



Violence and Healing: Roman Catholic Relations with Jews and Muslims

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The great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once warned that we must never forget “the depth of evil to which individuals and communities may sink particularly when they try to play the role of god to history.”¹ Of all the forms of violence, those inspired by religious convictions are among the most horrendous and frightening. All the world’s great religious traditions proclaim paths of peace and reconciliation and condemn the indiscriminate murder of random persons; yet, the history of the world’s religions is steeped in bloodshed. From prehistoric times to the present, violence has repeatedly been justified and even sacralized by religious beliefs.

Jesus taught his followers two principles for reflecting on evil: “Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? Or how can you say to your neighbor, ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye,’ while the log is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye” (Matt 7:3–4). It is easy to note what is wrong with someone else’s behavior and difficult to be honest about our own. Jesus also instructed his disciples: “When you are offering

¹Cited by Fereydoun Hoveyda, *The Broken Crescent: The “Threat” of Militant Islamic Fundamentalism* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1998) 174.

Throughout the past two millennia, terrible violence, inspired by religion, has too often marked the relations between Catholics and Jews and Muslims. Though much has changed in recent years, difficulties remain.

your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt 5:23–24). For Christians to worship God honestly, it is necessary to seek reconciliation with those whom we have offended.

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Violence may be defined as “the attempt of an individual or group to impose its will on others through any nonverbal, verbal, or physical means that inflict psychological or physical injury.”² Christianity in general, and the Roman Catholic Church in particular, has had a tragic and violent relationship to all of the world’s religious traditions; and this is particularly true of those religions with whom it is most closely bound in history and belief: Judaism and Islam. The three traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, sometimes called “children of Abraham,” intertwine in many ways.³ The later traditions have important internal relations to the earlier ones, as Jewish figures appear in the Christian Scriptures, and both Jewish and Christian figures appear in the Qur’an. While these religions share many important beliefs and values, Christians, in direct violation of the teaching and spirit of Jesus, have for centuries repeatedly vilified and demonized Jews and Muslims, even exercising physical violence against them.

This long and painful heritage continues to affect relationships among the Abrahamic religions. Fortunately, the last generation has seen important developments in reconciliation among these traditions, and ongoing dialogues seek to overcome the mistrust of previous centuries. This article will examine certain aspects of the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church with Jews and Muslims. Limitations of space preclude a complete discussion.

THE ORIGINS OF JEWISH-CATHOLIC TENSIONS

Conflicts at the origins of Christianity would bear bitter fruit in later centuries. Jesus and his first followers were Jews. From the beginning quarrels arose between some Jews who accepted Jesus as Messiah and Lord and other Jews who did not. Originally, these were inner-Jewish disputes, and typical of Jewish rhetoric of

²Craig L. Nesson, “Sex, Aggression, and Pain: Sociobiological Implications for Theological Anthropology,” *Zygon* 33/3 (1998) 451.

³See F. E. Peters, *Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

the period, the language at times was fiercely polemical.⁴ Tragically, New Testament authors prepared the way for centuries of anti-Jewish attitudes and practices by including John the Baptist's and Jesus' fierce criticisms of first-century Jewish leaders. Such criticisms in their original context continue the tradition of the critique of religious and political leaders by the Hebrew prophets, which is one of the great contributions of ancient Israel to the world's religious history. However, later Christians who were not Jewish would interpret the harsh language of John the Baptist and Jesus as indicting all Jews at every time and place.

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Crucifixion was a Roman punishment designed to instill terror in those who would disturb the peace of the empire. According to both the canonical gospels and the first-century Jewish writer Josephus, some Jews sought the death of Jesus. The gospel writers place special responsibility on the Jewish leaders who are said to have pressured a reluctant Pontius Pilate to have Jesus crucified. This portrait of Pilate probably arises from a later Christian desire to convince Roman authorities that Christians were not a threat to the peace of the empire. The Gospel of Matthew presents the crowd in Jerusalem as crying out: “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matt 27:25). In its original context, the Gospel of Matthew indicts a limited number of Jews in Jerusalem for advocating the death of Jesus and threatens them and their children with punishment, which the evangelist understands to be the destruction of the city by the Romans in 70 C.E.⁵ In later centuries, however, Catholic Christians repeatedly blamed each successive generation of Jews in every region for the death of Jesus and interpreted the voice of the crowd in the Gospel of Matthew as inviting retribution upon all Jews. Thus, Catholic Good Friday celebrations in Europe often led to attacks on Jewish communities.

