The Holocaust and Other Genocides

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Center for the Humanities,
Vanderbilt University

The Holocaust and Other Genocides

History, Representation, Ethics

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For Bev Asbury
University Chaplain, Emeritus
who for many years taught students and faculty
at Vanderbilt about the hard work of openness

Contents

Figures

Acknowledgments

This work is the result of the labors and support of many people. The initial inspiration came from Beverly A. Asbury, who, as Vanderbilt University Chaplain from 1967 to 1996, was the principal force behind the study of the Holocaust at Vanderbilt and a founding spirit of the Tennessee Holocaust Commission. The vision and generosity of Raymond Zimmerman, who encouraged a larger and more significant project than first planned, made our work financially possible. He was the initial benefactor and his support allowed us to approach the project in ambitious and even unorthodox ways. From its inception, the Tennessee Holocaust Commission also supported the project with a generous grant and a great deal of encouragement and hard work. Finally, the project could not have worked were it not for the engagement of Mona Frederick of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt University. The Center served as a congenial place to meet and Mona, with the help of Paul Burch and Sherry Willis, invested a great deal of time, energy, and thought into this book. We often think of books as being written, but they are also made. Without Mona, this book would never have come together, and this is true not in a vague sense but in the very real sense that without her intervention toward the end, the diverse efforts of many people might not have culminated in a finished work.

This book is also the result of a genuinely cooperative effort among its authors. The contributors come from universities across the state of Tennessee and from high schools in Nashville. We met every two weeks for an academic year to discuss how to teach the Holocaust and how to put together a work that would be of help to professors and teachers across a range of disciplines and at different levels of instruction. I chaired these talks with Peter Haas, formerly of Vanderbilt, now the Abba Hillel Silver Professor of Judaic Studies and Director of the Samuel Rosenthal Center for Judaic Studies at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. The talks were frank and open, insightful and contentious, and I believe that everyone learned a great deal from them. During these deliberations, we were

also aided by the wise counsel of several visitors to our forum, including Michael Berenbaum, the President of the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation and former Director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and James E. Young, Professor of English and Judaic Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. We were also blessed with the inspiring presence, for it can only be called that, of John K. Roth, the Russell K. Pitzer Professor of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College in California. On many occasions, John came to Nashville to advise us on the progress of the work, its strengths and its shortcomings, and to lend his measured but keen insight.

A special feature of the cooperation that went into the making of this book involves the teamwork between university professors and high school teachers. During the academic year, two remarkable teachers, Paul Fleming of Hume Fogg High School and Sue Chaney Gilmore of Hillsboro High School, not only participated in the discussions and helped compose the curriculum but also taught the university professors a good deal about what it is to convey the meaning of the Holocaust to young people. In the summer that followed, they also co-directed a teacher workshop in which teachers from the Nashville area discussed the curriculum, worked out lesson plans, corrected mistakes, told us what worked and what to cast away, and encouraged us, indeed inspired us, to revise and reshape the book. They too have had a significant hand in the making of this book, and it is a great pleasure to thank each of them: Carmen Anderson of Hillsboro High School, Robin Jubela of Wharton Middle School, Nancy Kemp of Centennial High School in Franklin, Lilian Lawrence-Crabtree of Hunter's Lane High School, Griff Watson of McGavock High School, and Andrea Joy York of Martin Luther King High School.

It is also a pleasure to thank Felicia Anchor and Ruth Tanner of the Tennessee Holocaust Commission for their support, for their work, and for their advice. The Tennessee Holocaust Commission has run wonderful programs with high school teachers and we hope that this curriculum will aid them in their further work. Pam Rothstein, a historian and friend, read the manuscript at an early stage and offered detailed criticism. Paul Elledge, then Interim Director of Vanderbilt University Press, was encouraging when we first broached the idea that the book might be published by Vanderbilt, and Michael Ames, who has since become Director of the Press, has worked tirelessly to make this a reality. Dariel Mayer, the editing and production manager, and Debby Stuart Smith, the copyeditor, have also put a great deal of care and attention into this book, significantly improving it.

