TEACHER BACKGROUND TO TEACHING ABOUT THE HOLOCAUST

Jewish – Christian Relations

It is still possible to hear some Church leaders, religious educators and mainstream Catholics espouse views about Judaism that we might identify as supersessionism. Supersessionism maintains that Judaism has been definitively replaced by Christianity and therefore belongs in a museum of history or culture.

Supersessionism has given rise to caricatures such as The Wandering Jew who is condemned never to settle in any homeland because Jews murdered Jesus ands rejected their chance to be redeemed. Catholic religious educators need to understand this view is not only mistaken but is morally objectionable and theologically unsound.

Catholic religious educators situate Jesus firmly within the Judaism of first century Palestine. He was brought up a Jew; he never abandoned Judaism nor was it ever his intention to begin a new religion or church. The historical sources on Jesus and early Christianity (Gospels and Acts of the Apostles) clearly demonstrate that the earliest followers of Jesus were Jews who accepted that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah. To call these people Christians is an anachronism since that term was not widely used for a long time.

Catholic religious educators need to be aware that in teaching about Jesus within the broader context of Jewish-Christian relations, the following points need to be kept in mind:

**Jesus was an observant Jew. The early Church was unambiguously Jewish.**
The Gospels had no cause to stress the Jewishness of Jesus or of early Christianity. That was too obvious, too self-evident. There was a theological need on the part of the Gospel writers to stress the distinctiveness of Jesus and to distance the Jesus Movement from mainstream Judaism. This is truer of Matthew, Luke and John than it is of Mark’s Gospel. The Gospels did not need to affirm the ongoing vitality of Judaism. That too was self-evident. They did need to justify why the Jesus Movement sought to revitalize what it viewed as tired and dysfunctional aspects of a particular form of Judaism.

**In the contemporary Religion classroom, Christianity needs to be presented as an Alternate Israel, not an exclusively New Israel.**
Both modern Judaism and Christianity come from the same origin within Second Temple Judaism. It is both inaccurate and disrespectful to present Judaism as a religion of dead legalism against which the richness of Christianity can be highlighted. The same God has inspired both the Old and New Testaments. It is not helpful and overly simplistic to present an Old Testament God as one of justice and retribution and a New Testament God as one of love and mercy.

**Jews are not Christ killers. It is historically and theologically unsound to claim that the majority of Jews at the time of Jesus rejected him and were directly responsible for his death.**
Medieval crusaders justified the slaughter of Jews on these grounds.
Many mainstream Christian leaders including some Catholic Church leaders justified maintaining silence and non-intervention during the Holocaust for the same reason. In Jesus’ time the majority of Jews would have had no idea of Jesus’ existence. Only a very small group would have had any contact with him. The narratives of Jesus’ rejection by the Jewish authorities and the narratives of Jewish involvement in his condemnation and death are theological constructs written into the Gospel stories and they require some explanation and critical analysis. They are not history nor are they theological statements that confirm the growing separation of the Jesus Movement from mainstream Judaism. The Jews were not responsible for the historical death of Jesus. He was a victim of the imperial Roman system.

**Summary: Jewish–Christian relations**

Jesus of Nazareth was Jew and always remained a Jew. Inspired by him, a Jewish group of men and women was formed that eventually left the mainstream. We sometimes refer to this group as the Jesus Movement. They were the forerunners of the Christians of today. Today’s Christians need to understand, against the grain of history, that Christianity came from Second Temple Judaism, as has modern Judaism. Christianity in general and catholic Christianity in particular cannot be validly explained within reference to its Jewish roots and without putting aside supersessionism. Mainstream Judaism has survived and remains a living faith that nurtures the spiritual needs of a large world community.

**Use of Terms - Shoah or Holocaust**

The word Holocaust comes from the ancient Greek: it means a sacrifice completely burnt on an altar; a sacrificial offering. Today Holocaust is generally used as a euphemism for mass murder, genocide in its most brutal and vicious form. Shoah is a Hebrew word, which means calamity and specifically denotes the Nazi effort to annihilate the Jews, as distinct from other instances of genocide against other peoples throughout history.

