

**Reflections on: *A World Without Jews: The Nazi Imagination*
From Persecution To Genocide - 2015**

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Christian Beginnings and Anti-Semitism

Confino's text is an in-depth examination not only of the de facto experiences of genocide within Nazi regime but a careful and thoughtful study of the underlying rationale for their actions. Of course the Nazi political/philosophical ideology was the overriding cause for their behavior; nevertheless, the historical rift between Christian and Jews served as an historical backdrop in Europe. All three Sky God religions have proclaimed one God who is the Father of all and, simultaneously, at various times in their history, their adherents killed their brothers who professed something different than their particular interpretations. Jewish

history stands as the least violent in this tradition; while today we see rampant fratricide within Islam.

What Confino's study makes soberingly clear is that the Nazi goal was to create a new consciousness - a new society – free from the pervasive presence of the Hebrew Scriptures and all the contributions of Jewish culture – in art, politics, music, science etc. Germany, under Hitler, would change history the way the Jews and their Scriptures had changed history. Nazi Germany would erase the Jews in order to inaugurate a new humanity, unsoiled by any submission to Jewish experiences/contributions and/or values. The Jewish body embodied all of what they wished to repudiate; German narcissistic needs would triumph over the Chosen People.

In these brief reflections I would like to outline some of the early Christian roots and beliefs that have been contributory to an anti-Semitic mindset. I am not evaluating Confino's book in depth. The text does evidence a sophisticated awareness of the obscene history of ghettos, exclusions and persecutions that Jews have

experienced; concurrently Confino presents an explication of Nazi ideology and its political/social consequences that eventuated in the holocaust. His story is soul wrenching.

In this short commentary, as I have indicated, I am limiting my reflections primarily to what some recent Scriptural studies can tell us about early Christian experience and anti-Semitic sentiments in some early Christian communities. I am not exploring, in any significant manner, the theological roots of anti-Semitism.¹ As a backdrop to our discussion it is important to recall that there were many Protestant and Catholic clergy and laity who opposed the Nazi/German persecutions – many lost their lives for this. We also know that there was a curtain of silence, particularly from Rome. Pope Pius XII's directive that Jews be given baptismal certificates (many found shelter in monasteries) is common knowledge – yet his public silence as Jews were being hounded, persecuted and killed is more than a troublesome enigma. The multitude of

¹ For anyone interested see: R. Ruether's *Faith and Fratricide: The Theological Roots of Anti-Semitism*.

progressively enacted laws against the Jews, from the first few months of Hitler's rule, which Confino carefully chronicles, belies the notion of ignorance. Also, of less import but nevertheless puzzling is the fact that Hitler was and seemingly remained, officially, a Roman Catholic.

Freud spoke to the relationship between Christianity and Judaism in terms of Oedipal conflicts, the son (Christian religion) displacing the father (Jewish religion). In my own interpretation, however, I prefer to approach an understanding in terms of the some of the thinking evident within the early Christian communities, and the society at large, which contributed to the growth of anti-Semitism; an anti-Semitism eventually seeding a murderous sibling relationship.

Some history: what we have learned from some current scriptural studies is that there were many different vying theologies and practices within the early Christian communities. Different beliefs about who Jesus was as well as his teachings were evident

from the very beginning (complicated by Gnostic and Manichean doctrine). What is not commonly known is that initially the primary Christian community was centered in Jerusalem, with James, Jesus's brother, as its head. James and the Church in Jerusalem, understood Jesus within a generic Jewish context. As best as we can reconstruct, the Jerusalem community, under James's leadership, was willing to dispense with circumcision and the dietary laws, among others – without compromising Jewish moral teachings. It was Paul, himself a Pharisee, who was one of the primary interpreters of Jesus as Christianity would understand him; it was his teachings that eventually contributed, later, to the doctrine of the Trinity.²

A crucial turning point in the history of Christianity, and consequently Jewish/Christian relations, occurred when the Romans plundered and destroyed Jerusalem in 67/70 CE –

² I am greatly indebted to Reza Aslan's *Zealot*. This text is a well-researched and engaging study of the life of Jesus and the era soon after his death.

massacring over sixty thousand inhabitants and destroying the Temple. Christianity was severed from its Jewish roots; it was to flourish from then on only **within** a Roman context. Christian scriptural writings would reflect that change i.e. it was the Jews who killed Jesus, not the Romans. Such a tactical missionary approach was secondary, however, to the mindset of most of the earliest converts. For example, the destruction of Jerusalem was not understood as a politically motivated retaliation, by Rome, for the ongoing and persistent Jewish rebellions. Rather, it was theologically interpreted as **an** unequivocal sign that God himself was punishing the Jews for rejecting their Messiah - echoing many similar style interpretations in the Hebrew Scriptures. (All this within the belief that God's final judgment on this world was imminent i.e. Jesus would return very shortly.)

