

## **Holocaust Memorial Day Two Weeks Early: Christian responses, then and now...**

### INTRODUCTION

The Holocaust: that is the murder of approximately 6 million Jews by the Nazis and their collaborators. The population of Exeter fifty times over. Between the German invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941 and the end of the War in Europe in May 1945, Nazi Germany and its accomplices strove to murder every Jew under their domination. Of course Nazi discrimination against the Jews began with Hitler's accession to power in January 1933, and many historians consider this the start of the Holocaust Era. The Jews were not the only victims of Hitler's regime. They also targeted the disabled, homosexuals, gypsies, Slavs, and Jehovah's Witnesses, but Jews were the only group that the Nazis sought to destroy entirely.

It is easy to assume therefore that the Holocaust is all about Jews. But it is also very much about Christians: very much a part of our story. For the other players, perpetrators, collaborators and bystanders, were primarily Christian - from the great Lutheran and Catholic traditions. Somehow they had lost that which made them followers of Jesus or they had chosen to suppress it in their horrid pursuit of killing Jews. When we think about the Holocaust, not only do we need to know what happened to the Jews, but also what happened to us Christians.

We are splitting my talk into three parts this evening, and within the time available to us, I shall try to address three issues:

- 1) the part Christians played in the lead-up to the Holocaust
- 2) the role of Christians during the Holocaust, both individuals and the institutional churches, and
- 3) some questions Christians face nowadays, practical and theological, in trying to respond to the Holocaust

Some of you will have heard some of this during my Holy Week addresses last year, but for tonight I have tried to read a bit more and think about it a bit more, and to present it in a slightly more coherent manner.

### 1) THE PART CHRISTIANS PLAYED IN THE LEAD-UP TO THE HOLOCAUST

Let's start with a fairly straightforward question. Why the Jews? Which leads at once to one of the most uncomfortable truths we have to stomach: that Nazi ideology owes its image of the Jew to long-term Christian antisemitism. And it seems fair to say that by the 1930s, this antisemitism was present, at a low level, across much of Europe.

So Hitler's thinking was not original when he wrote that the Jew remains "*a sponger who, like a noxious bacillus, keeps spreading as soon as a favourable medium invites him. And the effect of his existence is also like that of spongers: wherever he appears,*

*the host people dies out after a shorter or longer period.*" In writing this, Hitler was building on 1900 years of Christian tradition.

Following the destruction of the Temple in 70AD, Jews settled throughout the Europe. So for the best part of two millennia, Christians and Jews lived and worked alongside each other. Jewish communities experienced good times and bad, and of course created the rich textures of Jewish history and culture we still know today. But for much of this time, Jews were depicted as 'killers of the Son of God'. Through the centuries, eloquent and influential Christian preachers and theologians denounced Jews as 'blind', a 'brood of vipers' and 'companions of the devil'.

So in the 4th century, Saint John Chrysostom, the golden mouthed preacher, famous for having denounced church and political leaders for abusing their authority, nevertheless said of the Jews: "They know only one thing: to satisfy their stomachs, to get drunk, to kill. The synagogue is worse than a brothel ... It is the den of scoundrels ... the temple of demons ... a place of meetings for the assassins of Christ."

The Irish intellectual and politician Conor Cruise O'Brien has famously described antisemitism as a 'lightly sleeping dog' - which of course wakes up pretty regularly and bounds into life. From the late middle ages on, it found expression in many forms. In Christian preaching and teaching, worship and art, Jews were blamed for the death of Jesus, accused of kidnapping and murdering Christian children, and of drinking their blood. There remain memorials to this belief in both Lincoln and Norwich Cathedrals. Jews were driven out from cities, forced to live in separate areas and compelled to wear distinctive clothing. And in 1290, England was the first country to order the whole Jewish population to leave, by royal decree; thereby seeking to be a Christian territory with no Jewish presence.

