

# *Healing 2,000 Years of History: The Jewish-Christian Relationship Today*

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A vital topic in 2026, because where we are at today is a very mixed story:

On one hand: arguably *the most positive, respectful and fruitful relationship* (overall) between Jews and Christians (at least in most Western countries) since the time of the New Testament

On the other hand: in many Western (predominantly Christian) countries, *an unprecedented tidal wave of antisemitic violence and rhetoric* that is worse than at any time in the last 50+ years, and has left many Jewish people terrified to go about their daily lives (including worshipping at their local synagogue)

Some examples: Shaarei Torah synagogue in Toronto was vandalized 10 times in 18 months; Bais Chaya Mushka Elementary School has been shot at three times; in November, dozens of sacred mezuzahs were pried off the doorways of residents in a Jewish retirement home and stolen; Jewish businesses have had their windows shot at and smashed, or had things like “filthy Jew” or “kill the Jews” spraypainted on their buildings – Jewish buildings have had to implement extensive (and expensive) security measures to ensure the safety of their staff and visitors

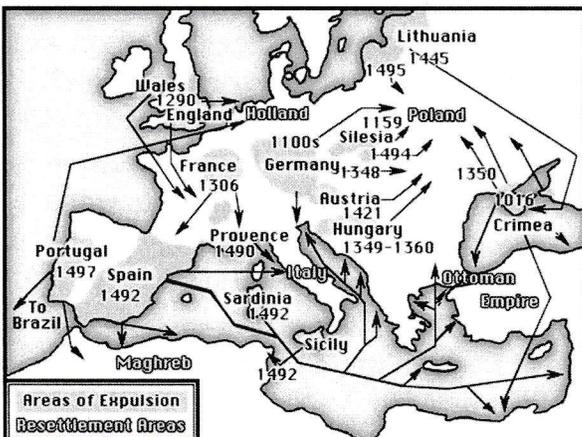
Canada is home to the fourth-largest Jewish population in the world (approx. 400,000 people), behind only Israel, the United States and France; the Jewish population in Canada goes back to the mid-1700s

Efforts at Jewish-Christian friendship and dialogue go back at least to the 1940s in major cities like Toronto, Winnipeg and Montréal, and to the 1960s in many other places

But today (especially in the wake of October 7 and the resulting Gaza War), many Jewish people feel abandoned by their onetime Christian colleagues and friends – they say that relationships have shrivelled up, phone calls and e-mails have stopped, and their Christian friends don’t seem to understand, or empathize with, what they are going through (and many Jewish people are left wondering if Christians really *care*)

For many Christians, their knowledge of Judaism largely ends with the New Testament, 1950 years ago, and we have no sense of how Judaism has changed and evolved in the two millennia since – many Canadians today (depending on where you live) have little or no direct contact with living Jewish communities and their members

Many Christian leaders receive little or no exposure to, or training in, Judaism and interfaith dialogue in their seminary formation – it isn’t considered a priority (only slightly more than 1% of Canadians are Jewish)



As Christians, because of the highly selective version of history we grew up with, we are often completely unaware of the very toxic historical tradition of how Christians have spoken about, and treated, Jewish people (St. John Chrysostom’s 8 “Homilies Against the Jews”; Martin Luther’s “On the Jews and Their Lies”; the repeated expulsions of Jews from Christian Europe throughout the Middle Ages (*see map at left*); the Christian roots of some of the measures implemented by the Nazis—and the widespread apathy/indifference on the part of European Christians to the rounding-up of Jews during the Holocaust “The pages that Christians have torn from their history books are the pages the Jews have memorized.” (Father Edward

Flannery, *The Anguish of the Jews: Twenty-three Centuries of Antisemitism*)

The dramatic turnaround that began to happen in the wake of WWII and the Holocaust [*Shoah*]

The careful, ground-breaking research of Dr. Jules Isaac, a distinguished French Jewish historian who lost much of his family in the Holocaust, but who spent the war years researching the roots of the widespread Christian hostility to Jews and Judaism, grounded in concepts that were historically false, inaccurate, or exaggerated Isaac's 1948 book *Jesus and Israel* [*Jésus et Israël*], which outlined 21 propositions where (he argued) Christian ideas about Jews were badly wrong and in need of correction

10 of these key ideas formed the basis of a 1947 conference of Jewish and Christian leaders in Seelisberg, Switzerland, out of which grew the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ). Those ideas are today known as "The Ten Points of Seelisberg" (see attached), and they remain surprisingly relevant even today.

