

# The Enduring Covenant

*The Education of Christians and the End of Antisemitism*



Padraic O'Hare

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Enduring  
Covenant*



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*For Peggy and Brian  
with gratitude and love.*

*“God is greater than religion . . .  
faith is greater than dogma.”*

— RABBI ABRAHAM HESCHEL

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# Introduction



In the preface to *Jewish-Christian Dialogue: A Jewish Justification*, David Novak writes: “No matter how abstract a theory about any type of human relationship becomes, the theorist must regularly return to the experiences that elicited his or her concern for it. Without that regular return, the theory loses contact with its own human content.” Novak proceeds to describe his first memorable contact with a Christian. It took place on a train in the 1940s when Novak was eight years old. He met a man, whose name Novak has long since forgotten, who turned out to be a retired Methodist minister. The kindly old gentleman asked Novak what he liked to read; Novak responded that he liked to read the Bible. The gentleman asked if his favorite biblical hero was David; Novak answered that his favorite person was Abraham. They spoke briefly of Father Abraham before Novak’s parents came looking for him. Novak concludes: “I sensed too that he was Abraham’s son. . . . Then and there we were equals; each of us accepted the other exactly as he was.”

I have asked a number of Christian friends and colleagues about the origin of their passion for reparation and reverence between Jews and Christians. I have heard some stories of first encounters, but never have I heard an adequate explanation of the passion. Its source, like my own, is not a sense of responsibility, though that is certainly present. The passion is not exhausted by appreciation for individual Jews or Judaism as such, though appreciation and friendship abound. I have concluded that the source is ineffable. Later in this book I quote Dom Bede Griffiths, who speaks of each individual as a “capacity” of the Holy One, as a light refracted from the Light. It must be, mysteriously, that for some, the expression of divine “capacity” is this passion.

I have said facetiously on many occasions that I was led to Jewish-Christian relations by a love of “deli,” or again by the insuperable joy I experience from the movies of Mel Brooks. I have stopped saying this, embarrassed that it sounds reductionistic, and perhaps insulting. Still — enjoying good food and laughter in the face of tears — perhaps it is not reductionistic after all.

I, too, have a first encounter indelibly etched in my memory. It is of a face, a gentleness, a solicitude for a little Gentile boy who truly shared with an old, Jewish delicatessen worker — what else — a love of “deli.” The delicatessen was called the Colony Deli. It is long since gone from Eighty-Second Street off Roosevelt Avenue in Jackson Heights, Queens, New York. I went in often for the hot dogs. But one afternoon the “old” gentleman (I was around eleven or twelve, I think; perhaps he was the age I am now) told me about Challah, the bread of Sabbath Seudah. I don’t remember any of his words about the bread, its preparation, or the importance attached to it. I remember only that he somehow did convey the importance of the bread and the wonders of the Sabbath, and that by doing so he graciously invited me into a strange, alluring world, though perhaps I am manufacturing and imposing portentous meanings and effects on this encounter and on the talk of bread for the Friday night Sabbath meal. Still, Jews and Christian both believe that the ineffable, as Rabbi Abraham Heschel has said, is manifest not only in great things but in ordinary things such as a morsel of bread.

This book emerges from that ineffable passion, from those origins, however obscure their meaning and dim the details. It arises as well from fifteen years of sustained and satisfying engagement in Jewish-Christian relations, into which I was invited by friends and colleagues, Martin Goldman and Michael McGarry, CSP. The book is divided into six chapters. In chapter 1 I survey what the philosopher Jules Isaac called the history of the “teaching of contempt.” Terrible memories — bitter for Jews, shameful for Christians — are raised here. I have only recently been reminded (by Margot Stern Strom) of how volatile Christian hearers can become when faced with the facts of this history, when faced with our sustained theological justification for subordination and misery for Jews, leading, inevitably if indirectly, to twentieth-century genocide.