The great reformer Martin Luther is best remembered for standing up against the corruption of the Catholic Church. But in 1542, he wrote a tract entitled *Against the Jews and their Lies*. It characterised Jews as parasites and called on people to set their synagogues and schools on fire. Unsurprisingly it was widely quoted and circulated in Hitler's Germany.

By the 19th century, European society became more secular and so did prejudice against the Jews. This coincided with the spread of ideas about evolution taken from Charles Darwin's book 'Origin of Species'. Although Darwin had not intended his evolutionary principles to be applied to humans, they were soon extended by others to a notional 'ladder' of races: with white, Aryan, Anglo-Saxons at the top, and blacks, Slavs and Jews at the bottom. Because many Jews never fitted into the surrounding Christian society, they were easy targets in places undergoing rapid industrialisation and change. They went to Synagogue on Saturday, not church on Sunday; they celebrated their own festivals, and ate their own food. Hence they became 'the other' - marginalised,

persecuted, blamed for every woe, from unemployment and slums to military defeats and unsolved murders. By the 1920s and 30s, Hitler had a fertile seedbed to exploit for his own purposes.

Not that antisemitism was given much prominence in the early days of National Socialism. Those who voted for the Nazis in 1932 knew they were voting for an antisemitic party, but antisemitism was not foremost in their minds. The Nazi campaign dealt with mass unemployment, the economic and social crisis facing Germany, and the need to rise from the military and political humiliation resulting from defeat in the First World War.

Gradually a vision crystallised for a new world order - one in which the invented master race had the duty to rule over others... an idyllic community of people governing the world, one that would be served by slaves. And because this utopian vision would raise Germany from its profound emotional and financial crisis, it seduced a layer of intellectuals (academicians, teachers, students, bureaucrats, doctors, lawyers, engineers and of course churchmen). They all joined the Nazi Party because of its promised future and status for their nation. It was this cadre of intellectuals that gave the vision credibility amongst the masses. A consensus evolved, led by this semi-mythological figure of the dictator, whose strategy developed into the Holocaust: the project to annihilate the Jewish people totally. Saul Friedländer has described this whole enterprise as redemptive antisemitism. I think by that he seeks to convey the widespread belief that the spiritual, moral and physical salvation of Aryans will be realised when the world is cleansed of Jews. And the most chilling thing about it all ... the Nazis were not inhuman - they were very human, just as human as you and I are.

## 2) THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANS DURING THE HOLOCAUST, BOTH INDIVIDUALS AND THE INSTITUTIONAL CHURCHES

The point of Holocaust Memorial Day, which we are pre-empting this evening, is to learn lessons from the past to create a safer, better future. There were of course Christians who did great things to help the Jews, and I hope to goodness they will inspire us. I remember the powerful effect of first seeing the film *Au Revoir les Enfants* in the late 1980s. But there weren't all that many Père Jeans during the war. The State of Israel recognises some 27000 so-called Righteous among the Nations, that is non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews from extermination by the Nazis, some Christians, by no means all. But time does not allow them to be our focus this evening. So instead, let's remember that while Hitler and many of his colleagues hated Christianity, and planned to destroy it once Germany won the war, nevertheless some key Nazis were active in the church. Hermann Goering, the highest ranking soldier in Germany, and second to Hitler in promoting the Reich, was brought up in a Christian home. Some who took part in

mass shootings, worked as guards in the concentration camps, and imposed widespread starvation continued to read the Bible, attend church, pray and sing hymns with their families. Many ordinary Christians took part in actions that they had no idea they were capable of.

Hearing a Holocaust survivor is always an emotional experience. The testimony that has had most impact on me was by Professor Daniel Gold, a microbiologist from Tel Aviv. He was born a Jew in Shauliai, the third city in Lithuania, in February 1937. At the time, Lithuania had a population of some 3 million people - almost all of them Roman Catholics, but 10% were Jewish. That's 300,000 Jews. Lithuania is an agricultural country full of trees. But the Jews were concentrated in the towns, where the synagogues were.

