

HOLOCAUST EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

Abstract

The Nazi Holocaust is the back-drop to every conversation between Christians and Jews. Religious educators working in Christian contexts must be aware of this reality. This article examines educational responses for educating Christian students about the Nazi Holocaust. The Catholic Church has made a number of faltering steps towards responding to the holocaust. A brief overview of these attempts provides a context for this discussion.

Introduction

Pope Benedict XVI visited Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial Museum in Jerusalem on 11 May 2009. On that occasion he gave a moving speech in the Hall of Remembrance. He told those present and the world's media: "I have come to stand in silence before this monument, erected to honour the memory of the millions of Jews killed in the horrific tragedy of the *Shoah*." He said that:

The Catholic Church, committed to the teachings of Jesus and intent on imitating his love for all people, feels deep compassion for the victims remembered here. Similarly, she draws close to all those who today are subjected to persecution on account of race, color, condition of life or religion - their sufferings are hers, and hers is their hope for justice. As Bishop of Rome and Successor of the Apostle Peter, I reaffirm - like my predecessors - that the Church is committed to praying and working tirelessly to ensure that hatred will never reign in the hearts of men again. (Benedict XVI, 2009)

Despite its heartfelt statements of regret and sorrow, Pope Benedict's speech was heavily criticised by sections of the Israeli media and some Jewish organisations. Officials at Yad Vashem expressed "disappointment" at the pope's speech. Among other things, the pope was criticised for his unwillingness to declare any direct responsibility on the part of Catholic Church officials for the conduct of the Holocaust. One Israeli journalist was blunt in assessing why this might have been the case:

In last night's speech, he inexplicably said Jews "were killed," as if it had been an unfortunate accident. On the surface, this may seem unimportant....But the word the pope used is significant because someone in the Holy See decided to write "were killed" instead of "murdered" or "destroyed." The impression is that the cardinals argued among themselves over whether Israelis "deserve" for the pope to say "were murdered" and decided they only deserve "were killed." It sounded petty. Even the recurring use of the term "tragedy" seemed like an attempt to avoid saying the real thing. (Segev, 2009)

Experienced Vatican journalist and author John Allen was more kind in his assessment of the speech, giving the pope "an A for effort, and a B for execution" (Allen, 2009). Whatever the assessment, the speech revealed the ongoing concern among many Jewish groups and individuals that Catholic Church officials had not yet delivered a consistent, comprehensive and transparent statement on Christian complicity in the Nazi Holocaust.

After Pope Benedict's speech, some commentators in the Jewish media reflected with greater acceptance on the visit by the previous Pope John Paul II on 23 March 2000. During his visit, Pope John Paul II recalled his Polish upbringing and his witness of Jewish friends murdered by the Nazis:

My own personal memories are of all that happened when the Nazis occupied Poland during the war. I remember my Jewish friends and neighbors, some of whom perished while others survived. I have come to Yad Vashem to pay homage to the millions of Jewish people who, stripped of everything, especially of their human dignity, were murdered in the Holocaust. More than half a century has passed, but the memories remain. (John Paul II, 2000)

The horrors of the Holocaust are a stain on the story of European Christianity. And, it is intriguing to reflect on the accidents of history that offers up a Polish pope and a German pope to represent the Catholic Church's views on it in the new century. These papal statements of memory and sorrow and their reception by Jewish communities reveal something of the present state of Catholic responses to the Nazi Holocaust. They also contain lessons for Australian Catholic religious educators. Attempts to teach the Holocaust in Australian Catholic schools risk receiving an A for laudable efforts but a B, or worse, for inadequate execution. Words, and how they are used, are important. The area of Holocaust memory and education is hotly contested. Efforts of Catholic Church officials to respond to the Holocaust have been closely scrutinised and challenged. Gaps appear still to exist in the Church's response. And these gaps present challenges for Australian Catholic religious educators.

