



From Contempt for the Law of God to the Holocaust

John Jovan Markovic
Professor of History

The first step in recognizing the effect of Christian theology behind the extent of the Holocaust is, of course, to learn about the history of ecclesiastical hatred and contempt for the Jews and Jewishness. The Nazi project, the “Final Solution,” would have never succeeded to the extent that it did had it not been for the widespread willingness of the Christian masses across Europe to collaborate with the Nazis, and had it not been for the Christian bystanders who selfishly rationalized away the “fate of the Jews” as preordained by God Himself. The Holocaust occurred among those who were under the tutelage of the Church for some two thousand years. Also, it happened among those who boasted of the greatest civilization ever—Western Civilization. History shows that Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans and other Christians

actively helped and supported the Nazi project to rid their respective communities of the Jews. That Christians could have thwarted and foiled Hitler’s plans is best seen in the open opposition to Nazism in Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, the small village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in southern France and a few other places. Indeed, a number of Christians did risk their lives and help save the Jews, but these Christians were far outnumbered by those who collaborated with the Nazis. Too many Christians straddled the fence, having no courage to stand up to evil. There were even those who did stand up to the Nazis, but wished the Jews away. Among the spiritual leaders, the clergy collaborating with the Nazis across Europe far outnumbered the clergy rescuing the Jews. There was hardly a Christian denomination which did not have among its clergy and its member-

ship those who deemed Hitler a God-sent savior from communism, socialism, liberalism, Zionism and the evils and vices of the modern world. A number of leading clergy even joined the National Socialist Party.

I cannot stress enough the importance for contemporary Christianity to examine the history of the two-thousand-years-long ecclesiastical hatred and contempt for the Jews. Ignorance of this subject is extremely detrimental to Christian life. Intellectual laziness, deliberate avoidance or procrastination to learn about it, or giving it a low priority in personal and public education, precludes and forestalls Christians from seriously reassessing their theology. I believe this reassessment is necessary. Christianity today is in a serious crisis, and to deny this crisis is in itself a serious problem. The Holocaust did not bring about this crisis, but rather

exposed it. The Holocaust forces Christians to face the ugly side of their theology. Again, the objective here is not to trash Christian theology as a whole, but to seriously reassess and, if possible, remove those tenets which are foreign and damaging to Christians, Jews, and the rest of humanity.

It takes will and a moral capacity to study the history of ecclesiastical hatred and contempt for the Jews and Jewishness. To study it for the sole purpose of merely knowing what happened, however, is not enough. As a matter of fact, to retell the history of ecclesiastical hatred and contempt for the Jews is altogether troubling. To retell the history of the Holocaust is even more depressing. I have students who have difficulties handling the Holocaust course emotionally and psychologically. The study of this lamentable part of Christian history ought to enhance our capacity to self-reflect, to attain spiritual discernment and to act against evil.

No other major religion of the world—Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam—has departed and deviated from its original foundation as much as Christianity. Whether that departure has been for better or worse can be best judged by the results it produced. The *real* Great Schism *did not* take place in 1054 (between the Eastern Orthodox and Western Catholic Christians), or in 1378 (between the Italian cardinals around Urban VI and the French cardinals around Clement VII), or in 1517 (when Martin Luther supposedly nailed his 95 Theses to the doors of the Wittenberg Chapel, thus starting in earnest the Protestant Reformation). All of these schisms pale in comparison to the Real Great Schism that was brought

about by the work of the second-century Patristic Fathers and that took the Church away from the Synagogue and cleansed it of Jewishness. We would not be far from the target if we took the publication of Justin Martyr's works *The First Apology* and *The Dialogue with Trypho* as the time the Real Great Schism took place. That is not to say that Justin Martyr was the only figure. Other Patristic Fathers made their own contribution to the "getaway" too.

That the second-century Church became different from the Apostolic Church, known as *The Way* (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:22), is well attested to by two leading scholars. Stephen G. Wilson sees the period from 70 to 170 C.E. as "the tunnel period, where things looked one way at the beginning and rather different at the end."¹ J. N. D. Kelly, speaking of the teachings of the New Testament, states that "the difference of atmosphere becomes immediately apparent as one crosses from the apostolic to the post-apostolic age."²

What makes Justin Martyr stand out among the second-century Patristic Fathers is his intellectual and literary skill to pull together the defense of Christian beliefs, the refutation of non-Christian teachings and numerous anti-Jewish diatribes, in a systematic and rational manner. He did all of it by using the very writings of his opposition. In *The Dialogue with Trypho*, by quoting, misquoting and *freely quoting* from the Hebrew Scriptures (the Christian Old Testament), Justin provided the Christians with an argument well packed with hateful theological rational. His focus was on the "Jewish" law. In one sweep, Justin rationally "proved:" 1) that the "burdensome" Law of

Moses [read, the Law of God] given at Sinai was for the Jews alone; 2) that neither Abraham nor other Patriarchs lived under the Law of Moses; 3) that the Law of Moses was abrogated with Christ; 4) that the Christians do not and should not live under the Law of Moses but under the New Law which is Christ; 5) that the Christians live in a new dispensation under the New Testament which is, again, Christ; 6) that the Jews never really understood, nor presently understand, the Scriptures, which was given to them under Moses and the Prophets but now is properly understood by the Christians; and 7) that it is therefore the Christian Church which is the true Israel.

