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"Spontaneity in Teaching: Incorporating Current Vatican Publications on the Jews into a Course on Modern Judaism," *Shofar* (Summer 1999)

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Source: *Shofar*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (SUMMER 1999), pp. 76-82

Published by: [Purdue University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42942940>

Accessed: 15-06-2015 17:19 UTC

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Spontaneity in Teaching: Incorporating Current Vatican Publications on the Jews into a Course on Modern Judaism

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I teach a course on Modern Judaism which serves as both an introduction to Judaism and a survey of modern Jewish thought. After laying a biblical and rabbinic foundation and introducing students to ideas of the Sabbath, festival and holy day cycle, we spend the rest of the semester tracing the development of the branches and the varieties of Zionism. I also incorporate a brief look at Jewish feminism. In past years I have spent a few sessions as well on Jewish-Christian Relations. In that section I have the students read Martin Luther, "On the Jews and their Lies," the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions," and Susannah Heschel's "Anti-Judaism in Christian Feminist Theology." While I do not keep track of such things, I can usually count on half the class enrollment being Jewish students from various backgrounds.

I studiously avoid teaching about the Holocaust in this course. Although I struggle with this decision and have found that I have been criticized for this by some students over the years, I do this primarily for two reasons. One is that we have a whole course devoted to the Holocaust at the College. The other is that most students have some exposure to the Holocaust, but most will never have encountered any rabbinic literature, any Glueckel of Hameln, any Abraham Geiger or Samson Raphael Hirsch, any Theodor Herzl or Ahad ha-Am. What they know is Jews as victims and they are not familiar with the rich culture Jews have created and the varieties of Judaism to which Jews have adhered. So I overlook one of the two most important historical events in the history of modern Judaism. But I do so with conviction.

Throughout the semester, whenever anything relating to Jews is published in the newspaper, I bring it into class and draw the students' attention to it, using it as a teaching tool. For instance, in January, 1998, the New York Times printed an article about the French paying tribute to Emile Zola on the 100th anniversary of the publication of his famous "J'ACCUSE: letter to the President of the French Republic" at the time of the Dreyfus Affair. That article was an opportunity to offer a preview to the students and remind them that much of what we would study that semester happened not so very long ago. Last spring, when the Vatican released a document written over

eleven years by the Commission on Religious Relations with the Jews, accompanied by a cover letter written by Pope John Paul II, it seemed appropriate to make room in the syllabus for discussion of these documents. Here I was, then, in the position of examining responses to an event which I had decided not to teach in my course.

To be perfectly honest, though, I don't think that my decision to incorporate discussion of these documents was a major diversion. For one reason, the publication of them in mid-March coincided almost perfectly with my having sent the students to the College Archives to view an original of the Nuremberg Chronicle in which are vividly depicted the Simon of Trent woodcut and sketches of Jews being burned at the stake. The students had been introduced to the medieval libels and the Church's role vis-à-vis Jews at that time. When I assigned the reading of the Vatican Commission's document and the papal cover letter, I asked the class to read it in light of what they knew of the medieval world and write a short response essay on the documents. We then devoted two full classes to discussing it. I went into this discussion with expectations and an agenda, and came out of it slightly unsatisfied.

Here is what I hoped students would discover. Perhaps the most obvious lesson was that the Holocaust has left a legacy which continues to affect both Jews and non-Jews. The most recent example of this, of course, is the canonization of Edith Stein as a saint on October 11, 1998. This latest action on the part of the Catholic Church raises questions about the Church's view of its relationship with Jews. The Holocaust is not simply an event of the past and not simply history, but in many ways it is an ever-present factor in the way Jews and Catholics approach one another. I hoped that this convinced students that it was essential to be informed about the Holocaust and that they needed to form opinions about key issues: What was done? What could have been done? Who was responsible?

I thought it was important that students had a context for Catholic responses to the Holocaust, that they did not see this as the first and only Catholic response. I told them that three months earlier French Catholic bishops had made a declaration of repentance at Drancy. Bishop Olivier de Beranger of St. Denis had declared that during 1941–42 “too many pastors of the Church by their silence offended the Church and its mission.”¹ That announcement went on to say:

Today we confess that this silence was an error. We implore God's forgiveness and we ask the Jewish people to hear these words of repentance. We recognize that the Church in France failed at that time in her mission of educating consciences and thus bear, along with the Christian people, the responsibility of not having brought help immediately.²

¹*The New York Times* (October 1, 1997), p. 8.