This article will survey the Catholic Church's official documentary record on the Holocaust and Holocaust education. The discussion will then move to consider the principles and practices that might underpin a positive educational implementation of these official Church pronouncements. One note on language is necessary before beginning this exploration. In many contemporary discussions, the word *holocaust* is often substituted with the Hebrew words *shoah*, or *churban*. *Shoah* is the word that describes a destructive whirlwind. *Churban* is a word that means destruction. *Holocaust* is a word that also describes the legitimate functions of sacrifice in the Second Temple period of the religion of Israel. So as to avoid any ambiguity or confusion, many now choose to use the word *shoah* to describe Nazi atrocities.

Official Catholic Documents on Shoah Memorial and Education

The pivotal official Catholic Church document on relations between Catholics and Jews was *Nostra Aetate*, the Second Vatican Council's 1965 declaration on the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions. This document - or more precisely # 4 - was a radical revision of the Catholic Church's attitude towards Jews and Judaism. It laid a foundation for subsequent official documents from Vatican and local Church sources. While it did not mention the shoah directly, it made a general statement deploring "all hatreds, persecutions, displays of antisemitism directed against the Jews at any time and from any source" (paragraph 4). It did not admit any Christian complicity in promoting any of these things. It did not make a specific reference to shoah education or memorial, but it did "beg the Christian faithful...to be at peace with all people" (# 5). It provided a platform upon which Vatican and local Church communities could reflect. It enabled the subsequent publication of more extensive accounts of the past and future of relations between Catholics and Jews.

In 1974, the Vatican established the Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews. In that year, this new body published a document called *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration Nostra Aetate, No. 4*. It proposed to offer practical advice on the ways various Church members and agencies might fulfil the intentions of # four of *Nostra Aetate*. It acknowledged the Vatican II document was written "in circumstances deeply affected by the persecution and massacre of Jews which took place in Europe just before and during the Second World War" (Preamble). Despite this admission, it mostly glossed over any specific consideration of shoah education or memorial. It asked for special attention to the publication of text books, history books and the formation of all religious educators who would be well versed in the new understandings of the relationship between Jews and Catholics.

Specific instruction on shoah education came a decade later from the same Vatican organisation in their 1985 statement: *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church*. The authors claimed that “catechesis should help in understanding the meaning for the Jews of the extermination during the years 1939-1945, and its consequences.” In general, this document showed the fruits of twenty years of dialogue between Catholics and Jews in the wake of Vatican II. It was more specific in its recommendations and responded directly to issues on the mind of many Jews that had formed the basis of criticisms of earlier Vatican publications. But its recommendations on shoah education, while direct and significant, were meagre: no plan or curriculum content or preferred approach was mentioned.

In 1997, the Congregation for the Clergy published a major statement on catechesis in which the authors directed catechists to acknowledge and attend to the relationship between Christians and Jews.

Special attention needs to be given to catechesis in relation to the Jewish religion. Indeed when she delves into her own mystery, the Church, the People of God in the New Covenant, discovers her links with the Jewish People, the first to hear the word of God. Religious instruction, catechesis, and preaching should not form only towards objectivity, justice and tolerance but also in understanding and dialogue. Both of our traditions are too closely related to be able to ignore each other. It is necessary to encourage a reciprocal consciousness at all levels. In particular, an objective of catechesis should be to overcome every form of antisemitism. (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, # 199)

This passage hints at the need for education on the shoah but stops short of actually naming it. The authors show an awareness of the maturing relationship between Catholics and Jews since Vatican II and encourage a form of dialogue that goes beyond mere instruction in the major symbols and beliefs of Jewish religion. While it could be admitted that such dialogue would inevitably include reflection on the shoah, the authors neglect to specifically reference this aspect.

In 1998, the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published a separate and lengthy document titled, *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*. The document claimed that Christians had a “duty of remembrance” in relation to the shoah and that “there is no future without memory” (# 1). It called for a “moral and religious memory” among Christians (# 2). The document ended with a call to “all men and women of good will to reflect deeply on the significance of the shoah” (# 5). Despite its extensive treatment of the subject, the document was heavily criticised in Jewish and some Christian circles for its selective remembering of history and its inability to fully express Christians’ complicity in the shoah. For example, the Vatican document recalled how Cardinal Bertram of Breslau in February 1931 published a pastoral letter condemning National Socialism - the Nazi ideology. Jewish critics pointed to the selective way that Cardinal Bertram was represented in the document. While it was acknowledged that he had condemned National Socialism in 1931, they pointed out that he opposed all public protest against the deportations and massacres of the Jews. After Hitler’s suicide in 1945, Cardinal Bertram “addressed a circular letter to the priests of his diocese inviting them to celebrate a solemn requiem service in memory of the Fuehrer” (International Jewish Committee, 1998). These critics contend that examples such as this demonstrate a response that is “slurred over” in the Vatican’s *We Remember* document.