Justin's argument that God gave the Law to the Jews alone is devious and, most of all, underhanded. It reveals hatred for both the Jews as a people and the Torah. It also set a tone for Christian theology. As far as the Jewish people are concerned, it became a major factor in the future definition of the Jews as human beings. By singling out the Jews as the people who alone were in need for God to step in and issue laws and precepts that would supposedly rein in their inherent proclivity to sin, Justin laid a foundation for the future antisemitic argument that Jews are by nature a different kind of beings than the rest of humanity. Justin says that the Jews have a natural tendency toward the worship of idols. God, according to Justin, imposed circumcision and the sabbaths upon the Jews so they would not stray too far away. Circumcision was imposed to mark them for retributive punishment. Since God in His foreknowledge knew that the Jews would crucify Christ, He predes-

tined them to suffer alone of all the peoples of the earth. The Jews, according to Justin, are not able to repent of sin, are wicked and ungrateful, foolish, dull and stupid. They are also instigators of evil rumors against the Christians, and are to be blamed for the suffering of the Christians and other peoples. This lie played exceptionally well in the ears of Christians who were undergoing persecution by the Roman authorities. The Jews, Justin says, are mired in sin, and are sick of spiritual disease. They do not grasp the truth, lack faith, and do not understand the Scriptures—and the tirade goes on.

In the process of defending Christianity, Justin articulated a set of Christian tenets which no other Christian apologist could outdo later. Every single tenet of Christian anti-Jewish theology of the Middle Ages—that the Jews do not and cannot understand the Scriptures, have a natural proclivity to sin, killed Christ, are cursed, are rejected by God, predestined and marked for punishment, and so forth, and because of that are replaced by the Christians as the true spiritual Israel, is found in the two works of Justin. Those who followed suit after Justin (Irenaeus, Origen, Tertullian, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Ambrose, and others) honed and polished the tenets Justin himself had already created. None of them added any new tenet to Justin's anti-Jewish philosophy; they only elaborated upon them and adapted them to the current conditions of their own world.

The Patristic Fathers—Justin Martyr in particular—changed the course of Christian theology in several ways: 1) they rejected the authority of the Torah; 2) developed a doctrine that the

Church replaced the Synagogue; and, worst of all, 3) opened the door for pagan hatred and contempt for Judaism and the Jews to freely flood Christian theology. Having said this, we should note that, by the grace of God, in the midst of all this, the Church nevertheless did preserve the belief of the full humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of salvation by grace as originally proclaimed by the Apostles.

This denial of the authority of the Torah necessitated a new source of authority. Thus came into being the so-called “replacement theory.” Whereas Paul and the Apostles saw Jesus the Christ to be the final authority—one who both gave and fulfilled the Law given at Sinai—Justin placed the authority in his “philosophical” Christ who abrogated and annulled the Law of Moses. Soon after Justin, another Church Father, Irenaeus, argued in his works that truth and the rule of authority in teaching is in the church in Rome.³ This theological-philosophical shift largely explains the long-time presence of the ecclesiastical hatred and contempt for Judaism and the Jews in the Church's teachings. Having usurped the right to judge on moral issues, and having severed its roots from Judaism, the Church found itself needing to continually define its relationship with Judaism. That the Torah was considered taboo is best seen in light of the fact that even when individual Jews converted to Christianity, they were still suspected of secretly observing the Torah. It was not enough for the Church that a Jew be baptized in public. A converted Jew was always under watch. By the thirteenth century, the Church was claiming full and unchallenged

authority to interpret and decide what was right and what was wrong in religious, social and even political matters. The negation of the Law of God was a practical necessity for the survival of the Church as both an ecclesiastical and a political force.