In 1940 Daniel was 3. Lithuania came under Soviet occupation. The next year the Nazis arrived: on 26 June 1941 they came to Shauliai - and two days later the Jews from all the surrounding towns were rounded up, taken to the woods, and forced to dig trenches, allegedly to lay pipes. They were of course digging their own graves. For as soon as the digging was done, they were shot dead. Nothing particularly surprising there, if you know anything about the Holocaust, similar things happened all over. But what I hope is surprising, and shocking, is that the people doing this shooting were not the newly arrived Nazis, but the local Lithuanians of Shauliai: Catholic Christians.

Daniel then told how those who had killed the Jews came back to town and boasted of how they had economised on bullets by battering the children to death. "How could they do this...", he asked, "how could they do this when these people had been living and working together as neighbours: with some people shooting their mates from school?" And all within a couple of days of the Nazis marching into town.

In 1946, just after the end of the war, the Swiss playwright Max Frisch observed: "When people who enjoyed the same education as I do, who love the same books, the same music, the same paintings as I do - when those people are by no means safe from the option to turn into barbarians and to do things that we would not have thought to be possible ... from where should I derive the confidence that I myself am safe from it?" That's the question we have to ask every time we think about the Holocaust.

What made them do it? Pressure from above. Herd instinct. Ideology. All of the above. And we've seen earlier the low level of antisemitism across much of Europe. One of the most convincing explanations I have heard comes from an American Professor, Christopher Browning, in his book about Reserve Police Battalion 101 entitled "Ordinary Men". He emphasises how the Nazis knew how to manipulate hatred and dehumanise their victims. And he makes much of group dynamics. People change who they are according to the situation they're in. Once you start to kill, you justify what you're

doing, and adapt your beliefs accordingly. If it's your job to kill, you become a professional killer. And history tells us that genocides gain momentum as people adjust their beliefs to their actions. It means of course that we can't look at these killers as individual psychopaths - they're human beings like you and me, but operating in the ways in which groups behave when organised in a particular manner. It's a persuasive case and a frightening prospect: any one of us here might have become a murderer, regardless of our Christian commitment.

Hitler's forces wrought their most brutal havoc in Eastern Europe. There churches were predominantly Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox, which explains why so much analysis of the wartime activities of the churches tends to home in on the Vatican. People don't always realise that the Vatican was neutral during World War II. That meant remaining apart from the two power blocks, the Nazis and the Allies, to safeguard as much freedom as possible for the Church. Pope Pius XII's policies fitted with this approach.

So, as Fascism extended its influence in Europe during the 1930s, the Catholic Church remained aloof, challenging the prevailing ideology only when it directly affected matters of Catholic doctrine or law. It refused to interfere with secular concerns. And of course, Catholicism found a number of aspects of right-wing regimes comfortable, appreciating their opposition to atheist Marxism, and their conservative social vision.

When mass killings began, the Vatican was informed, through its diplomatic channels. Despite repeated appeals, the Pope refused to issue any explicit denunciation of the murders, or to call upon the Nazis to stop the killings. The most he would do was to encourage humanitarian aid by the Church, issue vague appeals to Nazis, and try to ease the lot of Catholic converts of Jewish origin.

Two cases from France, where the Vichy Government also pursued an anti-Jewish policy, illustrate divisions within the Catholic Church. France was in two zones, the Nazi-occupied north, and the south ruled over by a French Government in Vichy, headed up by Marshal Philippe Pétain. This Vichy Government also adopted many anti-Jewish policies. In the autumn of 1941, Marshal Pétain wrote to an ambassador at the Vatican, asking him to find out what the Vatican's reaction might be to their anti-Jewish legislation. The ambassador's reply states that he consulted senior officials at the Vatican, and heard of no misgivings about acts of persecution and harassment against Jews. Of course, according to church teaching, there is fundamental conflict between racism and Christian doctrine. But, said the ambassador's letter, religion is not the only characteristic of Jews: there are also ethnic, not racial, factors that set them apart, so there was every reason to 'limit their activity in society and ... restrict their influence. It is legitimate to deny them access to public offices.'

