

AN INTRODUCTION TO
JEWISH-CHRISTIAN
RELATIONS

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Antisemitism and the Holocaust

CHAPTER 7

The eighteenth-century European Age of Enlightenment, also called the Age of Reason, marked the beginning of modernity. It challenged the intellectual assumptions of the traditional religious and political role of the Church and religious authority in general. It witnessed not only the emancipation of Jews and the granting of equal rights, but also the denigration of Jews and Judaism, rooted in a new form of political and social thinking, called antisemitism.

Reaction to the Enlightenment was mixed as both Jews and Christians were struggling to come to terms with it, and in both camps there were radicals and conservatives. Some Jews, like Moses Mendelssohn, the Reformers and the Orthodox leader S. K. Hirsch, welcomed its political and intellectual achievements, others, including the Gaon of Vilna (1720–97) feared the potential of the new ideas to undermine Jewish religious tradition. Enlightening Jews to the same hate, conservative Christians such as Pope Pius IX (1846–78) denounced the Enlightenment, condemning freedom of religion and applying the same synagogue of Satan to describe the enemies of the Church. Pius IX's attitude towards Jews is demonstrated by the Mortara Affair: the forced removal in 1858 of six-year-old Edgardo Mortara (1851–1902) from the home of his Jewish parents because he had allegedly been baptised by a Christian servant as a sick infant. Pius, who took a personal interest in Edgardo, was aware of international outrage but was convinced he had acted in the boy's interests.

Mendelssohn, known as the father of the Jewish Enlightenment, (*Haskalah*) was an observant Jew who engaged with Christian thinkers, denounced by his open correspondence (1769–70) with the Zurich theologian Johann Kaspar Lascaris but who maintained the traditional Jewish view of Christianity. He argued that rationality was the criterion by which to assess religious claims, and regarded Christianity as deficient in comparison with Judaism. In *Jewusalem* (1783) he urged tolerance for other religious groups based upon a common humanity, and regarded the

practice of religion as a private affair for the individual and for the community concerned.

On the political front, the Enlightenment led to the Jewish emancipation, that is, to Jews gaining civil rights on a more or less equal footing with other citizens of the countries in which they lived. On the intellectual front, humanist ideas were absorbed by the *Haskalah*, which also drew on earlier Jewish models from the Renaissance. It was assumed that there was one universal truth, attainable by reason, in which all might share, whether Christian or Jewish. Only the truths of reason, for instance in science, mathematics and ethics, were certain, and these were open to all.

France in 1791, the year of the emancipation act, was the birthplace of Jewish emancipation in Europe (although the Constitution of the United States of America was the first to grant Jews equality in 1789). Anti-Jewish laws began to be repealed in the 1780s, and the French Revolution granted Jews citizenship as individuals while depriving them of their group privileges. The emancipation of Jews was promoted alongside the emancipation of women, slaves and other religious minorities (Protestant groups in some countries, Catholics in England). However, the coming of the modern era resulted in political freedom for individual Jews, but not for the Jewish people as a community. So long as Jews identified themselves primarily as individual citizens they were accorded civil rights, but their communal identity was restricted.

The Emperor Napoleon (1769–1821) considered Jews a nation within a nation and decided to create a Jewish communal structure sanctioned by the state. He also converted the Grand Sanhedrin which paved the way for the formation of the consistorial system, making Judaism a recognised religion under government control. There was much debate about whether Jews should be emancipated and a significant contribution was made by Count Clermont-Tonnerre (1773–92) in a speech to the Sanhedrin in December 1789. He argued for an inclusive interpretation of the declaration of rights, but rejected different legal status for Jews. In his view, citizens were citizens as individuals, not as members of a religion; we must refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and accord everything to Jews as individuals (quoted in Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (eds.), *The Jew in the Modern World*, pp. 33–6).

