

REVIEW

Franklin Sherman, Ed.

Bridges: Documents of the Christian-Jewish Dialogue

Volume One: *The Road to Reconciliation (1945-1985)*

Volume Two: *Building a New Relationship (1986-2013)*

(Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2011 and 2014)

Volume 1: pp. xx + 442 pages.

Volume 2: pp. xix + 540 pages.

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A growing number of recent programs and publications, many of them related to the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council statement “*Nostra Aetate*,” have reminded us of the transformative and revolutionary nature of the Christian-Jewish conversations that began after 1945. With few exceptions the interfaith movement before 1945 focused on issues of common social and political concern, with theological conversations confined largely to the academic sphere. There were certainly Christian pioneers in the first half of the twentieth century, such as James Parkes in England and Mildred Eakin at Drew University in the United States, who were already doing critical studies of anti-Judaism in Christian history and teachings. It was only after the Shoah, however, that Christian theologians and the leadership of the different churches began to acknowledge Christianity’s role in the painful history and unspeakable harm that had been perpetrated against Jews. Simultaneously, an international network of Christian-Jewish organizations and publications emerged that could offer an institutional framework and continuity to the conversations that followed.

This two-volume set is an indispensable resource for understanding this history. Editor Franklin Sherman is a seminal figure in this history who was founding director of the Institute for Christian-Jewish Understanding at Muhlenberg College

and also served for ten years as the Associate for Interfaith Relations with the Department for Ecumenical Affairs of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. *Bridges* is a compilation of 167 statements on Christian-Jewish relations between 1945 and 2013. The statements are organized by tradition, with sections devoted to Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox Christian, ecumenical Christian, joint Jewish-Christian, and Jewish documents. The documents in each section are listed in chronological and sometimes geographical order, with the exception of the Roman Catholic statements in Volume One, which are grouped by level of teaching authority. Each volume is introduced by brief essays on the documents written by renowned interfaith practitioners and scholars Alice L. Eckardt (Protestant), Philip A. Cunningham (Roman Catholic), and Michael S. Kogan (Jewish).

Many readers will turn to these volumes as a reference work, looking for documents by topic, date, or denomination, but it is worthwhile to read through all these texts in sequence. Taken as a whole, the texts in these volumes reveal how greatly the Jewish-Christian dialogue after 1945 was a work in progress, complicated and at times weakened by the great diversity within Christianity and the numerous, often contentious issues that confronted interfaith circles at the time the respective documents were written. Beginning with the 1947 Seelisberg meeting, there was a new conversation between Jews and Christians about their shared history that opened the way to learn from one another. Even in the case of church statements like “*Nostra Aetate*” that were the outcome of an internal ecclesiastical process, background conversations and consultations with Jewish dialogue partners were often decisive factors in the final outcome. While there were several very early postwar statements of guilt by German church bodies, for the most part it took several decades for Christian churches to begin to acknowledge their historical role during the Shoah, beginning with a 1978 message by the Evangelical Church of Germany on the fortieth anniversary of Kristallnacht and John Paul II’s 1979 homily at Auschwitz.

The Middle East conflict emerges as an ongoing concern and subtext of many of the statements. There are also statements that explore liturgy and scripture, the joint Jewish-Christian commitment to the environment, and the importance of expanding the dialogue to include Muslims. Strikingly, the first volume concludes not with statements issued by Jewish groups, but with two essays from the 1960s that have become seminal documents in this history: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik's "Confrontation" and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel's "No Religion is an Island." The second volume includes 14 statements from different rabbis and Jewish centers that address different moments and issues in the dialogue.

While the impetus behind many of these documents was historical (not just the history of the Holocaust but the deeper "parting of the ways"), most of them are also forward looking, committed to a changed relationship, especially as evinced by changes in Christian teachings about Judaism and new interpretations of traditionally problematic texts. Reading through these volumes, the question naturally arises: how much change has really come about? As a Declaration issued by the Second Vatican Council, "Nostra Aetate" carried the full weight of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching authority and truly can be said to have changed interfaith history. In contrast, many of the Protestant statements were simply declarations issued by various synods, or groups of theologians and / or clergy, having no binding doctrinal or ecclesiastical weight. Some of the Jewish-Christian statements, notably the 1947 Seelisberg Declaration, represented real breakthroughs in the conversation; it can truly be said that Seelisberg set the foundation for post-Holocaust dialogue. Other statements were quickly forgotten and perhaps their primary significance was the lengthy process of reflection and discussion among those who wrote them. Still others—notably the 1998 Vatican reflection on the Shoah, "We Remember," and "Dabru Emet," the 2000 statement on Christianity issued by a group of Jewish scholars—provoked widespread debates and conversations that in turn drove the dialogue further and in new directions.

Although many of the major statements in Jewish-Christian relations are known because of their topic, their timing, or their binding status for the traditions they represented, the driving force behind most of these documents—and behind the changes in the Jewish-Christian relationship itself—was the dedicated engagement and leadership of many of the individuals involved. In the decades after 1945, an international network emerged of Jewish and Christian academics, theologians, church officials, and clergy who were committed to this new relationship. A separate book could be written about these figures—in fact, the material in *Bridges* could (and should, in my opinion) serve as the impetus for further scholarship on a number of issues that continue to be important for interreligious engagement.

The topic of interreligious relations and conflict continues to draw attention, both positive and negative. Because of widespread violence between different religious groups and the persecution of religious minorities around the world today, the history of Jewish-Christian relations has become less prominent. It would be a shame, however, if *Bridges* were to be read only by those interested in the post-Holocaust Jewish-Christian relationship. These volumes have much to offer the new generations drawn to interfaith work. In some ways they serve as a rather bleak reminder of how far we have yet to go. Despite the truly historical nature of some of these documents, representing profound changes in church teachings and doctrine, it must be said that a genuine transformation in Jews' and Christians' understandings of each other has occurred among only a minority from each community. The resurgence of antisemitism in many parts of the world shows the limited nature of this interreligious progress, and even Jews and Christians deeply committed to the dialogue may disagree vehemently about some issues. Yet there is no question that the outcome of the process documented here was a remarkable change in Christian-Jewish relations. Given that this occurred in the wake of the catastrophic genocide of the European Jews, the material in *Bridges* illustrates both the potential and the lasting significance of interreligious engagement.