

John T. Pawlikowski, "Anti-Semitism",
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ANTI-SEMITISM

Anti-Semitism is a term that is much used, but with little precision. Strictly speaking it could refer to prejudice against either Jews or Arabs. But its origins in the nineteenth century, as well as the history of its usage, have restricted it to hatred and discrimination against Jews. As the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac put it in his volume *The Teaching of Contempt*, "Antisemitism is used nowadays to refer to anti-Jewish prejudice, to feelings of suspicion, contempt, hostility, and hatred toward the Jews, both those who follow the religion of Israel and those who are merely of Jewish parentage."

The term "anti-Semitism" is a nineteenth-century phenomenon. What it represents was already known in the period of the Hebrew Scriptures, and researchers on anti-Semitism such as Fr. Edward Flannery (*The Anguish of the Jews*) have shown that it was a marked feature of pre-Christian Graeco-Roman society.

In the Hebrew Scriptures we read the account of Amalek's vicious attack upon the Jews who were late in leaving Egypt (cf. Deut 25:17-19). Rabbinic commentaries, which are critical in traditional Judaism for biblical interpretation, have always regarded this pericope as prototypical of anti-Judaism. And the Books of Maccabees recall the persistent efforts of Antiochus Epiphanes to suppress the first Jewish rebellion for religious freedom. As we move to the New Testament, we enter an area of some continuing scholarly controversy on the subject of anti-Semitism. While the Hebrew Scriptures record occurrences of anti-Semitic hatred, the question has been raised whether anti-Semitism is actually embedded in the teachings of the epistles and Gospels. No consensus exists today on this critical issue, with many scholars making the argument that the polemics found in the New Testament were in fact Jewish *internal* criticism and therefore cannot be regarded as a form of anti-Semitism. Others have also correctly pointed out that at times we have "globalized" criticisms of Jews and specific Jewish groups of Jesus' day (i.e., the Pharisees) when in fact these denunciations were likely directed only at sections of the Jewish community or particular movements.

On two points, however, there does appear to be emerging agreement among biblical scholars. The first is that many of the biblical texts have surely been interpreted in an anti-Semitic fashion by Church teachers and preachers over the centuries. Thus the tradition of biblical interpretation may in fact be described as "anti-Semitic" even if this does not hold for the texts themselves. Secondly, there are texts, particularly those in the Gospel of John and the Letter to the Hebrews, which must be said to come very close to crossing the anti-Semitic threshold. Some scholars such as Fr. Raymond Brown have in fact claimed that they are imbued with prejudicial thinking against the Jews to the extent that they should no longer be regarded as authentic catechesis for our time. Brown has in mind such texts as those in John where Jews are equated with the forces of darkness and sinfulness. It does no good in his mind to claim, as some Christians do, that here Jews were simply being used as a prototype of all sinful humanity. For to regard the Jews' principal mission after the Christ Event as exemplifying sinfulness surely provides fertile ground for anti-Semitism.

Whatever the final verdict on New Testament anti-Semitism may turn out to be, there is no doubt that it had taken solid hold in Christian theology and preaching by the time of the Church Fathers. Their era gave rise to the *adversus Judaeos* (i.e., "against the Jews") in which Jewish rituals and interpretations of Scripture were ridiculed and the notion was promoted that God expelled the Jews from their homeland and destroyed their Temple as a punishment for rejecting Christ. They were to persist in this condition until the end of days except for individuals who were willing to undergo conversion. Important Christian thinkers such as Justin, John Chrysostom, and Augustine spoke of the Jews as wanderers over the face of the earth in punishment for their supposed role in the crucifixion. For centuries, this charge of deicide, of Christ-killers, served as the cornerstone of anti-Semitic diatribes.

The Middle Ages continued the polemic against the Jews begun by the Church Fathers. But a moderating trend did appear. The Church of this period did develop legislation which extended a measure of protection to Jews and their religion. While these laws provided some freedom from harassment, they were often breached on the popular level. Efforts at forced conversion were commonplace and these were generally carried out with impunity. In countries such as Spain it was not uncommon for worshipers to leave churches on Good Friday and stone Jews they might meet on the streets. And literature of the period began to depict Jews as "money-grubbing." Such portrayals were frequent in plays and novels.

The period of the Crusades proved especially difficult for Jews. Massacre often replaced mere harassment. False charges abounded (still reflected in village popular piety in some places in Europe) which accused Jews of poisoning wells and slaughtering Christian babies so that their blood could be used in the making of Jewish bread.

