



Martin Luther and Anti-Semitism: A Discussion

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Editor, Theology Today, Princeton Theological Seminary,
United States

Theology Today

2017, Vol. 74(3) 235–242

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DOI: 10.1177/0040573617721912

journals.sagepub.com/home/ttj



Abstract

This transcription of the Question and Answer period for the public event “Martin Luther and Anti-Semitism” was held at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York City on November 13, 2016. This event was co-presented by the Morgan Library & Museum, the Leo Baeck Institute, the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Paul in New York City, and the Consulate General of the Federal Republic of Germany. The discussion session—as well as the two lectures preceding (also published in this issue)—took place as part of a series of events in conjunction with the Morgan Library & Museum’s exhibition “Word and Image: Martin Luther’s Reformation” which ran from October 7, 2016 through January 22, 2017. Professor Mark Silk, Director, Leonard Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life and Professor of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, served as moderator for the Q&A session. The respondents were Professor Dean P. Bell, Provost, Vice President, and Professor of History at the Spertus Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership in Chicago and Dr. Martin Hauger, Referent für Glaube und Dialog of the High Consistory of the Evangelical Church (EKD) in Germany. The translator for portions of the Q&A session was the Rev. Miriam Gross, pastor of the German Evangelical Lutheran Church of St. Paul (*Deutsche Evangelisch-Lutherische St. Pauls Kirche*) in Manhattan. *Theology Today* is grateful to the Morgan Library & Museum for permission to publish the transcription of this discussion session.

Keywords

Anti-Semitism, Jews, Luther, Old Testament, Reformation, supersessionism, Tanakh

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Silk: I thank both of our presenters.¹ I want to be able to give the audience a change to do some questions . . . I [also] want to ask a couple of questions up here of the panel, of our presenters, and then open things up . . . My first question really gets at the issue that was just raised . . . was the Reformation good for the Jews? One can certainly point, before the Reformation happened, to various bad things that happened to the Jews in pre-Reformation Europe, among them the expulsion from the Iberian peninsula and at the same time point to important developments of accepting Jews or at least allowing them into countries in Reformed parts of Europe, the Calvinist, Puritan England, and the Netherlands. So, to try to open things up: “Reformation—good or not good for the Jews?”

Bell: Let me take a first stab at it. Our president back at Spertus [Institute for Jewish Learning and Leadership] has a nice saying. He likes to quote Boris Yeltsin. When asked about how things were going, Boris Yeltsin said, “In a word, good. In two words, not good.” . . . Actually I would answer your Jewish question with a Jewish answer, and that is, in some ways it was good for the Jews, in some ways not. Clearly, not many things changed immediately amongst the Reformers and their positions related to Jews and Judaism. In fact, many of the first and second generation of Reformers have the same basic kind of approach to Jews and Judaism as late medieval thinkers did, and we clearly see continued marginalization and expulsion from territories in the cities through the early part of the Reformation. That having been said, things do appear to change by the time you get to the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th centuries. I’m not sure if “toleration” is the right word in an early modern context, but certainly some more opportunities to live and to work in certain kinds of areas does expand. The other thing I would add, though, is that from a positive standpoint these days we speak about reformations in the plural. That is, there was no one specific Reformation. There were Catholic reformations, Radical reformations, second-generation reformations, and the like. And so, I think we need to think about the issue of Jews in that regard as well. Most of the research these days tends to decenter Martin Luther and look at other aspects of Reformation development, which I think are equally important. And today we often speak more about the concept of confessionalization rather than reformation. This is the great age of dogma, where religious confessions were beginning to form. And if I look at that, I actually think it’s positive for the Jews. I myself have argued that Jews created their own confessionalization in the 16th century, with an interest in, sort of, continuity and cohesiveness in education, monopolization of power within the community, and the like. So, I’d say, yes good and not so good.

Hauger: I agree with what Dean said. It’s not an easy question, so it’s both true. If it’s good—it was good for Jews, it was good only in an indirect way, not in a

1. The video recording of the event for which the following is a transcription of the Question and Answer period, can be found at: <http://www.themorgan.org/videos/martin-luther-and-anti-semitism>. Accessed June 12, 2017. The transcription of this Q&A session was provided by Kelsey L. Lambright, PhD student at Princeton Theological Seminary.

direct way. There often has been talk about the Jewish-friendly early Luther, and this is not really true. It only makes sense if it refers to the degree of optimism about Jewish conversion. So it was not a concept of tolerance, and it was not accepting the Jews as Jews or tolerating their Jewish belief. It's only tolerating them because they are Christians under the Jews—optional Christians, something like that. But in an indirect way, I think it was good because the Reformation in some way prepared that there was the possibility to develop a concept of tolerance in later centuries. And from that perspective on, also Jews profited from it, I think. But it's always in an ambivalent way. What we see in 19th century, especially in the first half of the 19th century, there was a big emancipation of Jews and a great openness also from Jews to Luther—Luther himself, and seeing him as a person of freedom and of the modern times. And then the second half of 19th century, it went back to the rise of anti-Semitism.

