

*The Holocaust and the Christian World*, edited by Carol Rittner, Stephen D. Smith and Irena Steinfeldt.

Reviewed by [Kevin Madigan](#) in the [April 11, 2001](#) issue

For general readers this is the best available book on the Christian response to the Holocaust. It is ideal for use in churches, seminaries, colleges and universities. But if the intended readership is nonspecialist, the contributors are not. The book presents essays from most of the scholars who have meditated most profoundly on the Holocaust, Christian anti-Semitism, the role of the churches in complicity, silence and resistance to the Nazi persecution, and Christian attempts to come to terms with and repent for that role. The book includes essays on the pedagogical strategies and resources which enable Christians to think about these things in ways that will help them prevent similarly terrible events from ever happening again.

The essays successively present reasons why Christians should confront the Holocaust, a chronology of events related to the period, a discussion of anti-Semitism, and a sobering table comparing Nazi anti-Jewish measures (e.g., the Nuremberg Laws) with edicts of ecclesiastical law. The historical core of the book consists of articles on the role of the German churches (with a particularly enlightening and well-written contribution by Doris Bergen), on the churches in Nazi-occupied Europe at large, and on the vexed question of the Vatican, Pius XII and the persecution of the Jews.

This part of the book, which overwhelms and depresses readers with the magnitude of ecclesiastical sins of omission and commission, is followed by a welcome section on rescuing and sheltering individuals and organizations. Included are many fine short biographies of those rare individual and collective moral angels who risked all for their menaced Jewish neighbors--the villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in France, the Żegota Organization in Poland, Corrie ten Boom--as well as a fascinating analysis by David Gushee of the motives of the rescuers.

The book concludes with a series of essays on Catholic and Protestant responses to the Holocaust and on continuing issues of debate (e.g., how to read the New Testament anti-Semitic texts in the light of the Holocaust, the possible canonization of Pius XII, the problematics of canonizing Edith Stein, and even the hard question

posed by Stephen Smith, "Is there a Future for Christianity?").

Among the things that make the book ideal for initiating Christians into the historical, theological and ethical issues surrounding the church and the Holocaust are the brevity of the essays, which nevertheless manage never to be simplistic or superficial; the carefully posed questions for reflection in each chapter; the many powerful photographs; the provocative "sidebars," and the suggestions for further reading.