Underlying his words is a tension between religious and national identity, a tension that has existed from the rise of the modern nation state until today and can be illustrated with a brief discussion of the term 'Pole'. This has normally been used, not least among Poles themselves, as an everyday synonym for 'Catholic': it is not applied to Jews (or Protestants, who are

also a small community in Poland). Yet are not Polish Jews, Poles? Is there no real identification of the Jewish community as part of the Polish nation? This tension, demonstrated by the inappropriate term 'Polish-Jewish relations', undermines a sense of one national community, holding Polish Catholics and Jews together, where there exists an overriding common interest shared by the whole community, transcending partisan interests. In this example, which is applicable well beyond the confines of Poland, it is sometimes difficult to acknowledge the common humanity of those who are excluded from our community, who live beyond its boundaries. This difficulty is easily transformed into hatred and can be viewed as a significant (although unappreciated) reason for the lack of opposition among Catholic Poles to outbreaks of antisemitic violence that were commonplace in Poland.

During the period of the Emancipation many expected Jews to assimilate or convert to Christianity, and significant numbers did indeed convert, amongst them the German Jewish poet Heinrich Heine, who abandoned Judaism only to return to it in later life. His famous remark that his baptismal certificate was an 'admission ticket to European culture' indicated something of the pressure under which Jews remained to conform, at least outwardly, to the dominant faith.

Voltaire exemplified the ambivalence of the Enlightenment. He called for religious tolerance and advocated universal human rights but was not free of the very anti-Jewish prejudices that he ridiculed, discussing Jews in ways that suggested they had innate negative qualities. Voltaire has been seen by some scholars as the father of antisemitism, thus associating antisemitism and the Holocaust with the emergence of modernity.

Wilhelm Marr (1839–1904) was the first to use the term 'antisemitism' in 1879 but it would be a mistake to differentiate it completely from its much older sister prejudice, anti-Judaism, which has a theological basis. Marr saw Jews as biologically different to model blue-eyed, fair-haired, white Teutons and asserted that Semites, darker skinned than and inferior to northern European peoples, could not be assimilated to the majority race and were a threat to them.

In France, an upsurge of antisemitism began in the late 1800s, and Jews were blamed for the collapse of the Union Générale, a leading Catholic bank. Although the Jewish community was one of the smallest and most assimilated groups in Europe (perhaps 100,000), Edouard Drumont (1844–1917) in his very popular *La France juive* (1886) argued that Jews had seized power in the Revolution of 1789 and were subverting French tradition and culture.

The Dreyfus Affair epitomised the disdain held for Jews in French society, particularly among Catholic nationalists. In 1894 Captain Albert Dreyfus (1859–1935) was arrested and tried for treason. He was the only Jewish member of the French General Staff, and was blamed when military secrets were passed to the German military attaché in Paris. In 1895, Dreyfus was publicly stripped of his rank before a crowd that shouted 'Death to the Jews!'; he was then sent to Devil's Island. When it was clear that the evidence was fabricated, Dreyfus was tried again in 1899 and found guilty by a military court. There was no chance that they would find him innocent, since that would, by implication, apportion guilt elsewhere and implicate high-ranking officers in the machinations against him. In the event, ten days later, Dreyfus was pardoned by the President of France.

Emile Zola (1840–1902) was convinced of his innocence and in *Le Figaro* in 1897 wrote the famous article, *J'accuse*, attacking antisemitism; further articles warned of the danger of a military dictatorship in alliance with the Catholic Church. French Protestants tended to support Dreyfus and Catholics to oppose him, and Dreyfus became a symbol either of the denial of justice or of the eternal Jewish traitor. The publication of *J'accuse* was followed by antisemitic riots in France, notably in Catholic strongholds. Synagogues were attacked in fifty towns, and Zola was put on trial and fled to England to avoid imprisonment.

The debate about Dreyfus split France. To the French nationalist and religious right, Dreyfus the Jew symbolised all the liberal, alien and de-Christianising pressures on the traditional Christian order in the country. The Catholic Church through its media gave considerable support to the anti-Dreyfus sentiment sweeping France. The Dreyfus Affair had two major impacts: it motivated Theodor Herzl (1860–1904), a Viennese journalist who covered the trial, to write his book *The Jewish State* in 1896, and it also eventually led to the 1905 law separating church and state in France.

