After the Shoah:  
Christian Statements of Contrition  

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In August 1947, after the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps had been fully exposed to the world, an international gathering of Christian and Jewish leaders came together in Seelisberg, Switzerland to examine contributory factors in the growth of antisemitism over the centuries. At the Seelisberg conference the participants drew up a ten-point document outlining steps Christianity needed to take if it were to strip future Church teaching of negative images of Judaism and replace them with a new positive theological understanding. As important as the Ten Points of Seelisberg and a resolution on antisemitism by the World Council of Churches fourteen years later both were, it was not until Vatican Council II (1962-1965) and the Roman Catholic Church’s 1965 pioneering statement on the Church’s relationship to Judaism and the Jewish people, Nostra Aetate (“In Our Time”), that a virtual revolution in Christian thinking occurred. Since that conciliar document, Christianity as a whole has witnessed within many of its other denominational bodies a reversal of almost 1900 years of what Jules Isaac (1877-1963) called “the teaching of contempt”.

When the voices from most of the major denominations joined in the new conversation, it was often with an expression of contrition for the painful mutual history of these two great faiths – Judaism and Christianity – and with a recognition that the murder of millions of Jews during World War II and the Holocaust (Shoah) took place in the heart of Christendom. Although the declarations are markedly different in style and content, there are important similarities. For most, the assertion of God’s continuing covenant relationship with His people Israel and the responsibility to teach about Judaism from Judaism’s own texts are two central affirmations. As the late Protestant theologian Paul Van Buren remarked, the early Church Father Justin Martyr
was correct: “It is bad business to learn about Jews except from Jews”. Their texts are the tools needed to enable others to interpret the reality of Judaism and the Jewish people. To do otherwise is to perpetuate the canards that have marked traditional Church teaching down through the centuries.

In Germany, the first synod of the Evangelical Church of Germany (E.K.D) to produce a statement acknowledging some culpability on the part of Christianity, and specifically on the part of the German Churches, for the fate of Jews during the Nazi era, was the provincial Synod of the Protestant Church in the Rhineland. In 1980 it approved a statement calling for a “new relationship of the Church to the Jewish people,” adding its “recognition of Christian co-responsibility and guilt for the Holocaust.” Having looked deep within the soul of the Church at its failure to live up to the moral imperatives of its own tradition, the Synod statement affirmed the permanent election of the Jewish people as the people of God, and the belief that righteousness and love are the admonitions of God for both faith traditions. For Christianity, this demonstrated a radical turn in its historical understanding of Judaism.

Four years later (1984) a statement of the Evangelical Synod of Baden, also decrying the Church’s teaching about Jews as a rejected people, like the Rhineland statement before it, confessed that Christians in Germany bore a joint responsibility and guilt for the Holocaust.

In anticipation of the 50th Anniversary of Germany’s surrender in May 1945, the German Roman Catholic bishops produced two statements acknowledging the failure and guilt of many of their own people. Recalling an earlier joint statement (1988) by the German and Austrian Bishops Conference on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of Kristallnacht, they confessed in the January 1995 statement that the “Church which we proclaim as holy, and which we honor as a mystery, is also a sinful Church and in need of conversion.” They further charged that not a few of their members “got involved in the ideology of National Socialism and remained unmoved in the crimes committed against Jewish-owned property and the life of Jews. Others paved the way for crimes or even became criminals themselves.” In April 1995, the Catholic bishops reiterated their declaration that the Church had failed to effectively intervene as Nazism was on the rise. In that same month,
they joined the Council of Protestant Churches in a statement which promised that in the future both groups must “devote our strength to the protection of human life.”

The German and Austrian bishops were not the only European Catholic leaders to voice contrition and to call for repentance for the complicity of some of their own in the crimes of the Third Reich. During Advent in 1994, a statement was issued from the Hungarian Roman Catholic Bishops and the Ecumenical Council of Hungarian Churches. Theirs was timed to coincide with the 50th Anniversary of the year Hungary experienced the full brunt of Nazi rule. Declaring the Holocaust to be a sin which “burdens our history,” the statement went on to acknowledge that there were those who professed to be Christian but who, “out of fear, cowardice and compromise did not raise their voices in protest against the mass humiliations, deportation and murder of their fellow Jewish citizens. Before God we ask pardon for their negligence and omission in the face of this catastrophe fifty years ago.”

In 1995, Roman Catholic bishops of Poland issued their Declaration of the Polish Episcopal Commission for Dialogue with Judaism. The bishops of the Netherlands, that same year, in their statement Supported by One Root: Our Relationship to Judaism, praised their fellow Polish and German bishops for recognizing “co-responsibility for the persecution of the Jews in the past” adding that “in all sincerity, we join them in this sentiment.”

Later in the decade, Italian, Swiss and French Catholic leaders prepared responses of their own. In September 1997, at a ceremony at Drancy, the transit camp outside Paris where many Jews during the Nazi era had awaited deportation to Auschwitz, the French bishops read from their Declaration of Repentance. The time had come, they wrote, for the Church “to submit her own history to critical examination and to recognize . . . the sins committed by members of the Church and to beg forgiveness of God and humankind.” Decrying the inaction of Church leaders when France’s Nazi collaborationist Vichy government first deprived Jews of their rights, they acknowledged their own silence “in the flagrant violation of human rights . . . leaving the way open to a death-bearing chain of events.” Unhesitatingly, they affirmed that the Church, called at that moment to play the role of defender, did in fact have
considerable power and influence, and “in the face of the silence of other institutions, its voice could have echoed loudly by taking a definitive stand against the irreparable.”

