrations to emphasize points of ethical responsibility or faith commitment (e.g., Corrie ten Boom of The Netherlands was cited more than once, as was Anne Frank, the French Huguenot village of Le Chambon, Kristallnacht, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Schindler’s List). A few had even visited the United
States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. But none could recall preaching a specific sermon focusing directly on the Shoah and/or raising such themes as historical Christian complicity as foundational to Nazi ideology, Christian participation in the development of anti-Semitism, or the implications of the Shoah for Christian or denominational theology. Likewise, none of these clergy had themselves taught an adult or youth course in their congregations focusing directly on the Shoah, nor could they recall such courses being taught by others in their specific religious communities, nor, given the demands of their responsibilities, had they participated in organized Jewish-Christian dialogical activities.

4. Several clergy made reference to the State of Israel, the plight of the Palestinians, and the current Middle East crisis, directly relating these comments to the Shoah and expressing great concern about resolving these difficult situations. Uniformly, perhaps because they knew their interviewer was himself Jewish, all expressed great admiration for the Jewish People—theologically as God’s “chosen” or humanly as a powerful example to the world of a people able to overcome its tragic past.

5. Other topics seemingly relevant to the clergy themselves during the interviews included: the controversies surrounding Pope Pius XII’s role during the Shoah as well as that of the Roman Catholic Church itself, the role of Christian churches in Germany during the Nazi period, the questionable success of the European Enlightenment, the impact of the Arab-Israeli war of 1967, and model Passover “Seder suppers” conducted in church settings.

CONCLUSION: IMPACT AND IMPLICATIONS
As the events of the Shoah and the years 1933–45 recede into history, and generations yet to be born will only be able to confront these realities from an increasing distance—without the benefit of physical contact with living witnesses—there seems to be little reason to believe that the Shoah will maintain as central a presence in the Jewish-Christian dialogical arena. To be sure, it is likely always to continue as a topic, especially when coupled with anti-Semitism itself and the necessity of an historical overview. Still, its impact undoubtedly will lessen in the coming years. As with any historical event, the so-called “lessons to be learned” will become increasingly problematic as the future distances us from the events themselves.

Then, too, the tendency of the American Jewish community to make the Shoah a “Jewish story,” far in excess of its universal applicability to and
for others, may very well serve as a cause for its lessening impact in Christian settings, especially where contact with Jews and knowledge about Jews and Judaism are minimal at best. One pastor in our survey suggested the need for on-line teaching resources created and made specifically available for churches, but was largely unfamiliar with what was already available “out there.” Others offered no suggestions.

Equally, in a world where the so-called “war on terrorism” itself continues to occupy the media’s center stage, and other genocides, both present and future, capture the attention of Americans, calling for political, economic, humanitarian and other interventions, appeals to the Shoah of the last century will not, in all likelihood, have as sustained an impact upon generations too little schooled in its realities. American non-Jewish support for the State of Israel, too, while historically connected to the revelations of the Shoah, will no longer likely be based as much upon that connection in the coming years. Indeed, Jewish organizational life in the United States, including the vast fund-raising networks, will find itself no longer able as easily to draw upon either the Shoah or a future Shoah-like event to get Jews to give. Historical events will remain viable only to those for whom historical events are already meaningful; for the vast majority, the immediate worries and cares of the present impact on the future far more than events receding into the historical past.

For Jews themselves, their history is filled with dramatically horrific events—the Egyptian enslavement, the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian Exile, the destruction of the Second Temple and the Roman oppression, and the uneven Western migratory trek, punctuated by ghettoization, pogrom and expulsion. There have been moments of sublime exaltation as well—the theophany at Sinai after the liberation from Egyptian enslavement, the birth of the Third Jewish Commonwealth three hundred years after the arrival of the first Jews on the North American continent, and a continually rich religious, literary, and cultural heritage. For the American Jewish community, the freest and safest aggregate of Jews in all Jewish history, a hallmark characteristic of its very “at-home-ness” has been the pioneering Jewish-Christian dialogue of the post-World War II era that began in Europe but has experienced its fullest flowering here in America. There is no question that the Shoah has played an important role in the early development and sustaining of that dialogue.

Significantly enough, however, while the original Christian counterparts in that very same dialogue were, more often than not, influenced by the revelations of the Shoah, and, equally as likely, translated their encounters with
Jews into programs within their own congregations and, where possible, pulpit exchanges with local rabbis, the same cannot be said today. Though undergraduate courses in “The Holocaust” continue to be oversubscribed throughout the country, such courses have not, in the main, made their way into either Christian colleges or universities and, even less so, into denominational seminaries. Thus, those who presently occupy America’s Christian pulpits and also manifest serious interest in Jews, Judaism, or the Shoah tend to do so as a result of their own personal interest, reading, travel, or attendance at film or other cultural events (e.g., live theatre, musical performances, art exhibitions, etc.).

