A BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTISEMITISM

Definition of Antisemitism

Antisemitism is the marginalization and/or oppression of people who are Jewish based on the belief in stereotypes and myths about Jewish people, Judaism and Israel.

Historically, what began as ethnic prejudice and religious polemic evolved into a systematic policy of political, economic, and social isolation, exclusion, degradation and attempted annihilation. It did not begin in the Nazi era, nor did it end with the close of World War II. Its continuance over the millennia speaks to the power of scapegoating[1] a group that is defined as the "other."

Antiquity

According to the book of Genesis Abraham, who is revered by the three major monotheistic[2] religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), led his family to the land of Canaan around 1,800 years before the Common Era (BCE), where a new nation—the people of Israel—eventually came into being. During those centuries before Christianity, the Israelites (the early Jewish people) experienced intermittent persecution because they refused to adopt the religion of foreign regimes that controlled the land of Israel. This refusal to worship idols was seen as stubbornness and as a Jewish trait. Some Greco-Roman writer mocked the Jews because of their "strange" practices (such as Sabbath observance, dietary regulations, or the faith in an "invisible" god), but they also critiqued other peoples as well; they generally did not single out the Jews. There were incidents of anti-Jewish violence as well, especially in Egypt, such as the destruction of the Jewish Temple at Elephantine c. 410 BCE and anti-Jewish riots in Alexandria in 38 C.E.

It should be noted that the policy of the Roman Empire generally allowed Jews to maintain their religious tradition as a *religio licita* (a permitted religion).

The Rise of Christianity

After the advent of Christianity, a new anti-Judaism evolved. Initially, Christianity was seen as simply another Jewish sect, since Jesus and the Disciples were Jewish and preached a form of Judaism. As Christianity developed, it attracted primarily Gentile converts. What began as a form of Judaism eventually became a separate religion. Christianity had to explain how it differed from Judaism and often did so in the polemical style common in that era. Since both religions based their legitimacy on the Tanach/Old Testament, Christians sought to establish the validity of their religion by claiming it was the continuation of biblical Israel and had superseded[3] Judaism and the Jews. During the first few hundred years after the crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans, adherents of both Judaism and Christianity co-existed—sometimes peacefully, sometimes with tension—as they sought to practice their faiths in the

same lands. Christians viewed the Jewish refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah as another instance of their stubbornness and later as a sign of their supposed hatred of Jesus and Christianity. The primary manifestation of this was the idea that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus, known as "deicide." Jews and Judaism occupied a unique place in the Christian theology and imagination; no other people or tradition posed the same questions or challenges.

Initially, Christianity was not recognized as a religio licita by the Roman authorities. Nonetheless it continued to grow. In the early 4th century, the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and began to favor Christianity and remove the legal impediments to its practice. In 380 CE, the emperor Theodosius I made it the empire's sole authorized religion. This marriage of religion and state power was to have significant consequences for Jews.

The Middle Ages

During the next three centuries (300−600 C.E.) a new pattern of institutionalized[4] discrimination against Jews emerged: Jews were forbidden to marry Christians (399 C.E.), were prohibited from holding positions in government (439 C.E.) and were prevented from appearing as witnesses against Christians in court (531 C.E.), to name but a few examples. As Jews were officially being ostracized[5], certain bizarre fantasies about Jews arose in Northern Europe that foreshadowed the antisemitism of the 20th century. It was alleged[6] that Jews were in league with the Devil, had horns and tails and engaged in ritual murder of Christians, thus reenacting their murder of Jesus. The latter allegation, referred to as "blood libel," was devised by Thomas of Monmouth in 1150 to explain the mysterious death of a Christian boy. This theme recurs in English and German myths.

