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THE CHRISTIAN-AND-JEWISH STORY:
A CHRISTIAN HISTORIAN'S REFLECTIONS
Alice L. Eckardt

By way of introduction let me tell you very briefly how I first became aware that Christians and Christianity have a grave problem that calls not only for great honesty in admitting it but also courage to undertake the revolutionary thinking that is called for. I am here first as a historian — a historian who lived through the Holocaust (in the safety of America) and thus a historian who had to learn how it was possible for such a wholesale campaign of murder to be carried out in the Christian West without any significant protest; and, second, as a Protestant critical of my Christian heritage in view of what I have learned about not only the time of the Third Reich and its "Final Solution" but also about the preceding Christian centuries. I believe that all Christians should be critical Christians, on behalf of God's desires for a genuine world community, for I have spent some decades studying this history that most Christians (or other non-Jews) know little about — (and usually do not want to know).

My husband Roy Eckardt and I all but stumbled into the subject when he set out to write his Ph.D. thesis on what some foremost theologians of the late 19th to mid-20th centuries had to say about Judaism and the Jewish people. He wanted to work with Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, himself an American pioneer in Christian thinking on this subject just prior to and during the Nazi era. Niebuhr saw the need to alert American Christians to the devilishness of the antisemitic malignancy. Even though Roy was doing his work in the immediate aftermath of World War II, he did not undertake it with any prior awareness of the extent — historically, theologically, or psychologically — of the church's role in all but initiating antisemitism and in carrying it forward and giving it a respectable and lasting foundation. But he and I quickly discovered it — not just in the distant past but in that time which was "the present," and among churchmen of all confessions. The issue has engaged us from then on. You could say we were converted away from the old adversus Judaeos or anti-Jewish teachings and traditions of the church (even though we had not known them ourselves), and converted...
to finding a new way to confess our Christian faith free of that poison.

How pervasive such a conversion and renewal is among Christians is impossible to say, though the Rev. Dr. Beverly Asbury of Vanderbilt University holds that "widespread changes of consciousness or belief" in this regard are not to be found among much of the clergy and laity in "a number of ecclesiastical traditions." (I believe it is safe to say that this applies across the board in all the churches.) Such is the case in spite of "willingness in some Christian churches to change attitudes, theology, and institutional practices," and readiness on the part of "many Christians" to affirm the integrity of Judaism and the moral imperative of Jewish survival. (Asbury finds) that these changes "have taken place at a professional level of religious leadership, among scholars; and among those who have participated in . . . interfaith dialogue groups." But even among scholars and religious leaders this is true for only a minority, while most go on thinking, teaching, and preaching in the traditional mode, unprepared to face the moral challenge of the historical record and unwilling to undertake the frightening task of reformulating Christian theology so that it no longer carries the seed of either spiritual genocide or physical genocide. The terrible human consequences of absolutist theological assertions, especially when combined with the demonizing of the people of the original covenant, are not to be found only in the Nazi Holocaust but were preceded by many Christian centuries of religiously-inspired persecutions, crusades, judicial murders and mob massacres on false charges of host desecration or doing the devil's work, inquisitions, and pogroms.

However, Paul van Buren argues that since a "church history that has digested the history of the Jewish people will undercut every pretension of the church to be the reign of God on earth," we can be liberated from our antisemitic heritage and learn how to be one of God's people properly.

A few epigraphs are pertinent to what I want to put before you: "The foolish and the dead alone never change their opinion." --James Russell Lowell
"In any religious life there are times when an act of purification is called for and cannot be postponed."
--Jules Isaac (1960)

"The dead of Auschwitz should have changed everything, and nothing should have been able to continue as before including within our churches, especially within our churches."
--Johannes Baptist-Metz (ca. 1980)

"The Kairos of our time calls for the badly neglected ethic of welcoming the stranger . . . and welcoming the outcast."
--Darrell Fasching (1993)

While there is no straight line from Christianity's adversus Judaeos tradition, beginning at least as early as the second century, to the Third Reich's "Final Solution" with its mass murder facilities operated by full state authority, there is a very heavily trodden path that leads from the one to the other. True, it did not have to happen this way, though the logic of that final step was clearly there, especially in the Dominican and Franciscan friars' thinking and actions from the 14th century, and in Spain's actions not only in evicting its ancient Jewish population (1492) but also in its policies toward the "New Christians" (Jewish converts) during the 15th and 16th centuries. Moreover, it was the logical culmination of the Church's absolutist theology, which received new vigor in both the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and the wars of religion that followed. In any case we don't need the final extremity of the Holocaust to see the absolute need for changes in Christian teaching since the previous discriminations, restrictions, expulsions, and mass killings should have been sufficient.