Silk: Alright, here's the second question. This I guess is a counterfactual, you might say . . . I think the point is really important and fascinating that people could pick different passages from Luther, sound bites, as we would say, to support tolerance and to support antipathy. And yet I think that the view of historians now is that during the Holocaust, during the Third Reich, Lutheran leaders did worse than Catholic leaders. And so I guess my question here is, had Luther not suffered from this anger management problem and continued understandably theologically problematic, but nonetheless more kindly 1523 approach, might that actually have served the world and the Lutheran church better?

Hauger: Well, I think Lutheran theology in the early 20th century was in some relation problematic in its view of a creation order, which was really open for categories like folk and blood and nation. So, there was the possibility on one hand to give a reason for this ideology and to put it together with the anti-Semitism and with Lutheran theology. On the other hand, Luther's view of the two ways of God reigning the world tended to separate church on one hand and state on the other hand. And this became problematic in developing a critical view on the state. So that made Lutheran theology, I think, a little bit more open for national socialist ideology than especially the Reformed tradition, with Karl Barth and his view, which you can see also in the Barmen theological declaration, which is more coming from Barth's view and from the Reformed tradition.

Silk: So let me conclude, and I think with a present notion. I think we do tend to be somewhat more familiar now with the degree to which the Catholic church since the Second Vatican Council has opened up to different religious traditions and to Jews, obviously, in particular. But also Muslims and others. So how would you both characterize the current Lutheran–Jewish encounter? If we could do that quickly and then open to questions. I realize this is the subject of a long dissertation, but we won't have time.

Bell: Since Martin is the expert on this, I'm going to just say one thing by preface. And that is, I think until recently it has largely been in our experience of sort of Catholic–Jewish dialogue that has been central to a lot of Jewish discussions. It's only recently that Protestant Lutheran conversations with the Jewish

community have really taken the same hold, but I think that really has changed in the last five to ten years or a bit longer. And I'll just give you one example. In Chicago, our institution for the first time is partnering with the Lutheran School of Theology for a joint course on Jewish-Christian relations. And so this isn't something that we'd ever talked about before. It's not the kind of program that we'd ordinarily do, though we've done a number of other things with Loyola and DePaul on Jewish-Catholic relations. So, at least from our perspective, within the Jewish community, it seems like there is an openness, a willingness to have these conversations and to look quite openly and frankly about theological prejudices on both sides.

Hauger: Yes, I think that with 1944–1945, something began which took a long time with a new thinking about Jews. And it started with getting rid of that view that the church took the place of the Jews, that they are the new covenant, that they are the new people of God. And that was the traditional thinking of centuries . . . It started in the Holocaust in some respect, at least. And in starting with 1945—and it took more than almost 35 years until 1980—to learn that there is a different relation, that Jewish people are still the people of God, and that we are the ones, as Christians, who are not the ones who are giving something to the Jews, but we are receiving from the Jews. And it started with a new view on Romans 9–11. That is the main text in the New Testament for this new view. And that is very similar to what happened in the Catholic church, and so at this point we are very close together, I think. So that's the starting point for a new relation and a new basis for Christian–Jewish dialogue, but it took at least one generation to learn that after the Holocaust . . . after the Shoah.

Silk: Before we go to questions, let me have just state a couple of ground rules because our time is so short. One: questions!

Hauger: Just let me mention one thing. I brought some copies of the declaration from last year, and if you are interested in it, you will find it outside and you can take one of the copies.² It's not very long. It's only three pages . . .

Silk: It may even be online. So that's the first caveat: One, questions . . . short, because I'm going to have to repeat it for purposes of recording. And the second: . . . I'm going to really ask just one of our presenters to answer any given question so we can take several. Alright, right here, sir.

Question: Thank you. My question is to Dr. Bell. You went out of your way to use the Hebrew when you translated Josel of Rosheim's statement that Charles saved the Jews from Martin Luther, an unclean man. You used the Hebrew, and I appreciate that. And you said "*lo tahar*." As you know, in the book of Numbers, the "*ish lo tahar*" refers to someone who has to pass through a sacrifice, you know, it's a do-over. Why did Josel of Rosheim not use a stronger word, "*ish qamay*," is it simply an example of his "going high when they went low," or is it something more sophisticated?

2. "‘He keeps faith forever’ (Psalm 146:6): Declaration Concerning Christians and Jews," <https://www.ekd.de/en/Declaration-concerning-Christians-and-Jews-263.htm>. Accessed, June 12, 2017.

