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Christian Anti-Semitism: Past History, Present Challenges: Reflections in Light of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

John T. Pawlikowski
Catholic Theological Union, jtmp@ctu.edu

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Christian Anti-Semitism: Past History, Present Challenges: Reflections in Light of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*

Abstract

A contemporary film on anti-Semitism describes this centuries-long social disease as a "shadow" over the cross. Recent Catholic documents have spoken in even stronger language. In 1989 the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace insisted that "Harboring racist thoughts and entertaining racist attitudes is a sin." And it clearly included anti-Semitism in its list of continuing manifestations of racist ideologies that are to be regarded as sinful. In point of fact, it terms anti-Semitism "the most tragic form that racist ideology has assumed in our century." My assignment here today is to present an overview of post biblical anti-Semitism, following up on Professor Hamm's analysis of forms of anti-Semitism in the New Testament.

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A contemporary film on anti-Semitism describes this centuries-long social disease as a "shadow" over the cross. Recent Catholic documents have spoken in even stronger language. In 1989 the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace insisted that "Harboring racist thoughts and entertaining racist attitudes is a sin."¹ And it clearly included anti-Semitism in its list of continuing manifestations of racist ideologies that are to be regarded as sinful. In point of fact, it terms anti-Semitism "the most tragic form that racist ideology has assumed in our century."² During a visit to Hungary in 1991, conscious of the post-Communist era resurgence of anti-Semitism in certain parts of Central and Eastern Europe, the Pope spoke of the urgent task of repentance and reconciliation. "In face of a risk of a resurgence and spread of anti-Semitic feelings, attitudes, and initiatives," he said, "...we must teach consciences to consider anti-Semitism, and all forms of racism, as sins against God and humanity"³ And in his book *Crossing The Threshold Of Hope*, the Holy Father repeats this theme as he calls anti-Semitism "a great sin against humanity."⁴

Recently the issue of an arising, new form of anti-Semitism, particularly in parts of Europe, has been widely discussed in the media. I cannot delve into the current discussion of this new anti-Semitism in any depth in this presentation. A recent volume by Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer, two historians who have collaborated on the study of anti-Semitism over several decades, does an excellent job in bringing the historical reality of anti-Semitism, especially its

Christian form, into the present day.⁵ This book is a welcome successor to the groundbreaking volume by the late Fr. Edward Flannery titled *The Anguish Of The Jews* which first appeared in the mid-sixties.⁶ This rising form of anti-Semitism in Europe has generated several strong responses from religious leaders. British Chief Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks was joined by the Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams and the Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor in warning of the potential danger of this new anti-Semitic trend in their capacity as joint Presidents of the Council of Christians & Jews.⁷ And in a late December 2003 interview with the prominent Italian newspaper La Stampa Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, former President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, expressed concern that "There is a return of anti-Semitism in our Europe ...Not to recognize it, not to call it by its name is an unwitting way of accepting it."⁸ The Cardinal urged constant vigilance and frank solidarity with Jewish communities to combat the trend. So clearly anti-Semitism is a problem which continues to demand constant attention in our day.

My assignment here today is to present an overview of post biblical anti-Semitism, following up on Professor Hamm's analysis of forms of anti-Semitism in the New Testament.⁹ But let me briefly state some connection with the controversy that has developed regarding Mel Gibson's upcoming film *The Passion of the Christ*, a controversy in which I have found myself a central figure. The joint Catholic-Jewish scholarly group convened by the Secretariat for Ecumenical and

Inter-religious Affairs of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Department of Inter-religious Affairs of the Anti-Defamation League originally examined the script of the film in use at the time of the original filming in Rome. We did so because of the public claim by one of Mr. Gibson's associates Fr. William Fulco, S.J. of Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles who provided the Aramaic translations for the film. He indicated that the script was in total conformity with the Catholic Bishops' Guidelines on Passion Plays issued in 1998.

