



Encyclopedia of Religion and Society

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JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS AND ANTI-SEMITISM

Anti-Semitism, meaning hatred for Jews and attempts to repress them and/or their religion, predates Christianity. The Bible reports attempts by Pharaoh and Haman to annihilate Jews. Greeks not only warred against the Jews but, having conquered them, attempted to impose their culture on Jews by violence. Jews, led by the Maccabees, resisted. Cultural competition between these two civilizations resulted in ethnic conflict between Jews and Greeks at many points around the Mediterranean Basin. This led to the emergence of anti-Semitic stereotypes and literature.

With Christianity, hostility toward Jews and Judaism became central to a religion for the first time. The crucifixion of Jesus and Jewish culpability for his death are central to the Gospels. Matthew and John are contemptuous of and hostile to Judaism and Jews. The former (see 27:25) claims that Jews willingly and enthusiastically accepted the label of killers of Jesus Christ for themselves and their descendants (which for Christians is *decide*); the latter identifies them with the devil (8:44). These bitterly hostile images came to be woven into the liturgy, particularly of Easter, and thus annually reinforced among ordinary Christians. The early church fathers, particularly John Chrysostom, developed these themes with singular vehemence.

Later the church developed the doctrine of itself as the "true church" and Jews as the "witness" condemned to servitude (Augustine). As a result, Jews become Esau to Christians' "Jacob" (see Genesis 25:21-27:46). The Christian claim to have supplanted the Jews as "God's chosen people" goes to the core foundations of both religions. It precipitated an implacable conflict against Jews and Judaism. The Jews' continued adherence to Judaism was a negation of the very essence of the Christian claim to a new chosenness. Jews had to be punished for this rejection.

The Middle Ages and the Catholic Church

Despite clerical polemics, at the beginning of the Middle Ages there was little hostility toward Jews among the laity. The church condemned usury, an economic necessity, but permitted its practice by Jews. At the beginning of the eleventh century, clerical efforts resulted in expulsions from a number of cities. The crucial change occurred with the First Crusade (1096). Crusaders on their way to the Holy Land attacked Jews in German and French towns. Jews were massacred, and numbers of them committed collective suicide to avoid conversion. Each call for a crusade resulted in renewed attacks on Jews.

In the thirteenth century, following the adoption of the doctrine of transubstantiation, blood libels and charges of Host desecration were made against Jews. Jews were required to wear a distinguishing symbol, a hat or a badge. The imposed social distance facilitated the spread of additional myths, such as Jews being physically different from other humans (see Shylock's soliloquy in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*). As trade and money moved into the hands of Christians at the end of the

thirteenth century, Jews were no longer as necessary to the nobles. Protection was removed. Numerous expulsions and massacres occurred. Rabbis were required to enter into *disputations* with clergy to defend Judaism's doctrines. Win or lose, the Jewish community would be required to convert or leave. Often the disputations involved passages of the Talmud, and the Talmud was banned and burned. In the fourteenth century the outbreak of the black plague resulted in the myth that the Jews were poisoning the wells, hence further massacres ensued.

On the Iberian Peninsula, when the Christians wrested control from the Muslims, the Inquisition was vigorously promoted. Finally, in 1492 in Spain (1497 in Portugal), Jews were required to choose between conversion and expulsion. Those who converted to Christianity (*anusim*, or "forced converts," in Hebrew; *marranos*, or "pigs," in Spanish) nonetheless remained suspect. They continued to be subject to the Inquisition's tortures and to death by the *auto de fe* (burning at the cross; literally, an "act of faith"). The Spanish developed a notion of purity of blood to keep the *marranos* separate.

The Reformation gave rise to a fracturing of anti-Semitic sentiments. Luther preached extreme hatred and violence, but Calvinists identified with the Old Testament and with Jews. Among Catholics, ghettos for Jews were introduced.

The Modern Period

In the modern period, while Christianity in eastern Europe continued its open hostility to Jews, elsewhere other forces, particularly nationalism and racism, became the lead forces of anti-Semitic persecution. Churches, retreating from the arena of politics, continued their support of anti-Semitism with their teachings and their influence, although at times opposition to anti-Semitism was also voiced.

