



## **JEWES AND CHRISTIANS THROUGH THE CENTURIES: A TROUBLED RELATIONSHIP**

Progressive Christians Uniting  
Primary Author: Eva Fleischner

### Preface<sup>1</sup>

In 1979 in Claremont, California there occurred events that were to have unforeseen and long-range consequences. The women's groups of the local Jewish congregation of Temple Beth Israel and the Claremont Presbyterian Church had begun to talk together about each other's festivals. An outbreak of antisemitic graffiti around town led to a desire on the part of the Christian members to express and deepen their solidarity with their Jewish neighbors. Under the leadership of Rabbi Mandel and Pastor Jim Angell there began an interfaith exchange which, twenty-six years later (at this writing), has become a cherished tradition. It includes today an annual exchange of pulpits, an invitation from the Temple to a Sabbath celebration and from the church to attend Sunday worship, studying the Decalogue together, and joint community service by the women's groups.

This account makes clear that Christian-Jewish relations is not a subject in a long-ago history, but a reality alive today and relevant to our time. The Claremont experience highlights both the ongoing existence of antisemitism, and the joint Christian and Jewish efforts to combat it – efforts grounded in a new-found spirit of Christian solidarity with the Jewish people. We shall examine the evolution of Christian antisemitism, the new and hopeful rapprochement that has taken place between the two communities, and the challenges – some new, some ancient – that still face us today. We shall seek to explain how we came to be where we are at this time.

### Introduction

We begin with a text from the *Baltimore Catechism*, the standard text used in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church until the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's:

Q: Why did the Jewish religion, which up to the death of Christ had been the true religion, cease at that time to be the true religion?

A: The Jewish religion...ceased at that time to be the true religion because it was only a promise of the redemption and figure of the Christian religion, and when the redemption was accomplished and the Christian religion established by the death of Christ, the promise and figure were no longer necessary. (391)

No mention is made here of the Jews as Christ-killers, nor as a people rejected and cursed by God – accusations which became staples in Christian preaching and catechesis, and which led to centuries of persecution and pogroms. Yet, as we shall see, these deadly accusations grew out of the theological view of Judaism expressed in this text: with the coming of Christianity the Jews are no longer people of God.

In what follows we shall find a frequent interplay between history and theology. Theology does not arise in a vacuum but is profoundly influenced by history. Moreover, without some

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<sup>1</sup> Author's note: I am indebted for the following account to Dr. Gordon Douglass of Pilgrim Place, a participant in the Claremont Interfaith Exchange from its beginning.

knowledge of history, there is no possibility of genuine dialogue between Jews and Christians. This presents a problem: Jews are very familiar with a history that has effectively been erased from Christian memory.

The opening page of Fr. Edward Flannery's book, *The Anguish of the Jews* (1965, first edition) eloquently makes the point:

One evening several years ago, I walked north on Park Avenue in New York City in the company of a young Jewish couple. Behind us shone the huge illuminated cross the Grand Central building displays each year at Christmas time. Glancing over her shoulder, the young lady – ordinarily well disposed toward Christians – declared:

“The cross makes me shudder. It is like an evil presence.”

Flannery was shocked. How was it, he asked himself, that the cross, supreme symbol of universal love for Christians, had become a sign of fear, of evil, for this young Jewish woman? In further conversation it became clear to him that the woman's reaction was the result of a knowledge of history he completely lacked: a history of centuries of suffering of her people at the hands of Christians. “The pages Jews have memorized have been torn from our histories of the Christian era...”. This realization moved Flannery to write what became the first history of Christian antisemitism in English by a Roman Catholic priest.

The Christian attitude toward and treatment of Jews over the centuries represents the shadow side of Christianity. Facing up to this dark history is essential for Christian self-knowledge and for a mature, purer Christian faith. This new knowledge will challenge some traditional Christian theological views. It will also enable Christians to understand why, despite the beginnings of a radically new and positive relationship between Jews and Christians over the past forty years, many Jews still approach Christians with unease and suspicion.

There are scholars who maintain that the relationship between Jews and Christians has been one of ever increasing hostility and persecution, inevitably and logically culminating in the Holocaust (or *Shoah*; see page 4) This is the view of the “Dean” of Jewish historians, Raoul Hilberg, for whom church laws from 306-1434 parallel Nazi legislation from 1935-1942.<sup>2</sup>

We do not believe that this view represents the whole picture. There is no doubt that centuries of Christian preaching and teaching provided a fertile seedbed for the Nazi genocide, and that the church was all too often indifferent to, even complicit in, the Shoah. Yet not all of history between Christians and Jews can be reduced to a story of persecution and hatred. Nor was its culmination in the Shoah inevitable. Several facts that provide a more nuanced picture should be kept in mind:

--The polemic so evident in the gospels' anti-Jewish texts was typical of the Judaism of the time, as well as of the Greco-Roman world. This may also apply to some of the sermons of the church fathers, e.g., of John Chrysostom.

--Throughout the Middle Ages we find, in sermons of some popular preachers, certain passages that express respect for, even admiration of, Jews: e.g., for their commitment to the Sabbath, high Jewish moral standards, commitment to education and learning, and fidelity to their faith even in the face of death.

--Even in times of great danger for Jews, such as the first Crusade (1096), there were Christians, often in positions of high authority, who spoke out and tried to protect Jews.

--While there was indeed frequent enmity and conflict, there were also times and places where Jews and Christians lived side by side in peace. The “Golden Age” in Spain (“Andalusia”

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<sup>2</sup> Cf the chart in Hilberg's *The Destruction of European Jews*, p. 5ff.

at the time) lasted three hundred years; during that time some Jews occupied high positions in Muslim society (see p. 11f).

--Edicts in favor of Jews from church authorities, even from the pope, did not necessarily affect popular beliefs or prevent pogroms. Thus, accusations of blood libel or ritual murder continued to be made in spite of papal decrees that denounced such charges as groundless.

--Despite the proliferation of the anti-Jewish literature in patristic and medieval times, the church never issued a theological or dogmatic tract against the Jews. No mention of Jews is made in any of the Christian creeds. (It should be remembered, however, that preaching and teaching generally have a much wider impact than dogmatic definitions.)

--Although theology was the enduring basis for Christian anti-Judaism (see below, “the teaching of contempt”), economic and social factors also played decisive roles. To take only one example: a severe outbreak of persecution and pogroms occurred during the time when Europe was devastated by the bubonic plague (Black Death) in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In their desperation the populace needed to find a cause for their suffering, and Jews were a natural scapegoat (as they were to be centuries later, after Germany’s defeat in World War I and the Treaty of Versailles). The role of the Jews as money-lenders – a role into which they had been forced because Christians were forbidden to engage in usury – frequently earned them popular hatred.

--The tragic history of Christian anti-Judaism notwithstanding, it does not by itself account for the Nazi genocide. It took 19<sup>th</sup>-century racism and modern technology to make possible the Shoah. To put it succinctly: Christian anti-Judaism was not the sufficient cause of the Shoah, but it was a necessary one (John Roth). Without this foundation Hitler would not have found such a receptive soil for his ideology.

None of the contributing factors just mentioned played as central and constant a role in making the Shoah possible as did the negative Christian teaching about Jews and Judaism. In the words of Rosemary Ruether:

...the church must bear a substantial responsibility for a tragic history of the Jew in Christendom which was the foundation upon which political antisemitism and the Nazi use of it was erected.<sup>3</sup>

How could this have happened? How could Jesus’ teaching of love have been turned into a teaching of hate? We shall attempt to answer this question in what follows, and to trace the calamitous consequences of this teaching. In the last part of the paper we shall speak of the radical and positive changes that have occurred – and are still occurring – in the relationship of the two peoples over the past forty years.

### A Note on Terminology

Supersessionism: This is a recent theological term, frequently used today in Jewish-Christian studies and dialogue. It is derived from the Latin *supersedere* – supersede, take the place of, replace – and refers to the ancient Christian claim that Christians have replaced, “superseded,” Jews as people of God. Christians are the new people of God, replacing the Jews, who lost this privilege because they failed to recognize Christ as Messiah. Therefore their covenant is null and void, replaced by the New Covenant. Supersessionism is today rejected by most mainline churches.

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<sup>3</sup> Rosemary Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, p. 184

Shoah: Hebrew for “catastrophe.” The word “Holocaust” has been used so widely, for catastrophes of all kinds, that it no longer refers specifically to the Nazi genocide of Jews (e.g. “nuclear holocaust”). “Shoah” has been common usage in place of “Holocaust” in France and Germany for some years already and is being used increasingly in the English-speaking world. We shall use it throughout this paper.

Anti-Judaism and antisemitism: Are they two terms for the same phenomenon? The question is still being debated. We believe that a distinction can be made. Anti-Judaism refers to the religious or theological view – expressed in supersessionism – that the Jewish people failed in their vocation and are no longer people of God. In this view, Judaism represents all that is negative in religion (legalism, hypocrisy, empty ritual, etc.) in contrast to Christianity, which embodies love, grace, and truth. Anti-Judaism is a theological term.

Antisemitism is technically a racist term. It appears for the first time in 1879, coined by Wilhelm Marr, a German journalist. It views Jews as a race, intrinsically inferior and evil. (See p. 18) The distinction between the two is clear if we remember that throughout Christendom Jews who converted were accepted as Christians. Under Nazism this “way out” was no longer an option; conversion no longer saved Jews from the gas chambers.

However, while the distinction seems valid and helpful to us, it is dismissed by some because anti-Judaism so easily, and so often, leads to antisemitism. As one reads of the repeated denigration of Jews and the outbreaks of violence against them in the course of Christian history, it becomes increasingly difficult to make the distinction. We shall at times use the two terms interchangeably. The definition by the French historian Jules Isaac may be useful: “Antisemitism is used nowadays to refer to anti-Jewish prejudice, to feelings of suspicion, contempt, hostility and hatred toward Jews, both those who follow the religion [of Judaism] and those who are merely of Jewish descent.”<sup>4</sup>

Old and New Testaments: These terms suggest that the New Testament has superseded the Old, which is valid no longer. The term “Hebrew scriptures” is problematic because the Jewish scriptures are not identical with the Christian Old Testament. Some scholars today use the terms “First” and “Second” Testaments – we shall follow this usage.

Pogrom: An organized and often officially encouraged massacre of Jews. There have been literally hundreds of pogroms in the course of Jewish history.

Blood libel/ritual murder/desecration of the host: The “blood libel” charge by Christians against Jews held that Jews kidnapped and ritually murdered Christian children, as their historic role in Jesus’ crucifixion had created in them a lust for innocent blood. “The blood libel resembled a virus that then lodged itself in the Christian imagination.... Jews were accused of crucifying boys all over Europe, even into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>5</sup> The ritual murder charge appears also in western literature, from Chaucer to James Joyce.

### Jewish Origins of Christianity

Christianity began as a Jewish sect, one among a number of sects in first-century Palestine (e.g., the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots). Jesus was born, lived, and died as a Jew, faithfully observing the Law (Torah). As we know from the gospels, he was circumcised and presented in the Temple, like any Jew of his time. He extolled respect for Torah (Matt. 5:17ff).

<sup>4</sup> *The Teaching of Contempt*, p. 21

<sup>5</sup> James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword*, p. 272ff

The rhythms of his life were marked by observance of the great pilgrimage festivals, and by attending the synagogue on the Sabbath. His message was addressed only to Jews, as is clear from his insulting words to the Canaanite woman (Matt. 15:22ff.)

What, then, of the tensions and conflicts between Jesus and the Pharisees that we find in the gospels – tensions which have made the word “Pharisee” synonymous with “hypocrite” in the minds of many Christians, still today? These tensions must be seen against the background of a complex and diversified movement. In general the Pharisees were among the most devout and respected religious figures of the time – precursors of the rabbis and founders of what came to be known as rabbinic Judaism. Like all devout people in every religion, the Pharisees did not always live up to their high ideals, nor were they immune to the dangers of hypocrisy. Criticism of various types of Pharisees by other Pharisees is equal to and sometimes exceeds any of Jesus’ criticism of them. Differences about the interpretation of Torah were typical of first-century Judaism and often led to acrimonious debates within Judaism. Yet it is clear that Jesus in his teaching was closer to the Pharisees than to any other Jewish group of the time.