Within the context of this unit of work, Holocaust or Shoah refers to the systematic annihilation of six million Jewish people by Germany’s Nazi regime over the period 30 January 1933 to 8 May 1945. The Holocaust is a unique event in the history of humankind, in that one specific people, the Jews, was marked for destruction as a basic ideology of the state. It should be remembered that other groups and individuals (including Gypsies, homosexuals, political dissidents and the intellectually and physically disabled) were also targeted by the Nazis.

Two other factors, which make the Holocaust or Shoah unique, are the gigantic scale of the persecution, oppression, enslavement and extermination of human beings and the 'industrialisation' of the process of doing so. However, if the Holocaust was unique, its lessons are universal.

Many would now claim that Shoah is a more accurate description of the horror that took place between 1933-1945. Yet it remains an elusive term. For the purposes of these educational resources the term Holocaust will continue to be used. Teachers should settle on one term and use it consistently with students.
Why Teach about the Holocaust in a Catholic School?

The Holocaust and Religious Education
A core purpose of teaching any subject is to engage the intellectual curiosity of students in order to promote critical thinking and personal growth. For the religious educator, the aim is to *form students who are literate in the Catholic and broader Christian tradition so that they might participate critically and effectively in faith contexts and wider society* (Strategic Plan for the New religion Curriculum, Brisbane Catholic education Office, 2011).

There will always be a *head, heart and hands approach* to the Religious Education enterprise. The goal of Religious Education is religious literacy. Religious literacy implies a capacity on the part of students to engage with religious ideas and to give a religious voice to world events, both past and present. It demands of the student that they develop the knowledge, deep understanding and skills required to make meaning of religious ideas and beliefs and how those ideas and beliefs influence and are influenced by human existence and daily life. Contemporary Religious Education classrooms engage inquiry-based teaching and learning approaches that have an unambiguous ethical dimension with a strong emotional charge designed to evoke an emotional response from students. This is not blind emotion but one founded in intellectual inquiry and shaped by gospel values of empathy, compassion and solidarity. Finally, religious literacy also implies a *hands* approach to teaching and learning. The Brisbane Catholic Education Learning Framework (2002) asserts that the overarching goal for learning is to *empower learners of all ages to shape and enrich our changing world by living the gospel of Jesus Christ*. This implies a capacity on the part of students to actively work for justice and especially in the case of Holocaust Education, to ensure that the horrors of the past are not repeated; the Holocaust was not an accident in history; it occurred because individuals, organisations, and governments made choices that not only legalised discrimination but also allowed prejudice, hatred, and ultimately mass murder to occur. Surely, building capacity in students so that they might effectively confront injustice is the ‘stuff’ of the Religious Education classroom.

Through engagement with Holocaust Education it is hoped students in Catholic Schools will come to understand that:

- Gospel values are not automatically sustained but need to be appreciated, nurtured, and protected;
- Silence and indifference to the suffering of others, or to the infringement of human rights in any society can, however unintentionally, perpetuates problems;
- The Holocaust was not an accident in history. It occurred because individuals, organizations, and governments made choices that not only legalised discrimination but also allowed prejudice, hatred, and ultimately mass murder to occur;
- The Holocaust was a watershed event, not only in the twentieth century but also in the entire course of human history;
- Study of the Holocaust assists students in developing an understanding of the roots and ramifications of prejudice, racism, and stereotyping in any society;
- Thinking about these events can help students to develop an awareness of
the value of pluralism and encourages acceptance of diversity in a pluralistic society;

- The Holocaust provides a context for exploring the dangers of remaining silent, apathetic, and indifferent in the face of the oppression of others;
- A study of Holocaust associated topics helps students to think about the use and abuse of power, and the roles and responsibilities of individuals, organizations, and nations when confronted with human rights violations and/or policies of genocide;
- Christians are called to take seriously the words of the prophet Micah, *to act justly, act tenderly and walk humbly with your God.*

When you as an educator take the time to consider the rationale for your lessons on the Holocaust, you will be more likely to select content that speaks to your students' interests and that provides them with a clearer understanding of a complex

The Holocaust is a part of Christian History. It is part of our history, if we are Christian. This is frightening, this is sickening, and, for many, unbelievable. But the first thing Christians need to recognise is that we study the Holocaust because it is part of our history, as well as part of Jewish history. Not only do we study what happened to them but what happened to Christians and by Christians.