Silk: I'm not going to be able to capture that wonderful question quickly, but let's just say, why did Josel not take a harsher view when he characterized Luther?

Bell: Yeah, I think it's because he sounds very much like Luther, which is why I read it the way I did. Because if you compare it with some 19th-century, more positive Jewish responses to Luther, where they use terms like "*lauter*" and other things to almost express a kind of clarity and value of Luther's scholarship and approach to the Bible. So, it's used in a variety of ways, but I think purposely in this case he was using it because it had that affinity to the sound of Luther.

Silk: Ma'am, right here.

Question: Yes, my question is simple. Given the role that the writings of Luther played in Germany before the Nazicide, do you think that the celebration of the 500th anniversary now and the study, the rejuvenation of Luther's writings, will have any effect on the growing anti-Semitism now in Europe?

Silk: Alright. Well that's a trick question! I'm going to [come] over to Martin, having just come over from Europe. The question is: Will the celebration of Luther's movement this coming year have an effect on growing anti-Semitism in Europe?

Hauger: On one hand, what just—I've heard it yesterday, I didn't see it on my own—that in the eastern part of Germany, the AFD, the populist party in Germany, they made some kind of...advertising with pictures of Luther and Bach and saying, "We are voting the right way." So, it's some kind of "*anspielung*—"

Gross: They refer to Luther and they use his thoughts for their own propaganda.

Hauger: But on the other side, the jubilee is a chance for the churches to deal with this dark side of the Reformer and to think critically about their own heritage and negative legacy and to learn from history. And that's what's happened. I referred to the declaration from last year, and here it's very clear that we are not going to celebrate Luther as a hero without any dark sides, and we have to have a critical view on him and start rethinking Lutheran theology. And we're going next year on—every year we have The Week of Brotherhood—and it's of Christian–Jewish dialogue. And we are going to present a symbol of coming together again, and the Protestant church will pay for a professor for ten years, and which is especially for the subject of Christian–Jewish dialogue, and it will be a strong symbol of reconciliation. So, it's a chance. But...[this] dark side, it's still there.

Silk: I'm going to come down over here, and then I'll get back up there.

Question: Several of you alluded to the identification of Jews with the papacy. I was wondering what conditions or relationships of theology made that a plausible identification at the time.

Silk: The relationship between the Jews—during the Reformation—with the papacy?

Question: Well, I thought I heard you say that the people attacking the Jews would often use them as pawns in the papacy or allies...

Silk: Right. The Jews were considered by Protestants, because of lots of ceremonies, to be like Catholics, and then... We'll let—

Bell: I guess I would add to it. I mean, if you're also comparing Luther's criticism of Roman Catholicism . . . there's fifteen hundred years that separates them from apostolic purity until his own day, in which they've added all sorts of, you know, strange accretions and practices and made up their own laws. You see something very similar with rabbinics. And so, he certainly criticizes Jews for varieties of interpretations, if you will. He's got very negative things to say about Jewish interpretation. There's also an interesting visual similarity as well. I put up the image of the "*Judensau*," which I'm sure you've all seen before, but there's a great image that's sort of a very anti-Catholic image of the pope riding on a pig holding a pile of excrement, and so the same kinds of visual imagery is used for both Jews and [other] Christians as well as Catholics, as well as other groups. Generally, as [Silk] suggests, I think it's because of this sense of false ceremonials, of hierarchies and authority, of false interpretations over long periods of time, that tends to associate the two. The accusations go back and forth. Catholics call Luther a "Judaizer." Luther calls the Catholics "Judaizers." It's a good term for everybody to throw around.

Silk: Sir, I think you've had your hand up for a bit.

Question: This isn't more of a question about Luther as it is about Lutherans—in this country, one of the few Lutheran theologians who has any real public image would have been Reinhold Niebuhr.

Silk: But he was not a Lutheran.

Question: Well, he started as an evangelical—

Silk: He was part of the [Evangelical and] Reformed tradition, but you can ask the question anyway.

Question: Okay, he started as an evangelical Lutheran and obviously evolved as a theologian over the course of his life. I'm just curious, what, if any, influence does he have in Germany?

Silk: [to Hauger] Do you know any of—I mean, the question has to do with, did Reinhold Niebuhr, who was the leading political theologian of the middle of the 20th century. Is he known at all in Germany?

Hauger: Yes, he is known, but not very well. His influence was more in the US. I know his name, but I've never read something of him . . .

Silk: I'm afraid we have a zero there. Yes, ma'am.

Question: I am glad to hear that the work started in 1945 is continuing in a very positive way. I still have a very hard time when I hear the Jewish Bible referred to as the "Old Testament." Right there we are perpetuating its inauthenticity, and I would like to see part of the work start saying the "Hebrew Bible" and the "Christian Bible."