In 1215 the Fourth Lateran Council decreed that Jews were obligated to wear distinguishing badges and that they should reside only in certain restricted sections of a city. Though the term was still not in formal use, this legislation in fact laid the foundation for the later Jewish ghetto. In 1492 Jews were expelled from Spain where, for a brief golden age, they had achieved an unprecedented level of dialogue with Christians and Muslims in such cities as Toledo. Portugal followed suit five years later.

The Reformation in the sixteenth century did not usher in any significant improvements for Jews in terms of their social situation. Though Martin Luther initially courted Jewish leaders after his break with Rome, he eventually turned strongly against the Jewish community, authoring several anti-Semitic tracts that came to be admired greatly by the Nazis.

The birth of the modern era saw some improvements for Jews. Having been already accorded some limited civil protection and rights in Poland, they were now allowed a measure of equality in Germany and France. But this was often at the price of secularization and the destruction of communal identity. But new forms of anti-Semitism also emerged. The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a forgery, became extremely popular in many circles. They described a purported Jewish cabal that was intent on controlling the world. And theories of inherent racial impurity began to arise. Jews quickly became prime targets of such theories. Nazism, which resulted in the annihilation of some six million European Jews, represented the most insidious example of such theories. But, while Nazism was qualitatively distinct from more classical forms of anti-Semitism which never advocated total Jewish annihilation, Christians cannot ignore the fact that the Nazis' choice of Jews as their primal targets had everything to do with the centuries of Jewish degradation commonplace in popular Christianity. And certainly classical anti-Semitism provided an indispensable seedbed for public cooperation with Hitler's so-called "Final Solution" to the Jewish question. Hitler himself made the connection explicit when, in responding to two bishops who had come to protest his treatment of the Jews, he said he was only putting into practice what the Church had been teaching for centuries. His great admiration of the Oberammergau passion play is yet another example of an awareness of clear linkage on his part.

While considerable strides have been made in eradicating anti-Semitism in recent decades, this social disease has not totally disappeared. Klan and other radical right groups continue to target Jews as well as African-Americans and Asian Americans. An upsurge of anti-Semitism is evident in parts of Western and Eastern Europe, even in areas where Nazism reduced the Jewish population to a tiny minority. The *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* continue to be distributed in certain circles, including religious ones (both Christian and Islamic).

But, despite the fact that we are still a considerable distance from the time when we can safely declare anti-Semitism as past history, the latter part of the twentieth century has witnessed the most thorough repudiation of its legitimacy from a faith perspective in the history of Christianity. Numerous Protestant denominations have released statements deploring anti-Semitism as unworthy of Christians. For Roman Catholics the major turning point occurred at Vatican Council II which in chapter four of its Declaration on Non-Christian Religions undercut the theological foundations for the classical *adversus Judaeos* tradition and went on to denounce anti-Semitism in explicit terms: ". . . the Church, mindful of the patrimony it shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-semitism directed against Jews at any time and by anyone." Subsequent documents from the Vatican such as the 1975 Instruction reaffirmed this condemnation of anti-Semitism: ". . . the spiritual bonds and historical links binding the Church to Judaism condemn (as opposed to the very spirit of Christianity) all forms of antisemitism." Other Church documents, including one from the Polish Episcopal Conference, have declared anti-Semitism a sin. Clearly we are on the road towards reversing the age-old support of anti-Semitism which by word and deed Pope John Paul II has consistently and staunchly opposed.

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See also HOLOCAUST (NAZI); JUDAISM; OBERAMMERGAU; VATICAN COUNCIL II.

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ANTI-JUDAISM. A term used to describe Christian critique of Judaism as a religion, i.e., Christian condemnations and denigrations of Jewish belief and practice. This polemic appears already in the NT, but anti-Judaism was greatly exacerbated by the sermons and commentaries of later church fathers. What some label anti-Jewish polemic in the NT, others label intra-Jewish polemic, since in the earliest period Christianity is not a fully established religion distinct from Judaism.

In the wake of the Holocaust, much reflection and debate has ensued about the relationship between theologically motivated Christian anti-Judaism and the racially motivated anti-Semitism that inspired Nazism. Some Christian theologians insisted that only the term anti-Judaism was appropriate to describe Christianity's critique of Judaism while anti-Semitism was the result of secularism, nationalism, and racism.

With greater historical and theological sophistication, however, the idea that Christian anti-Judaism was a wholly separate phenomenon from anti-Semitism lost credibility. There were too many lines of continuity and areas of overlap. Most historians and theologians now recognize that the long history of Christian anti-Jewish polemic fostered much of the hostility that made the Holocaust possible.