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

During the middle of the 14th century, the Bubonic Plague spread throughout Europe, killing an estimated one-third of the population. Fear, superstition and ignorance prompted the need to find someone to blame, and the Jews were a convenient scapegoat because of the myths and stereotypes that were already believed about them. Though Jews were also dying from the plague, they were accused of poisoning wells and spreading the disease. In Germany and Austria it is estimated that 100,000 Jews were burned alive for this and other false accusations including using the blood of Christian boys to make Passover Matzah[7] and for desecrating the host.[8] Images of Jews in Christian church art—murdering Christian children, suckling from the teats of pig, etc.—were used to inflame the masses.

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

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

Since Jews were not allowed to own land, employ Christians, or join certain guilds, and because the Church did not allow Christians to loan money for profit, Jews had few alternatives but to become moneylenders. Once they became associated with the forbidden trade of usury—the practice of lending money and charging high interest—a new set of stereotypes evolved around the Jews as money-hungry and greedy. As moneylenders, Jews were frequently useful to rulers who used their capital to build cathedrals, outfit armies, and engage in international commerce. As long as the Jews benefited the ruler, either through finance or by serving as convenient scapegoats, they were tolerated. When it suited the ruler, they were expelled[9]—from England (1290), France (1394), Spain (1492), Warsaw, Sicily, Lithuania and Portugal (1483), Brandenburg (1510),the Papal stated (1569), Italy and Bavaria (1593), and elsewhere.

In the sixteenth century, Jews began to be restricted to certain areas of a town or city, which came to be known as "ghettos", after the area in Venice known as the "ghetto nuovo," (literally, "the New Foundry"), the first of many such examples.

Modern Antisemitism

The term "antisemitism" was coined in 1879 by Wilhelm Marr, a German political agitator in his work, *Victory of Judaism over Germanism.* His thesis was that Jews were conspiring to run the state and should be excluded from citizenship. Antisemitism, in Marr's conception, was linked to the Jews as a people, rather than to Judaism as religion.

In 1894, Alfred Dreyfus, a Jew who was a captain in the French Army, was falsely accused and convicted of selling military secrets to the Germans. When evidence was discovered that Dreyfus was innocent, it was quickly covered up by French Officers of the General Staff who wanted to blame the crime on a Jew. Although Dreyfus was eventually vindicated[10], "The Dreyfus Affair," as it became known, showed how deep-rooted and pervasive antisemitism was in France.

In 1903 in Russia, czarist[11] secret police published a forged collection of documents that became known as *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion.* It told of a secret plot by rabbis to take over the world. Racism

and antisemitism were also facilitated by the development of Social Darwinism and pseudo-scientific notions based on theories of racial superiority and inferiority.

In Russia, although most Jews themselves were extremely poor, they were blamed for all the problems of the Russian peasantry. Pogroms were instigated by the czarist secret police in part to deflect anger from the regime—another case of scapegoating. The Russian Orthodox Church often abetted the police though anti-Jewish sermons. In 1905, Russia's loss in the Russo-Japanese War moved the government to incite a bloody pogrom in Kishinev. Between 1917 and 1921, after the Russian Revolution, more than 500 Jewish communities in the Ukraine were wiped out in pogroms. About 60,000 Jewish men, women and children were murdered.

The Holocaust

During the political turmoil that followed the defeat of Germany in World War I, the legacy of Christian anti-Judaism and the new pseudo-scientific "antisemitism" enabled nationalist leaders once again to scape-goat the Jews as the source of all the world's problems.

In the early 20th century, Germany was perceived as the center of the intellectual and scientific world, indeed the center of the "civilized" world. Since antisemitism was (and remains) woven into the very fabric of Christianity and Western culture and was ubiquitous throughout Europe, many have asked why it was Germany that perpetrated the Holocaust?

Following World War I, Germany was a deeply troubled country. Having lost the war, its citizens felt humiliated by the defeat. The victorious countries, including the United States, France and England, authored the Treaty of Versailles, a peace treaty which compelled Germany to give up territory and to pay reparations to countries whose lands it had damaged. Its economy was in freefall. This was particularly demoralizing to the German people and made them susceptible to was a demagogic[12] leader like Adolph Hitler. Hitler offered the German a vision of a Germany whose power and prestige would be restored. He drew upon accumulated legacy of antisemitism to evoke fear that the Jews would contaminate what he referred to as the superior Aryan race. Therefore, according to Hitler's doctrine, all Jews and their genetic pool must be eliminated.

