

Anti-Judaism in the Christian Tradition: A problem then, a problem now.

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1. Read Numbers passage.
2. Some vocabulary [slide 2]:
 - a. “anti-Judaism” denotes a hatred of Jews and the Jewish religion.
 - b. “Antisemitism” (formerly anti-Semitism) denotes hatred of the Jews on the false basis of “race.”
 - c. Shoah = the systematic murders of one Jewish person after another, from ~1939-1945, until ~6 million had died. “Shoah” = “destruction” in Hebrew. “Holocaust” = a sacrificial offering honoring the divine-human relationship, used by Christians to describe these events.
3. Anti-Judaism has been a part of the Christian tradition since its origins.
4. Antisemitism in practice preceded Christianity, endured alongside/outside it.
 - a. The term dates from the late 19th century, when it was embraced by Europeans who despised and mistrusted Jews, including those who had converted to Christianity. To an anti-Semite a Jew is always a Jew, *racially*.
5. [slide 3] Did Christian anti-Judaism “cause” the Shoah? No. But it was among the causes, and certainly a necessary one. It helped create the conditions that made it possible for ordinary people in Germany, Poland, and other regions, to regard the elimination of the Jews from their communities as a reasonable, even desirable thing.
6. [Slide 4: some correctives to the myth that the Shoah was the work of a minority, carried out with coercion]
7. When did Christians begin to realize this? Remarkably late. A conference held in Switzerland in 1947 denounced antisemitism as unchristian, but did not take full responsibility for Christianity’s history or contributions. **No significant follow up for decades.**
8. [slide 5] One participant at that conference was Jules Isaac, a French historian. His wife and daughter were murdered at Auschwitz; he missed being deported with them by mere chance. Despite this and a long personal battle with French antisemitism, Isaac promoted dialogue with Christians. He published several books on this subject after the war. In 1960, at the age of 83, he met with the then-pope, John XXIII, and gave him an outline of

what would be his last book: *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*. Diary: "I asked if I can carry away a bit of hope. [Pope] cries, "You have a right to more than hope!"¹

9. The Pope directed the planners of the second Vatican Council to address the church's history of anti-Judaism, which it did in *Nostra Aetate* (*In our age*, 1965): the first document by any Christian denomination to renounce its historical contempt for the Jews. This launched a re-examination of biblical scholarship, church history, and theology that continues across Christianity today.

10.Key question: Has this message reached the pews? [we'll return to this]

11.[slide 6] Anti-Judaism in Christian origins:

- a. Mt 23: Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, 'The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.... 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.'
- b. Note the date: 85 CE. But in 70 CE, the Roman Empire's army had destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem, the ritual center of Judaism.
- c. Who survived? 2 Jewish groups: the Pharisees and the followers of Jesus of Nazareth. **Two Jewish Groups.**
- d. They survived because they were innovators, approaching Jewish teaching in similar ways:
 - i. Closely studied HB; commented extensively (Mishnah, NT);
 - ii. Converted temple offerings / sacrifice into metaphors: study, prayer, alms-giving; "praise and thanksgiving"
 - iii. Both made Judaism even more "portable" than it was before.
 - iv. Compete for "market share," Yankees vs. Red Sox, Coke vs. Pepsi – **sibling rivalry** – neither group being dominant in the wider society.

¹ <https://www.ccrj.us/dialogika-resources/documents-and-statements/jewish/isaac1960>