In North America, as in Europe, the Protestant Churches also have issued statements of contrition. Following the precedent set by the Vatican in its Conciliar statements of 1965 (Nostra Aetate), 1975 (Guidelines for Implementing Nostra Aetate), and 1986 (Notes on the Correct Ways to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church), and after examining how Judaism had been presented in their own texts, these denominational bodies began the process of correcting the teaching of the past in their own traditions. The Disciples of Christ, for example, in a lengthy Statement on Relations between Christians and Jews (1993) called upon its Church to review thoroughly the long and painful mutual history of Judaism and Christianity. It suggested examining Biblical texts, the laws against Jews enacted by synods of the Church, subsequent patterns of religious persecution through the ages and finally the Shoah itself. In an effort to help its members gain a greater understanding of the bonds which link the Jewish and Christian people, it recommended that resources from the Church’s Commission on Theology be used in future study.

In 1987, the Presbyterian Church (USA) adopted a study paper entitled a Theological Understanding of the Relationship Between Christians and Jews. Like other denominational bodies, it affirmed the ongoing covenantal relationship of the Jews with God. The paper also called for repentance for the Church’s “long and deep complicity in the proliferation of anti-Jewish attitudes and actions.” Not disseminated for broad use, it nonetheless was published with the Presbyterian General Assembly proceedings in 1987. That same year, at the 16th General Synod of the United Church of Christ, the delegates overwhelmingly approved a resolution which was hailed as a breakthrough for their Church’s relationship with the Jews. Again one finds the affirmation that, all earlier positions of the Christian Church to the contrary notwithstanding, “God’s covenant with the Jewish people has not been abrogated.” As had the Disciples of Christ, the UCC called for new educational resources for its seminaries and local Churches. Additionally it directed its inter-agency bodies,
local congregations and regional judicatories to engage in dialogue with the Jewish community in an on-going effort to establish firm relationships of trust.

In 1994, a document entitled *The Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community* was adopted by the ELCA at their Church Council. The one page declaration expressed pain and sadness at both “certain elements in the legacy of the reformer Martin Luther, and the catastrophes, including the Holocaust of the Twentieth Century, suffered by Jews in places where the Lutheran Churches were strongly represented.”

Recalling Luther’s “stand for truth” and his witness to “God’s saving Word,” it expressed, nonetheless, the compelling need to acknowledge his anti-Judaic diatribes and the “violent recommendations” against the Jews within his later writings. Recognizing all antisemitism as an affront to the Gospel, the Church pledged to oppose in the future “the deadly working of such bigotry, both within our own circles and the society around us.”

Within the Baptist denomination, it was the Alliance of Baptists, in their 1995 statement, which expressed most forcefully a need for contrition. Recalling that *Nostra Aetate* heralded a significant change in Jewish-Christian relations, first among Roman Catholics and soon thereafter among Protestant Christian bodies, they affirmed the influence of this invitation to dialogue begun by Vatican II. They called for a public confession of sins; first for the sin of interpreting sacred writings in ways deleterious to the Jewish people, then for the sins of complicity, silence, and indifference, and finally for “inaction to the horrors of the Holocaust.” As others had before them, they called for the Church to affirm that the gifts of God to the Jewish people are irrevocable, and emphasized their members’ need to be educated about Judaism.

At the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in the fall of 1997, His All Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew of the Greek Orthodox Church, before a gathering of Christians and Jews, recalled the indifference of so many peoples during the *Shoah* as their neighbors were taken away. While praising those who risked their own lives to save others, he acknowledged that the “bitter truth for so many Christians of that terrible time was that they could not connect the message of their faith to their actions in the world.” He
went on to attest that “silence in the face of injustice, silence in the darkness of Auschwitz’s bitter night will never again be allowed.”

Although a resolution is not due out for a few years, it should be mentioned that one of the most far reaching and promising study papers ever to be drawn up within Protestantism is *Bearing Faithful Witness*, a 59 page document of the United Church of Canada. It, no doubt, will prove to be a significant and far-reaching theological and pastoral statement when it is published.

While Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) began the revolutionary process in Roman Catholic Christian Church thinking which changed forever the course of Christian-Jewish relations, it has been Pope John Paul II (1978- ) who has made the relationship between Catholicism and Judaism a central concern of his pontificate. The wealth of Biblical and liturgical scholarship during his time as Pope, the statements forthcoming from the Vatican, and the actions he has taken with regard to the Jewish communities within countries around the world have helped to bridge solidly, what was once regarded as an unbridgeable chasm. The final document of the century to emanate from the Vatican, *We Remember, A Reflection on the Shoah*, has not been without its critics. But it is offered up as yet another text to help strengthen the bonds between the Catholic and Jewish faiths as the two continue on in conversation. It must be added that similar degrees of critical assessment have been applied to many of the Protestant statements by both Christian and Jewish leaders.

Unfortunately there are Churches which have not entered into the interfaith discussion at any level, preferring, for reasons of their own, to ignore or discount this troubled history. For them the choice has been to avoid giving serious consideration to the damaging effects anti-Jewish references in teaching have had, and will continue to have, not just on the Jewish people, but on their own congregants as well. Perhaps in time more will recognize what is at stake in following the lead set by denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church and the United Church of Christ. To those Church bodies which, in a spirit of cooperation and caring, have labored long and hard in confronting their past, gratitude and recognition must be given. By understanding what this history has meant and by attempting through
education to bring about repentance, change and reconciliation, they have ensured that the next millenium holds the promise of untold opportunities for all, Christians and Jews alike, to grow in religious faith and understanding.