Perhaps influenced by Luther, many Protestant churches also shared in the antisemitic outlook on Jews and Judaism at this time and maintained the traditional *Adversus Iudeos* position. Protestants emphasised the importance of the Old Testament (*vela scriptura*) with the aid of polarities such as promise/fulfilment, law/grace, old/new, judgement/love. The history of the Jewish people became viewed as a history of failure: God's 'old' covenant with Israel was broken and the 'new' covenant was made with Christians. This polarity easily led to a selective reading of Scripture, illustrated by the following passage by the Jewish scholar and Liberal

leader Claude Monneore (1858–1938), who criticised the approach of Harry Fosdick (1878–1969) to Scripture:

[illegible][illegible]

Anti-Jewish presuppositions were common among Protestants, including eminent scholars such as Emil Schürer (1844–1910), who insisted that Judaism was doomed to fail because of its particularism. It is also possible to detect an anti-Jewish undertone in the writings of Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918), best known for *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (1883).

and his different Higher Critics, which inquires into the authorship and dates of different books of the Bible; it was dubbed by Solomon Schechter (1847–1903) the 'Higher Antisemitism' because of its claim that the latest strain of the Pentateuch reflected a degeneration of spirituality into a completely legalistic fixation on the details of a sacrificial cult. Any extreme example is Gerhard Kittel (1888–1968), editor of the influential *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, who was also a Nazi. Joining the party (1933) and its Reich Institute for the History of the Jews in Germany (1939), he openly supported Nazi policies against Jews (whom he believed to be morally and racially degenerated), with the possible exception of genocide. 'Authentic Judaism', he wrote, 'bides by the symbol of the stranger wandering restless and homeless on the face of the earth' (*Die Judenfrage*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1935, p. 7). In 1933 the Synod of the American Unitarian Conference (1893–1933) adopted the apocryphal sacred (Article 3), 'we recognize [...] in the Old Testament the apostasy of the Jews from God, and thence their sin. This sin is made manifest throughout the world in the Crucifixion of Jesus. From thenceforth until the present day, the curse of God rests upon this people.'

Anti-Jewish prejudice can also be found in Protestant writings in the decades after the Holocaust. If we turn to the prominent theologian Martin Noth, whose *History of Israel* has become a standard reference for students and academics alike, we find a description of Judaism as dying, "a slow agonising death in the first century. Eventually, Israel ceased to exist and the history of Israel came to an end" (*History of Israel*, London: A & C Black 1960, p. 400). Rudolf Bultmann offers a similar view. He stressed the antithesis between the teaching of Jesus and Rabbinic Judaism, and argued that by the end of the biblical period the Jewish God had become so transcendent and remote as to have been almost purified away. As for the Old Testament, "to the Christian that the Old Testament is no longer revelation as it has been and still is for the Jews, for the person who stands within the Church, the history of Israel is a closed chapter. [...] To us the history of Israel is not a history of revelation." ("The Significance of the Old Testament for the Christian Faith," in *The Old Testament and Christian Faith: A Theological Discussion*, ed. B. W. Anderson, New York: Charles F. & Row 1965, p. 30). In *Theology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1972, pp. 12–15), perhaps his most influential work, Bultmann held to the view that a Jewish people cannot be said to exist with the emergence of Christianity.

In Orthodox Christianity, with its veneration of tradition, the *Adversus Iudeos* tradition remained at the fore of its understanding of Jews and Judaism. Lengthy texts of Holy Week, included in the matins of Good

Friday, remained as anti-Jewish as the patristic and early medieval rhetoric that was employed to denigrate the perfidious Jews.

There were serious outbreaks of antisemitism in Russia throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when no less than half the world's Jewish population was located within the Russian empire. In order to contain them, an extensive 'Pale of Settlement' was established (1793), intended as a home from which Jews might move to other areas only with permission. Pogroms, a Russian word meaning 'devastation' and referring to violent attacks on Jews, regularly took place, the worst being in 1881, 1903 and 1905. While they might be prompted by social and economic factors, they were also coloured by religious ignorance dressed in the garb of zeal.