Initially, Jesus’ followers lived peacefully among their fellow Jews, keeping the Jewish times of prayer in the Temple even after the resurrection (cf. Acts 3). They entertained the hope that their fellow Jews would soon recognize Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah. On the Jewish side, there was the expectation that the new sect would soon disappear, now that the Master was dead.

Neither expectation was to be fulfilled. Not only did Christians not disappear, they soon grew in number, making converts first among their fellow Jews (cf. Acts 2 and the first Pentecost), and before long among gentiles. As described in Acts, Paul was sent by the Christians of Antioch to Jerusalem to discuss a difficult problem that had arisen for some of the apostles, led by James and Peter, with the gentile Christians. The problem had reached Antioch through believers who had come from Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas were to reach agreement with the apostles on the question: Should gentile converts to Christianity before being baptized be obliged to observe the full Jewish law, including food restrictions and the circumcision of males, or did Christ free them from observing the Torah? After a difficult debate, both sides agreed to differ and as a practical matter divided the territory: Paul to the gentiles and Peter to the Jews (Gal 2:7-10). This solved the problem for gentiles outside of Jerusalem.

In Jerusalem the Jewish community was divided over whether Jesus was the Christ, leading to outbreaks like the mob that stoned Stephen, a Hellenistic Jew who followed Jesus as the Christ (Acts 7). Most Jews could not believe that a man who had been shamefully put to death on a cross could be the Messiah; the mainstream of Jewish messianic expectations did not allow for a suffering Messiah. Bitterness increased on both sides, yet prior to the Roman War of 66-70 we can still speak of one people.

### The Parting of the Ways

The first Roman war played a pivotal role in the destiny of both Jews and Christians. After fierce fighting for nearly four years and enormous casualties Jerusalem fell in 70 C.E., the Temple was destroyed, and the people lost what little autonomy they had enjoyed until then. What was left was still more radically destroyed sixty years later, in the rebellion against Rome led by Bar Kochba (132-135). From that time on, until 1948 and the founding of the modern state of Israel, the Jewish people no longer had a land of their own. They were homeless, at the mercy of the goodwill of the peoples among whom they lived in the Diaspora (“dispersion”).

The way in which this catastrophe, the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, was interpreted by Jews and Christians differed radically. Jews saw it, as they had the Babylonian captivity, as God's punishment because they had not been sufficiently faithful to the Torah. Yet faith in God's enduring mercy and forgiveness sustained them and enabled them to save what could be saved from the disaster. At Jamnia (Javneh, Jabneh) outside Jerusalem, Rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai established a center of learning, an "Academy," where the work of conservation and adaptation was carried out so successfully that "Judaism not only was tided over the crisis, but entered upon a period of progress which it may well count among the most notable chapters in its history."<sup>6</sup>

Christians, on the other hand, saw the war as the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecy, as God's punishment upon the Jewish people because they had failed in their mission. After the murder of James in 62 C.E., the bishop of the Christian believers in Jerusalem, shortly before the outbreak of the war, Christians fled from their brothers. In spite of the tradition of a move to Pella, for all practical effects the Christians of Jerusalem disappeared. Thus events on the ground settled what the apostles were not able to settle between James and Paul a generation earlier.

### The Second Testament

It was during those critical years that the Christian scriptures took shape in their final form. What we have in the gospels are not primarily historical documents, but a reflection of the life of the early church. Many of the words attributed to Jesus in the gospels reflect the way in which the church had come to view Jews by this time: as obstinate and blind, deliberately refusing to recognize God's salvation in Christ. What had been intra-Jewish debates now became debates between "us" (Christians) and "them" (Jews).

There is an unmistakable crescendo in the hostile ways that Jews are portrayed in the gospels, beginning with the earliest, Mark (ca. 70 C.E.) and attaining a peak in John, written toward the end of the century. The term "Jews" appears 16 times in Mark and 71 times in John. From intra-Jewish controversies in the synoptics, Jesus' conflict with "the Jews" has become, in John, the story of a cosmic conflict, the battle between the forces of light and the powers of darkness, Satan (cf. the Prologue). And it is "the Jews" who are the symbol of this cosmic evil. Thus, in John 8 Jesus denounces them as the offspring of Satan: "Your father is the devil, and you do your father's will. He was a murderer from the beginning." By implication, his offspring are also murderers. Moreover, by the time John's gospel was written, the church was composed of more gentiles than Jews, and Christians had been expelled from the synagogue – a fact probably reflected in texts such as John 9:22 and 12:2-3. Nevertheless, the complexity of the issue is shown by the evangelist John's refusal to blame the Jews for Jesus' execution.

The young church was trying to define itself as separate from the Jewish roots of its birth, while also struggling for survival in the hostile climate of Roman occupation. This accounts for the effort of the writers of the Synoptic Gospels to shift the blame for Jesus' death from the Romans to the Jews.

### The Teaching of Contempt

Although the phrase is modern (it was coined by the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac, part of whose family perished in Auschwitz), the phenomenon it describes goes back to the late first

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<sup>6</sup> George Foot Moore, *Judaism*, vol. I, p. 84

century. By the end of the fifth century it was full-blown. What follows is a summary of the main elements of this teaching.

Jews are now portrayed in Christian teaching and preaching as rejected and cast aside by God because they failed to recognize Jesus as Messiah. Therefore their ancient covenant is null and void. The Roman destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple are God's punishment for the crucifixion of Jesus – visible and tangible evidence of God's wrath and rejection of the "old" people of God. A new people of God, the Christian church, has taken its place. This is the "replacement theology," the supplanting of one people by another, which today is often referred to as supersessionism. It was to sink deep roots in Christianity and helped the young church to define itself –which it did in opposition to, and over against, Judaism. Jews now became "the other." As we shall see, the teaching of contempt has been a major source of persecution of Jews and discrimination against them over the centuries.

Late in the second century, Melito of Sardis added a particularly toxic dimension to supersessionism: the accusation of deicide. Since, according to Christian faith, Jesus is God, it follows logically that in crucifying him the Jews had killed God. "God has been murdered; the king of Israel is slain by an Israelite hand" (*Homily on the Passover*). Similarly, Justin Martyr said in his *Dialogue with Trypho*: "Tribulations were justly imposed upon you, for you have murdered the Just One." This accusation was leveled not only at Jesus' contemporaries, but at all Jews everywhere, in every age, for all time. It had deadly consequences and was so long-lived that the Second Vatican Council in 1965 found it necessary expressly to repudiate this charge.

### The Fourth Century

These second-century beginnings took on a new and far more dangerous dimension in the fourth century, when Christianity emerged from the catacombs and began to be identified with imperial power. Despite the devastation of the Roman wars, Judaism had not only survived but continued to attract converts and was thus seen as a threat to the church. This may explain in part the new and hitherto unprecedented vehemence in anti-Jewish rhetoric that we find in the writings of some of the greatest Christian theologians of the time, the Church Fathers. (These writings are today known as the adversus Judaeos literature.) Thus, Chrysostom asserts that Jews worship the devil; their rites are "criminal and impure," their religion is "a disease," their synagogue "an assembly of criminals,... a den of thieves,... a cavern of devils, an abyss of perdition."<sup>7</sup> Gregory of Nyssa speaks of Jews as

...slayers of the Lord, murderers of the prophets, enemies of God, adversaries of grace, enemies of their father's faith, advocates of the devil, brood of vipers, slanderers, scoffers, men of darkened minds, leaven of the Pharisees, congregation of demons, sinners, wicked men, stoners, and haters of goodness.<sup>8</sup>

The deicide charge is now full-blown. Augustine accuses Jews of

...guilt for the death of the Savior, for through their fathers they have killed the Christ. The Jews held him, the Jews insulted him, the Jews bound him, they crowned

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<sup>7</sup> Homilies 1&3, quoted in Flannery, p51

<sup>8</sup> *Homilies of the Resurrection*, 5

him with thorns, dishonored him by spitting upon him, they scourged him, they heaped abuses upon him, they hung him upon a tree, they pierced him with a lance.<sup>9</sup> Chrysostom goes further yet: nothing can atone for the Jews' crime, for their "odious assassination of Christ." It lies at the root of their degradation and suffering. For this decide there is "no expiation possible, no indulgence, no pardon." Vengeance is without end. Hence Jews will always remain without temple or nation. They will live "under the yoke of servitude without end." God hates them and has always hated them. It is a duty of Christians to hate them: "He who can never love Christ enough will never cease fighting against those who hate him."

Given such iniquity, the Jewish people should logically have disappeared. Yet they continued to exist, even to grow – a confusing fact for the church. Augustine finds an explanation for this puzzling fact: he argues that in their homelessness and suffering Jews are a necessary reminder to the world of what happens when human beings reject God. Therefore they must remain alive until the end of time, as "the witness people."<sup>10</sup>

However shocking such views sound to us today (and indeed are!), they had remained relatively harmless during the first three centuries, when both Judaism and Christianity were powerless minority religions. The situation changed drastically, however, when Christianity became the official religion of the empire in the fourth century and took on the trappings of Rome's temporal power. Theological views now began to be translated into legislation, a process that gained momentum and persisted throughout the Middle Ages. Starting with the Council of Elvira in Spain (a regional council, ca. 304) and reaching a climax in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council (a general council of the church), a body of anti-Jewish laws developed – ranging from the prohibition of inter-marriage to the imposition of special clothing and a badge – that foreshadowed Nazi antisemitic legislation.

Indeed, in many respects there was little Hitler needed to invent in the *Nuremberg Laws*, which the German parliament passed in 1935. The main legislative tool for excluding Jews from society, these laws segregated them, prohibited marriage with non-Jews, made Jews ineligible for employment, and ultimately deprived them of all civil rights. Hitler merely completed the process began centuries earlier by the church. He added, however, one unprecedented, critical step which the church had never countenanced: genocide.

### Theological Issues

The *Adversus Judaeos* literature of the fourth and fifth centuries must be set within the wider context of the church's efforts to articulate a distinctive Christian theology. Central to this effort was the God-question. That the Christian God was also the God of Israel was not held in doubt (except at an earlier period, by Marcion condemned as a heretic.) The question facing Christian theology, however, was this: What was Jesus' relationship to this God? Could the church affirm that Jesus was truly divine and still maintain its monotheism – a belief as central to Christianity as it was to Judaism? Such questions preoccupied not only theologians but also, because they directly affected the language and practice of worship, aroused passionate interest among ordinary people. Gregory of Nyssa reported that if you ask a baker the price of bread, he will tell you that the Father is greater than the Son.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Sermon on the Cross*, 3:10

<sup>10</sup> *Reply to Faustus*

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Mary Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?* P. 161. I rely frequently on this work in this section.

The church's increasing immersion in Greco-Roman culture necessitated a more philosophical interpretation of many Second Testament texts which, while they did not clarify such questions, yet remained the basis for Christian faith. Thus, the ancient hymn in Philippians 2:5-11 exalts Christ above every creature in the universe, while affirming that it is God who has bestowed lordship on Jesus, "to the glory of the Father." While some saw such texts as evidence that the church had cast aside monotheism, others interpreted them as an expanded concept of monotheism. The worship of God, so central to Judaism, now included the risen Christ as well.

This "expanded monotheism" (Boys) found valuable resources in post-exilic Jewish literature, in images such as Sophia – Lady Wisdom – who is God's partner in creation (Prov. 8:22-31; Wis. 7:25-26). The Greek-speaking Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria speaks of *Logos*, the Word, as "first-born," "governor of all things." Paul, in I Cor. 5-6, uses similar language:

Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth – as in fact there are many gods and many lords – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.