Silk: Well, I'm going to let Dean answer this, though I think if we—one of the problems I would say, just, I don't know, just because I'm the moderator here and I—, is that "Hebrew Bible" isn't a term that Jews use and the "New Testament" is what Christians want to call their New Testament, so I think it's an interesting question. I'm going to let both sides take thirty seconds to answer this.

Hauger: I think I understand what you mean and it's really true. We have to describe what we mean. And we have to avoid the impression that "old" has to

mean that [it is . . .] gone or just old in a sense that it's over, but it's true in a sense that the Jews are the first ones and we are the second one[s]. And so, we also have to recognize that the "Old Testament" is not the same as the "Tanakh," so there's also a difference in the way, in the text itself. The Tanakh is ending—the Christian "Old Testament," in quotations—is ending with the prophets, and that's a change to the Jewish view. We have to be aware of all these differences and have to talk about that and to be sensitive for what it means. So, thank you very much for that one . . .

Bell: . . . I would agree. I mean, obviously as someone writing in Jewish history, we're always very careful about making the distinction as we're describing this, but as we're looking at Christian writers who were clearly using that language and it means something very specific in terms of, as you say, a kind of supersessionism or an "old dispensation leading into a new dispensation," it's part of a theological issue. So, as a historian, I have little difficulty separating those out. As somebody who's dealing with contemporary theological conversations and opportunities for rapprochement, I think this is an issue that has to be discussed. What are the implications of using the terminology even if—in terms of, you know, an actual description of a body of text . . . it fairly makes sense in the Christian context, but it's raising other theological problems by the nature of its—I think "How do we get around that?" That's a challenge.

Silk: It is. Gentleman up there. I want to give the "peanut gallery" the chance to ask a question. And, yes, that's you. The gentleman who just raised his hand. Stand up so we can hear you.

Question: . . . The question is, what is the separation between theology and politics of religion?

Silk: Okay, what is the separation of theology and politics of religion. I think I'm going to answer that question and say, it doesn't exist. No, I mean, this is not the kind of question that obviously we can answer in thirty seconds, but if you've got thirty seconds [to Hauger].

Hauger: I would take—

Silk: We've got a theologian in the house, so we'll let him do it.

Hauger: Theology is about thinking about our faith, about our relation to God, and if we say Jews and Christians have a relation to God, then we both have theology. And it's about thinking together about our relation to God. And that has an effect on how we live, and, in this sense, it's also political . . . but in the second sense, I mean.

Bell: If I could add just one thing to that, and I'm not a theologian so I should be taken at face value here. Particularly with Luther, Luther's theology, as you read it, it changes inflection points significantly at different times, is not only in response to core theological issues and how's he's reading earlier scholars, but it's also in response to contemporary events, some of which he unleashes himself and then has to respond to. So, for example his discussion of ministry changes dramatically in the course of the 1520s. Other political elements find their way into his theological discussions. So, again, I'm not a theologian, but my sense is of his

theological agenda which actually includes practical application, which is quite a unique aspect, but also has to grapple with a lot of political issues that are surrounding him. And from that standpoint, I don't think they can be separated in the 16th century, and I think likely they couldn't be today either.

Silk: Well, you know, this is a great last question, but I see one hand up from a young person, and we're going to have this be the last [question] . . .

Question: This question is addressed to Mr. Hauger on the question on the terms of the Old and New Testament. And what do you think of these terms when you think about movements in the Protestant church in Germany like theology professor Slenczka from Berlin, who spoke last year about the question of whether the Old Testament belongs to the Christian Bible at all and it provoked discussion in the Protestant church about this question.³

Silk: Well, that sounds like an old subject within the Christian tradition—how to conjure with the Tanakh. And so, Martin, you're going to have the last word here before we adjourn.

Hauger: Yes, that's a big discussion in Germany about Slenczka. He wrote an article suggesting that the Old Testament is not in the same sense part of the canon of the Bible, of the Christian Bible. And, well, we had a big discussion on that, but if we are believing as Christians in Jesus, who is a Jew, then we cannot define our own belief without reading the Old Testament. It's like cutting off our roots.

Silk: And our Lutheran pastor [translator Gross] is nodding her head in agreement.

Hauger: And it's not only about reading the Old Testament, but also listening to Jews, how they read the Old Testament, to learn from them. That's the problem. Luther tried to tell the Jews how to read the Old Testament instead of listening to the Jews and learn from them.

Silk: And that's a wonderful note on which to end. Thank you.

Author biography

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3. Notger Slenczka, "Das Alte Testament in der Theologie," *Marburger Jahrbuch für Theologie*, 25 (2013): 199. Also available online: <https://www.theologie.hu-berlin.de/de/professuren/professuren/st/slenczka-die-kirche-und-das-alte-testament.pdf>. Accessed June 12, 2017.