

From Anti-Judaism to Anti-Semitism

From its earliest days, Christianity has viewed Judaism and Jews ambiguously. Given its roots within the Jewish community of first-century Palestine, there was much in Judaism that demanded Church admiration and praise; however, as Jews continued to resist Christian truth, there was also much that had to be condemned. Major Christian thinkers of antiquity – while disparaging their Jewish contemporaries for rejecting Christian truth – depicted the Jewish past and future in balanced terms, identifying both positives and negatives.

Beginning at the end of the first millennium, an increasingly large Jewish community started to coalesce across rapidly developing northern Europe, becoming the object of intense popular animosity and radically negative popular imagery. The portrayals of the broad trajectory of Jewish history offered by major medieval European intellectual leaders became increasingly negative as well. The popular animosity and the negative intellectual formulations were bequeathed to the modern West, which had tragic consequences in the twentieth century. In this book, Robert Chazan traces the path that began as anti-Judaism, evolved into heightened medieval hatred and fear of Jews, and culminated in modern anti-Semitism.

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From Anti-Judaism to Anti-Semitism

*Ancient and Medieval Christian
Constructions of Jewish History*

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Prologue

The Holocaust was a traumatic event for all of Western civilization, as it exposed depths of inhumanity that the Western world had assumed lay far back in the distant past. The Holocaust constituted a monumental tragedy first and foremost for the West's Jewish minority, which was the target of the Nazi genocide. Secondly, it impacted the West's majority, which was confronted by painful evidence of ongoing savagery that it thought had been eradicated from its midst. Within the Western majority, this impact was especially distressing for the various Western Christian churches. Since Christianity has long been the dominant religion in the West, and as observers have pointed increasingly to the influence of Christian anti-Jewish stereotypes on Nazi thinking, the diverse Western Christian churches of the post-World War II period have been forced to confront their possible culpability for sowing the seeds that resulted in the murder of millions of Jews by the Nazis and in the silence of much of the rest of the European populace during the genocide.

In the immediate aftermath of the war, many projected the Nazi movement as non-Christian or even anti-Christian – a tendency that has been mitigated considerably with the passage of time.¹ Despite the effort at distancing Christianity from the Nazis, important observers suggested that Christianity – although not directly implicated in modern anti-Semitism generally and in Nazi anti-Semitism more particularly – nonetheless played an important role in the germination of these anti-Jewish movements and their thinking. One of the first such observers was James Parkes, an English clergyman and historian, who was deeply distressed over the emergence of Nazi anti-Semitism in the 1920s and 1930s and turned his scholarly attention to the history of Christian–Jewish relations

and especially to the Christian tradition of anti-Jewish thinking that established the foundation for widespread modern European antipathy toward Jews.²

Subsequent to World War II and the Holocaust, Parkes's concern with the Christian roots of European animosity toward Jews and of the especially virulent Nazi variety of this animosity intensified. A leading spokesman for the view that traditional Christian thinking played a dominant role in modern European fear of, and hostility toward, Jews was Jules Isaac, a renowned French intellectual. Isaac was a highly respected historian, who before World War II had little association with Judaism and Jewish life, but who suffered deeply nonetheless during the war years, losing his wife and daughter during the Holocaust. As Isaac turned his scholarly attention and formidable academic skills to the anti-Jewish themes that shaped Nazi thinking, he focused on the centrality of traditional Christian perceptions of Judaism and Jews.

Isaac's pithiest and best-known work has been translated into English as *The Teaching of Contempt*. In this widely cited and influential work, Isaac highlighted three central Christian teachings about Judaism and Jews:

1. The degenerate state of Judaism at the time of Jesus
2. The crime of deicide
3. The dispersion of the Jews as providential punishment for the Crucifixion³

All three doctrines, which Isaac considered the cornerstone of the Christian "teaching of contempt" and thus the core out of which the anti-Jewish Nazi program developed, involve aspects of Jewish history as constructed by Christians – the allegedly debased state of Judaism at the time of Jesus, the role purportedly played by the Jews in the crucifixion of Jesus, and the projected impact of that role on subsequent Jewish fortunes. According to Isaac, these negative characteristics of Jewish history and thus by extension of Jews over the ages – regularly projected by traditional Christian thinkers and widely accepted by Christian masses – shaped much of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century European imagery of modern Jews.