By way of contrast, Jules-Gérard Saliège was Archbishop of Toulouse. During the war he was old and frail, but he was popular and had great authority. He stood out against Vichy from the start, and expressed concern about Nazism as early as 1937. In 1942 when they began deporting Jews, he issued a pastoral letter denouncing the action:

*“That children, that women, fathers and mothers should be treated like animals, that family members should be separated and sent off to an unknown destination, it has been reserved for our time to see such a sad spectacle. Why does the right of sanctuary no longer exist in our churches? ... Jews are real men and women... They cannot be abused without limit. They are part of the human race. They are our brothers like so many others. A Christian cannot forget it.”*

Government officials tried to stop the letter being read aloud, but most priests went ahead and obeyed their bishop. Four other French bishops then copied Saliège's example. And it is clear that following this overt opposition to the deportations, more Jews found hiding places with the French population.

There is a huge body of evidence to consider, but two clear positions emerge from the debate about Pius XII and the Vatican. His supporters argue the Pope avoided making public statements because they might have exposed innocent people to drastic reprisals. Papal opponents on the other hand focus on the evil Nazism represented, and claim that in such circumstances Christian leaders must be forthright, clear and outspoken.

If we turn from Catholics to Protestants, most church leaders in Germany welcomed Hitler's rise to power: like the rest of their compatriots they resented all the blame for the First World War being attributed to Germany. In April 1933 the Protestant churches came together to form a new "national" church, the German Evangelical Church, believing this centralisation would improve relationships between Church and State. These so-called German Christians (“Deutsche Christen) pushed for Hitler's advisor on religious affairs, Ludwig Müller, to be elected as the new Church's bishop. He spent his time trying to integrate Nazi ideology and Protestant Christianity, purging the Church of all its Jewish components, and promoting the Hitler cult. As early as 1934, he claimed: “We must emphasise with all decisiveness that Christianity did not grow out of Judaism, but developed in opposition to Judaism.” The very words of a German bishop. As I said earlier, churchmen formed part of the intellectual consensus that gave Nazi antisemitism credibility amongst the wider public.

Not everyone was willing to travel in this direction, thank God: Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer are well known exceptions; as is Martin Niemöller who served as a submarine commander in World War I. One of our 10 o'clock congregation tells me she knew him and his sister when she was a girl. Deeply shaken by the German defeat in

World War I, Niemöller left the military, and was ordained a Protestant minister. Having voted for the Nazis in 1924, he was disenchanted with their attacks on the Church. So he became a leader of a dissenting group, later known as the Confessing Church, and at a meeting with Hitler in 1934 was outspoken in his objections. From then on, he was followed by the Gestapo. It's worth noting that his opposition was not founded on his dislike of antisemitism. His opposition lay in his concern to maintain the Church's independence.

In 1937, Niemöller was arrested for pulpit abuse, a fact that shocked Confessing Christians, thinking the Nazis would avoid attacking a man of Niemöller's stature and fame. He was released after 7 months, but Hitler was so angry, he had the Gestapo re-arrest him. He was sent to Sachsenhausen concentration camp and later to Dachau, where he was interned until the end of the war.

One thing stands out from our reflections on the Church's reaction to the Holocaust: so much of what appears crystal clear to us at this distance was far from such at the time. Making the right decision requires clear thinking, faith, and a great deal of courage, and they are hard to come by.

The reason I warm to Niemöller is that he was a compromised individual. He never denied his guilt in the time of the Nazi regime, but claimed his 8 years in prison were a turning point. He then became an ardent pacifist, and in 1961 was made President of the World Council of Churches. He is though best remembered for his well known poem:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out - because I was not a Socialist.  
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out - because I was not a  
Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out - because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

### 3) THE RESPONSE OF CHRISTIANS NOWADAYS, BOTH PRACTICALLY AND THEOLOGICALLY

Daniel Goldhagen's best seller from 1996 "Hitler's Willing Executioners" portrayed Germans as willing participants in the Holocaust because of a unique and virulent "eliminationist antisemitism" that he claims prevailed amongst them. Scholars have been unusually unanimous in resisting this approach: the prevailing antisemitism was by no means that extreme, and this was not a characteristic that can be attributed just to the German population. We cannot simply pin the blame on them, however attractive that may be. The reality is that in those circumstances, you and I would have done pretty much the same. Those who broke rank were few and far between.

