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# A Time of Turning: Three Major Themes in Protestant Documents

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**A Time of Turning:**<sup>1</sup>  
*Three Major Themes in Protestant Documents*

by Alice L. Eckardt

The mainline Protestant churches' turning *away from* the centuries-long "teaching of contempt" for and behavior toward Judaism and its people, and *toward* a new understanding and appreciation of Judaism began mainly (though slowly) in the decades following World War II when the Holocaust's realities became known, along with learning how badly so many of the churches had behaved and failed during the Nazi era – and not only in Germany. While post-war churches mostly expressed shock, sorrow, and horror over this mass destruction of the Jewish population of Europe, they generally did not yet see any need to abandon the long-established conviction that the Church must convert Jews to Christianity. In 1948 in Amsterdam at the World Council of Churches' first meeting it strongly re-emphasized that conviction. A move away from that position – surrendering the need to convert Jews – is one of the important particular changes to be noted in the newer theological thinking to be found reflected in many of the church statements issued between 1986 and 2013. This is accompanied by the increasing assertions of the validity of Jewish faith on its own terms.

The conversion toward the idea of the two faith communities both working for God's kingdom was led early on by the Protestant Church in Berlin-Weissensee's 1950 affirmation that God's promise remains "valid for his chosen people even after the crucifixion of Jesus Christ." And this was reiterated in 1960 at Berlin-Brandenburg, along with new insistence that Christians' salvation "cannot be separated from Israel's election."

In 1964 in the United States the Episcopal Church led the way with its denunciation of antisemitism as a "direct contradiction of Christian doctrine," its renunciation of the "charge of deicide against the Jews" (that is, the killing of God), and its condemnation of other "unChristian accusations" against the Jewish people. Twenty-four years later the Episcopal 1988 Guidelines clearly rejected all supersessionist teachings along with teachings of contempt.

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at the Institute of Jewish-Christian Understanding of Muhlenberg College 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary program "Words Matter" on Nov. 2, 2014; slightly amended April 2016.

The world-wide Anglican Communion's more inclusive 1988 lengthy document broke new ground with its "Jews, Christians, and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue," in which it says that "If Christians wish their own faith to be affirmed by others they themselves must be open to the full force of the attraction of [its] partner in the dialogue and be willing to affirm all [of the other's faith which they can assert], especially when it resonates to the Gospel."<sup>2</sup>

Lutheran churches in Germany, Scandinavia, and the U.S., along with the Lutheran World Federation have played a major role in rethinking the relationship, although not without occasional stumbles along the way.<sup>3</sup> Particularly noteworthy is the 1990 Declaration by the European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People. It insists that God's choice of Israel as His people is unbroken and finds this "confirmed in the New Testament's confession of [the Jew] Jesus as the Messiah already come." It acknowledges that the Shoah is a challenge to Christian teaching and practice that must be overcome: "A reappraisal of . . . theology is "imperative if we want to attain credibility for the church and to reform our common life in Europe." Dialogical encounters offer opportunities to overcome the failures of the past and to build a new relationship. Four years later (1994) the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America issued its strong rejection of Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes with their long-reaching impact, and its pledge of opposition to all such bigotry.

The Calvinist Reformed churches have been major contributors to the reformation of their church teachings as well – especially in Germany, but also in France, Switzerland, Austria, and Italy. But Poland's small Reformed Church in 2000 regretfully admitted that the accusation of the "Jew = (as) God-murderer" was still being heard in its churches. Reformed churches in the United States which have made significant statements about the old and the hoped-for new relationship include the Disciples of Christ, the United Church of Christ, and the Presbyterian Church.

Neither Lutheran nor Calvinist, the Methodist Church and Australia's Uniting Church are

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<sup>2</sup> A new plan in Berlin was to construct a single house of worship for three faiths – Judaism, Protestant Christianity, and Islam – each with its own space.

<sup>3</sup> The Lutheran World Federation's 1964 document contained contradictory statements regarding the Jewish people: In one section it said that the division between "old" Israel and "new" Israel will be healed only when "all Israel" recognizes Jesus of Nazareth as its Messiah." Whereas another section affirmed that antisemitism is "a denial of the image of God in Jews," and a "demonic form of rebellion against the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob." *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*, Vol. I, ed. Franklin Sherman (N.Y.: Paulist Press, 2011).

equally assertive in making such reformulations of their theology, particularly the Australians' briefly stated 17 points which are a remarkable summary of the rethinking that has been developing.

This new theology includes: rejection of the idea that the church replaced or superseded the synagogue; of thinking of Judaism as a cold legalistic faith; of the Jewish people as having been rejected by God for not accepting Jesus as their messiah; and of their having been cast out of the Land to which God had led them from Egypt. In place of all that, the new thinking finds that the church and its teachings are more closely related to the Jewish faith and its people than it had previously recognized, and sees how much the early church actually incorporated and built on from its Jewish forebears – Israel's covenants, its patriarchs, the Torah, and the worship format which churches largely follow.

It must be noted that in some of the statements since 2000 great concern has been expressed about the “new wave of antisemitism” spreading across the European continent,<sup>4</sup> including among their own memberships, and which they have been unable to counteract.

Furthermore the growth of anti-Israelism is a source of great concern. The State of Israel, which was supposed to give the Jewish people a place where they would be liberated from “the teaching of contempt” has, in fact, become the target of a greatly-widened geographical source of Jew-hatred – in some cases with vociferous and violent manifestations. This is to be seen even in Western Europe – France, Sweden, and The Netherlands. And within North American Protestant churches there have been many attempts, some successful, to establish a policy of some kind of boycott and divestment from companies doing business with Israel.

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<sup>4</sup> Among the particularly egregious statements are those of the Protestant Church in Germany (2000), of the Lutheran World Federation (2001), and from the Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People (2004 and 2010).

In contrast, affirmations of the State's right to exist and its people's need for security from attacks are found in at least eight church documents,<sup>5</sup> particularly in the 1970 lengthy document "Israel: People, Land and State" by the Reformed Church of the Netherlands.<sup>6</sup>

One of the major pioneers in revealing the actual and destructive nature of the Christian-Jewish relationships over the past two millennia was Dr. James Parkes of England. He was asked how long he thought it would take to change the thinking undergirding that history. He replied, "Oh, some hundreds of years." The Jewish questioner said, "I'm glad to hear your answer; had you said 20 or 50 years I would have known you didn't really understand the problem."

We need to face that reality, and not give up when the going gets tough, as newer and more vociferous opposition and hatred toward the Jewish people and the State of Israel are issued. We can be helped in finding the right path by studying and utilizing new statements of faith and understanding and giving them wider circulation. In fact, why shouldn't one or more of them be read along with the Bible and the creeds in the church service?

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<sup>5</sup> See *Bridges*, vol. II: #1, Presbyterian, 1987; #6, United Methodist, 1996; #9, United Church of Canada 2003; #14, Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People 1990; #18, Protestant Churches in Austria 1998; #20, European Lutheran Commission on the Church and the Jewish People 2004; #26, Lutheran World Federation 2001. Some others make a brief statement of concern for Israel's security but state the need to study the subject in more depth: #11, Federation of Churches in East and West Germany 1988; #12, Protestant Church of the Palatinate 1990; #17, Waldensian Church in Italy 1998.

<sup>6</sup> See Vol. I, #11; 19 pages. Two statements from the Christian Scholars Group on Judaism and the Jewish People which deal with the State of Israel are to be found under "Ecumenical Documents" as they involved Protestants, Roman Catholics, and occasionally an Orthodox Christian scholar. (Vol. I, # 47, 1973; and Vol. II, #73, 2002).