

Martin Luther and the Jews: How Protestant Churches in Germany Deal with the Reformer's Dark Side

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Abstract

Despite the fact that Luther was referenced in order to justify anti-Semitic hatred of Jews during the time of National Socialism it took the German evangelical churches almost forty years to get round to intensively working through Luther's anti-Jewish Statements and their effects through history. During the first decades after World War II, intra-church discussion focused on working through its own guilt (1945–1950) and finding a new direction for theology concerning Israel (1960–1980). However, the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth in 1983 fueled a discussion about the Reformer's attitude towards the Jews. It centered, first, on the question of how to assess the anti-Semitic co-option of Luther in the Nazi period; second, on how Luther's friendly statements towards Jews in his early years relate to the invective of his late writings. The latest EKD statement turns away from a genetic view of Luther towards an appraisal of his theological assessment of Judaism in connection with his Reformation theology.

Keywords

Martin Luther, anti-Semitism, Reformation, National Socialism, Evangelical Church of Germany

Immediately after the “Reich pogrom night” on 9 November 1938, during which over 1400 synagogues burnt down in Germany, Martin Sasse, bishop of the Evangelical Church of Thuringia, issued a pamphlet in which he had compiled Martin Luther's anti-Jewish statements.¹ It bore the programmatic title

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“*Martin Luther on the Jews: away with them!*” and rapidly achieved a circulation of 100,000 copies. A few weeks later, theology professor Walter Grundmann stated in an expert opinion: “In the churches the decision against Judaism must be carried out with full clarity... That will fulfill an essential legacy of the German Reformer.”² He issued this paper prior to becoming director of the notorious Eisenach *Institute for the Study and Elimination of Jewish Influence on German Church Life*, which was founded shortly afterwards at nearby Wartburg castle, where Luther translated the Bible. In fact, young Luther had also attended the local grammar school in Eisenach, which is in the territory of the Thuringian church. Locating the institute in Eisenach is therefore further evidence of the line of tradition in which the institute founders saw themselves.

Those are only two, albeit prominent, examples of the appeal to Luther in order to justify racist hatred of Jews in the time of National Socialism. The anti-Semitic co-opting of Luther in the Third Reich still remains a heavy burden weighing on the churches of the Reformation. The interpretation pattern according to which a direct line leads from Luther to Hitler is also to be found on the side of the opponents of National Socialism—this time critically, instead of approvingly. In 1945, Peter F. Wieners text “Martin Luther. Hitler’s Spiritual Ancestor” appeared; the cover picture of the re-edition published in 1999 by the American Atheist Press shows a pile of Jewish bodies after their execution in the gas chamber.³

Against this background, it seems amazing that—after the collapse in 1945—the German churches took almost forty years to get round to intensively working through Luther’s anti-Jewish statements and their effects through history. True, it seemed that the nationalist, and so also the National Socialist, co-option of Luther as a German hero had broken down with the disaster of the Third Reich. This heroic image was expressed iconographically in the 19th century by a hammer-swinging picture of the Reformer, nailing his Ninety-five Theses to the Wittenberg church door with powerful blows, and even more by countless iconographic paintings showing Luther with a firm-jawed Germanic profile opposing the emperor at

2. Quoted from Peter von der Osten-Sacken, “Ein ‘wesentliches Vermächtnis des deutschen Reformators’?,” *Begegnungen. Zeitschrift für Kirche und Judentum* 1 (2016): 23f.

3. See also the statement of the chair of the board of the humanist Giordano Bruno Foundation in an interview on the 2017 anniversary of the Reformation: Luther was “one of the greatest hate

3. See also the statement of the chair of the board of the humanist Giordano Bruno Foundation in an interview on the 2017 anniversary of the Reformation: Luther was “one of the greatest hate preachers that Christianity has brought forth. In particular, his aversion to the Jews knew no bounds. It was not for nothing that the Nazis constantly referred to his pamphlet ‘Of the Jews and their Lies.’ Karl Jaspers was right when he said: ‘Hitler followed Luther’s advice, with the exception of direct killing in the gas chambers.’ Celebrating such a man in the country of the Holocaust is, in my view, an insult to the victims” (quoted from <https://www.noz.de/deutschland-welt/kultur/artikel/864136/michael-schmidt-salomon-ein-hassprediger-1#gallery&0&0&864136>—Accessed on 7.6.17. See also *Martin Luther. Volksheld. Antisemit. Hassprediger* ed. Giordano-Bruno-Stiftung (Oberwesel: 2017; download: <https://www.giordano-bruno-stiftung.de/meldung/luther-hassprediger>).

the Diet of Worms in 1521.⁴ And the Lutheran theology of creation and order was discredited after it had been misused to legitimize the concept of race and *Volk* as a divinely ordained order. And yet the German Protestant churches did not engage critically with Luther's anti-Judaism in the postwar period, although the topic was certainly present in specialist circles. This was particularly the case thanks to the groundbreaking study by Reinhold Lewin from the year 1910—he was a student at the Jewish theology seminary in Wrocław, Poland, and later became a rabbi.