The official Catholic documentary tradition on shoah education is scant and sketchy: the efforts are commendable but the execution of positive strategies is somewhat lacking. Certainly, clear guidance has been provided to catechists and religious educators to engage in shoah education and memorial. But the official endorsement to do so is hardly compelling and the scope and content of that education is fraught with ambivalence about the level of acceptance of Christian complicity in the shoah. This lack of official support and guidance on shoah education means large gaps exist in the conduct of shoah education in Australian Catholic schools. The discussion in this paper will now turn to the nature of these gaps and what educational responses might be appropriate.

What Challenges Confront Australian Religious Educators who Teach the Shoah?

Shoah education in contemporary Australian Catholic schools can pursue a number of directions - many of them inadequate or dangerous in their own way. Teaching can be moralistic, shocking, sentimental, uninformed, artificially freed from the ghosts of the past, simplistic, missionary, unhistorical, inadequate, unsophisticated, poorly conceived, and/or de-humanised. The antidote to these potential pit-falls in presenting material on the shoah to Australian students in Catholic schools is similar to the way other curricular hurdles are cleared: sound text books and materials, well prepared teachers, a close attention to language, avoidance of cliché, and the presentation of material with which students can engage in a critical and evaluative manner and not the proffering of glib or simplistic responses. The shoah poses questions for Christians and for all people, the depths of which can never be adequately plumbed. Any teaching that glibly communicates an easy resolution to these complex questions requires pedagogical revision.

For Catholic schools, a particular responsibility is apparent. Programs in Australian Catholic schools must confront the regrettable history of encounters between Christians and Jews. Mary Boys has said that in our history of interactions with Jews, there is much "that is a source of deep shame for all of us who are Christians" (Boys, 2002, p. 12). She argues that contemporary Christians need to confront the shameful aspects of their history, not to tax people with more guilt - which would be ultimately paralysing - but because it has an astringent effect, "awakening us to the dangers of shallow religiosity and ignorance masquerading as zeal" (Boys, 2002, p. 12). Teaching the shoah in Australian Catholic schools necessitates some exploration of the Christian teaching of contempt for the Jews. As one United States Jewish educator put it, omitting the history of antisemitism in teaching about the shoah "allows teachers to avoid unpleasant encounters with their religion's history...the omission also avoids possibly unpleasant encounters with Christian parents" (Schweber, 2006, p. 52). Avoidance of this aspect leaves students groping for answers to the reasons why the Jews were persecuted. It ignores any considerations of the processes of victimisation and resistance.

For religious education programs in Catholic schools, this attentiveness to the past requires some consideration of the deicide charge - the accusation that the all Jews everywhere and at all times were responsible for the killing of God in the person of Jesus. The charge of God-killing is founded in an interpretation of the gospel text in Matthew 27:25 [Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be upon us and on our children".] This passage - the so-called blood curse - has resounded through Christian history in passion plays, sermons and vitriolic denunciations of Jewish responsibility for Jesus' crucifixion. While the deicide charge was never official Church teaching, the effects of it have penetrated deeply into the consciousness of Christians. These effects will need some accounting for. Religious educators will need to provide at least a brief historical survey of the consequences of the deicide charge for Jews and Judaism.

