

Deicide

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Pope Benedict XVI has published [a book about Jesus of Nazareth](#) in which he exonerates the Jews of guilt over his death. It has received a lot of publicity. But why? Pope John XXIII (in my view the greatest and saintliest pope of modern times) was responsible for the Second Vatican Council that started in 1962. He did not live to witness its conclusions. The Council produced the document "Nostra Aetate" in 1965 which, amongst other things, relieved the Jews of the theological crime of deicide. Never mind how it is conceivable that humans could kill a non-material God, other than in Nietzsche's metaphorical sense that God was dead. The vote of bishops was 1,763 to 250 and it was a landmark in Jewish-Catholic relations.

After the infamy of Pope Pius IX, who approved the kidnapping of young Edgar Mortara, and Pius XII's moral failure to condemn the Nazis, Pope John XXIII singlehandedly transformed the Catholic Church's relationship with Judaism. In a short time the Catholic Church began to address Jewish sensitivities, just as the World Council of Churches, the major Protestant organisation, started to move in the opposite direction.

Nevertheless, I recall hearing the late Cardinal Franz Konig of Vienna say that for all the good intentions of recent popes, anti-Semitism still flourished, particularly in the lower reaches of the Catholic Church around the world. Indeed, in the US new immigrants from Catholic countries, particularly South America, have come in with inherited anti-Semitic beliefs. Fortunately, they tend to lose them over time in the US. One can only pray that Muslim immigrants go through a similar transformation.

Perhaps this explains why the pope has decided to reintroduce the issue now. By writing about the issue in a more popular book, rather than in a dry theological statement, he hopes it will reach a wider audience. Or perhaps he has realized there is so much anti-Semitic religious literature flooding into Europe from Muslim sources it might be time to try to balance things a little. Regardless of whether one does or does not like Israelis, Israeli policies, Israeli ministers, or for that matter Israeli food, the fact is that the tone and specifics of the language used against Israel, whether in the Arab world or in the intellectually challenged West, too often crosses the borders of anti-Semitism.

Perhaps it this background of consistent condemnation of Israel but silence in regard to the unspeakable horror of so many really evil regimes that has led the pope to conclude that anti-Semitism is indeed still alive and flourishing, that it is necessary for him to reiterate at least in the Christian world that the basis of two thousand years of hatred contempt and dehumanization needs to be counteracted.

The truth is that every new religion, however much it may proclaim the virtues of peace, rises on the delegitimization of those that came before it.

Every holy text condemns the poor, ignorant, or graceless savages who failed to see the benefits of the New Revelation, and dominant religions have always persecuted them when they had the upper hand.

The uniqueness of Judaism is that for the past two thousand years its Midrashic commentaries and its legal judgments have overwhelmingly modified the harshness of the initial pronouncements. It has pointedly rejected any attempt to identify peoples condemned three thousand years ago with those today who might share the same names. Sadly, in the current political and theological climate some of our own seem to be regressing to earlier religious aggression. The problem with Christianity and Islam is that the old fundamentalist standards have for too long remained dominant and in place, so that flagellatory fanaticism has a tradition to call on.

Christianity has a problem with its gospels, not least of which is the patent contradiction between the synoptic authors of the apparent events or myths they were describing with an obvious polemic intent. The late Hyam Maccoby was particularly effective in challenging the historical accuracy of the gospel narratives. To admit they were the products of a specific era, and to admit they had an agenda that distorted their objectivity, does not necessarily damage any moral or ethical message, if that message can be distilled and purged of its animus. But when the messages do in fact lead to inhuman and immoral behavior on the part of the faithful, the issue has to be addressed. All fanaticism is dangerous, and in some religions more than others fanaticism and murder go hand in hand.

The pope continues in the enlightened tradition of trying to eliminate primitive literalism in favor of humane reinterpretation, and for this he deserves praise. He at least wishes to occupy the moral high ground, even if parts of his Church are clearly failing. He is not taking sides in a political dispute. He is simply trying to remove impediments to improvement. If only more of his counterparts in the other faiths would follow his example.