In order to understand this belated historical reappraisal of Luther's view of Jews within the Protestant churches, we should take a look at the development in Germany after 1945. In the decades after World War II until the early 1980s, intra-church discussion focused on working through its own guilt and finding a new direction for theology concerning Israel (II). However, the 500th anniversary of Luther's birth in 1983 fueled a discussion about the Reformer's attitude towards the Jews. It centered, first, on the question of how to assess the anti-Semitic co-option of Luther in the Nazi period (III); second, on how Luther's friendly statements towards Jews in his early years relate to the invective of his late writings (IV). The latest EKD statement turns away from a genetic view of Luther towards an appraisal of his theological assessment of Judaism, which remained the same all his life, in connection with his Reformation theology (V).

II

After 1945 the Evangelical Church in Germany came only hesitantly to admit Christian guilt in respect of the Jews. With the *Stuttgart Confession of Guilt* from 1945, the churches took a first step in confessing failure and guilt, although the declaration remains vague and general. It makes no mention at all of the murdering of six million Jews. It was only with the "Wort zur Judenfrage" in 1950, known as the Weissensee Statement, that the EKD Council expressly acknowledged the churches' share in the guilt for National Socialist crimes against

4. The Luther monument in Worms by the sculptor Ernst Rietschel became a key visual factor in forming the defiant pose of the Reformer. Compare Andreas Kuhn and Gabriele Stüber (eds.), *Lutherbilder aus sechs Jahrhunderten* (Ubstadt-Weiher, Heidelberg, Basel verlag regionalkultur, 2016), 52ff. Compare also Hartmut Lehman: "In the six decades from Prussia-dominated German unification until the end of the Weimar Republic, an overwhelming majority of Germans admired the reformer Martin Luther as the greatest German of all times. Starting in the 1880s, two images of Luther evolved: Luther the anti-Roman and anti-Catholic, national-conservative reformer, whose courageous appearance before the Diet of Worms in 1521 was intended to inspire the Germans in pursuing their political interests in the world. And Luther the ethno-nationalist (völkisch) anti-Semite, who admonished the Germans, as true descendants of the Germanic peoples, to protect their ostensibly racial identity against, first and foremost, the Jews," in: "Die Nationale Luther-Rezeption vom Deutschen Kaiserreich bis 1933: 'Er ist wir selber: Der ewige Deutsche'," "Überall Luthers Worte..." *Martin Luther im Nationalsozialismus* | "Luthers Words are Everywhere..." *Martin Luther in Nazi Germany. Exhibition Catalogue*, ed. Stiftung Topographie des Terrors; Gedenkstätte Deutscher Widerstand (Berlin: Stiftung Topographie des Terrors, 2017), 180.

the Jews, a guilt founded not only on active perpetration but also, and above all, on passive tolerance. This was the first sign of a new theological reflection on the relationship of the Protestant church to Judaism. At Weissensee theologians started turning away from the traditional doctrine of disinheritance, according to which the church had taken the place of Israel, which God had rejected; they were moving towards a belief in the lasting election of Israel and the still valid covenant of God with his people.

Christian–Jewish dialogue did not really start up again until the 1960s at the German Protestant “*Kirchentag*,” a large lay gathering that is a progressive, experimental workshop for German Protestantism. The *Kirchentag* working group on “Christians and Jews” was very influential at the time, and is still active.⁵ An important breakthrough was then the synod decision of the Evangelical Church in the Rhineland of 1980.⁶ In the following years most of the EKD member churches amended their constitutions to include the belief in the lasting election of Israel and the special relation of the church to Judaism.

