CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the relationship between Judaism and Christianity has changed dramatically and is one of the few pieces of encouraging news that can be reported today about the encounter between religions. The rapprochement in relations and the development of a new way of thinking were pioneered by a small number of scholars and religious leaders in the first half of the century. However, it was the impact of the Holocaust, the creation of the state of Israel, the development of the ecumenical movement and the work of the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) which in combination made the changes more widespread. As a result, Christianity, so long an instigator of violence against Jews, rediscovered a respect and admiration for Judaism, and the once close relationship, which had become a distant memory, has been to a large extent restored. For Jews, the traditional view that they were on their own and that Christianity was an enemy has been replaced by a realisation that partnership with Christianity is possible.

At the same time as gaining a new appreciation of Judaism, Christians now acknowledge their contribution to antisemitism and the detrimental impact of the legacy of the *Adversus Iudaeos* (anti-Jewish) literature. Christianity no longer holds that Jewish interpretation of Scripture was false or had been replaced by Christian interpretation. This is illustrated by the contemporary teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, which states: 'The Jewish reading of the Bible is a possible one, in continuity with the Jewish Sacred Scriptures [. . .] a reading analogous to the Christian reading which developed in parallel fashion' (*The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible*, 2002). The churches are also aware of the intrinsic need to learn about developments in post-biblical Judaism, as demonstrated by the World Lutheran Federation's assertion that 'Christians also need to learn of the rich and varied history of Judaism since New Testament times, and of the Jewish people as a diverse, living community of faith today. Such an encounter with living and faithful Judaism can be profoundly enriching

for Christian self-understanding' (*Guidelines for Lutheran–Jewish Relations*, 1998). Consequently, there is today recognition within Christianity that the formation of Christian identity is dependent upon a right relationship with Judaism. Each bishop is now commended to 'promote among Christians an attitude of respect towards their "elder brothers" so as to combat the risk of anti-semitism, and he should be vigilant that sacred ministers receive an adequate formation regarding the Jewish religion and its relation to Christianity' (*Congregation for Roman Catholic Bishops, Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops*, 2004). Although these are the official teachings of the Church, there remains a great deal to be done before they will have filtered to the pulpit and pew.

For their part, Jews initially responded to the modern changes in Christian teaching about Judaism with distrust; others engaged in dialogue with Christians for defensive reasons, in other words in order to tackle prejudice and antisemitism. There were of course individual Jewish figures who offered a different approach, such as Martin Buber (1878–1965) who reminded Jews that Jesus was a fellow Jew, their 'great brother'. But in recent years there have been stirrings of a new and much more widespread interest in Christianity among Jews, illustrated by the publication in 2000 of *Dabru Emet* (Speak Truth), which consists of a cross-denominational Jewish statement on relations with Christianity and asserts, for example, that 'Jews and Christians seek authority from the same book – the Bible (what Jews call "Tanakh" and Christians call the "Old Testament").' The eight-paragraph statement demonstrates an awareness of a common purpose with Christianity, although there were a number of Jews who were critical of the document. The positive impact of the papal visit to Israel, also in 2000, made an indelible mark on the Jewish psyche.

Of course, the new situation is not one of complete agreement, for there continue to be divisions and quarrels over, for example, attitudes towards the state of Israel and its relationship with the Palestinians as well as its other Arab neighbours. Evidence of increasing antisemitism, particularly in Europe and the Middle East, has also led to a corresponding increase in Jewish sensitivity to criticism, particularly Christian criticism. In addition, the consequences of 9/11 and the upsurge of violence in the Middle East are causing a strain on relations. Nevertheless, it seems clear that many of the main divisive issues have been either eliminated or taken to the furthest point at which agreement is possible. The efforts of Catholics and Protestants towards respect of Judaism project attitudes that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago. Christian theology has been profoundly revised at the official level: all churches are committed to the

fight against antisemitism and to teaching about the Jewishness of Jesus, and the problem of mission to Jews has been significantly reduced.

It might be assumed therefore that, because the history of the encounter between Judaism and Christianity stretches over two millennia, it is a well-worn path of study. Yet, although the distinctiveness, even uniqueness, of the relationship between the two faiths has long been noted by Jews and Christians alike, there still exist few works for the interested lay person which explore the variety of aspects that go to make up this relationship. My *Dictionary of Jewish–Christian Relations* (edited with Neil Wenborn and published by Cambridge University Press in 2005) was one of the first works to define the field of study, and this *Introduction* intends to provide an accessible and readable textbook of the long and continuing Jewish–Christian encounter.