The Enlightenment required that Jews be absorbed and disappear, yet society did not permit Jews to do so. A backlash developed against Jews among the new nationalists as well as supporters of prerevolutionary regimes. Political anti-Semitism developed particularly in Germany and France in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Racism was created as a new justification for anti-Semitism. This was especially useful where Jews had shed their religious and ethnic behaviors. It was used in much the same way that "pure blood" had been used by the Spanish *hidalgos* against the *marranos*.

Russia and Central Europe : Russia acquired a Jewish population following its annexation of eastern Poland. The czarist regime derived its legitimacy from the Orthodox faith, and anti-Semitism based on Christian religious prejudice remained a powerful political force. Jews were required to remain in the "pale of settlement," and they were forbidden to enter a number of occupations. Boys were drafted to the army for periods of up to 20 years (cantonists). The regime encouraged pogroms against Jews to direct hostility away from itself. In 1905, under the auspices of the secret police, the press of the czar published the fraudulent *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a forgery purporting to show the existence of an international Jewish conspiracy bent on world power. Similar anti-Semitic patterns characterized the Ukraine and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Western Europe and the United States : Persecution of Jews in Russia led many Jews to flee to the West. The Jewish populations in England, France, and Austria-Germany expanded rapidly, and with this expansion, anti-Semitism increased. There had been little overt anti-Semitism in the United States, but it became manifest at the end of the nineteenth century. There was open discrimination in housing, higher education,

and jobs. As other minorities also suffered discrimination in the United States, it was easier for Jews to find allies and to avoid the brutal political repressions by the state that characterized anti-Semitism elsewhere.

The Holocaust and its aftermath : Beginning in the 1930s, the Nazis conducted a war of extermination against Jews and Judaism that came to be known as the Holocaust. The tactics used—armbands to distinguish Jews from others, racial ideology, debasing of Jews and denigration of Judaism, herding Jews into ghettos, stripping Jews of legal protection, encouraging mobs against them, caricaturing Jews and Judaism, slandering of Jews and their holy books, desecrating synagogues and Torahs—had been used before in the persecution of Jews in the name of religion. This time persecution in the name of nationalism and racism culminated in a campaign of extermination in which 6 million people, including women and children, perished.

This was not an ordinary attempt to vanquish a people, because Jews had no armies and no arms. Neither was it an attempt to take territory, for Jews controlled none. The persecution did not end when Jews had been despoiled of their wealth and their homes and expelled from the countries in which they lived. Stripped of all they owned, they were hunted down to be killed. This war was directed against both Jews and Judaism. The Talmud and other works of Jewish scholarship were slandered and burned. Synagogues were pillaged. The Jews' Torah scrolls were desecrated and made into lamp shades or shoe liners. Frequently the two persecutions came together, as when Jews were herded into synagogues to be burned alive. Nazism's anti-Semitic appeals fell on the fertile ground that had been prepared by religious persecutions. In the late 1930s, before the Nazis had begun their campaign of extermination and were still bent on driving the Jews out of Germany and the areas they had conquered, western Europe and North America closed their doors to refugees, with some minor exceptions. The British "White Paper" of 1939 blocked further immigration to Palestine. As a result, Jews could not flee and were trapped in Europe.

When the Nazi plan for the "liquidation" of the Jewish people came to be known in 1943, the allies refused to make it public, arguing that it would "hinder the war effort." Although the Roman Catholic Church protested Nazi policies (*Mit Brennender Sorge* Encyclical, 1937) and some Protestant pastors (Martin Neimöller, Dietrich Bonhoeffer) were imprisoned, during the war the Vatican did not openly condemn the atrocities against the Jews.

In the immediate postwar period, as the extent of the atrocities against Jews became known, revulsion at the crimes committed against the Jews led to a reaction against anti-Semitism, particularly in the United States, and to a sympathetic view of the establishment of a homeland for Jews in Israel.