As a prominent French academic, Isaac was able to command a far-reaching audience for his views. His writings were especially influential with the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church, played a considerable role in the innovative policies of Pope John XXIII, and eventually impacted the Second Vatican Council and its concern with historic

anti-Jewish thinking in the Church.⁴ The promulgation of the *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* by the Second Vatican Council acknowledged – at least to an extent – the reality of destructive anti-Jewish Church teachings and articulated a commitment to purging the Church of this baneful legacy.⁵ This commitment on the part of the Roman Catholic Church was paralleled by similar concerns and efforts in many other Christian churches as well.

With the passage of time, consideration of the role of Christian imagery of Judaism and Jews in anti-Semitic and Nazi thinking has given rise to further examination, clarification, and nuance. A sense of varying degrees of Christian anti-Jewish thinking has crystallized. Since Christians and Jews disagree with respect to key theological issues, Christian negativity toward Judaism and Jews is grounded in significant measure in standard interreligious theological disagreement. The term “anti-Judaism” has been utilized to designate such theological disagreement, and it has been argued that this normal interreligious contention should not be adduced as an element in murderous Nazi imagery and policy. At the same time, however, many observers have urged that Christian hostility toward Judaism and Jews has often moved well beyond the bounds of what is projected as theologically grounded anti-Judaism.

A leading researcher in distinguishing varieties of Christian negativity toward Judaism and Jews was Gavin I. Langmuir. Langmuir attempted to differentiate among three levels of Christian anti-Jewish imagery – what he called the rational, the nonrational, and the irrational.⁶ For Langmuir, Christians and Jews sometimes disagreed over issues that could be and were approached rationally. More common and important, however, were issues that divided the two communities but were not amenable to rational discussion. Langmuir fully accepted the notion of Christian anti-Judaism. For him, Christian anti-Judaism constitutes nonrational Christian disagreement with Judaism and Jews, that is to say disagreement involving issues of far-reaching metaphysical principles that cannot be adjudicated through the use of reason. While such disagreement can engender a significant level of frustration and even hostility, it does not – according to Langmuir – account for the intense and radical quality of modern anti-Semitic and Nazi fear and hatred of Jews.

For Langmuir, the intense and radical modern fear and hatred of the Jews that marked Nazism was a different phenomenon, which drew its strength from irrational – rather than nonrational – perceptions of Judaism and Jews. While pre-medieval Christian disagreement with and argumentation against Judaism and Jews was nonrational according to

Langmuir, medieval European civilization created irrational perceptions that produced extreme fear and hatred of Jews and became contributing factors to Nazism and the Holocaust. For this more intense hostility toward Jews, Langmuir used the term “antisemitism,” although he was fully aware that the term carries overtones of modern racial pseudoscience. For Langmuir, “antisemitism,” despite its problematics, was the only term available to signal the difference he sought to establish between religiously grounded and nonrational Christian disagreement with Jews and the virulent anti-Jewish imagery that emerged in medieval Christian Europe, that became a destructive element in modern European thought, and that eventually played a central role in Nazi projections of the dangers allegedly posed by modern Europe’s Jews.⁷

According to Langmuir, the history of medieval antisemitism began during the middle decades of the twelfth century in western Christendom. The claim first leveled in Norwich in 1150 that the Jews of that town crucified a Christian youngster constitutes for Langmuir the onset of irrational Christian thinking about Jews – antisemitism in his view – and the beginning of its long and destructive history.⁸ Although he acknowledges the earlier roots of this antisemitic thinking in prior Christian imagery, his position represents as it were a gloss on the Isaac claims. For Langmuir, the traditional assertions identified by Jules Isaac as the core of Christian teaching of contempt do indeed entail potential dangers. However, for over a thousand years these dangers did not materialize. Although pre-twelfth-century Church spokesmen often spoke harshly of Jews, they did not – in Langmuir’s view – cross over from the nonrational to the irrational. It was only in medieval Christian Europe that this momentous leap was made. Thus, early Christian imagery was potentially dangerous, but the dangers were not actualized until the twelfth century, exerting a frightful toll thereafter.

Langmuir’s work has attracted considerable criticism. His definition of irrationality has been widely challenged, and irrationality is the key to his distinction of levels of anti-Jewish hostility. Irrationality has proven difficult for the mental health profession to define, and Langmuir’s proposed definition has seemed to many observers primitive. Moreover, Langmuir identified the grounds for the emergence of irrationality in medieval western Christendom as growing rational doubts regarding key Christian beliefs, such as transubstantiation. In his view, the effort to suppress these rational doubts fostered heightened irrationality within the Christian populace.⁹ This grounding for the proposed new irrationality has been severely questioned. Finally, many have been uncomfortable

with the term “antisemitism” for the intensified medieval anti-Jewish sentiment that Langmuir has proposed, although alternatives have not been forthcoming.