As a contemporary Christian scholar has written, "Christian anti-Judaism discloses the dark side of Christian history" -- a dark side that most Christians today either don't know about, or believe they can ignore because it was in the past. But is it only in the past? or does it not live in our midst, not only in its most perverted and we would way most unChristian fashion among the antisemitic (and anti-Black) extremists, but also as it is embedded in many of the church's
Sunday lectionaries that are heard and absorbed by the laity almost unthinkingly and approvingly since it comes from "God's Holy Word"? (Poor God! How much human evil we have placed on God's shoulders.)

Robert Litton in his study of the Nazi medical doctors who participated in the "Final Solution" process contends that those persons had not willed to do evil, but had come to accept the evil as already there and thus capitulated to it (by which he means they had come to accept it). A parallel question for those of us who are Christians is: Do we, will we accept and capitulate to the evil imbedded in the church's traditional theology with all its built-in negation of Judaism (as well as to other religions though with less hostility) or will we openly acknowledge and then reject that evil and stand up against it?

Let me be clear: I was not claiming a few remarks back that the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews was the deliberate work of the churches (though some came close to endorsing it). But I am saying that without the preceding millenia of anti-Jewish preaching and teaching and legislation, the Holocaust could not have happened. Or at least it could not have been so enormously successful. Nor could it have been carried out with most churches and churchmen saying nothing against it.

"Like all memory, Christian memory is selective" -- as is, of course, Jewish and all other memory. Why do people remember what they do, and not other things? One answer is that we "remember the past for the present." That is, we single out what we think is "more representative, more typical, more significant" -- especially what we idealize -- as part of our desire to acquire self-understanding and identity. The same process is true for collective groups, such as religious institutions and nations. Because collectivities such as these "cannot bear the idea that they have no beginning and no history," they will create one, or they will re-create one that suits their desired self-image. Thus we all tend to idealize our past and bury those things we prefer not to remember.

"Collective imagination" does not mean pure fabrication, but it does mean applying interpretation to certain selective historical data. In that process different groups, such as religions, may utilize the same remembered events in totally different, even opposite, ways because of the way they interpret them. That is exactly
what has happened with Judaism and Christianity in (a) selecting the events that are seen as of central significance, and (b) remembering and interpreting the previous events that are seen as leading up to, and as consistent with, the new self-image. Thus, as Robert Wilken observes, though Jews and Christians claim a "common history in ancient Israel, . . . their constructions of the past have almost nothing in common." "Christians have always been perplexed and troubled" about why Jews do not embrace the Jesus whom Christians see as Israel's long-awaited messiah. From that perspective, they concluded -- or argued themselves into concluding -- that Jews had to be either blind and hard of heart or wicked, perhaps even deliberately wicked. This allowed the church to claim for itself everything that seemed positive in the Bible they first inherited and then appropriated from the Jewish people. In the process, "Christians constructed a caricature of Judaism to conform to Christian beliefs. [And] if Judaism [therefore] had no right to exist, because Christianity had taken its place, Christians thought that Jews should be excluded from the privileges accorded other members of [Christian] society." \( ^1 \)

On the other side of the divide, Wilken continues, "a Jew does not need Christianity to give coherence to his view of the past" which is the important and shaping factor in Jewish belief because that view was shaped very largely prior to any significant Christian impact on Judaism. Though Christianity has certainly had a strong impact on Jewish existence, it is one that is external to Judaism.\(^10\) (We can see how in the same way Christians feel about Islam, for the Muslim religion stems from post-Christian beginnings and has no direct impact on Christian beliefs; it is external to Christianity.)

In other words the later religion is more challenged by the earlier one with which it contests commonly claimed sources from earlier times than is true the other way around.