So let's not start by judging what's happened: humility is a better approach, and sorrow, and penitence - these are after all our Christian brothers and sisters; and let's seek to learn from past mistakes.

In thinking about our response, it helps to reflect what kind of God we believe in after the Holocaust. Our faith in God has to make sense in a world where the Holocaust can happen - because it did happen. And if we dare to talk of Resurrection, that too has to make sense in a post-Holocaust world.

To approach these questions, I want us to start with Jewish Theology, which has understandably struggled to cope with the Holocaust; but it raises some questions that are pertinent for us as well. The issue is straightforward: if God is omnipotent and just, why didn't he do something? Because to judge him by his own standards, in the death camps, he has been found morally lacking. On the other hand, if he's not omnipotent, what do we mean by God? Only to be expected, the Rabbis have come up with some options: one is to be angry with God, to ask unpalatable questions, but still to believe in him. The difficulty with that approach, of course, is that it kind of silences theology, at least about the Holocaust. Rabbi Irving Greenberg argues that the Holocaust proves that God cannot be both omnipotent and just - one of those qualities has to give. And so he concludes that God can't do it all on his own: he needs human cooperation in order to address the ills of the world. That's a familiar approach from Christian theology: God has set the world in motion, in Jesus he's given us a model to live by, and we are now stewards of this world, the living Body of Christ, charged with its care and its flourishing.

Rabbi Kalman Shapira's sermons survive from the Warsaw ghetto, where he preached each Sabbath from 1940-42, though did not himself survive. For him, the suffering of the Jews was the suffering of God himself: not caused by their sins (though sinful they surely were), but by God's plan for humanity. Though the question this raised for the Rabbi was whether the suffering was not so great that it ended up undermining God's master plan, because it risked the total annihilation of God's chosen people.

"The suffering of the Jews was the suffering of God himself." That is of course what Christians say about the cross. Where was God at the crucifixion? On the cross. And where was he at the death camps...?

So far, so good, but what of the resurrection? I struggled with this question in my Holy Week addresses, and confess I still do. Maybe you can help me out. My dilemma is this: Easter shows us that everything Jesus stood for is not lost or swallowed up in death: Good Friday doesn't have the final say. But our theology and lived experience also help us to realise that resurrection does not promise easy answers, or a fast escape from the

sorrows of this world. It's not that we suffer now, and will enjoy glory hereafter. If there's to be glory, it too is in the here and now - so Rowan Williams argues and so I believe - in the trials of life as it's lived. So then we turn to the Holocaust and ask: where is our experience of resurrection in the Church and in daily? You'll see I don't want to impose this question on Jews - it is one for Christians to wrestle with. But even within our Christian ambit, we find barely the faintest glimmer of Christian life and glory lived out in those dark days. Is that as much as we can expect?

And while you're thinking about that question, here are one or two more to go with it. About the Church as an institution? For have we really learned anything? Does our political position nowadays always give priority and dignity to human individuals? There are obvious links between this question and all the Safeguarding Enquiries facing the Church of England. Or do we rather continue to put the wellbeing of the Institution ahead of the individual?

And finally, have we sufficiently altered our theological and ecclesiastical structures to permit a relationship of trust between Jews and Christians? There's a version circulating of this evening's Gospel that tells of the man who has been assaulted and left on the side of the road for dead. Presently, along came an educated, God-fearing and good man; a man known for his generosity and charity. He saw the man who'd been beaten and robbed, but crossed the road, and continued on his way. Shortly, along came a priest, a well respected man of wisdom and learning. Seeing his neighbour in distress, he too crossed over to the other side. After all, he would not be seen helping a Jew. And so the Jew lay in the gutter waiting for the good Samaritan. But there was no good Samaritan. Not this time. As the American Methodist Sidney Hall reminds us: "Christians must be aware that after Auschwitz the Jewish people suspect Christians as well as Christian theology. Jews have 2000 years of documented history on the danger of trusting Christians."

