

Jews and Christians: The Wake-up Call of the Holocaust

In Part 1 of this series, we covered the history of Jewish-Christian relations from the book of Acts through the Holocaust. And while it is a very sad tale of separation and contempt, there has been much positive development since that time.

The death of 6 million Jews in the heart of Christian Europe had served as a wake-up call in many respects.

After 1,900 years of praying “next year in Jerusalem,” the Jewish people had already begun making their way back to their homeland when, thanks to the breakup of the last Islamic (Ottoman) Empire and a wave of nationalism in the early 20th century, the stage was set for the birth of Israel and its ratification by the United Nations. The Holocaust was not the catalyst for this return, but it did produce a wave of international support for the idea.

Impact of the Holocaust on Christianity

The tragedy of the Holocaust also sent a shockwave through the Catholic and Lutheran churches predominant in Germany at the time. Eventually, every major Christian denomination felt the ripple effect.

The impact on the Catholic Church was astounding. Under the leadership of Pope John XXIII, the Catholic Church convened the Second Vatican Council and issued the *Nostra Aetate* (Latin for “In Our Time”). It was a landmark call to reexamination and reform. It reaffirmed that God’s covenant with Israel is still in effect and called for productive dialogue between Catholics and Jews as well as a new appreciation of the Jewish Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament). And finally, there was a call to reexamine the “teaching of contempt”—the charge

of deicide that had been placed on generations of Jewish people.

The Catholic Church went so far as to change their Good Friday liturgy, which had often resulted in anti-Semitic attacks by worshippers on their way home from services. Many Evangelicals today do not realize that for centuries Easter week was the most dangerous time of the year for Jews. This cataclysmic change in Catholic theology reduced this threat greatly.

The Lutheran Church went through a similar shake-up. It's founder, Martin Luther, had ended his life rabidly anti-Semitic, and his book *The Jews and their Lies* had been reproduced and distributed by the Nazi regime to obtain Protestant support for their treatment of the Jews. Luther's book called for a "solution," and Hitler came up with the "final solution"—annihilating the Jewish race.

Several years after the shock and tragedy of the Holocaust, the Lutheran denomination disassociated itself from Martin Luther's horrendous writings. In time, every major Protestant denomination began to issue statements against antisemitism and affirming the Jewishness of Jesus and the roots of the Christian faith.

Unfortunately, neither the Catholics nor the Protestants went so far as to recognize Israel. And as the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement has made its way into some of those Protestant denominations, they have opposed Israel, failing to recognize the BDS movement as a new expression of the antisemitism they once disavowed.

Impact of the Establishment of Israel

The Evangelical movement was less affected by the Holocaust because its center of growth was in the United States. It is also a largely grassroots movement without one denominational headquarters to provide leadership on an issue. But this movement is significant and has been impacted greatly by

another historic event—the birth of the state of Israel.

Since Israel was established in 1948, millions of Christians have visited the Holy Land. Many came home appreciating the privilege of pilgrimage granted by the government of Israel. They benefitted from the Jewish State's care for the Christian sites and archaeological artifacts supporting the Bible. Some of these tourists came away impressed by the fervent Jewish faith they encountered and their interactions with the locals.

Most importantly, these Christians are reading their Bible with a new worldview. No longer are the Jews a persecuted and dispersed minority that seemed to be suffering for some wrongdoing. They are back in their land, just as God had promised they would be, and they are building a nation that is leading the world in science, technology, and innovation. God's promises to Abraham and Moses, as well as His words through the Hebrew prophets, are all coming to pass!

The Growth of the Evangelical Movement

This theological realignment is impacting global Christianity significantly because of the size and strength of this new Bible-based segment of the faith. Since Israel was established, Evangelical Christianity has become the fastest-growing segment of Christianity, fueled particularly by the rapid growth of the Pentecostal part of the movement.

Evangelicalism is a Bible-based movement that is largely philosemitic and pro-Israel. And it is growing like wildfire in the global south—Africa, Asia and Latin America. Already in some Latin American countries, Evangelicals outnumber Catholics.

If this growth continues, Evangelicalism will become the largest segment of global Christianity. And this will have a profound and positive effect on Jewish-Christian relations.

Learning to Relate

With this amazing turnaround in Christian history, we see the blossoming of a whole new level of Jewish-Christian relations in our day. It is critical that we protect this friendship and nurture it, so it matures to full adulthood. Therefore, in addition to understanding this history, we need to learn from those who have been pioneering this new relationship over the last 50 years.

We will share their advice in Part 3 of this series on *Jews and Christians Learning to Relate*.

Dr. Susan Michael is USA Director of the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem and host of the Out of Zion podcast. Listen to her series on *Jews and Christians Learning to Relate*.