



Uncommon Allies - Tracking the Jews

01/02/2026 | Victoria J. Barnett

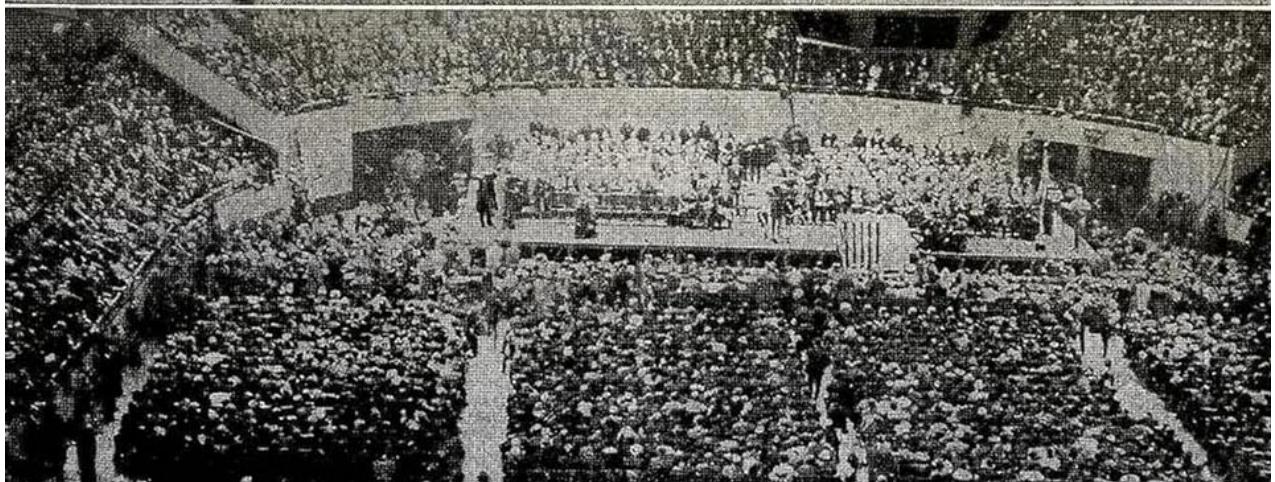
Alan M. Shore: *Uncommon Allies: American Jews and Christians Uniting against Hitler, 1933-1945* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2024, 267 pp. + illustrations
Carolyn Sanzenbacher: *Tracking the Jews: Ecumenical Protestants, Conversion, and the Holocaust* Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2024, 340 pp.

TRACKING THE JEWS

ECUMENICAL PROTESTANTS, CONVERSION, AND THE HOLOCAUST

UNCOMMON ALLIES

AMERICAN JEWS AND CHRISTIANS
UNITING AGAINST HITLER, 1933-1945



Most scholarship about Christian responses to the plight of German Jews and the Holocaust has focused on the role of the Catholic and Protestant churches in Germany and occupied Europe, the issues of the Protestant Church Struggle in Nazi Germany, and the controversies surrounding Pope Pius XII and the role of the Vatican. Until recently, there has been little historical focus on interreligious activism. A growing body of literature is changing what remains a complicated narrative, and these two new books are welcome additions. Alan M. Shore's *Uncommon Allies* tells the story of the U.S. Christian and Jewish leaders who united to raise public awareness in the United States about the persecution of Jews in Europe. Carolyn Sanzenbacher's *Tracking the Jews* is a critical examination of the theological supersessionism that shaped Protestant ecumenical attitudes toward European Jews during the Holocaust.

Shore begins with a portrait of U.S. Jewish-Christian discourse in the early twentieth century and the existing interreligious partnerships that deepened after 1933. The book goes on to explore the issues that united Jews and Christians against Nazism during the 1930s. Once the Second World War began, however—particularly as news began to spread of the mass murders of Jews—differences emerged within the U.S. Jewish community about how best to respond to the unfolding catastrophe. American Jews feared that they might provoke increased anti-immigrant and antisemitic sentiment in the U.S. There were also divisions about how to address Zionism (especially since the FCC and NCCJ included opponents of Zionism, including Jewish staff members of the NCCJ). Shore's book concludes with an examination of the alliances that formed between Christians and Jews on the issue of Zionism, setting the foundation for postwar cooperation after 1948.

