

IAF June 2013 *Combating our Teachings of Contempt: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Introspection and Projection: Jewish Keynote*

### **Naming and Addressing Jewish Teachings of Contempt**

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The creator of the term “teaching of contempt,” Jules Isaac, was a Jew who personally suffered enormous losses during the Shoah. By naming this tradition of Christian teachings about Judaism, he brought it these teachings to the conscious attention, most importantly of Pope John XXIII; they consequently became a *self-critical* category of thought for Christians. As an outsider to the church, Isaac could play a role as a catalyst, perhaps, but he could not himself effect change. That required the internalization of this label, a painful process of understanding its implications, and the gradual (and still ongoing) rebuilding of a coherent set of teachings that neither embody nor rely on contempt of Jews and Judaism.

The work that the churches have undergone is difficult and painful, and the road has been bumpy. While applauding and encouraging it, Jews also find it very easy to point out every bump and unmet challenge – essentially remaining in the role played by Jules Isaac of naming the other’s flaws. This critical stance says only, “We Jews have suffered enormously through history; we have been perpetual victims. We will find every possible issue that might result in more persecutions and identify it for you.”

However, this stance is insufficient and indeed highly problematic. First, it is usually counterproductive, as it presumes that the Jewish community holds the moral high ground, that the problems lie only within the Christian community. This is not a dialogic stance as it refuses to admit our dialogue partners as equals, as partners in a search to address shared problems. It suggests a haughtiness and lack of humility that instead builds walls.

Second, the reality is that few if any Jews today continue to live in situations where they are truly second-class citizens because of their religion. Sure, anti-semitism, both from Christians and Muslim, continues to raise its ugly head (including not far from here), but it is rarely sanctioned by state powers. Where Jews are victims, the quality of that victimhood has changed. This derives significantly from the existence of the State of Israel. Jews today collectively have one country where Jews are the majority, where Jewish traditions and teachings shape the culture.

The third point is largely a corollary of the second: because Jews are a majority culture in Israel, and a freely self-expressing culture in most of their largest communities outside of Israel, received teachings developed under situations of oppression, Jewish “teachings of contempt,” no longer function simply as means of psychological resistance to victimizers. Instead, they themselves become the basis for Jewish attitudes that can turn Jews into oppressors themselves, an increasingly toxic reality that the Jewish community must name and address as its own “teachings of contempt.” Jewish *self-criticism*

about Jewish teachings of contempt is vital today because these teachings increasingly have lived consequences.

First, a short elaboration on the first point. The Jewish tendency to find flaws in others derives in no small part from a deeply embedded characteristic of Jewish society, one most easily traced to the high esteem given to the traditions of talmudic learning and its methods, now turned to other endeavors as well. The Babylonian Talmud, the massive text that has stood at the center of traditional Jewish learning for at least a millennium,<sup>1</sup> establishes its points by dense argumentation. In order to enter into and develop the text's own discussion, engaging this text typically requires interaction with a study partner, effectively adding new layers to this process of argumentation in what has been called "the battle of Torah." These habits of mind often shape Jewish interactions, leading to quick criticism of the other. Inside Jewish culture, this criticism is not taken personally; rather it leads to friendly if impassioned counter-argument and a welcomed sharpening of thinking all 'round.

But this does not necessarily translate well to interactions in cultures where criticisms are generally unspoken and taken much more personally when voiced. This is something I always have to remember when interacting with students at Boston College, a Jesuit university, and even with colleagues there. But more importantly for our topic here, this helps explain the Jewish tendency to critique others outside the Jewish community, often with a lack of sensitivity as to how it is received. For Jews, the ability to criticize openly is a mark of confidence in a relationship, and it embeds an expectation of continued and constructive conversation.