As we know the four Gospels were written over a period of many years by unknown authors; they were meant to convey the "good news" of Salvation; they were not and are not historical

documents. These writers did not have an understanding of history, as we understand the term today. The stories and events that are related are primarily intended to convey a teaching and/or a particular understanding of Jesus. The Gospels were not intended as an accurate chronicle of Jesus' actual life. Mark's Gospel was written the closest chronologically to the life of Jesus, (c 60 CE) while the author of John's Gospel is the farthest away (c 120 CE). It is in John's Gospel where Paul's interpretation of Jesus holds sway and where, as well, there are repetitive statements about the Jews' rejection of Jesus. Within such a framework the history of anti-Semitism can be read as a narcissistic competition – a sibling/fratricidal history,³ transparently a splitting and a projection of the bad self onto the Jews.

As I have mentioned, there were many different interpretations as to what Jesus' message meant and who he was. There were

³ Augustine used the story of Cain and Abel to assert that the Jews must not be persecuted since they were serving God's purpose - the Biblical reference is the prototypical story of fratricide. Jerome, the translator of the Bible into Latin, took a more negative view.

other Gospels, recently unearthed, such as the Gospel of Peter, of Thomas, the Gnostic Gospels as well as many other writings that were suppressed by the early fundamentalist Church - in favor of the four canonical Gospels. Bert Ehrman's latest work, *How Jesus Became God*, along with the works such as those of Dominic Crossan, Mack, Aslan and a host of others give us a better picture of Jesus the man and have refocused his "divinity" in the context of faith. Following the works of such Scriptural scholars, it is important to note that Jesus, except as found in the Gospel of John, never made a claim to divinity. For example, the statement "I and the Father are one" is more soberly understood as his willingness to do whatever his Father wished. In the judgment of many such a claim of divinity, when he walked the earth, would have been impossible for him - he was a good Jew.

He was against the corrupt money preoccupations of the high priests, the consequent commercialization of the Temple, the proliferation of rules and regulations that made God and the

experience of worship a distant object rather than a present reality; he called for repentance and caring, even for a stranger e.g., the parable of the good Samaritan. Ultimately he spoke to a radical spiritual renewal – focusing on the need for the personal over the formal, the individual over tradition. He was a healing itinerant preacher announcing the imminent presence of the kingdom of God. His message was a new consciousness of God's presence with His people.

The Gospel of John reflects Greek thought, in its profundity and appreciation of the transcendent; its anti-Jewish comments, however, reflect, among other contributing factors, the failure to appreciate the Jesus of Nazareth distinct from the transcendent Christ. Tragically this Gospel mirrors the growing distance between Jew and Christian. It is as if many of the early Christians emotionally and intellectually missed the obvious: Jesus, as the Christ, is a belief of faith, it assumes a personal response – as an act of faith - it is not simply a consequence of listening to the

Jesus' message – even the message that he was seen and experienced after he was crucified. Such a belief, for all those who did not experience it, is an act of faith. Given the mindset of many of the early believers, the ever-present narcissistic phantasy of possessing the truth, and the conviction of the imminent ending of the world – the Jews “refusal” to believe – was interpreted by the followers of Jesus as just that; an obstinate refusal. As if Christian belief was a self-evident reality.

With the statement of Jesus as divine (Council of Nicaea in 325 – called by Emperor Constantine), the separation between Jew and Christian became irreversible. The participating bishops struggled, fought and debated very different formulas in their articulation of Jesus as divine.⁴ When “orthodox” Christianity became the new state religion, under Constantine's mandate, Jews and other religious minorities were de facto second-class citizens. What had

⁴ One of the most common and pervasively popular formulas was that of Arius...whose belief made Jesus divine but not co-equal with God. See Ehrman, pp140ff.

been done to Christians by the state was now done to do to Jews and others; a phenomenon we are all accustomed to. Difference was not welcomed then, it was forbidden in Nazi Germany, it is not accepted in many places today.

Democratic consciousness is a hard won experience – narcissism is not a child of reason.

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The Newsletter of the Chicago Open Chapter for Psychoanalysis