Despite frequent references to Father, Son and Spirit, the Second Testament does not speculate about their relation to one another. Clarification of those texts became necessary once Christianity became a dominant force in the fourth century. The councils, creeds, bishops – especially Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), and Chalcedon (451) – now emerge as the essential tools by which the church defined and set boundaries to its faith.

In the context of this paper we shall mention only one instance in which this effort to clarify Christian faith impacted directly on the church's relationship to Judaism. The Council of Nicaea was called by the emperor Constantine to deal with the Arian controversy. Arius argued that Jesus was subordinate to God. His major opponent in the years following Nicaea, and leading up to the Council of Constantinople, was Bishop Athanasius. Athanasius used what were by now traditional anti-Jewish themes as his main weapon against "the Arian maniacs." Arians are the "new Jews of the present day;" like the Jews who killed Christ, Arians have become the enemies and slayers of Christ. Athanasius compares them to the Pharisees, who "...pretended to study the words of the Law, wishing to deny the expected and present Lord." The Arians' emphasis on the Son's humanity parallels the Jews' failure to see Christ's divinity:

Since this sort of madness is a Jewish thing, and Jewish in the way that Judas the traitor was Jewish, let them profess openly that they are disciples of Caiphaz and Herod and stop disguising Judaism with the name of Christianity...<sup>12</sup>

Although anti-Judaism never made it into any of the Christian creeds, the main themes of the teaching of contempt re-appear regularly in the controversies surrounding the articulation of Christian faith, particularly in preaching the Gospels. In this way Christian congregations were fed a steady diet of anti-Judaism, week after week, year after year. Such preaching can still be heard today.<sup>13</sup>

## The Medieval Period

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<sup>12</sup> Cited in Boys, p. 168, n. 29

<sup>13</sup> See Ronald J. Allen & Clark M. Williamson, *Preaching the Gospels Without Blaming the Jews, a Lectionary Commentary*. Westminster 2005

“Christendom,” the world of medieval Europe, was a society whose every aspect was permeated by Christian faith and culture. In such a world Jews had no integral place; they were inevitably the outsiders. Their fortunes varied, depending on place and circumstance. At times they found friends and protectors among secular rulers, at whose courts they enjoyed influential positions and performed useful services. Bishops and popes also often protected them. The First Crusade, however, marked the beginning of persecutions on a scale not hitherto seen.

The year 1096 remains one of the most tragic dates in all of Jewish history. On their way to the holy land the crusaders passed through France and Germany. With the cry “God wills it” on their lips, they suddenly turned on “the infidels at home.” In France (at Rouen) and Germany (at Worms and Mainz) they slaughtered thousands of Jews, in effect exterminating entire Jewish communities. The massacres were largely the work of mobs, whose rage at these “infidels” neither bishops nor popes were able to contain. While some saints (e.g., Bernard of Clairvaux) tried to stop the slaughter, others supported it: Jews should be punished because “they defile Christ and Christianity and fleece Christians”; the Crusade should be financed with their money; Jews should not be killed, “but like Cain, the fratricide, they should be made to suffer fearful torments and be prepared for an existence worse than death”:<sup>14</sup> There is irony in the fact that medieval church law made discrimination against Jews legal and emphasized their inferiority, while at the same time forbidding their murder. Jews must be kept alive until the end of time, as testimony to and reminder of human sinfulness – the theory of the “witness people” that goes back to St. Augustine.

The era of the Crusades coincided with far-reaching social and economic changes that profoundly affected the Jews’ fortunes. The growth of commerce required large sums of money. Christians were forbidden to engage in usury, yet capital was needed. Jews were the logical solution and were forced into money lending. They now found themselves caught in a vice: protected by the prince as long as he needed their services, abandoned by him when the anger of creditors exploded against them. The Jew as money-lender was hated, yet had become an economic necessity.

Although the underlying factors for the persecution of Jews during the Middle Ages were economic, the reasons articulated were primarily religious. Thus Pope Innocent III, one of the most powerful of all medieval popes, spoke of the perpetual servitude of Jews to Christians because God had rejected the Jewish people. “Their sufferings and homelessness are the just deserts for their crimes.” A case could be made that the teaching of contempt, with origins in the second century C.E., bore its full “fruit” only now, centuries later.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century a new accusation was added to traditional anti-Judaism, one that was to prove deadly to Jews again and again: the charge of blood libel. Appearing for the first time in 1141 in Norwich, England, it was to leave a bloody trail through the ensuing centuries. The local veneration of many of the supposed child victims assured the longevity of this accusation, which is still found in 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia. About the same time the accusation of the desecration of the host also made its appearance and frequently led to massacres. Although several emperors and popes exonerated Jews on both counts, they had no influence on popular belief.

Things went from bad to worse during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. When the Black Death (bubonic plague) swept across Europe, a desperate populace looked for a rational explanation. Jews provided the answer; they were the natural scapegoats. The rumor that they had poisoned wells with a secret drug first surfaced in southern France. From there it swept like wildfire into northern Spain, Switzerland, Bavaria, Austria and eastern Germany, Belgium and Poland.

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<sup>14</sup> Peter the Venerable, quoted in Flannery, p. 94

Unbeliever and usurer; ritual murderer and poisoner of wells, “stripped of all human features, the Jew assumed a satanic guise.”<sup>15</sup>

The traditional theological view of Jews and Judaism at this time is vividly portrayed in two famous statues, which to this day stand on either side of the main portal of the cathedral of Strasbourg. Two tall, stately women face each other. The one -- majestic, erect and queenly -- represents the church; the other -- blindfolded and with bowed head -- symbolizes the synagogue.<sup>16</sup>

### Medieval Spain

While the situation of Jews in Europe was becoming increasingly precarious, the Iberian peninsula, to the south, presented a very different scene. Cut off from the rest of Europe by high mountains, a rich intermingling of Moorish, Christian and Jewish cultures had been able to develop under Muslim rule – “what some remember as a kind of paradise.”<sup>17</sup> Spanish historians refer to this era as *convivencia* (“living together”), a far richer term than the English “co-existence.” Moors, Jews and Christians influenced each other, learned from each other, enriched each other. Jews were taught Arabic by Muslim scholars and in turn taught Christians. Jews became conversant not only with the Koran, but with Plato and Aristotle, who had been rescued from oblivion by Islam during Europe’s “Dark Ages.” All three religions were undergoing a profound spiritual and material renaissance. Christians and Jews held positions of power and influence under Islamic regimes. In Cordoba Christians were welcome to worship in the Great Mosque – which they did.

Cordoba became emblematic of the rich intermingling of the three faiths. It was the birthplace of Ibn Rashid, known in the west as Averroes (1126-98), whose works of Arabic philosophy were mediated to the west by Jewish linguists. The collaboration of Jews, Christians, and Muslims was a natural outcome of *convivencia*. Cordoba was also the city of Maimonides, the greatest of all Jewish philosophers. According to historian Norman Roth, had Maimonides lived in Germany or France he would have become just another obscure rabbi writing commentaries on the Talmud, no matter how great his genius. Because he was nurtured by “the richest diversity of influences in the world, he became the greatest genius ever produced by the Jewish people.”<sup>18</sup>

Although *convivencia* was not to last, it represents a moment full of promise of what might have been. Its mere existence shows that the history of Jewish-Christian relations is not monolithic, that it was not fated to lead inexorably to disaster. That Jews, Christians and Muslims can live together in mutual respect and friendship is no idle dream; for some centuries they did just that.

They did so, however, in an Islamic, not a Christian, world. And even there, *convivencia* was to give way to *reconquista* (“re-conquest”) in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, which restored Christian rule to Spain for the first time since the Islamic conquest of that part of the world in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. Yet for a short time it still survived in Castile, now under Christian rule. Ferdinand III, king of Castile from 1217-1252, called himself “King of the three religions.” Castile’s capital of Toledo was called the Jerusalem of Spain, and Jews participated actively in its life. Alfonso X, known

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<sup>15</sup> Flannery, p. 101

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Mary Boys, *Has God Only One Blessing?* for a new version of these ancient symbols.

<sup>17</sup> James Carroll, *Constantine’s Sword*, p.323

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in James Carroll, p. 323

as The Wise, surrounded himself with Jewish scholars and scientists. When he buried his father, he ordered the tombstone to be inscribed with tributes in Hebrew, Arabic, Castilian, and Latin.

In 1145 a stricter, more militant Muslim sect invaded Spain from Africa, and *convivencia* began to break up. Tolerance toward both Jews and Christians began to decline. In 1159 Maimonides fled with his family from Cordoba to Egypt, where he became famous as the Sultan's physician. Soon after, the crusading spirit of northern Europe invaded Spain, along with the hope of bringing all of Iberia back under Christian control. This goal was achieved in 1212, when Christian armies under Alfonso VII decisively defeated the Almohad rulers of Spain.

With Christian rule the old anti-Judaism reappeared. In Aragon, under the influence of the newly founded Friars (Dominicans and Franciscans), all-out efforts were made to convert Jews. They were forced to attend Christian sermons, and to participate in theological debates where the cards were *a priori* stacked against them and where the outcome was never in doubt. Jewish refusal to convert was now interpreted in a novel way, the ancient deicide charge taking on a new form: by refusing to convert, Jews were accused of crucifying Christ anew. Having murdered him once, it was said, they continued to murder him daily by their refusal to become Christians. The accusations of ritual murder and desecration of the host, already widespread in northern Europe, now reached Spain.

When this theological anti-Judaism coincided with a terrible natural catastrophe, the results can barely be imagined. The Plague, or Black Death, swept across Europe, claiming 25 million victims between 1348 and 1351. As we have already seen, Jews were made the scapegoats and accused of having poisoned wells throughout Europe. Pope Clement VI (at Avignon) denounced the accusation as blatantly false, condemned violence against Jews, and ordered bishops to protect them. Other popes, Martin V and Sixtus VI, were to do likewise. But they were unable to stem popular rage and violence. As Rosemary Ruether points out, "the mob merely acted out, in practice, a hatred which the Church taught in theory."<sup>19</sup>

The end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century was particularly tragic for Spanish Jews. In Seville a preacher named Ferrant Martinez preached such vicious anti-Jewish sermons that they led to a massacre in 1391. Pogroms soon spread to other Spanish cities. Faced with the choice of "convert or die," for the first time in their history large numbers of Jews chose baptism. Called *conversos* (or "new Christians" or *Marranos*), they formed a new class that was to subsist in Spain and Portugal into our own time. In some cases conversions were authentic; more often they were a choice for survival. (Some of Spain's most celebrated saints – e.g. Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross – were descendants of *conversos*.) Many *conversos* continued to practice their Judaism in secret, which made them heretics in the eyes of the church and, if discovered, victims of the Inquisition.

The existence of these *Marranos* led to the birth of racism within the church. In 1547 the archbishop of Toledo issued a statute which forbade *Marranos*, or their descendants, to hold office in the church, because of "impure blood." This statute of *Limpieza da Sangre* or "purity of blood," was opposed by Pope Nicholas V, but re-instated by Paul IV. Even religious orders – the Jesuits among them – succumbed to what can only be called a "paranoia": fear of the taint of Jewish blood. Not until 1945 did the Jesuits drop their requirement that new recruits must be free of Jewish blood. The distinction we had made earlier, between religious anti-Judaism and racist antisemitism, has become moot in the case of Spanish racism within the church itself.

A century after the Seville massacre, in 1492, under "their Catholic Majesties" Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, Jews were expelled from Spain. Expulsion was nothing new in

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<sup>19</sup> Ruether, *Faith and Fratricide*, p. 206

Jewish experience: Jews had been expelled earlier from Germany, England, France, and Austria. But these expulsions had involved relatively small groups and were sometimes revoked not long after. The 1492 expulsion from Spain included tens of thousands and was not rescinded until the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Again many Jews converted, thus adding to the *conversos* population. Yet more than 150,000 left their native land. Many settled in the Middle East, in lands under Muslim control; some went to the Netherlands, others to central Europe and the papal territories. The expulsion from Spain is ranked by many Jewish historians as one of four major calamities in all of Jewish history (the other three being the Babylonian Exile in 586 BCE, the destruction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple in 70 CE, and the Shoah). The remarkable era of the Jews in Spain had come to a tragic and definitive end.