While this is an explanation of what the process has been, it is not a justification in any of the cases. And it seems to me that it is high time for all of us to acknowledge our common heritage and reexamine how we have used and misused it. And it is high time for us to reexamine how we have reconstructed the past to suit our own desired self-image; to learn the history of how those who had power abused it to injure those who were seen as outsiders or even competitors, and who lacked power to defend themselves.
It is almost unbelievable to learn how Christians over the centuries, in the majority and holding all the reins of power, consistently feared the influence of the Jewish minority -- even as that minority diminished to but a drop in the bucket of the national, and even wider, society! There is no doubt in my mind that that fear, and unacknowledged insecurity, was responsible for much of the ideology and theology that progressively painted "the other" in ever blacker images, and for the periodic violence unleashed against those seen as the threat, the enemy.

It is also time for us to acknowledge our own need for at least some of each other's insights; to learn how ideas (especially theological ones) that have been created and used to do grave and even gross injury to those seen as "others" need to be and can be replaced by theologies that by being more open to others will also be more open to the Creator God who surely is concerned for all peoples. It is time to recognize that "change, innovation, and diversity" have in certain ways always been part of Christianity despite the church's and theologians' efforts to deny it.

Facing up to the dismal past has both a negative and a positive rationale: On the negative side, should we fail to create a theology free of traditional anti-Jewish and antisemitic teachings, we would, in effect, be undergirding a post-Holocaust justification for the centuries-long murder of Jews. On the positive side, we need to recognize that there are "key moments of history [when] possibilities for transformation emerge, which will in turn create a new tradition. These moments are kairos (a Greek word standing for times filled with the promise of the future [a new future]... and [perhaps even] expectation of new revelatory experience. At such a juncture [humans] can respond either by seeking to hold onto the past, out of anxiety about the new and untried future, or [they] can take the risk of the new."11 To be sure, such moments have been seized before, some successfully, some disastrously, some without any significant impact. The ending of slavery would certainly be near the top of any list of such moments, despite subsequent failure to truly incorporate those liberated into many of the broader societies in which they had been enslaved. The granting of full political and legal equality to women in the West would be another, again with acknowledgment of some
further progress needed and especially the need for similar revolutions of this nature in other parts of the world. 12

I dare to venture that we live in a time of kairoi, or at least potentially so. Not because of an initiating moment of grand breakthrough on its own, but a time of kairoi in response to that event of massive and all-but-unimaginable evil: the Nazi Holocaust.

We can transform our faith, our attitudes, our teachings so that they will not carry the genocidal impulse or the impulse to subordinate any group or class of people. We can learn to be more humble in our confession, even more relativist (to use a much maligned concept). We can recognize that human limitations and egotistical needs often determine our creeds and theology so that insights from others' faith perceptions are either ignored or denigrated instead of being appreciated and perhaps even adopted for ourselves.

This kind of revolutionary metanoia requires knowledge of what was wrong in the past, and a genuine experience of repentance (teshuvah). It also calls for courage to walk forward into the unknowable and to try the untried. But what an opportunity!

Where do we as Christians begin?

First we are called to listen -- to those outside our own circle, and especially to Jewish sisters and brothers. Christians have done the talking for far too long, with too much arrogance, pride, and even hate, and we have begun to recognize what that led to. We created a false image of Jews and the Jewish faith out of a limited and self-serving perspective. Perhaps Christians have been afraid to know what Judaism really teaches. It is time to listen and learn; not just to listen to the hurts, but to the joy and the faith of those others in the covenant with God. (A rabbinic saying I particularly like says that humans were given two ears and one mouth because we need to do twice as much listening as talking.)

After listening we need to ask difficult questions of ourselves, and to consider seriously some of the answers being put forward by fellow Christians who have vicariously entered the whirlwind of the Shoah and then have dared to backtrack in order to find what had made it possible. Let me suggest some of the key questions for our time:

1. What is the mission or role of the Jewish people and of Judaism in the world today?
2. What should be, or can be, the mission of the church and of Christians today? What must the church revise in order to have a credible witness?

3. Can the church, individual Christians, and the Christian community affirm Jesus as Messiah, and especially the resurrection of Jesus, without that affirmation being triumphalistic, that without negating Judaism and the covenant between Israel and God? Or, alternatively, without making that covenant an instrument of imposing special demands on Jews that may lead to their continuing suffering and possible death?

4. Did God really finish the work of redemption some 1900 years ago? If so, is there a real basis for hope in this world in light of the destruction we have witnessed and that we know is potentially even worse today?