The Soviet Union : Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, religiously driven anti-Semitism abated. From 1948 to his death in 1953, however, Stalin pursued an anti-Semitic policy. Accusations were made of a doctors' plot against Stalin. All Jewish cultural institutions were liquidated. Thousands of Jews were dismissed from their jobs. Jewish artists and writers were arrested and executed.

Under Khrushchev, the executions ceased, but the persecution of Jews continued. Books and pamphlets were printed by government agencies attacking not only Jews and Israel (which was the enemy of the Soviet Union's Arab client states) but also Judaism. Synagogues were closed and attacked as hangouts for criminals. With the fall of the Communist regime in 1989, Soviet Jews were permitted to emigrate in mass numbers. Fearing a revival of anti-Semitism, about 1 million Jews left the Soviet Union

in the next five years.

In Islam : Although the Qur'an* attacks Jews for refusing to recognize Mohammed as a prophet, Jews were rarely demonized as in Christianity. Arab anti-Semitism was furthered by the growing Jewish-Arab conflict during the Mandate period and intensified by the birth of the State of Israel in 1948. In the postwar period, its virulence has been unequalled. Arab regimes that published much hate literature show the influence of the Nazi canards and cartoons as well as those of Russian anti-Semites. This literature has been used to support the Arab case against Israel. Anti-Zionism is now used to cloak anti-Semitism. The Arab bloc succeeded in 1975 in having the United Nations adopt a resolution condemning Zionism as racism as part of this anti-Semitic campaign.

Changing Jewish-Christian Relations

The failure of the Catholic Church to condemn the atrocities perpetrated against the Jews by the Nazi regime became an embarrassment after the war. The Second Vatican Council, following the intentions of Pope John XXIII (d. 1963), in 1965 undertook a revision of the Easter liturgy to remove "the Jews in our time" from blame for the death of Jesus. Nonetheless, Jews are still damned for not accepting Jesus as the Messiah. The State of Israel is still not officially recognized by the Vatican, although the beginnings of this process are under way. Controversy also still exists over the meaning of the Holocaust and attempts by Catholic groups to define Auschwitz and other death camps primarily as places of martyrdom of Catholics.

The response of Protestant groups to the Holocaust has reflected their divisions. German Lutherans tended to embrace Nazis, but Denmark, also a Lutheran country, following the lead of their king, saved their entire Jewish population, even adopting wearing of the Jewish badge. Following the establishment of the State of Israel, and particularly following the Six Day War and reunification of Jerusalem (1967), fundamentalist Protestant groups, particularly in the United States, tended to embrace Israel and Jews generally, while Protestant mainstream groups and organizations tended to support the Arabs.

Interfaith dialogue developed from efforts to missionize Jews. Christians saw these efforts as sharing the opportunity for personal salvation. Jews saw it as an attempt to undermine their ancestral faith. Following World War II, churches began to recognize that some of the roots of anti-Semitism derived from their own teachings. Nonetheless, the hostile stance of many Protestant churches to Israel following the Six Day War seriously undermined this movement.

Blacks and Jews in the United States were generally close allies throughout the period of the civil rights movement. Since the mid-1960s, conflict has erupted between the two. Black Muslims have been particularly virulent in their attacks on Jews and Judaism; and some of this has affected attitudes of the wider black community.

Defense Organizations

The Anti-Defamation League of B'nai Brith, founded in 1913—the largest and best known of Jewish defense organizations—is an American national organization with offices in Israel and Europe. It engages in research on hate crimes and hate groups in the United States and worldwide, and seeks to combat anti-Semitism through programs of education and legal and political means.

Student Struggle for Soviet Jewry, founded in 1964, gained the support of major Jewish organizations in the 1970s.

The Jewish Defense League, founded in 1967 by Rabbi Meir Kahane, advocated violence in self-defense but has been shunned by major Jewish organizations. Kahane was assassinated in New York in 1990.

Since the 1960s, Israel has been a participant in international Jewish defense. Examples include the capture and trial of Adolf Eichmann, the Entebbe raid rescuing Jewish hostages in Uganda, assistance to various government agencies in countering terrorism against Jews, and the rescue of Jews from regimes where they are threatened, such as Ethiopia.

—M. Herbert Danzger

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