Chapter 2 deals with genuine religious pluralism and dialogue. It is an insistent plea that such pluralism rests not on civility or tolerance, nor least of all on “liberal” indifference. Reverencing those on paths of holiness other than one’s own is demanded by who God is! The chapter evokes the witness and scholarship of exemplars of such interreligious reverence, Abraham Joshua Heschel and Krister Stendahl. And it situates within authentic Catholic theological anthropology a theological justification for the proposition — as Bishop Stendahl has said — that “from God’s perspective we are all minorities.”

Chapter 3 is the most arduous piece of writing I have done. (I

trust it will not be any reader's most arduous "read.") It is a short Christology, as it would be called in traditional systematics. The purpose of the chapter is to demonstrate the possibility and necessity of teaching in a way utterly devoid of triumphalism and exclusivism our beliefs about Jesus Christ and the experience for Christians of Jesus Christ as the Near Presence of the Holy One. It is at the same time a catechesis of Jesus Christ that is richer for Christians than the classical Christology that still dominates in many places. The chapter places the focus on eucharistic practice.

Chapter 4 is an essay on the religious educational theory of my teacher Gabriel Moran. By distinguishing between "teaching religion" and "teaching religiousness," by acknowledging the many relational experiences that constitute education and the many graces of ordinary life that support and sustain "religiousness," and, finally, by insisting that the purpose of religious education is to form holy people, Moran provides the only conceptualization of religious education practice that is adequate for our purpose. His is a theory of practice in which interreligious reverence is intrinsic, because it is a theory devoid of triumphalism and apologetic intent.

Chapter 5 is an appreciation of Judaism, of the religious worldview and life that emerges from what is here called "the genius of Judaism." It is a perilous venture not only because something as complex, diverse, and rich as Judaism is virtually impossible to encapsulate in an essay, book, or whole library of books, but also because of the danger of casting the meaning of certain Jewish experiences and beliefs in the mold of unexamined Christian assumptions. My justifications for the effort are based on the admiration I have felt for Judaism and many Jews of my acquaintance, some of whom I count as friends, and the need to debunk persistent stereotypes.

The concluding chapter focuses on practice, on (1) elements of a paradigm shift to which Christian religious educators (and Jewish, Muslim, and other religious educators, as well) must give themselves if reverential convergence of peoples on different paths of holiness is to occur; (2) principles for such practice; and (3) select examples of religious education programs for interreligious reverence, especially between Jews and Christians.

When I conceived the ideas for this book and began writing, the book had but one purpose: to speak about a practice of religious education that eliminates anti-Judaism. I have written often and appreciatively of late about the richness of Eastern religious traditions. So it is not surprising to me that as I wrote, a more broadly



conceived practice for interreligious reverence became more prominent in the pages of the manuscript. But what did surprise me in the course of composing this book was how obvious it became to me that triumphalist religion destroys the very clues to holiness that the religious community seeks to pass on to its members. What I have come to believe is that every time we unearth a defensive and xenophobic practice or pattern of speech in our religion and set it aside, we are doing something that adds to the health of our religious community, to its capacity to assist people to become holy.

## Chapter One

# Anti-Judaism, Antisemitism: History, Roots, and Cures



In this chapter I will define Antisemitism,\* distinguish it from anti-Judaism, show the intimate relationship between the two, and link both to ecclesiastical triumphalism, glorification of the church as the one place of salvation, and of its hierarchs as absolute arbiters of truth. The triumphalist attitude is the linchpin of theological anti-Judaism and often of Antisemitism among Christians.

Further, I will clarify the links between persistent anti-Judaism and the way Christians understand the Second Testament, early church origins, and early Judaism. The history of Christian anti-Judaism and Antisemitism, including contemporary developments, will be assessed and some preliminary remarks on what Christians need to reform in our thought and teaching will be offered.