Despite these criticisms, the direction pioneered by Langmuir has proven fruitful and has been pursued by a number of subsequent scholars. R. I. Moore has projected twelfth-century Christian Europe as the scene of persecutory tendencies that were maintained and in fact intensified over the succeeding centuries. Not closely focused on the Holocaust, Moore has been concerned with a wide range of twentieth-century persecutions and has – like Langmuir – identified their roots in the generally expansive and creative environment of twelfth-century Europe. The factors projected for these persecutory tendencies by Moore are socio-economic and differ considerably from those suggested by Langmuir.¹⁰ Anna Sapir Abulafia, highlighting the accelerating emphasis on the rational in twelfth-century Europe, has concurred with Langmuir and Moore regarding the accelerating antipathy toward Jews during this period. She has argued that the deepening conviction of Christianity’s total rationality transformed the Jews, as deniers of Christian truth, into irrational and hence subhuman creatures.¹¹

In *Medieval Stereotypes and Modern Antisemitism*, I joined this chorus of voices urging that medieval western Christendom spawned a sequence of destructive stereotypes that projected the Jews as malevolent toward their Christian neighbors, as bent on harming these neighbors, and as having the power to inflict serious damage on the Christian societies that hosted them.¹² The destructive stereotypes included the allegation of gratuitous Jewish murder of Christians, of ritualized Jewish murder of Christian children, of utilization of the blood of Christian youngsters for Jewish ritual purposes, of Jewish desecration of the host wafer, and of Jewish poisoning of the wells of Europe. I suggested that these stereotypes were absorbed into the folklore of western Christendom and, under the intense pressures generated by the process of modernization, emerged as the core projections of the anti-Semites, who identified the Jews as sources of radical danger to the Christian majority of modern Europe.

Recently, Sara Lipton, in her *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography*, has advanced considerably the case argued by Langmuir, Moore, Abulafia, and me.¹³ Like these predecessors, Lipton argues for the deterioration of the image of the Jews in medieval Europe. Using representations of Jews in medieval Christian art, she is able to marshal an enormous quantity of source material to support her claim of

deterioration and to present a series of steps in this process. In effect, she is able to construct a six-stage chronology of deterioration that begins in the eleventh century and concludes at the close of the fifteenth century.

Lipton argues that, during the three earliest stages of Christian representation of Jews, the focus was on the Jews of antiquity and their shortcomings.¹⁴ Lipton suggests that, beginning early in the thirteenth century, the focus shifted from the ancient to the contemporary:

In moralizing imagery in various types of artwork, coins and coin-filled bags signified moneylending or avarice; cats, which were associated with hunting and nighttime and symbolized heresy, were shown with Jews; and crows, which collected shiny objects, and toads, which swelled themselves up, signaled greed and usury, the illicit amassing of wealth. Through these and other images, Jews, traditionally used to signify the outdated past, came to be identified with the most “modern” of activities and tendencies – moneylending, philosophy, heresy, curiosity.¹⁵

The transformation of European Jews from a relic of the outdated past to a source of present-day danger was a giant step in the deterioration of the imagery of medieval European Jewry.

Lipton’s book, in addition to its copious source material and its specification of stages in the deterioration of the imagery of Jews, offers yet another important advantage. Because of its nature, much of the Christian artwork upon which she draws survived into modernity and continued to convey its negative messages to succeeding generations. Even Christians no longer fully committed to the Church continued to view these works of art, be moved by them, and absorb their anti-Jewish messages, the most dramatic of which involved the broad dangers that Jews posed to their European contemporaries. While I suggested in my earlier study the absorption of the new and more damaging imagery of Jews into European folk wisdom, Lipton’s study of medieval Christian art opens up more identifiable channels of transmission of what Langmuir dubbed medieval antisemitism into modern Europe.

The present study focuses on yet another channel through which the increasingly negative perceptions of Jews were transmitted into modernity. Like artwork, intellectual achievements maintain their impact over the generations. Important European authors were read and pondered into modernity. In this book, I shall move beyond the popular perceptions of Jewish enmity and the dangers purportedly flowing therefrom that developed in medieval western Christendom and examine the buttressing of these popular perceptions in the writings of key thought leaders on the medieval and early modern scene. These thought leaders were profoundly

influenced by the innovative popular perceptions of the dangers posed by Europe's Jews, but they moved beyond the popular focus on Jewish contemporaries and addressed what they perceived to be the essential nature of the Jews, who were allegedly so consumed by hatred and malevolence.