### The Reformation

The Reformation is frequently considered the beginning of modern Europe. It broke the religious monopoly in the West of the Church of Rome, thus effectively putting an end to medieval Christendom. It gave birth to other churches and theologies, and so to the beginnings of religious pluralism. No longer was there one single Christianity in the West; for the first time Christians could see that society and the Church were not identical. Social changes took place that made it somewhat easier for Jews to live among what remained still, however, a Christian majority.

All this seemed to offer new hope to Jews, promising greater religious freedom, and an end to persecution and discrimination. Yet, as far as the religious views of Jews on the part of Christians were concerned, the Reformation represents continuity with, rather than a break from, the medieval world. While the horrors of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries had abated, and large-scale expulsions, such as that of 1492, had come to an end, the traditional image of Jews as obdurate and rejected by God continued to prevail. In the verbal warfare between Protestants and Catholics, and among some of the Reformers themselves, no accusation was considered more damning than that of “Judaizer.”

This applies especially to the initial stage of the Reformation, which is dominated by the powerful figure of **Martin Luther**.<sup>20</sup> Theologian and biblical scholar, Luther’s love of the “Old Testament” might have provided an opening toward a more sympathetic understanding of Judaism. Instead, the antithesis of Law and Gospel so fundamental to his theology brought with it the antithesis between Judaism and Christianity: Judaism stood for the religion of law and legalism, Christianity for gospel and grace. (Luther considered the Epistle of James, the most Jewish of the books of the New Testament, “a right strawy epistle,” not worthy of inclusion in the Christian scriptures.)

Already in Luther’s earliest writings, his lectures on the Psalms (1514-15), we find many of the familiar themes we encountered in early and medieval Christian anti-Judaism: God has rejected the Jewish people and their covenant; their place has been taken by Christianity; they remain obdurate in their refusal to recognize Christ, hence cursed by God. Luther’s exclusively Christological interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures robs them of any intrinsic value; their sole importance lies in their pointing to Christ.

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<sup>20</sup> See Heiko A. Oberman, *The Roots of Antisemitism in the Age of Renaissance and Reformation*. Fortress Press 1984.

Luther's 1523 tract, *That Jesus was born a Jew*, is often cited as evidence that the young Luther was well disposed toward Jews, in contrast to Luther in his old age. In this work Luther chastises his fellow Christians for their brutal and inhumane treatment of Jews. How could Jews be expected to convert to Christianity, when their only image and experience of it was one of inhumanity and brutality? "They have dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs, and not human beings." He calls on Christians to treat Jews with kindness and brotherly love.

It is clear that Luther's motive for urging such a change in behavior is his hope that Jews will be drawn to Christianity and will convert. Luther was no racist. He was ready throughout his life to welcome Jews who were willing to convert to Christianity. But unbaptized Jews – Jews as Jews – were for him part of that "Satanic enemy" against whom he fought all his life: the Church of Rome, Jews, false Christians, and Muslims. Indeed, Jews embodied all other evils. Despite their powerlessness throughout Europe, Jews were for Luther the evil lords of the world.

Luther's theology of Judaism not only reiterated and reinforced the ancient themes of Christian anti-Judaism but had far-reaching negative consequences. Hitler was to make good use of some of Luther's later writings, especially the 1543 tract, *Against the Jews and their Lies*. The vitriolic language of this work has rarely been surpassed, nor have the measures Luther advocates in it. They include the following:

- Burn down their synagogues and their schools
- Destroy their homes, force them to live in barns
- Take from them their religious writings, including the Talmud
- Forbid rabbis to teach
- Deny them safe conduct when traveling
- Forbid them to lend at interest
- Force able-bodied men to become manual laborers

Luther was born on November 10, 1483. Four hundred and fifty-five years later, the Lutheran bishop of Thuringia, Martin Sasse, exulted, "On November 10, 1938, on Luther's birthday, the synagogues are burning in Germany". The bishop was referring to *Kristallnacht*. His joy was expressed in the foreword to his collection of Luther's anti-Jewish writings, which the bishop was publishing in the hope that the German people would take to heart the words, as he put it, of the greatest anti-Semite of his time, the warner of his people against the Jews.<sup>21</sup> At the end of World War II, when Julius Streicher, editor of *Der Stürmer*, the vicious anti-Jewish paper published throughout the Nazi era, was tried at Nuremberg for his crimes against Jews, he said in his defense that, if he stood accused of such charges, Martin Luther should stand beside him.

When we come to **John Calvin**, the major figure of the second stage of the Reformation, the situation is vastly different. Like Luther, Calvin loved the Hebrew Scriptures, but differed sharply in his approach to them. Unlike Luther, he was educated from his youth in Renaissance circles. His extraordinary command of Hebrew (Luther also knew Hebrew) – it became his third language, after French and Latin – was at least partly due to his intense and life-long study of the great medieval Jewish exegetes, whom he considered his "authentic language teachers." (He urged Christian scholars to take language lessons from Jews – "who but Jews can teach the idiom of the Hebrew language?"). This unusually deep familiarity with Hebrew enabled Calvin to understand the Hebrew Scriptures from within, as it were, in the manner in which Jews

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<sup>21</sup> Quoted by Daniel Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners*, in Carroll, p. 428

understood them. For the first time in Christian history, the “Old” Testament is “old” no longer. Rather, it is “the original testament in which the eternal and lasting covenant is proclaimed to the people of Israel for all time.”<sup>22</sup> The distinguished German biblical scholar, Hans-Joachim Kraus, writes that Calvin stands out like “a solitary rock” in the history of Christian interpretation of Judaism. The Hebrew Scriptures are the enduring Word of God, first given to the Jewish people who were, and remain, God’s first-chosen.

To give but one example, let us cite Calvin’s interpretation of Jeremiah 31:31 (the new covenant). Throughout Christian history this text had been seen as proof that God had made a new covenant with the church, which cancelled the old covenant with Israel. Calvin sees in this text renewal, not revocation: renewal of the covenant God made with Abraham and his descendants.<sup>23</sup> Christians are added to, inserted into, this original people of God (cf. Romans 11).

Ever since the Church Fathers, the “Old Testament” had been considered the key to the New (“the OT bore the New in its loins” – Origen). Its relation to the Christian scriptures was that of shadow to light, of promise to fulfillment, and – in Luther and many of his contemporaries – of law to gospel. Calvin does away with this opposition. The Hebrew Scriptures are the original, the primary revelation of God to his people, God’s free gift, a covenant of grace. Hence, the Torah remains the way of life, also for Christians, today and for all time, within the context of justification by grace alone.

This undercuts one of the main themes of the teaching of contempt: supersessionism (cf. p. 3f). God has not rejected his people; the Jews remain God’s people; there is only one people of God. This means that the harsh threats and prophetic critique of Israel in the scriptures are directed to Christians as much as to Jews. There is no cleavage for Calvin between “us and them,” a distinction so prominent in Christian theology, beginning with early interpretations of the gospels.

While we find echoes of the traditional anti-Judaism in Calvin – e.g., he castigates Jews for their stubbornness in not accepting Christ as Messiah – these are far outweighed by his revolutionary interpretation of scripture, which was to impact history in the centuries to come. Regions where Calvinism predominates seem to have been more hospitable to Jews than other Christian countries. Two examples come to mind. One is the Netherlands, which became a haven for Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal, and which has been relatively free of antisemitism. It was the first country to grant Jews citizenship.

The other is the French mountain village of Le Chambon sur Lignon. The Calvinists of France, known as Huguenots, suffered long and severe persecution for their faith at the hands of the Catholic majority. The experience of suffering gave them an innate sympathy for the Jews persecuted by the Nazis. Le Chambon, with its predominantly Calvinist population, and under the dynamic leadership of its pastor, Andre Trocmé, became a city of refuge for some 5000 Jews during the Nazi occupation of France.<sup>24</sup>

Calvin’s own experience of persecution also added to his sympathy for the Jewish people and to his understanding of their scriptures. He and his followers suffered severe persecution from 1525-1535. In speaking of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt, Calvin writes that God “accompanied

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<sup>22</sup> Heiko A. Oberman, *Calvin Studies VI*, p. 3

<sup>23</sup> Oberman, *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> See the beautiful film on Le Chambon by Pierre Sauvage, “Weapons of the Spirit,” and the book by Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*. Harper. 1994

the children of Israel night and day on their flight, present among them as a fugitive himself.”<sup>25</sup> God as fugitive is reminiscent of the ancient Jewish mystical belief that the Shekhinah (symbol of God) accompanies the people whenever they go into exile.

We can only speculate what suffering, culminating in the Shoah, Jews might have been spared if Calvin’s theology of Judaism had become more widespread and deeply rooted throughout western Christianity. His approach to the scriptures foreshadows themes that we find in the radical reappraisal by post-Shoah Christianity of its attitude toward Judaism. Oberman calls Calvin “the only sixteenth-century Christian interpreter of the Hebrew scriptures who is still relevant as a resource for modern textual studies.”<sup>26</sup>

### From the Reformation to the Shoah

Although the Reformation and the Enlightenment spelled the end of medieval Christendom, Christianity remained a potent force in Europe. This was true especially of the Church of Rome. Increasingly under attack by liberal political and social forces and, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, faced with the loss of papal territories, the church held on to what power it still had. One of the last vestiges of its power was the Roman ghetto.

The Roman ghetto had been established in 1555 by Pope Paul IV, by a special papal “bull” (papal decree) that imposed severe restrictions on every aspect of Jewish life. The cramped conditions inside the ghetto led to disease and poverty. Periodically abolished and rebuilt by successive popes, the ghetto was still in existence in 1870 under Pope Pius IX. More than a hundred years later Cardinal Edward Cassidy, head of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with Jews, said that “the ghetto, which came into being in 1555 with papal bull, became in Nazi Germany the antechamber of extermination.”<sup>27</sup>

While Jews enjoyed a new freedom in much of Western Europe, in Rome and the papal states they remained subject to the pope. This is clearly seen in the Mortara Affair – the kidnapping of a Jewish boy, Edgardo Mortara, who had been secretly baptized by a Catholic maid. In 1858 the boy was snatched from his home in Bologna (at that time part of the papal states) and taken to Rome, where he was put under personal protection of Pius IX. Neither his family’s desperate efforts, nor widespread outrage and protest throughout much of Europe, and even the U.S., succeeded in restoring Edgardo to his family and people. He ended his life as a Catholic priest.<sup>28</sup>

While this event underscores the value which the Roman church gave to baptism, it also proves that by this time the church no longer embraced the “purity of blood” policy it had adhered to in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Once baptized, a Jew now was considered a full member of the church. This is a welcome sign of the rejection of biological racism within the church. It led, however, to a tragic phenomenon under Hitler: the church’s discrimination between baptized

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<sup>25</sup> Oberman, Initia Calvini: *The matrix of Calvin’s Reformation*, p. 142. I am indebted for these sources to Dr. Jane Douglass of Pilgrim Place, Claremont, California.

<sup>26</sup> Oberman, *Calvin Studies VI*, p. 3

<sup>27</sup> Comment made at a Jewish-Christian meeting of Catholic and Jewish leaders in Chicago, March 20, 1999; quoted in Carroll, p. 376. The author of this paper was present at the meeting.

<sup>28</sup> See David Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara*

and non-baptized Jews. During the Shoah the Vatican regularly interceded on behalf of baptized Jews, whom it considered its “children,” while it was largely indifferent to other Jews. Jews as Jews were outside the pale of its concern. We have not yet, however, arrived at the Shoah.