As Shore's book illustrates, U.S. mainline Protestant and Catholic leaders displayed greater readiness to speak out for European Jews than is often recognized. Throughout the 1930s (especially after shocking events like the November 1938 pogroms) there were rallies, petitions, newspaper op-eds, boycott initiatives, and organized efforts to move American politicians to act. His book includes riveting accounts of some of these events, from the 1933 Madison Square Garden rally (featuring Christian and Jewish speakers, and which was attended by thousands and heard by thousands more in a live radio broadcast) to the stunning 1943 "We Will Never Die" pageant in New York (dedicated to "The Two Million Civilian Jewish Dead of Europe").

These featured prominent leaders like Rabbi Stephen Wise, Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, Episcopal Bishop John Manning of New York, Michael Williams (founding editor of the Catholic journal *Commonweal*), the suffragette Mary Ritter Beard, and Catholic politicians Al Smith and Fiorello LaGuardia. Many of them viewed the fight against antisemitism as part of a larger battle to defend (in Manning's words) "our common brotherhood, our common humanity, the quality of all in the sight of God, the equal right of every human being to justice, to liberty, and to life" (Shore, 42). It was a big-tent approach that united Americans from different faiths to oppose all forms of hatred—not only antisemitism, but anti-Catholicism and racism—and it emerged from the interfaith partnerships of the early twentieth century "goodwill" movement, which had united mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Reform Jews around social justice issues. Stephen Wise and Christian leaders like John Haynes Holmes, for example, had long cooperated on various initiatives (e.g., both had been founding members of the NAACP in 1909). At the end of 1933, the American Jewish Committee published *The Voice of Religion*, a pamphlet of excerpts from various Christian publications condemning Nazi policies and supporting Jewish concerns. A new era of deeper Jewish-Christian engagement seemed to be dawning at the very moment when it was urgently needed.

From the beginning, however, there were tensions between the Jews and Christians in these movements. The National Conference for Christians and Jews, founded in 1928, conflated the battle against antisemitism with their opposition to racism and anti-Catholicism, and so they avoided statements that focused purely on the persecution of Jews in Germany. NCCJ leaders also worried about arousing anti-German prejudice in the US. They also tried to steer clear of

contentious theological issues like proselytization and conversion. By the end of 1933, the focus of the Federal Council of Churches—the Protestant ecumenical body—had turned more to the Protestant Church Struggle in Nazi Germany, with some Christian publications framing Nazi anti-Jewish measures as part of a larger “war on religion” that included Christians as victims. Shore also discusses the deep divisions within and between both communities about Zionism. And unfortunately, the public displays of interreligious solidarity were never matched by broader public opinion or the political will of the U.S. government (nor were they shared by the majority of American Christians). Even after the November 1938 pogroms in Germany, for example, 71% of Americans opposed allowing more Jewish refugees to enter the United States [USHMM, “Americans and the Holocaust”: <https://exhibitions.ushmm.org/americans-and-the-holocaust/main>]

As the persecution of Jews in Europe intensified, many American Jews felt that their Christian partners failed to recognize the gravity of the situation, and they were increasingly worried about domestic antisemitism. This makes Shore’s accounts of interreligious solidarity all the more poignant. *Uncommon Allies* covers a lot of territory and inevitably, there are places where there could be more complex analysis. As he notes, evangelicals were absent from most of these initiatives, but there’s a history there that includes the fundamentalism wars of the 1920s, the evangelical discomfort with the socio-political focus of the “goodwill movement,” and the sympathy for National Socialism within some American denominations and churches. (An interesting work that explores how these divisions played out among American Baptists is Lee Spitzer’s *Baptists, Jews, and the Holocaust*). Shore did not consult the archives of the Federal Council of Churches or the National Conference of Christians and Jews; the material in both archives paints a far more complex picture of both organizations and their relationship to the Jewish community. In the final chapter on early postwar Christian reactions to the Holocaust, there are some claims that do not hold up (the German Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, for example—which made no mention of the persecution and genocide of the Jews—is viewed by most historians as an alibi for church complicity with the regime, not an early acknowledgment of Christian guilt for the Holocaust). On the whole, however, *Uncommon Allies* is a well-written and important introduction into an aspect of this history that should be better known.

One of the complexities that Shore does explore concerns the deeper tensions about Christian theological attitudes toward Judaism. Despite their solidarity on democratic principles and the necessity to combat antisemitism, with some notable exceptions most Christians involved in these Jewish-Christian partnerships remained theologically supersessionist.

