Protestant Parallels to *Nostra Aetate*

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When *Nostra Aetate* was issued in 1965, Protestants as well as Roman Catholics concerned with Christian-Jewish relations rejoiced. I recall a meeting in Chicago convened by the American Jewish Committee to consider the document. All present—Protestants, Catholics, Jews—shared at least two emotions: immense gratitude for the breakthrough in the millennia-old estrangement between Christians and Jews that *Nostra Aetate* represented; and astonishment that a statement so brief (only §4, on Judaism, was considered) could have such epochal significance.

In subsequent years, numerous statements of a similar nature were issued by Protestant bodies—statements of repentance for the "teaching of contempt" towards Jews and Judaism as well as pledges of commitment to a new relationship. The question therefore naturally arises of whether these Protestant developments may have been due to the influence of *Nostra Aetate*, being in a sense imitative of it. The answer to this must be a complex one; one needs to avoid the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy.

On the one hand, Protestants committed to overcoming the alienation between Christians and Jews were indeed emboldened by the fact that it was the Roman Catholic Church—regarded by itself and others as the most stalwart defender of "the faith once delivered to the saints"—that took the courageous step of reversing an age-old teaching, namely, that of deicide. Many Protestants were also envious of what they saw as the far more effective "command and control" apparatus in Roman Catholicism that would make it possible to implement this revision in all areas of the church's life, and in all parts of the world. (Only later would they learn, along with

Catholics themselves, of some of the obstacles to the full realization of this vision.)

So *Nostra Aetate* clearly did have some impact on Protestants, even if only on a leadership cadre. On the other hand, one has to account for the fact that well before Vatican II, Protestant bodies in America and elsewhere had already made statements of a similar nature. The earliest of these statements go back to the years just following the Second World War.

Already in August 1945, the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (Protestant Church in Germany) issued the dramatic "Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt," acknowledging "with great anguish" that "through us [Germans] has endless suffering been brought to many peoples and countries." Noting that some had indeed struggled against National Socialism, they nevertheless declare: "[We] accuse ourselves for not witnessing more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously, for not loving more ardently."[1]

It was subsequently noted, however, that although the Declaration mentioned offences against "many peoples," there was no specific mention of the Jews. In excuse of this, it might be maintained that the full scope of what came to be called the Holocaust or the Shoah was not yet known at that time. While this may be true to some extent, everyone knew that thousands and tens and hundreds of thousands of Jews had disappeared from the cities of Europe, as well as the countryside. This lacuna was evidence of a serious remaining "fog of conscience," as one might call it, comparable to the fog of war.

By 1948, at least one of the German Protestant regional churches (*Landeskirchen*), the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saxony, realized that more needed to be said. In a state-

[1] Franklin Sherman, ed., *Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue*. Vol. 1—*The Road to Reconciliation (1945-1985)* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 41.

ment entitled "Declaration of Guilt toward the Jewish People," it makes its confession:

> We feel it a matter of deep shame that the most comprehensive and terrible attempt at the forceful extermination of Jewry that world history has ever known was undertaken in the name of the German people. Millions of Jews—men, women, and children, a third of the total Jewish population worldwide—were destroyed by us. It need hardly be said that this stands in deepest contradiction to the Christian principles of justice, tolerance, and neighbor-love. But it would be too easy to push off the responsibility to the ruling authorities of that time... Insofar as racial hatred has been fostered among us or simply has been tolerated without vigorous resistance, we share in the guilt.[2]

This was an expression of repentance for past sins. But the past proved to be not truly past. In 1960, the Protestant Church in Berlin-Brandenberg issued a cry of alarm about a new wave of antisemitic incidents in Europe. It urged all its members, but especially parents and educators, to "break the widespread, awkward silence in our country in regard to our shared responsibility for the fate of the Jews and resist whatever tempts the younger generation towards enmity against Jews."[3]

Statements such as the foregoing clearly reject anti-Jewish attitudes and actions, but they do not yet express the need for a drastic reformulation of Christian teaching regarding the Jews and Judaism. They do not deal with the charge of "deicide," i.e., of Jewish culpability for the crucifixion. We do find this clearly addressed, however, in a statement issued by the House of Bishops of the Episcopal Church (U.S.A.) in October 1964 (*Nostra Aetate* would appear just a year later). Entitled "Deicide and the Jews," it states in part:

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[2] Ibid., 45.
[3] Ibid., 54.

> Antisemitism is a direct contradiction of Christian doctrine. Jesus was a Jew, and, since the Christian Church is rooted in Israel, spiritually we are Semites.
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> The charge of deicide against the Jews is a tragic misunderstanding of the inner significance of the crucifixion. To be sure, Jesus was crucified by some soldiers at the instigation of some Jews. But, this cannot be construed as imputing corporate guilt to every Jew in Jesus' day, much less the Jewish people in subsequent generations. Simple justice alone proclaims the charge of a corporate or inherited curse on the Jewish people to be false.[4]

The Episcopal General Convention, meeting at the same time and including lay delegates, issued a similar statement.

