

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Definition of Anti-Semitism

Anti-Semitism refers to prejudice and/or discrimination against Jews as individuals and as a group. Anti-Semitism is based on stereotypes and myths that target Jews as a people, their religious practices and beliefs, and the Jewish State of Israel.

Historically, what began as a conflict over religious beliefs evolved into a systematic policy of political, economic, and social isolation; exclusion, degradation and attempted annihilation. It did not begin in the Nazi era, nor did it end with the close of World War II. Its continuance over the millennia speaks to the power of scapegoating¹ a group that is defined as the “other.”

Biblical Times

Abraham, the father of three major monotheistic² religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), led his family to Canaan almost 1,000 years before the Common Era (BCE), where a new nation—the people of Israel—came into being. During those centuries before Christ, the Hebrews (the early Jewish people) experienced intermittent persecution because they refused to adopt the religion of the locale or ruler and worship the idols of the kingdoms of the Middle East, as was the custom at the time. This refusal to worship idols was seen as stubborn and was resented.

Anti-Judaism

After the advent of Christianity, a new anti-Judaism evolved. Initially, Christianity was seen as simply another Jewish sect, since Jesus and the Disciples were Jewish and preached a form of Judaism. In the year 70 C.E.,³ the Romans destroyed the Jewish State, and most Jews were scattered throughout the ancient world.

During the first few hundred years after the crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans, adherents of both Judaism and Christianity co-existed—sometimes peacefully, sometimes with animosity—as they sought to practice their faiths in the same lands.

With the conversion of the Roman emperors, Christianity became the sole established religion of the Roman Empire, and the early church fathers sought to establish Christianity as the successor to Judaism. The refusal of Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah was viewed as a threat to the Roman rulers and to Christianity. Since both religions came from the Old Testament, Christians sought to establish the validity of their new religion by claiming that it superseded⁴ Judaism.

The Middle Ages

During the next three centuries (300–600 C.E.) a new pattern of institutionalized⁵ discrimination

¹Scapegoating: blaming an individual or group for something based on that person or group’s identity when, in reality, the person or group is not responsible.

²Monotheistic: adjective for the noun “monotheism,” which is the belief that there is only one God.

³C.E. (Common Era): the equivalent to A.D. which is Latin (anno Domini) for “in the year of the Lord,” referring to Jesus. Since the Christian reference is not recognized/accepted by many, the C.E. designation is seen as more inclusive.

⁴Superseded: to force out of use as inferior, to displace in favor of another.

⁵Institutionalized: as part of the system, such as the legal or economic systems.

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against Jews occurred: Jews were forbidden to marry Christians (399 C.E.), were prohibited from holding positions in government (439 C.E.) and were prevented from appearing as witnesses against Christians in court (531 C.E.). As Jews were officially being ostracized⁶, certain bizarre fantasies about Jews arose in Northern Europe that foreshadowed the anti-Semitism of the 20th century. It was alleged⁷ that Jews had horns and tails and engaged in ritual murder of Christians. The latter allegation, referred to as “blood libel,” was devised by Thomas of Monmouth in 1150 to explain the mysterious death of a Christian boy. This theme recurs in English and German myths.

In 1095, Pope Urban II made a general appeal to the Christians of Europe to take up the cross and sword and liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims, beginning what was to be known as the Crusades. The religious fervor that drove men, and later even children, on the Crusades was to have direct consequences for Jews. The Crusader army, which more closely resembled a mob, swept through Jewish communities looting, raping and massacring Jews as they went. Thus the pogrom—the organized massacre of a targeted group of people—was born.

During the middle of the 14th century, the Bubonic Plague spread throughout Europe, killing an estimated one-third of the population. Fear, superstition and ignorance prompted the need to find someone to blame, and the Jews were a convenient scapegoat because of the myths and stereotypes that were already believed about them. Though Jews were also dying from the plague, they were accused of poisoning wells and spreading the disease. In Germany and Austria it is estimated that 100,000 Jews were burned alive for this and other false accusations including using the blood of Christian boys to make Passover Matzoth⁸ and for desecrating sacramental wafers.⁹ Stereotypes in Christian church art were used to inflame the masses.

Martin Luther, the founder of the 16th century Reformation and Protestantism, wrote a pamphlet in 1545 entitled *The Jews and Their Lies*, claiming that Jews thirsted for Christian blood and urging the slaying of the Jews. The Nazis reprinted it in 1935. Some scholars feel that these scurrilous attacks mark the transition from anti-Judaism (attacks motivated because of the Jews’ refusal to accept Christianity) to anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews as a so-called race that would contaminate the purity of another race).

Increasingly, Jews were subjected to political, economic and social discrimination, resulting in the deprivation of their legal and civil rights. They were restricted to living in ghettos and, beginning in the 13th century, Jews were required to wear a distinctive symbol (a badge and/or a pointed hat) so that they could be immediately recognized, an action that was revisited by the Nazis in the 20th century.

Since Jews were not allowed to own land and the Church did not allow Christians to loan money for profit, Jews had few alternatives but to become moneylenders. Once they became associated with the forbidden trade of usury—the practice of lending money and charging high interest—a new set of stereotypes evolved around the Jews as money-hungry and greedy. As moneylenders,

⁶Ostracized: to exclude from a group by common consent.

⁷Alleged: to state as a fact but without proof.

⁸Matzoth: unleavened bread that is eaten during the Jewish holiday of Passover.