On the basis of this fundamentally new turn taken by theology a fresh, critical view of the Reformation heritage became not only possible but also necessary. A milestone was the Luther year in 1983 which marked the quincentenary of the Reformer’s birth. Besides a statement by the EKD Council, others were made by the Lutheran World Federation and the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (for American Lutheranism the statement by the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America of 1994 is more significant), which raised the issue of Luther’s anti-Jewish writings.⁷ Since 1983, Luther’s anti-Judaism has been thematically present in German church statements and has also played an important role in the lead-up to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017, notably during the “Luther decade” which was launched in Germany in 2008.⁸

In 2012 a motion was put to the EKD Synod that it should distance itself from Martin Luther’s anti-Jewish writings before the 2017 anniversary. Cautious about rushing things on that occasion, the synod decided not to make a declaration but recommended that the EKD take a suitable opportunity to distance itself from Luther’s statements against the Jews in the context of preparing for the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. At the same time, in the lead-up to the 2017 anniversary, a growing pressure was building up in the media, which expected

6. Documented with an English translation at <http://www.jcrelations.net/Synodalbeschlu%DF+zur+Erneuerung+des+Verh%E4ltnisses+von+Christen+und+Juden.1350.0.html?L=2> (Accessed on 7.6.17).

7. See Darall Jodock, “Luther and the Jews: A USA-American Perspective,” *Martin Luther und die Juden. Luthers Judenschriften und ihre Rezeption—Ein Projekt zum Reformationsjubiläum (2)*. Epd-Dokumentation Nr. 11 (2016): 19–24.

8. See <https://www.luther2017.de/en/> (official English website).

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the EKD to make an official declaration. This then happened at its synod in Bremen in 2015.

An appropriate judgment of Luther's attitude is not easy, in fact; the source situation is difficult, Luther's statements appear contradictory and how his *Judenschriften* (writings on the Jews) fit into his theology and the totality of his work remains a matter of dispute, as does the way they are to be historically assessed in the context of the 16th century. Another relevant question is: which has had the greater historical influence in the church—the early, Jew-friendly statements or the later, hate-filled condemnations?

III

In March 2013 a fundamental article appeared in the newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) by Margot Kässmann, the EKD Council's special envoy for the Reformation anniversary: "The dark side of the Reformation" (30 March 2013),⁹ followed shortly afterwards by a critical reply by the renowned church historian Johannes Wallmann (FAZ of 31 October 2013). The issue was the extent to which Luther's late writings, with their excessive violence and hate-laden statements about the Jews, and the fatal "advice" to drive them away and exclude them, could have had any influence on the anti-Semitism of the 19th and 20th centuries. Johannes Wallmann argued that the Protestant church had only focused on Luther's friendly tract about the Jews from 1523 until well into the 20th century, whereas his anti-Jewish late writings had been unknown. By contrast, Kässmann stressed the aspect of continuity between Lutheran anti-Judaism and modern anti-Semitism.

The source situation is tricky; also because we have to distinguish between the availability of Luther's anti-Jewish writings and the prominence of his theological thinking about the Jews.¹⁰ While his *Judenschriften* were included in all the large collected works, they were missing in the more widely distributed selections and in the 18th and 19th centuries there were practically no single publications of these writings. Besides individual references, however, there were also anthologies, or collections of quotations, published in the 19th century. Excerpts from Luther's late writings about Jews had been included in the "Antisemiten-Katechismus" of Theodor Fritsch, which from 1887 was published in numerous editions under an alias; later, starting with the 26th edition, the title was changed to "Handbuch der Judenfrage" (*Handbook of the Jewish Question*) and Fritsch was named as the editor. German church historian Volker Leppin has recently pointed out that the

10. The most important source texts are in the excellent reader ed. by Brooks Schramm and Kirsi I. Stjerna, *Martin Luther, the Bible and the Jewish People. A Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

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texts were available at any time—even on the eve of the Third Reich.¹¹ And that they were always fished out of the data memory when anti-Jewish material was in demand. That applies, conversely, to the “Jew-friendly” Luther. There was, above all, an instrumental, legitimizing use of Luther—in both directions. Luther was always quoted when it suited people’s own position.

Today, however, there is broad consensus that there is no simple causal line of continuity from Luther’s anti-Judaism to National Socialist anti-Semitism. One major reason is that Luther did not play a crucial role in the complex genealogy of the biologist racist anti-Semitism emerging in the 19th century. If Luther was referenced in order to justify anti-Semitic hatred of Jews, this was generally accompanied by a selective approach that separated Luther’s “recommendations” about eliminating the Jews from their theological rationale and quoted one-sidedly from the late publication *Of the Jews and Their Lies* from 1543. The ambivalence and volatility of appealing to Luther—both to justify tolerant dealings with Jews and also to legitimize hatred and exclusion—does have a certain basis in the sources. That leads to the question of how we should assess Luther’s attitude towards Jews.