²*Ibid.*

The result of the French Catholic bishops' initiative was a five-page document called "Declaration of Repentance." It highlighted the historical context of anti-Jewish persecution during World War II. It acknowledged that for many centuries a strong anti-Jewish tradition was evident at many levels of theology in both preaching and in the liturgy. Furthermore, it cited the "serious responsibility" of the Church to the extent that its pastors and leaders allowed anti-Jewish teaching to develop. I let my students know that the bishops of Germany, Poland, and Hungary have all apologized for their predecessors' behavior during the Holocaust. I mentioned the Pope's 1979 visit to Auschwitz, and I described the historic occasion in 1986 when the Pope made the first-ever papal visit to a Jewish place of worship, to a synagogue in Rome where for centuries Jews had been forced to listen to sermons by Christian preachers. In 1994 this same pope had established diplomatic relations with Israel. Having mentioned this background, I opened discussion on the Vatican publications.

I expected my students to think critically about the documents. First, I asked them to look at the prefacing letter. They should notice that the Pope uses the word Shoah and consider why he does that. They should observe that the Pope places the apology squarely in a Christian context with these words: "at the beginning of the 3rd millennium of Christianity" he calls for the Church's "sons and daughters" to "place themselves humbly before the Lord and examine themselves on the responsibility which they have for the evils of our time."³ This strikes me as vague. Is it sufficiently linked to the Holocaust? It is noteworthy, and hardly surprising, that the Pope calls on "all Catholics and Jews and all men and women of good will," a designation which immediately links this letter to the Gospel of Luke (2:14). Nowhere in the prefacing letter is there an apology. Of course, there is an important issue to raise regarding the issue of apology: to whom would an apology be made? I hoped that my students would raise questions.

The first thing in the Commission's document that I wanted them to note was that the context was the millennium and that that was seen as a time for reflection. Is there something millennialist intrinsically about that? The document cites the historical connection of Jews and Catholics, stating that it is unlike any relationship to any other religion. What precise examples might it have given? The document implies remembrances of injustices of the past as part of the spiritual connection between the two religions, but it fails to cite examples.

One looks for specifics in the next section, entitled "What We Must Remember." Are there specifics? For instance, the documents mention that Jews have suffered before

³All quotations from both Pope John Paul II's cover letter and the document issued by the Commission for Religious Relations With the Jews, "We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah," are taken from *The New York Times* (March 17, 1998), pp. 1ff.

the Holocaust, but it gives no examples. It states that Christians are particularly called to reflect on the Holocaust, but it misses an opportunity for education as to why this might be the case. There is no mention of the medieval libels, no admission of earlier negative characterizations of Jews in the liturgy (the phrase “perfidious Jews” used to be part of the Good Friday liturgy) or scriptural statements, such as Matthew 27:25, “His blood be on us and on our children” and John 8:44, “You are from your father the devil.” (Although there is an oblique reference to the influence of “certain interpretations⁴ of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people as a whole.”) What about statues or other damning artwork in churches and cathedrals? Why not point out the abject figures of Synagoga with Ecclesia triumphant over her in influential places such as Troyes and Strassbourg? What about the woodcut of Simon of Trent and the depictions of the Host Desecration libel in the paintings of Paolo Uccello in Urbino and those by other artists?

One of the most disturbing things about the document is how it fails to be specific about historical evidence of the Church’s role in limiting of the rights of Jews. Details about the religious sanctions in the laws of Constantine, Constantius, Theodosius, and Justinian would have given more weight to characterizations of the “tormented history of the relations between Jews and Christians.” There is some acknowledgement of expulsions, forced conversions, the Jewish oath, scapegoating, looting, massacres, but far too sketchy for a document which took eleven years to produce. More alarming is the all too general statement about the nineteenth century which asserts that Jews “had achieved an equal standing with other citizens in most states and a certain number of them held influential positions.” How could the writers overlook the fact that it was not until 1848 that Jews were given civil rights in Germany? (Not to mention that civil rights came much later in other European nations.)

I hoped that my students noticed that early on the document begins to divorce the Church from the role of persecution by pointing toward Nationalism and racial theories, now discredited, as the real culprits. It distinguishes antisemitism (which it claims that the Church rejects) and anti-Judaism (which it acknowledges Christians have been guilty of). Does this effectively remove Christians from responsibility for anti-semitism? The document asserts that National Socialism went farther than Christian anti-Judaism. It points out that many Nazis rejected Christianity, but were Catholics systematically persecuted simply for being Catholics? It proclaims the Church’s leadership in repudiating National Socialism, mentioning Cardinals Bertrams and

⁴I have italicized the word “interpretations.” I am uncertain as to what the writers mean by choosing this word. It is possible that they mean to imply that even the New Testament has interpretations and thus is subject to critical appraisal?