5. What are we to do with theologies founded on vicarious suffering and sacrifice after such massive, incomprehensible, and meaningless suffering as this century has witnessed? And what should or can be our relationship with God after all this?

The first question regarding the role or mission of Jews and Judaism in the world today when addressed to Christians is a barometer, for most Christians have never considered the question at all. When faced with it, most are completely taken aback. The reaction can indicate whether Christians think it is a valid question, or whether they still believe the answer was given centuries ago, by God, and that there is no reason to change the answer: namely, that Judaism has no mission (except perhaps a negative one) because the church as "the new Israel" is fulfilling the mission Israel failed or refused to assume.

However there are some exceptions today:

a) Some Christians dare to attest that the Jewish mission is to teach us Christians what faithfulness can mean without it involving the derogation, or exclusion, of those who are different.

b) A Dutch pastor, Coos Schoneveld, insists that it is time we see Jewish survival over so many dire centuries in the light of a new understanding of what the Resurrection affirmed: the Resurrection-affirmation (that is, by God) of the Torah, which Jesus upheld; the Resurrection-affirmation of the people of Israel, of which Jesus was one; and the Resurrection-affirmation of Jewish existence as such. Schoneveld sees Jesus as having been vindicated as a Jew who underwent martyrdom
for the justification of God's name (kiddush ha-Shem). Just think, if that were to become the central message of Christian preaching on Easter Sunday (and in the weeks leading up to and following Easter), what a difference it would make. And it would not rule out a Christian place in God's plan of things.

c) A Methodist preacher and teacher of the United States, Franklin Littell, argues that Jews alone seem to understand the "Language of Events." That is, they uniquely continue to affirm the Lord of history, and therefore to see new historical events as having some revelatory significance. (I will say a bit more about this when we consider the next question.)

d) Growing numbers of "evangelical" Christians today see Jews as living out biblical prophecy in returning to Israel and rebuilding the national homeland and state.

Once the possibility of Jews and Judaism having a positive role is entertained, there is a sound basis for questioning the negative image the church has presented of this covenant community, and for questioning the advisability of trying to convert Jews away from their own mission in order to become Christians and take on whatever the Christian mission is. In Germany the Lutheran pastor Dr. Rudolf Pfisterer denounces the "mission to the Jews" (Judenmission) as eine geistliche Endlösung — a spiritual Final Solution. (That is, you don't kill them but you still remove them from the Jewish community, already so diminished, and its role.) Dr. Robert Willis (in the U.S.A.) challenges us by arguing that if, after the death camps, Christians can "still cling to the pretension that their story undergirds a responsibility for the conversion of Jews, then it is questionable whether we can learn anything from the events of history." Unless the church can revise its traditional stance of triumphalism, it is foredoomed to "exclude fellow human beings who are Jews from responsible, conscientious caring." Such an "unredeemed" form of triumphalist Christianity lacks the possibility of shaping conscience and behavior in any morally appropriate fashion after the Shoah.

Dr. Willis' observation already speaks to the second question I suggested: What is the mission of the church today, and what must it revise in order to have a credible witness? Littell argues that the Christian view of history and of salvation history which has said that
the Christ event (the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth) is the last revelatory event to take place in history must be replaced. For according to that traditional Christian view no other historical event will have revelational impact. Accordingly the Holocaust and the rebirth of the Jewish nation would have nothing to say to us about God or our understanding of the divine will, for they are purely human events from which certain human lessons may be drawn, but which are otherwise irrelevant for believers or their faith. The Holocaust, deplorable as it was, tells us nothing, reveals nothing, has no new message. And it certainly has had no impact on God's plan of salvation.

A Protestant theologian of Canada taking this view is Alan Davies. Even though he has said that the Holocaust must be a command to Christians "never again" to have anything to do with the destruction of Jews, even as silent bystanders, Davies still insists that the crucifixion and resurrection lie "along the margins of history" and therefore they qualify "the extent to which Christian faith can accept new revelatory moments..." In other words, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus rule out the Holocaust and State of Israel as having significance for faith (as well as any other conceivable event of history, as far as I can see).