### Definitions

For the moment, I accept as a working definition of Antisemitism that offered by Edward Flannery in the introduction to the 1985 edition of his pioneering work, *The Anguish of the Jews*. For Flannery, three elements constitute Antisemitism: hatred, contempt, and stereotype.<sup>1</sup> We shall see, however, that some of the contemptuousness displayed century after century by Christians toward Jews, as well as some of the stereotyping, is fueled more by theological conviction and not by hatred. This is not to claim that where there is genuine theological conviction, hatred cannot also be present. The purpose here is not to exculpate Christians or any other people

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\*Advocates for the use of the term "Antisemitism" (rather than "anti-Semitism") include Professor Yahuda Bauer of Hebrew University in Israel. The argument for this new usage is that the prior usage subtly grants the existence of something called "Semitism," in response to which one might well assume a posture of opposition. There is, however, no such ideology or entity as "Semitism." Thus the new usage.

whose imaginations, language, and other images contain and carry anti-Judaism. Nor is the distinction that will be made between Antisemitism and anti-Judaism too fine a point, a bit of Gentile preciousness. Both anti-Judaism and Antisemitism predate Christianity. For example, in his authoritative study, *The Origins of the Inquisition in 15th-Century Spain*, Benzion Netanyahu traces Antisemitism and anti-Jewish stereotype to a tract, "A History of Egypt," written by the Egyptian priest Manetho in 270 C.E. Netanyahu calls the work "the first written Antisemitic piece to come down to us from antiquity...[one full of] the most atrocious lies and the most absurd libels,..." a diatribe occasioned by the alliance of Jews in Egypt with the Persian overlords.<sup>2</sup> But Christianity is unique in that its anti-Judaism, born of theological conviction, is virtually identical to its classic expression of its own self-understanding, which is to say its understanding of Christianity replacing Judaism. And this Christian understanding of itself has achieved an orthodox status with vast numbers of confessants. The foundation and formulation of the self-understanding of vast numbers of Christians cannot helpfully be reduced in all instances to hatred.

The second reason the distinction between anti-Judaism and Antisemitism is so important is in a way the opposite of the first. If the first proceeds from sympathy, however guarded and realistic, the second proceeds from a rigorous attention to just how insidious it is to confront a majority (Christians) whose corporate self-understanding is in such large measure founded on being anti-Jewish in theological conviction. It is not only the haters who have to be confronted but those who do not hate but are still anti-Jewish. The best way to confront this problem is to make the distinction but also to show the links between anti-Judaism and Antisemitism, as I hope to do, and by doing so to help the anti-Jewish to change their hearts.

A final reason for the distinction is related to the marked virulence of Christian Antisemitism. Having noted that Antisemitism predates the Christian *adversus Judaeos* tradition, Rosemary Radford Ruether nevertheless makes this chilling point: "Hatred between groups which have no stake in a common stock of religiously sanctioned identity symbols can scarcely be as virulent as hatred between groups whose relations express a religious form of 'sibling rivalry.'" <sup>3</sup> Hatred founded on such volatile motives needs to be assessed and countered with passion but also with precision.

I leave it, therefore, to the reader to distinguish between contemptuousness and stereotyping driven by sincere (but destructive) theological conviction, and that motivated by hatred. And I propose, not uniquely, that Antisemitism is hating Jews just because they are Jews. Surely everything that emerges from racial Antisemitism, what Netanyahu traces to the Inquisition in Spain, is hateful. The reader will judge whether there is, in addition, but not unrelated to such hatefulness, a distinct anti-Judaism. For the present, let us consider anti-Judaism without reference to hate and return to the larger question.