Preface

> Of all the memories that I lack, perhaps the one that I would most like to have is of my mother combing my hair. . . . I do not speak the language my parents spoke, I do not share in any of the memories they might have had; something which was theirs, which made them who they were, their history, their culture, their hope, was not passed on to me. . . . I write because we lived together, shadow among their shadows, body next to their bodies; I write because they left an indelible mark on me, of which the written word is the trace.

The author of these lines is the French writer Georges Perec. His mother, a Jew, was deported to Auschwitz in 1943 and murdered there. From 1933 to 1945, Nazi Germany killed some six million Jews: in concentration camps, in ghettos, and by mobile death squads. Infants, children, women, and men were destroyed systematically and methodically because they were Jews. The purpose of this criminal policy was not just to kill as many individuals as possible but to erase from the face of the earth Jewish history, culture, and faith. That is what genocide is. It is not the number of dead that distinguishes genocide from other mass crimes but the goal of extinguishing by violence a people and its way of life. Perec's observations express in a very intimate and human way the personal and social loss that the Holocaust left as a "shadow" over our world.

All genocides attack fundamental human values and, for this reason, force us to remember and to reflect. In this curriculum, we start with the Holocaust because it constitutes a paradigm of genocide in modern society. Germany, an advanced nation, attempted to eradicate a people, the Jews, completely and utterly, so that they would no longer exist on this earth.

According to the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, genocide entails the attempt to "destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group." The Holocaust was not the only genocide, nor the first or the last. The attempt of the Ottoman Turks to eradicate the Armenians preceded it and the genocide

in Rwanda followed. Yet, as the historian Yehuda Bauer argues, the Holocaust constituted the most extreme form of genocide. It was extreme, and to date singular, but not because of the numbers of Jews killed or because of the suffering involved. Rather, the Holocaust was a genocide unrivaled for its purely racist motivation, for its global reach, and for its totality. As the Holocaust scholar Steven T. Katz has written: "Never before has a state set out, as a matter of international principle and actualized policy, to annihilate physically every man, woman, and child belonging to a specific people.... Only in the case of Jewry under the Third Reich was such all-inclusive non-compromising, unmitigated murder intended."

Studying the Holocaust nevertheless also teaches us lessons about other genocides. We start from the assumption that, to cite Gerard Prunier, author of *The Rwanda Crisis*: "Genocides are a modern phenomenon ... and they are likely to become more frequent in the future." Between the Holocaust in Europe and the genocides that have marked the post-Holocaust world (in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia and Kosovo), there are parallels: national and racial ideologies that deny human diversity; political campaigns that target, identify, marginalize, and expel minority groups; frighteningly efficient bureaucracies with no sense of remorse; brutal perpetrators and indifferent killers; and bystanders and rescuers. It is our conviction that the study of the Holocaust—how it happened, how it is represented, and how it has changed our moral and religious world—can be the starting point for a fuller understanding of the world we live in, a world in which genocide has, to our great misfortune, become part of who we are.

This curriculum is meant as an introduction and as a resource. There are four parts, which examine (1) the history of the Holocaust, (2) representations of the Holocaust, (3) other genocides, and (4) the ethical and religious dilemmas bequeathed to us by the fact of genocide in the modern world. Parts I–III have three or more chapters. Each chapter includes a narrative that is supplemented with "documents" (primary texts or discussions of literary or artistic works), as well as questions for discussion, "links" to other readings in the curriculum, and suggestions for further reading. Some chapters also include a glossary and a timeline. Part IV is unique. It raises ethical questions associated with the Holocaust and other genocides and suggests ways to answer them.

The links that follow the questions in each chapter are very important to the overall conception of the curriculum. Each link is identified by part, chapter, and document number and can readily be located from the Contents. For example, a chapter on passive bystanders during the Holocaust might be linked to the poem "You Onlookers" in Part II, "Representations,"

Chapter 6, "Literature and the Holocaust," or to a similar document about passivity during the Armenian genocide or to an essay in Part IV, "Ethics" addressing the question "How Does Good Happen?" In this way, we hope that teachers and students might think about the Holocaust from multiple perspectives and through different media. We also hope that they will reflect on the lessons of the Holocaust for the study of other genocides.