Within the "battle of Torah," an argument generally leads to a counterargument. When Jews receive criticism, they frequently argue back. Is this a rejection of the criticism, or is it a culturally embedded way of conversationally evaluating it? For many Jews, there is a joy in this process of argument, but it transfers uneasily from the study hall of the yeshiva and the Sabbath dinner table into the world of interreligious dialogue.<sup>2</sup> This is an element of Jewish culture that I find it helpful to name. It helps Jews struggle to express themselves in ways that communicate as intended; it also helps Jews be more constructive recipients of critique from their dialogue partners who don't expect a counter-argument. It is a "teaching of contempt" to feel that one can give but not receive criticism.

Constructing critiques of the pre-existent "other" is a normal part of a process of religious self-differentiation, however sorry its consequences. The earliest traditions of Christianity and Islam thus embed disparagements of Judaism. But what sorts of "teachings of contempt" shape Jewish thinking about religious others, and how do they affect our lived reality today? The answers to this question are complex on many levels; I am going to endeavor to balance providing the larger picture combining it with some detailed examples. I will be speaking for myself, as an academic historian of Jewish traditions as well as as a personally observant Jew of fairly liberal leanings.

Biblical calls for Jewish self-differentiation from the religious other set the pattern for latter Jewish thought. Over and over, God warns the Israelites not to participate in any way in the cults of surrounding nations. Later Jewish understanding teaches that punishment for participating in pagan idolatry led to the destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile. Idolatry, or more precisely,

עבודה זרה, “strange worship,” becomes a key rabbinic lens for understanding and judging the religious other and consequently for legislating Jewish interactions with their neighbors. Fundamentally, Jews are not only prohibited from participating in idolatrous worship, but they are also commanded to avoid anything that might abet gentile idolatry. Thus, Jews may not socialize with non-Jews or even do business together, particularly in proximity to non-Jewish festivals.

However, these concepts originated in response to ancient polytheism, and their ongoing application to Islam and Christianity has been questioned. While Islamic monotheism is clearly absolute, Christian use of religious imagery and Trinitarian theology, especially the Incarnation, seem through Jewish eyes to fall under the ancient prohibitions. However, many Jews recognize that Christian self-understanding is monotheist. Jews living among Christians whose economic survival depended on interaction with their neighbors found ways, sometimes convoluted, to integrate Christian understandings of monotheism as appropriate for non-Jews. This move never negated the theological and halakhic category of idolatry; it rather redefined it to make it possible for Jews to subsist in Christendom.<sup>3</sup> This is not a positive approach to Christianity; rather, it encourages a judgmental attitude that reinforces all but economic communal barriers.

This labeling of all non-Jews as somehow or other “idolaters” is one of the most important “meta-concepts” of the Jewish “teaching of contempt.” Jews engaged in dialogue therefore struggle with the question of how to understand and deal with this tradition today. A small conference a few years ago raised a wide diversity of views. Jews at the most liberal side of today’s religious spectrum feel free to reject halakhic categories that for one reason or another seem problematic or dated. They adamantly insisted that *avodah zarah* is irrelevant today and needs no attention. Indeed, most liberal Jews would be bewildered and offended by it. Similarly, those influenced by what originated as “positive historical Judaism,” what became the middle of the road Conservative or *Masorati* movement, understand this as a category relevant to the past, but of limited value today.

But for Orthodox Jews who accept received *halakhah* as binding, this category must remain part of their vocabulary, and the question of how to apply it persists. Most would argue that this *halakhah* still forbids even setting foot into a place of non-Jewish worship, let alone attending a worship service. Exceptions are made only for political expediency and the wellbeing of the Jewish community, as when rabbis attend papal funerals or installations. Other questions debated in some circles include whether one may invite a non-Jew to participate in Jewish rituals, like one’s Passover Seder, or indeed, any meal? Does one today cross the street to avoid even walking by the entrance of a church, as did many pre-war European Jews? This halakhic tradition marks the social and religious boundary between Jews and other religious communities as starkly as it can, struggling to eliminate any ambiguities.