Jewish emancipation was finally achieved as a result of the French Revolution; Jews were granted full citizenship rights. In the nineteenth century Jews were able for the first time to participate fully in modern western society. They embraced the new opportunities now open to them with enthusiasm – e.g., entrance into universities and professions. At the same time, the new freedom gave rise to tensions within the Jewish community which it had not previously experienced. Some Jews now saw assimilation, and even baptism, as “the entrance ticket to society” (Heinrich Heine). Others believed that Judaism had the capacity and vitality to adapt to modern life. Thus was born, in Germany, the Reform movement within Judaism.

Yet there were signs – besides the Mortara Affair – that Christian anti-Judaism was alive and well. Many clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, still saw Jews as alien, linked to anti-clerical and socialist “enemies” of the church. In France, the land that had liberated Jews from the ghetto and that had been the first to grant them full citizenship, reactionary movements against liberalism and secularism were led by conservative Catholics who also, for the most part, were profoundly antisemitic. Eduard Drumont, who has been called the “evil genius of French antisemitism” (Flannery) in 1866 published *La France Juive*, in which he blamed the Jews for all the evils that had befallen France since the rise of modernity. This is the conclusion of his book:

At the end of this book of history, what do you see? I see one face and it is the only face I want to show you: the face of Christ, insulted, covered with disgrace, lacerated by thorns, crucified. Nothing has changed in the eighteen hundred years. It is the same lie, the same hatred, the same people.<sup>29</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian anti-Judaism found a new ally in the racial myth. Racial antisemitism now became widely accepted and respectable. In France Count Arthur de Gobineau’s *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races* warned against “crossbreeding.” Houston Stewart Chamberlain’s *Foundation of the Nineteenth Century* quickly became the bible for antisemites. A naturalized German citizen of English background, Chamberlain stressed the superiority of the “Teutonic race,” and the consequent inferiority of Jews. The word *antisemitism* appears for the first time in 1879 in Germany in the writings of Wilhelm Marr, a German antisemitic journalist.

It was not in Germany, however, but in France, that the most virulent and infamous explosion of antisemitism occurred. The Dreyfus Affair bitterly divided France and riveted the world for twelve years.<sup>30</sup> Late in 1894 Captain Alfred Dreyfus, the only Jew on the French general staff, was accused of spying for the Germans (the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, in which France had been defeated, was still fresh in people’s memory). Dreyfus was tried behind closed doors, found guilty, and sentenced for life to Devil’s Island, France’s worst penal colony. The only evidence against him was a letter supposedly in his handwriting, which was eventually proven to

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Carroll, p. 459

<sup>30</sup> For an extensive account see Jean-Denis Bredin, *The Affair: The Case of Alfred Dreyfus*, George Braziller 1986

be a forgery. Amid passionate controversy for and against Dreyfus his trial was re-opened; in 1899 Dreyfus was found completely innocent of all charges against him, and pardoned. Throughout the “Affair” antisemitism and hatred of Dreyfus were fueled by conservative Roman Catholics, although individuals like Charles Péguy passionately defended him.

Priests throughout France attended antisemitic congresses, gave antisemitic sermons, inflamed Catholic congregations, and invoked the usual stereotypes: the Jew as revolutionary, money lender, traitor, killer of Christ, ritual murderer. The Catholic hierarchy remained silent. This explosion of hatred towards Jews spelled the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century hopes for Jewish emancipation – although few could have foreseen this at the time. One who did was a Viennese journalist, a Jew by the name of Theodor Herzl. He had been present at the first Dreyfus trial and became convinced that Jews would never be safe except in their own homeland. Thus was born modern Zionism as a political movement.

### The Shoah

Whether the Dreyfus Affair is seen as prelude to what was to come one generation later (Hannah Arendt), or as the first act of the Shoah (James Carroll), nothing had prepared the Jewish people – either in recent history or in the past 1800 years – for the catastrophe. No statistics can even remotely convey the horror of the genocide that murdered one third of the world’s Jews, for no other reason than that they were Jews. Millions of other victims were also murdered by the Nazis: those branded racially inferior, e.g., Roma (Gypsies) and Poles – the disabled – the politically undesirable (homosexuals, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Communists). Only Jews were targeted for genocide as a people, in order to make the world *judenrein* (free of Jews). In the words of Elie Wiesel, “Not every victim was a Jew, but every Jew was a victim.” For those of us who were not there, only the testimony of those who experienced the Shoah – whether or not they survived – can begin to convey something of the horror. We cite here one paragraph from Wiesel’s memoir of his time in Auschwitz as a teenager:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night. . . . Never shall I forget that smoke. Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. . . . Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God himself. Never.<sup>31</sup>

The overwhelming evil of the Shoah forced the churches at long last to confront the role which their distorted teaching about Jews and Judaism – the teaching of contempt – had played in preparing the soil for Hitler’s genocide. Much of the rest of this paper will deal with the results of their soul searching and repentance. Before we come to this hopeful chapter, however, we need briefly to look at the record of the churches during the Shoah itself.

### The Churches and the Shoah<sup>32</sup>

“Christianity was not a sufficient condition for the Holocaust, nevertheless it was a necessary condition” for it, writes the Holocaust scholar John Roth. We shall cite three examples that illustrate Roth’s point:

-- In 1941 Archbishop Konrad Gröber of Freiburg (Germany) issued a pastoral letter in which he blamed Jews for the death of Christ. He added, “The self-imposed curse of the

<sup>31</sup> Elie Wiesel, *Night*, New York, Bantam Books, 1982, p.32. First published in English in 1960 by Hill and Wong.

<sup>32</sup> See the chapter by Eva Fleischner, “The Shoah and Jewish-Christian Relations,” in *Seeing Judaism Anew*, Mary C. Boys, ed., Sheed & Ward 2005, pp. 3-14

Jews, ‘His blood be upon us and upon our children’ (Matt. 27:25) “has come terribly true in our time.”<sup>33</sup>

-- Also in 1941, Marshal Pétain, head of Vichy government in France, asked Léon Bérard, Vichy’s ambassador to the Vatican, to find out the Vatican reaction to the anti-Jewish laws the Vichy regime had enacted. Bérard reported that he had not heard any misgivings in Rome concerning the persecution of Jews. “In principle, there is nothing in these measures which the Holy See finds necessary to criticize.”<sup>34</sup>

-- In 1942 Rabbi Michael Dov-Ber Weissmandel (of Slovakia) went to Archbishop Kamerko to plead for his intercession on behalf of Slovakian Jews, who were about to be deported. The rabbi did not know as yet about the gas chambers, but he stressed the dangers of starvation and disease to which the victims would be exposed. The Archbishop of Nitra replied: “It is not just a matter of deportation. You will not die there of hunger and disease. They will slaughter all of you, old and young alike, women and children, at once – it is the punishment that you deserve for the death of our Lord and Redeemer, Jesus Christ – you have only one solution. Come over to our religion and I will work to annul this decree.”<sup>35</sup>

The record of the Protestant Church of Germany is no better. The majority of German Protestant Christians (known as “German Christians” under Hitler) supported Hitler, who appointed Bishop Ludwig Muller as their head. As early as 1935, Müller said that Christianity did not grow out of Judaism: “There is no bond between them, rather, the sharpest opposition.” Even the “Confessing Church,” comprised of Christians who courageously and unambiguously opposed Hitler, did not mention Jews in its statement of opposition to Nazism, the Barmen Confession of 1934.

Before leaving this chapter we need to mention the rescuers. While Jews were abandoned by the institution of the church and of the government (Denmark and Bulgaria are two shining exceptions to this shameful record), thousands of individuals, Christian and non-Christian, risked their lives to help Jews. The story of the rescuers is perhaps the only ray of light that pierces the almost impenetrable darkness of the Shoah.<sup>36</sup>

Let us now come to the turning point in the 2000-year-old history of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism.

### From the Teaching of Contempt to the Teaching of Respect

On September 10, 2000 there appeared in *The New York Times* a remarkable document. *Dabru Emet* (“To speak the truth”) was the work of four distinguished Jewish scholars and was signed by 275 other scholars. We quote the first paragraph of the introduction, as a summary of what we hope to do in this next part of our paper.

In recent years there has been a dramatic and unprecedented shift in Jewish and Christian relations. Throughout the nearly two millennia of Jewish exile, Christians have tended to characterize Judaism as a failed religion or, at best, a

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<sup>33</sup> Cited in Guenter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany*, , p.294

<sup>34</sup> Cited in Michael Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and Jews*, , p. 201

<sup>35</sup> Cited in Greenberg, “Cloud of Smoke,” in Fleischner, ed., *Auschwitz: Beginning of a New Era?*, pp. 11-12

<sup>36</sup> The literature on the rescuers is today voluminous, and still growing. We cite here only one example, the story of the French village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon already referred to (see p32): Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*, Harper, paper 1994, first published by Random House in 1974

religion that prepared the way for, and is completed in, Christianity. In the decades since the Holocaust, however, Christianity has changed dramatically. An increasing number of official Church bodies, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, have made public statements of their remorse about Christian mistreatment of Jews and Judaism. These statements have declared, furthermore, that Christian teaching and preaching can and must be reformed so that they acknowledge God's enduring covenant with the Jewish people and celebrate the contribution of Judaism to world civilization and to Christian faith itself.

What accounts for the "dramatic change" referred to in *Dabru Emet*? The answer is clear: the Holocaust, or Shoah. On the one hand, everything that has been said thus far about Christian anti-Judaism culminated in the until-then unimaginable horror of the Shoah. At the same time, it was precisely this event, once it was acknowledged by the churches, that led to a radical turning point in Christian teaching about Jews and the relations between the two faith communities.

To say that nineteen centuries of the teaching of contempt culminated in the Shoah is not to say that this teaching was by itself solely responsible for the Holocaust. Had it been, the attempted genocide of the Jewish people could or would have happened centuries earlier. It took a combination of other factors to produce the Shoah: modern racial antisemitism; Versailles and the crushing defeat and humiliation of Germany in World War I which eventually propelled Hitler to power; the sophisticated technology of a modern state; a vast and brilliant propaganda machine, which persuaded millions of people that the Jews were not only responsible for Germany's defeat, but that they were a cancer on society.<sup>37</sup>

Having said this, however, it remains an indisputable fact that Christian anti-Judaism had prepared the soil in which the Shoah could be carried out, with no or only minimal protest from the rest of the western world, including the churches. It was the gradual awareness of this that eventually led to a deep soul-searching, and to the determination to cleanse Christianity of a teaching that had done incalculable harm to Jews, and had disfigured the teaching of Jesus beyond recognition. Certainly, shame and guilt played a major role in the "sea change" we shall now briefly examine. We shall begin with some mainline Protestant churches, and then discuss the changes in the Roman Catholic Church.

### The Protestant Churches

The change did not happen quickly, nor all at once. The deep roots which the teaching of contempt had sunk in the Christian psyche could not be eradicated easily. And it took time for the churches (as well as the rest of the world) to confront the full horror and implications of the Shoah. In the two decades following the end of World War II, the World Council of Churches and several individual churches issued statements that decried antisemitism. Thus the 1948 WCC Assembly of Amsterdam called upon its member churches "to denounce antisemitism as a sin against God and man." But the text reiterated the traditional view that Jews had failed in their mission and reaffirmed Christian responsibility to work for their conversion. The Protestant Evangelical Church of Germany, in statements issued in 1947, 1948 and 1949, also decried antisemitism, but (incomprehensibly!) blamed Jews for the destruction that had come upon them because they had crucified "the Messiah of Israel." Their only hope lay in conversion to Christ. It was a half-hearted beginning at best!

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<sup>37</sup> Cf Richard Rubenstein, *The Cunning of History*. Bobbs Merrill, 1966

One of the earliest and most promising statements was issued in 1947 at Seelisberg in Switzerland, the work of an international conference of Jews and Christians. Its ten points, or “theses,” laid the ground work for efforts that were to flourish two decades later.