It should not be assumed that theology alone provides the basis for relations between Jews and Christians today. Other topics, such as cultural relations, interact and overlap. Take for example Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ*, which generated great controversy when it was released in 2004. It was not produced within an ecclesiastical context but was the artistic creation of an individual practising Christian. For a number of reasons, including insensitivity to Judaism and the film's graphic and unrelenting violence (90 of the 126 minutes' running time were devoted to bodily mutilation), it raised tensions in the Jewish–Christian encounter. The film was criticised because anti-Jewish features were added to the sketchy New Testament accounts of the Passion, or were grossly exaggerated. Statements in the film, such as that the Pharisees 'hate' Jesus, contradicted official Roman Catholic teaching as well as mainstream biblical scholarship, which depicts Jesus as being closer to the Pharisees than to any other Jewish group. Pilate (governed 26–36 CE) is portrayed not as the cruel Roman ruler that we come across in the Gospels and in other contemporary first-century accounts, but as a weakling.

Gibson indicated that he was not interested in scholarly commentaries on the Gospels to support his own visualisation of the final hours of the death of Jesus. His task, as he explained to the *New Yorker*, was to narrate the story as his devotional reflections revealed it to him. The unusual combination of a cinema blockbuster and personal theology generated controversy. For many of the film's critics, Gibson represented a conscious attempt to turn the clock back to a world before 1965, before Vatican II, to a time before the Roman Catholic Church entered the modern world of interfaith dialogue, and began to engage in reconciliation with Judaism. The film seemed to return to an era when visions of Christ centred wholly

on his suffering, to an eighteenth-century period when Christians took it for granted that Jews were collectively cursed for the crucifixion, when narratives emphasised Jewish evil and wickedness.

In Gibson's film, culture and theology came together and demonstrated that it is not only questions of faith that provide the basis for a contemporary conversation about Jewish–Christian relations today. Jews and Christians do not exist only in religious communities – they also live in the world and the Jewish–Christian encounter is consequently influenced by a wide range of factors. The *Introduction to Jewish–Christian Relations* therefore does not only address the theological context, but also explores cultural, philosophical, historical, sociological and political dimensions of the ongoing encounter between Judaism and Christianity. Just as war is too serious a matter to entrust solely to generals, so the encounter between Jews and Christians is too important to leave to theologians.

By its very nature, the study of Jewish–Christian relations is interdisciplinary, and this book features a wide range of subjects. So, for example, it is the author's view that it is essential to include literary studies because a reading of *The Merchant of Venice* or *Daniel Deronda* sheds light on the Christian perception of Jews and Judaism in sixteenth- and nineteenth-century England. It is similarly essential to include biblical studies because a proper understanding of Christian exegesis requires familiarity with Jewish interpretations of Scripture (and vice versa). Likewise, it is important to include the discipline of history since historians are the professional remembrancers of what Jews, Christians and others are tempted to forget.

Setting the scene: a brief history of Jewish–Christian relations

In its original form, Christianity consisted of some Jewish followers of Jesus declaring him as the Messiah, claiming to represent the true path during what was to be seen as the last era of world history, and demanding conversion to their interpretation of Judaism. Christianity was one Jewish group amongst many, including the Sadducees, Zealots, Essenes and Pharisees (and we should not ignore the influence of Hellenisers), but only the Jewish followers of Jesus (the Christians) and the Jewish descendants of the Pharisees (the rabbis) survived the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70 CE.

The Apostle Paul's missionary work helped spread the Christian movement, while the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and periodic persecution of Christian groups influenced the Gospels' downplaying of Pilate's role in

the death of Jesus. Gradually the Church came to view the Jewish people as the preliminary and outdated people of God, replaced by the newly covenanted people of the *ecclesia* (Church). This view deeply influenced the Christian understanding of the Gospels' anti-Jewish passages from the second century onwards, and movement towards separation became considerable. The separation between Christianity and Judaism consisted of a series of 'partings of the ways' (cf. James Dunn), beginning perhaps when the Jewish followers of Jesus started to attract large numbers of Gentiles. Arguments over the abolition of Jewish customs such as circumcision and *kashrut* (food laws) contributed to the rejection of Christianity by most Jews. The main argument over theology concerned Christian claims about the divinity of Jesus. Bitterness between Jews (as well as Gentiles) over the significance of Jesus can be seen in the early Christian writings, and a similar theme can be noticed in rabbinic literature.