If (and that “if” is itself worthy of a sustained conversation within the organized American Jewish community) the subject of the Shoah is important to continuing Jewish-Christian dialogical relations, then significantly more creative educational programming must be developed in concert with the various Christian denominational communities already committed to dialogue with Jews, as well as those Christian denominational communities potentially committed to this dialogue. Christian denominational colleges, universities, and seminaries that are the least-explored venues for the transmission of this specific knowledge must become the recipients of renewed contact and opportunities for such teaching, preferably in concert with other courses in Judaic studies, including courses in Israel and the Middle East. Local Jewish communities, in addition, must re-energize and re-embrace their own efforts to initiate dialogue with their neighbors, not only about Israel and the Shoah, but other arenas of Jewish knowledge as well (e.g., the literatures of Judaism, including Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, and Responsa, Jewish political positions on contemporary “hot button” topics, etc.). In a world growing smaller communicatively while becoming fractiously divisive, continuing Jewish survival may very well become increasingly dependant upon interconnectivity with allies with whom, generations ago, such interconnection was deemed both unthinkable and unrealizable. The continuing and ongoing success of Jewish-Christian dialogue may, in fact, be the model for that survival.
Notes


2. For a full accounting of the wide range of the programs and resources available at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, consult their extensive website www.ushmm.org.

3. Of particular interest to this author is the creation, wherever possible, of academic chairs in Jewish studies at such institutions, which has not yet happened, to the best of my knowledge, to any appreciable degree.

4. The document’s own endnote stated the following:
   We continue to use the expression Old Testament because it is traditional (cf. already 2 Cor 3:14) but also because “Old” does not mean “out of date” or “out-worn.” In any case, it is the permanent value of the O.T. as a source of revelation that is emphasized here (cf. Dei Verbum, 3).

5. Significant, too, is the formal declaratory recognition of the State of Israel, rather than a reference to the “Holy Land” or “Land of Israel.” While waffling somewhat on this modern nation-state solely as a political entity divorced from historical Jewish religious longings, its political recognition, a long-sought for goal of both world-wide Jewry and Israel herself, opened the doors to ambassadorial exchange, itself not without international significance. Religiously and theologically, by acknowledging Israel as a sovereign nation-state, in effect, the Vatican was equally refuting any notion of the Jewish people as a “failed people,” alive only to give living credence to the “truth” of the Christ and Christianity.

6. Problematic for Jews and others, however, was the phrase, “I do not say on the part of the Church as such,” which was understood by many as explicitly exonerating the Roman Catholic Church from any sense of institutional responsibility for the antisemitism of the past or the Shoah of the present.

7. The Mobile (AL) Jewish-Christian Dialogue, now more than twenty-five years old and initiated by the late Roman Catholic Archbishop John L. May, of Mobile and later St. Louis, MO, remains the oldest and, at times, the largest pioneering venture in such inclusive dialogical encounters in the United States.

8. The “Questions for Representative Clergy” were grouped as follows:
   I. Introductory Questions
      1. Briefly describe your denomination.
      2. Briefly describe your congregation.
   II. Jews & Judaism
      3. Aside from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), how knowledgeable do you consider yourself regarding Jews and Judaism?
      4. What do you consider the primary source(s) of that knowledge?
      5. Are there particular historical events and/or ideas that stick out in your mind?
III. Jewish-Christian Relations
6. How familiar do you consider yourself with regard to the official statements of your denominational community regarding Jewish-Christian relations?

7. How would you summarize the major (salient) points of these documents and/or resolutions?

8. Have you implemented any or all of the concrete proposal/suggestions associated with these statements?

IV. The Holocaust
9. How knowledgeable do you consider yourself about the Holocaust?

10. What do you consider the primary source(s) of that knowledge?

11. Are there particular historical events and/or ideas that stick out in your mind?

V. Impact and Implications
12. Describe what impact, if any, the events and/or ideas associated with the Holocaust have had on your ministry work?

13. Describe what impact, if any, the events and/or ideas associated with the Holocaust have had on your thinking about Jews and/or Judaism.

14. Describe what impact, if any, the events and/or ideas associated with the Holocaust have had on your interaction with Jews.

15. Describe what impact, if any, the events and/or ideas associated with the Holocaust have had on your thinking in general.

VI. Conclusion
16. Are there other comments and/or thoughts you would like to share?

17. Are there any recommendations and/or suggestions you would like to share?

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The Impact of the Shoah

Works Cited


