

How Silent were the Churches?

Canadian churches and their response to Jewish persecution in World War II

by Johan D.Tangelder.

In the 1930s the world seemed to be divided into two camps: “one that wanted to be rid of Jews and one that would not accept them.” This observation is confirmed by the peculiar fate of *St. Louis*, the ship which was forced to sail the seven seas in search of a safe haven. Spurned by Latin American, American and Canadian ports, its Jewish passengers were returned to Europe, where some of them perished. This widely reported incident epitomized the Jewish plight. Alan Davies and Marilyn F. Nefsky, the authors of *How Silent Were the Churches?* note that, “Antisemitism in Germany launched the *St. Louis*, and antisemitism in other nations, including Canada, charted its strange and tragic course.”

French Canada

In Quebec anti-Semitism permeated every section of society, including the Church, the intelligentsia, the press and the political arena. It was not confined to the fanatical and shrill-voiced Adrien Arcand’s blue-shirted fascists. It was promoted by the controversial priest-historian, nationalist spokesman Lionel-Adolphe Groulx, who devoted himself to elaborating the myth of the French Catholic nation in North America. He saw the Jews as impurities in the blood of French Canada. Anti-Semitism was prominent in the rhetoric of the Catholic politicians and intellectuals who considered Jews an economic, radical, and racial threat to French Catholic nationalism. The “Achat Chez Nous” movement was created by Church and nationalist leaders to institute a boycott of all Jewish businesses in the province – an attempt at forcing the Jews to leave.

English Canada

English Canada was also infected with anti-Jewish feelings. The Jew served, along with other foreigners, as the scapegoat (Lev.16:20-28) for a vast variety of economic and social ills. For example, following the Winnipeg general strike of 1919, an anti-immigrant backlash in the city inspired newspaper advertisements calling for the deportation of undesirable aliens, including a number of prominent Jewish Canadians. The Great Depression and the gathering storm in Europe cast its clouds over Canada as well. Canada was a nation in travail. The 1930's were a dangerous and demoralizing decade. Disillusionment (both with existing institutions and accepted values), isolationism, and racism led to flirtations with radical new political ideologies. The mood was anti-immigrant, anti-refugee, and anti-Semitism was one of its fruits. Militant antisemitism was preached by Father E. Coughlin, the radio priest at the Shrine of the Little Flower near Detroit, but advanced as well by the Protestant Fundamentalist Gerald Winrod of Kansas. Antisemitism had also permeated into the upper levels of the Canadian government. Prime Minister Mackenzie King worried that allowing in Jews would “pollute” Canada’s bloodstream. His favorable impression of Hitler beggars description. In his diary he wrote that

“Hitler...will rank some day with Joan of Arc among the deliverers of his people, & if he is only careful may yet be the deliverer of Europe.” The authors comment that Kings’ view of a “virtuous Hitler” successfully extinguished his better judgment, whatever the evidence of the ears and eyes, and blotted out the cruelty of the German government, at least temporarily. Antisemitism and anti-refugees attitudes were behind his cabinet and its bureaucratic servants’ refusal to open Canada’s gates to Hitler’s Jewish victims. In fact, Canada had by far the worst record of any Western or immigration country in providing sanctuary to the Jews of Europe in the 1930s and 1940s.

How silent were the Canadian Protestant churches? They had a divided mind on Jews. Mixed and sometimes contradictory attitudes characterized the various Protestant churches during the Nazi era. They did not speak with a collective voice. But many Protestant pulpits were not silent, nor were many presbyteries, conferences and synods, nor were a sizable number of editorialists and academics. However, Protestant churches were able to reach only part of the population that attended Sunday worship services - a minority. The First World War had brought out into the open the secularization process that had been growing in Canada. Decline of religious influence was well under way. Over the unchurched majority, baptized and unbaptized, the Church’s influence was scant. Formidable intellectual challenges were eroding faith in the Bible. The Modernist versus Fundamentalist controversies drained time and energy.

Davies and Nefsky made a thorough study of the Canadian Protestant churches’ reaction to the plight of the Jews during the Nazi era. They examined letters, church documents, and publications of mainline denominations, Baptists and evangelicals, Lutherans, Mennonites and Quakers.

The United Church

The chapter devoted to The United Church of Canada shows that some members were bigoted toward the Jews. The number drawn to fascism was small. Rev. Harold Hendershot, an ardent Germanophile, wrote that he regarded the Nazi anti-Jewish measures as both natural and intelligible. In a letter, written in 1938, a Nova Scotia minister “wonders if democracy is not its own greatest danger, and whether a period of Fascism would be all bad.” But the Nazi program did not sit well with the majority in the denomination. And from the very beginning of the persecution, the evils of the Nazi system were denounced in the official press of the United Church. Pro-Jewish and pro-refugee resolutions were passed on to the King government. Although there was no sustained mass outcry on behalf of the Jews among the church rank-and-file, as an institution the church was far from silent.