The essence of theological anti-Judaism lies in Christian replacement theology, quite literally Christians' understanding of themselves as replacing Judaism in the affections of God, the Holy One. Mary Boys points to the etymology of the term *supersessionism*, which names the many tenets of this ideology, noting that it derives from the Latin verb *supersedere*, "to sit upon."<sup>4</sup> Boys identifies eight tenets that define supersessionism: (1) revelation in Jesus Christ supersedes the revelation to Israel; (2) the New Testament fulfills the Old Testament; (3) the church replaces the Jews as God's people; (4) Judaism is obsolete, its covenant abrogated; (5) post-exilic Judaism was legalistic; (6) the Jews did not heed the warning of the prophets; (7) the Jews did not understand the prophecies about Jesus; (8) the Jews were Christ killers.<sup>5</sup>

Clark Williamson and Ronald Allen speak of theological anti-Judaism in somewhat different terms, though their treatment is consistent with Boys's. In *Interpreting Difficult Texts: Anti-Judaism and Christian Preaching*, they identify six defining features of this opposite theological ideology: (1) that Jews and Judaism represent everything bad about religion; (2) that the cleavage between promise and denunciation in the prophetic books of Hebrew Scripture is represented by Christianity (promise) and Judaism (denunciation); (3) that Christianity embodies salutary universal values; and Judaism, destructive particularistic prejudices; (4) that the "Old Adam" (Judaism) embodies law and the letter of the law; and the "New Adam," Christ Jesus, and the Christians embody spirit and grace; (5) that the Jews have been rejected for their crimes; and (6) perhaps their most interesting contribution, that anti-Judaism itself is a comprehensive *model* for understanding both Judaism and Christianity.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, one of the most detailed examinations of anti-Judaism in the polemical texts of the Christian Scripture and early church life is Jules Isaac's famous list of eighteen points in the appendix of his

historic monograph of 1947, "Has Anti-Semitism Roots in Christianity?"<sup>7</sup> Isaac states the case positively, offering propositions for correcting anti-Jewish stereotyping and ignorance about the Second Testament and the early days of Jewish Christianity. By putting the propositions in a negative key, we have an exhaustive catalog of the erroneous foundations of theological anti-Judaism.

Isaac's points are these: (1) There is awesome ignorance among Christians of the Hebrew Scriptures, and (2) ignorance, therefore, of the classical Jewish religious values that constitute so much of the spirituality, the faith path, set out in the Christian Scriptures. (3) Christians undervalue, indeed, dismiss the religious and moral significance of Jewish monotheism; (4) deny the vibrancy of first-century Palestinian Judaism from which Christianity emerged; (5) ascribe the dispersion of the Jewish people after the destruction of the Second Temple to divine retribution; (6) ignore certain "editorial tendencies" (as Isaac gently puts it) in the Christian Scriptures, editorial liberties casting many of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries in the worst light; (7) fail to link Jesus and his teaching to Jesus' own Judaism and fail to appreciate the "Jewishness" of Jesus. (8) Related to item 7, Christians ignore the fact that Jesus remained a Jew, "under the law," preaching in synagogue and temple for his whole life; (9) deny that Jesus understood his mission as directed to his own Jewish compatriots; (10) deny the acceptance and receptivity of many Jews to Jesus; (11) assume the Jews of Jesus' time rejected him as Messiah when he was presented to them as the Messiah; (12) assume the Jewish leaders of Palestine represented the Jewish people when, in fact, as Isaac says, they were the "representatives of an oligarchic caste bound to Rome and detested by the people"; (13) interpret certain texts so that Jesus is perceived as rejecting Israel, when, in fact, Jesus always distinguished the people of Israel from "evil shepherds"; (14) falsely accuse the Jews of killing God; (15) assert that those who participated in the death of Jesus had the support of the people; (16) assume erroneously that the Jewish people had a legal role in the proceedings against Jesus; and (17) assume, erroneously yet again, that all or most of the Jews of Jesus' time resided in Palestine.

The eighteenth in Isaac's list is perhaps the most touching point of this awful catalog of ignorance and prejudice. Isaac concludes his appendix by noting that even if, as is polemically portrayed at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, there were a scene in which a mob of his fellow Jews screamed to Pilate about Jesus, "his blood be upon us and our children," for Rabbi Jesus, "Father for-