

The Light Sleeper
ANTI-SEMITISM TODAY





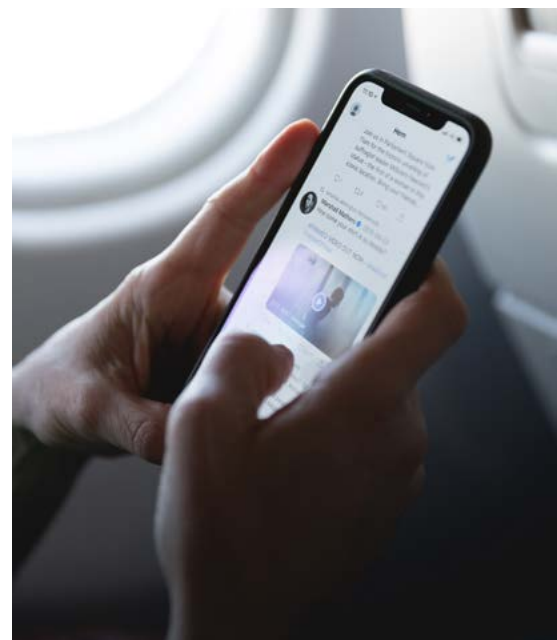
History of anti-Semitism

The habits of anti-Semitism have been burrowing into European and British culture for as long as we can remember.

A Light Sleeper was the title of a report on anti-Semitism published by the Runnymede Trust in 1994. In this century, and perhaps particularly since the referendum on Brexit, the sleeper has woken up and is horribly active.

People sometimes speak of 'a new anti-Semitism', which reflects new causes that are distorted to serve anti-Semitic agendas, new groups of people who are drawn into anti-Semitic ways of behaving and speaking, and new methods which are developed to promote anti-Semitic propaganda.

The Lessons Learned? collection has on its cover a chilling image of a smartphone with a grossly anti-Semitic tweet. But at the same time this is no new phenomenon: it is the same tropes which re-emerge, of a conspiratorial cabal controlling the world's destiny, of a morally repugnant group opposed to basic decency, of control of the media and the rewriting of history, and so on - even the blood libel resurfaces in some forms of contemporary anti-Semitism.





Christianity

It is a shameful truth that, through its theological teachings, the church, which should have offered an antidote, compounded the spread of this virus.

Archbishop Justin does not go into details in his essay, but neither does he mince his words. The extent of the 'teaching of contempt', l'enseignement du mépris, in Christian tradition was powerfully charted by the French historian Jules Isaac in the last century, and his analysis was largely taken on board by the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council in the 1965 declaration *Nostra Aetate*. That has proved hugely influential for Christians of many different denominations, and as a result Christian-Jewish relations are undoubtedly in a much better place now than they were a hundred years ago. However, Christianity is a notoriously fragmented religion, and there are certainly parts of the Christian scene where anti-Jewish attitudes continue to flourish.

It is important to distinguish between Christian anti-Judaism, seeking justification in an inadequate theology, and secular anti-Semitism, claiming support from pseudo-scientific theories of race or whatever. But that is not to exonerate Christianity from historical responsibility, nor to lessen the challenge for us today: Christian anti-Judaism helped to prepare the ground in which secular anti-Semitism could grow, and distorted theology can still be used to support negative attitudes to Jewish people in our own time.



Agendas

The virus continues to seek a host. It latches onto a variety of different issues: financial inequality, wars and depressions, education, politics and government, grave international issues, such as the rights of Israelis and Palestinians, and inter faith tensions.

There is so much that could be said at this point, but perhaps the most eye-catching in the Archbishop's list of agendas capable of being suborned to anti-Semitism is the reference to Israel / Palestine issues. This is for some contested ground, but to me there seems no question that denying the right of Israel to exist, failing to take seriously the claim of its citizens to security and recognition, viewing the complex situation in the Holy Land as an unparalleled example of injustice when it is in fact surrounded by egregious instances of oppression and unsettlement, adopting a one-sided view which fails to recognise the legitimate interests and real anxieties of all sides - all these can be manifestations of, or excuses for, real anti-Semitism.





