



Lutheran-Jewish Relations in the United States: A Historical and Personal Retrospect

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In the following I will offer, first, a brief retrospect on the history of the Lutheran and Jewish communities in the United States, which show some interesting similarities, both having long been "outliers" from the mainstream Anglo-Protestant culture. I will then give a more detailed account of the closer and more dialogical relationships of the two communities during the past forty to fifty years.

As a participant in many of these more recent developments, I will try to provide some historical context and nuance for pivotal events such as the issuance by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America of its "Declaration to the Jewish Community," in which it repudiated Luther's anti-Jewish views.^[1]

1. Historical Background

Both Lutherans and Jews have been a part of U.S. history from the beginning. Lutheran émigrés from Holland arrived in the New York area as early as the 1620's, and in the following decade, Swedish Lutherans settled in the area of present-day Philadelphia and Wilmington. German Lutherans arrived in great numbers in the 18th century, becoming especially numerous in eastern Pennsylvania. By the time of the adoption of the U.S. Constitution in 1787, the Lutheran pastor Frederick Augustus Muhlenberg had become prominent enough in public life to be chosen as the first Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

Individual Jews or groups of Jews were also among the earliest settlers of North America. The first organized Jewish congregations were established in the 1650's. It was to the members of one of these, the congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, that President George Washington penned his famous letter of August 1790, expressing his hope that "the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other Inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig-tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid."^[2]

Despite these deep historical roots, however, there was a lingering sense of "foreignness" about both the Lutheran and Jewish communities in the United States. Neither of them were an integral part of the dominant, patrician culture stemming from New England, nor, for that matter, of the other distinctive American sub-cultures such as that of the South or, later, the Southwest. The influence of Lutherans was significantly reduced by the fact that even where they became numerically predominant (e.g. in Pennsylvania and Minnesota), they spoke and/or worshiped, for several generations at least, in languages other than English. And as to the Jews, despite Washington's fervent hopes for toleration, they were, as is well known, subject to a pervasive antisemitism over the years, especially following the mass migration of Eastern European Jews to the United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The period of the Second World War and its aftermath saw significant changes in this respect. Serving side by side in the armed forces created new bonds between those who previously had been only the unknown "other." The same was true as returning veterans crowded America's college and university campuses, taking advantage of federal support through the "G.I. Bill." Yet

another factor in this period was the massive migration from the cities, with their distinct ethnic enclaves, to the suburbs, most of which were devoid of the traits of any particular sub-culture.

It was in the context of these and related trends that both Lutheranism and Judaism "came of age," so to speak, and became more visible players on the American scene. In the process, they also became more visible to one another. A detailed description of these developments would belong to the province of a church historian, not a theologian. Many of the conversations and joint undertakings that took place were local in nature, and are not archived. Also, in many instances Lutherans, having become much more ecumenically open, were included in broader Christian (predominantly Protestant) entities such as councils of churches that engaged collectively in dialogue or in common projects with the Jewish community.^[3] Thanksgiving Day, for example, a holiday not identified with any particular religious tradition, often became the occasion for an interfaith prayer service in a local church or synagogue.

2. First Fruits of the Dialogue

Observations and Guidelines (1971)

It was the frequency of such encounters and observances at the local level, together with the need for guidance as to their proper conduct, that led the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. to issue its 1971 statement, "Some Observations and Guidelines for Conversations between Lutherans and Jews."^[4] "In order to have authentic relationships," the Guidelines advise, "there must be honesty, openness, frankness, and mutual respect, along with a recognition of the real differences that exist and a willingness to risk confronting these differences." It advises planning not just one joint meeting but a series of them. "Because of fervent commitments," the statement notes, "emotions may run deep. It should be underscored that neither polemics nor conversions are the aim of such conversations, nor is false irenicism or mere surface agreement." The statement urges Lutherans to "make it clear that there is no biblical or theological basis for antisemitism," and declares that all "conscious or unconscious" manifestations of such are to be opposed.