June 1960: Jules Isaac has a private audience with Pope John XXIII, in preparation for the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Isaac presents his research to the pope, and asks that it form the basis for a reform of Catholic teaching about Jews to be discussed by the bishops at the Council. That "Decree on the Jews" would eventually become the declaration *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time"), on non-Christian religions, in which the Catholic Church dramatically redefined its relationship to the Jewish people, beginning a process of re-thinking and renewal that has continued in many of the Christian churches over the last 60 years

The change in the 1000-year-old Good Friday "Prayer for the Conversion of the Jews," and its use of the extremely disparaging adjective "perfidious" to refer to the Jewish people – the original meaning of "perfidious" shifted over the centuries, from "unbelieving" to "scheming, sinister, treacherous, disloyal, untrustworthy, hostile, morally corrupt". The term was finally removed by Pope John in 1959, and the prayer was completely rewritten in 1970, in a much more respectful, positive form

A similar change has recently taken place in the Anglican Church, with the 2023 General Synod's decision to replace the 1962 BCP Prayer for the Jews with a new, more respectful and humble form

Over the last 75 years, Scriptural and interreligious scholarship has led us to correct mistakes that had been at the basis of many Christians' negative attitude toward Jews:

- A renewed awareness that Jesus, Mary, the first Apostles and first Christians were all Jews—and that this has profound theological importance for our understanding of the Incarnation ... the Jewishness of Jesus (and what it means) has provided the catalyst for dozens of books and hundreds of scholarly articles;
- Traditional Christian rhetoric blaming the Jews (of all times and places) for the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus was both factually and theologically mistaken;
- That Christian ideas about the Jews being "punished" by God for their rejection of Jesus and His death were false (and this connected also to the idea of the "Wandering Jew," unable ever to settle in a homeland, which raised theological challenges after the establishment of the modern State of Israel in 1948);
- That Christianity's deepest identity is grounded in Judaism, and can never be viewed apart from it;
- That the unshakable faithfulness of God means that God did not ever abandon the Jewish people and His covenant relationship with them; on the contrary, as St. Paul wrote in Romans 11: "as regards God's choice, they remain beloved for the sake of their ancestors, for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (11: 29). The idea that Christianity "replaced" Judaism (=supersessionism) is false and harmful;
- That the way many Christians have thought, spoken, prayed and preached about—and acted toward—Jewish people has, more often than not, been a betrayal of the foundational Gospel message of love and forgiveness, for which we must repent and pursue a different path;
- We should strive to understand Judaism accurately and fairly. To do this, the best people to ask and consult are ... Jewish people themselves!
- Jews and Christians share a common vocation: to bring healing to a broken world [Judaism calls this *tikkun olam*], and thus to reveal God more fully to the people of our time.

Today, there are significant teaching documents on the Jewish-Christian relationship from authoritative Anglican sources, including the Anglican Church of Canada's 1989 study resource *From Darkness to Light: Rethinking Christian Attitudes Towards Jews and Judaism in the Light of the Holocaust* (re-issued in 2015), and the Church of England's 2019 document *God's Unfailing Word: Theological and Practical Perspectives on Christian-Jewish Relations* (both available online). There are also dozens of official statements from other Christian churches, including the Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, various Reformed churches, and the World Council of Churches. In 2011, the Pontifical Commission for Interreligious Dialogue, the World Evangelical Alliance, and the World Council of Churches jointly published "Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World: Recommendations for Conduct," which reminds us:

Christians are called to conduct themselves with integrity, charity, compassion and humility, and to overcome all arrogance, condescension and disparagement ... Christians are to speak sincerely and respectfully; they are to listen in order to learn about and understand others' beliefs and practices, and are encouraged to acknowledge and appreciate what is true and good in them. Any comment or critical approach should be made in a spirit of mutual respect, making sure not to bear false witness concerning other religions. (<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/christian-witness-in-a-multi-religious-world>)

#### **Things that help Jewish-Christian dialogue:**

- Learning and studying about Judaism (and Jewish-Christian dialogue) from reputable, knowledgeable sources;
- Gatherings of Jews and Christians to get to know each other, and to respectfully explore their similarities and differences (including shared explorations of Biblical texts and concepts!) -
- Working together on projects that build up the community, promote social justice and peace, and foster greater care for Creation and God's creatures;
- Visiting Jewish places of worship and observing Jewish prayers and celebrations (such as Passover) in a Jewish context; Inviting Jewish clergy to come to your church (if they are comfortable doing so) to speak to the congregation;
- Learning and using appropriate terminology and greetings for Jewish holidays and life-cycle events (Bar/Bat Mitzvah, "Chag sameach!", "May her memory be a blessing," etc.)
- Standing up bravely for, and with, Jewish people who are being threatened, persecuted, or marginalized

