

A CHRISTIAN IN CRISIS
AND
THE DECLARATION OF
THE EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH IN AMERICA
TO THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

A brief address presented by
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LUTHERAN SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY AT CHICAGO
in the context of the following solemn assembly:

From the brochure:
The Bernard and Rochelle Zell Center for Holocaust Studies
at Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies and The Midwest Jewish Council
invite
the Chicago Jewish Community to join us in a solemn observance of
the 50th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi Concentration Camps
and the 52nd anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising
FROM UPRISING TO LIBERATION
Sunday, April 23, 1995. 1:00-3:00pm.
Mather High School Auditorium
5835 North Lincoln Avenue, Chicago.

PARTICIPANTS:

Prof. Timuel D. Black,
Fellow at the Msgr. John Egan Center, DePaul University
Rabbi Yehiel Eckstein
International Fellowship of Christians and Jews
Zolman Emyanitoff
Vice President, Midwest Jewish Council
Milton Herst
President, Midwest Jewish Council
George Landman
Treasurer, Midwest Jewish Council
Rev. Dr. Walter Michel
Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago
Hasha Musha
Cantorial Soloist, Congregation B'nai Yehoshua Beit Elohim
Fr. Dr. John Pawlikowski
Catholic Theological Union
Rabbi Dr. Byron L. Sherwin
Vice President for Academic Affairs, Spertus Institute
Joanna Turska
Noted Polish-Jewish classical musician
Members of Chicago's Jewish Youth Groups

Auschwitz, ...

“End-Lösung,” the Final Solution (i.e., the final solution to the Jewish problem), ...

Holocaust (עֹלָה, *ōlāh*, “whole burnt offering”), ...

Shoah (שואה, *šō’āh*, “trouble,” “mistreatment”), ...

Ḥurban (חורבן, *ḥūrbān*, “destruction”), ...

(On Saturday, April 2, 1995, at 8:15 p.m., I heard Elie Wiesel speak at Moriah Congregation on 200 Taub Drive in Deerfield, Illinois on the topic, “Longing for Home, Today: Fifty Years After Liberation.” Among many important comments he also said something to the effect, “I no longer like the expression ‘Holocaust,’ today I prefer Ḥurban.”)

Words fail us to speak about the horrendous horror which the German National Socialists *unleashed* upon Europe during World War II. Their *racial* ideology demanded the extermination of Jews and Judaism from the face of the whole world.

The Christian teaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism was not *racially* motivated. But, they (mainly gentile Christians) claimed, from the very beginning, that *they* had *religiously* superseded Judaism; that *they* had the *only* right way to express the relationship between God and humans.

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire (in the fourth century of the Common Era) Christians were convinced that *their* faith had ultimately superseded Judaism. Unbearable suffering was *unleashed* upon Jews in the name of Jesus and in the name of God wherever Christians had political power.

Christians claimed that the Jews had killed their Lord, their Messiah, their anointed King of the Endtime. Because it is possible in the gentile world for a human to become a god, Christians even claimed that the Jews had murdered Jesus of Nazareth, who was the flesh become God. Jews had killed God -- a thought totally impossible for Jews.

There simply is no doubt that these, and other false and dealy teachings, prepared the climate in which murders and pogroms of Jews became possible and Hitler was able to begin the execution of the Final Solution.

Auschwitz is *not* only a horror for Jews and Judaism, and for all of humanity, but, it is, in particular, the sign of the *end of Christianity ... unless* Christians *repent* and *prove* the sincerity of their repentance by *totally abrogating their claim of supersession* and by stating their Christian faith in terms which are not anti-Jewish.

Any other religion or ideology, which claims that it supersedes, replaces and invalidates another, condemns itself, by that very statement, as invalid for consideration by even one human being.

After Auschwitz Christians *must* express their Christian faith always in the light which is cast from the burning of more than one million Jewish children -- if they want to be taken seriously. Have Christians done this after Auschwitz? If they have not then they are just as guilty as the Nazis. (Actually, this is true also for any one else who plots the elimination of Jews and Judaism)

I am a Christian -- a Christian suffering a deep spiritual crisis. This crisis began in 1944, when I, as a 12 year old boy, was sent to a “Führer-ertüchtigungs-lager,” a leader-toughening-up-camp, in Łódź/Litzmannstadt, in Poland.

One day my immediate leader pointed to some of us and said:

“You, you, and you, follow me.” He marched us to a tram station. We boarded the street car. After some time the doors to the tram were locked and a deadly silence fell upon all in the tram. I was horribly afraid, because I could not understand what was happening. Then I saw. What I saw was shocking. Half starved, dirty people with yellow stars on their clothing. No one had prepared me for this moment. Soon the immediate horror was over for me, but the repercussions have stayed with me all of my life. The doors of the tram were unlocked and normal chatter filled the tram. None of us said anything about what we had just witnessed. No one asked questions and neither did I.

I survived World War II. I was driven to find out what I had experienced. So, I studied the Bible, Christianity, Judaism, History, Philosophy, Theology.

I have served the Lutheran Church as a teacher of religion in Austria and as a pastor here in the United States of America. I became a scholar in the field of Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, and in the field of Biblical Hebrew and other Semitic languages.

Since 1972 I have served as a professor of Old Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, which is a seminary of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

Much has happened to me and to Jewish-Christian relationships since 1945.

Finally, even my church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has made a little baby step in the direction of accepting the enormous guilt of the teaching of contempt for Judaism throughout the last 2,000 years.

The Church Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America on April 18, 1994, adopted the following document as a statement on Lutheran-Jewish relations. If you have heard it before, for example, during the "Service of Confession," which was held at Grace Lutheran Church and at Temple Har Zion in River Forest, then the following reading will be a reminder:

"In the long history of Christianity there exists no more tragic development than the treatment accorded the Jewish people on the part of Christian believers. Very few Christian communities of faith were able to escape the contagion of anti-Judaism and its modern successor, anti-Semitism. Lutherans belonging to the Lutheran World Federation and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America feel a special burden in this regard because of certain elements in the legacy of the reformer Martin Luther and the catastrophes, including the Holocaust of the twentieth century, suffered by Jews in places where the Lutheran churches were strongly represented.

The Lutheran communion of faith is linked by name and heritage to the memory of Martin Luther, teacher and reformer. Honoring his name in our own, we recall his bold stand for truth, his earthy and sublime words of wisdom, and above all his witness to God's saving Word. Luther proclaimed a gospel for people as we really are, bidding us to trust a grace sufficient to reach our deepest shames and address the most tragic truths.

In the spirit of that truth-telling, we who bear his name and heritage must with pain acknowledge also Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and violent recommendations of his later writing against the Jews. As did many of Luther's own companions in the sixteenth century, we reject this violent invective, and yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations. In concert with the Lutheran World Federation, we particularly deplore the appropriation of Luther's words by modern anti-Semites for the teaching of hatred toward Judaism or toward the Jewish people in our own day.

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

I am very grateful that my church has made this statement.

But, I am also *very* sad and, actually, outraged that our Christian teaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism is compared merely to *bigotry* -- even now, 50 years after Auschwitz -- and that this statement does not include a paragraph expressing full and sincere repentance, Teshuvah (תשובה, *těšúbāh*), and a plan to exclude all anti-Jewish statements from all Lutheran teaching, preaching, singing, and worship services.

Please, my Jewish brothers and sisters, *do not be lenient with us Christians*. Keep pressing us for complete repentance, not so much for *your* sake, but for *our* sake and for the sake of peace among *all humans*. This may then lead to true liberation for us all.

Thank you for your attention.