Scholarly Studies

On the scholarly level, the maturity of the Lutheran-Jewish dialogue already in the 1970's is shown by the publication in 1974 of a substantial volume of coordinated essays by Lutheran and Jewish scholars. The book resulted from a series of symposia co-sponsored by the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. and the American Jewish Committee. Entitled *Speaking of God Today: Jews and Lutherans in Conversation*, the volume presents paired essays by Lutheran and Jewish scholars on biblical and theological topics such as "Promise and Fulfillment" as well as contemporary themes such as "Speaking of God after Auschwitz."^[5] Long out of print, the volume is still worth consulting if one can gain access to it.

The American Lutheran Church and the Jewish Community (1974)

The year 1974 was also marked by the issuing of the first official statement on Christian-Jewish relations by a U.S. national Lutheran church body (as distinct from a coordinating council or regional synod). Entitled "The American Lutheran Church and the Jewish Community," it was adopted by the American Lutheran Church (ALC) in October, 1974. It was paradoxical that this particular Lutheran group was the first to officially address this topic, since as a primarily Midwestern body, headquartered in Minneapolis, it had much less direct contact with Jews than did the similarly named Lutheran Church in America (LCA), which predominated on the Eastern seaboard. This pioneering role of the ALC can be attributed in great measure to the influence of St. Olaf College professor Harold H. Ditmanson (1920-88), who chaired the drafting committee for the 1974 statement and offered leadership to U.S. and world Lutheranism in the field of Christian-

Jewish relations for many years.

The statement is organized under three headings.^[6] The first, "Solidarity," speaks eloquently of three levels of solidarity between Jews and Lutherans: Our Common Humanity; Our Common Heritage (the heritage of Abraham and the Hebrew Bible); and Our Spiritual Solidarity. It urges Lutherans to learn from Jews themselves the story of the rich spiritual life of post-biblical Judaism and to become aware of both what Jews and Christians have in common and where they differ.

The second section, "Confrontation," reviews the sad history of prejudice and discrimination against Jews, a history in which Christian anti-Judaic teaching, as the statement acknowledges, has been a major factor. When Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire, it notes,

a systematic degradation of Jews began in which both church and empire played their parts. Jews were regarded as enemies who were to be eliminated by defamation, extermination, prohibition of their writings, destruction of their synagogues, and exclusion into ghettos and despised occupations. During these nineteen centuries, Judaism and Christianity never talked as equals.

Today, however, the statement adds with gratitude, there is a precious opportunity for dialogue between Jews and Christians based on civic parity and mutual respect.

In the third section, "Respect and Cooperation," the 1974 statement urges cooperation between Jews and Lutherans (either as such, or as part of a coalition of Christians) in common social concerns. At the theological/ecclesiological level, it acknowledges a disagreement among Lutherans as to whether the Christian approach to the Jews should be primarily under the rubric of "mission" or "dialogue." The statement itself adheres strongly to the latter.

The final paragraph of the statement deals with the State of Israel, noting that while a "theology of the land" may be viewed as undergirding Israel's claims, a "theology of the poor" tends toward support of the Palestinians. The statement concludes as follows:

It seems clear that there is no consensus among Lutherans with respect to the relation between the "chosen people" and the territory comprising the present State of Israel. But there should be a consensus with respect to our obligation to appreciate, in a spirit of repentance for past misdeeds and silences, the factors which gave birth to the State of Israel, and to give prayerful attention to the circumstances that bear on the search for Jewish and Arab security and dignity in the Middle East.

3. Formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1988)

Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations

Taking into account all of the above, it is evident that when the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) was formed in 1988 by a merger of the ALC and the LCA plus progressive elements from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, it entered upon a rich heritage of Lutheran-Jewish encounter. To carry forward this work, the ELCA established a Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations, locating it within the Department for Ecumenical Affairs (later renamed Ecumenical and Inter-Religious Relations). Initially, the Panel had three members: a pastor, a professor, and a bishop. Later it was expanded to include other scholars and leaders in the field.^[7]

It was not long before the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations faced its first great challenge: what to do about the growing awareness in American society of the anti-Jewish writings of Martin Luther and their fateful role in the history of antisemitism. There was a paradox here.

Most Lutherans, even Lutheran clergy, were unaware, or only vaguely aware, of the existence of this material, even though the major such treatise, *Von den Juden und ihren Lügen* ("On the Jews and Their Lies") had been translated into English and published in 1971 as part of the massive American Edition of Luther's Works.^[8] Despite the set's appearance on the shelves of many pastors' studies, not many, apparently, had read that far into its fifty-five volumes. Even Lutheran seminary education did not customarily deal with this unseemly aspect of Luther's heritage. But toward the beginning of the 1990's, it began to become evident that even if Lutherans didn't know about Luther's anti-Jewish writings, others did.

In 1992, for example, a series of television programs on the history of antisemitism, entitled *The Longest Hatred*, gained widespread attention. Produced by the BBC and shown on American public television, it featured Luther prominently as a font of antisemitism in the West. In the same year, a book was published by Alan Dershowitz, well-known Harvard law professor and commentator on current affairs, in which he recounted his experiences with anti-Jewish prejudice. In so doing, Dershowitz also cited Martin Luther as a chief source of antisemitism. After quoting extensively from "On the Jews and Their Lies," he asked how contemporary Protestantism could still honor as a hero a man who could write such things.^[9]

Also within that general time-frame, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum opened in Washington, D.C. (April, 1993). Erected by virtue of an Act of Congress, although built with private funds, the Museum soon became a place of pilgrimage not only for American Jews but for persons of all faiths and all walks of life. What is especially pertinent to our topic is the short film on the history of antisemitism that is shown in a small theater near the beginning of the main exhibit. Prominently featured in the film as a key figure in that doleful history is Martin Luther. As his visage is thrown on the screen, some of the most hateful passages from his anti-Jewish writings are read out, and demonic images of the Jews from woodcuts of the time are shown.

It was not long before the awareness began to spread among the Lutheran church leadership that although, as already noted, Lutherans themselves had been almost entirely unaware of this dimension of Luther's life and thought, the society at large was very rapidly becoming aware of it. It is gratifying to be able to state that despite this uncomfortable situation, the ELCA at no point protested against Luther being included in the Holocaust Museum film or asked that any of it be altered or removed. Rather, at the behest of visionary leaders such as Pastors Richard Koenig and John Stendahl of the New England Synod, the ELCA decided that the time had come to make a formal statement acknowledging that Luther had indeed held those hateful views, but at the same time stating very clearly that they are not the views of Lutherans today.

Declaration to the Jewish Community (1994)

Based on an enabling resolution passed by the ELCA Churchwide Assembly in the summer of 1993, the Consultative Panel on Lutheran-Jewish Relations prepared a brief but pointed resolution to this effect. The statement was unanimously adopted by the ELCA Church Council (its governing body between Assemblies) on April 18, 1994. The text of this brief Declaration, as it was styled, is worth quoting in its entirety:

Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community

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 the violent recommendations of his later writings 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 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, 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. [\[10\]](#)

The Declaration was received with great appreciation by those to whom it was addressed, as well as being widely noted in the press. Particularly noted was the passion of the statement, as well as its honesty regarding the historical record. Joint Lutheran-Jewish rallies were held in cities across the country to mark its promulgation, and it is frequently cited as a prime example of the advances in Christian-Jewish relations in our time. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington also judged it to be of such significance that it added a postscript to the above-mentioned film on the history of antisemitism. Now, when a visitor viewed the film, he or she still saw the visage of Luther and heard his hateful words read out; but at the end of the film, saw a panel reading as follows:

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, the Christian churches are reconsidering their teachings about the Jews and Judaism. In April, 1994, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America rejected Luther's anti-Jewish writings.