We have tried to encourage interactive learning. For example, in Chapter 7, "Monuments and Memorials," Document 7.2 is an examination of the memorial at Treblinka, the death camp where 850,000 Jews were killed. The memorial (seen in Figure 7.2) consists of granite shards that resemble broken, imperfectly edged tombstones. Teachers and students might discuss the ideas behind these shards; but they might also consider designing a memorial themselves. Throughout the curriculum, we have included suggestions for making learning about the Holocaust and other genocides as interactive as possible.

The focus on texts and on interactive learning also reflects our sense that with respect to the Holocaust and other genocides, the questions evoked are as important as the answers given. But good questions often follow from a consideration of detail in a text. One might consider a railway schedule for January 1943 (Document 3.8) that details a transport carrying Jews from Berlin to their death in Auschwitz. The transport must be scheduled; it must pass by many train stations. Because the schedule is not secret, many stationmasters know that the train carries a full cargo of Jews to a place called Auschwitz. Then, on this one sheet of paper, they see that the train must be turned around and, now empty, return. The document raises questions about what people knew, about what they did, about complicity and about secrecy. It also suggests that the people involved were sometimes very ordinary people, the man at the train station, and that they said nothing. Why?

In this curriculum, we offer a wide array of materials, which teachers and students can use as they choose and according to the amount of time they devote to the Holocaust and other genocides. We are well aware that some instructors may be able to devote only one classroom session to the Holocaust and other genocides, while other instructors may spend a week, even a semester, discussing the issues raised by modern genocide. Teachers may also teach this material from different disciplinary perspectives. Thus, a unit on the Holocaust might be differently taught in English, history, civics, or religious studies.

On the whole, then, the curriculum is not an attempt to pass on a preformed body of knowledge. Rather, we intend to provide material and guid-

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On the whole, then, the curriculum is not an attempt to pass on a preformed body of knowledge. Rather, we intend to provide material and guid-

ance so that teachers and students of the Holocaust and modern genocide can use it as a starting point for reflecting on central, if deeply disturbing, events of our time. The material, we hope, will both raise questions about people's capacity for inhumanity and deepen an appreciation for their capacity for compassion. It may also raise questions of a more personal nature: concerning one's own capacity to resist, or one's own ability to see violence when it occurs. For some people, the Holocaust and the continuing legacy of genocide necessarily undermines all-too-easily held assumptions: that progress brings an end to human savagery, for example, or that culture self-evidently blunts a civilization's capacity for evil. For others, the Holocaust and other genocides continue to pose profound questions about education and its purposes, about morality, and about God. In the opening scene of Elie Wiesel's *Night*, Moshe the Beadle prays that God will give him "the strength to ask Him the right questions." It is in the spirit of trying to find the right questions that we have worked through this material.

A teacher's curriculum guide, written by Paul Fleming, a social studies teacher from Hume-Fogg Magnet High School in Davidson County, is available from the Tennessee Holocaust Commission, 2417 West End Ave., Nashville, TN 37240. It contains guidelines for teaching about genocide as well as a variety of interdisciplinary approaches tied directly to the text of this book.

Contributors

The writing of *The Holocaust and Other Genocides* was a cooperative effort of university professors and high school teachers from the state of Tennessee who met twice a month at Vanderbilt University in the 1999–2000 academic year. The cooperation was initially made possible by generous grants from the Raymond Zimmerman Foundation and the Tennessee Holocaust Commission. This cooperation has also been supported by Vanderbilt University and by the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt.

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The Holocaust and Other Genocides

Part I
History of the Holocaust

The Holocaust refers to Nazi Germany's attempt to eradicate the Jews of Europe. The attempt nearly succeeded. In the course of World War II, Nazi Germany killed nearly six million Jews. The Jews were not casualties of war, however, but victims of modern genocide. The endpoint of racism, genocide refers to the deliberate effort to exterminate an ethnic or racial group. In the Holocaust, the number of killings mounted with astounding swiftness. "In mid-March 1942," the historian Christopher Browning writes in his book *Ordinary Men*, "some 75 to 80 percent of all victims of the Holocaust were still alive, while 20 to 25 percent had perished. A mere eleven months later, in mid-February 1943, the percentages were exactly the reverse. At the core of the Holocaust was a short, intense wave of mass murder."