These reflections on the essential nature of the Jews addressed the broad history of the Jewish people. As is normally the case, the conviction of these Christian thinkers was that the essential nature of human communities is clearly reflected in their histories. Thus, these medieval Christian thinkers undertook a reconstruction of the entire trajectory of Jewish history – the Jewish present, the Jewish past, and the Jewish future. In so doing, they engaged a very complex aspect of Christian thinking about Judaism and Jews and skewed the generally balanced complexities of ancient Christian thinking in a decidedly negative direction, bequeathing to modern Europe a more broadly grounded pejorative perspective on Jews than that embodied in the popular and somewhat limited slanders.

The normal tendency to identify the essence of a human community through its history touched on an especially sensitive element in Christian thinking, which flowed from the unique evolution of Christianity itself. Christianity began its lengthy and rich history as a small dissident Jewish group in tumultuous first-century Palestine. Slowly, it broke away from its Jewish matrix and assumed independence as a separate and increasingly powerful religious community. This curious evolution meant that Jewish history and identity formed an integral element in Christian history and identity. Thus, the history of the Jews has necessarily played a central role in Christian self-perception and self-understanding.

For Christians, the history of the Jews has had to include elements both of commendation and condemnation. The commendation was mandatory. By the lifetime of Jesus, Jews had developed a monotheistic system that posited one divine being, divine control of human history, a covenant between that divine being and a human community, the significance of this human partner community for the workings of all of human history, and a series of revelations bestowed upon his human partners by the beneficent God. Out of these early Israelite/Judean/Jewish views emerged a small group of Palestinian Jews who perceived in the Jew Jesus of Nazareth a divinely mandated figure sent by God to shape the next stage of human history. The emergence of the Church that built upon Jesus and his initially small band of followers can be understood only against the backdrop of prior Jewish history and thought. Without this prior Jewish history and thought, the emergence of Christianity is incomprehensible.

At the same time, condemnation of Jews has been mandatory as well. In the Christian view, rejection of Jesus by the first-century Jews of Palestine was a stunning sin, exacerbated by their responsibility for his condemnation and crucifixion. God had sent his Messiah to the Jewish people, as he had promised he would do. The Jewish people, however, had spurned him and occasioned his demise. In the face of this breathtaking failure, God replaced his original covenant people – the Jews – with the Christian Church, perceived as more loyal and trustworthy. Thus, in this sense as well, Jews and Judaism laid the foundation for the emergence of Christianity and its eventual successes. Once again, but this time in a negative sense, Christianity cannot be understood without reference to the Jews.

This double grounding of Christianity in the prior history of the Jewish people – in both a positive and negative sense – has meant that the subsequent Christian Church has had to be intensely focused on the history of the Jewish people, as played out before, during, and after the brief mission of Jesus. A sure grasp of Christian history has meant concern with and comprehension of the history of the Jewish people – its pre-Jesus history, its engagement with Jesus, and its post-Jesus trajectory. An understanding of Christianity requires attention to and knowledge of the history of the Jews that extends from the hoariest antiquity down through the present and in fact into the future as well. The trajectory of Jewish history – in both positive and negative terms – must be known and its meaning grasped, if Christianity itself is to be properly comprehended.

To be sure, there has been one constant in Christian views of Judaism and Jews over the ages, and that is negative assessment of Jewish contemporaries for not acknowledging the truth of Christianity, which for Christians has been so obvious. Although this negative view of contemporary Jews has been standard, its evaluation has varied widely. For some Christians, the failure to accept Christianity has constituted a critical shortcoming of the Jews and reflects their profound disabilities – intellectual, spiritual, and moral; for other Christians, this failure reflects a Christian lack of the charity and the reasonable argumentation that would prove convincing to Jews and creates a challenge to provide that sympathy and reasonable argumentation.

Alternative assessments of the Jewish present have led ineluctably to divergent constructions of the Jewish past and future. For some Christian observers, the failures of the Jewish present are rooted in a past characterized by unceasing Jewish inability to perceive religious truth and to act in accordance with that religious truth; for others, the Jewish past has been splendid, with the Jews bringing the vision of one true God into the

world and thus in effect civilizing primitive humanity. These divergent views of the Jewish past are paralleled by alternative projections of the Jewish future. For one set of Christians, Jews will be punished decisively by God for their recurrent failures; for another set of Christians, the richness of the Jewish past and Jewish service to God and humanity will be suitably rewarded at the end of days.

