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Judaism and Christianity: A Study in Conflict

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Abstract

Holocaust Literature in addition to turning inside out Hitler's ghoulish "final solution" and the struggle of its victims presupposes that it is the religious prejudices of the Christian society against the Semites that really caused the Holocaust. The paper explores the history, theology, philosophy that divided the Jews and Christians in Europe and the resultant conflict that has gone on for centuries while truly upon the Holocaust life writings of a few writers.

Key words: Theology, Philosophy, Jews, Christians, Clara Kramer, Miriam Winter, Anita Lobel

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The *Encyclopaedia of Wars* documents that, out of 1,763 wars that have been fought over the centuries all over the world, only 123 or 6.98% have religion as the primary cause (Axelrod 1484-1485). The World Wars are also part is one of the 123 wars but the devastating effect it had on the humanity is unparalleled in the history of human civilization. The Holocaust said to have happened due to the economic crisis after World War I also overshadows the

religious and cultural conflict between Judaism and Christianity that prevailed from time immemorial. Both the religious groups have the same practices but have differences in their ideologies that divide them. After Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany in 1933, he successfully manipulated the German society in decimating the Jewish community during 1939-1945. While doing so Hitler employed the age-old stereotypes that reflected the Semites in bad light. To understand this, we need to look at the history of conflicts between Christianity that is an offshoot of Judaism. Here is a glimpse of it.

In the fourth century, the religious and cultural conflict between the Jews and Christians began in the Roman Empire leading to the persecution of the Jews. This was largely the result of Christian vilification propaganda that the Christians were ill-treated by the Jews. The Theodosian Code, a compilation of all the legislations passed during the mid-fifth century, serves to reconstruct the progressive decline in privileges and security suffered by the Jews in the Roman Empire from 321 to 438 (Pharr 392). This code shows the immunities granted to the Jews by the Roman and Christian rules in their respective worlds, making the Jews a privileged class.

Revd Dr. James William Parkes's book *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of anti-Semitism* (1934) suggests that the Jews occupied the economic stratum of the empire, as some were merchants, artisans and farmers. They had their own cult organizations called synagogues. The Jews who did not belong to the cult had to pay the Roman government the poll tax and sacrifice to the Roman gods. The Jews were not forced to perform any task that violated their religious convictions, and neither

compelled to celebrate state worship nor forced to attend the temples other than their own. However, the Jews had to perform all other liturgies and *tutelage* (forced donations) that was common to all Roman citizens. The most religious duty for the Jews was to maintain the central Jewish administration council called the *Sanhedrin* and several schools which were run under the guidance of Jewish *nasior* patriarch. A Jew could be a slave but only for seven years and it was a religious duty for Jews to free brothers enslaved by the Gentiles. Therefore, it seems probable that there were very few Jewish slaves, and most Jews contributed at least something to the public welfare. This situation changed as most of the emperors and the Roman governments showed indifference to Judaism after the second great revolt in Palestine (135-313). The reason – the Christians became the close allies of the roman emperors in 313 changing the status of Jews for over 100 years that relegated them to an outcaste in Europe.

With regard to the claim that Jews have been the active persecutors of Christians for centuries the historians are divided. While Jean Juster's *Etudes d'histoire juridique offertes a' Paul F. Girard* (1913) that offers a valuable study of the legal position of the Jews under the Visigothic kings and Arthur L William' book *Adversus Judaeos* (1935) attempt to show that there is no existence of the historical fact to prove that the Jews as a class, hated and persecuted the Christians. Contrary to this, Jerome, the church father of fourth century, in his "Commentary on Amos" writes: "holding fast to their ancient anger and violence, still today under the name of Nazarenes, the Jews in their synagogues blaspheme the Christian flock: and while they slay us, they will their own destruction in the eternal fire" (qtd Seaver 9). This usual

opinion of Jewish malice toward the Christians remained among the churchmen during the fourth and fifth centuries. Yet another book *Acta Sanctorum*, depicts the Jews as wicked persecutors of the Christians. The references made here may have some truth as the Jews hated those Jews who converted to the Christianity under the law of Constantius issued in 339. This law forbade the Jews from stoning of Christian converts to death which means Jews were against the Jews who became Christians. Now we know why Jews had come to be perceived as persecutors of the Christians. This partly answers the question whether the Jews really persecuted the Christians or not.