That is not always the case - sometimes these things are just the product of lazy thinking or inadequate understanding - but the litmus test is the re-emergence of anti-Semitic tropes from the past, even if the language of 'Jews' is replaced by 'Zionists' or 'Israelis', or whatever. It is indeed important to safeguard a space for robust criticism of the policies of any particular Israeli government, but the Chief Rabbi is surely right in saying: "When someone denies the right of Israel to exist, it hurts us, just as an attack on a close member of our family would hurt us ... the idea of Jewish self-determination [is] at the very core of mainstream Jewish identity." I have been much helped in charting the boundaries of appropriate language on these issues by a section on anti-Semitism appended to the recent World Council of Churches document on Religion, Violence and Racism.

Anti-Semitism is at the heart of racism.

If anti-Semitism is the particular, racism is the general; or perhaps, if anti-Semitism is the parent, racism is the child. For centuries Jewish people and communities, as the primary 'Other' in European societies, bore the brunt of xenophobia, suspicion and scapegoating, and racism today finds its most virulent and undiluted expression in anti-Semitism. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, states in his short essay: "Hate crime against Jewish people is an attack on everything we stand for."



Positives

Alongside a robust condemnation of anti-Semitic discourse, it is imperative that we celebrate the extraordinary contribution of the Jewish community to British society over the centuries through science, ethical finance, and the arts, to name but a few.

One of the ways in which what one might call low-level or shallow anti-Semitism can be removed is through positive encounter with Jewish people whose integrity and stature cannot be questioned. And of course, these do not have to be scientists, ethical financiers or artists; they can also be entirely ordinary people living by Jewish values in Jewish ways alongside their Christian or other neighbours. Archbishop Justin kindly goes on to speak warmly of his association with our own organisation CCJ. Our core values are: promoting understanding, valuing difference, demonstrating empathy and respect, and challenging prejudices; these are surely an antidote to anti-Semitism.





Confrontation

Anti-Semitism permeates and pervades all that it touches when it is swept under the carpet, denied and not confronted head-on.

This is the other side of the coin to building positive relationships: sometimes it is necessary to challenge negative attitudes. In a fine contribution to *Lessons Learned?*, Sajid Javid speaks of 'dinner party antisemitism', referring to the respectable, middle-class people who would recoil in horror if you accused them of racism, but are quite happy to repeat modern takes on age-old myths about Jews. It is in the dark soil of un-rebuked casual bigotry that the weed of virulent anti-Semitism can grow, as history teaches us clearly. Here indeed is a challenge right into the heart of polite English society, which can make us feel quite uncomfortable.



Theology

Anti-Semitism undermines and distorts the truth: it is the negation of God's plan for his creation and is therefore a denial of God himself. Anti-Semitism is the antithesis of all that our scriptures call us to be and to do.

This is the heart of the matter for us as Christians and Jews. There is a fundamental truth that Jews and Christians hold in common: we are taught, and we believe, that men and women are made in the image of God. It follows that to demean, to hate, to plan to destroy our fellow men and women, whatever their race or religion, means nothing other than to demean, to hate, to plan to destroy the God in whose image they are made.

It follows that when we speak, act, pray against any evil that dehumanises others on grounds of religion and race, we do not do that because we subscribe to any fashionable ideology or political correctness. On the contrary, we have seen how cruel fashionable thought can be, how political discourse can be not just incorrect but plain wrong. We challenge anti-Semitism, and any religious or racial intolerance, because in doing that we are taking sides with the God of justice and fairness who honours each person made in his image. Combatting anti-Semitism is an issue for God, and it must be an issue for us too.

Thank you all for your support of CCJ as we seek to play our part in that combat.

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