#### **Things that hinder Jewish-Christian dialogue:**

- Continuing to perpetuate false stereotypes and clichés of Jews and Judaism that demean Jewish people and contribute to anti-Jewish and antisemitic sentiments;
- Generalizing about Jewish people as a uniform reality, instead of reflecting the wide diversity of opinion and practice in Judaism (which includes many different "movements" and currents)
- Adopting, extracting and "baptizing" key Jewish rituals and symbols, such as "Christian Passovers," which often tamper with these rituals in ways that feel disrespectful to most Jews, and would make us uncomfortable if our Christian rituals were treated in a similar way;
- Speaking or acting as if Jewish people are somehow proxies for the State of Israel and its policies, and are somehow responsible for (or supportive of) actions by the Israeli government that we may reject;
- Not taking seriously the Jewishness of Jesus, Mary, the Apostles and many of the first Christians - displaying/using artwork that obscures or denies that Jewishness;
- Speaking as if Judaism and Christianity were somehow opposed or enemies of each other.

#### **To learn more:**

Rabbi Stephen M. Wylen, *Settings of Silver: An Introduction to Judaism*. 2nd ed., Paulist Press, 2014.

Dr. Edward Kessler, *An Introduction to Jewish-Christian Relations*. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

# An Address to the Churches (The "Ten Points of Seelisberg")

August 5, 1947

We have recently witnessed an outburst of antisemitism which has led to the persecution and extermination of millions of Jews. In spite of the catastrophe which has overtaken both the persecuted and the persecutors, and which has revealed the extent of the Jewish problem in all its alarming gravity and urgency, antisemitism has lost none of its force, but threatens to extend to other regions, to poison the minds of Christians and to involve humanity more and more in a grave guilt with disastrous consequences.

The Christian Churches have indeed always affirmed the un-Christian character of antisemitism, as of all forms of racial hatred, but this has not sufficed to prevent the manifestation among Christians, in various forms, of an indiscriminating racial hatred of the Jews as a people.

This would have been impossible if all Christians had been true to the teaching of Jesus Christ on the mercy of God and the love of one's neighbour. But this faithfulness should also involve a clear-sighted willingness to avoid any presentation and conception of the Christian message which would support antisemitism under whatever form. We must recognize, unfortunately, that this vigilant willingness has often been lacking.

We therefore address ourselves to the Churches to draw their attention to this alarming situation. We have the firm hope that they will be concerned to show their members how to prevent any animosity towards the Jews which might arise from false, inadequate or mistaken presentations or conceptions of the teaching and preaching of the Christian doctrine, and how, on the other hand, to promote brotherly love towards the sorely-trying people of the Old Covenant.

Nothing would seem more calculated to contribute to this happy result than the following:

## TEN POINTS

1. Remember that One God speaks to us all through the Old and the New Testaments.
2. Remember that Jesus was born of a Jewish mother of the seed of David and the people of Israel, and that His everlasting love and forgiveness embrace His own people and the whole world.
3. Remember that the first disciples, the apostles and the first martyrs were Jews.
4. Remember that the fundamental commandment of Christianity, to love God and one's neighbour—proclaimed already in the Old Testament and confirmed by Jesus—is binding upon both Christians and Jews in all human relationships, without any exception.
5. Avoid distorting or misrepresenting biblical or post-biblical Judaism with the object of extolling Christianity.
6. Avoid using the word "Jews" in the exclusive sense of "the enemies of Jesus," and the words "the enemies of Jesus" to designate the whole Jewish people.
7. Avoid presenting the Passion in such a way as to bring the odium of the killing of Jesus upon all Jews or upon Jews alone. It was only a section of the Jews in Jerusalem who demanded the death of Jesus, and the Christian message has always been that it was the sins of humanity which were exemplified by those Jews, and the sins in which all people share that brought Christ to the Cross.
8. Avoid referring to the scriptural curses, or the cry of a raging mob: "His blood be upon us and our children," without remembering that this cry should not count against the infinitely more weighty words of our Lord: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."
9. Avoid promoting the superstitious notion that the Jewish people are reprobate, accursed, reserved for a destiny of suffering.
10. Avoid speaking of the Jews as if the first members of the Church had not been Jews.