Germans killed Jews in myriad ways. Some Jews died in hastily constructed, densely crowded, disease-ridden ghettos. Many more were killed systematically by mobile killing units of the German SS. These units rounded up Jewish men, women, and children, forced them to dig their own graves, and shot them. In this way, the Germans murdered more than two million Jews. The Germans murdered a still larger number of Jews in killing centers, factories of death that included Chelmno, Belzec, Sobibor, Majdanek, Treblinka, and Auschwitz. The history of the Holocaust is about this killing: who killed, how, and why. But it is also about the antecedents to the killing, the habits of hate that allowed the Holocaust to happen in the first place.

We present this history in four chapters. Chapter 1 concerns the genesis of racist hatred. Chapter 2 addresses the "racist state" that paved the way to the Holocaust and the Germans who participated, watched, or looked the other way. Chapter 3 examines the killing process itself, and Chapter 4 examines resistance and rescue. Throughout we try to show how the Holocaust came about, but we also raise questions about those who were involved—the degree of their complicity, the range of their motivations, the shadows of their moral universe—and about what could have been done to prevent the Holocaust.

1
From Religious Prejudice to Racism

At the root of the Holocaust lies a long-standing animosity of Christians toward Jews. Based at first on religious differences, this animosity increasingly assumed secular hues and eventually was transformed by the tarbrush of modern racism. Both continuity and change mark this history. In the modern period, many of the images of old religious prejudice resurfaced in remarkably similar guise. But modern racism also broke with fundamental assumptions, arguing that Jews constituted a people apart, not a separate religion, and that the two groups, Germans and Jews, now defined as two races, should not coexist. Some took modern racism a step further and argued that, as a race and as a people, the Jews themselves should no longer exist.

Medieval prejudice against Jews centered on the religious beliefs that Jews were blind to the truth of Jesus and that the Jews had killed Christ. In the New Testament the missionizing Paul (Acts 13–15) attempts to convince the Jews of the truth of the resurrection of Christ. The specific idea of Jewish blindness comes from Acts 13:8–11. Paul meets a Jewish sorcerer named Elymas and says to him: "Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind, and for a time you will be unable to see the light of the sun." Scholars place Paul's attempt to missionize the Jews in the year 59. At the time there was no notion that the Jews killed Christ, only that they did not believe in his resurrection. The idea of Jews as Christ-killers derives from the Gospel of John, written at the end of the first century, a time of changing fortunes for the Christians in the Roman Empire, when it had become clear that the Jews would not convert. It is instructive to compare John's rendition of the passion with those of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, composed earlier. John writes about "the Jews," Matthew, for example, about "the crowd." In the fourth century, Augustine reiterated the charge that the Jews killed Christ but argued that the continuing presence of the Jews in a miserable, humbled state bore truth to the victory of Christianity. He therefore argued against destroying them.

Because of the paucity of sources, it is difficult to ascertain the attitudes of Christians toward Jews in the succeeding centuries. From the period of Pope Gregory I, in the eighth century, we know that the Church prohibited Jews from keeping Christian slaves, servants, and wet nurses, and that there were ordinances forbidding Christians to dine with Jews and to visit Jewish physicians. From the period of Charlemagne, in the ninth century, we know that Jews lived under separate laws "for aliens" and depended completely on the graces and the protection of their immediate sovereign. Still, and despite discrimination, there is strong evidence to suggest that the first thousand years of Christianity witnessed very little violence against Jews.

The especially vexing problems began in the eleventh century, when Christians increasingly focused on the suffering and the martyrdom (as opposed to the glory) of Christ. During this time, Christians placed transubstantiation at the center of the liturgy, believing more fervently than ever before that the Eucharistic wafer, or Host, and the wine were the actual (as opposed to the symbolic) body and blood of Christ. In this context, the idea that "the Jews" had tortured Christ assumed greater immediacy.