The script was leaked by an employee of Mr. Gibson's production company ICON. Each of us read it individually before we compared notes. When we did begin a group discussion of the script, we quickly concluded that it was one of the most troublesome texts relative to anti-Semitic potential that any of us had seen in 25 years. It must be emphasized that the main storyline presented Jesus as having been relentlessly pursued by an evil cabal of Jews headed by the high priest Caiphas who finally blackmailed a weak-kneed Pilate into putting Jesus to death. This is precisely the storyline that fueled centuries of anti-Semitism within Christian societies. This is also a storyline rejected by the Catholic Church at Vatican II in its document *Nostra Aetate* and by nearly all mainline Protestant churches in parallel documents. And modern biblical and historical scholarship has generally emphasized that Pilate was a horrible and powerful tyrant, eventually removed by Rome from his position because of his extreme brutality; a tyrant the occupied and politically powerless Jewish community was in no position to blackmail. Unless

this basic storyline has been altered by Mr. Gibson, a fringe Catholic who is building his own church in the Los Angeles area and who apparently accepts neither the teachings of Vatican II nor modern biblical scholarship, *The Passion of the Christ* retains a real potential for undermining the repudiation of classical Christian anti-Semitism by the churches in the last 40 years.

Let me now turn to the post biblical history of Christian anti-Semitism which *The Passion of the Christ* could conceivably rekindle. There is little question that what another contemporary film has called "the longest hatred" has its roots in the teachings of the Church Fathers. Whatever we say about anti-Semitism in the New Testament,⁹ its presence is clear as a central component of Christian identity as we enter the Patristic era (First through Eighth Centuries). A number of Christian scholars, including Robert Wilken, David Efroymson and Rosemary Radford Ruether have uncovered a prevailing anti-Judaic bias at the core of patristic literature (literature written by Patres). While notable exceptions such as Clement of Alexandria can be found,¹⁰ the great patristic writers such as Tertullian, Origen, Irenaeus and Eusebius all made anti-Judaic bias an integral part of stating the fundamental meaning of Christian faith.

In many of his writings, but especially in those directed against Marcion who wanted to eliminate the Old Testament from the church's biblical canon, Tertullian presented Jesus as the messiah who ought to have been recognized by

the Jewish people but was not. As a result, he argued, the Jews were subjected to God's wrath. For Tertullian Jesus' severity towards Jews was completely in line with the antagonism expressed by his Father, the Creator, as David Efroymson states it,

What seems significant here is not the negative picture of the Jews of Jesus' time, which was, of course, already firmly embedded in the tradition. It is rather the heavy emphasis on the appropriateness of the opposition between Jesus and the Jews, or between Jesus and the Jews, or between God and Jews... Not only was there an emphatic heightening of an anti-Jewishness ascribed to Jesus; there was the additional element, apparently now crucial against Marcion, of a God who for some time had "opposed" Israel and had wanted to rid himself of the "old" covenant in the interest of something new and better.¹¹

Origen's approach was marked by a particular emphasis on what he called the "spiritual sense" of the scriptures. Reading the biblical texts in this way, he insists in *On First Principles*, is the solution to the problem of the "hardhearted and ignorant members of the circumcision" (that is, Jews), who "refused to believe in our Savior" because they could not get beyond the *literal* sense of the text. (4.2.1).

Irenaeus explained Jewish law as necessary for a time because of human sinfulness. But the coming of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem signaled that the time of the Jews and their law was over. According to Irenaeus, Jesus was

attacking the Jewish claim to be able to know the Father without accepting the Son. He relied on the parables of the wicked tenants (Mt 21: 33-34) and the wedding feast (Mk 22: 1-14) to "prove" that God had destined the Gentiles to replace unresponsive Jews in the kingdom.

The most important and complete Christian document of the patristic era was Justin's *Dialogue with Trypho*. It became a model for discussions about Judaism in the ancient church. Justin's writings were the first real expression of the idea that Jewish social misfortunes are the consequence of divine punishment for the death of Jesus. As a result, Jews will never be able to escape suffering in human society. Having made references to the expulsion of Jews from Jerusalem, their desolate lands and burned out cities, Justin assures his rabbinic dialogue partner that these sufferings were justly imposed by God in light of Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus. Here we have the seeds of an attitude that would come to dominate the thinking of the church by the fourth century and greatly contribute to the spread of anti-Semitism.

Finally, Eusebius, in his early fourth century *Ecclesiastical History*, confines the role of Jews to that of witnessing to divine justice. That was especially true in the first century, when Jews were being punished at the hands of the Romans while the Christian church was flourishing.