Until the fourth century, the Judaeo-Christian encounter remained a battle of words. But the victory of the church and the official recognition granted to it by the Roman empire empowered the Church and then on, the church practiced zero tolerance towards the Jews. A new element added to the burning situation was the widespread adoption of superficial Christianity by the upper-class Roman society. This change brought anti-Jewish group into the church, for the wars of the first and second centuries had made the Jews unpopular with the Roman ruling class. At this juncture, the hostility of the church fathers found it easy to sow the seeds of hate. After this, the Jews were treated not as human beings at all. The Jews became a monster race according to a theological abstraction of superhuman malice and cunning. The church fathers saw a distorted picture of Judaism. Christianity protected the Jews as a continual disappointment to God, and then it claimed all the virtuous actions in the *Old Testament* for itself. After this, the Jews became the icon of “continuous disobedience,” and their rejection was pictured as almost inevitable. This idea was very harmful to the Jews

when all the promises in *the Bible* were applied to the Christians, and all the curses and threats therein were levelled at the Jews. A terrible falsification took place.

Issues of Faith between Jews and Christians

Judaism, the oldest of the world's monotheistic religions, is the parent of both Christianity and Islam. It proclaims that there is only one God, whose name is *Yahweh*, the creator and ruler of the universe. He revealed His law, the *Torah*, to the Jews or the Hebrews and He chose them to be a light for all humanity. The sacred scriptures of judaism consist of three groups of documents: the **Law**, the **Prophets**, and the **Writings** (such as Psalms and Proverbs). These Scriptures form the *Old Testament* of the Christian Bible. Judaism does not accept the inspiration of the *New Testament* or its account of the fulfilment of the *Old Testament* prophecies. The *Torah* contains some 613 commands that are summed up in the *Ten Commandments*. The Jewish traditions deny the claims of the churches. Rabbinical Judaism is seen as the only legitimate continuation of the biblical tradition and the so called religion of the ancient Israel.

Theology is the root of the clash between Judaism and Christianity in addition to politics, economy, and culture. While the Judaism acknowledges multiple messiahs – Joseph, David, and so on, Christianity closes it with Jesus. Generally, the Jews believe in God who sent a powerful messenger (the Messiah) to deliver Israel from the oppressors and usher in a reign of peace and prosperity. Christians believe that Jesus is also a *messiah* sent by God to save humanity but the Jews reject this completely. Now as the time passes, the prejudices and the practices of Christianity and Judaism are working in opposite directions.

There are many areas of agreement between the two faiths, they accept the *Old Testament* and all its teachings as inspired and the creation of the world out of nothing by an infinite God, the entrance of sin into this world via the temptation of another transcendent being called Satan, the judgement of God on sin, and the necessity of atonement for sin. In Judaism, this atonement is accomplished through sacrifices, prayer, righteous acts, and God's mercy.

Judaism, rejects in toto the central Christian teaching that Jesus Christ is the *Messiah* foretold in the *Old Testament*. Based on what is said in Galatians 3:13-14, "But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.' Through the work of Christ Jesus, God has blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham" (*New Living Translation*). This is the essence of the *Old Testament*, the second coming of the *messiah* for the Christians, where as for Jews, this is not. Christianity has received from Judaism its basic understanding of God, and accordingly there is a divine plan, *Yahweh* is the King not only of the Jews but of all the earth. Some Jews who have become Christians refer to themselves as "completed Jews". For them, the *Old Testament* is filled with hope, and the *New Testament* is its very meaning. They consider Jesus as the *messiah* of God, the Jews doubt this, creating a permanent schism between them and this comes to the fore during political crises in modern times.