Ideas initially religious became increasingly colored by superstition. By the thirteenth century, some Christians believed that Jews stole the Host (now conceived of as the actual body of Christ), desecrating and torturing it (Figure 1.1a). Others believed that Jews ritually murdered Christian children (symbolically standing for Christ) and used their blood in the baking of the matzo during Passover. Chimeras of the medieval imagination then mixed with beliefs in magic (that Jews, in alliance with the devil, possessed special powers) and with more ordinary stereotypes. Because Jews, unlike Christians, were allowed to lend money with interest, for example, all Jews were seen as usurious. The image of Jews in the Christian imagination was reinforced by special dress codes and later by ordinances requiring Jews to wear a yellow badge (Figure 1.1b).

Violence against Jews also increased. During the First Crusade, Christians on their way to the Holy Land to combat the infidels stopped to massacre Jews along the route, "for here in our midst dwell the archenemies and murderers of our redeemer." In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries massacres often accompanied accusations of Host desecration and ritual murder. Further violence resulted from popular wrath against Jews as moneylenders, and, in the fourteenth century, from the fictitious assertion that Jews had poisoned the wells, thus causing the Black Death. Where violence did not suffice, expulsion followed. In the medieval period, England and France expelled the Jews in the thirteenth century. Many German cities expelled the Jews in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. And in 1492, Spain expelled the Jews as well.

The Reformation of the sixteenth century promised to undermine the vast buttresses of superstition, including legends about Jews, that had artificially supported Christian faith in the medieval period. Martin Luther in his early writings counted the ill treatment of Jews among the failures of medieval Catholicism. "The Jews had been dealt with as though they were dogs, not humans," the father of the Reformation wrote in a pamphlet published in 1523. But when he saw that the Jews would not convert to his "purer" Christianity, his tone changed utterly. His *The Jews and Their Lies,* published in 1543, illustrates this changed tone (Document 1.2). Brusque and inflammatory, the pamphlet had an extremely deleterious effect on Christian attitudes toward Jews in post-Reformation Europe.

After 1800, racism rather than religious prejudice increasingly informed anti-Jewish sentiment. In 1879 Wilhelm Marr popularized the word *anti-Semitism* to describe the prejudice based on the alleged racial characteristics of the Jews. In the Christian tradition, Jews could convert. But the anti-Semites like Marr denied that Jews could be anything other than Jewish. They argued that Jews could never become true Germans because nationality is defined by blood and the Jews belonged to a different race and not merely a different religion.

The anti-Semites hoped to undo any progress that had been achieved toward the emancipation of the Jews, and they hoped to curtail what they saw as harmful Jewish influence on the German nation. To this end, the anti-Semites circulated a petition in 1881 that called for a special Jewish census, limits on Jewish immigration, and the preservation of the "Christian character" of schools and of all positions of state authority. With its mixture of Christian and racist language, the petition garnered 265,000 signatures and represented a watershed in the history of racial anti-Semitism. It proved that there was widespread support for the concept that Jews were outside the nation, that indeed they were an alien race. The first explicitly anti-Semitic political parties flourished in certain regions of Germany in the 1890s. Nevertheless, at the height of their popularity before World War I, these parties failed to win 4 percent of the vote in a national election. Even though they remained on the fringe of politics, they nevertheless had a deleterious effect on public discourse, making it more and more acceptable to denigrate Jews. The anti-Semitic political parties were also home to ruthless, viscerally racist, politicians. Adolf Hitler, who would emerge at the head of the Nazi Party, was a politician of this kind. In his earliest political writing, dated September 16, 1919, he emphasizes that Jews are a race, not a religious community (Document 1.3). He also argues that older forms of violence against Jews, such as pogroms, no longer suffice. The final aim of a modern anti-Semitic policy, he insists, "must be the uncompromising re-

moval of the Jews altogether." Five years later, Hitler would elaborate his anti-Semitic position in greater detail in his book *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), which he wrote while imprisoned for his part in the abortive "Beer Hall Putsch" in Munich in 1923. Here, and in subsequent speeches, he would speak more explicitly of annihilation.