It is very good that a couple of months ago, the Faith and Order Commission published a report "God's unfailing word" reflecting on Christian-Jewish relations and trying to address some of these issues. It is no more exciting to read than most reports issued by the Church of England, but perhaps that's inevitable. Given the need to bring together a diversity of opinions, its colours are firmly nailed to the fence. For me the highlight is the rather blunt *afterword* by the Chief Rabbi, complaining that, unlike the Vatican, in this report the Church of England has missed the opportunity of ruling out the desirability of converting Jews to Christianity. That fairly substantial criticism aside, for the report to have any impact, it is now up to the wider Church to read and inhabit the document.

CONCLUSION

As we draw to a close, and I leave you to consider those questions and any other issues this evening may have raised, let me apologise for having only scratched the surface of such a critical matter for our Christian life, theology and credibility. I commend the Holocaust and the Church's response to you for further investigation and reflection, and have produced a list of resources that you may or may not find helpful. It's on the table.... Of course before embarking on any of the books, I suggest you read a review on line so you know what you're in for!

And now to finish let me leave you with Yehuda Bauer's 11th, 12th and 13th commandments. Professor Bauer is one of the world's premier historians of the Holocaust: one of those people who has pondered virtually any question before we've even thought of it. On Holocaust Memorial Day 1998, he addressed the German Parliament, the Bundestag, and in his address, he proposed three additional commandments, on top of the usual ten. They are of course just as illuminating for Christians as they are for Jews; and I pray for the future of humanity that they will have the same impact on the world as the previous ten.

"You, your children, and your children's children shall never become perpetrators"

"You, your children, and your children's children shall never, ever allow yourselves to become victims"

"You, your children, and your children's children shall never, *never*, be passive on-lookers to mass murder, genocide, or (may it never be repeated) a Holocaust-like tragedy."

Amen. May it be so.

Jonathan Greener, January 2020

The Church and the Holocaust - some resources:

**NOVELS**

**The Book Thief**

Markus Zusak

**The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas**

John Boyne

**Once/Then/Now/After/Soon/Maybe**

Morris Gleitzman

**Alone in Berlin**

Hans Fallada

**HHHH**

Laurent Binet

**The Chosen**

Chaim Potok

**Schindler's Ark**

Thomas Keneally

**The Last of the Just**

André Schwarz-Bart

**Badenheim 1939**

Aharon Appelfeld

**HISTORY**

**The Years of Persecution**

Saul Friedländer

**The Years of Extermination**

Saul Friedländer

**The Holocaust**

Laurence Rees

**From Prejudice to Genocide**

Carrie Supple

**Rethinking the Holocaust**

Yehuda Bauer

**Ordinary Men**

Christopher Browning

**MEMOIRS**

**The Diary of Anne Frank**

**If this is a man/The Truce**

Primo Levi

**Night/Dawn/Day**

Eli Wiesel

**Man's search for meaning**

Viktor Frankl

**The Pianist**

Wladyslaw Szpilman

**But you did not come back**

Marceline Loridan-Ivens

**Scroll of Agony**

Chaim Kaplain, tr. Abraham Katsh

**This way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen**

Tadeus Borowski

**Five Chimneys**

Olga Lengyel

**CHURCH/THEOLOGY**

**A Theology of Auschwitz**

**The Holocaust & the Christian World**

**Bonhoeffer**

**The Hiding Place**

**Holocaust Theology: a Reader**

**Long night's journey into Day**

**The Righteous**

**Christian Heroes of the Holocaust**

Ulrich Simon

Rittner, Smith & Steinfeldt

Eric Metaxas

Corrie Ten Boom

Dan Cohn-Sherbok

A. Roy Eckardt with Alice L. Eckardt

Martin Gilbert

Joseph J. Carr