



# Response to the Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

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## Response to the Statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

**By David J. Levy**

In July of 1995 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada adopted a critically important statement addressed to the Jewish community of Canada. The significance of that statement, and the extent to which it is appreciated by the Jewish community of Canada, cannot be overstated. The document is a milestone in Canadian Christian-Jewish relations.

The question has now become:  
Where do Jews and Lutheran Christians go from here? I'll

suggest three possible directions.

## **Dealing with our heroes**

Rabbinic literature spans a period of more than two thousand years. One theme to be found in that literature is reflection upon the real lives of biblical personalities. If you were to take the quest for the historical Jesus and place it into a different academic milieu, you'd have an intellectual pursuit comparable to that rabbinic theme - the quest for the historical biblical heroes. One aspect of that quest strikes me as particularly relevant.

In chapter 30 of the Book of Genesis, Leah is busy giving birth to child after child. Rachel, meanwhile, remains barren. Rachel approaches Jacob and asks, "Give me children or else I die!"

The Torah records Jacob's reaction: "And Jacob's anger was kindled against Rachel; and he said, "Am I in G-d's stead, who has withheld from you the fruit of the

womb?"

The rabbis of the Midrash (Bereshet Rabba 71:7) chastise Jacob for his reaction. They say: "Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Jacob: Is that a way to answer a woman in distress? By your life, your children will one day stand in supplication before Rachel's son Joseph and he will likewise answer them, "Am I in the place of G-d?"

In chapter 16 of Genesis, the barren Sarai gives her handmaid Hagar to Avram. Hagar becomes pregnant. Sarai torments Hagar. Nachmanides states again that "our matriarch did transgress by this affliction . . ."

Even the heralded Moses is recorded, not by Rabbinic literature, nor by medieval literature, but by the Torah itself, in chapter 20 of Numbers, as having sinned as he smites the rock of Meribah instead of talking to it. For that sin, Moses is not permitted to enter the land of Israel.

The conclusion is obvious. According to Rabbinic thought,

perfection is a goal we strive for. Yet, the biblical heroes portrayed in the Torah - the real people whose biographies are believed to have been written by the Holy One, the Creator G-d, and recorded in the Torah - that same Creator G-d and author details the weaknesses of even His greatest leaders.

Why? What value could there possibly be to recording the transgressions of spiritual heroes?

Of course, the point is to inform us that His creation Adam, that which we call the human, is imperfect. To date, there has not been a perfect Adam. From Adam to Moses, from Sarai to Miriam, all biblical heroes have their shortcomings.

There are predictable consequences that flow out of an acceptance of that view of humanity. If spiritual heroes are imperfect, how much more so the average individual?

Thus, imperfection is normal and ought to be coped with as the unchangeable

reality of human existence. That's the human challenge, the human struggle.

With that background, we can address the first of the three avenues for future Lutheran-Jewish Dialogue.

## **Revisiting Luther**

From an early age, all 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century Christians were indoctrinated with Jew hatred. Everybody hated the Jews; there simply was no option. Nor were there any exceptions. There were no other intellectual options.

Reuchlin did not preserve Jewish texts because he loved Jews he preserved the texts because he believed in free scholarly access to the sources of Christian kabbalah. Erasmus had no love of Jews, and attributed France's superiority to the fact that France alone was "not infected with heretics, with Bohemian schismatics, with Jews, with half-Jewish Marranos." [Marrano:

Christianized Jew of medieval Spain.]

In that case, an agenda item for Lutheran-Jewish relations would be a revisiting of the implications of that which is referred to as "the early writings versus the later writings."

Often, reflecting on the contrast between Luther's earlier and later writings, young Luther is portrayed as a Jew-lover who, in his later life, becomes a Jew-hater. Is that portrayal defensible? Suffice it to say that even the attempt to defend it is potentially offensive.

Was there a pragmatic component to early Luther's toleration of the Jews? In his 1523 *That Christ Was Born a Jew*, Luther states that early missionary attempts had failed "not so much [because of] the Jews' obstinacy and wickedness, as rather [through] the absurd and asinine ignorance and the wicked and shameless life of the popes, priests, monks and scholars."

Did early Luther respectfully tolerate a Jewish presence in the hopes of proving through the conversion of the Jews that his anti-Catholic teachings were in fact truth? Did Luther see the Jews, not as Jews, but as potential ammunition in his anti-Catholic arsenal? Perhaps yes. Regardless, he certainly did not love the obstinate and wicked Jews.

Even setting aside historical inaccuracy, I can think of no factor that should motivate one to attempt a defense of Luther. Luther was an Adam, a human, created and imperfect. As such, Luther was as capable of hate as Jacob was of impatience and Moses of anger. Luther's weaknesses ought to be highlighted no differently than Moses', Jacob's, or Abraham's.

Human spirituality advances by learning from the mistakes of its leaders no less than by learning from their divinely granted blessings. To attempt apologetics handicaps the

cause of human spirituality.

Everybody hated the Jews. Let us stop describing Luther as a disenchanted idealist and instead discuss the consequences of hatred.

## **Issues involving the Holocaust**

My second point is inspired by reference to the Holocaust in the ELCIC document. I would suggest, as have others, that the Holocaust is the most important Christian occurrence since the Reformation.

Franklin Littell has said: "The murder of six million Jews by baptized Christians, from whom membership in good standing was not (and has not yet been) withdrawn, raises the most insistent question about the credibility of Christianity."

Harry Cargas says the same differently: "The Holocaust is, in my judgment, the greatest tragedy for Christians since the crucifixion. In the first instance, Jesus died; in the latter,



Christianity may be said to have died. In the case of Christ, the Christian believes in a resurrection. Will there be, can there be, a resurrection for Christianity?"