The chapter on The Church of England notes that it was far from silent. The “us liberty-loving Anglo Saxons,” was a refrain, again and again stated by Anglican writers, who detected the “menace of fascism” almost from the moment of its inception. They spoke out against the anti-Jewish tactics of the Nazis and denounced Adrien Arcand’s Quebec fascists for their unChristian and unBritish anti-Semitic spirit. The circulation of “venomous” anti-Jewish literature in Canada was also deplored. In the mid-thirties, when the Hitler regime was on its best behavior because of the forthcoming Olympic Games, the editor of *The Canadian Churchman* asserted that it was “high time that the public opinion of the world was aroused at the condition of the Jews in Germany,” pointing to their “pitiable” and “doomed situation.” The Anglicans also committed themselves to their spiritual and material assistance. The authors note that for the Anglicans to save the Jews was to save the honor of the British Empire and the

principles of the Christian faith.

Presbyterians

The chapter on the Presbyterian Church in Canada notes that a few of them were vehemently anti-Semitic. In 1936, the *Presbyterian Record* saw fit to publish a sermon preached by C.M. Kerr, the minister of St. David's Church in Halifax. He wrote the haunting and inexcusable reflection, "Have you ever considered that the Germans are now treating the Jews exactly as the Jews once treated other peoples whom they thought might contaminate them? That is to say they set out to exterminate them."

Many prominent Presbyterians spoke out against the rise of Nazism. Rev. W.H. Leathem, preaching in St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Ottawa, the church attended by prime minister King, castigated the "Spirit of anti-Christ" that was overwhelming German Christianity. In light of King's actions, he must have been sound asleep when Leathem preached. But the struggle of the anti-Nazi Confessing church in Germany seemed to preoccupy the Presbyterians to the point that it deflected attention from the plight of the Jews. Furthermore, the church was in a survivalist state of mind, having to reconstitute itself after their 1925 schism. The loudest voice protesting anti-Semitism was Rev. Morris Zeidman (1894-1964), a native of Poland. He became a Christian shortly after his arrival in Toronto, where he spent the remainder of his life in an innovative and energetic inner-city ministry. He called himself a "Hebrew Christian," and devoted his life to the proclamation of the Gospel to the Jews. Formal services and Bible studies in both English and Yiddish for adults, and Sunday school for children, as well as relief aid for the Jewish community were part of his ministry. His little paper, *The Hebrew Evangelist*, constantly reminded its readers about the evils of Nazism in Europe. When the American Gerald Winrod came to Toronto and spoke in the Peoples Church on Bloor Street, Zeidman organized a peaceful protest and picket line against the slander of this anti-Semite.

Baptists

The Canadian Baptists, because of their strong assertion of the free church-congregational principle, were instinctively suspicious of Nazi plans for a national German Protestant church. They were quickly alerted to the abhorrent Aryan laws and the persecution of the Jews. But no Canadian Baptist was more vehemently anti-Nazi than the fearless and outspoken Dr. T.T. Shields (1873-1955), pastor of the Jarvis Baptist Church in Toronto, founder of the Toronto Baptist Seminary, the pre-eminent Baptist preacher in Canada of his generation, and editor of the *Gospel Witness*, which was his virtual mouthpiece. He was under no illusion concerning the new political situation in Germany. He directed his fury against the proponents of disarmament and appeasement. He didn't mince words in his description of Hitler. He called him an "utterly satanic personality," another "Benhadad," a "modern Sennacherib," and an "execrable murderer." In a sermon preached in Massey Hall in the wake of Kristallnacht* – the Jarvis Street Church had been destroyed by fire, possibly set by local Nazi sympathizers, or so its members speculated – he said, "Let us remember the attitude represented by modern Germany and Italy, and of a great many people in this country and in the United States – the anti-Jewish, anti-Semitic attitude is anti-Christian...The whole programme of Hitler is against God." Another strong opponent of Nazism was the devout Baptist Watson Kirkconnel (1895-1977), a linguist who understood over forty

