A SHORT HISTORY OF ANTI-SEMITISM

Definition

Anti-Semitism is hatred of Jews simply because they are Jews. Sometimes referred to as "the oldest hatred," it has been called anti-Judaism when it targets Jewish beliefs and practices, and anti-Semitism when it targets the Jewish people as a hated "race." Historically, what began as a conflict over religious beliefs evolved into a systematic policy of political, economic, and social isolation, exclusion, degradation, and attempted annihilation. Anti-Semitism did not begin in the Nazi era, nor did it end with the close of World War II. Its continuance over the millennia speaks to the power of scapegoating a group that is defined as "other."

Biblical Times

Abraham, the father of the three major monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) led his family to Canaan, where a new nation — the people of Israel — came into being almost 1,000 years before the Common Era (BCE). During those many centuries before Jesus, the Hebrews (the early Jewish people) experienced intermittent persecution because they refused to worship the idols of local rulers, which was the custom at the time. This refusal to worship idols was seen as stubborn and was resented.

Anti-Judaism

In the year 70 CE the Jewish Temple was destroyed by the Romans and most Jews were exiled throughout the ancient world. After the advent of Christianity, a new anti-Judaism evolved. Initially, Christianity was seen as simply another Jewish sect since Jesus and his disciples were Jewish and were preaching a form of Judaism.

During the first few hundred years after the crucifixion of Jesus by the Romans, adherents of both Judaism and Christianity co-existed — sometimes peacefully, sometimes with animosity — as they sought to proselytize their faith in the same lands.

With the conversion of the Roman emperors, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. Early church fathers sought to establish Christianity as the successor of Judaism. Since both religions derived from the Old Testament, Christians sought to establish the validity of their new religion by claiming that it superseded Judaism. The unwillingness of Jews to accept Jesus as the Messiah was viewed as a challenge both to the Roman rulers and to the Christian faith.

The Middle Ages

Leading up to the Middle Ages (from 300-600 CE), a new pattern of institutionalized discrimination against Jews occurred. Jews were forbidden to intermarry with Christians (399 CE), prohibited from holding high positions in government (439 CE), and prevented from appearing as witnesses against Christians in court (531 CE). As Jews were being officially ostracized, certain bizarre fantasies about Jews arose in Northern Europe that foreshadowed the anti-Semitism of the 20th Century. By this time in the Middle Ages it was alleged that Jews had horns and tails and engaged in ritual murder of Christians (for example, to make matzah for Passover). The latter allegation, referred to as the "blood libel," was fabricated by Thomas of Monmouth in 1150 to explain the mysterious death of a Christian boy. It recurs in English and German myths.

In 1095, Pope Urban II made a general appeal to the Christians of Europe to take up the cross and sword and liberate the Holy Land from the Muslims, beginning what were to be known as the Crusades. The religious fervor that drove men, and later even children, on the Crusades was to have direct consequences for Jews. The Crusader armies, which more closely resembled mobs, swept through Jewish communities, looting, raping, and massacring the inhabitants. Thus the pogrom, the organized massacre of Jews, was born.

During the middle of the 14th century, the Bubonic Plague spread throughout Europe, killing an estimated one-third of the population. Fear, superstition, and ignorance prompted the need to find someone to blame, and the Jews were a convenient scapegoat because of the myths and stereotypes that were already believed about them. Though Jews were also dying from the plague, they were accused of poisoning wells and spreading the disease.

In 1290, Edward I expelled the Jews from England, making England the first European country to do so. Over two hundred years later, on July 30, 1492, the Jewish community of Spain — some 200,000 people — was expelled by an edict issued by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. This was part of the larger Spanish Inquisition, which was carried out in part to convert Jews to Catholicism.

In 1545, Martin Luther, the founder of the 16th Century Reformation and Protestantism, wrote a pamphlet entitled "The Jews and Their Lies," claiming that Jews thirsted for Christian blood and urging the slaying of Jews. The Nazis reprinted it in 1935. Some scholars feel that these scurrilous attacks mark the transition from anti-Judaism (attacks motivated because of the Jews' refusal to accept Christianity) to anti-Semitism (hatred of Jews as a so-called "race" whose existence would contaminate the purity of other "races").