⁹Wafer: a round thin piece of bread used in the Christian ceremony that remembers the last supper of Jesus called Communion.

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Jews were frequently useful to rulers who used their capital to build cathedrals and outfit armies. As long as the Jews benefited the ruler, either through finance or by serving as convenient scapegoats, they were tolerated. When it suited the ruler, they were expelled¹⁰—from England in 1290, France in 1394, and Spain in 1492.

Modern Anti-Semitism

The term “anti-Semitism” was coined in 1873 by Wilhelm Marr, a German political agitator in his work, *Victory of Judaism over Germanism*. His thesis was that Jews were conspiring to run the state and should be excluded from citizenship. In Russia, czarist¹¹ secret police published a forged collection of documents that became known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. It told of a secret plot by rabbis to take over the world. Racism and anti-Semitism were also facilitated by the development of Social Darwinism and pseudo-scientific notions based on theories of racial superiority and inferiority.

In 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a Jew who was a captain in the French Army, was falsely accused and convicted of selling military secrets to the Germans. When evidence was discovered that Dreyfus was innocent, it was quickly covered up by French Officers of the General Staff who wanted to blame the crime on a Jew. Although Dreyfus was eventually vindicated¹², “The Dreyfus Affair,” as it became known, showed how deep-rooted and pervasive anti-Semitism was in France.

In Russia, although most Jews themselves were extremely poor, they were blamed for all the problems of the Russian peasantry. Pogroms were instigated by the czarist secret police. In 1905, Russia’s loss in the Russo-Japanese War moved the government to incite a bloody pogrom in Kishinev. Between 1917 and 1921, after the Russian Revolution, more than 500 Jewish communities in the Ukraine were wiped out in pogroms. About 60,000 Jewish men, women and children were murdered.

Many have asked why anti-Semitic behavior turned into the genocide¹³ of the Jewish community in Germany, rather than in France or England, or Russia, as all had a tradition of anti-Semitism. Following World War I, Germany was a deeply troubled country. Having lost the war, its citizens felt humiliated by the defeat. The victorious countries, including the United States, France and England, authored the Treaty of Versailles, a peace treaty which compelled Germany to give up territory and to pay reparations to countries whose lands it had damaged. Adolph Hitler was a demagogic¹⁴ leader, and obedience to authority was a strong cultural norm in Germany. Hitler called upon remembered myths of the “blood libel” from the Middle Ages to evoke fear that the Jews would contaminate what he referred to as the superior Aryan race. Therefore, according to Hitler’s doctrine, all Jews and their genetic pool must be eliminated.

The Holocaust

There may be no more succinct description of the Holocaust than the statement issued by the

¹⁰Expelled: forced to leave, usually by official action.

¹¹Czarist: of or related to the ruler of Russia.

¹²Vindicated: freed from blame.

¹³Genocide: the deliberate extermination of a group of people.

¹⁴Demagogic: like a person who appeals to other people’s emotions and prejudices in order to arouse discontent and to advance his or her political purposes.

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Vatican on March 12, 1998:

“This century has witnessed an unspeakable tragedy, which can never be forgotten — the attempt by the Nazi regime to exterminate the Jewish people, with the consequent killing of millions of Jews. Women and men, old and young, children and infants, for the sole reason of their Jewish origin, were persecuted and deported. Some were killed immediately, while others were degraded, ill-treated, tortured and utterly robbed of their human dignity, and then murdered. Very few of those who entered the [concentration] camps survived, and those who did remained scarred for life. This was the Shoah.”¹⁵

Speaking to 60 theologians and clergy from around the world at a Vatican symposium October 30–November 1, 1997, Pope John Paul II recognized, “... erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability have circulated for too long...” and “contributed to a lulling of many consciences” at the time of World War II, so that, while there were “Christians who did everything to save those who were persecuted, even to the point of risking their own lives, the spiritual resistance of many was not what humanity expected of Christ’s disciples.”

Contemporary Anti-Semitism

After the Holocaust, after the world witnessed the horrors of Auschwitz, anti-Semitism became far less accepted. Seeing what anti-Semitism could lead to made peoples and nations ashamed of openly expressing anti-Semitism. In the case of the Catholic Church, it would eventually lead to real change, when in the 1960s, the Church removed the historic and dangerous charge against the Jewish people of being responsible for the death of Jesus.

Anti-Semitism did not completely disappear, but the events of World War II significantly inhibited its expression. As the decades passed, as memories faded and criticism of the Jewish State of Israel mounted, many of these inhibitions weakened. In recent years, there has been a concerning upsurge of anti-Semitism around the world. Some is directly connected to Israel—accusing Israel of age-old anti-Semitic charges, such as blood libels and using evil power to control the world.

Some manifestations of anti-Semitism are more indirect. The excessive criticism of Israel leads some people to feel more comfortable attacking Jews and Jewish institutions around the world. For example, during the recent war in Gaza, there were 220 anti-Semitic incidents in the United Kingdom and 113 in France. Others are expressing anti-Semitism in more traditional ways. For example, ADL polls have shown that large numbers of Europeans believe that their Jewish citizens are not loyal to the countries in which they live, and that they have a disproportionate amount of political and economic power.

This resurgence of anti-Semitism is a great concern, especially as we move further and further away from the lessons of the Holocaust. The Jewish people do have allies in the United States and around the world, however, who remember the lessons of history and are ready to stand against this very old and very sinister hatred.

¹⁵Shoah: The Holocaust