languages, and was president of the Baptist-affiliated Acadia University in Nova Scotia. He saw, as readily as Shields, that anti-Semitism lay at the heart of the new German “atavistic tribalism,” and he found ample evidence of Nazi attempts to manipulate German Canadian opinion in the interest of Hitler’s political agenda and racial policies in the German language press in Canada, particularly in Bernard Bott’s *Deutsche Zeitung*. To Bott, a German national and paid Nazi agent, the Jews were the “sworn enemy of sound Canadianism.” Kirkconnel adopted a strong pro-refugee stance. Dr. Oswald Smith, evangelical pastor and founder of the non-denominational Peoples Church, the church picketed by Zeidman, penned a rather naive and idealized description of the new Germany following a visit in 1936: “a Germany from which all fear and insecurity had vanished, in which people were suffused with hope and joy.” What Davies and Nefsky fail to mention is Smith’s early opposition to fascism. In his book *Is the Antichrist at Hand?*, which was published in 1926, Smith called Italy’s dictator Mussolini’s regime the foreshadowing of the reign of the anti-Christ. Although naive about Hitler’s Germany, he was not anti-Semitic. In his book Smith called the persecution of the Jews in Poland “abominable practices.” In the light of all the evidence, it cannot be said that the Baptists and others evangelicals sealed their lips about the Jews in Europe.

Lutherans

Canadian Lutheranism was neither autonomous nor united. A single unified Lutheran Church in Canada did not exist prior to the Second World War. It was a branch of American Lutheranism. Because a substantial part the Canadian Lutheran community was of German extraction, and still smarting from anti-German sentiments following the First World War, initial reactions to Hitler’s Germany were either ambivalent or laudatory. In 1937 a pro-Hitler book was favorably reviewed in *The Canadian Lutheran*. North Americans were advised to visit Germany and see for themselves that “Hitler has won the boundless gratitude, the deep appreciation, the fanatic enthusiasm of a whole people.” The invasion of Poland and the outbreak of war had a sobering effect on any lingering illusions about Hitler and his regime.

The highly decentralized Mennonites could not speak in a single denominational voice. Some adopted Nazi ideas. The influence of Gerald Winrod was also felt in this community. In the German-language Mennonite press, official Nazi denials of Jewish concentration camp incarcerations were passed on. Derstine of the English Mennonite press thought differently. In 1939 he wrote, “We very well know that there are millions of Germans who hang their heads in shame over the terrible crime the Nazis have committed against the Jews.” With the advent of war, the pro-German voices dropped their support for the Third Reich and aborted further discussion of the Jewish question. Quakers, although few in number, were deeply involved in the cause of refugees in the Nazi era. And like most of the Mennonites, they remained steadfast in their pacifism throughout the war years.

Moral judgments about the attitude of the Canadian churches are difficult, especially after the fact. Davis and Nefsky rightly note that they are “coloured by hindsight and tend to assume its wisdom, and because they exaggerate the power of right moral choices to bring forth desirable results.” For example, the historical records show that few Canadian Protestants understood the stark reality of the Holocaust. The Holocaust historian Michael Marrus pointed out that no one at that time was predisposed to believe the unbelievable: “To a degree everyone was in the dark.” Many could not

believe it possible for such a civilized nation as Germany to perpetrate this horrendous genocide – a nation which had given birth to such great philosophers, composers and theologians. Too many still had a blinkered view of human nature. They did not think that human beings were capable of organizing concentration camps and killing centers.

Conclusion

The authors' commendable and well-researched studies clearly show the dilemmas faced by Protestant communities and individuals in the Nazi era. But Christians need to stay vigilant. Since silence kills, we dare not be silent in the light of the disturbing anti-Semitic acts, which are on increase in Canada. Since the Fall of 2000, synagogues, cemeteries and Jewish community centers in Canada have been desecrated. Jewish citizens have been threatened and assaulted. In light of current developments, the book by Davis and Nefsky deserves our attention, but it should be read with critical care. The authors' views of Scriptures leave much to be desired. For example, they mistakenly claim that the roots of anti-Semitism are found in the New Testament representations of Pharisees and Sadducees. They state, "There is little doubt that the Matthaean image of the blind, legalistic, impious, hypocritical, fanatical and murderous Pharisee (Matthew 23) is a caricature inspired by Jewish-Christian frictions in [Antioch] in the final decades of the first century." The authors also leave the distinct impression that Christians should never evangelize the Jews. They view it as an anti-Semitic activity. But mission work to the Jews is still our mandate. We need to weep over the atrocities committed against the Jews. Yet we still have the obligation to proclaim that Jesus is the promised Messiah and the only way to God the Father. We are to preach to all and sundry the Gospel of Jesus Christ "because it is the power of God for salvation of everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then for the Gentile" (Rom.1:17).

** Kristallnacht (or the "Night of the Broken Glass") occurred on November 9 in 1938, and it in many ways marked the beginning of the Nazi Holocaust. On this night Nazis coordinated an attack on Jewish people and their property in Germany and German-controlled lands.*