**Age Appropriateness**

Students in the middle years and above demonstrate the ability to empathise with individual eyewitness accounts and to attempt to understand the complexities of Holocaust history, including the scope and scale of the events. While primary school students are able to empathise with individual accounts, they often have difficulty placing them in a larger historical context. Such demonstrable developmental differences have traditionally shaped social sciences curricula throughout Australia; in most states, students are not introduced to European history and geography, the context of the Holocaust, before middle school. Primary school can be an ideal location to begin discussion of the value of diversity and the danger of bias and prejudice. These critical themes can be addressed through local and national events; this will be reinforced during later study of the Holocaust.
Pedagogical Considerations in Teaching about the Holocaust

The teaching of Holocaust within the context of Religious Education demands of educators a high level of sensitivity and a keen awareness of the complexity of the subject matter. The following recommendations, while reflecting approaches that would be appropriate for effective teaching in general, are particularly relevant to Holocaust education.

**Define the term “Holocaust”**

The Holocaust was the state-sponsored, systematic persecution and annihilation of European Jewry by Nazi Germany and its collaborators between 1933 and 1945. Jews were the primary victims—six million were murdered; Gypsies, the handicapped and Poles were also targeted for destruction or decimation for racial, ethnic, or national reasons. Millions more, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Soviet prisoners of war and political dissidents, also suffered grievous oppression and death under Nazi tyranny.

**Do not teach or imply that the Holocaust was inevitable**

Just because a historical event took place, and it is documented in textbooks and on film, does not mean that it had to happen. Students and teachers alike often overlook this seemingly obvious concept. The Holocaust took place because individuals, groups, and nations made decisions to act or not to act. Focusing on those decisions leads to insights into history and human nature and can better help your students to become critical thinkers.

**Avoid simple answers to complex questions**

The history of the Holocaust raises difficult questions about human behavior and the context within which individual decisions are made. Be wary of oversimplification. Seek instead to nuance the story. Allow students to think about the many factors and events that contributed to the Holocaust and often made decision-making difficult and uncertain.

**Strive for Precision of Language**

Any study of the Holocaust touches upon nuances of human behavior. Because of the complexity of the history, there is a temptation to generalize and, thus, to distort the facts (e.g., "all concentration camps were killing centers" or "all Germans were collaborators"). Rather, you must strive to help your students clarify the information presented and encourage them to distinguish, for example, the differences between prejudice and discrimination, collaborators and bystanders, armed and spiritual resistance, direct orders and assumed orders, concentration camps and killing centers, and guilt and responsibility. Words that describe human behavior often have multiple meanings. Resistance, for example, usually refers to a physical act of armed revolt.

During the Holocaust, it also encompassed partisan activity; the smuggling of messages, food, and weapons; sabotage; and actual military engagement. Resistance may also be thought of as willful disobedience such as continuing to
practice religious and cultural traditions in defiance of the rules or creating fine art, music, and poetry inside ghettos and concentration camps. For many, simply maintaining the will to remain alive in the face of abject brutality was an act of spiritual resistance.

Try to avoid stereotypical descriptions. Though the Nazis targeted all Jews for destruction, the experiences of all Jews were not the same. Remind your students that, although members of a group may share common experiences and beliefs, generalizations about them, without benefit of modifying or qualifying terms (e.g., "sometimes," "usually," "in many cases but not all") tend to stereotype group behavior and distort historical reality. Thus, all Germans cannot be characterized as Nazis nor should any nationality be reduced to a singular or one-dimensional description.

*Strive for balance in establishing whose perspective informs your study of the Holocaust*

Most students express empathy for victims of mass murder. However, it is not uncommon for students to assume that the victims may have done something to justify the actions against them and, thus, to place inappropriate blame on the victims themselves. One helpful technique for engaging students in a discussion of the Holocaust is to think of the participants involved as belonging to one of four categories: victims, perpetrators, rescuers, and bystanders. Examine the actions, motives, and decisions of each group. Portray all individuals, including victims and perpetrators, as human beings who are capable of moral judgment and independent decision making.