Over the centuries this original patristic *adversus Judaeos* tradition exercised a sometimes direct, sometimes more subtle anti-Judaic impact on Christian theological formulation of the meaning of Jesus' ministry, death and resurrection. But it also was the basis for increased social legislation against Jews. And the transfer of the *adversus Judaeos* tradition into Christian art, comprehensively depicted in Heinz Schreckenberg's *The Jews in Christian Art*,¹² further assisted the implantation of the negative image of Jews and Judaism into the prevailing ethos of Christian societies.

No century was more decisive for Jewish-Christian relations than the fourth century. The Edict of Milan issued by Emperor Constantine in A.D. 313 granted freedom of worship to all religious groups, including Jews. But Christianity quickly was to become the chief beneficiary of this decree, while Jewish fortunes were to sink to a new low.

In A.D. 323 Christianity was granted a special position within the empire. Judaism theoretically continued as a legal religion, but it was frequently abused by Christian preachers and people without any action being taken by the imperial government. By the time Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity on his deathbed in 329, the imperial government had already begun to institute restrictive measures against Jewish privileges. By the end of the fourth century the civil status of Jews was in serious danger and their image had greatly deteriorated. The Jew

was now seen as a semi-satanic figure, cursed by God, and specially set apart by the civil government.

It was in the fourth century that Christian preachers turned upon Judaism with great force. Foremost among these preachers was John Chrysostom. His denunciations of the Jewish people are found in six sermons he delivered in Antioch where Jews were numerous and influential and where apparently some Christians were attending synagogues and visiting Jewish homes. He accused the Jews of all imaginable crimes and vices. The devil lived in Jewish homes, according to John Chrysostom, and the synagogue was an assembly of animals. This was so because of the Jews' assassination of Jesus. God has always hated the Jews, John Chrysostom insisted, and they will forever remain without temple or nation.

In addition to the teachings of Christian preachers and teachers, the legislative measures taken both by the church and the empire, sometimes in concert, proved crucial for the situation of the Jews. Church councils in this period did everything possible to prevent any contact between Christians and Jews, fearing that the Christians' faith would suffer as a result. The imperial legislation went even further and directly interfered with the life of the Jewish community through a series of new laws. The culmination of this process took place with the publication of the Theodosian Code in 438. Some of the laws in this code actually protected

Jews from violence and asserted their basic rights and freedom. But the largest section restricted Jewish cult and activities.

As a result of this legislation Jews were generally forced out of agriculture and industry and into smaller trades and crafts. The pattern of Jewish life for centuries to come was being formed. Jews were also barred from public functions in the empire and marriage to Jews was considered shameful and subject to the death penalty. All Jewish rights to govern their own communities were abolished by the beginning of the fifth century. While in some respects this imperial legislation tried to maintain the freedom of worship granted the Jews in older Roman law, it reflected the spirit and frequently the letter of the decrees of church councils.

The Christian picture of Judaism developed in the fourth and fifth centuries gave the churches for centuries a pseudo-religious basis for countless persecutions of the Jews. Misguided Christians considered themselves chosen to assist God in fulfilling the curse upon the Jews and felt they were free to engage in attacking Jews with a divine seal of approval. As the ecclesial political power increased, a terrible cancer gnawed at its basic spirit. This caused many Jews to flee to Babylonia which became the national and cultural center of Judaism.

Despite the Theodosian Code's protection of Jewish rights in theory, these rights were often violated in the ensuing centuries. Matters were made worse for

Jews in the sixth century when Emperor Justinian I decided to redo the Theodosian Code. His substantive revision which came to be known as the Justinian Code basically eliminated many of the protective clauses regarding Jews in the original version, including the provision which guaranteed Jews the right to practice their religion. The Justinian Code imposed new restrictions on the Jews in nearly all areas. The most critical restriction was the transfer of power to Emperor to regulate Jewish worship.

All was not total darkness for Jews in the medieval society. In West Europe the conquering peoples such as the Goths and the Lombards generally accepted the protections accorded Jews in the original version of the Theodosian Code. And Pope Gregory the Great (590-604), while intent on converting Jews, added his public support for these articles in the Code. The so-called Golden Age in Spain gave Jews unprecedented access to public life even though some restrictions remained in force. And subsequently in Poland, after the collapse of the Golden Age which occasioned extensive Jewish migration to that country, Jews were accorded a measure of toleration and even political freedom by Polish princes despite opposition from some church leaders. Charlemagne and his son Louis the Pious also committed themselves to the legal protection of the Jewish community.