This is the theme of Carolyn Sanzenbacher’s *Tracking the Jews*, which studies the attitudes within the international Protestant ecumenical networks toward persecuted Jews, primarily through the story of Conrad Hoffmann and the International Committee on the Christian Approach to the Jews (ICCAJ). Many of those who became active in the ecumenical movement came out of the international missionary movement. Sanzenbacher’s book opens with an overview of how these former missionaries thought about conversion before 1932, particularly with respect to the “Jewish problem.” She then traces how these attitudes shaped ecumenical responses to the Nazi regime’s early measures against German Jews and Christians of Jewish descent. Racialized antisemitism was central to Nazi ideological aims for Germany and, after 1939, throughout Europe. The chapters covering 1937-1945 explore these policies and the ecumenical responses to them. Throughout this period, theological and eschatological attitudes toward Judaism were the framework within which many church documents were written. The final two chapters analyze the legacy of these attitudes in the early postwar period.

Conrad Hoffmann became central to ecumenical discussions about the persecution of European Jews. He was a U.S. Presbyterian missionary who became the Executive Secretary of the World Christian Student Movement in 1920 and directed the ICCAJ from its founding in 1927. Throughout the Nazi years, he worked with European student organizations, refugee agencies, and ecumenical Protestant leaders on both sides of the Atlantic. In the larger history of ecumenism, Hoffmann is a

marginal figure—but as Sanzenbacher shows, his focus on Christian-Jewish relations made him an influential figure in shaping international Protestant understandings of antisemitism. In 1927, 6700 copies of his booklet, *The Christian Approach to the Jew*, were distributed at an ecumenical conference attended by European and North American church leaders.

At first glance, Hoffmann's writings on antisemitism seem progressive. "The Christian approach to the Jews," he wrote in 1937, "must embody full respect and gratitude for Judaism," and in 1941, he emphasized that antisemitism was a Christian problem: "the Christian who tolerates or aids antisemitism is morally responsible and guilty" (Shore, 73). Theologically, however, Hoffmann was motivated by what Sanzenbacher describes as a paternalistic "Christian benevolence" toward Jews, the real aim of which was to proselytize and convert them. In his words, conversion was necessary "to save the Jews from becoming a problem and even a menace to the Christian faith. The more he becomes a menace, the more likely we are to have anti-Semitism. It is a vicious circle. The only way out is Christ..." (Sanzenbacher, 97). In other words: Jews were responsible for the problem of antisemitism; its cure was their conversion.

Such attitudes were not unique among Christians of that era and are reflected in many international church statements about the Nazi persecution of the Jews, particularly the targeting of converted Christians of Jewish descent under the Nazi racial laws. The ICCAJ's founding intersected with existing "Jewish missions" (i.e., organized denominational efforts to proselytize Jews). It also coincided with the emergence of the ecumenical organizations that operated out of Geneva during the 1930s and were formally united in the World Council of Churches in 1948.

Equally importantly, the larger context of Hoffmann's activities (as well as the U.S. Christian responses discussed in Shore's book) was not simply the plight of persecuted Jews throughout Europe, but the destabilized political landscape after 1918. In the interwar period, ecumenical organizations saw themselves alongside bodies like the League of Nations and the International Red Cross as international advocacy bodies that could address larger social and political issues. In the United States, they focused on the battle against all forms of prejudice and a new liberal commitment to social justice issues. In Europe, there were fears about political violence, the aftermath of the Russian revolution, the rise of fascism and ethno-nationalism, and most especially the plight of "religious minorities"—which for ecumenists included not only Jewish refugees fleeing postwar pogroms in eastern Europe, but Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant Christians who had been displaced by the post-1918 redrawn borders.

This meant that even for Christians during that era who were concerned about antisemitism, the persecution and genocide of European Jews was always one issue among many. Only after 1945 did Christians begin to acknowledge the horrific consequences of the Christian "teaching of contempt" against Jews. An exception—and Sanzenbacher skillfully weaves this into her story—is the role of British Anglican minister James Parkes. Ten years older than Hoffmann, Parkes was initially drawn to ecumenism but had left the movement by 1930, primarily because of its failure to address Christian theological antisemitism. Parkes' books *The Jew and His Neighbor* (1929) and *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (1935) countered Hoffmann's arguments. And while Parkes shared many of the wider ecumenical concerns about Nazism, his emphasis on the plight of the Jews—and the Christian responsibility for antisemitism—was one of the few precursors of the postwar Jewish-Christian dialogue that began in Seelisberg in 1947.