Such attacks lasted until within living memory. A friend of mine, a Jewish rabbi in Chicago, was born in Munich, Germany, in 1916 and grew up playing with Catholic boys. One day when he was seven years old, all his Catholic playmates jumped on him and began beating him up. They had always had the usual childhood struggles, but nothing like this had ever happened before. When they had finished fighting, he dusted himself off and asked them why they had done that. They told him they had just come from catechism class and had learned that he had killed Christ. Being only seven, he did not remember doing any such thing and

⁴Luke Timothy Johnson, “The New Testament’s Anti-Jewish Slander and the Conventions of Ancient Polemic,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108/3 (1989) 419–441.

⁵Donald Senior, “Matthew’s Story of the Passion: Theological and Pastoral Perspectives,” *Chicago Studies* 40/3 (2001) 281–285; and Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah: From Gethsemane to the Grave*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 1994) 830–839.

went home to his father, who tried to explain the situation to him. Far worse atrocities happened over and over again in Jewish history.

Some Jews persecuted early followers of Jesus, who were themselves also Jews. According to the Acts of the Apostles, a Jewish crowd stoned the deacon Stephen to death, and shortly afterward the young Saul sought out followers of Jesus with murderous intent. Later Christians interpreted these incidents not as part of an inner-Jewish dispute but rather as signs of the perfidy of all Jews.

In the second century, Christians begin to vilify Jewish worship and practice. The *Epistle of Barnabas*, written about 130–140 C.E., charged that the Jewish people were not worthy to understand the revelation given through Moses (14:2) and that they were seduced by an evil spirit into their legal observances. According to the second-century *Epistle to Diognetus*, the Jewish observance of the Sabbath is a ridiculous superstition (4.1–2) and Jewish sacrifices are no better than pagan idolatry (3.5). In the early third century, Origen expressed the opinion that Jews had to suffer more than other peoples because they were responsible for the murder of Jesus (*Against Celsus* 2.8). John Chrysostom, who is still the patron saint of preaching in the Roman Catholic Church, excoriated Jews as the most miserable of people, charging that synagogues were places for drunken parties, prostitutes, and thieves (*Sermons against the Jews* 1.1–2; 4.1). Augustine, the most influential of the Latin church fathers, shaped later Catholic policy in Europe, declaring that the Jews should be allowed to live, but kept in a state of misery because of their crime of killing Jesus. For the first millennium of Christian history, the mistreatment of Jews by Catholics did not involve widespread physical violence. That, however, would change with the First Crusade in the eleventh century.

RELATIONS OF CATHOLICS WITH JEWS AND MUSLIMS IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND BEYOND

For centuries, Catholics, in direct violation of Jesus' own teaching, shaped their own self-understanding by using Jews as scapegoats and targets of hostility. When the black death swept through Europe in the fourteenth century, many Catholics accused Jews of poisoning the wells. In some places, such as Narbonne and Carcassonne in the south of France, Catholics dragged Jews from their homes and burned them to death. Pope Clement VI (1342–1352) rejected this accusation and forbade the persecution of Jews without trial, but this had little effect outside of the papal states in Italy and the papal territories around Avignon in southern France.⁶

The rise of Islam in the seventh century posed new challenges for Christians and Jews alike. Within a few years after Muhammad's death in 632, Muslim armies swept through the richest provinces of the Byzantine Empire, crushed the Sasanian Empire in Persia, conquered Jerusalem in 638, and marched across North

⁶William Nicholls, *Christian Antisemitism: A History of Hate* (Northvale, NJ and London: Jason Aronson, 1993) 245.

