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Holy hatred and the consequence of ideas

by Bill Tammeus

A small c catholic

Several years ago I audited a two-semester course on Christian history at an American Baptist seminary in the Kansas City area.

I wasn't required to take the pop quizzes, though I did. Nor was I required to write the required six papers, though I did that, too.

And rarely a week goes by now that I don't feel good about my decision to be an overachiever.

It turned out that the papers I wrote then traced the long, shameful arc of anti-Judaism through nearly 2,000 years of Christian history. Although I knew some of the breath-taking story of what scholar and author Robert Michael, in the title of his book called "holy hatred," I wasn't aware of the full scope of the centuries-long oppression.

It began soon after followers of Jesus began to separate themselves from Judaism and it continued -- often with the official church encouragement -- well into my own lifetime. When this relentlessly painful story becomes familiar, it's easier to understand why Voltaire once described human history as "hardly more than the history of crimes."

What I concluded while writing these research papers was that this appalling anti-Judaism had helped to create the poisonous atmosphere in which modern antisemitism became possible, and that without modern antisemitism the Holocaust is simply incomprehensible. (Just to be clear, anti-Judaism is theological in nature while modern antisemitism is much more racial. In the first instance, Jews are condemned as Christ killers; in the second, they are dismissed as filthy money-grubbers intent on ruling the world exactly the picture of them painted in the fraudulent, but still available, Protocols of the Elders of Zion.)

Learning this history proved to be good background for the work I later did with a rabbi to write our new book, *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust*. And it allowed me to combine my six seminary papers into an essay I've posted on my blog and into a speech I've given to Christian, Jewish and secular audiences. (No surprise: The Jews know this history in much more depth than do the Christians, some of whom seem shocked to be hearing about this for the first time.)

But it seemed to me that the post-Auschwitz cry of "never again" cannot be the cry just of families of the victims. It also must be the cry of the families of the perpetrators and of those who stood by and did nothing -- or who might well have been part of either group had we been adults in Europe during the Holocaust.

So I have decided to lead a seminar on "Lessons from the Holocaust" the first weekend in November at Kirkridge Retreat Center in Pennsylvania. And one of the things I plan to do is make sure that the participants are familiar with the history of anti-Judaism I came to know in some depth when I audited the Christian history class at Central Baptist Seminary.

I do not want you or any of my seminar participants to conclude that this abominable history of anti-Judaism means that any criticism Christians make of Israel today is automatically antisemitism. No. That would be adopting the same sort of unthinking, simplistic labeling that helped to create antisemitism in the first place. Indeed, there is much to criticize about the actions of both modern Israel and the Palestinian leadership ? to say nothing about those of our own government.

But I hope that people who grasp the importance of this history will understand that words and ideas have consequences. What we teach our children can lead them to be bigots who marginalize and even destroy others simply for who they are or, as was the case of people in our new book, can lead them to work to save people when they become targets.

But we're unlikely to be in the latter group if we're ignorant of history.

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