Increasingly Jews were subjected to political, economic, and social discrimination, resulting in the deprivation of their legal and civil rights. They were restricted to living in ghettos and, beginning in the 13th Century, were required to wear a distinctive emblem (a badge and/or a pointed hat) so that they could be immediately recognized.

Since the Church did not allow Christians to lend money for profit, some Jews became moneylenders. Once they became associated with the forbidden trade of usury, a new set of stereotypes evolved around Jews as money-hungry and greedy. As moneylenders, Jews were frequently useful to rulers who used their capital to build cathedrals and outfit armies. As long as the Jews benefited the ruler either through finance or by serving as a convenient scapegoat, they were tolerated; when it suited the ruler, they were expelled — from England in 1290, from France in 1394, and from Spain in 1492.

Anti-Semitism

The term "anti-Semitism" was coined in 1879 by Wilhelm Marr, a German political agitator. It coincided with the development across Northern Europe and the United States of a new pseudo-science based on theories of racial superiority and inferiority.

Many have asked why anti-Semitism turned genocidal in Germany, rather than in France or England, which had the same medieval heritage. Following World War I, Germany was a deeply troubled country. Having lost the war, its citizens felt humiliated by the defeat. The victorious countries, including the United States, France, and England, authored the Treaty of Versailles, a peace treaty that compelled Germany to give up territory and to pay large sums of money to the countries whose lands it had damaged. In addition to this social and economic degradation, Adolf Hitler employed a demagogic leadership that exploited the German cultural norm of obedience to authority and the long history of demonizing Jews. Hitler played up conspiracy theories of victimization about WWI, blaming Jews for poisoning Germany's body politic. He also called upon myths such as the "blood libel" to evoke fear that the Jews would contaminate what he referred to as the superior "Aryan race." According to Hitler's doctrine, all Jews and their genetic pool had to be eliminated.

The Holocaust

There may be no more succinct description of the Holocaust than the statement issued by the Vatican on March 12, 1998:

> This century has witnessed an unspeakable tragedy, which can never be forgotten: the attempt by the Nazi regime to exterminate the Jewish people, with the consequent killing of millions of Jews. Women and men, old and young, children and infants, for the sole reason of their Jewish origin, were persecuted and deported. Some were killed

immediately, while others were degraded, ill-treated, tortured and utterly robbed of their human dignity, and then murdered. Very few of those who entered the [Concentration] Camps survived, and those who did remained scarred for life. This was the Shoah.

As Pope John Paul II recognized, "erroneous and unjust interpretations of the New Testament regarding the Jewish people and their alleged culpability have circulated for too long..." and may have created anti-Jewish sentiment in some Christian minds and hearts. The progressive dehumanization that Jews endured — the image of the Jews' demonic "otherness" — made the Holocaust possible.

Contemporary Anti-Semitism

In Germany today, governmental safeguards against fascist anti-Semitism have been instituted and yet young neo-Nazi Skinheads, frustrated at rising unemployment, look for scapegoats. When they cannot find living Jews, they desecrate Jewish cemeteries. They also look for other vulnerable targets such as immigrant workers. Physical attacks against Jews and Jewish institutions in Europe come from some in the Muslim community under the guise of anti-Zionism. In Eastern Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union has brought with it a rise in nationalist groups that use anti-Semitism to meet their political ends. There is even anti-Semitism in countries where there are virtually no Jews.

The United States has been unique in its constitutional separation of church and state, full provision for citizenship for Jews, and its institutional support of Jewish life from President Washington to the present. Despite enjoying the full benefits of citizenship, Jews are still being victimized by acts of hate. In addition, extremist groups and Skinhead youth promote racist and anti-Semitic world views and are actively recruiting young people through various means including music and the Internet. Although such groups constitute only a tiny minority, one of the lessons we learn about anti-Semitism is that we can never be complacent.