Africa. A century later, Muslims invaded Spain and pressed into France, where they were turned back by Charles Martel in 732 at the battle of Tours and forced to retreat back to beyond the Pyrenees. The Muslim army besieged Constantinople for a year in 717 and 718 but was eventually forced to withdraw.

For over a millennium, from the death of Muhammad in 632 until the second siege of Vienna in 1683, Catholic Christians encountered Muslims as a powerful military threat. Century after century, Catholic and Muslim armies repeatedly went out to battle, each believing that God was fighting on its side. This challenge called forth a Catholic development of the notion of a holy war, which would have a long and horrifying history. In the early third century the great theologian Origen interpreted the conquest narratives in the Hebrew Bible as commanding an allegorical struggle against sin in one's own soul and thought it would be horrendous to take them literally. Not all later Catholics agreed. In 1095 at the Council of Clermont, Pope Urban II called Catholic Europe to arms against the Muslims who held the holy places in Jerusalem. Seljuk Turks had conquered the area and had begun to torture and kill Christian pilgrims. In response, the pope invoked the language of holy war and described the Muslims as "more execrable than the Jebusites," invoking the ancient image of the foes of Israel who were to be exterminated.⁷

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As the armies formed, wearing the sign of the cross, some crusaders struck first at defenseless Jews, especially those living in France and the Rhineland. Estimates are that 10,000 were killed. Some crusaders thought that Jewish sufferings bore witness to the redemption of Christians. Even though church leaders protested against it and Catholic bishops sometimes offered Jews shelter in their cathedrals and their homes, violence against Jews was a recurrent feature of the Crusades.

The sack of Jerusalem by Catholic crusaders on 15 July 1099 was merciless and bloodthirsty. The crusaders, fighting in the name of Christ and wearing his cross as their emblem, breached the walls of Jerusalem about 3:00 P.M., the very hour when Christ had died. After routing the Muslim defenders, they engaged in a general massacre of the Muslim and Jewish populations and confiscation of their property. According to crusader historians, 70,000 people were slaughtered in one part of Jerusalem and 10,000 in another.⁸ The survivors were put to work hauling away the bodies. When the crusaders had finished their bloody business, they

⁷Edward Peters, ed., *The First Crusade: The Chronicle of Fulcher of Chartres and Other Source Materials* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) 9.

⁸F. E. Peters, *Jerusalem: The Holy City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets from the Days of Abraham to the Beginnings of Modern Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985) 286–287.

washed themselves off and sang hymns of praise and thanksgiving to a merciful God. One eyewitness commented: “So let it suffice to say this much at least, that in the Temple and porch of Solomon men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins. Indeed it was a just and splendid judgment of God that this place should be filled with the blood of unbelievers, since it had suffered so long from their blasphemies. The city was filled with corpses and blood.”⁹ People reported that they could still smell the stench of the dead six months later at Christmas. Though Catholics have largely forgotten the slaughter, this event is still remembered in the Muslim world as a horrendous atrocity. Crusaders who died in battle were promised a plenary indulgence and died in the hope of immediate entrance into heaven.

Catholic images of Muhammad and Islam were overwhelmingly negative.¹⁰ A few scholars, such as Peter the Venerable and Robert of Ketton in the eleventh century, had a reasonably accurate understanding of the teachings of Islam; but most Catholics learned an extremely biased and distorted caricature. Muhammad was often described as an epileptic who embarrassed his wife Khadijah. To soothe her, Muhammad allegedly invented the story that he gazed upon the Archangel Gabriel. Other Catholics charged that Muhammad was actually possessed by an evil spirit. Still others viewed Muhammad as a magician who deceived the credulous Arabs with fake miracles. He was accused of being licentious and ambitious and of having fabricated revelations to further his desires. Catholic mothers would threaten their children that if they misbehaved, Muhammad would come and capture them. Often Catholics viewed Islam as a heresy of Christianity, a deviation from Christian faith that was taught to Muhammad in distorted form by a heretical monk named Sergius. Medieval Crusaders stigmatized Islam as a religion of the sword, even as they were putting crosses on their own battle gear.