At the same time, there are significant differences between modern anti-Semitism and ancient Christian anti-Judaism. Nazism was not a Christian movement, and its brand of anti-Semitism was heavily influenced by pseudo-scientific theories of race that postdate the NT by centuries. Scholars of early Christianity often employ the term *anti-Judaism*, not to deny the ways in which NT texts contributed to anti-Semitism, but to maintain greater historical and sociological precision in describing the causes and motivations of anti-Jewish polemic. See ANTI-SEMITISM; HOLOCAUST AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION.

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ANTI-SEMITISM. There are texts in the Christian canon that express hostility toward Jews and seemingly denigrate Judaism, sometimes severely. These texts have, at times, been interpreted by Christians in such a way as to promote anti-Semitism. Whether or not the term *anti-Semitism* should be used in regard to biblical literature is debatable. Because the term was not coined until the late 19th cent. in Germany and has racial connotations that do not necessarily apply to antiquity, most contemporary biblical scholars prefer to use the term ANTI-JUDAISM to describe texts that demean Jews or Judaism. At the same time, anti-Semitism is commonly used today to denote any antipathy toward Jews as Jews. Taken in this sense, there can be no doubt that biblical texts have been used to foster anti-Semitism, even if the biblical texts themselves cannot be properly labeled anti-Semitic.

The Gospels and Paul have been most influential in the promotion of Christian anti-Semitism. Because of the antagonistic role played by Jews in the story of Jesus' death, gospel texts were instrumental in the formulation of negative images of Jews. In all four Gospels, both Roman and Jewish authorities play a role in the crucifixion of Jesus. Over time the role of the Romans became insignificant while the role played by Jews became theologically critical (see PASSION NARRATIVES). The involvement of Jews in the death of Jesus ultimately coalesced into the charge of deicide, the notion that all Jews, past, present, and future, bear collective responsibility for killing Christ. The Passion play—an Easter liturgical tradition popular in the medieval period in which the story of Jesus' passion was dramatized—tended to emphasize the calumny of the Jews in the execution of Jesus, popularizing the portrayal of Jews as "Christ-killers." Certain passages from the Gospels became widely known proof-texts for illustrating Jewish culpability for the death of Jesus, such as "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matt 27:25).

The image of Jews as Christ-killers meant that Jews were not merely people who rejected Jesus; they rejected God and, as a result, God had rejected them. The mutual enmity between God and Jews consequently led to the perception that Jews were the agents and allies of Satan. Jesus appears to confirm this perspective in the Gospel of John when he says to his Jewish audience: "If God were your Father, you would love me, for I proceeded and came forth from God. . . . Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. . . . He who is of God hears the words of God; the reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God" (John 8:42-47).

Certain passages in Paul's letters were also used to demonstrate that Jews were despised by God. In Gal 3:10 , e.g., Paul says "all those who rely on works of the law are under a curse." Traditionally "those who rely on works of the law" was understood to refer to Jews. Here and elsewhere Paul was taken to mean that the giving of the Torah to Israel was a form of divine punishment—the result of the

intractable obduracy of the Jews. Moreover, the image of Paul that developed in church tradition contributed to reading Paul's letters as anti-Jewish. Paul was understood to have converted from Judaism to Christianity, and his letters were perceived to reflect that experience. Paul's ostensibly negative statements about law were collectively taken as a wholesale rejection of Torah-centered Judaism in favor of Christ-centered Christianity. Paul's letters thus enabled the development of a Christian theology of Judaism, in which Judaism was portrayed as the antithesis of Christianity, the former being a legalistic religion of "works-righteousness," the latter a grace-filled religion of faith.

While passages from the NT have been most frequently utilized in the denigration of Judaism, OT passages have been similarly utilized. The ancient Israelite tradition of self-critique produced texts in which Israel acknowledges her guilt before God and God holds Israel to account, sometimes severely (e.g., Pss 50:12-23; 95:6-11 ; Hos 4:1-10:15 ; Isa 65:1-16). In a Christian context, historically removed from the world of ancient Israel, this rhetoric of self-critique was lost. Judgment oracles and other texts that describe divine retribution were instead read as condemnations of Jews, while promises and blessings were understood to pertain to Christians.

Post-Holocaust reflection of the late 20th cent. has led scholars to a new level of awareness about the problem of anti-Semitism and the NT. Biblical scholars have tried to distinguish between the biblical text itself and Christian interpretive tradition in an effort to show that many texts used to foster anti-Semitism have different and even positive interpretive possibilities, once the complexities of the historical context are taken into account.

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