IV

Let us go back to the year 1983. In the statement by the EKD Council marking the 500th anniversary of Luther’s birth we read: “As important as Luther’s early pamphlet [from 1523] about the Jews was and still is today, the statements of the old Luther were fatal. No one today can still approve them.”¹² The discussion about the tension between Luther’s statements early on and those of his late

11. “So wichtig Luthers frühe Schrift über die Juden auch noch heute ist, so verhängnisvoll wurden Äußerungen des alten Luthers. Niemand kann sie heute gutheißen.” Quoted from *Die Kirchen und das Judentum. Dokumente von 1945 bis 1985*, ed. Rolf Rendtorff and Hans Hermann Henrix (München: Bontinfatius-Verlag and Chr. Kaiser: 1987), 604f. A similar description, differentiating between Luther’s early and late statements, is found in the EKD Study *Christians and Jews III. Schritte der Erneuerung im Verhältnis zum Judentum. Eine Studie der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2000), 56f.

12. “So wichtig Luthers frühe Schrift über die Juden auch noch heute ist, so verhängnisvoll wurden Äußerungen des alten Luthers. Niemand kann sie heute gutheißen.” Quoted from *Die Kirchen und das Judentum. Dokumente von 1945 bis 1985*, ed. Rolf Rendtorff and Hans Hermann Henrix (München: Bontinfatius-Verlag and Chr. Kaiser: 1987), 604f. A similar description, differentiating between Luther’s early and late statements, is found in the EKD Study *Christians and Jews III. Schritte der Erneuerung im Verhältnis zum Judentum. Eine Studie der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus 2000), 56f.

writings was for a long time at the heart of the question about Luther's anti-Judaism. What is at stake here?¹³

For Luther the Jews belonged to the group of enemies of the gospel whom he combated; besides the Jews there were also the "Turks" (i.e. Islam), witches, the Anabaptists and Enthusiasts, but above all the Pope and his supporters. Among these opponents the Jews have a special status through the Old Testament; their rejection of the gospel of Jesus Christ weighs particularly heavily. That is because Luther thought that Scripture, above all the part common to Christians and Jews in the Old Testament, or the Jewish Tanakh, testified indisputably that the Messiah had come 1500 years ago. The Jews, he said, contested this coming against their better knowledge. The poverty and oppression suffered by Jews in the 1500 years since then only proved that their hopes in the holy city of Jerusalem were null and void, and that the people of the Jews faced God's judgment and wrath.

However, in 1523 Luther was of the view that the Catholic Church itself, through its lack of credibility in its attitude towards the Jews, and the centuries of obscuring the gospel, was responsible for the stubbornness of the Jews. With the rediscovery of the gospel by the Reformation, however, there was hope that the Jews too could be converted to Christianity if only the gospel were properly explained to them. Of course, that meant that people would have to be friendlier towards them than was mostly the case. Social integration was to serve as a means of religious conversion. That is the basic tone of the treatise *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew* of 1523.

As early as the mid-1520s, Luther's relatively friendly attitude began to change. Besides an unhappy encounter he had with two or three Jewish scholars in about 1526, rumors about the alleged successful Jewish mission among Christians played a role; in addition, Luther started reading anti-Jewish literature by converts and taking notice of Jewish pamphlets smearing Christianity.

From being victims of Christian non-credibility (1523) Jews for Luther then became deliberate and malicious deniers of the gospel; the hope of conversion turned into the conviction that such attempts at conversions were pointless, even harmful; in addition there was a dramatic overestimation of the alleged "danger of seduction" by Jews. Apocalyptic interpretation patterns contributed to Luther's increasingly demonizing the Jews. The Reformer was only able to interpret the Jewish "No" to Christ as nothing less than a work of the devil. He held the Jews increasingly to be dangerous and deserving of punishment, which is why he abandoned the proposal of condoning them as part of a conversion strategy, and instead called for "sharp mercy": the Jews were to convert or be driven out so that they would not be a danger to Christians, who, through their tolerance of Jewish machinations shared in the guilt of the Jews' alleged blasphemy of Christ.

13. For the following exposition cf. Thomas Kaufmann. *Luthers Juden*, (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2014) with more literature. See also, besides his article in this journal, by Dean Phillip Bell: "Martin Luther and the Jews. The Reformation, Nazi Germany and Today," *The Solomon Goldman Lectures. Vol. VII*, ed. Dean Phillip Bell (Chicago: Spertus Institute of Jewish Studies, 1999) 155–187; also the introduction in Schramm and Stjerna, *Martin Luther*.