The shoah is becoming, in this generation, a symbol with universal application. Historian Yehuda Bauer contends that, while the shoah is unprecedented in human history, "it has become a symbol of evil in what is inaccurately known as Western civilization, and the awareness of the symbol seems to be spreading all over the world" (Bauer, 2001, p. x). In contemporary culture, books, artworks, movies and documentaries on the shoah are commonly released to popular audiences. These creative artists seem to be mining the meaning of the shoah for clues with which to understand our a common humanity. This contemporary trend also encourages religious educators to consider that shoah education may best be principally located in the humanities and creative arts, rather than among the social sciences. An exploration of the shoah might make profitable use of the methods and subject matter drawn from the disciplines where the human person is the centre of academic inquiry.

What Should Catholic Religious Educators Teach their Students about Christian Complicity in the Shoah?

A shift in writing and teaching about the shoah has occurred in the past fifteen years or so. Up until the 1990s, most programs focused on the suffering of the victims of Nazi persecutions. These studies

considered the shoah as an outgrowth of traditional antisemitism, albeit the most destructive and horrific in a long history of pogroms and persecutions against Jews. This simplified picture has been compounded by an increased focus on the perpetrators and bystanders of the Holocaust, the “near ubiquitous complicity” as Hannah Arendt expressed it, of the civilian populations. In short, scholarly attention has been given, not just to the Jew-hating Nazi thugs, but to railroad bureaucrats, doctors, lawyers, industrialists, bankers, police officers, accountants, and it needs to be said, Church officials (Browning, 1992; Goldhagen, 1996; Friedlander, 1997; Cornwell, 1999; Ericksen & Heschel, 1999; Rittner, Smith & Steinfeldt, 2000; Krieg, 2004).

Another strand in writing and research about the shoah focuses on the resisters and rescuers. Some of these rescuers have entered the popular imagination and their efforts at resistance to the Nazis and care for Jews are relatively well known: Oscar Schindler has been featured in Steven Spielberg’s movie, *Schindler’s List*; Swedish diplomat Raoul Wallenberg rescued Jews in Budapest; Father Max Kolbe took the place of a condemned compatriot in Auschwitz. The Yad Vashem museum in Jerusalem pays homage to over 16,000 “righteous gentiles”; no one can be sure of the precise number of people who rendered courageous service in the cause of rescuing Jewish people during the Nazi terrors.

A context for understanding the role and significance of the rescuers and resisters would include attention to the fact that their numbers were relatively few in the vast populations who either turned their backs or cravenly collaborated with Nazi plans. So, balance and perspective are required. For example, consideration of the heroic actions of those such as Father Max Kolbe will need to be balanced with studies of those who watched on and chose to do nothing. The story of Max Kolbe is well enough known and recited in Catholic circles. In 1941 while interred at the Auschwitz extermination camp, Max Kolbe volunteered to take the place of a condemned fellow Polish inmate. He was starved to death by his captors. He was canonised as a Catholic saint by Pope John Paul II in 1982. The efforts of a Kolbe, Schindler, or Wallenberg are exceptional; they are not indications of normal responses from those confronted by the Final Solution. A further corrective is also possible with a simple confrontation with the question: “Would we have done any better if we had been in their place?”

What Should Australian Catholic Schools Do in Relation to Shoah Education?

The question of an appropriate approach to teaching and learning the shoah in an Australian Catholic school is complex and requires an extensive treatment. The following ten principles provide a discussion point for the creation of an adequate teaching and learning approach in Australian Catholic schools.

1. Teach the shoah with the same academic principles used in teaching other topics – rigorous investigation, inquiry, questioning, challenge... An overly reverential atmosphere in the study of the shoah is an enemy of understanding. Begin the inquiry with an understanding that many questions will not be able to be assigned clear and unambiguous answers. While greater clarity is achievable in a well designed study, some questions will live with students for a life-time.
2. Catholic religious educators have a share in the responsibility to explain to and explore with their students Christian complicity in the shoah. This exploration will seek to describe Christian complicity in the shoah – including the history of the teaching of contempt for the Jews - and not limit an understanding of the causes of the shoah to the actions of Adolf Hitler and his henchmen.
3. Sensitivity is required when selecting material to be presented, especially those materials placed before children and younger adolescents. Many of the pictorial and documentary evidence is shocking and not suitable for review by children. Fortunately, a helpful range of children’s literature is being published that provides age appropriate stories about the shoah for children.