Soon after the Edict of Milan (313), which ended the persecution of Christians, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. As new barbarian warlords were establishing their new kingdoms on the rubble of the collapsed western parts of the Empire, the new kings and the Church decided that a mutual support would be of benefit to both. Thus, hand in hand, the Church and the kings worked together in converting the barbarian peoples. The Church was determined to stamp out all heresies, such as Arianism. Legislation became the major venue to constrain and outlaw Jewish life. Both the Theodosian (fifth century) and Justinian Codes (sixth century) are full of anti-Jewish decrees and edicts. The Visigothic Code (seventh century) was especially vicious, aiming directly at Judaism and the Torah itself. The Jews, who usually lived in major cities, were a continual reminder of the true roots of Christianity—the roots the Church was also continually denying. The first major effort on the part of the Church and the state to eradicate Judaism occurred in the Visigoth Kingdom (modern Spain), in late seventh century. If it were not for the Muslims who destroyed the Visigoth Kingdom in 711, the Jews in Iberia would have perished. At the end of the eleventh century, in conjunction with the First Crusade, the Jews were severely persecuted and murdered. In a medieval world where

the powerful and wealthy cheated and even killed each other, where both exploited the poor, where there was a power struggle between the Church in Rome, the powerful bishops throughout Europe, and the princes and the kings, the Jews were used, abused and at the end persecuted and killed. The pogrom became the most convenient way to cancel long-overdue loans to Jewish merchants (the Jews were allowed to charge usury, whereas Christians were not).

Both the Renaissance and the Reformation movements did little to change anti-Jewish attitudes and beliefs among the Christians. Martin Luther, the man who stands as the herald of the Reformation, produced probably the most vicious and vulgar attacks put to print against the Jews. They were so vicious that even Hitler admired them and fully incorporated them into his own propaganda platform against the Jews. The gradual growth in numbers and economic power of a liberal urban class, starting in the fourteenth century, and consequently the emergence of the nation-states, gave hope to the Jews of emancipation. It came to being only in September 1791, during the French Revolution. The anti-Jewish attitudes and beliefs were so deeply ingrained into the minds of the public that even the “enlightened” philosophers of the eighteenth century, who were in general anticlerical, struggled with how to treat the Jews in their new world. The notion that a baptized Jew cannot be expected to truly become Christian changed into one where a Jew cannot truly be expected to be loyal to a nation.

In the nineteenth century central and eastern Europe, where the

concept of nation embodied ethnicity and religion, the issue of loyalty became even more acute: How can a Jew who is loyal to Mosaic Laws be loyal to the modern state, a nation-state that was, for example, both German and Christian or Russian and Orthodox or Croatian and Catholic? This new development added the ethnic and racial component to the already existing ecclesiastical hatred and contempt for Jews. The nineteenth century, like the second, produced a major shift in redefining the relationship of the Jews to the Christian population. In the second century, the shift was basically philosophical and theological; in the nineteenth, it was philosophical and scientific. One of the most notable characteristics of the nineteenth-century intellectual elite was a desire to appear and sound “scientific.” To be known as a Jew-hater seemed vulgar, medieval, primitive, religious. So, Wilhelm Marr, a German journalist and an enemy of the Jews, coined a more respectable term—anti-Semitism. Overnight, the old ecclesiastical hatred and contempt for the Jews became anti-Semitism, an ism pretending to be an intellectual philosophical system equal to, for example, liberalism, nationalism, socialism, communism, and so forth. It was a new philosophical system where ecclesiastical hatred and contempt for the Jews merged with modern racism. We historians call this nineteenth-century development anti-Semitism.

The Church was not prepared to deal with this new development and under the pressure of its own previous anti-Jewish traditions many among the clergy succumbed to antisemitism. The Nazis added their own ideas, but

in general built upon already-existing anti-Jewish sentiments. What enabled the Nazis to murder almost six million Jews was: new technology which helped in mass propaganda and in collecting information about the whereabouts of the Jews; a state-sponsored bureaucratic administrative structure; and, most of all, anti-Semitism. The Christian Church, whose theology claimed that there is indeed evil, failed to stand up to it.⁴

¹Stephen G. Wilson, *Related Strangers: Jews and Christians, 70-170 C.E.* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), p. xv.

²J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 3.

³According to Irenaeus, the primacy of the church in Rome should be recognized because both Peter and Paul and their disciples established the church in Rome and died in Rome. *Against Heresies*, in *The Library of Christian Classics. Volume I. Early Christian Fathers*, transl. and ed. by Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), pp. 370-377.

⁴For more on the persecution of the Jews in the Visigoth Kingdom, see John Jovan Markovic, “The Church, the Royal Court, and the Statutory Ostracism of the Jewish People in the Visigothic Kingdom,” in *Creation, Life, and Hope: Essays in Honor of Jacques B. Doukhan*, ed. by Jiří Moskala (Berrien Springs: Old Testament Department, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2000), pp. 321-338; and on the history of the ecclesiastical hatred and contempt for the Jews, on the history of antisemitism and the failure of the Church to confront the Nazis, see idem, “The Ecclesiastical Roots of the Holocaust: From the *Adversus Judaeos* Tradition to the Holocaust,” in *Thinking in the Shadow of Hell: The Impact of the Holocaust on Theology and Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. by Jacques B. Doukhan (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 2002), pp. 3-27.