Despite the name-calling and military campaigns, in many regions during the Middle Ages Jews, Catholics, and Muslims did manage to live peacefully together. During the tenth and eleventh centuries in Spain, Jews, Catholics, and Muslims shared their scholarship and learned from each other, enriching the entire Mediterranean world and beyond and offering an example of a community of religions in dialogue. These exchanges made possible the flowering of Catholic scholarship and culture in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Later European Christians, however, tended to repress the memory of how much Catholics in the early Middle Ages had learned from a superior Muslim intellectual culture and viewed them as the constant enemy.

Even though Catholics and Muslims frequently had lived together on reasonably good terms, in the early fourteenth century Pope Clement V (1305–1314) stated that the presence of Muslims on Christian soil constituted an insult to God. Muslims were expelled from Sicily in 1301 and by the end of the fifteenth century the Catholic monarchs of Spain, Ferdinand and Isabella, would succeed in expel-

⁹Ibid., 285–286.

¹⁰See Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford, England: Oneworld, 2000).

ling Muslim authorities from the last part of the Iberian Peninsula. One of their first actions after their victory was to order all remaining Jews and Muslims in Spain either to convert to the Catholic Church or to leave. Those who chose to convert were monitored by the Inquisition under the control of the Catholic monarchy for suspicion of retaining their earlier faith. Often ordinary Catholics in Spain who lived in contact with Jews and Muslims had a much higher regard for their neighbors' religious practices than did the authorities.

The fifteenth century also marked the beginning of the age of discovery. In 1452, as the Portuguese were inaugurating their journeys of discovery and conquest, Pope Nicholas V granted to the king of Portugal the right to enslave the entire non-Christian world: "In the name of our apostolic authority, we grant to you the full and entire faculty of invading, conquering, expelling and reigning over all the kingdoms, the duchies...of the Saracens, of pagans and of all infidels, wherever they may be found; of reducing their inhabitants to perpetual slavery, of appropriating to yourself those kingdoms and all their possessions, for your own use and that of your successors."¹¹

Later colonial empires often used the goal of spreading the Catholic faith as a pretext for conquest and oppression. French colonialists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw themselves as carrying out a "*mission civilisatrice*" to Muslim lands that was both religious and cultural. Anti-Semitism remained strong in many areas of Catholic Europe, as witnessed by the Dreyfus Affair in France. Papal policy throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continued to seek the subordination of the Jews to Christians.¹²

RECONCILIATION AND DIALOGUE

If the long history of Catholic violence and disrespect toward Jews and Muslims were the final word, there would be little hope for future Catholic interreligious relations. Fortunately, there have been major breakthroughs in Catholic relations with both Jews and Muslims since the 1960s.

On 25 January 1959, Pope John XXIII announced the convocation of an ecumenical council. Encouraged by the warmth of the new pope and by his interventions to save Jewish lives during the Holocaust, Jules Isaac, a French Jewish historian who had studied the history of Catholic teaching about the Jews,¹³ requested an audience, which was granted. Isaac asked of Pope John that the coming ecumenical council reject the Catholic Church's unjust and false teaching about the Jews. He quoted the catechism of the Council of Trent, which taught that Jesus died for the sins of all people, and argued that this means Jews cannot be singled

¹¹Nicholas V, *Dum Diversas*, 1452; quoted in Peter Schineller, *A Handbook of Inculturation* (New York: Paulist, 1990) 34.

¹²David I. Kertzer, *The Popes against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Knopf, 2001).

¹³Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1964).

out as the people directly responsible for his death. As the meeting ended, Pope John told Isaac that he had reason for more than hope.