4. Conduct a Yom HaShoah ritual with a class or school assembly. A Yom HaShoah ritual typically includes the lighting of six candles to commemorate those murdered at the hands of the Nazis, the recitation of prayers - especially a reading from the scroll of destruction - and the reading of testimonies, prayers and survivor memoirs. The Yom HaShoah could be included in the prayer rituals of Catholic schools in April when it typically features in Jewish communities, or at another selected time suitable to the school's program.
5. Currently, many feature narrative films are being released for general public viewing that focus on themes related to the shoah. Teachers should resist the urge to show any of these films in their entirety. Each movie is the unique perspective of a director or production company who have a particular agenda to prosecute. No one movie could hope to encapsulate the complexity of the shoah; students will not understand the shoah by viewing movies alone. Instead, use the analytical tools of the media studies discipline to discern what meanings are embedded in each selected cinematic representation. Movies are one helpful adjunct to the study of the shoah, not a substitute for other necessary forms of inquiry.
6. Include stories of Jewish life in Europe before the Nazi Holocaust. This will provide students with a context to understand Jews as persons, European citizens, holders of a range of religious responses to life, and members of various cultural, social, political and economic groups. This will assist students to see European Jews as more than merely victims of Nazi atrocities. It will also help to break down stereotypes about "the Jews" and foster understandings of a people characterised by, among other things, diversity, complexity and difference.
7. Include stories of the "righteous among the nations" – those non-Jews who assisted in the survival of Jews at great personal risk. But, do not confine the study of the shoah to these people only or allow the understanding to develop that their actions and responses were normal or widespread. A consideration of the so-called righteous among the nations helps students to explore issues of courage, responsibility and care.
8. Avoid giving the perception that Jews exist only or principally as the victims of Christian persecution. The shoah does not define Jews or Judaism, even though it assumes a destructive presence in their history. Another way of stating this is: resist the simplistic equation that "a study of Jews and Judaism = a study of the shoah."
9. Avoid cliché and oversimplification in the quest for answers. Simplistic slogans such as "Never again" or "Remember" tend to simplify and domesticate the shoah and its meanings. A study of the shoah should not hang upon the expression of such slogans which can become glib attempts to deal with complex and ambivalent material. Similarly, the use of simulations and role plays about the shoah in classroom programs is potentially problematic in that these activities distort the actual experience of victims of the shoah. For example, eating a reduced diet for consecutive school lunch times does not replicate the experience of people starving in the camps or ghettos under Nazi occupation.
10. Avoid a mere social science approach to teaching the shoah. Avoid an over-concentration on study of "the numbers" killed or interned. A focus on numbers risks affirming Stalin's obscene dictum that "a single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a mere statistic". Instead, use art, poetry, autobiography, music, narrative and other disciplines of the humanities and creative arts in studying the shoah. Survivor testimonies and memoirs are a valuable source of materials for student examination. These classroom resources, drawn from the humanities, provide opportunities to explore the question of how the shoah was humanly possible, help to avoid stereotypical images ("the Jews", "the Germans"), and discourage premature judgments about the motivations, actions and responses of victims, perpetrators, bystanders and rescuers.

Conclusion

Gabriel Moran has pointed to the centrality of the Nazi Holocaust for Jewish and Christian dialogue: "I cannot postpone the immediacy and urgency of the Holocaust. On the Jewish side, it is the reality that hovers over every Christian-Jewish conversation, whatever may be the topic under discussion" (Moran, 1991, p. 25). Any attempts to assist Christian students to understand Jews and Judaism will need to include some specific exploration of the Shoah and Christian complicity in it. This notion was given specific form in the observation of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations when commenting on the Vatican's, *We Remember* document in 1998. They pointed out that "as Catholic belief as expressed in recent documents clearly links the salvation of Christians with God's redemption of the Jewish people whose covenant with him is irrevocable, Christians cannot view the Shoah as they do other genocides" (1998). This perspective places before Catholic religious educators the challenge of presenting the Shoah to their students as an unprecedented event in the history of the world in which Christians were fundamentally complicit.

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