The modern move away from emphasizing these sorts of rulings and attitudes is largely a result of the effects of the growing toleration of Jews in enlightenment Europe, followed by Jewish emancipation in the wake of the French revolution. The great German-Jewish philosopher of the eighteenth-century, Moses Mendelssohn, implicitly addressed these Jewish “teachings of contempt.” In his 1769 correspondence with Johann Christian Lavater (who was seeking to convert him), he calls those who study such things “rabbinical scholars and rabbinical smatters [who] grubbed in obsolete scribbling,

which no sensible Jew reads or knows of..." Instead, he sought by demonstrating virtue "to shame the opprobrious opinion commonly entertained of a Jew."<sup>4</sup> He taught that Judaism emphasizes the common humanity of all, with the consequence that God's salvation is available to any righteous gentile without their needing to become Jews. This, he said, represented a true attitude of toleration of the religious other.<sup>5</sup>

It was such changes in behavior and thought that the French governing powers sought from Jews a condition of their emancipation. Jacob Katz writes, "In the nature of things, tolerance could not remain a one-sided affair...the integration of Jews as equal citizens into state and society...compelled them to clarify their attitude towards their country and fellow citizens."<sup>6</sup> Napoleon convened a Jewish Assembly of Notables in 1806, posing to them a dozen questions designed to clarify some Jewish teachings that created barriers to full expression of Jewish citizenship. This diverse assembly unanimously affirmed that the Torah requires Jews to love their neighbors,<sup>7</sup> and it explicitly rejected the rabbinic interpretation that, for Jews, "neighbor" means only fellow Jews. As they wrote, the "tie of gratitude" that arose among Jews in response to being granted toleration by Christians and then citizenship in France in 1791, led to their considering all France their country and all Frenchmen their brethren. As a consequence, they treat "Frenchmen not of [their] religion" precisely as they do Jews.<sup>8</sup> Implied here is the series of halakhic traditions that had emerged over the previous half-millennium of Jewish life in Christian Europe that excluded Noahides, including Christians, from the category of idolaters and that explicitly understood the intent of Christian worship to be the true God, even if the vehicles of such worship were themselves prohibited to Jews.

This emergence of Jews into full participation in modern society definitely encouraged many to take a self-critical stance to their teachings about the religious other. Because the degree of integration allowed was much greater, this tendency was much more marked in Western Europe and America than in Eastern Europe or among Jews living in the Muslim world. Thus, for many --though not for all-- of today's Jews, *avodah zarah*, at least in its classic sense, has ceased to be an operative category. For more traditional Jews, it still remains a source of negative teachings about religious others, and one that continues to raise its head: may wigs made from hair donated at Hindu temples be worn? may one attend a church funeral or wedding?

A significant factor shaping Jewish "teachings of contempt" is also the influence on various communities of kabbalah, of Jewish mystical teachings. In the aftermath of the cataclysm caused by the expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492, forms of popularized kabbalah developed. Earlier forms of kabbalah, largely esoteric, included some teachings about the partial legitimacy of other religions.<sup>9</sup> Now, without these, kabbalah became much more widely known, broadly impacting Jewish practice and thought.

Most kabbalistic teachings about the non-Jew are exclusivist and even xenophobic. This has its roots in a metaphysical dualism that understands Israel to represent the cosmic good (or the potential for it) and the other nations, especially as represented by Christianity and Islam, to represent primal evil.<sup>10</sup> The teachings of Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century popularized this view and led to a widespread understanding that gentiles lack souls, making it impossible for them to participate in the

world in any mystically significant way. As these teachings were elaborated in subsequent centuries, they sometimes went beyond “teachings of contempt” to being truly dangerous teachings, justifying Jewish persecution and even killing of gentiles, had Jews been in a situation to act upon them. Alan Brill, in his discussion of these texts, condemns them as “racist calls to violence” and adds “they cannot simply be ignored. This horrific approach moved the exclusivity of the past to a new and potentially dangerous realm.” He points out that while the influence of this cosmology and its cultural resonance have “certainly waned with modernity,” they still sometimes “appear in the rhetoric of contemporary Jewish separatists” and thus must be acknowledged and repudiated.<sup>11</sup>