Church Synagogue divide during Second World War

The eruption of violence against the Jews during the Second World War has its origins in the superstitious belief that the Jews are the source of the black plague and murder

Christian children and use their blood for ritual purposes. Such hostility became intense during the thirteenth and early fifteenth centuries. It was in Paris in 1240, the first confrontations took place. Christians argued that *the Talmud* contains blasphemies against Jesus and the Christian faith. Despite many spirited defence by the Jewish participants, this event resulted in the condemnation and burning of *the Talmud*. Two decades later a second disputation occurred in Spain presided over by the King of Aragon and the agenda was to convert the Jewish populace. The Jewish scholar, Nachmanides was permitted to defend the Jewish tradition in Jerusalem in 1099 A.D (“Moshe ben Nachman”). The third disputation occurred in Tortosa from 1413 to 14 and unlike the previous two encounters, this event lasted for nearly two years that later was presided over by Pope Benedict XIII. During such encounters, the Jewish community was terrified of the outcome and feared for its safety.

In addition to each having varied views on the other as a religion, there has also been a long and often painful history of conflict, persecution and at times, reconciliation, between the two religions, which have influenced their mutual views of their relationship over time. Since the time of the Middle Ages, the Catholics uphold *Constitution pro Judæis* (Formal Statement on the Jews written in 1199 AD), which states:

We decree that no Christian shall use violence to force them to be baptized, so long as they are unwilling and refuse. ... Without the judgment of the political authority of the land, no Christian shall presume to wound them or kill them or rob them of their money or change the good customs that they have thus far enjoyed in the place where they live. (Baskin 120)

In spite of this, persecution, forcible conversion, forcible displacement of Jews (i.e. hate crimes) and pogroms have happened in Christian Europe, including restrictive land ownership and ghettoization, mandatory dress codes. They have had major effects on Jewish culture. Add to this, there have also been non-coercive missionary efforts such as London Jews Society, founded in 1809, (Smith 275) that was formed to promote Christianity among the Jews – more precisely to make the Jews accept Jesus as the messenger of god, restore the Jews to their promised land Israel and establish harmonious understanding between Judaism and Christianity. This shows two things: (i) the continuation of the theological debate between the Christians and the Jews; (ii) the continuous socio-political efforts to bridge the gap between the two religions.

While such efforts continued to be there on oneside, the victimisation and dehumanisation went on in Europe in 19th and early 20th century owing to region specific political upheavals. For example: in the eighteenth century Europe, Jews still did not have the freedom of movement and could settle only in territories where they had received special permission. In many cities, they had to stay in assigned areas called “ghettos”, which they could only leave during the day. In 1791, the French revolutionary parliament, the first country emancipated in Europe, gave full citizenship and legal equality to the Jews. This position of freedom continued until nineteenth century, but the imperial Russia where most of the European Jewish population lived, forced Jews to settle only in the so-called “Pale” or district of settlement because the Jews were regarded as a potentially revolutionary element. After the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881, many anti-Jewish riots and pogroms

took place in Russia until the First World War. About two million Jews left Russia between 1881 and 1914, due to extreme poverty. The economic and social problems that accompanied the rise of capitalism and industrialization were often blamed on the Jews (Monika 78). The social upward mobility of the western Jews during the nineteenth century especially frightened the bourgeois middle class that became the main supporter of anti-Semitic ideas which is the case in Russia and Germany. In this case, the history of the Jews in Europe is one of love and hate relationship. When the European nations want their economies to develop they invite the Jews, but the moment the Jews prosper, they hate and persecute them, which is fairly visible even to the ordinary eyes.

In response to constantly changing European attitude to the Jews, the community has made intellectual and cultural attempts to bridge the gap between the Christian Europeans, modernity and their age-old culture and religion. This led to the reform of the community from within which began in the second half of the eighteenth century when *Haskala*, the Jewish enlightenment, originated in Germany. The movement attempted to open the Jewish mind to the culture of Europe. Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) in Berlin, himself an orthodox Jew, became the best-known representative of the *Haskala* and advocated Jewish emancipation. He translated the Hebrew bible into German so that the Jews learnt the language of their surrounding culture. It's another thing that the Polish rabbis who felt *The Bible* should only be read in the holy Hebrew language banned this translation. In the West, Jews were first to embrace contemporary culture under Mendelssohn's leadership who combined Jewish and European culture. But the next generation continuing on modernity advocated

religious reforms in Judaism. They gave up speaking western Yiddish, learned less Hebrew and became culturally German. The Jewish religion, which had formerly dominated almost every aspect of their lives, was subjected to reforms in order to better adjust to modern life. This was the birth of liberal Judaism. The Jews learnt to assimilate themselves to the culture, language and manners of their host countries. Jews were there in the German army, in German Parliament and in the field of art and culture. Similarly in Poland, the Jews there became more Polish than the Polish people which is depicted in the holocaust literature written after the Second World War.