If the Holocaust is that important a Christian occurrence, and if, as there appears to be, there is a unique connection between the writings of Martin Luther and the writings of Adolf Hitler, and, as others have argued, between the policies suggested in Luther's later writings and the policies adopted by the Third Reich, and in light of the fact that in 1933 the Nazis reprinted Luther's diatribe, *On The Jews and Their Lies*, then perhaps the Lutheran community bears a special obligation to see that the Holocaust appears on the Christian agenda.

What is meant by appearing on the Christian agenda? To begin with, I mean commemoration of the Holocaust in the Christian community.

To illustrate the problem, please

realize that, five years ago, I brought this topic up to the Kitchener Council of Churches. They responded by suggesting that the Holocaust was not a Christian issue. Perhaps out of a Lutheran-Jewish dialogue would grow a more general understanding of how it is that the Holocaust is, indeed, a Christian problem.

Second, courses on the Holocaust ought to be obligatory for every seminary student. The theological issues that the Holocaust prompts are the ticket to a future of world peace and intercommunal understanding. As well, you cannot approach an understanding of contemporary Judaism without an understanding of the Holocaust. To this very day, congregants regularly bring issues to my attention that grow directly out of the Holocaust experience.

Third, might be to bring up for responsible dialogue the current debate over responsibility.

Daniel Goldhagen's book, Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust, has returned to centre stage the topic of responsibility.

We can anticipate some popular discussion of the issue on the op-ed pages of our local rags. Such has occurred in the Kitchener-Waterloo Record, with pieces submitted by James Skidmore of Wilfrid Laurier University and the valuable response from Peter Mikelic, a pastor with the Lutheran church.

However, there is a world of difference between discussion on the op-ed pages and dialogue. The issue is a painful one, but one which needs discussion. Were there innocent bystanders?

### **Dealing with stalemates**

The third path for further consideration would be that referred to in the final paragraph of the ELCIC document. What does it mean to live your "faith in Jesus Christ in love and

full respect for the Jewish people"?

Again, to illustrate the question, allow me to continue reflecting upon the early attitudes of Luther.

When we counsel a young couple purportedly in love and considering marriage, we assure them that love means accepting a person as they are, accepting the fact that they might well change over time, but that neither spouse will ever be able to control or direct that change. You don't marry with the hope that you'll be able to change a person. By definition, love means you accept them as they are.

Can Luther be described as loving the Jews if his motive for maintaining relations was the changing of the Jews, that is, their conversion?

To the Jew, the ideas of "witness intended to inspire conversion" and "love of the Jews" are mutually exclusive ideas. You do not love me if you want me to convert. If you love me, the conversion

issue is irrelevant.

To hear Luther described as a friend of the Jews, and in the same breath to hear of his desire to convert the Jews, is thus an absurd comment.

The Jewish perspective is that anybody who wants to convert the Jews does not love the Jews.

Of course, there is a standard Christian response.

Christianity has something it wishes to share, and the desire to share is testimony to the love. There is no need to review the entire debate; it's been going on for centuries. In short, the debate ends in a stalemate. You're not going to change my mind and I'm not going to change yours.

So what do we do and where do we go? How do we deal with stalemates?

I found helpful to the "stalemate dilemma" the wording of the final sentence of the ELCIC statement: "We pray that greater understanding and cooperation may continually grow between Lutheran

Christians and the Jewish community in Canada."

Christian-Jewish relations via dialogue seem to oscillate between two poles, the syncretistic pole (the "that which we have in common") and the irreconcilable differences pole (the "that which we do not share"). The polar preference, so to speak, in my experience has been dependent upon the participants in the event.

As it turns out, the first, the syncretistic pole, is easily accepted. It is naturally optimistic, full of hope, and bodes well for the future - all the while sweeping the difficult issues under the carpet.

Yet, some balance must be maintained. Part of that balance involves, first, a recognition of the irreconcilable differences, and second, a strategy of acceptance of those differences. I've heard it referred to as a "theology of the other."

That being the case, how can we as Christians and Jews

deal with the reality  
of the classic  
Christian definition  
of love as "witness  
with the intent of  
inspiring  
conversion" and the  
classic Jewish  
rejection of that  
definition? How do  
you deal with  
stalemates?

Certainly we need  
go no further than  
our differing  
perspective on  
Jesus. How do we  
cope with that? How  
do we help our  
congregants cope  
with that? Thus,  
while cooperation  
focuses upon that  
which we have in  
common (the  
syncretistic pole),  
the prayer for  
greater  
understanding  
directly addresses  
the pole of  
irreconcilable  
differences.

There are,  
apparently, two  
schools of thought  
as to how to  
approach the issue  
of irreconcilable  
differences. The first  
suggests that  
stalemates be  
acknowledged,  
placed on the back  
burner and  
restricted to that  
location. The  
stalemate is not  
allowed to  
precipitate anger,  
nor frustration, nor  
resentment. The

stalemate is relegated to a cerebral compartment. The Israeli scholar Shemaryahu Talmon, Augustin Cardinal Bea and others belong to this school of thought.

The second includes most others involved in Christian-Jewish dialogue. The back-burner approach just won't do.

It's going to take a while to undo nineteen centuries of negative baggage, but we'll never succeed if we don't get started. And the ELCIC statement was quite a jump start.

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Rabbi David Levy served as one of the Canadian Jewish Congress representatives to the Canadian Christian Jewish Consultation and as the national chair of the Canadian Jewish Conference Committee on Religious and Inter-religious Affairs. This article has been adapted from a presentation he made to the convention of the Eastern Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, London,



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