It is understandings like these that encourage overt Jewish anti-Christian and anti-Muslim actions, particularly in Israel where power relationships have been reversed. What originally may have been a psychologically grounded but ultimately passive response to victimization now can be an excuse to victimize. Thankfully, the Israeli government and the rabbinic establishment are apparently moving from mere words of condemnation to actually punishing and hopefully preventing Jewish acts of violence like spitting at Christian religious or desecrating mosques and churches. Without question, most of the Jewish world does not share the views that undergird such Jewish religiously motivated violence and finds such actions despicable. The idea that non-Jews lack souls is incomprehensible.

The Jewish library is huge, and the texts that deal with *avodah zarah*, these mystical teachings, or indeed, anything about other religions, do not play any significant role in any Jewish curriculum anywhere on the Jewish spectrum. The question thus arises, how are these attitudes transmitted? How do they maintain their power from generation to generation? The point of a self-critical stance is not only to name the problematic points, but also to seek ways to transform them.

One point of transmission is simply popular discourse. Particularly in Europe, in response to constant Christian conversionary pressures, Jews developed a counter-discourse that taught attitudes as well as specific answers to Christian missionary arguments. At one level, this embedded simple mockery. Jesus’ name was customarily spelled in such a way that it became an acronym for *ימח שמו וזכרו*, “may his name and memory be blotted out,” a curse derived from the biblical requirement to blot out the name of the arch-enemy Amalek.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the text known as *Toldot Yeshu* seems to have been widespread, drawing loosely on the few mentions of Christianity in the Babylonian Talmud to create a mocking counter-narrative to the Gospel story. It asserts that Jesus was born of an illicit relationship and hence a bastard; and that his supposed miracles were the result of his having stolen access to the powers of the Divine Name, something that anyone could (but wouldn’t dare) duplicate.<sup>13</sup> Jews also had handbooks of responses to Christian biblical readings, also far from respectful in their formulations. Many of these written traditions were suppressed. Because of Christian censorship from the dawn of printing, they have emerged from manuscript only in recent years – or they were published by Christians eager to demonstrate the evils of Judaism. Thus, for about five hundred years, they have largely dropped from the Jewish library. However, the attitudes they embodied persisted in many circles, especially among those less assimilated into Christian society.

A question I cannot answer is whether there was a similar literature supporting a Jewish anti-Islamic tradition. Jews living under Islam were generally not subject to the same kind of conversionary, social and economic pressures, although there certainly were Jews who converted to Islam.

Jewish liturgy –my field of greatest expertise – also plays a role in this discussion. Presuming that a significant number of Jews, or at least Jewish men, followed the rabbinic dictates that they pray three times a day, the words of those prayers then became formative of Jewish thought. I have published several long articles and a book on the theology of the religious other expressed in Jewish liturgy; what I offer here are just some headlines.

These prayers fall into several categories. The first are positive statements of Jewish identity, praising God for things like being a Jew, being in covenant with God, receiving the Torah, etc. With few exceptions, these are reasonably non-controversial. They do bolster Jewish self-esteem, but not by teaching contempt of others.

The second category is specific mentions of other nations, often in historical contexts. In the statutory prayers, these references are all pre-rabbinic. They voice joy over the defeat of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks or Persians,<sup>14</sup> events all deep in the past. What perdures is the understanding that God operates in these modes; just as God saved Israel in the past, so too will God act in analogous ways in the future and maybe even in the present.

Within this category, though, we find also some non-statutory texts that can be more problematic. They raise the question of how we should remember the tragedies of Jewish history without creating ongoing toxic consequences. For instance, there is a tradition of reciting collective memorial prayers several times a year, and since the Holocaust, it has become increasingly common to include a special prayer for its victims. There is a range of ways that versions of this prayer name the Holocaust's perpetrators. Traditionally, Jewish liturgical language is allusive rather than explicit, allowing an openness to reinterpretation over time. However, some versions name not just the Nazis and their helpers, a delimited historical group, but instead name the Germans as well. This is much more problematic because it suggests that all Germans of all time remain guilty, leaving no room for German repentance. I have experienced too much authentic German penitence for the Shoah to be comfortable with this formulation.