To this traditional Christian view of history, one is driven to ask: If one believes in God as Lord of history -- that is, as one who has intervened in historical periods of time under certain conditions of crisis, or if one believes that God acts through the happenings of time and place -- then what does one believe in during and after such a terrible event as the Shoah when God did not intervene? Can the church continue to separate God and itself from the nasty realities of life? Or must the church recover the sense of God's continuing presence in some way, such as God's own suffering in the death camps and Her rejoicing in the return of the Jewish people to Eretz Israel, even with all its uncertainties and dangers?

We can be thankful that we live at a time when the churches have begun to acknowledge not only the realities of Christian history (rather than only the ideal it proclaimed) but also their theological underpinnings. This is attested by close to one hundred quite
remarkable church statements\(^{18}\) (together with occasional more lengthy supporting documents) which acknowledge responsibility for past doctrinal errors and centuries of suffering imposed on the Jewish people, and which then call for a reformulation of the faith.\(^{19}\)

These official statements need to become the initial portion of a new Christian "testament" for they are our twentieth century counterparts of the epistles to the churches found in the New Testament. They are the carefully spelled out thinking of clergy and laity of denominations, regional church associations, and interdenominational groups undertaken after much study and thought at a critical time in history. They are the responses of people of faith to an evil whose prior roots had long been ignored and even undergirded by the churches. With eyes and minds thus opened, Christians are enable to gain new insights by rereading the first volume of Scripture (the Tanakh or "Old Testament"), reconsidering Jesus' life and teachings, and establishing new relationships with God's people Israel. Like the letters in the Apostolic Writings, most of these statements have a sense of immediacy, and an urgency that calls for response.

Yet these primary teaching resources are virtually unknown in the congregations. How many of you know of them? have read even one? have heard them talked about in church? They have not been made part of the theological education of clergy. Nor are they chosen by preachers as the text for the day and subject for the sermon. They are not incorporated into the churches' religious education materials. Consequently the new thinking they embody has not become intrinsic to Christian belief and affirmation of faith.

It is time we stopped ignoring them, for they need to become a permanent part of the church's foundational resources as we seek to understand our role in God's creation.

The second question about what the church needs to revise in order to have a credible witness in the light of real history also leads me to quote Dr. Theodore Gill. After talking about even the Confessing Church's failure to respond to Hitler's crimes, he testified (and that word is the correct word to use): "We have little to learn from any church or any prophet who cannot recognize murder until it is murder in the cathedral." Even so, Gill finds that we do have things to learn from the Confessing Church's experience: "the church by
itself is not big enough to make the essential differences. So we need to look around for allies. ... We learn the common language." For the Confesing Church shows us "what happens when you are late .... We need an alerting signal way, way out from the church .... and most of the sensors should be 'human rights'," not theological fine points. "Above all ... we [Christians] do not [that is, should not] theologize before Jews .... Since the Holocaust what word can we hear but Bonhoeffer's who ... said that thereafter the Germans could not speak evangelically again to the Jews." Then Gill said he would enlarge that from Germans to Gentiles. And I enlarge it from Germans or Gentiles to Christians.

What must we do? asks Gill. "Humanize, humanize, that is the ticket: [people], their freedom, their chances, their creativity, their relationships, fulfillments, hopes -- that is what we need to keep our eyes on .... It is transgressions in these areas that give us our warnings .... Watch for [people] giving trouble to people."20

The third question is at the heart of the Christian dilemma: Can we affirm Jesus as Messiah, and especially his resurrection, without that affirmation being absolutist and therefore negating other faiths, but especially that of Jews? Rosemary Ruether puts the question, can we profess Christ without at the same time, willy-nilly, saying "and the Jews be damned"?

We in the churches have to recognize that we have a very great challenge to make our christological confession no longer the twin to, or underpinning of, anti-Judaism and antisemitism. We have to do our homework on many fronts in order to stop the preaching of a gospel message still filled, even if unconsciously, with the adversus Judaeos message, or with any triumphalistic one. It is not easy for the church or its theology to break out of the mold hardened by nineteen centuries. Yet that is what we must do.

The complexity of the Christian problem is demonstrated by the chronological relation of Easter and Yom haShoah. Yom haShoah, the day of remembrance of the victims of the Holocaust, follows Easter by one week. If Easter is the message of resurrection, victory of life over death, of God's rule over that of man, what is Yom haShoah? It is the truly "Black" Friday message of Jesus' cruel death multiplied six million times. And the event it mourns occurred nineteen centuries...
after the church's proclaimed act of redemption. So what is the Easter message today? or, what is the message of Yom haShoah a week after Easter Sunday?