Jewish opposition increased when Christians failed to support Jewish revolts against Rome in the first century and the messianic claims of Bar Kokhba in the second. This did not prevent many Christians in the early centuries attending synagogue services, especially at the autumn High Holy Days and at Passover. In response, church leaders such as Chrysostom and even Jerome delivered derogatory sermons and interpretations, which insisted that Jews did not understand that the Old Testament was a prefiguring of Christ and the Church. In the second century, Melito of Sardis produced the first unambiguous accusation of deicide, and later Augustine portrayed Jews as children of Cain whose dispersion and woes were God's punishment. They simply served as witnesses to their own evil and to Christian truth. By the time of the completion of the Talmud (*c.* 500) Judaism and Christianity had fully diverged. It is not coincidental that around the same time Jewish Christianity also ceased to exist.

Once Christianity was established as the religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, the situation for Jews became more difficult, though this was a gradual process because the energy of Christian Europe was directed towards defeating pagans and Christian heretics. During this time Christian anti-Jewish writings (*Adversus Iudaeos* literature) resulted in little violence against Jews; nor did it stir much of a Jewish response, possibly because until then Christianity was viewed with little interest. The sixth-century rabbinic anti-Christian text *Toledot Yeshu* seems to be an exception.

As the Church spread outside Palestine it increasingly denied the significance of that land despite the presence of indigenous Christian communities. The Emperor Constantine (*c.* 285–337), however, supported the building of large churches on significant sites of Jesus' life and death.

Monastic orders followed suit and by the sixth century more than 500 churches had been built and attracted each year thousands of Christian pilgrims. Residents claimed that the grace of God was more abundant in Jerusalem than elsewhere and increasingly the term 'holy land' was used. The church fathers opposed Jewish hopes of restoration, and the Emperor Julian's late fourth-century plan to rebuild the Temple worried several generations of Christians, even after his early death in 363.

In the Eastern-Byzantine Empire, the Justinian Code (535–53) removed many Jewish rights granted by previous emperors (such as the Theodosian Code, 438). Severe restrictions on synagogue practices enabled local authorities to outlaw Judaism, close synagogues and enforce baptisms despite some church opposition (e.g., Nicaea, 787). In the West, Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) insisted that Jewish legal rights be respected and their internal affairs not disturbed, but official church protection through the later Middle Ages was more often ignored than observed.

Interestingly, as far as scriptural interpretation is concerned, there is evidence that Jewish and Christian commentators were aware of and sometimes even admired each other's interpretations. This was a two-way process and both Jews and Christians occasionally adopted each other's interpretations. The willingness of some Jewish exegetes to appropriate Christian interpretation, wrap it in Jewish garb and include it in Jewish biblical commentary suggests a closer relationship than might have been anticipated.

From approximately 1100 onwards, as Christendom became more homogeneous, Jews were seen as one of the last 'different' groups, and by the sixteenth century they had been expelled from most of Western Europe, beginning with England in 1290. Jews were liable to mass assaults, as witnessed in the Crusades from the eleventh century and the response to the Black Death in the fourteenth. During this period, Christians were becoming increasingly aware of the existence of post-biblical Jewish writings such as the Talmud and denounced them. This was the time of the Inquisition, the burning of thousands of Jewish books, including the Talmud, the preaching of conversionist sermons at which Jewish attendance was compelled, blood libel accusations and the wearing of a distinctive badge.

Since Judaism was a minority in both the Islamic world and Christendom, Jews were prompted to consider why God allowed these faiths to flourish. One view was that Christianity was a form of idolatry, perhaps not in the full biblical sense but through inherited patterns of idolatrous worship. Another approach categorised Christianity in terms of the Noachide

laws, which formulated moral standards without demand for conversion to Judaism. According to Rabbi Johanan, whoever denied idolatry was deemed a Jew (BT. Megillah 13a, a concept revived in the nineteenth century by Elia Benamozegh). Another view, propagated by Judah ha-Levi (*c.* 1070/5–1141) and Maimonides (1135–1204), was that Christianity prepared the way for nations to worship the God of Israel and for redemption. Menachem Ha-Me'iri (1249–1316) put forward the most positive view in the Middle Ages when he argued that Christianity should be understood as a form of monotheism and coined the phrase 'nations bound by the ways of religion' to relax certain rabbinic laws and facilitate a more fruitful interaction between Jews and Christians.

