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The origins of Christian anti-Semitism beyond the New Testament

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Religious Studies at Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand

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2001
This thesis presents a study of anti-Semitism in Christianity from the first to the fourth centuries and the resulting relationship between Jews and Christians.

The focus of the thesis is to examine the degree to which Ruether's contention, that virulent anti-Semitism appeared only as Christianity became powerful enough to rival the status and respect given to the Jewish people throughout the Roman Empire, may be substantiated. This contention is examined in both the historical and contemporary settings.

The thesis contains five sections which explore the appearance and development of what may be termed 'anti-Semitism in Christianity'.

The first addresses the origins of anti-Semitism within Christianity in the first century, primarily from the perspective of Jules Isaac, and details some contemporary reactions to his work.

The second section details the early history of anti-Semitism in the Roman Empire and the work of the classical scholars Philo and Josephus who used their considerable skill to oppose it.

The third section explores such historical factors as the significance of the two Jewish revolts against Rome, the effect of the Council of Jerusalem on the development of Christianity, the impact of the new Rabbinic Judaism and the developing rivalry between the two religions.

The fourth section outlines the development of anti-Semitism as a theological imperative within the writings of the early church, and offers a historical survey of the relationship between Church and Synagogue.

The fifth section tenders the conclusions of the thesis.
I have been very privileged to have attended Religious Studies lectures at Massey and Victoria universities.

These lectures have never failed to interest and fascinate me. For this I am grateful to Dr Peter Donovan, Dr Bronwyn Elsmore, Dr James Veitch, and Dr Brian Colless, who have completely transformed my view of religions.

I have also learned about the thoughts of leading theologians and philosophers such as Teilhard de Chardin, Martin Buber, and Rudolf Otto with his vision of a Council of World Religions to promote understanding among different religious groups, thereby promoting world peace.

As well we have studied major ancient and modern religions of the Middle East, Egypt, India, Japan, China and South-East Asia – a kaleidoscope of different ideas and cultural behaviour.

I wish to thank Dian Harper for her practical assistance in the final assembly of the thesis, and also for introducing me to the story of the Catholic Sisters of Our Lady of Sion.

I am very indebted to Dr Peter Donovan, my supervisor, and Dr Bronwyn Elsmore for their patience, their unflagging inspiration and encouragement.
# CONTENTS

Abstract  

Acknowledgments  

Chapter One  
Modern Awareness of Christian Anti-Semitism  

Chapter Two  
Pre-Christaian Anti-Jewishness  

Chapter Three  
Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism Become Rival Religions  

Chapter Four  
Ecclesiastical Anti-Semitism  

Chapter Five  
Conclusions - Including the New Testament  

Bibliography  

Abstract  

Acknowledgments  

Chapter One  
Modern Awareness of Christian Anti-Semitism  

Chapter Two  
Pre-Christaian Anti-Jewishness  

Chapter Three  
Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism Become Rival Religions  

Chapter Four  
Ecclesiastical Anti-Semitism  

Chapter Five  
Conclusions - Including the New Testament  

Bibliography  

Abstract  

Acknowledgments  

Chapter One  
Modern Awareness of Christian Anti-Semitism  

Chapter Two  
Pre-Christaian Anti-Jewishness  

Chapter Three  
Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism Become Rival Religions  

Chapter Four  
Ecclesiastical Anti-Semitism  

Chapter Five  
Conclusions - Including the New Testament  

Bibliography  

Abstract  

Acknowledgments  

Chapter One  
Modern Awareness of Christian Anti-Semitism  

Chapter Two  
Pre-Christaian Anti-Jewishness  

Chapter Three  
Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism Become Rival Religions  

Chapter Four  
Ecclesiastical Anti-Semitism  

Chapter Five  
Conclusions - Including the New Testament  

Bibliography