As with any topic, students should make careful distinctions about sources of information. Students should be encouraged to consider why a particular text was written, who wrote it, who the intended audience was, whether there were any biases inherent in the information, whether any gaps occurred in discussion, whether omissions in certain passages were inadvertent or not, and how the information has been used to interpret various events. Because scholars often base their research on different bodies of information, varying interpretations of history can emerge. Consequently, all interpretations are subject to analytical evaluation. Strongly encourage your students to investigate carefully the origin and authorship of all material, particularly anything found on the Internet.

*Avoid comparisons of pain*

A study of the Holocaust should always highlight the different policies carried out by the Nazi regime toward various groups of people; however, these distinctions should not be presented as a basis for comparison of the level of suffering between those groups during the Holocaust. One cannot presume that the horror of an individual, family, or community destroyed by the Nazis was any greater than that experienced by victims of other genocides. Avoid generalizations that suggest exclusivity such as "the victims of the Holocaust suffered the most cruelty ever faced by a people in the history of humanity."
Do not romanticise history

People who risked their lives to rescue victims of Nazi oppression provide useful, important, and compelling role models for students. Given that only a small fraction of non-Jews under Nazi occupation helped to rescue Jews, an overemphasis on heroic tales in a unit on the Holocaust can result in an inaccurate and unbalanced account of the history. Similarly, in exposing students to the worst aspects of human nature as revealed in the history of the Holocaust, you run the risk of fostering cynicism in your students. Accuracy of fact along with a balanced perspective on the history must be a priority.

Contextualize the history

Events of the Holocaust and, particularly, how individuals and organizations behaved at that time, should be placed in historical context. The occurrence of the Holocaust must be studied in the context of European history as a whole to give students a perspective on the precedents and circumstances that may have contributed to it.

Similarly, study of the Holocaust should be viewed within a contemporaneous context, so students can begin to comprehend the circumstances that encouraged or discouraged particular actions or events. For example, when thinking about resistance, consider when and where an act took place; the immediate consequences to one’s actions to self and family; the degree of control the Nazis had on a country or local population; the cultural attitudes of particular native populations historically toward different victim groups; and the availability and risk of potential hiding places. Encourage your students not to categorise groups of people only on the basis of their experiences during the Holocaust: contextualization is critical so that victims are not perceived only as victims. By exposing students to some of the cultural contributions and achievements of 2,000 years of European Jewish life, for example, you help them to balance their perception of Jews as victims and to better appreciate the traumatic disruption in Jewish history caused by the Holocaust.

Translate statistics into people

In any study of the Holocaust, the sheer number of victims challenges easy comprehension. Show that individual people—families of grandparents, parents, and children—are behind the statistics and emphasize that within the larger historical narrative is a diversity of personal experience. Precisely because they portray people in the fullness of their lives and not just as victims, first-person accounts and memoir literature provide students with a way of making meaning out of collective numbers and add individual voices to a collective experience.

Make responsible methodological choices

One of the primary concerns of educators teaching the history of the Holocaust is how to present horrific, historical images in a sensitive and appropriate manner. Graphic material should be used judiciously and only to the extent necessary to achieve the objective of the lesson. Try to select images and texts that do not exploit the students’ emotional vulnerability or that might be construed as disrespectful of the victims themselves. Do not skip any of the suggested topics for study of the Holocaust because the visual images are too graphic. Use other approaches to
address the material.

In studying complex human behavior, many teachers rely upon simulation exercises meant to help students "experience" unfamiliar situations. Even when great care is taken to prepare a class for such an activity, simulating experiences from the Holocaust remains pedagogically unsound. The activity may engage students, but they often forget the purpose of the lesson and, even worse, they are left with the impression that they now know what it was like to suffer or even to participate during the Holocaust. It is best to draw upon numerous primary sources, provide survivor testimony, and refrain from simulation games that lead to a trivialization of the subject matter.