It was only in the 1960’s that the churches began to confront fully the implications of their failure during the Shoah. (“Failure” here refers to the churches in general as institutions, not to the often heroic efforts to protect Jews on the part of individual Christians, including some highly placed church officials.) The 1961 New Delhi Assembly of the WCC and the 1967 Bristol Report of its Faith and Order Commission speak of ecumenical dialogue, and of a common study based on the Hebrew Scriptures. During the next three decades, most mainline Protestant denominations in the U.S. issued significant statements. The United Methodist Church in 1972 adopted “Bridge in Hope: Inter-religious Dialogue between Jews and Christians,” which it updated in 1996. This statement gives special emphasis to the enduring covenant of the Jewish people, thus reversing one of the most pernicious elements of the teaching of contempt: that God had rejected his people.

We believe that just as God is steadfastly faithful to the biblical covenant in Jesus Christ, likewise God is steadfastly faithful to the biblical covenant of the Jewish people.... Both Jews and Christians are bound to God in covenant, with no covenantal relationship invalidated by any other.

Statements issued by the Lutheran Church – both the Lutheran World Federation and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America – are noteworthy for their frank repudiation of Luther’s antisemitism. Referring to the anti-Jewish writings in his old age, the Lutheran Church of America declared: “We reject this violent invective, and yet more do we express our deep and abiding sorrow over the tragic effects on subsequent generations....” Its 1998 “Guidelines for Lutheran-Jewish Relations” offer concrete steps for genuine dialogue and mutual understanding.

The Presbyterian Church’s statement, published in 1987, “A Theological Understanding of the Relationship between Christians and Jews,” makes seven “Affirmations,” each of which is followed by a detailed theological explanation aimed at facilitating acceptance by the church’s membership of what is essentially perceived to be a new teaching. The affirmations emphasize that Christians and Jews worship the same God. They include repudiation of supersessionism and affirmation of the ongoing validity of the Jewish covenant, and repentance for the teaching of contempt and its contribution to the Shoah. “Jews and Christians are partners in waiting. Christians see in Christ the redemption not yet fully visible in the world, and Jews await the messianic redemption. Christians and Jews together await the final manifestation of God’s promise of the peaceable kingdom.”<sup>38</sup>

In 2003 the Alliance of Baptists published the following resolutions:

As the Alliance of Baptists, institutionally, and as individual members and churches, we

1. Affirm the teaching of the Christians Scriptures that God has not rejected the community of Israel
2. Renounce interpretations of Scripture which foster religious stereotyping and prejudice against Jews
3. Seek genuine dialogue with the broader Jewish community, a dialogue built on mutual respect
4. Lift our voices quickly and boldly against all expressions of antisemitism
5. Educate ourselves and others on the history of Jewish-Christian relations from the first century

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<sup>38</sup> Affirmation 7

6. Commit ourselves to rigorous consideration of appropriate forms of Christian witness for our time.

### The Second Vatican Council and its Aftermath

The changes in the Roman Catholic Church received their major impetus at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). The French Jewish historian, Jules Isaac, who had lost part of his family at Auschwitz but had survived in hiding with a Catholic couple in the south of France, had met with Pope John XXIII in 1960 and persuaded the Pope to put the church's relationship to Judaism on the Council's agenda. Thanks to the commitment of the Pope and the capable guidance of Cardinal Augustin Bea, head of the Subcommission of the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity, a draft on the Church and Jewish people was prepared for consideration by the Council. It went through many ups and downs, was the object of heated and acrimonious debate by the attending bishops, but was finally passed at the closing session of the Council in October 1965. Known as *Nostra Aetate* "(In Our Time)", the relatively short statement forms part of the larger Council document on the church's relationship to non-Christian religions.

*Nostra Aetate* rejected all forms of antisemitism as sinful; repudiated the accusation of Jewish collective guilt for the death of Jesus, both at the time of Jesus and through the ages; and affirmed God's ongoing love of his people, and the church's unique spiritual bond with Jews. Seen from our perspective of forty years later, *Nostra Aetate* seems rather minimal; even at the time it was promulgated there were many who had hoped for more. One of these was the main architect of NA, Cardinal Bea, who had hoped for a far stronger statement. In his book, *The Church and the Jewish People*, Bea tried to give as positive an interpretation to the final outcome as possible. His presentation makes it clear, however, that it was not only political pressure from the Arab world (Christian and Muslim) that was responsible for the toning down of the original text. "One reason for the defeat of Bea's intentions... was that too many texts from the New Testament were against him. This is the really serious level of Christian antisemitism. Can the church admit to the tinge of anti-Jewish elements in its very Scriptures?"<sup>39</sup>

Nonetheless, *Nostra Aetate* may be considered the magna carta of the Roman church's new approach to its relation with the Jewish people. It gave the green light to further theological and biblical studies, which proliferated in the decades that followed, both from the Vatican and from national bodies of bishops, especially those of France and the U.S. We can refer here only to the most important of these documents, with special emphasis given to those from the Vatican, because of Rome's authority and wide influence. Taken together they have revolutionized Roman Catholic theology concerning Judaism. They affirm the ongoing validity of God's covenant with the Jews, who remain people of God.

Yet already in 1967 Krister Stendahl of Harvard, later Lutheran bishop of Stockholm, had written:

The question must be asked... if the present attempts to purge Christian liturgies, catechism, and hymnals from overt anti-Semitic elements are not only coming too late, but are primarily too timid and totally insufficient. The church is not only responsible for its intentions, which may be honorable, but also for what *actually*

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<sup>39</sup> Krister Stendahl, in "Judaism and Christianity, Romans 2: A Plea for a New Relationship". Reprinted in *Meanings*, Fortress 1984, p 221

happens in the minds of its *actual* members and half-members as they have been and are exposed to its Scriptures and message.<sup>40</sup>

Despite all the progress in the forty years since these lines were written, the question Stendahl asked then is still relevant today: are our reforms still too “timid” and “insufficient”?

The Vatican documents frequently built on statements by national hierarchies; the reverse was also true. The U.S. bishops were the first to publish, in 1967, guidelines for the local implementation of NA. They pointed out the incompatibility of dialogue and proselytism and urged the involvement of Catholic scholars at all levels of the dialogue. In 1974 the Vatican’s newly formed Commission for Religious Relations with Jews issued its own *Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing Nostra Aetate*. These Guidelines are practical in nature, emphasizing the need for educational and liturgical reform.

One important result of this reform was the new and entirely rewritten Good Friday prayer for the Jews. Instead of praying for the conversion “of the faithless Jews” – words that had been used for centuries – the prayer now reads:

Let us pray for the Jewish people, the first to hear the word of God, that they may continue to grow in the love of his Name and in faithfulness to his covenant....

The 1985 *Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis* built heavily on two statements by the French bishops (1973) and the U.S. bishops (1975). It raises important theological issues such as Christian worship and problematic passages in the Second Testament.

The 2001 statement of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, acknowledges the validity and significance for Christians of Jewish readings of the Hebrew Bible.

“We Remember: a Reflection on the Shoah,” issued in 1998 by the Vatican (accompanied by a personal letter from Pope John Paul II) has been the subject of a good deal of controversy, for not going far enough. Nevertheless, it was the first time that the Roman Church acknowledged that its teaching had contributed to the Shoah.

Pope John Paul II did more, during his long reign, to build a new relationship of the Church to Jews than all the popes before him. In addition to his firm support of *Nostra Aetate* and further biblical and theological studies, of statements by the Vatican and national conferences of bishops, and of his recognition of the State of Israel, two “gestures” made by this pope spoke at least as clearly as any written words and have reached a much wider audience. The first was his visit to Rome’s Great Synagogue in 1986 -- the first visit ever to a synagogue by a pope -- where he embraced Rome’s Chief Rabbi as true equal and as “our beloved brother.” The second was his visit to Yad Vashem and the Western Wall in Jerusalem in March 2000. Placing a prayer in the stones of the Wall – an ancient Jewish custom – the Pope begged God’s forgiveness and pledged the Church’s commitment to forging “genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.” *The New York Times* commented on the latter gesture: “It was a searing image that many Israelis said signaled a new era in Jewish-Christian relations.”<sup>41</sup>

Will this “new era” become reality? The documents referred to in the foregoing pages—both Protestant and Roman Catholic – are a sign of extraordinary progress and reason for hope. The highest authorities in many churches have spoken with a new voice. Supersessionism,

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<sup>40</sup> Italics in original, *op cit.*, p 223

<sup>41</sup> *The New York Times*, 3/27/2000

which is so central to the teaching of contempt, is no longer valid; the first Covenant has not been superseded. The challenge the churches still face, however, is how to bring the new teaching to ordinary Christians in the pews. The revision of textbooks, which has been undertaken by several churches, is one step in that direction. Training of clergy in biblical studies and preaching is another, as is reform of texts in Christian worship; much still remains to be done in these areas.

An “Affirmation” published by the United Methodist Church of Claremont, California in 1993 is a rare example of a local congregation that has embraced and clearly articulated every element of the new teaching. The full text follows:

#### AFFIRMATION

The Claremont United Methodist Church publicly states its affirmation that Judaism is a continuing bulwark of the faith, that it has not been superseded by Christianity, that God has not rejected the Jewish people, that the Jewish people have never lost their covenant with God, that salvation is available to Jews as a covenant people, that the Jews as an historic nation are not responsible for, and therefore not to be blamed for, the death of Jesus, and that Jews should not be pressured to convert to Christianity.

Furthermore, we state that anti-Judaism in all forms should be universally condemned. We ask forgiveness for past sins and persecutions against the Jewish people. We pray that old barriers to communication and understanding will be removed and that the relationships of this church with the congregations of the local Jewish community will be enhanced.

(approved by the Administrative Board, 01/19/1993)

#### Jewish – Christian Relations Today

The “dramatic changes” described in this paper raise a question for us: Can we truly speak of dialogue if all the changes have taken place on one side, the Christian side? It is true that, given the tragic history between us, Christians had to make the first move. It is true that Christianity cannot understand itself without knowledge of its Jewish roots. It is true that there has been much interaction in recent years between Jews and Christians, especially in collaboration on social issues. But can we say that Judaism recognizes Christianity as a faith tradition which is important to Judaism theologically, and from which it has something to learn?

Our response to this implied criticism of Judaism is that the last forty years, or one generation, can hardly undo a tradition that is as old as Christianity. Yes, Christianity has taken “dramatic steps.” But given the centuries of suffering Jews have endured at the hands of Christians, is it realistic – do we have the right? – to expect Jews to take us at our word, to trust us so quickly? Especially when antisemitism is on the rise (see below), and when so much work still remains to be done on the Christian side.<sup>42</sup> It may well take generations to build trust on firm foundations. Meanwhile, Christians have every reason to be grateful for *Dabru Emet*, and to show by our actions that we really mean what we (or our documents) say.

We return now to *Dabru Emet* (see p. 21ff). After the initial paragraph cited there, *Dabru Emet* goes on to speak of theological points that unite Jews and Christians (e.g., worship of the same God, seeking authority from the same scriptures), as well as those that differentiate the two

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<sup>42</sup> For a devastating critique of Roman Catholic efforts at reform, see Daniel Goldhagen, *A Moral Reckoning: The Role of the Catholic Church in the Holocaust and its Unfulfilled Duty of Repair*. Knopf 2002

faiths and will continue to do so. Eight brief statements of *Dabru Emet* unequivocally affirm that it is important for Jews *for their own sake as Jews* (italics added) to reflect about Christianity as a vital faith. For the first time in history, a group of Jewish scholars has spoken publicly in these terms. *Dabru Emet* is a ground-breaking document, one more sign that Jewish-Christian dialogue has come of age.