Similarly, there are moves these days to formulate versions of the *על הנסים* prayer for Israeli Independence Day. To my mind, it is critical that they be scripted in such a way as to leave room for peaceful, positive relations to develop between Israel and its Arab neighbors. This is not the case with the text recently republished in a special prayerbook for this day in Israel, a text developed in the early years of the state by the kibbutz movement. Instead of focusing on the miracle of the establishment of the state, it begins by naming the Arab armies that sought to annihilate it and complete Hitler's work.<sup>15</sup> Compare this to the Conservative movement's text that makes mostly the same historical points, but with less inflammatory language.<sup>16</sup>

More complex are the traditions of the Ninth of Av, the summer fast day mourning the destructions of the Jerusalem Temples as well as a string of subsequent disasters, many of them

perpetrated by European Christians. Some prayers point to Jewish sins as the source of divine chastisements. At the same time, they express some degree of anger and pain. This is essentially benign when expressed about the actions of communities, like the Babylonians or Romans who no longer exist. But in reality, because of their allusive poetic language, these prayers do not only describe the actions of lost communities. Rome became Christian Rome, and later poets embedded references to Christianity into their laments. Laments over events in Europe also describe the atrocities committed by Christians, sometimes gruesomely, from the Crusades to the Shoah. I'm challenged by the question of how to deal with these memories of victimization in an era of new interreligious understandings.

The third category of prayers includes more global negative statements about the religious other, mostly from the statutory prayers. This is a limited category, one limited even further by medieval and early modern Christian censorship. These prayers seek to shape Jewish identity by delimiting the boundaries of the community. Thus, one praises God for "not making me a gentile." The *birkat haminin* in its precensored forms cursed Jewish converts to Christianity, Christians, Israel's enemies, and the governing powers. Christian censorship meant that most of these categories changed to benign and abstract categories like "evil" and "insolence," but it does seem that Jews remembered for a long time what the original intent of the prayer was, even with its changed language.

Most important today is the *aleynu* prayer because its censored line is being restored. Where medieval commentaries and Christian critiques make quite clear that "they bow down to nothingness and emptiness...while we pray to ...the Holy One..." refers to Jesus, and perhaps also Muhammed, modern prayer book commentaries flatly reject this interpretation. Discussions in an Israeli congregation over whether this line should be recited made it quite clear that most were unaware of its earlier meaning and were giving it their own interpretations. This, however, was not the case in the eighteenth century when the Prussian government stationed Christian theologians in synagogues to insure that the line was omitted.

Is this then a teaching of contempt or not? It certainly was when the prayer became part of the daily liturgy in the twelfth century, as some manuscripts elaborate on it in grotesque ways. It certainly was in the eighteenth century when the Prussians objected. Today, perhaps, its status depends on how one understands it. If idolatry is no longer literally a category of concern, then either this line is irrelevant (and one can continue to omit it), or it refers to something more abstract, to our modern, human construction of new sorts of idols, as some argue. However, worshipers still claim the moral high ground for themselves in contrast to everyone else, implying a contempt for others.

It will always be easier to identify a "teaching of contempt" than to address it constructively. This is all the more true because of the complexities of our communities. To avoid being "a voice crying in the wilderness" requires coalition building, finding the influential voices who can shape the call appropriately to each sub-community. However, naming a problematic teaching, raising it to consciousness, is always a necessary first step. Although not always possible, it is best when this is done with humility and from a self-critical stance, because real transformation needs to come from within.