Jews viewed the Reformation as a positive development, partly because of its challenge to the unity of the Church, which at first diverted Christian attention away from Judaism. This was reinforced by the Protestant return to the Hebrew Bible (*sola scriptura*) and some Reformers' awareness of Jewish biblical commentaries (which may also have contributed to a rise in messianic fervour among Jews). The early writings of Martin Luther (1483–1546), such as *That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew* (1523), suggested a dramatic change in Christian perceptions of Judaism, but expectations were short-lived and the bitter anti-Jewish treatises written towards the end of his life served to reinforce Jewish loyalty to the Catholic emperor. Despite its early promise, most Jews saw the Christian 'teaching of contempt' continue unabated in the Reformation, although John Calvin (1509–64) and Calvinist churches were generally less antagonistic and held a more positive view of Judaism. Calvinism produced tolerance for Jews in the Netherlands and later in the American colonies, where the separation of church and state and an emphasis on the rights of man helped create a more tolerant society.

In Europe, during the dramatic changes of the Enlightenment a small number of Jews, such as Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), reflected more positively on the Jewish relationship with Christianity. Although Mendelssohn himself remained Jewish, there was significant Jewish assimilation into either secularism or Christianity. Heinrich Heine (1797–1856) famously called his conversion a 'ticket of admission to European culture'. The dramatic increase in assimilation in the nineteenth century was foreshadowed by the French Revolution, which offered Jews equality on condition of abandoning their faith.

A more widespread shift in attitudes to Christianity among some Jewish religious leaders can be noted in the years following the Enlightenment and consequent Jewish emancipation. Reform figures such as Abraham

Geiger (1810–74) and Stephen Wise (1874–1949) embraced the Jewishness of Jesus, and even S. R. Hirsch (1808–88), one of the founders of Modern Orthodox Judaism, argued that Jesus embodied the essence of Judaism. Jewish philosophers such as Hermann Cohen (1842–1918) and Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929) also made contributions to the Jewish understanding of Christianity, the former arguing that Jewish ethics were superior to Christian (heavily influencing Leo Baeck (1873–1956)), and the latter that Christianity was a pathway to God for Gentiles. As liberal culture spread throughout Europe, East European thinkers also wrote on Christianity: for example, Abraham Isaac Kook (1865–1935), later Chief Rabbi of Palestine, praised Jesus but criticised Christianity for moving far from Judaism.

Jewish views of Christianity were also affected by an increasing anti-Jewish prejudice and the rise of racial antisemitism. The Enlightenment doctrine that, whilst society could be remade, certain people were beyond redemption provided the basis for modern racism and reached a climax in the rise of Nazism and ultimately in the Holocaust. The failure of the churches during 1933–45 resulted in anger towards and distrust of Christianity, epitomised by the radical views of Eliezer Berkovits (1908–92), who argued that the roots of Nazism can be traced back to the New Testament: 'Without Christianity's New Testament, Hitler's *Mein Kampf* could never have been written,' he wrote in 1974.

During the years of the Third Reich, while most German churches accepted the state's 'race, soil, and blood' stance, some churches, such as the Dutch Reformed Churches, began to question traditional *Adversus Iudaeos* theology about Judaism as well as the assumed necessity of Jewish conversion. In 1947 a small group of leading Christians and Jews meeting at Seelisberg, Switzerland called on the churches to revise their thinking and preaching about Judaism and its people. This remained a minority position and in 1948, while acknowledging and regretting the churches' contribution to antisemitism, both the Evangelical Church in Germany and the World Council of Churches insisted that Christians were still obligated to include Jews in their evangelistic work, since Israel's election had passed to the Church.

Deep-seated theological transformation began two to three decades after the Holocaust. Even the term 'Holocaust' was questioned and began to be replaced by the word 'Shoah', which is also biblical in origin. 'Holocaust' is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *olah*, meaning 'whole burnt offering', and its sacrificial overtones, implying an appeasement of God, was offensive to many. 'Shoah' is Hebrew for 'catastrophe' and its connotations of rupture and doubt are often preferred.