A strong reaction against these efforts at giving Jewish a measure of equality eventually took hold. St. Agobard (779-840) returned to the rhetoric of

John Chrysostom. The civil situation quickly worsened. With the death of Charles the Bald Jewish rights practically vanished in the quicksand of feudalism. The ninth century produced new forms of Jewish persecutions. Jews were accused of treason on a number of occasions. And a custom developed whereby on every Good Friday, in punishment for their supposed part in Christ's death, Jews received a facial blow.

As we move into the Medieval period the preaching associated with the birth of the Crusader movement spelled even greater difficulties for the Jews. It seemed unreasonable to the Crusaders to travel great distances to liberate the Holy Land and not attack the people they held responsible for Christ's death along the way. The first Crusade in 1096 saw bloody attacks against Jews in various parts of the Rhineland in Germany. Therefore, massacres of the Jews were part and parcel of each subsequent Crusade.

During the years between the first and second Crusade, Jews were forced into occupations distasteful or forbidden to the Christian community. Many of these occupations were connected with finance. It would be false to suppose that all Jews were money lenders. Yet, Jews became identified with this occupation, a stereotype that has not completely disappeared even in our own time. Parenthetically, we found traces of this theme in the shooting script for *The Passion of Christ*. The identification of the Jews as money lenders led to a suppression of their rights as time went on.

In the second half of the twelfth century there arose another libel that fanned flames of hatred against the Jews--unverified accusations of ritual murder. It was charged that each Holy Week Jews killed a Christian, usually a child, as a sacrificial offering for Passover. A young man named William found murdered in the English town of Norwich in 1144 was the first example of this accusation by Christians against Jews. Subsequently, the charge was widened to include other religious purposes for which Jews supposedly murdered Christians. Jews were also charged with attempts to profane hosts in England, France and Germany where these false accusations led to the execution of Jews despite papal edicts denying such charges.

With the establishment of the Inquisition by the church in the thirteenth century and the ensuing struggle with heretics, Jewish writings were censored and suppressed. The Talmud was condemned and St. Albert the Great ordered the burning of all copies. During the thirteenth century, the wealth of the Jews was often confiscated and their financial position became more and more precarious. By the end of the thirteenth century, the mass murder of Jews had become a common occurrence in Germany and France. It is estimated that some 100,000 Jews died as a result of persecution during that century.

The now entrenched pattern of the marginalization and death of Jews continued throughout the remaining centuries of the pre-modern era. Jews were blamed, among other things, for famine in Europe and for causing the Black Death.

They were increasingly confined to specific areas of cities, a process that eventuated into the creation of formal ghettos. While there were some periods in which pressure on the Jewish community was relaxed to an extent as the result of protests by several popes and political leaders, the basic anti-Semitic framework remained firmly in place.

The coming of the modern era with its theme of social liberation did result in a measure of political freedom for individual Jews in certain countries such as France and Germany, but not for the Jewish community as a body. Anti-Semitism was still widespread among the Christian masses and frequently surfaced in connection with performances of Passion plays which were becoming rather commonplace. And, in Russia, home to about fifty percent of the Jewish population, the situation remained as it had been for the previous centuries. In fact, anti-Semitism in Russia was intensified with the appearance in 1905 of so-called *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. Written by Russian anti-Semites it claimed the existence of a Jewish cabal that was plotting to take control of global society. *The Protocols* still circulate today in some countries. The fact that the shooting script of *The Passion of the Christ* and the early rough cuts portrayed the Jewish community in Jewish time as an evil cabal hell bent on killing, seemed to those of us who examined it to suggest allusions to *The Protocols*' theme which could strengthen the anti-Semitism *The Protocols* continue to breed in some areas.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth century anti-Semitism took on yet another form in many parts of Christian Europe such as France, Germany and Poland. Jews were accused of being supporters both of Communism and Liberalism which Christians often regarded as diabolical and a serious threat to the continued existence of the Church in Europe. Jews were accused of being at the heart of what was termed freemasonry which advocated religious freedom, a notion strongly condemned by the popes of the period. They were charged with being the source of immorality in society as purveyors of pornography.