Inspired by *Dabru Emet*, a group of Protestant and Catholic scholars, the Christians' Scholars Group (CSG) issued in 2002 a statement of ten points under the title, *A Sacred Obligation*. This statement eventually led to the publication of a book, *Seeing Judaism Anew: Christianity's Sacred Obligation*<sup>43</sup> which expands on and explores the implications of the earlier statement for Christian faith and practice. We quote from the editor's introduction:

We believe that revising Christian teaching about Judaism and the Jewish people is a central and indispensable obligation of theology in our time. It is essential that Christianity both understand and represent Judaism accurately, not only as a matter of justice for the Jewish people, but also for the integrity of Christian faith, which we cannot proclaim without reference to Judaism...<sup>44</sup>

The essays in this volume build on the work of theologians such as Clark Williamson, who are rethinking Christian theology in light of our new understanding of Judaism, and of the Shoah (see suggested reading at the end of this paper).

Can we speak of a corresponding effort on the Jewish side? Are there Jewish scholars who believe that Judaism can be enriched by a thoughtful, serious study of Christianity? *Opening the Covenant* by Michael Kogan attempts to do precisely that.<sup>45</sup> True dialog, Kogan believes, demands what he calls self-transcendence: I must be willing to let go of my absolutist and exclusivist view that my own faith is the only authentic revelation from God, and open myself to the possibility that other religions are also authentic revelations.

Why should this come as a surprise? After all, every revelation of the divine is of necessity partial and finite, not because God is finite, but because we are. How could the finite ever fully contain or hope to grasp the Infinite? "All of us are finite hearers of the Infinite life of God. We come closer to that Infinite when we realize that we are not alone. Others bear it all with us (Kogan, p. 212). Kogan's work builds on decades of a dialogue that had engaged eminent scholars on both sides. His book enables us to take a further step into the authentic mutuality between Jews and Christians.

### Challenges

So far, we have described much that is hopeful. Can we conclude that the ancient hostility between Christians and Jews is finally laid to rest? For a brief period, the truly revolutionary changes in the decades that followed Vatican II gave rise to this hope. More recent developments, however, point to a revival of antisemitism in general, as well as to a potential resurgence of Christian anti-Judaism. One example of the latter:

In the summer of 2008 two hundred U.S. Catholic bishops voted to delete a reference to the covenant between God and the Jewish people in *The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults*. The sentence to be deleted, pending Vatican approval, is as follows: "Thus the covenant

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<sup>43</sup> *Seeing Judaism Anew: Christianity's Sacred Obligation*, edited by Mary C. Boys. A Sheed & Ward Book, 2005

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. xiv

<sup>45</sup> *Opening the Covenant: a Jewish Theology of Christianity*, by Michael S. Kogan. Oxford, 2008

that God made with the Jewish people through Moses remains eternally valid for them.” It is to be replaced with a text from Romans 9:4-5: “To the Jewish people, whom God first chose to hear His word, belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ.” The reason given for the change is that some bishops feared too many Catholics seemed to misunderstand the sentence, believing that it meant that Jews do not need Jesus to be saved. As one Jewish leader asked, “Why take a very simple sentence and replace it with a very complicated paragraph?”

How are we to interpret the change? Are we to think of Jews as no longer chosen by God? Vatican II and its aftermath represented a giant step away from the centuries-old Teaching of Contempt. Are some bishops trying to turn back the clock?<sup>46</sup>

As to the danger of a revival of antisemitism, events in the middle East are a major factor in the development of a climate hostile to Jewish-Christian relations. In what follows we examine what appear to us the reasons for this.

In the immediate post-Shoah years, antisemitism was taboo. Whether out of a sense of guilt, or genuine horror at what Jews had suffered, there was widespread sympathy for Jews in general and for Holocaust survivors in particular (even though Great Britain refused to admit them to Palestine). The USSR was the first country to cast its vote in the UN in favor of an independent state of Israel, on May 14, 1948. The new state was seen by the West as giving Jews – homeless for 2000 years – a land and home of their own. From the Jewish perspective, Israel was the realization of an age-old dream: “Next year in Jerusalem!” had been prayed at every Seder for centuries.

Zionism as a political movement, born in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and spurred on by the unrelenting efforts of Theodor Herzl, was at first rejected by most western, assimilated Jews, who saw themselves as citizens of their countries of adoption – whether France, England, Germany or Austria. It was also opposed by ultra-orthodox Jews, for whom only the Messiah could usher in the Jews’ return to their ancient homeland.

All this changed dramatically with the Shoah, when it became clear that Jews had nowhere to go. In the words of Chaim Weizmann, “the world seemed to be divided into two parts – those places where Jews could not live, and those where they could not enter.”<sup>47</sup>

Arabs had resisted the founding of the state from the first and declared war on Israel one minute after midnight on May 15, 1948. Amos Oz, the Israeli novelist, remembers how his father—who had seen graffiti in Germany, Russia and the Ukraine: “Jews go home to Palestine!” — years later, as a citizen of Israel, saw new signs: “Jews out of Palestine!” Images of the Shoah, and of centuries of pogroms, lay close to the surface in the memory of every Jew in Israel. Amos Oz tells how he “wanted to be a book, not a man. The house was full of books written by dead men, and I thought a book may survive.” Fear was everywhere, even after the Israeli army, vastly outnumbered by Arabs, won an astounding victory.

The early Zionists saw Israel as “a land without people for a people without a land.” Only the second part of this phrase was correct. Palestinians had been living for centuries in what was now the State of Israel, and they had not been consulted by the U.N. in the founding of the state.

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<sup>46</sup> See the *National Catholic Reporter* of 9/19/08 for an article on this issue, and Eva Fleischner’s letter to the editor in the *National Catholic Reporter* of 10/17/08.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in “The Spirit Level: Amos Oz writes the story of Israel,” *The New Yorker*, November 8, 2004, p. 85. All other quotations from Amos Oz are from the same article.

Israel Kantor, a lawyer and old friend of Amos Oz, is quoted as saying, “The original sin of the Israeli Jews is that they thought too much about land and not enough about people.”<sup>48</sup>

After the 1967 war, the situation changed dramatically once more. David now came to be seen as Goliath; the victims were no longer Jews, but the Palestinians. The Israeli occupation of the lands conquered in the war became permanent, and led to the establishment of hundreds of Jewish settlements on Palestinian land. While the struggle between Israel and Palestine can be seen as the struggle between right and right, the conflict was, and remains, an unequal one. Israel’s army has become the most powerful army in the Middle East and is backed by the most powerful nation on earth. Leaving aside Arab hostility toward Israel, Europe’s sympathy has shifted more and more to the oppressed Palestinians. The desperate conditions of European Jews prior to the founding of the state have been relegated to history.

Israeli violation of Palestinian human rights has led to strong criticism, by many churches as well as by secular voices. The most visible and extreme example of new tensions that have arisen between Israel and the churches is the issue of divestment. In 2004, at its 216<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, the Presbyterian Church USA initiated a process designed to lead to selective, phased divestment from some companies doing business with Israel (special mention was made of Caterpillar, Inc. which builds the bulldozers used to demolish Palestinian homes.) Other Protestant churches – the WCC, NCC, and Anglican World Communion, announced that they would study the matter, and a group of American Jews opposed to Israeli policy also recommended divestment. But it was the Presbyterian action that drew the most fire. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and Alan Dershowitz of Harvard Law School, accused the church of bigotry and antisemitism, of fostering terrorism, and of equating Israel with South Africa under apartheid. Church authorities have been at pains to contain the damage. They pointed out that the study is to be phased and selective, with no decision to be made before 2006. They have reiterated their historic support for Israel’s secure existence and their repudiation of Christian anti-Judaism as expressed in the church’s “Theological Statement” of 1987 (cf. p. 38). They have renewed their efforts for continuing dialogue and met with a group of Jewish leaders in New York in September 2004. “No one’s mind was changed,” but concerns were aired and suggestions made for future conversations.<sup>49</sup> Although the controversy shows no signs of abating, both sides at least continue talking.

There are those – Christians as well as Jews – who believe that the criticism of Israel by some mainline churches is part of a deeper, theological problem. One of these is Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford (UK), who emphasizes the fundamental difference in Christian and Jewish self-understanding. For most Christians, religion is the individual’s personal relationship to God, regardless of nationality or ethnic background. For Jews, on the other hand, to be a Jew is to be a member of a particular people. Judaism is inseparable from peoplehood, with a particular people tied to a particular land. In the words of Israeli scholar Geoffrey Wigoder: “The relationship of covenant to land, as of the Jews to Israel, is as much outside the Christian experience as the centrality of Jesus in the mystery of the triune God is outside the Jewish experience.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> In “Spirit Level,” p. 95. See also *Tikkun*, Vol. 20, No. 1, January/February 2005, especially pp. 10ff.

<sup>49</sup> See *Network News*, Fall 2004, pp. 19-21. For the more recent developments (at the time of this writing) see the following: “Divestment: an Exchange,” in *The Christian Century*, February 8, 2005, pp. 30-38 and “The Divestment Debate,” *Tikkun*, March/April 2005, especially the piece by Michael Lerner (pp. 33-45, 38-43).

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Richard Harries, “Israel in Christian Thought,” in James Parkes, *End of an Exile*, third edition, p. 252

In this matter, as with regard to criticism of Israel in general, Israelis and many Diaspora Jews complain of a double standard: other nations who commit far greater human rights violations are not criticized. We suggest several explanations for this higher standard:

--Israel is being judged by western standards, since it is not a third-world nation.

--Far from being a victim, Israel today has come to be the strongest military presence in the Middle East, and is supported by billions of dollars annually from the U.S., its largest foreign-aid package. We believe that our criticism of Israel's occupation is part of our responsibility as progressive Christians, and that it is, at the same time, also a critique of our government's policies in the Middle East.

--Jews throughout biblical history have held themselves to higher moral standards than other peoples. This is still so today in many cases (cf. the Israeli opposition movement, "Peace Now"). Whether consciously or not, we believe that the West has come to judge Israel by the high standards which Jews have set for themselves for thousands of years.

While we understand Israeli fears and support Israel's right to exist and to have secure borders, as progressive Christians we also insist on our right to express criticism where we believe it is called for. Indeed, more than ever today, Israel needs honest criticism from its friends. Many Christians, as well as Jews, are worried that the current Israeli treatment of Palestinians is making those who were oppressed into oppressors. On this complex subject, see the paper "The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Progressive Christian Review," by Progressive Christians Uniting, April 2004.

In this context we express concern about the current alliance between the Israeli government and evangelical Christians. We believe that the all-out and uncritical support for the State of Israel by evangelical Christians conceals, in reality, their hope that the in-gathering of Jews in Israel will facilitate their eventual conversion to Christianity and thereby hasten the final coming of Christ. It is ironic and tragic that Israel, in its search for friends and security, has made an alliance with a group of Christians who, ultimately, desire the end of the Jewish people. Israeli historian Robert Wistrich suggests that many Jews probably take a fairly cynical view: "These guys are nuts, but we want all the voices we can get for Israel, and we can't afford to worry about theological niceties." In his own, more serious words: "From the Jewish point of view, it has not always been easy to balance the advantage of such support against the disadvantage of its linkage with a programme or at least a hope for conversion."<sup>51</sup>

Despite what has been said, it is undeniable that antisemitism is on the rise, especially in some European countries, where synagogues and cemeteries have been defaced and Jews have been attacked personally. This fuels ancient Jewish fears and intensifies Israeli efforts at security.

As one follows the daily news – the Wall encroaching on Palestinian land, suicide bombers, innocent civilians being killed on both sides – the situation at times seems hopeless. Yet there are both Israelis and Palestinians working for a just political solution: guaranteeing the Palestinians' right to a viable state, and at the same time Israel's legitimacy and right to security. Both peoples are exhausted, tired of the killings, more ready perhaps than their leaders to defeat occupation and displacement. The occupation cannot win. Ultimately, Israel's security cannot be achieved through military might, but only through a just peace in which the Palestinian right to a viable state and Israel's right to security and legitimacy are both recognized.