What shall we make of this consonance, these parallels, between Protestant statements issued between 1945 and 1964 and the Second Vatican Council's *Nostra Aetate* of 1965? Clearly, it cannot be the influence of the latter on the former. But neither is it a mere coincidence. Rather, we need to see this as an instance of what in the history of ideas, especially the history of science, is called "simultaneous invention" or "multiple independent discovery." Many examples of this can be cited: the formulation of calculus by both Newton and Leibniz in the seventeenth century; the discovery of oxygen by Priestley, Lavoisier, and others in the eighteenth century; the theory of evolution, articulated by both Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace in the nineteenth century; the development of radio by Marconi and others on both sides of the Atlantic at the turn of the twentieth century; and so on, down to our own time. "Sometimes the discoveries are simultaneous or almost so," notes the sociologist Robert K. Merton, who made this a special topic of research; "sometimes a scientist

[4] Ibid., 59.

will make a new discovery which, unknown to him, somebody else has made years before."[5]

What accounts for this phenomenon? At least two factors come to mind, both of which are relevant to our question. One is internal to the scientific discipline in question: it is at a point of readiness for this new step. A series of lesser discoveries cry out for a grand synthesis; an urgent problem demands to be resolved. The other factor is external: there are new developments in the surrounding context; new data to be reckoned with; new discoveries to be made by venturing farther afield (Darwin's voyage of the *Beagle*). With reference to our question: Christians of all persuasions, in the post-1945 period, were reeling from the gradual realization of the enormity of the Holocaust, and the extent to which long-standing Christian anti-Judaism had fueled the rise of modern antisemitism. All saw the need for repentance and renewal in the Christian attitude toward the Jews and Judaism. All drew on the work of pioneering scholars like James Parkes in Britain and A. Roy Eckardt in the United States, and were influenced by towering Jewish figures such as Jules Isaac and, later, Abraham Joshua Heschel. So it is no wonder that there are parallels in the Protestant and Catholic responses.

We have reviewed above some of the key Protestant statements on Christian-Jewish relations antedating Vatican II. As to the post-Vatican II period, we can deal with only a few of the numerous Protestant statements issued in the following decades.[6] Many of these are quite lengthy and of considerable scope; in this respect they are more comparable to the Catholic teaching documents that followed *Nostra Aetate* than to *NA* itself. (This would include the Pontifical Commission for

[5] See Robert K. Merton, "Singletons and Multiples in Scientific Discovery: A Chapter in the Sociology of Science," in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 105 (1961), No. 5, 470-486. See also, for a somewhat whimsical review of the matter, Malcolm Gladwell, "In the Air: Who Says Big Ideas Are Rare?," *The New Yorker*, 12 May, 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/05/12/in-the-air.

[6] The *Bridges* collection contains 46 such documents.

Religious Relations with the Jews' "Guidelines and Suggestions" of 1974 and "Notes on the Correct Way to Present the Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church" of 1985, as well as similar documents prepared by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and other national bishops' conferences.[7])

Typical of these later documents is the statement prepared by a task force of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and commended by its 1987 General Assembly for study and reflection. Entitled "A Theological Understanding of the Relationship between Christians and Jews," it is set forth in a series of affirmations:

1. We affirm that the living God whom Christians worship is the same God who is worshiped and served by Jews. We bear witness that the God revealed in Jesus, a Jew, to be the Triune Lord of all, is the same one disclosed in the life and worship of Israel.
2. We affirm that the church, elected in Jesus Christ, has been engrafted into the people of God established by the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Therefore, Christians have not replaced Jews.
3. We affirm that both the church and the Jewish people are elected by God for witness to the world and that the relationship of the church to contemporary Jews is based on that gracious and irrevocable election of both.
4. We affirm that the reign of God is attested both by the continuing existence of the Jewish people and by the church's proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Hence, when speaking with Jews about matters of faith, we must always acknowledge that Jews are already in a covenantal relationship with God.

[7] See *Bridges*, Vol. 1, 193-263, and Vol. 2, *Building a New Relationship (1986-2013)*, New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 294-360.

5. We acknowledge in repentance the church's long and deep complicity in the proliferation of anti-Jewish attitudes and actions through its "teaching of contempt" for the Jews. Such teaching we now repudiate, together with the acts and attitudes which it generates.
6. We affirm the continuity of God's promise of land along with the obligations of that promise to the people Israel.
7. We affirm that Jews and Christians are partners in waiting. Christians see in Christ the redemption not yet fully visible in the world, and Jews await the messianic redemption. Christians and Jews together await the final manifestation of God's promise of the peaceable kingdom.[8]

Each of these "Affirmations" is followed by a historical and theological "Explication" of some length.