The anti-Semitism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries took on a biological and racial dimension that moved it beyond the earlier forms of anti-Semitism. This new form of anti-Semitism reached its peak during the Holocaust. While I would want to maintain a certain distinction between classical Christian anti-Semitism and the Nazi variety, one cannot make the total separation between the two found in such documents as *We Remember*, the Vatican document on the Shoah issued in 1998.¹³ I continue to maintain that classical Christian anti-Semitism served as an indispensable seedbed for the indifference and even support that many in the churches gave to the Hitlerian attempt to annihilate the Jewish community in Europe and beyond.

It was only with the emergence of *Nostra Aetate* at Vatican II and the strong statements of Pope John Paul II during the course of his long papacy that the

foundations for anti-Semitism have been decisively destroyed. But in light of this dark history of anti-Semitism at the center of Christianity for centuries Christians cannot relax their guard on this matter. Any possibility that this grave sin will resurface must be firmly resisted,

That is why our joint Christian-Jewish scholarly team that reviewed the shooting script took our responsibility so seriously. We genuinely believed that the credibility of recent church teaching was on the line in light of the shooting script's clear portrayal of the Jewish leadership as having the primary responsibility for the death of Christ rather than the Roman government of occupation headed by the brutal tyrant Pilate. Any return to the charge of primary Jewish responsibility carries with it a definite potential for reigniting anti-Semitism. If Mel Gibson has in fact significantly altered the basic theme to conform with the perspective of *Nostra Aetate* and other Christian guidelines on the portrayal of the passion we will welcome that but likewise take some credit for forcing the changes despite the personal attacks that have been launched against us by ICON and their neoconservative supporters. I for one will never regret having raised this issue. It was the responsible thing to do. I wish we could have had an off-the-record dialogue with Mr. Gibson and ICON as was our original intent. They, not us, made it a public issue. But as Christians we can never let the searing flame of anti-Semitism burn anew when we see what it did to Jewish bodies and the Christian soul over the

centuries and in light of the churches' recent condemnation of it as fundamentally sinful.

1. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *The Church and Racism: Towards a More Fraternal Society*. Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1988, 34 (#24) United States Catholic Conference, 1988, 34 (#24)

2. *The Church and Racism*, 23 (#15)

3. Pope John Paul II, "The Sinfulness of Anti-Semitism," *ORIGINS* 23:13 (September 5, 1991), 204.

4. Pope John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold*, ed. Vittorio Messori. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994, 96.

5. Marvin Perry and Frederick M. Schweitzer (eds.), *Anti-Semitism: Myth And Hate From Antiquity To The Present*. New York: PalgraveMacmillan, 2002.

6. Edward H. Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews*. New York: Macmillan, 1964.

7. Cf. "Church Leaders to Condemn Attacks on Jews," *The Times* (London), December 1, 2003, 4.

8. As quoted in the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* online service, Dec. 21, 2003.

9. I myself have written on New Testament anti-Semitism in several publications. Cf. "A Faith Without Shadows: Liberating Christian Faith from anti-Semitism," *Theology Digest*, 45:3 (Fall 1996), 203 -217, and "New Testament Anti-Semitism: Fact or Fable?," in Michael Curtis (ed.), *Anti-Semitism In The Contemporary World*. Boulder and London: Westview Press, 1986, 107-127.

10. Cf. W. Barnes Tatum, "Clement of Alexandria's Philo-Judaism: A Resource for Contemporary Jewish-Christian Relations," in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *Overcoming Fear: Between Jews and Christians*. Philadelphia/New York: The American Interfaith Institute and Crossroad, 1992, 41.

11. David Efroymson, "The Patristic Connection," in Alan T. Davies (ed.), *Anti-Semitism and the Foundations of Christianity*. New York: Paulist Press, 1979, 103 -104.

12. Heinz Schreckenberg, *The Jews In Christian Art: An Illustrated History*. New York: Continuum, 1996.

13. Cf. John T. Pawlikowski, "The Vatican and the Holocaust: Putting WE REMEMBER in Context," in Judith H. Banki and John T. Pawlikowski, OSM (eds.), *Ethics In The Shadow Of The Holocaust: Christian And Jewish Perspectives*. Franklin, WI and Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2001, 215-226.