V

Typically the central focus of church statements in the 1980s and 90s lay on the question of this development between the early “Jew-friendly” and the late “anti-Jewish” Luther. This perspective, however, conceals the danger of a questionable apologetics and split into a good and a bad Luther. That was pointed out by Heiko A. Oberman: “There is always the danger of idealizing the young Luther, exalting his output of the 1520s as a beacon of freedom and intellectual testament, while comfortably relegating to the shelf the practically unknown late works under the label, ‘Relapse into the Middle Ages.’”¹⁴ The problematic side of this genetic view is consequently that it runs the risk of not sufficiently perceiving Luther’s theological judgment on the Jews, which essentially remained the same.¹⁵ But Luther’s statements about Judaism are only to be appropriately interpreted and appreciated by situating them in his theology.

The problem was discussed in academic theology in the 1960s; it focused on the opposition between the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which is central for Luther’s theology, and a supposedly Jewish works justification. Luther used the expression “Judaize” as a fighting term that he also applied to papists and enthusiasts. The Reformer thus understood the opposition to Judaism as a religious and theological one, touching upon the heart of faith and Reformation theology. Besides the distinction between faith and works, other basic distinctions in Luther’s theology are also in play, for example between law and gospel, promise and fulfillment, but above all about Luther’s christological interpretation of the Old Testament.

In early summer 2015 an important conference of the Protestant Academy in Berlin took place in cooperation with the education department of the Central Council of Jews on Jewish perspectives on Martin Luther.¹⁶ The Jewish side asked the justified question as to whether Luther’s theology as a whole had an anti-Jewish character to the extent that it made Judaism a negative foil to Christianity. The question is certainly open, not only because Luther merely

15. Kaufmann, *Luthers Juden*, 48.172. Kaufmann revives the older thesis of Wilhelm Maurer and others that there was only discontinuity at the level of the required behavior. See, however, the

16. *Reformer, Ketzer, Judenfeind. Jüdische Perspektiven auf Martin Luther. Tagung der Evangelischen Akademie zu Berlin und des Zentralrats der Juden in Deutschland, Berlin 10–12.6.15.* epd-Dokumentation Nr. 39 (2015).

16. *Reformer, Ketzer, Judenfeind. Jüdische Perspektiven auf Martin Luther. Tagung der Evangelischen Akademie zu Berlin und des Zentralrats der Juden in Deutschland, Berlin 10–12.6.15.* epd-Dokumentation Nr. 39 (2015).

perceived Judaism in the polemical portrayal of convert literature and not on the basis of his own experience and genuine encounters. It is clear that his Reformation theology may be interpreted in an anti-Jewish sense; it remains a challenge however, to see how it can be *re*-interpreted in a non-anti-Jewish sense in the light of the newly arisen, post-Shoah Christian–Jewish dialogue. And a theologically critical consideration of Luther must keep the perspective of the victims in view; it must not downplay Luther’s invective as rhetoric and gloss over its extremism.

The co-opting of Luther for racist ideology in the 20th century remains, on the one hand, an abusive reinterpretation and instrumentalization of the Reformer and his authority, which was already overstated in the 19th century. On the other hand, his invective against Judaism prepared the intellectual ground on which anti-Judaism and later anti-Semitism could thrive. The Bremen declaration of the EKD synod in autumn 2015 pointed this out and therefore called for a critical handling of Martin Luther and the Reformation heritage.¹⁷ It unanimously agreed to distance itself from Luther’s anti-Jewish approaches and stated that his views concerning Judaism were not compatible with today’s understanding of God’s faithfulness to his people as presented in the Bible. In its declaration, the Synod furthermore identified the necessity to take steps of repentance and renewal. It was with great joy that the KLAK-network appreciated the focus on the renewal of Christian–Jewish relations by the recent EKD synod. “KLAK” is the name of the network of people responsible for Jewish–Christian relations in the 24 regional churches within the Protestant Church of Germany (EKD). At its annual meeting in January 2016 the KLAK-delegates adopted the impulse of the EKD-Synode by drafting a “Zwischenruf” with considerations concerning a theology molded by the Reformation within Christian–Jewish Relations.¹⁸ As a further step of this journey

of repentance and renewal, the EKD synod in November 2016 unanimously agreed

18. http://www.klak.org/index_htm_files/KLAK-Zwischenruf_A4_2016.pdf (Accessed on 7.6.17).

to oppose any Christian “Mission to the Jews.”¹⁹

Author biography

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19. https://www.ekd.de/archiv/synode2016/beschluesse/s16_05_6_kundgebung_erklaerung_zu_christen_und_juden.html (Accessed on 7.6.17).