Christian Roots of AntiSemitism

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Today's sermon is in response to a request for a sermon about the Christian roots of anti-Semitism. This is a vast topic, which I cannot do justice to in just 20 minutes. There's no way I can address all the issues today, so please understand that this is going to be a taster, rather than a meal. Secondly, I may also be the wrong person to answer this question, since I am a Christian minister, so I cannot be objective. However, I was asked, so I'll do my best.

So, let's start with a basic question: have Christians contributed to antisemitism? That one is easy. Yes, we have. No question about it. Throughout Christian history there have been laws which have marginalized and limited the freedom of Jews and the practice of their religion. There have been many times in the last 2000 years when Christian countries have persecuted Jews for being Jews:

Crusades

When the Crusades began in 1096, Christian nations sent armies into the the holy land to free Jerusalem from Muslim rule. On the way there, many Jewish communities in Germany were attacked, with thousands killed.

The Crusaders reasoned that if they were going to the Holy Land to fight infidels, why shouldn't they fight non-Christians in Europe as well?

In 1290, England expelled all Jews from British soil, and they were not allowed back for another 360 years.

Spain

In 1492, just as Columbus was setting off on his first voyage to the New World, Spain expelled all Jews and Muslims from their country. The only way to stay was to convert to Christianity. It is estimated that 40,000 Jews left the country.

Nazis Genocide

The most infamous persecution of Jews was perpetrated by the Nazis during World War Two. They set out to kill all Jews in an act of genocide against their faith and their people.

Although the Nazis embraced a pagan religious ideology, Germany was a Christian country, and the persecution was not prevented by Christians.

The next question is why have Christians persecuted Jews? Often, there was a combination of motivations, some religious, some racist, others economic. During the Middle Ages, it was illegal for Christians to lend money with interest. This was called usury. The restriction on this kind of loan was based in the Bible. There are many passages forbidding the loaning of money with interest. Here's one from the Book of Exodus:

25 If you lend money to my people, to the poor among you, you shall not deal with them as a creditor; you shall not exact interest from them. (Exodus 22:25)

 When Jesus gives his famous instruction that we should love our enemies, he also says that we should not lend money with interest:

34 If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; (Luke 6:34-35)

In the Middle Ages, it was felt that usury was a kind of sloth, where a person could make money - interest - even while they were asleep. Both Christians and Jews agreed that they should not lend money with interest, except to foreigners. In Europe, Jews considered Christians to be foreigners, so it was acceptable to lend money to Christians. Christians also lent money, but it was condemned as sinful. But it was lawful to get loans from Jews.

The result was that Christians came to resent Jews because they could extract money from Christians through interest payments, which could be as high as 30 or 40 percent. This antipathy was captured in Shakespeare's play The Merchant of Venice, where the money lender Shylock is presented as a villain. The usury laws also meant that some Jews amassed property and wealth, which were seen as stolen from Christians.

This attitude, both economic and religious, generated resentment, and was used to justify the expulsion of Jews and seizure of their property in places like England and Spain. During the Renaissance, Christians changed the rules. Anyone could lend money, setting the stage for the modern banking industry. Nonetheless, Jews have been portrayed as caring only about money, an attitude that persists to this day.

Messiah?

Another source of antisemitic attitudes is rooted in how Christians understand the identity of Jesus. Jesus was born a Jew, and his first followers were Jews. Some of the converts to Christianity after Jesus died were also Jews.

The Hebrew Scriptures predict the coming of a messiah to rescue the world and the Jews in particular. This is expressed in prophecies and in the psalms. However, where Jews and Christians differ is over whether Jesus of Nazareth was that messiah. Christians say yes, Jews say no. The Jews expected a Messiah who would free the Jewish people from oppression, specifically, the Romans. Jesus did not do that, so they concluded Jesus of Nazareth was a rabbi , a teacher, but not a messiah.

This difference of opinion caused trouble. In the Book of Acts in the New Testament we hear about how the Apostle Paul spread the word about Jesus. Paul was born a Jew, so he was welcome in synagogues as he travelled (Acts 14:1). He spread the news about Jesus, arguing that he was the messiah the Jews had been waiting for. Some were receptive, most were not. Paul found that he was having more success among non-Jews. Paul's letters show his frustration with the Jews - he thinks they are making a terrible mistake (Romans 9). However, it should be remembered that Paul's beliefs evolved over time. By the time he writes his last letter, to the Christian community in Rome, his position softens, and he declares that God will save everyone, including the Jews (Romans 11:26).

Paul died in the year 64 or 65. Shortly afterwards, a historic event contributed to another cause of Christian antipathy towards the Jews.