- v. [Slide 7: John's gospel] But when the Jesus movement gains traction more with Gentiles than Jews, these attacks live on in the gospels and become more us/them, and more "anti-Jewish"
 - e. **Does it matter, though? Does anyone really confuse the Pharisees with our Jewish contemporaries? Yes... [Slide 8]**
 - i. Also: do these contrasts sound familiar:
 - ii. Spiritual not literal
 - iii. Love, freedom vs. Law, restriction
 - iv. Simple and sincere vs. wily and hypocritical
 - v. God of love vs God of Wrath
 - vi. Statements like "I really don't like the OT...I prefer the Gospels" notwithstanding the fact that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Bible used by Christians **is the OT**.
 - vii. Or questions like: Aren't the Jews still waiting for a political Messiah? Didn't they reject Jesus because he wasn't a military leader?
 - viii. Doesn't the Bible tell us the Jews were the enemies of Jesus and didn't they plot his death?
 - f. [slide 9: repeat John 8]: a later Gospel, a further hardening of division
12. What are we seeing here? Did Jesus actually say, and mean, these things?
Highly doubtful:
13. The gospels are not journalism. They were written at least a generation after the death of Jesus, each in a different place, by people who had had different experiences of his life, death and resurrection – and **different agendas, vis a vis the world around them**. Biblical scholars agree that it's very difficult to know which of Jesus' sayings and actions can be directly attributed to him.
14. Authenticity: when a speech or action by Jesus appears in only one Gospel, it may not reflect the real Jesus. When it appears in several Gospels, it's more likely that he said or did it. Both Mt 23 and John 8 (virtually all of John's gospel) are unique.
15. [slide 10: supersessionism] "John's" successors: ever-more extreme "Christian" rhetoric becomes part of "identity formation" – "we are NOT you" – and: "We are better than you. We are now God's Chosen People, not you; we are the True Israel." Result:
- a. Jews are **blind** to the true meaning of their scriptures; Christ is the key

- b. Jews don't have a real relationship to God or a living faith: "stationary in useless antiquity"
16. Supersessionism has served the Christian tradition for nearly two thousand years. It has helped to maintain a wall between Christianity and a living, breathing, vital Judaism. When Christians have encountered "real" Judaism, they have been puzzled, amazed, edified, and rattled. "If we are right, why are *they* still here?"
 17. Still, the odious "witness" function has helped to preserve Jewish existence, making Christianity a less dangerous enemy than secular forms of antisemitism, such as Nazism.
 18. **Again: has any of this historical reflection reached the pews? Sometimes. But there are (at least) three barriers.**
 19. [slide 11] Top-down: teaching directives ignored
 20. [slide 12] Liturgical autopilot: Sunday's readings, RCL – Numbers vs. John – Numbers' "brazen serpent" is simply a foreshadowing of Jesus. It has no reality on its own as a gracious divine action, understood within Judaism.
 21. [slide 13] Laziness:
 - Assuming that the Gospels are literally "what Jesus said"
 - Wanting comfort food, not real "meat"
 - Simplistic preaching against hypocrisy, legalism, hardness of heart
 - Blaming biblical "Jews" for not accepting Jesus; assuming we would have behaved differently
 - In sermons or in teaching, playing Us vs. Them – "look at the violence! Look at the bad behavior of {David, Moses, etc.}! **And who is telling these stories? The Israelite people themselves. They're not hypocrites! [David: Ps 51, BCP**
 22. The issue of bad behavior came up last week, and how it's used to explain some Christians' allegiances to politicians who behave badly – they are "God's flawed instruments"
 23. Some Bad Behavior was NOT tolerated, however: Solomon, David's son, committed idolatry – the worship of false gods. As a result, the kingdom of Israel was divided and ultimately destroyed.
 24. [Slide 14] By resisting our history and not working to change our future, we risk making faith into idolatry. As Eucharistic Prayer C says, "Deliver us

from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; for pardon only, and not for renewal.”

25. So: **Change**

- Christianity without Jewish roots & Jewish challenge: deformed, impoverished, false
 - **Roots:** God wills the salvation of all, is faithful to God’s promises: The God of Jesus *is* the God of the Hebrew Bible: that’s the only Bible he knew, the only God he knew
 - **Challenge:** Orthopraxy (right action) vs. Orthodoxy (right belief); The prophets aren’t predicting the future: they are challenging bad behavior and prescribing alternatives
- Study the Hebrew Bible for its record of God’s love
 - Every Yom Kippur, the entire book of Jonah is read in the synagogue, to remind us of our arrogance, and of God’s saving will for all – not the people whom we deem worthy
 - Don’t rely on lectionary snippets, which were picked for polemical reasons: try Ellen Davis’s *Getting Involved with God*
- Work harder: read more, think more, question more
- Challenge lazy assumptions, especially from the pulpit

26. Torah study: how to read Numbers for itself: what’s the message? (Say nothing that you cannot say in front of dying children: Johann Baptist Metz.)