The statement is very brief, and should probably have used the term "repudiated" rather than "rejected," since the point is not that the writings as such have been thrust aside – they remain as part of the historical record – but rather that their views of Judaism and the Jewish people have been disavowed. Nevertheless, the ELCA's action is clearly acknowledged, and it is indeed gratifying that those who pass through the Museum now see the unpleasant historical facts concerning "Luther and the Jews" put in a more encouraging contemporary context.

Revised Guidelines (1998)

The year 1998 saw the issuance by the ELCA of a revised and expanded version of the 1971 LCUSA Guidelines (see above). The new version takes a more historical approach, speaking of the "deep and common roots" that Christians share with Jews. [\[11\]](#) It urges Lutherans to "learn of the rich and varied history of Judaism since New Testament times, and of the Jewish people as a diverse, living community of faith today." Such an encounter, it states, "can be profoundly enriching for Christian self-understanding." The new Guidelines also include a note about the vexed question of how to regard groups such as "Jews for Jesus" or "Messianic Jews," i.e., persons from a Jewish background who have converted to Christianity but wish to retain their Jewish heritage and identity. "Lutherans should be aware," the Guidelines advise, "that most Jews regard such persons as having forsaken Judaism, and consider efforts to maintain otherwise to be deceptive."

Lutherans also, the revised Guidelines urge, need to understand the depth of Jewish concern for survival, "a concern shaped not only by the Holocaust but by centuries of Christian antipathy towards Judaism." This concern is seen as manifest not only on the issue of conversion, but also in Jewish views on intermarriage and on the State of Israel. "Lutherans are not obligated to adopt the same perspective on these matters," the Guidelines note, "but it is vital for us to understand and respect our neighbors' concerns." The earlier suggestions for visits to one another's congregations, etc., are repeated, with the addition of a recommendation for student and faculty exchanges between Lutheran and Jewish colleges and theological schools.

Addressing itself to the clergy, the Guidelines urge that Lutheran pastors "make it clear in their preaching and teaching that although the New Testament reflects early conflicts, it must not be used as justification for hostility towards present-day Jews." They add that "blame for the death of Jesus should not be attributed to Judaism or the Jewish people, and stereotypes of Judaism as a legalistic religion should be avoided."

With these two significant documents on the record (the 1994 Declaration and the 1998 Guidelines), as the 21st century dawned the question arose as to what should be the next step for the ELCA in this field. The Declaration was addressed to a particular issue, that of Luther's writings and their impact, while the Guidelines were rather general in nature. The task now seen was that of addressing more fully and more deeply some of the basic theological issues in the whole Christian-Jewish relationship. The ALC statement of 1973 had touched on a number of these, but that was a generation earlier.

Talking Points (2002)

The Consultative Panel identified eight such issues to propose for church-wide discussion, and created a series of educational materials dealing with them. These "Talking Points," as they were dubbed, were set forth in a series of leaflets, each consisting of an initial proposition or thesis on the topic in question, a page or two of explanatory material, and a set of discussion questions. [\[12\]](#)

The first issue identified was that of clarifying who is the Jewish conversation partner in Christian-Jewish dialogue. Most Christians know little of Judaism since New Testament times, the Talking Points note, repeating a theme that had already been voiced in earlier statements. The first Point refers to the need to correct that deficiency. Its topic heading and thesis are as follows:

Judaism Then and Now

Modern Judaism is a vibrant community with much to offer us in faith, ethics, and piety. Christians err if we dismiss Judaism as a misguided relic of the past.

The explanatory paragraphs under this Point provide highlights of Jewish history in the rabbinic/Talmudic, medieval, and modern periods, noting in the last of these the significant leadership American Jews have given in philanthropic and social justice causes. "The Jewish community," the text concludes, "is a powerful partner with the church in living out God's call to be stewards of healing for the world."