The great historian of the Holocaust Raul Hilberg has summarized the shift from religiously based anti-Judaism to the policies of Nazi Germany, a modern racist state, as follows: "Since the fourth century after Christ there have been three anti-Jewish policies: conversion, expulsion, and annihilation. The second appeared as an alternative to the first, and the third emerged as an alternative to the second."

Document 1.1. Images of Jews in the Medieval Period

Figure 1.1a. The Stealing of the Host in Passau, 1470.

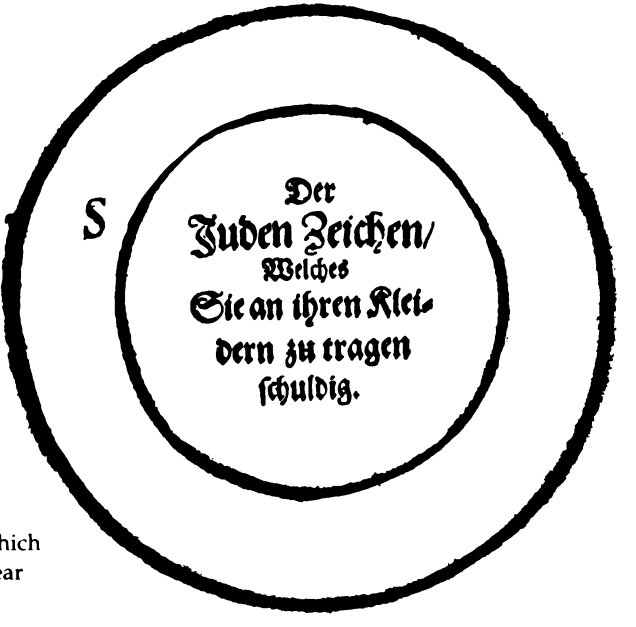

Figure 1.1b.
"The Jewish symbol, which Jews are required to wear on their clothes."

Document 1.2. The Jews and Their Lies by Martin Luther, 1543

Learn from this, dear Christian, what you are doing if you permit the blind Jews to mislead you. Then the saying will truly apply, "When a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into the pit" [cf. Luke 6:39]. You cannot learn anything from them except how to misunderstand the divine commandments. . . .

Therefore be on your guard against the Jews, knowing that wherever they have their synagogues, nothing is found but a den of devils in which sheer self-glory, conceit, lies, blasphemy, and defaming of God and men are practiced most maliciously. . . .

Moreover, they are nothing but thieves and robbers who daily eat no morsel and wear no thread of clothing that they have not stolen and pilfered from us by means of their accursed usury. Thus they live from day to day, together with wife and child, by theft and robbery, as arch-thieves and robbers, in the most impenitent security.

Over and above that we let them get rich on our sweat and blood, while we remain poor and they suck the marrow from our bones. . . .

What shall we Christians do with this rejected and condemned people, the Jews? . . .

First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them. This is to be done in honor of our Lord and of Christendom, so that God might see that we are Christians, and do not condone or knowingly tolerate such public lying, cursing, and blaspheming of his Son and of his Christians. . . .

Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyed. For they pursue in them the same aims as in their synagogues. Instead they might be lodged under a roof or in a barn, like the gypsies. This will bring home to them that they are not masters in our country, as they boast, but that they are living in exile and in captivity, as they incessantly wail and lament about us before God.

Third, I advise that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them. . . .

Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb. . . .

Fifth, I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished com-

pletely for the Jews. For they have no business in the countryside, since they are not lords, officials, tradesmen, or the like. . . .

Sixth, I advise that usury be prohibited to them, and that all cash and treasure of silver and gold be taken from them and put aside for safekeeping. . . .

Seventh, I commend putting a flail, an ax, a hoe, a spade, a distaff, or a spindle into the hands of young, strong Jews and Jewesses and letting them earn their bread in the sweat of their brow, as was imposed on the children of Adam. . . .

Source: *Luther's Works*, vol. 47, edited by Franklin Sherman, The Christian in Society, vol. 4 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 268–93.