In the year 68, just three years after Paul's death, the Roman Emperor Nero died. He had been a kind of absentee emperor, preferring to sing and act in plays than to rule.

Four Emperors

When he died, there was no clear successor. Over the next year, four men tried to be emperor, killing each other or committing suicide when they lost the fight for the throne. It was chaos, a true succession crisis.

During this period, Jewish rebels in Israel saw an opportunity. They launched an attack to take back Jerusalem and the countryside from Rome. They succeeded, regaining control over their homeland for the first time in a century.

But in the year 70, the succession crisis was over, and the empire strikes back.

Conquest of Jerusalem

 The Jewish rebellion was crushed. The temple was burnt to the ground and looted. Thousands of Jews are so heart broken they commit suicide.

Jewish prisoners

At the time it was estimated that the Romans killed almost one million people, and took another 10,000 back to Rome as slaves.

Back then, everyone believed that nothing this big could have happened without divine approval. The Romans saw it as proof that their gods wanted the rebellion crushed. The early Christians also thought this way. The destruction of Jerusalem and the Jews was seen as proof that God was on the side of Christians. God had punished the Jews to make way for this new religion led by Jesus.

Jerusalem was conquered in the year 70. The first Gospel, the Gospel of Mark, is written at this time. The other three gospels are written a decade or so later. These Gospel writers believe that they have seen proof that God wants the Jesus movement to succeed, and that God has abandoned the Jews. This explains why the gospel writers record so many of Christ's disputes with Jewish religious authorities, and the pious Pharisees. The writers know that Jerusalem will fall. To them, it looks like traditional Judaism will die out, and God has selected Christianity to take its place.

This animosity against Judaism is most explicit in the Gospel of John. He often describes Christ's conflicts with the temple leaders, which is probably historically accurate. However, in John's text, he does not refer to priests and Sadducees as Christ's opponents. He simply calls them " the Jews." Here's a quote after Jesus has healed the blind man in the temple courts, raising the ire of some Temple officials.

16 Therefore the Jews started persecuting Jesus, because he was doing such things on the sabbath. 17 But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is still working, and I also am working.' 18 For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only

breaking the sabbath, but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God. (John 5:16-18)

The way John writes the scene, it seems like all the Jews were mad at Jesus rather than just a few officials. This becomes a problem in Christianity later on, when the actions of a few Jewish leaders at one time in one place becomes synonymous with all Jews of all time being against Jesus and his followers. It would be as if we disagreed with one of Mayor Olivia Chow's policies, and decided that all Asians were to blame. It is both unfair and illogical.

The terrible irony in all of this is that a close reading of the Bible reveals that most of what Jesus stood for was a continuation of values embraced and promoted in the Hebrew Scriptures. Christians have historically sought to portray Jesus as a break from Judaism, but this ignores too much. Jesus was born, lived and died as a Jew. He quoted Hebrew scripture constantly, with approval. At times he even asked that it be taken further. His concern for the poor and marginalized is entirely consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures. If we embrace Jesus as the social justice Messiah, then we are talking about a Jewish vision of justice. The psalms constantly call for the rescue of the poor and downtrodden, and deride the rich and powerful for their cruelty.

There are differences between what Jesus preached and the content of the Hebrew Scriptures, but they are matters of degree. The Jewish faith focuses on the fate of the collective, of the Chosen people. Jesus introduces a more individualistic emphasis, and offers salvation to all. But this promise of one God, for everyone, is also present in the Hebrew Scriptures in Isaiah's prophecy and other places. Despite the many continuities between the two faiths, Christians have often defined themselves in opposition to Jews, a strategy that sustains antisemitism.

But it does not have to be this way. Christians no longer think that every natural or political disaster is caused by God. We don't think that God wanted the Nazis to kill the Jews during World War Two. How could a loving God ever order that to happen? By the same logic, we must disagree with the early Christians who thought the fall of the temple in the year 70 was proof of God's condemnation of the Jews. God weeps as the Jews and other people suffer, God does not celebrate. God wants all people to prosper and find a way to a just peace. This does not require the conversion of all peoples to any one religion. Rather, God has been spreading the message of divine love all over the world, to peoples in different religions. God yearns for co-operation and interfaith understanding so that a more just world may be created.

Jews and Christians need to peacefully coexist, to act like neighbours who get along and respect each other's differences. But to do so, we Christians have to be careful not to repeat past lies and slander. We have been deeply wrong about Judaism, and we must call out our own faith and scripture when it perpetuates dangerous values and ideas. God asks us to get along, to work together with with all peoples to create the Kingdom of God. May it be so. Amen.