After a fierce debate, Vatican II issued *Nostra Aetate, The Declaration on the Church's Relation to Non-Christian Religions*, in 1965. This document expressed the respect of the Catholic Church for Muslims, noting that they worship the one God and seek to submit themselves to his decrees. It acknowledged their veneration of Jesus and Mary and their practice of morality, prayer, almsgiving, and fasting. Lamenting the history of conflict, the council called all Christians and Muslims to forget past hostilities and work together for social justice, peace, and freedom (*Nostra Aetate* 3).

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Turning to Jewish-Catholic relations, Vatican II cited the teaching of St. Paul that “the Jews still remain very dear to God, whose gift and call are without regret” (*Nostra Aetate* 4, referring to Rom 11:28–29). The council firmly rejected the charge that all Jews at the time of Jesus, let alone later generations, could be held responsible for his death; and it condemned any form of anti-Semitism at any time from any source.

While tensions remain in the relations between the Catholic Church and Jews and Muslims, there has been a dramatic change in the overall tone of these relationships. There is regular dialogue between Catholics and Jews in many areas across the United States and beyond. In 1986 Jews and Catholics in Albany, New York, organized a reconciliation service, “From Fear to Friendship,” which was hailed as the first of its kind. Pope John Paul II has visited the synagogue in Rome, becoming the first bishop of Rome ever recorded to have done so. Perhaps most dramatic of all, in the spring of 2000, as part of the celebration of the new millennium, Pope John Paul II traveled to Jerusalem and prayed at the Western Wall, placing therein a prayer to God asking forgiveness for the sins of Catholics against Jews throughout the centuries. This prayer today is in Yad Vashem, the memorial of the Holocaust in Jerusalem.

Nonetheless, difficulties remain. Rabbi Arthur Hertzberg has remarked, “If relations between Jews and the Roman Catholic Church are so good, why are they so bad?”¹⁴ Many Jews continue to be critical of the Vatican for not opening the archives of the Catholic Church during the pontificate of Pope Pius XII, and controversy swirls around the silence of this pope during the Holocaust. Many Jews were critical of the 1998 statement issued by the Vatican, “We Remember: A Reflection

¹⁴See Ira S. Youdovin, “Jewish-Catholic Relations,” *Chicago Studies* 41/2 (2002) 153.

on the Shoah,” which minimized the relation between Catholic anti-Jewish attitudes and behaviors and Nazi anti-Semitism.

International Muslim-Catholic relations are often difficult, partly because of restrictions placed on Catholics in predominantly Muslim countries. In some areas, such as northern Nigeria and southern Sudan, there is open conflict between Muslims and Catholics. Catholics in East Timor suffered greatly for decades under rule by predominantly Muslim Indonesian forces. Meanwhile, there is often prejudice against Muslims in Europe and the United States, and Croatian Catholics committed atrocities against Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s.

In the United States relations are generally much more cordial. There are currently three regional Muslim-Roman Catholic dialogues underway, in the Mid-Atlantic, the Midwest, and the Pacific regions, as well as a number of local dialogues.¹⁵ Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, Pope John Paul II distinguished authentic Islam from the actions of the terrorists and urged Catholics to dedicate themselves to Muslim-Catholic understanding with renewed fervor. A few days after the attacks, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the leaders of five major Muslim organizations in the U.S., representing the vast majority of this country’s Muslims, issued a statement condemning the terrorist attacks and urging respect for all persons. In light of the changed situation, the Midwest and Mid-Atlantic dialogues have focused on the teachings about and the history of violence in our two traditions. Muslims have been particularly grateful for expressions of support from the Catholic Church during a time of increased suspicion. Sayyid Syeed, executive director of the Islamic Society of North America, the largest Muslim organization in the United States, described the cards they had received from Catholic school children seeking to be “peace partners” as “our greatest treasure.” ⊕

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¹⁵For one local area’s experience, see Ghulam-Haider Aasi and Rita George Tvrtkovic, “Catholic-Muslim Relations in Chicago,” *Chicago Studies* 41/2 (2002) 169–182.