Consideration of the Church's 'teaching of contempt' for the Jewish people was put on the Second Vatican Council's agenda by Pope John XXIII (1881–1963) at the urging of Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–72) and Jules Isaac (1877–1963). This resulted in the publication of *Nostra Aetate* (1965). Both men encouraged church leaders to condemn antisemitism, to eliminate anti-Judaism from church teachings and to acknowledge the permanent value of Judaism. *Nostra Aetate*'s insistence that 'Jews should not be presented as rejected [. . .] by God' was a significant turning point for the Roman Catholic Church and has been further amplified and developed by later pontifical documents. When Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) led the Vatican to recognise the state of Israel in 1994, he overturned centuries of teaching that tied Jewish eviction from their land to their sinful rejection of Christ. Yet at the same time the Church, as representative of God and Christ on earth, is not seen as guilty of any error or wrong. This continues to be a cause of tension when antisemitism and the Holocaust are subjects of discussion, exemplified by contemporary controversies over the role of the wartime Pope, Pius XII (1876–1958).

The Protestant churches in the last sixty years have also come to the recognition that the Holocaust made for ever unacceptable the view of Christianity as the successor religion to Judaism, as though Judaism had no legitimate place or vocation in the world once Christianity had come. Most of the Protestant church bodies have now produced statements, such as the 2001 *Church and Israel* published by the Leuenberg Church Fellowship, that seek to clarify the present-day relationship of their communities with the Jewish people and Judaism, and speak of God's eternal covenant with both Israel and the Church – either one covenant in two modes or two inseparable but distinct covenants.

The Orthodox Church, however, along with fundamentalist and biblically conservative churches generally, did not participate in these theological revisions, and still have not done so. Some churches retain an insistence on active missionary obligation, and both Jewish and Christian liturgy remains, for the most part, unchanged in the light of the modern Jewish–Christian encounter.

Mission remains a problematic topic for the churches, particularly the Protestant branches. The Evangelical Church of the Rhineland's 1980 document was a major turning point with its assertion that Jews were permanently elected as God's people, and that the Church was taken into this covenant with God through Jesus Christ the Jew. It insisted that the Church has no mission to the Jews, and the United Church of Canada has also repudiated efforts to convert Jews since God's covenant with Israel is

irrevocable (2002). An ecumenical American scholars' group repeated these assertions and affirmed the redemptive power of God's enduring covenant with the Jewish people (*A Sacred Obligation*, 2002).

As the post-Second World War reassessment of Christian attitudes towards Judaism accelerated and became more widespread, it began to have an impact on Jewish attitudes and contributed to a reassessment of Christianity among Jews. This eventually resulted in the publication of *Dabru Emet* in 2000, a document that explored the place of Christianity in Jewish terms. It represents the views of a significant proportion of Jews in English-speaking countries, although there are also many for whom Christianity is unimportant in their Jewish identity or who are critical of the document (particularly some Orthodox Jews).

THE MODERN STUDY OF JEWISH–CHRISTIAN RELATIONS

Several major themes in the last fifty years have emerged from writings that have explored Jewish–Christian relations. Beginning with biblical studies, modern scholarly works demonstrate a willingness to take the Hebrew Bible seriously on its own terms, rejecting the traditional approach of the *Adversus Iudaeos* literature, which had rendered it virtually impossible for Christians to know how to write an Old Testament theology. It is increasingly accepted that Christian biblical theology can only be developed in dialogue with Judaism.

Associated with biblical theology are studies of the New Testament. Profoundly influenced by the writings of the scholars Geza Vermes (b. 1924) and E. P. Sanders (b. 1937), modern scholarship since the 1970s has emphasised that the ministry of Jesus can only be understood in the historical context of first-century Palestinian Judaism, since Jesus was a Jew who taught his fellow Jews, some of whom followed his teaching while others did not. Scholars point out that Jesus' Jewish followers argued amongst themselves about the conditions under which Gentiles might be admitted to this new Jewish movement and with other Jews over issues such as Torah observance and claims about Jesus. The New Testament bears witness to the disputes, which were vigorous and often bitter, but until recently New Testament scholars had almost completely neglected the fact that these arguments were between Jews, about a Jew or about Jewish issues. Traditionally, polemical passages were read as if they were 'Christian' arguments against 'Jews'. Modern scholarship has shown that to read them this way is to misread them and that this misreading contributed significantly to the Christian 'teaching of contempt'.