To that difficult question let me urge you to consider again Coos Schoneveld's rereading and reinterpretation of Jesus' resurrection as God's support for the Jewish people's role and hope. But let me also make a few other tentative suggestions for your consideration.

It is hardly revolutionary to say that Easter's victory was not and is not the final victory over death and evil. Yet we need to recover and reaffirm the disciples' own realization that Easter was not the final act, but would be -- had to be -- followed by the coming of God's kingdom. At best the resurrection was a promise of an ultimate victory at some future time of God's will for good and of God's reign of justice and harmony. We may see it as a signal not to give up hope but especially not to give up working to achieve a loving and caring human community. The realization or recovery of the idea -- which Judaism has so long stressed -- that we are God's co-partners gives dignity to the human person but also shows us what a tremendous amount of responsibility for the Creation God has bestowed on us, like it or not.

Then I suggest we expand our thinking about resurrection. Can we perhaps let it represent the individual and collective return to life of all those Jews (and other liberated victims) on the very brink of the grave in the death camps? Can we make what will appear to be more limited claims, and yet may actually be more radical ones? For example, that resurrection represents the reaffirmation of life, of trust in the future, of struggle so that the hoped-for future may be achieved, of humaneness in defiance of the negation of all life-sustaining values. That resurrection may be a call for the reaffirmation of love over hate; of human worth over the devaluation of the human; of justice over massive injustice; of personal dignity over personal indignity.

Can we apply resurrection to the triumph of the human spirit not to succumb to total denigration and degradation? -- that triumph that enabled a person to feel that she or he did have some human value even as much as twelve years of dehumanization by the German Nazis.
and their cohorts, and abandonment by the rest of human society; the triumph of the human spirit that believed that there was a function in picking up one's life and building for a future. As Irving Greenberg has put it, to climb out of the death pits and have a child is either madness or messianic. Or, to put it another way, to have an insane or magnificent determination to fight back against regnant Evil.

Also, perhaps resurrection ought be recognized in the return to collective Jewish life in congregations, associations, and in a national life by the remnants of the European-wide Jewish people so overwhelmingly decimated by humiliation and murder (not just in the Nazi years but throughout so many Christian centuries). Even secular Israelis often speak of their national rebirth as "resurrection."

However we rethink or reapply the event or concept of resurrection, let us make sure that we no longer use it as if it were God's vindication of Christian claims over against Judaism and its people.

The fourth question about whether God finished the work of redemption nineteen hundred years ago in Christ is relevant to Christians' attitude and relationship to all other religions of the world, not just toward Judaism. But it also says a great deal about what we think about God. Do we really believe that God would be so perverse or lacking in imagination or historical consciousness that the Holy One would limit humankind's means of attaining awareness and knowledge of the sacred to only one people, or one channel of communication, or one type of insight? Since God's creation abounds in diversity, it would appear logical that we should expect to find diversity in efforts to comprehend the Supreme Being, in the beliefs arrived at, and the means of expressing response and devotion -- and not without God's approval of all these efforts. (After all, none of the religious traditions is without its failings, especially in the way it treats or speaks about certain people)

Tom Driver has commented that because "belief in Christ Jesus as 'the way, the truth, and the life' has . . . for many [non-Christians] become the badge of arrogance . . . . numerous theological voices are today questioning Christianity's historical claims concerning the centrality, the finality, and the exlusionary uniqueness of God's revelation in Christ." Driver himself goes so far as to wonder whether the centrality of Christ is "a clear, a beneficial, or a necessary part of Christian doctrine" given the way that assertions
about Christ's exclusive salvational role have been at the root of denying equal humanity and dignity and equal power to women. Driver also points to how Christ's exclusive salvational role has been at the foundation of rationalizing and spreading antisemitism, and treating other faith adherents as non-equals. (My earlier comments about the relation of Easter and Yom haShoah are applicable in the context of this question as well as the third one.)

Finally, our fifth question regarding theologies of sacrifice and suffering: This is an enormous subject and I can only give it very brief attention now. Christian theology is built on doctrines of incarnation and vicarious suffering according to which God took on human form in order to share in the human plight and thus to redeem humans from the consequences of sin. Suffering in this context is given a glorified status and Christians are urged to be prepared to share Christ's "passion" because suffering becomes vicariously redemptive.