Without reproducing the full text of this or the other seven Talking Points here, it will be instructive to quote at least their topics and initial theses. The latter, as can be seen, are designed to expand the ordinary horizons of Lutherans vis-a-vis these subjects:

Covenants Old and New

Living in the new covenant given by God in Jesus Christ, we also affirm God's continuing faithfulness to the covenant with the Jewish people.

Law and Gospel

The meaning of "law" for Jews is positive, in a way quite different from what it has usually meant to Lutherans.

Promise and Fulfillment

Christians affirm that God's promises to Israel are fulfilled in Jesus Christ and in the life of the church. We need to be aware that Jews also have experienced God's continuing faithfulness in rabbinic Judaism and in the contemporary reality of Jewish faith and life.

Difficult Texts

Christians are morally obligated to understand the New Testament's harsh words against Jews and Judaism in their original contexts, without translating those polemics into antisemitism.

Jewish Concern for the State of Israel

The State of Israel holds a special place in the life and thought of the Jewish people. The need for

Christians to understand the depth of Jewish concern for Israel is especially urgent as we seek to participate faithfully in the quest for peace and justice for all peoples in the Middle East.

Tikkun Olam – Mending the World

Jews and Christians both hear the call to be active in “the care and redemption of all that God has made” and can collaborate in such efforts.

Christians and Jews in the Context of World Religions

Christians and Jews share a special relationship within the community of world religions. Their recent experience in building mutual respect and understanding can provide a model for wider interfaith relations.

Covenantal Conversations (2008)

Realizing that these brief discussion materials were hardly adequate to the weighty topics involved, the Consultative Panel Relations also undertook to prepare a scholarly book on these topics. The completed book was published in 2008 with the title *Covenantal Conversations: Christians in Dialogue with Jews and Judaism*, edited by Darrell Jodock. [\[13\]](#) A unique feature of the volume is that the primary author of each chapter, a Lutheran, wrote his or her essay "in conversation with" another scholar, in most cases a Jewish scholar, whose response is also printed. Thus the book aims to exemplify the dialogical method that it advocates.

Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding

It should be added that a major resource that the ELCA has been able to call upon in many of these undertakings has been the Institute for Jewish-Christian Understanding of Muhlenberg College, an ELCA-related college in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The Institute, established in 1989, states as its mission:

To enhance Jewish-Christian understanding by helping Christians understand Jews and Judaism more clearly, more deeply, and more appreciatively, and by helping Jews understand Christians and Christianity more clearly, more deeply, and more appreciatively.

Toward this end, the Institute offers programming on interfaith relations and prejudice reduction both for the students and faculty of the college and for local churches, synagogues, schools, and civic organizations. The Institute and its leaders have also played a prominent role in national and international venues. [\[14\]](#)

4. Recent Dialogues

While tending to its relations to the broader Jewish community, largely through its participation in the Christian-Jewish "roundtables" sponsored by the National Council of Churches, the ELCA has been in a structured dialogue since 2003 particularly with the Union for Reform Judaism (URJ). Clergy and lay leaders from each group gather periodically for colloquies on biblical and theological topics as well as the practical challenges facing religious life in America today.

It was in recognition of this special relationship that the Presiding Bishop of the ELCA, Bishop Mark S. Hanson, invited the President of the URJ, Rabbi Eric H. Yoffie, to address the ELCA's 2005 Churchwide Assembly – the first Jewish person to have been invited to do so. "I am particularly appreciative," said Rabbi Yoffie, [\[15\]](#) in words that reflect the developments summarized above, "of the role played by the ELCA in forging meaningful relations between Christians and American Jews. You have been a path setter in this regard."[\[16\]](#)

Dr. Franklin Sherman was the English Language Editor and Managing Editor of this web site from 2002 to 2007. For additional information please see also:

www.jcrelations.net/Sherman_Franklin.540.0.html