

Teaching the Christian Faith in the Shadow of the Holocaust. Pastor Alan Lai

These days I seldom get a chance to address this topic that was on my dissertation that I have spent so much time searching: issues relating to teaching Asian Christians in the shadow of the Holocaust. But I am thankful that there are people out there who have given me the opportunity to keep this topic alive. Last year around this time in May, I was invited to preach at the 28th Annual Christian Service in Memory of the Holocaust in Toronto. The event was organized by the Jewish-Christian Dialogue Committee in Toronto. My theme message was "The Relevance of the Holocaust to Asian Christianity." The Jewish organizers were fascinated because seldom do they find Asian Christians interested in Holocaust studies. Before the memorial service began, in a luncheon hosted by the committee in a synagogue, I got a chance to address some of the Christian leaders and rabbis. The organizers must have liked what they heard because they have just invited me back this November to participate in their annual bigger event: The 29th Annual Holocaust Education Week (see their website: <http://www.holocausteducationweek.com/index.php>). Again, the organizer wants me to address Asian Christians.

It is not surprising for me to hear the organizers' desire to have me talk to Asian Christians about the challenge of the Holocaust to Asian churches. Whenever I mention this topic, most people cannot connect the dots and ask: Why does it matter? Certainly most Asian Christians would ask such a question. Common to most people's understanding is that the Holocaust was a European problem; Asian Christians had nothing to do with it. This mindset needs to be rebuked. But my larger passion about this topic has to do with educating all Christians. In addition to the lack of understanding among Asian Christians, discussion of the Holocaust nowadays is often sidetracked by the contemporary Israelite-Palestine conflict. I do not intend to give the contemporary Israelite government an easy excuse, but to link post-Holocaust reflections with the recent conflict in Palestine and treating them as if they are exactly the same topic being under considered is to turn the call to examine Christian in-house mistakes into an excuse to pointing fingers at others.

Increasingly, the church is realizing that an atrocity such as the Holocaust did not occur overnight. Rather, it took centuries of Christian condemnation of Jews and Judaism and misreading the Bible that helped foster a habit of mind concerning Jews. The complicity of Christianity in the Holocaust and the theological root of anti-semitism cannot be denied. Although most modern Christians would denounce anti-semitism, the traditional Christian claim is that Christianity has superseded Judaism, replacing it as the true Israel and therefore as the only true God's people. This theological insertion is what I call "anti-Judaism." Conventional Christian teaching accuses Jews of deicide, unfaithfulness to God's covenant, and legalism. By not honoring Jesus as the Messiah, Judaism is said to have become obsolete and forsaken by God. It is absolutely necessary for Christians to understand how such defamatory rhetoric entered the pages of the Bible and how to begin to learn to debunk the anti-Judaic myth circulating in our churches. Because of the complicity Christianity plays in the Holocaust, Christians have no choice but to confront the seedbed they provided for the suffering of Jews.

Asian Christians may find it difficult to envision how they bear the same responsibility as Western Christians to correct the age-old problematic Christian teaching related to Judaism. Yet, Asian Christians are in no way exempted from engaging in post-Holocaust Christian learning. In fact, it is a dangerous attitude on the part of Asian Christians to think that they are unaffected by the Holocaust, thereby no need to engage learning with Jews. Although Auschwitz and many other death camps are far away from Asia geographically, Asian Christians belong to the same religious family called Christianity. As members in the same familial tradition, Asian Christians share the glory and pain of this tradition. This reality calls all Christians, Asian included, to purge the anti-Judaic myths that are still alive among many

churches. More importantly, Asians came to know Christianity at a time when condemning Jews as inferior religiously was the standard theological lens in promoting the Christian faith. Needless to say, many Asian Christians still consider the historical Christian understandings of God, church and the world western missionaries had taught as untouchable truth. Without actively purging the colonial mindset concerning the Christian faith and world religions, Asian Christians are far from being excused from their share of problems even after the Holocaust. That being said, occasionally, I am uplifted by courageous individuals. Last month when I attended a Lutheran World Federation theological consultation in Augsburg, Germany, I missed the chance to visit Dachau, one of the death camps during WWII, which is close to Munich. Among the participants in Augsburg was a Japanese Lutheran theologian who earned his doctorate many years ago at the Luther Seminary in Minnesota and is now teaching in a Lutheran seminary in Japan. Dr. Moto Ishii came a few days early and got a chance to see Dachau. He told me it was worth seeing the camp. It is gratifying to learn that there are other Asian Christians who understand the significance of the Holocaust in their reflections.

One of my tasks as a pastor-teacher is to help people see the underside of things and to hear the forgotten voices. The stake is extremely high as Christians continue to display anti-Judaism in churches. A larger concern has to do with how Christians view traditions and change. Although the Holocaust is not a pleasant topic and many people sincerely want to avoid talking about it; justice-seeking Christians could embrace it as a way to a quest for life-honoring ways to read and re-read the tenets of their faith. Like most Jews and Christians who participate in Jewish-Christian dialogue and learning, I am not interested to take it as an opportunity to shame Christianity; but to build a community of learners that is not afraid of correcting our mistakes. I am committed to teach in ways that foster hope in a weary world.

On September 1, 2002, *Christian Scholars Group*, a Jewish-Christian study group sponsored by Boston College published a ten-point statement *A Sacred Obligation: Rethinking Christian Faith in Relation to Judaism and the Jewish People*. These Christian scholars, both Catholic and Protestant, urged Christians to rethink their Christian faith in light of the church's renewed understanding of Judaism. As stated in *A Sacred Obligation*, revising Christian understanding of Judaism "is not simply a matter of justice or correctness. It is essential for the integrity of Christianity itself to have accurate understandings of Judaism because it is impossible to proclaim Christian faith without reference to Judaism." (*A Sacred Obligation*, 2002).

Just a few weeks ago in Cache Creek, I was invited by an ecumenical clergy group (Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Lutherans) in Kelowna to be the keynote speaker of their annual retreat. Bishop Gerhard Preibisch was also there. My theme presentation was "Jesus, Empire and the Politics of Teaching." This theme demonstrates my love for challenging Christians the need to confront empire and the need to relate to all people differently as the result of significant events such as the Holocaust. I take it seriously that if the kind of pre-Holocaust mindset concerning Jews is theologically unjustifiable, then the practice of teaching, preaching, worship and learning must be altered. Our Christian self-identity and self-talk, including our usual assumptions about the Bible and Jesus, cannot remain the same. This has to be one of our missions: We cannot change the past, but we can shape the future.