The classical Christian view of vicarious suffering in fact carries forward the traditional Jewish view of martyrdom as a means of sanctifying God's Name (Kiddush haShem), and of the Thirty-Six Righteous in every generation who in and through their suffering help sustain the world, or enable it to survive despite rampant evil.

I feel compelled to ask whether either of these views can be maintained after the Shoah with its massive number of dead, its unrelieved cruelty, and its unacceptable rationale? Who or what was "redeemed" by that suffering and death? Would any end be worth such means? Would any purpose be sufficiently valuable to be served by such sacrifice of human value and life?

Within much (probably most) Jewish thinking today (religious, philosophical, and political) there is firm rejection of the teaching of martyrdom. And within the Christian liberation theology of Latin America, feminists, and Blacks, as well as among many Christians whose lives have been altered by confrontation with the Holocaust, there is rejection of the vicarious suffering-servant model applied to the human situation. If we listen to the voices of the suffering peoples of the world, we will hear them say to us: Stop exalting suffering and sacrifice! If we are told that suffering or martyrdom has a positive effect, or even that it may be necessary for salvation, we may be
persuaded to endure it. Especially so if the Christ model is held up for our emulation. By contrast, if we define suffering as negative, something to be fought against, we may "prepare the ground for its annihilation." Wilhelm Niemoeller reminds us that when millions of European Christians had the opportunity to suffer for Christ and their faith, few accepted the challenge. "Suffering Servant" has a heroic sound until one is faced with the reality. To recommend it for others is the height, or rather, the depth of immorality.

Now let me share with you a provocative myth created by Hans Jonas, together with its implications.

"In the beginning, for knowable reasons, the ground of being, or the divine, chose to give itself over to the chance and risk and endless variety of becoming. And wholly so: entering into the adventure of space and time, the deity held back nothing of itself: no uncommitted . . . part remained to . . . ultimately guarantee the devious working-out of its destiny. . . . In order that the world might be, and be for itself, God renounced His own being, divesting Himself of His deity -- to receive it back from the Odyssey of time . . .; transfigured or even disfigured by it. [God forfeited] divine integrity for the sake of unprejudiced becoming. . . ."

After aeons of time during which God's case was "safe in the slow hands of cosmic chance and probability," there came "the first stirring of life . . .: and with it a tremendous quickening of concern in the eternal realm and a sudden leap in its growth toward recovery of its plenitude."

"But . . . with life together came death, and that mortality is the price which the new possibility of being had to pay for itself . . . And then He trembles as the thrust of evolution . . . passes the threshold where innocence ceases and an entirely new criterion of success and failure takes hold of the divine stake. The advent of man means the advent of knowledge and freedom, and . . . self-fulfilling life has given way to the charge of responsibility under the disjunction of good and evil . . . The image of God . . . passes . . . into man's precarious trust, to be completed, saved, or spoiled by what he will do to himself and his world. In this awesome impact of his deeds on God's destiny . . . lies the immortality of man."
"With the appearance of man, transcendence . . . accompanies his doings with the bated breath of suspense, hoping and beckoning, rejoicing and grieving, approving and frowning -- and . . . making itself felt to [man] even while not intervening in . . . his worldly scene. . . ."

Jonas tells us that the "theological implications in this [tentative] myth . . . only slowly emerged [and are] still in the process of emerging." Then he sets out to try to connect this myth with "the more responsible tradition of Jewish religious thought."

First Jonas tells us he is speaking of a "suffering God" (but not in the Christian connotation of the "suffering God" for he is not speaking of a special or specific act of the deity undertaken to save man). He is speaking of "the relation of God to the world from the moment of creation." (He reminds us that in the Bible even the "majestic God" grieves over man's sleights and rejection, "ruining that He created man, and suffering from the disappointment.")

Second, "the myth suggests a becoming God. . . . a God emerging in time instead of possessing a completed being. . . ." This means that "He is affected by what happens in the world," that is, He is "altered, made different. . . . His continuous relation . . . to the creation . . . means that He experiences something with the world, that His own being is affected by what goes on in it."

Three, a suffering and a becoming God is . . . a caring God -- . . . not remote and detached and self-contained but involved in what He cares for. . . . [Nevertheless,] this God . . . has left something for [humans] to do and thereby made His care dependent upon them."