Statements of a similar import have been made (speaking first of North American bodies) by the United Church of Christ (1987), the Episcopal Church (1988, expanding the brief 1964 statement referenced above), the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (1993), the United Methodist Church (1972 and 1996), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (1998), the Alliance of Baptists (2003), the United Church of Canada (2003), and the Presbyterian Church in Canada (2011).[9] Overseas, there are statements by Protestant bodies in Germany, Hungary, Poland, Switzerland, Italy, and Austria, as well as Australia.[10] There are also statements from two worldwide bodies: the Lambeth Conference, representing the Anglican/Episcopal churches, and the Lutheran World Federation.[11]

[8] *Bridges*, Vol. 2, 51-62.
[9] Ibid., 63-106.
[10] Ibid., 107-151.
[11] Ibid., 152-173.

Among Lutherans, a key statement was the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's "Declaration to the Jewish People." Authorized by its 1993 Churchwide Assembly after a selection from Luther's hateful writings about the Jews had been read out to the delegates (most of whom, whether clergy or lay, had little or no previous knowledge of these materials), the statement was prepared by a special panel and issued in April, 1994. It reads in part:

> In the long history of Christianity there exists no more tragic development than the treatment accorded the Jewish people on the part of Christian believers. Very few Christian communities of faith were able to escape the contagion of anti-Judaism and its modern successor, anti-Semitism. Lutherans ... feel a special burden in this regard because of certain elements in the legacy of the reformer Martin Luther and the catastrophes, including the Holocaust of the twentieth century, suffered by Jews in places where the Lutheran churches were strongly represented...
>
> Luther proclaimed a gospel for people as we really are, bidding us to trust a grace sufficient to reach our deepest shames and address the most tragic truths. In the spirit of that truth-telling, we who bear his name and heritage must with pain acknowledge also Luther's anti-Judaic diatribes and the violent recommendations of his later writings against the Jews. As did many of Luther's own companions in the sixteenth century, we reject this violent invective, and yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations...
>
> Grieving the complicity of our own tradition within this history of hatred, moreover, we express our urgent desire to live out our faith in Jesus Christ with love and respect for the Jewish people. We recognize in anti-Semitism a contradiction and an affront to the Gospel, a violation of our hope and calling, and we pledge this

> church to oppose the deadly working of such bigotry, both within our own circles and in the society around us.[12]

This Declaration was celebrated in joint Lutheran-Jewish meetings around the country and was followed by study materials on the subject.[13]

Particularly poignant are the statements of guilt, repentance, and the hope for reconciliation and renewal between Christians and Jews issued by the Protestant churches in Europe, which had seen directly the murderous effects of the age-old Christian anti-Judaism in their own midst, coupled with the emergence of modern racist antisemitism. The East German Protestant churches issued a statement marking the fortieth anniversary of Kristallnacht (the "Night of Shattered Glass") that confessed:

> The burden of a great guilt lies upon our people. The events of November 9, 1938, were met at that time, for the most part, with a depressing silence, a frightful indifference, or open approval. Most people broke off all relations with Jews, gave credence to the slanders, let themselves be intimidated, and avoided the slightest human contacts. Only very few raised their voices in protest and tried to stand by the oppressed and persecuted Jews.

Applying the lessons of that time also to more recent instances of resentment against those who are "different," the East German statement adds:

> We are called, as we live among our neighbors today, to practice:

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[12] Ibid., 81-82.

[13] For these later materials, particularly the 1998 "Talking Points: Topics in Christian-Jewish Relations," see Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, http://www.elca.org/Faith/Ecumenical-and-Inter-Religious-Relations/Inter-Religious-Relations/Jewish-Relations.

– love, rather than hate
– help, rather than condemnation
– respect, rather than contempt
– understanding, rather than rejection
– connection, rather than separation.[14]

The Protestant churches in West Germany issued a parallel statement.[15] And the same was done on the fiftieth anniversary of Kristallnacht, now in a unified statement—even preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989—by East and West German Protestants.[16]

The Reformed Church in Hungary, in a statement of 1990, made its own acknowledgement of complicity:

> The Reformed Church in Hungary is still standing before God in self-examination remembering this shame of Europe which caused six million Jews—including 600,000 from Hungary—to be murdered. In that time of crisis our church, too, proved to be weak in faith and in action, and was unable to prevent this genocide.[17]

And the small Evangelical Reformed Church in Poland spoke similarly in a 1995 statement marking the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II and the liberation of Auschwitz:

> During the war many Poles, at great risk to their own lives, sheltered Jews from the Germans and rescued them. However, there were also some—and not as few as is often maintained—who handed over Jews to certain death. And the greater part of the population remained indifferent to the fate of the Jews. In re-