The current political situation is having repercussions for Jewish-Christian relations. Genuine dialogue must include dialogue about Israel/Palestine which, given the Jewish tendency

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<sup>51</sup>Parkes, p. 260

to equate any criticism of Israel with antisemitism, is often difficult or impossible. It is not always easy to distinguish genuine criticism of Israel from antisemitism. Neither theology nor the churches are exempt from history. For the first time in two thousand years, Jews have a land of their own. Along with this come the challenges and temptations of sovereignty and nationalism. Tensions are high, the situation is explosive, and Israel has lost many friends. As long ago as 1967, Krister Stendahl sounded a note of warning as well as of hope. His words seem equally applicable today:

...The present political situation may well unleash a type of Christian attitude that identifies Judaism and Israel with materialism and lack of compassion, devoid of the Christian spirit of love. Even a superficial knowledge of Judaism on its own terms makes it abundantly clear that such is not its nature. And an even more superficial acquaintance with church history suffices to silence such a patronizing attitude. Our hope for Israel should rather be for political wisdom in accordance with the riches of the long and varied tradition of the Jewish faith, a faith rich in compassion, as it always remembers the words, "...for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 22:21).

As we look and work toward a new structure for our common trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – and of Jesus of Nazareth – that trust includes our personal confidence in Judaism as a force for peace and justice.<sup>52</sup>

Whatever the current problems, a return to the often vicious and deadly Christian anti-Judaism of the past is unthinkable. Progress made regarding mutual respect and understanding is solid, with roots deep enough to withstand the current crisis. The Claremont interfaith experience mentioned at the beginning of this paper continues to go forward and to expand, under the leadership of a new and dynamic rabbi. Discussion of the political situation is often difficult, but does not stop the dialogue. To quote Amos Oz once more: "Look at the Europeans. It took them a thousand years to make peace.... I will risk a prophecy: It will not take the Middle East as long to make peace.... And we'll shed less blood."<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

Where are we today?

The church as a whole has repented of its anti-Judaism. It acknowledges the profound aberrations and evil consequences of the teaching of contempt, and rejects this teaching. Instead of seeing itself as superseding the Jewish people, it finds its identity in being grafted on to the original people of God (Romans 11). It seeks new ways of understanding and articulating a Christian faith purified of anti-Jewish elements. A promising beginning has been made, but the process is complex and will take time. While official church documents clearly reject the teaching of contempt today, there is evidence that it persists in the minds of many Christians, often unconsciously. To give one example: In everyday speech the word "Pharisee" is synonymous with "hypocrite." Yet the Pharisees were highly respected and devout religious leaders, and most scholars today believe that Jesus was closer to them in his teaching than to any other Jewish group.

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<sup>52</sup> Stendahl, *Meanings*, p. 229

<sup>53</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 94

Christian liturgy, especially during Holy Week, is an area urgently in need of reform. Much work remains to be done. As progressive Christians we commit ourselves to this on-going and important task. Therefore,

-- We reject supersessionism, the view by which the church has claimed to supersede the Jewish people as people of God. God's covenant with the Jewish people endures forever, because God is faithful (Rom 11:29). "We now live in the new covenant established by and in Jesus Christ, joined in continuity to those who have already been made God's people in the covenant of Sinai..." (The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, *Talking Points on Jewish-Christian Relations*).

-- We reject a narrow focus on personal salvation, available to human beings only through conscious acceptance of Jesus as the one and only savior. Our focus, as progressive Christians, is on personal and social life in the here and now.

-- We reject an uncritical or literal reading of scripture, uninformed by contemporary biblical scholarship, and ignorant of the historical context of the anti-Jewish texts in the Second Testament. Such reading can make the Second Testament into a dangerous book!

Certain aspects of Christian theology that center on the person of Jesus can lead to a negative view of Judaism, for example:

- neglecting Jesus' humanity and emphasizing only his divinity.

The Jesus whom we confess was fully human. Like all human beings he was of his time and place, conditioned by the historical and cultural circumstances in which he lived. He was not only a teacher, but a Jewish teacher.

- seeing Jesus as the Messiah who fulfilled all Jewish expectations.

It is clear that Jesus did not fulfill mainstream Jewish Messianic expectations, which envisioned an earthly restoration of the world as we know it (cf. Micah 4:3-4), and a king along the lines of David. Jesus' first followers shared this Jewish view – "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6) They came to look to the future. For some, this future meant the return of Jesus in the *Parousia* (Second Coming); for others, a universal resurrection. After all, Jesus had taught his disciples to pray for the coming of the *basileia theou*, the divine commonwealth, or realm, in which God's purpose for the world will be fulfilled. We believe that a different view of Jesus, and of redemption, is imperative for the sake of a more authentic Christian faith, and in order to do justice to Judaism. Is it not more accurate to say that the gospel drew gentiles into sharing in Jewish Messianic hope, rather than viewing Jesus as the expected Messiah?

The dominant understanding of redemption in the New Testament is the future transformation of the world, an understanding common to both Jews and Christians. While there are differences in the ways in which both conceive of redemption, the commonalities outweigh the differences between them. As progressive Christians we are committed to social justice. The ancient Jewish concern for the poor and oppressed is a deep bond between us. Speaking of her father's writings, Susannah Heschel quotes Abraham Heschel as saying that, "for the prophets....justice is the tool of God, the presence of God, the means of redemption. Justice is the ultimate expression of God".

Differences between us remain with regard to the Messianic future. These may not, however, be as radical as is often thought. Christians have come to believe that in the death and resurrection of Jesus something unique and unprecedented has already happened: the future is mysteriously present in the now. The church sees itself as living in the "between-time" (St. Augustine), in both the "already" and the "not yet." For Jews,

the Messianic Age is still to come. And yet, God's presence in history, in particular the saving event of the Exodus, are a pledge that God will one day create "a new heaven and a new earth" (Isaiah). Both Jews and Christians await the fullness of redemption.

Christianity began as a Jewish sect. The "parting of the ways," which for so long has led to hostility, fear, contempt, and persecution, is today changing to a climate of trust and becoming a source of mutual enrichment. As the trust between us deepens, we hope it will enable us to voice criticism where it is needed (e.g., of Israeli policy toward Palestinians).

We discover that we have much to learn from each other. The Jewish sense of peoplehood reminds us that, while each of us individually seeks to be a faithful follower of Jesus, fullness of life is possible only as it is universally shared. Salvation is, ultimately, communal: it involves the whole of society and all of creation.

Our emerging dialogue has sometimes been called "a-symmetrical." That is to say Christianity needs Judaism for its self-understanding in a way which Judaism does not need Christianity, Christians have an interest in theological dialogue which Jews do not share. *Dabru Emet*, Michael Kogan's *Opening the Covenant*, and other recent changes in Jewish attitudes toward Christianity indicate that inequality is giving way to partnership. Given the so often tragic history between us, this is not only astonishing, but deserves to be welcomed by Christians with gratitude.

One of the most fruitful evolutions of the last hundred years has been the rediscovery, the re-appropriation, by Jews of Jesus – as one of their own, as a faithful Jew. We recall here Martin Buber's famous words: "From my youth on I saw in Jesus my great brother" (*Two Types of Faith*). Robert Raphael Geis, a German orthodox Jewish theologian, writes: "A Jew can, after 2,000 years, understand Jesus' word and deed, life and death, as a piece of himself."<sup>54</sup> Contemporary Jewish scholarship about Jesus is a gift to Christians as well as to Jews. For who can understand Jesus the Jew better than his own people? Such a deepened understanding of Jesus will also, necessarily, change our understanding of the gospel.

None of this means that we seek to turn back the clock of history. Christianity today is no longer the Jewish sect it once was. Nor is contemporary Judaism the Judaism of the first century. Both traditions have undergone a long historical development. It is precisely in our separateness, our "otherness," that we can learn from and challenge each other. Jews and Christians today live in a world that faces crises of previously unimaginable proportions. As worshipers of the God of Abraham, we hope to be partners – open to God's guidance – in contributing to the healing and redemption of this world which God has created.

### Suggestions for Reflection/Discussion

1. Can we, out of deep faith affirm loyalty to our own religious tradition, yet articulate an honored role for other religions?
2. What constitutes a legitimate Christian witness to Jews? (Keep in mind the continuing validity of God's covenant with the Jewish people, the apostolic nature

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<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Eva Fleischner, *Judaism in German Christian Theology*, p. 128

of the Christian message, and the terrible history of Christian attitudes and behavior toward Jews over the centuries.)

3. In an interview shortly before his death the great Jewish religious thinker, Abraham Joshua Heschel, said: "I would rather go through Auschwitz than be the object of conversion." How do you explain this shocking statement?
4. What does it mean to be a chosen people?
5. In what way(s) is Jesus the promised Messiah for you (for Christians)?
6. What is going well today in Jewish-Christian relations? Where do you see current difficulties and challenges?
7. What does Zionism mean to Jews? To you as Christian?
8. In what ways is John Calvin's theology about Judaism 400 years ahead of his time?

### Some Suggested Reading

Allen, Ronald J. & Williamson, Clark M. *Preaching the Gospels Without the Jews*. A Lectionary Commentary. Westminster, 2005.

Boys, Mary C. *Has God Only One Blessing? Judaism as a source of Christian self-understanding*. Paulist Press 2000, paper.

The author is professor at Union Theological Seminary. Starting with the story of Jacob and Esau, Boys shows how Jews and Christians, for so long rivals for God's love, can become partners.

Boys, ed. *Seeing Judaism Anew: Christianity's Sacred Obligation*. Sheed & Ward 2005, Paper

In 2002 a group of Protestant and Catholic scholars published a ten-point statement, A Sacred Obligation, suggesting ways in which Christianity's attitude toward Judaism needed to be revised. In this volume each member of the group further elaborates on this statement, providing a framework within which Christians can rethink Judaism.

Carroll, James, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews*. Oxford 2001

One of the most comprehensive explorations of the church's nearly 2000-year-old anti-Jewish tradition, covering a vast body of literature. Don't be discouraged by the size of the book (more than 700 pages) – it is brilliantly written, and real page-turner!

Flannery, Edward, *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-three Centuries of anti-Judaism*. 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, Paulist, 1985, paper

The first edition, published in 1964, was the first history of Christian anti-Judaism written by a Roman Catholic priest.

Ruether, Rosemary, *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of anti-Semitism*. Crossroads/Seabury, 1974

A bombshell when it first appeared, this book remains a classic.

Littell, Franklin H. *The Crucifixion of the Jews: The Failure of Christians to understand the Jewish Experience*. Harper & Row 1975



The author is one of the pioneers of Jewish-Christian relations.

Van Buren, Paul, *Discerning the Way*, and *A Christian Theology of the People Israel*, Parts 1 and 2 of *A Theology of the Jewish-Christian Reality*. Seabury 1980 and 1983

Williamson, Clark M. *A Guest in the House of Israel*. Post-Holocaust Church Theology. Westminster 1993, paper.

The author is professor emeritus of Christian Theological Seminary in Indianapolis. “A fresh and challenging portrait of Christian faith stripped of its ancient patina of anti-Judaism ... Essential reading for scholars, pastors, and all serious students of Christian thought.”

### Film and Video

“Weapons of the Spirit,” by Pierre Sauvage. This film tells the inspiring story of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, which became a city of refuge for Jews during the Shoah. Pierre Sauvage was himself saved at Le Chambon as an infant.

“Walking God’s Paths”: A six-session program to stimulate conversation between Christian and Jewish congregations. Short discussion-starting video tapes and a detailed User’s Guide. Produced for the National Council of Synagogues and the Bishops’ Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. Available in VHS or DVD formats, from USCCB Publishing, 3211 Fourth St. NE, Washington, DC 20017 (Tel. 800 – 235 – 8722, Fax: 202 – 253- 5422)