But it was Hoffmann who shaped European ecumenical understandings of the issue, especially after the Nazis came to power in 1933, and this also led to his involvement in refugee and rescue efforts after 1939. Sanzenbacher's analysis of Hoffmann's work in the context of the German church landscape and the ecumenical discussions is essential reading for anyone trying to understand the complexity of European Protestant responses to the Jewish community. Her book includes lengthy analyses of the background and repercussions of key ecumenical documents, including "The Christian Approach to the Jews," the section of the 1948 founding statement for the

World Council of Churches that reaffirmed the ecumenical commitment to proselytize Jews. Hoffmann was the primary author of that five-point statement which, although it acknowledged both the Christian teachings that had demonized the Jews and Christianity's failure to fight antisemitism, also underscored "the justification for postwar evangelization of surviving Jews" (Sanzenbacher, 253).

Sanzenbacher's book is a bleak chronicle of ecumenical Christianity during the Nazi years, but she also conveys the poignancy of how the persecution of the Jews personally impacted figures like Hoffmann. After 1939, a small circle of ecumenical officials in Geneva became involved in broader refugee and rescue efforts, including the initiatives of the U.S. War Refugee Board the Quakers, and the World Jewish Congress. As Sanzenbacher shows, Hoffmann continued to see this tragedy through his theological biases, and he did not change his mind after 1945. Her account also makes clear, however, that Hoffmann and his ecumenical partners (particularly Willem Visser 't Hooft, who headed the ecumenical offices in Geneva, and Adolf Freudenberg, who directed the refugee work), were genuinely trying to save Jews and were horrified by the genocide that was unfolding.

During this period Visser 't Hooft and Freudenberg also met weekly with Gerhard Riegner, head of the World Jewish Congress, who in his memoir described these friendships as "the sole point of light in the darkness" during that period. (Riegner, *Never Despair*, Ivan R. Dee: 2006, 127) In 2000, I interviewed Riegner in Geneva about his work with these ecumenical colleagues during the Holocaust and he told me that he had been so shocked by the 1948 Amsterdam document and its recommitment to the proselytization of Jews that he had ended his long friendship with Visser 't Hooft. The two reconciled in the early 1960s.

It is an indication—if we need any reminding in our present moment—of how painfully deep the divisions between Christians and Jews remain. Like many books in the field, these new works focus primarily on the theological underpinnings of Christian attitudes toward Jews and their consequences. An equally important narrative in both books, however, concerns the self-understanding of Christians with respect to civil society and the rights of different religious faiths. A minority (but significant minority, I would argue) of Christians during this era helped Jews because they believed in their human rights and viewed this commitment as essential to western democracy.

That support was compromised by the continued antisemitism that shaped Christian teachings about Judaism, and it is worth noting that the post-Holocaust Christian-Jewish dialogue that began at Seelisberg involved a different group of people. Although initially envisioned as a fact-finding report on post-Holocaust antisemitism in Europe, the Seelisberg meeting took a very different turn after Jewish delegates—particularly Jules Isaac, who wrote the famous "Ten Points of Seelisberg"—confronted the Christian leaders present with the necessity of repudiating centuries of Christian anti-Jewish teachings. Theologically, this led to pre-Vatican II conversations between Jewish and Catholic scholars, which in turn shaped the text of "Nostra Aetate." But it also means that, in the wake of Vatican II, there was a theological continuity in Jewish-Catholic dialogues that does not exist in ecumenical Protestantism.

In the United States, too, I would contend that the postwar emphasis on "Judeo-Christian" America involved a different group of people and issues. Most of the figures described by Shore and Sanzenbacher had died or were in retirement by the 1950s. As Shore observes, the more conservative and evangelical leaders who emerged as advocates for the new state of Israel had not been involved in the interfaith conversations before 1945. At the same time, the engagement of Jews in the American civil rights movement (American Jews as well as refugees from Nazism like Abraham Joshua Heschel and Joachim Prinz) led to new relationships between Jews and Black church leaders as well as ecumenical Protestants.

In other words, there are breaks as well as continuities in these histories. After 1945, interreligious work focusing on civil liberties and human rights continued, and new theological conversations between Christians and Jews had begun. Both these books are essential contributions to our understanding of the history of Jew-ish-Christian relations during the Holocaust and in its wake.

Source: [Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations](#) 20, no. 1 (2025).