While this may explain the particular circumstances that led to Hitler's rise in Germany, it would be a mistake to assume that Germany was somehow unique in its susceptibility to antisemitism. The enthusiasm with which people throughout Europe enthusiastically embraced Hitler's antisemitism and collaborated in the Final Solution, or stood by and kept silent, demonstrates the pervasiveness of antisemitism; the Germans merely exploited what was already there.

In the end, more than 6,000,000 Jews—one third of the Jews in the world at the time—perished in the Holocaust.

Post Holocaust Jewish-Christian Relations

The reality of the genocide of European Jewry shocked the Christian world. How was it possible that such a horrendous crime could be carried out in Christian Europe by so many people who considered themselves Christians? This resulted in a profound crisis among Christian theologians and provoked a difficult examination of Christian teachings about Jews and Judaism. Prominent theologians and church bodies acknowledged the direct connection between the historic Christian teaching of contempt for Jews and Judaism and the Nazi final solution and led to the development of new, non-supersessionist theologies, perhaps the most famous of which is Nostra Aetate (1965), one of the documents of the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council. Nostra Aetate repudiated the charge of deicide and implied that the Jewish covenant with God remained in effect. It also repudiated antisemitism and called for dialogue.

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

The post-war era saw the emergence of Jewish-Christian dialogue, including numerous publications, conferences and the establishment of centers of Jewish-Christian relations.

Contemporary Antisemitism

After the Holocaust, after the world witnessed the horrors of Auschwitz, antisemitism became far less accepted. Seeing what antisemitism could lead to made peoples and nations ashamed of openly expressing antisemitism.

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

Other manifestations of antisemitism are more indirect. The excessive criticism of Israel leads some people to feel more comfortable attacking Jews and Jewish institutions around the world. Historically, Islam has viewed Jews and Judaism as a "people of the book," a second-class status that often brought with it certain legal restrictions but which was higher than the status of "idolaters." Whereas the persistence of Jews and Judaism was a central theological concern for Christianity, this is not the case with Islam. Thus, by and large, Jews enjoyed less oppression under Muslim rule than under Christian rule. However, since the establishment of the state of Israel, Antisemitism has grown significantly in the

Muslim world, in part in reaction to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, but also because of the exploitation of that conflict by autocratic rulers to deflect popular anger over repression—another example of scapegoating. And many of the medieval Christian stereotypes (such as blood libel) have been adapted in Muslim media.

Others are expressing antisemitism in more traditional ways. For example, ADL polls have shown that large numbers of Europeans believe that their Jewish citizens are not loyal to the countries in which they live, and that they have a disproportionate amount of political and economic power. The growth of ethnic nationalism and white supremacy, and the explosion of on-line antisemitism, demonstrate that antisemitism is still a significant problem.

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

"A Brief History of Antisemitism" was originally published in *Grosfeld Family National Youth Leadership Mission Guide* (NY: Anti-Defamation League, 2018), www.adl.org. All rights reserved.

Endnotes

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

[2]Monotheistic: adjective for the noun "monotheism," the belief that there is only one God.

[3]Superseded: to force out of use as inferior, to displace in favor of another.

[4]Institutionalized: as part of the system, such as the legal or economic systems.

[5]Ostracized: to exclude from a group by common consent.

[6]Alleged: to state as a fact but without proof.

[7]Matzah: unleavened bread that is eaten during the Jewish holiday of Passover.

[8]Host – sacramental wafers: a round thin piece of bread used in the Christian Eucharist, sometimes referred to as "Holy Communion" or "the Lord's Supper."

[9]Expelled: forced to leave, usually by official action.

[10]Vindicated: freed from blame.

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

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