Christian constructions of the Jewish present, past, and future have by no means been internally consistent. As noted, assessment of the Jewish present is inherently negative, grounded in the fact that Jews have chosen to remain Jews. However, this brute fact can be and has been evaluated by Christians in multiple ways. Negative evaluation of the Jewish present can readily be combined with the positive evaluation of the Jewish past and future (as was the case for Paul, for example). Thus, breaking down global and undifferentiated Christian impressions of Judaism and Jews into constructions of the Jewish present, past, and future opens the possibility of a more nuanced understanding and a surer grasp of the complexities of Christian stances toward Jews over the ages and will allow us to assess more carefully the shift from the balanced Christian constructions of Jewish history bequeathed from antiquity to the increasingly negative views generated in medieval western Christendom and passed on to the modern West.

In the present study, I shall begin by engaging ancient Christian constructions of the trajectory of Jewish history and note the tendency in these early constructions toward balance between the negative and the positive. In the second part of the book, I shall turn our attention to a number of medieval Christian constructions of the trajectory of Jewish history, which turn far more thoroughly pejorative.¹⁶ These more intensely negative constructions of Jewish history complement the emergence of the popular slanders generated in medieval western Christendom. The more intellectually grounded and expressed constructions of Jewish history reinforced powerfully on the medieval scene the broad popular negativity identified by a number of recent researchers; at the same time, these negative and damaging constructions constitute yet another important channel through which the medieval anti-Jewish imagery was transmitted to modern Western civilization.

Notes

- 1 There is now a growing literature on the role of German Catholicism and Protestantism in Nazi Germany. As an introduction to the topic, see the recent and important studies of Richard Steigmann-Gail, *The Holy Reich: Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919–1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

- Press, 2003), and Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).
- 2 James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue* (London: Soncino, 1934); idem, *The Jew in the Medieval Community* (London: Soncino, 1938); idem, *Antisemitism* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1963). For a valuable study of James Parkes, see Robert Andrew Everett, *Christianity without Antisemitism: James Parkes and the Christian-Jewish Encounter* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1993).
 - 3 Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 37. I have (with apologies) reordered the sequence presented by Isaac.
 - 4 Marco Morelli, “Jules Isaac and the Origins of *Nostra Aetate*,” in *Nostra Aetate: Origins, Promulgation, Impact on Jewish Catholic Relations*, eds. Neville Lamdan and Alberto Melloni (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007), 21–28.
 - 5 See the valuable study by John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews 1933–1965* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012).
 - 6 Langmuir’s most important and innovative essays were collected and published as *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). The synthesis of his work was published at the same time as *History, Religion, and Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).
 - 7 Langmuir attempted to avoid the pseudo-scientific overtones of the term “anti-Semitism” by consistently utilizing the strange orthography of “antisemitism,” feeling that “anti-Semitism” suggests there is something that can be labeled Semitism. For the purposes of this study, I have taken a slightly different track. When speaking of the modern political and cultural phenomenon, I have used the normal orthography of “anti-Semitism”; however, when using the term to signify radical medieval anti-Jewish imagery, which Langmuir projected as essentially irrational, I use the strange orthography of “antisemitism.” This is hardly an ideal procedure, but it enables me to build on the insight of Langmuir and others that suggests extreme anti-Jewish perspectives that began to crystallize in twelfth-century Christian Europe and intensified thereafter.
 - 8 Gavin I. Langmuir, “Thomas of Monmouth: Detector of Ritual Murder,” *Speculum* 59 (1984): 822–846, reprinted in *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, 209–236.
 - 9 Idem, “Peter the Venerable: Defense against Doubt,” in *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism*, 197–208.
 - 10 The first edition of Moore’s book had enormous impact – R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). In 2007, he published a slightly revised second edition.
 - 11 Anna Sapir Abulafia, *Christians and Jews in the Twelfth-Century Renaissance* (London: Routledge, 1995).
 - 12 Robert Chazan, *Medieval Stereotypes and Modern Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
 - 13 Sara Lipton, *Dark Mirror: The Medieval Origins of Anti-Jewish Iconography* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2014).

- 14 Ibid., chapters 1 through 3.
15 Ibid., 132.
16 It is not my intention to suggest that all medieval constructions of the trajectory of Jewish history were negative. Just as the popular anti-Jewish slanders were not universally embraced among medieval Europeans, so too was medieval Europe diverse enough to generate a variety of constructions of the Jewish present, past, and future. Nonetheless, the negativity we shall encounter on the part of the major thought leaders upon whom we shall focus is extremely important for understanding the emergence of modern anti-Semitism.