[14] Sherman, *Bridges*, Vol. 1, 129-131.
[15] Ibid., 132-133.
[16] "Statement on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Pogrom in November 1938," *Bridges*, Vol. 2, 107-109.
[17] Ibid., 119.

membering this today, we acknowledge that indifference as guilt and sin.[18]

The Protestant Church in Austria[19] offered its retrospective in its statement, "Time to Turn: The Protestant Churches in Austria and the Jews" (1998). "The part played by Christians and churches and their shared responsibility for the suffering and misery of Jews," they acknowledge, "can no longer be denied." Looking to the future, it offers the following assurances:

> - The Protestant churches know themselves obliged to always keep alive the memory of the Jewish people's history of suffering and the Shoah.
> - The Protestant churches know themselves obliged to check the teaching, preaching, instruction, liturgy, and practice of the church for any antisemitism, and to also, through their media, stand up against prejudice.
> - The Protestant churches know themselves obliged to fight against every form of personal and social antisemitism.
> - The Protestant churches want, in their relations to Jews and Jewish congregations, to walk a common way into a new future.[20]

The most inclusive European Protestant document on Christian-Jewish relations was issued in 2001 by the Leuenberg Fellowship, subsequently re-named the Community of Protestant Churches in Europe, which includes more than ninety church bodies in some thirty countries. Entitled "Church and Israel: A Contribution from the Reformation Churches in Europe to the Relationship Between Christians and Jews," it is some eighty printed pages in length; thus it is more a study document than a statement. If it breaks little new ground, it is nonetheless a very useful recapitulation of the

[18] Ibid., 127-129.
[19] Full name: Protestant Church of the Augsburg and Helvetic Confessions in Austria.
[20] Ibid., 139.

state of the question and an impressive achievement in reaching consensus among these diverse bodies.[21]

Among the many other statements that might be considered, one issued in 1988 by the Lambeth Conference, representing the world Anglican community, deserves special notice for its tri-faith approach. Entitled "Jews, Christians, and Muslims: The Way of Dialogue," it sets forth a compact résumé of what each faith community needs to know about the other in order to avoid prejudicial oversimplifications. Each faith, it points out, has developed far beyond its historical origins; is internally diverse; and has experienced both tolerance and intolerance for and from the other two communities. The document speaks eloquently of "The Way of Understanding," "The Way of Affirmation," and "The Way of Sharing" among the three faiths.[22]

If the issuance of statements on Christian-Jewish relations by Protestant bodies seems to have slowed in recent years, this is no doubt largely due to the fact that most of the major denominations have already made statements. But it also reflects the fact that work on this front is increasingly being done by organizations that include both Protestants and Roman Catholics, and often Eastern Orthodox Christians, as well as Jews. This was true already of the pioneering "Ten Points of Seelisberg," issued in 1947 by the famous conference in that Swiss village that included Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish scholars and leaders, with official observers from both the Vatican and the World Council of Churches.

The International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), which grew out of that conference, has continued work on this interfaith basis down to the present.[23] Also inclusive of

[21] The full text may be viewed, in both English and German, at Leuenberger Documents, Vol. 6, www.leuenberg.eu/sites/default/files/publications/lt6.pdf.

[22] *Bridges*, Vol. 2, 157-169.

[23] See especially its major statement, "A Time for Recommitment: Building the New Relationship between Jews and Christians" (Berlin, 2009), ibid.,

both Roman Catholics and Protestants is the Christians Scholars Group on Christian-Jewish Relations, the U.S. group that prepared and issued "A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People," a response to the pivotal Jewish document "*Dabru Emet:* A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity."[24] Increasingly, too, the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations (CCJR)[25], an association of more than forty academic centers and institutes in the United States, with affiliate members overseas, provides a significant venue for Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish scholars and leaders to compare experiences and discuss matters of common interest. So we are well placed to move into the future together.[26]

455-462. Current developments may be followed at International Council of Christians and Jews, www.iccj.org.

[24] Ibid., 417-422 (the Christian Scholars Group statement). For *Dabru Emet*, see Institute for Islamic, Christian, and Jewish Studies, www.icjs.org/dabru-emet/text-version.

[25] See Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations, www.ccjr.us, especially the section "Dialogika," the CCJR's extensive and continually updated documentation of work in this field.

[26] The above has dealt with what in the U.S.A. is commonly called "mainline" Protestantism, and has been written from that perspective. For an overview from a Conservative Evangelical standpoint, see Alan F. Johnson, "Vatican II and *Nostra Aetate* at Fifty: An Evangelical View," in Gilbert S. Rosenthal, ed., *A Jubilee for All Time: The Copernican Revolution in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014), 106-153. I am indebted to Peter A. Pettit for this reference and for other discerning comments on a draft of this article.