The most famous, or infamous, conspiracy document to condemn Jews was *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which originated in Russia and appeared in the West in 1917. These purport to be a series of lectures given by an Elder of Zion to people to whom he could frankly and openly reveal the Jewish plot to take over the world by overthrowing its rulers. In 1921, *The Times* correspondent in Istanbul demonstrated that the *Protocols* were based upon *Dinaguer aux Eglises entre Monténégro et Maribor*, a satire by Maurice Joly (1829–78) on the grandiose ambitions of Napoleon III, Emperor of France from 1852 to 1870. All that the authors of the *Protocols* had done was to substitute the Elders of Zion for Napoleon III, and to rearrange, somewhat clumsily, the material to suit their own purpose. The *Protocols* still occasionally come to public attention when they are used by the *Protocols* and Holocaust denial were the main reasons why the proposed commemoration of the antisemitic Bishop Richard Williamson (1940) by Pope Benedict XVI caused such controversy in 2009. The *Protocols* are sometimes portrayed as historically correct in a few Arab countries and in 2002 there was controversy over the broadcast of a TV drama series in Egypt based on the *Protocols*. However, in this case antisemitism is closely bound up with the political conflict involving Israel and the Arab states.

There were church leaders who condemned pogroms and antisemitism but it was not for an Orthodox Christian to welcome Judaism as it stands. Archbishop of Warsaw in 1912 and the most senior of Russian bishops, Antoni Václavski (1846–1912), Metropolitan of St Petersburg, Another bishop, Platon Rozhdavskii (1866–1934), faced a mob in Kiev on his knees while endeavouring to still the pogrom of 1905.

Despite such individual exceptions, in the Age of the Enlightenment Christian anti-Judaism and its modern offspring, antisemitism, not only survived but thrived, gaining popularity both West and East. It could be found not only in theological and political writings but also in literary works, such as the books of English authors C. K. Chesterton (1874–1936, writer of many Christian works and the Father Brown detective stories), John Buchan (1873–1940, thriller writer, among whose works is *The Thirty-Nine Steps*) and Agatha Christie (1890–1976), the Queen of Crime. In her *Three Act Tragedy*, first published in 1935, M. Satterthwaite, an elderly snob yet an acute observer of the human condition, contemplates a young man named Oliver Mander:

A handsome young fellow, twenty-five at a guess. Something, perhaps, a little slack about his good looks. Something else – something – was it foreign? Something unEnglish? ...
 'English? You slippery Shlick!' –
 'Of course, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, 'that's it – not foreign – Jew!' (New edn, London: Pan in association with Collins, 1983, p. 28)

For further examples, including Buchan's frequent allusions to 'Judo-Bolshevism' and Chesterton's description of 'the Jewish problem in Europe' in *The New Jerusalem* (1920) and elsewhere, see Bryan Cheyette's discussion of this topic in *Constructions of 'the Jew' in English Literature and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). The point is not that these authors were particularly violent exponents of antisemitism, or even consciously anti-Jewish; indeed, Buchan had Jewish friends and Chesterton explicitly condemned Hitler's actions; rather, the casual comments illustrate the stereotypes and caricatures widespread in the society of their day.

THE ROAD TO AUSCHWITZ

For Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) and his Nazi party, race and not religion was the dominant motive for destroying Jews. He espoused a conspiracy view of history: Jews were responsible for Germany's defeat in the Great War of 1914–18. He regarded the German Weimar Republic, which rose from the ashes of the Great War and collapsed in the economic crisis of the early 1930s, as a racket run by Jews for their own benefit. Such an interpretation built on a foundation laid by others.

Jews, according to Hitler, were vile, even vermin. Yet if race provided the mythology and motivation for anti-Jewishness, secularised religious

language provided the justification. In *Mein Kampf* (1925), Hitler did not hesitate to use overtly Christian language to appeal to a pious audience. He wrote that the Jews' 'whole existence is an embodied protest against the aesthetics of the Lord's image'. 'Thus he could piously affirm, "I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the word of the Lord."'

Many Christians came to agree with him and many more stood by when the Nazis enacted policies that built on the racist and religious attitudes towards Jews in Europe that helped pave the way to Auschwitz.

In 1933, book burnings began, Jewish scholars, members of the performing arts and others were forced from their posts.