Four, therefore He is also an endangered God, a God who risks something (or, it would seem He risks everything-ALE).

Fifth, consequently God is not omnipotent.

"Having given Himself whole to the becoming world God has no more to give; it is man's now to give to Him."

Jonas concludes: "there[is] weeping in the heights at the waste and despoilment of humanity . . . [and so] eternity looks down upon us with a frown, wounded itself and perturbed in its depths." And might, or must, we not feel it? " . . . God is in danger as never before. . . . We literally hold in our faltering hands the future of the divine adventure. . . ."
Many of us are convinced that in this century events have occurred that must be seen and understood as new faith-orienting experiences: the Nazi Holocaust and the rebirth of the State of Israel -- happenings that challenge much that we have professed and on which we have placed our trust. The memory of the Shoah must remain a life-shaping force that makes us significantly more sensitive to suffering and death imposed on people, to the frailty and preciousness of human life, and to the insidious ways in which religious and philosophical ideas can lead people to justify life-destroying behavior. Above all it must remind us of the need for human solidarity.

The re-creation of Israel attests to the continuing attempt of the Jewish people not only to survive but also to be enabled to contribute in some small way to the salvaging of God's creation from destructive forces. The challenges that face all of us at this time demand everything: honesty, humility, fortitude, and above all the courage to dare the new and untried.

Notes


2. See a later reference in this paper to a significant number of church documents which speak on behalf of such changes, yet are largely ignored. It may well be that American Christians are more influenced toward tolerance of and openness to others of different faith communities by the traditions of democracy and cultural pluralism than by their church teachings.

3. Beverly Asbury, "The Revolution in Jewish-Christian Relations:
Is It To Be Found in Christian Theological Seminaries? A Preliminary Study," Theological Education, XXVIII, 2 (Spring 1992): 61. He contrasts the resistance to changes in this realm among the theological education communities with their being in the forefront of movements involving sexism, racism, and homosexuality.

4. Robert Wilken insists that Christians need to recognize that Christian antisemitism "did not arise by the importation of ideas foreign to Christianity through some historical accident. . . . The roots of Christian antisemitism need be traced no further than Christianity itself; Christians have been antisemitic because they have been Christians. . . . We must learn . . . to live with the unpleasant fact that antisemitism is a part of what it has meant historically to be a Christian, and is still part of what it means to be a Christian" (The Myth of Christian Beginnings: History's Impact on Belief (Garden City: Doubleday, 1972), p. 197.


10. Ibid., pp. 17, 16.


12. Revolutions involving major and often fundamental changes in government also come to mind: the American, the Russian, the two of China, the French -- with quite different conclusions.

13. Jacobus Schoneveld, "The Jewish 'No' to Jesus and the Chris-


15. The looked-for Second Coming of Christ will happen at the end of history rather than within history.


17. Dan Cohn-Sherbok asserts that God is in pain when His people go astray, but also "is with them in their trials and tribulations," even in the death camps. "We believe that our God is the one who enters the depths of degradation with us and is there always sharing our sufferings" (The Times [London], Feb. 19, 1994).


19. Basic themes include the following: antisemitism is condemned and the guilt of the churches in its persistence is acknowledged; Christian penitence is expressed; the idea that the Jewish people live under a corporate or inherited divine curse because of the crime of "deicide" is repudiated, along with the theology of the church displacing the synagogue; churches are asked to examine their publications to remove all false and injurious generalizations about Jews; Christians are urged to show respect and love for Jewish neighbors and to work with them in the struggle to eliminate dis-
crimination and to foster human rights; and dialogue is endorsed. Recent statements openly acknowledge the Jewish people's continuing place as God's people. Several statements, including that of the United Church of Christ which is one of the most forthright, have been issued since publication of the volumes mentioned in the previous note.


21. The disciples expected such an event to be imminent. We have learned otherwise. Perhaps we must further adjust our expectations along the lines that Hans Jonas suggests, as it is presented at the conclusion of this paper.

22. Tom A. Driver, "Toward a Theocentric Christology," Christianity & Crisis 45:18 (November 11, 1985): 450, 451, 452. My earlier comments about the relation of Easter and Yom haShoah are applicable in the context of this question as well as the third one.

