HOLOCAUST EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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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.

Despite its heartfelt statements of regret and sorrow, the Pope'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.

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 provide a Polish pope and a German pope to represent the Catholic Church's views on it. 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 Catholic religious educators.

Pope Benedict XVI visits Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, 11 May 2009

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 response to 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 Holocaust Memorial and Education

The pivotal official Catholic Church document on the 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 paragraph 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 holocaust education or memorial, but it did "beg the Christian faithful...to be at peace with all people" (paragraph 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 paragraph 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 holocaust 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 called for by 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 content or preferred approach was canvassed.

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 anti-semitism. (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, paragraph 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, this Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews published a separate and lengthy document on the shoah, 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" (paragraph 1). It called for a "moral and religious memory" among Christians (paragraph 2). The document ended with a call to "all men and women of good will to reflect deeply on the significance of the shoah" (paragraph 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. However, 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, critics pointed out that he opposed all public protest against the deportations and the 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.

Cardinal Adolf Bertram, 1859-1945

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 Holocaust

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, 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 US 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 allows 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 anywhere and at any time were responsible for the killing of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

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" (Baeur, 2001, p. x). In contemporary culture, books, 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 to understanding a common humanity.

Auschwitz-Birkenau Extermination Camp

What Should Catholic Religious Educators Teach 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 Holocaust as an outgrowth of traditional antisemitism, albeit the most damaging in a long line of pogroms against the 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, 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 resistors and rescuers. Some of these rescuers have entered the popular imagination and their efforts at resistance and care for the 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; 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 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 in any better if we had been in their place?"

Unidentified Catholic clergy with Wilhelm Frick and Joseph Goebbels, date uncertain

What Should Catholic Schools Do in Relation to Holocaust 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. What follows below is ten principles that might

provide a discussion point for the creation of adequate teaching and learning approach. This list is not exhaustive but does take into account the current understandings of shoah education.

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.

2. Catholic religious educators have a share in the responsibility to explain to and explore with their students the Christian complicity in the shoah. This exploration will seek to describe Christian complicity in the shoah, 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 to children and younger adolescents. Many of the pictorial and documentary evidence is shocking and not suitable for viewing by children. Fortunately, a helpful range of children's literature is being published that provide age appropriate stories related to the shoah for children.

4. Conduct a Yom HaShoah ritual with a class or school assembly. A Yom Ha Shoah ritual typically includes the lighting of six candles to commemorate those murdered at the hands of the Nazis, the recitation of prayers, especially the scroll of destruction and the reading of testimonies, prayers and survivor memoirs. The Yom Ha Shoah could be included in the prayer rituals of Catholic schools.

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 which has a particular perspective to portray; 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.

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, members of various cultural, social, political and economic cohorts. This will assist students to see European Jews as more than merely victims of Nazi atrocities.

7. Include stories of the "righteous among the nations" – those non-Jews who assisted 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.

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 the history of Jews and Judaism. 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 are potentially problematic in that they shrink

10. Avoid a mere social science approach to teaching the shoah. Avoid an over-concentration of study of "the numbers" killed or interned. 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.

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 the Christian complicity in it. This notion was given specific content in the observation of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations when commenting on the Vatican's, *We Remember* document in 1998. The 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 event in which Christianity was deeply complicit.

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