Faulhaber and Dean Lichtenberg. But shouldn't these men be cited as exceptions, rather than the rule?

I think it is important that my students note that the document does ask two salient questions: 1) "whether Nazi persecution of Jews was not made easier by the anti-Jewish prejudices embedded in some Christian minds and hearts"; and 2) "did anti-Jewish sentiment among Christians make them less sensitive or even indifferent" to the Nazi persecution? The key question is asked: "Did Christians give every possible assistance to those being persecuted and in particular to persecuted Jews?" The answer is disappointing: "Many did, but others did not." Is this wording accurate? It is appropriate to insert this defense? What exactly are the statistics on this question? Wasn't it only exceptional Christians who put their lives on the line for Jews?

Pope Pius XII has been criticized for his silence and the issue of his role is at best ambiguous. Yet the document asserts that "he personally or through his representatives saved hundreds of thousands of lives." I suppose that this kind of apologetic is out of place in a document which is attempting to bridge the gulf of 50+ years' silence.

To its credit the document does agree that Christians did not live up to the expectations of their faith for both spiritual resistance and concrete action. It follows this up with a call for penitence. Wouldn't a concrete suggestion as to how to do that penitence have been in order?

An aggravating aspect of the document is the point at which it turns to global issues. It proceeds to mention Armenians, Ukrainians, Gypsies, American racism, internecine strife in Africa and the Balkans, and those persecuted in totalitarian states. It then announces: "Nor can we forget the drama of the Middle East, the elements of which are well-known." While there is room for criticism of all parties in the Middle East, I am shocked that a document addressing the Holocaust so casually tosses in so complex a subject. It simply has no place in this discussion.

Finally, the document points to a common future for Jews and Catholics and utilizes the argument of the Hebrew roots of Catholicism as a reason to build a future together. I find the reference to Paul's letter to the Romans 11:17-24 problematic in that it overlooks a central point of that text in which it says: "And even those in Israel, if they do not persist in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again." To my mind this, in an unfortunate way, fits in with the Christological and messianic tone of the opening of the document.

Ultimately the document expresses "deep sorrow," but it stops short of apology. It uses the Jewish concept of *teshuvah* but does not fully understand the demands of that term. As Ehud Luz points out in his article on "Repentance" in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought*, *teshuvah* implies two distinct meanings: 1) return and 2) reply,

“response to a question or call that has come from without.”⁵ From my perspective that response is lacking in this document which has been awaited for so long. Indeed, any response which would begin to be useful and adequate would require that the Vatican open up its Archives for independent research on its role during the Holocaust.

What did my students gain from this reading and discussion?⁶ I’m not sure. Although some came to this study having taken a college course on the Holocaust, most came to it without much prior knowledge. In spite of their lack of background and prior information, many felt that they could express critical opinions of the document. Most felt that the document did not go far enough. They raised some important questions. One asked why the writers of the document felt it necessary to portray Christians as fellow victims. That writer felt that this assertion had no place in a document which was supposed to be an apology. Another writer objected to the language that expressed a separation of the Church from its members. He likened it to the response of those at the Nuremberg trials: “I am not responsible.” This writer also saw the document as apologetic, rather than an apology, and an attempt to construct a favorable history. Another student suggested that rather than making an invitation to reflect on the Church’s role, this should be a requirement. Christians need to learn their history, she stated. She also objected to the extension of the invitation to men and women of good will. Why not include all people? One perceptive student pointed out that this was a document aimed at a Catholic audience, that it was not even meant to be read by Jews. While technically he may be right, one can wonder why a Commission whose charge is to address the relationship of Jews and Christians would write only in terms accessible to Catholics alone. This student raised the question: how does that change the tenor of the document? Another student objected that people were being called to responsibility as Catholics and not as people. Many of the students saw some of the points I thought it important for them to see. Remarkably, Jewish students seemed more accepting than non-Jewish students. One wrote: “I have mixed feelings about this document. I’m glad it was written. I am saddened by the Church’s inflexibility in not being more self-critical. But still I am hopeful that [it] is the first of many steps on the part of the Roman Catholic Church to improve relations with the Jewish people.”

Was the exercise useful? I doubt that I could have ignored these documents. I think it was especially important that my students wrote responses to this publication and that we devoted class discussion to it. I am convinced that they gained more from this

⁵Ehud Luz, “Repentance” in *Contemporary Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1987), p. 785.

⁶All quotations from my students have been taken from their response essays, which they gave me permission to use.

approach than they would have had I simply lectured on the documents. Would I do it again? Most certainly.

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