WHAT ARE THE SOURCES OF ANTI-SEMITISM?

In general, people feel more comfortable with similarities than they do with differences. People who refuse to accept the norms and ways of their neighbors are often rejected by those neighbors. Throughout history the Jews adhered to their beliefs and way of life even in the face of persecution, and many felt resentful or threatened by the Jews' refusal to conform to the practices of the larger society.

Jewish identity can be traced all the way back to Abraham, who rejected the idolatry of his fellow Mesopotamians in favor of monotheism, the belief in one God. The Hebrew slaves in Egypt maintained that monotheistic difference from their polytheistic (i.e., multiple-god worshipping) Egyptian masters up until Moses led the Hebrew exodus from slavery to freedom, as celebrated in the Jewish holiday of Passover. In Persia, a Jew named Mordechai rejected Prime Minister Haman's order for all subjects to bow down to him, refusing to bow down to anyone but God, as celebrated in the Jewish holiday of Purim. When the land of Israel was ruled by the empire of Alexander the Great, a band of Jews rebelled against the forced imposition of Greek religion and culture, as celebrated in the Jewish holiday of Chanukah. Later, when Jews refused to obey the anti-Jewish rules of the Roman Empire, the Roman army destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem, slaughtered thousands of Jews, and banished most of the survivors to live in exile, as commemorated by the Jewish holiday of Tisha B'av.

As this list demonstrates, not only have Jews been singled out for thousands of years, but Judaism actually celebrates and commemorates its historical challenges.

For the last 2000 years, Jews have refused to accept Jesus as the messiah. Couple that refusal with the traditional accusation that Jews are responsible for the death of Jesus (see Myth #3) and the result has been centuries of Christian European anti-Semitism.

In the Muslim world, Jewish refusal to accept Mohammed as a prophet of God has resulted in Jews (along with Christians) being considered as *dhimmis* (second-class citizens), with fewer rights and privileges than their Muslim neighbors. This coupled with the existence of Israel has resulted in decades of rising and ever-more virulent anti-Semitism across the Arab and Muslim worlds.

WHAT IS BELOW THE SURFACE?

Anti-Semitism can be compared to an iceberg, where only a relatively small portion is visible to the casual observer and the greatest mass lies below the surface. Typically people see or hear about only the most horrendous examples of anti-Semitism, such as hate crimes that hit the headlines. The incidents that receive public attention are really just the tip of the iceberg. Subtle slurs, graffiti, and other expressions of bias that do not make it into the news can be likened to the 90% of the iceberg that remains hidden below the waterline. All individuals need to recognize ignorance and insensitive behavior for what it is. While taking care to not overreact, it is important to recognize that ignoring small transgressions can lead to more serious incidents. If you ignore subtle bias, you help foster a climate in which hate crimes can occur.

Another aspect of anti-Semitism is the application of double standards, whereby Jews and Israel are held to a particular standard that is not applied to other people and countries. For example, Jews have been accused of forming tight-knit communities even though many groups tend to associate with others who share their culture, ethnicity or religion. Moreover, there is a historical basis for Jews forming tight knit communities — centuries of rejection by their non-Jewish neighbors led Jews to rely on one another for social and economic support.

Just the Facts

So how can people determine if they are overreacting, or if what they have experienced is truly anti-Semitism? Fortunately, most Americans will never personally experience the most visible parts of the iceberg — the hate crimes, assaults, and serious damage to property. That is because the United States is a country in which hate-motivated behavior is not tolerated by the majority of citizens. There has never been systematic persecution of Jews in the U.S., and anti-Semitic attitudes are not the norm.

On the other hand, while there are legal guarantees of freedom in the U.S., myths and misconceptions about Jews cannot be legislated out of existence. This booklet addresses a few of the common myths about Jews and offers information and language that can be used to combat prejudices and stereotypes that you may encounter.