Despite such efforts both by Christians and Jews to wipe out the difference between the two oldest communities in the world, the simmering religious discontent keeps erupting in volcanic proportions all the time affecting only the Semites like the Holocaust in twentieth century. Significantly, the language Hitler used to consolidate peoples opinion against the Jews is that of Christian saints and philosophers. More precisely, Hitler had appropriated the German reformer Martin Luther clearly biased views towards the Jews in Germany. Hitler did attack the church as well for not supporting him but did not annihilate the Christians, where as his “final solution” campaign targeted nobody else than the Jews. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_and_Judaism-cite_note-Gottfried2001-52 Following the Holocaust, the loss of six millions of the Jews attempts have been made to construct a new Jewish-Christian relationship of mutual respect for differences, through the inauguration of the interfaith body – the Council of Christians and Jews in 1942 and International Council of Christians and Jews. The Seelisberg Conference in 1947 established 10 points relating to the sources of Christian anti-Semitism. The ICCJ's

“Twelve points of Berlin” sixty years later aiming to reflect a recommitment to interreligious dialogue between the two communities. Pope John Paul II and the Catholic Church have “upheld the Church’s acceptance of the continuing and permanent election of the Jewish people” as well as a reaffirmation of the covenant between God and the Jews. In December 2015, the Vatican released a 10,000 words document that, among other things, stated that Catholics should work with Jews to fight anti-Semitism.

To understand the assimilation of the Jews into European culture, the harmonious existence of the Semites with the Christians and the devastating effects of the holocaust we need to read the holocaust writings such as holocaust life writings which graphically narrate the Jewish life. In addition, the Holocaust memoirs go on to show that only a few were biased in Germany or in Poland and especially the people holding the reins of power more than the ordinary people living in cities, towns and the rural world. For example, Clara Kramer’s memoir *Clara’s War* brings to light the humanitarian or the humane side of the Polish rural society which sheltered the entire family of Clara for nearly two years ignoring the threat to its life by Nazi perpetrators. It was Mr. Valentine Beck and his wife Julia Beck who risked their own lives to save members of Clara Schwarz family. Again, in Miriam Winter’s memoir *Trains: A Memoir of a Hidden Childhood During and After World War II* (2007) it is Cesia, a Christian caretaker, who not only sneaks Miriam Winter out of the ghetto in order to save her life but looks after Miriam for two years. Cesia, a Christian was fully aware of the fact that the Winter’s were Jews but that did not prevent her from saving their lives. Anita Lobel’s memoir *No Pretty Pictures* presents Niania (nanny) a Christian woman as a true saviour of the

kith and kin of the family members of Anita. Anita's life of a Jewish orphan begins at the age of six and goes on till the end of World War II. During the four and half years, she lives in various places and under various caretakers who were all Christians. Niania was one such. These examples clearly indicate that the whole of Germany, Austria, Poland or Ukraine was not against the Jews. While the ghoulish Nazi persecuted the Jews they were protected by the majority Christians. Theological difference or the religious difference among the religious scholars of Judaism and Christianity and the difference in cultural practices of the Jews the majority Christian Europe, not within the Semites were more of political victims than the followers of Jesus.

The incidents – theological, political and sociological – discussed here do say that there exist theological/religious issues between the followers of *The Bible*. But, in essence that has not affected the Jews. In other words, Jews and Christians have not fought wars or battles over their religious differences – leading to bloodshed, deprivation, displacement and impoverishment of the brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. Emperors, monarchs, kings, political heads of state and murderous dictators have but definitely concocted anti-Semitic myths employing the old and forgotten religious debates to settle their scores against an innocent, unprotected populace. Importantly, not all the Christians hated the Jews in Germany instead it was a political party – the Nazis that misused the 'existing differences between the groups' for its own socio-political and economic benefits. Indeed, to have a better society we need thinkers, philosophers and leaders. If irrational thinking based on racial, religious lines is not addressed now, genocides/ethnocides and the Holocausts – will bounce with a bang.

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