Furthermore, word scrambles, crossword puzzles, counting objects, model building, and other gimmicky exercises tend not to encourage critical analysis but lead instead to low-level types of thinking and, in the case of Holocaust curricula, trivialization of the history. If the effects of a particular activity, even when popular with you and your students, run counter to the rationale for studying the history, then that activity should not be used.

**Five Guidelines for Teaching about Genocide**

The term "genocide" did not exist before 1944. It is a very specific term, referring to violent crimes committed against groups with the intent to destroy the existence of the group. Teachers are strongly encouraged to discuss the concept of genocide and its development since World War II as a background and foundation for their investigation of individual or multiple genocidal events. For more information on these topics, visit http://www.ushmm.org/conscience/history/.

**Define genocide**

"Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: killing members of the group; causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; forcibly transferring children of the group to another group." ¹

**Investigate the context and dynamics that have led to genocide**

A study of genocide should consider what the steps toward genocide in a society have been or could be. Analysis should be made of various factors and patterns, which may play a role in the early stages: political considerations, economic difficulties, local history and context, etc. How are targeted groups defined, dehumanized, marginalized, and/or segregated before mass killing begins? As students learn of the early phases of genocide, have them consider how steps and causal conditions may have been deflected or minimized. Have students think about scope, intent, and tactics. Be mindful that there is no one set pattern or list of preliminary steps that always lead to mass murder.
Be wary of simplistic parallels to other genocides

Each genocide has its own unique characteristics of time, place, people, and methods employed. Students are likely to try to make facile comparisons to other genocides, particularly the Holocaust; however, it is up to the teacher to redirect students to focus on the pain and specifics of a particular community at a particular time and place. Some parallels do indeed exist between the Holocaust and other genocides: the use of trains to transport victims, camps for detention and killing, etc. However, genocide has also occurred without these two tactics. Thus, careful comparisons could be made in the “tactics” or procedures utilized by oppressors to destroy the communities, but one should avoid comparing the pain and suffering of individuals.

Analyse Australian and world response

The world community is very different and far more complicated in the aftermath of the Holocaust. An important goal in studying all aspects of genocide is to learn from mistakes and apply these lessons for future action. To do this, students must strive to understand not only what was done, or not done, in the past but also why action was or was not taken. As with any historical event, particularly genocide, it is important to present the facts. Students need to be aware of the various choices that the global community had available before, during, and after the mass killing. It is important to begin at home, with the choices available to Australia. It is likewise pertinent to discuss all of the stakeholders involved—political leaders, religious leaders, and private citizens. Next, it is critical to discuss the range of choices seemingly available to the rest of the global community. How do international and regional authorities respond? What is the role of non-governmental organizations? When is diplomacy, negotiation, isolation, or military involvement appropriate or effective? Students may become frustrated when they learn of governmental inaction in the face of genocide. While there are certainly cynical reasons for not intervening, teachers can lead students to understand the complexity of responding to genocide, that it is usually not a simple matter to step into another country across the world and tell one group to stop killing another group. In addressing what might cause genocide and how to prevent it, consider these questions:

- When does a nation (Australia, for example) have the political will to take all necessary steps to stop genocide?
- How much international cooperation can be mustered? How much is needed?
- What are the possible ramifications of intervention?
- Is a nation willing to absorb casualties and death to stop genocide?

Illustrate positive actions taken by individuals and nations in the face of genocide

One reason that genocide occurs could be the complicity of bystanders within the nation and around the world. However, in each genocide, there have been individuals who have spoken out against the oppressive regime and/or rescued threatened people. These have been persons at risk inside the country as well as external observers or stakeholders. There are always a few who stand up to face evil with tremendous acts of courage—and sometimes very small acts of courage, of no less importance. Teachers should discuss these responses without exaggerating their numbers or their frequency. When teaching and learning about genocide,
individuals may fall prey to helplessness or acceptance of inevitability because the event is imminent or in progress. The magnitude of the event and seeming inertia in the world community and its policymakers can be daunting, but actions of any size have potential impact. Numerous episodes from the Holocaust and other genocides illustrate this point.