In 1935, liaisons between Jews and others were forbidden, designated as crimes against the state.

In 1938, all Jews were forced to register their property, and Jewish communal bodies were put under the control of the secret police, the Gestapo. On the night of 9–10 November 1938, called *Kristallnacht*, a night of broken glass, over 300 synagogues were torched and many Jewish homes and businesses all over Germany were burned to the ground.

When Poland was occupied in September 1939, Jews were deprived of their belongings and forced into manual labour which Nazis called 'destruction through work'. After Hitler invaded Russia in 1941 Jews there were rounded up, taken to the outskirts of towns, shot and buried in mass graves. Between October and December 1941, perhaps 300,000 died in this way; and in 1942 a further 900,000. Special troops known as *Einsatzgruppen* were employed for this purpose. From 1941, death by gas was carried out and death camps were built at Chelmno, Auschwitz, Majdanek, Sobibor, Treblinka and Bezece. After the Wannsee Conference in January 1942, the Nazis began the systematic deportation of Jews from all over Europe to these concentration camps which were designed to carry out genocide, known as the 'Final Solution', the extermination of all Jews. At the camps, the ill and the elderly were killed immediately, but the young and fit were put to manual work. At its greatest capacity, the camp at Auschwitz held 140,000. Its five ovens could burn 10,000 a day. Over 1.1 million people died at Auschwitz.

The Nazis aimed at identifying and murdering every single person they considered to be a Jew – without any exception. They included Jews who had converted to Christianity, such as Edith Stein (1891–1942), who converted to Catholicism in 1922 and became a Carmelite nun. She and her sister Rosa perished at Auschwitz. Controversy about Stein erupted with her canonisation in 1998, which whilst acknowledging her Jewishness recognised her as a Christian martyr. Stein herself interpreted her impending

death as part of her 'Jewish fate', a joining of the 'sacrifice' of the Jewish people and saw God's judgement enacted in the Holocaust and the persecution and murder of the Jewish people as the 'cross' of Christ. Although the Nazis certainly robbed Jews, Jewish property was not the motivation for the murder; rather, robbery was the natural 'accompaniment of the desire, first, to expel Jews, and then, to murder them. The Nazi ideology was not based on economic, cost-effective calculations – the genocide was committed for purely ideological reasons.

When the war ended in 1945, so had a whole way of life for European Jews. Their numbers were catastrophically reduced – 6 million had perished. Of the pre-war Jewish populations of Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Germany and Austria, fewer than 10 per cent survived; and fewer than 30 per cent of Jews in occupied Russia, Ukraine, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Norway and Romania.

In the Holocaust, the morality of many Christians was tried and found wanting. Relatively few non-Jews helped their Jewish neighbours and even fewer Christian organisations – Żegota in Poland was a noteworthy exception – were established to rescue them. The Jewish people, not least at the Jerusalem memorial, Yad Vashem, honour names like Oskar Schindler (1908–74), a German industrialist, Raoul Wallenberg (1912–47), a Swedish diplomat, Nicholas Winton (b. 1909), a British civil servant, Anna Shtammate, a Lithuanian librarian, Charles Lutz (1889–1975), a Swiss consul, and other individuals for their courageous acts. There, from the 1990s, trees were planted in their names in the Avenue of the Righteous of Nations. Many of these righteous Gentiles were Christians, but many were not.

CHRISTIANS AND THE HOLOCAUST

Few leaders of the Christian churches did much. Eugenio Pacelli, Pope Pius XII from 1939 to 1958, remains a controversial figure, with some claiming that he knew much and yet did nothing of importance to help Jews during the Holocaust, while others reiterate that he did what he could and encouraged others to do more. As Vatican Secretary of State, he signed a concordat with Hitler on 20 July 1933, which guaranteed the right of the Church to regulate her own affairs. Hitler broke its terms almost immediately, but that never encouraged Pacelli to think he might do likewise.

The Third Reich neutralised the Protestant churches as effectively as the Roman Catholic Church. On 14 July 1933, the Reichstag proclaimed a new 'Reich Church', forcibly bringing together all Protestant churches.