<sup>1</sup> The traditional understanding places this development as early as the seventh century or so, as the Babylonian geonim begin to teach the text and assert authority through especially through the Arab world and beyond. However, see Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud: Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), who argues that it is only the work of Rashi (d. 1105, Troyes, France) and the Tosafist school begun by his grandsons that transforms this text into the real shaping force of the Jewish world. This is coherent with the development of Christian attention and critique of this text that begins only in the thirteenth century.

<sup>2</sup> I am very influenced in this discussion by David Kraemer, *The Mind of the Talmud: An Intellectual History of the Bavli* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> The most thorough discussion of these issues, providing a sifting of the various sorts of approaches, is in Alan Brill, *Judaism and Other Religions: Models of Understanding* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> M. Samuels, *Memoirs of Moses Mendelsohn the Jewish Philosopher, including the celebrated correspondence on the Christian Religion with J.C. Lavater, Minister of Zurich*, (London, 1827), 54-55.

<sup>5</sup> Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance: Studies in Jewish-Gentile Relations in Medieval and Modern Times* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), Chapter XIV, "Enlightenment and Toleration."

<sup>6</sup> Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance*, 183.

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 19:18.

<sup>8</sup> "The Assembly of Jewish Notables, Answers to Napoleon (1806)," in *The Jew in the Modern World*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr and Jehuda Reinharz (Oxford, 1995), 129-130, from M. Diogene Tama, *Transactions of the Paris Sanhedrin*, trans. F. D. Kirwan (London, 1807).

<sup>9</sup> Brill, 81-85, in his chapter on "The Inclusivist Tradition."

<sup>10</sup> Brill, 163-164, with reference especially to the Zohar's midrash on Ruth.

<sup>11</sup> Brill, 165-166.

<sup>12</sup> Dt 25:19; compare Ex 17:14 where God promises to wipe out Amalek's memory.

<sup>13</sup> The manuscripts of this text show enormous variation one from the next. Peter Schaefer (Princeton University) is currently leading a project to collect the data. See <http://www.princeton.edu/judaic/special-projects/toledot-yeshu/>, and the volume from their first conference, *Toledot Yeshu ("The life story of Jesus") revisited: a Princeton conference*, Peter Schäfer, Michael Meerson, Yaacov Deutsch, eds. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> In the Exodus, at Hanukkah, and at Purim, respectively.

<sup>15</sup> *Mahzor L'Yom Ha'Atzma'ut* (Jerusalem: Koren, 2013), 48 [Hebrew]. The history of this text is given in a note on that page. In my rough translation, it reads: ...when the Arab armies opposed Your people Israel and sought to annihilate, murder, and destroy the inhabitants of Your land, from youth to aged, baby, and women, among them the remnant of the people escaped from the sword, saved from the inferno of Your enemies, one from a city, two from a family, who hoped to find a resting place for their feet in Your land which You promised to them -- and You, in Your great mercy, stood for us in our time of trouble, undercut their plans and ruined their thoughts. You straightened our posture and established our freedom. You fought our fight, judged our judgment, exacted our vengeance, handed over the many into the hand of the few, the impure in the hands of the holy, and made for Yourself a great and holy name in Your world, and for your people Israel, you created a great victory and rescue like today. You eliminated nations under us and peoples under our feet, and gave us our inheritance, the land of Canaan according to its borders, and You returned us to the place of Your Temple...

Note the many allusions here to Amalek and the Purim story, some of it derived from the parallel prayer for that day. However, the rawness of the Holocaust is still very present in this text as well.

<sup>16</sup> *Siddur Sim Shalom* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1985), 118-119. The English translation there reads: "In the days when Your children were returning to their borders, at the time of a people revived in its land as in days of old, the gates to the land of our ancestors were closed before those who were fleeing the sword. When enemies from within the land together with seven neighboring nations sought to annihilate your people, You, in Your great mercy, stood by them in time of trouble. You defended them and vindicated them. You gave them the courage to meet their foes, to open the gates to those seeking refuge, and to free the land of its armed invaders..." Note that "seven nations" does not name them, and that this says almost nothing about Palestinians except those who were themselves seeking to annihilate Jews.