Christian Anti-Semitism: Myth or Deadly Assassin

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“What allowed millions of people who considered themselves to be Christian to participate as perpetrators, collaborators, or silent bystanders as six million men, women, and children were slaughtered?”[[1]](#endnote-1) The origins of Anti-Semitism are widely controversial; however, regardless of how it started, this state of mind has lead to catastrophic consequences. One of which is the Holocaust, a genocide, in which six million Jewish people were brutally murdered. The question that must be asked is how did Anti-Semitism arise? “The Holocaust took place only a few decades ago under the very eyes of Christian Europe.”[[2]](#endnote-2) How could an institution that is built on “loving thy neighbor” sit back and watch as this atrocity was taking place? A conclusion that can be drawn is that Anti-Semitism found its origins in Christianity. By examining Anti-Semitism and its relationship with Christianity, it is clear that multiple parallels can be found, however, what is still unresolved is how much of an influence those parallels actually had on Anti-Semitism itself.

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Anti-Semitism is the, “hostility toward or discrimination against Jews as a religious, ethnic, or racial group.”[[3]](#endnote-3) This particular attitude became extremely apparent in the 1900’s especially during the time of Hitler. Hitler made his opinions of the Jewish people very clear in his book, *Mein Kampf*, in which he stated, “the Jew—for reasons which will at once become apparent—was never in possession of a culture of his own.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Hitler treats them as if they were on the same level as a bug. He states that they do not have their own culture; therefore to him this means that they have no right to even stay alive. The big question though, is where did this hatred come from? Did Hitler come up with the idea of Anti-Semitism or was this already set in stone long before Hitler? The answers to these questions are not easy, however many people believe that they have found the answer in the form of Christianity. People are starting to take up the belief that Anti-Semitism has been around since the age of the Bible and its origins are in the disagreements between the Christian and Jewish faith. One question to ask yourself, however, is if this mindset has been around since the age of the bible, what is it that set it off on such a destructive path? The answer to this question is it does not have anything to do with religion, but rather Hitler himself. Although Hitler was not the only cause of the Holocaust he was a major contributor and he was able to persuade a large amount of people that his goal in life was just. Typically, a belief does not simply develop over a few days or even years, but rather it develops over the course of many years. This supports the fact that most likely the feelings of Anti-Semitism were not developed during the time of the Holocaust, but rather much earlier, thus making the theory of Christian Anti-Semitism more plausible.

In 1850, Malcolm Hay wrote the book, *Thy Brother’s Blood: The Roots of Christian Anti-Semitism*. Hay is a firm believer that the roots of Anti-Semitism reside in religion, specifically Christianity. In his book Hay’s goal is to prove to his readers that the origins of Anti-Semitism do in fact come from Christianity. Although Hay’s goal is to convince his readers of this concept, he does not do a very good job in doing so. He is criticized for not explaining the “why” just the “how” Anti-Semitism has its roots in Christianity. Hay does go in depth about how he believes that Anti-Semitism has its roots in Christianity, however many people agree on the fact that he skirts around explaining the reasons behind why Anti-Semitism obtained its roots from religion. People who have reviewed Hay’s work agree that his book is a decent, “chronicle of historical growth of Anti-Semitism.”[[5]](#endnote-5) Although regardless of the decent portrayal of historical growth, Hay failed in his original purpose. Due to the fact that he did not explain his reasoning, he did not give a sound enough argument to persuade his readers to believe that Anti-Semitism was due to Christianity, leaving the readers disappointed with the work that was presented to them, as well as even more lost in terms of pinpointing the roots of Anti-Semitism.

Charles Glock and [Rodney Stark](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_Stark) are two important figures in the mystery of Christian Anti-Semitic origins. Together they wrote, *Christian Beliefs and Anti-Semitism* which, “Argues that certain theological beliefs of Christians play a causal role in Anti-Semitism even today.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Both Glock and Stark had a very similar mid set as Hay in that their goal with their book was to prove to their readers that Anti-Semitism came from religious reasons. Both Gluck and Stark, however, did a much better job of convincing their readers of this task because not only did they describe how, but they also stated why. In order to test this theory Glock and Stark collected data in the form of a survey in which they sent out to church members. The two authors reported that their findings supported their hypothesis. Through this study, Glock and Stark concluded, “Christian Orthodoxy leads to particularism, the belief that Christians alone have religious truth and virtue, which leads to negative religious images of Jews of New Testament times.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Not only did Glock and Stark explain why this sentiment appeared, they also collected concrete evidence. Throughout the years, many people have replicated Glock and Stark’s findings only to find that their results yielded similar conclusions in some ways, but not in every facet.

Although Glock and Stark believed that they proved that Anti-Semitism has its roots in Christianity, one must question how this hatred arose. Many believe that the New Testament played a major role in creating this hatred toward the Jewish community. “In the New Testament gentile Christians began to claim that their communities were the true Israel.”[[8]](#endnote-8) This is when we can start to see a divide between the Jewish and the Christian people. The Christian people started referring to Jesus as the Son of God, upsetting the Jewish community because they did not believe in the holy Trinity. The Jewish view Jesus as a prophet and they are still waiting for the Son of God to come to Earth. This caused yet another split in the two religions. In the New Testament, in the book of John, there is a whole passage on the Jewish people rejecting Jesus. In this section the Jewish people bring rocks to stone Jesus to death and they tell Jesus, “We’re stoning you not for any good work, but for blasphemy! You a mere man, claim to be God.”[[9]](#endnote-9) The rejection of Jesus is believed to be one of the major influences that resulted in Anti-Semitic feelings. The Christians could not believe that the Jewish people would turn their backs on Jesus, however they were even more appalled at the fact that they would try and murder him. Another parallel that researchers believe to be a contributing factor is not only did they condemn Jesus for calling himself God’s son, but the Jews also hold some responsibility for his crucifixion. In fact in Matthew, Pilate yells down to the Jews that he is not to be responsible for the death of Jesus Christ and the people respond, “We will take responsibility for his death—we and our children.”[[10]](#endnote-10) In this verse the Jewish people are admitting that they played a role in his death and it is strongly believed that this has lead to strong Anti-Semitic views. It is hypothesized that some Christians saw the Holocaust as a way for God to punish the, “unforgiven crucifiers”.[[11]](#endnote-11) To the Christians the Jewish went against all that they thought was important to their religion. Scholars believe that it is this deep-rooted hatred that was one of the aspects that lead to Christian Anti-Semitism.

Glock and Stark’s research study started a movement and was replicated by many other researchers. Russell Middleton conducted a similar study and concluded, “those who are more religious tend to be more highly prejudiced against Jews and those who have no religious affiliation are less Anti-Sematic.”[[12]](#endnote-12) Middleton’s results seemed as though they further backed the findings of Glock and Stark making their research more valid, however Middleton’s findings disagreed with Glock and Stark in one major way. Middleton introduced eleven background variables, seven social-psychological variables, and three other prejudice measures. When Middleton accounted for these new factors, his results yielded that the religious results alone only accounted for two percent. Middleton believed that the majority of the correlation that Glock and Stark were seeing was due to social-psychological factors. Middleton thus concluded that, “The Christian belief taken alone did not play a very important part in causing secular Anti-Semitism.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Although he concluded that religion was not the complete cause of Anti-Semitism he did not rule it out one hundred percent, still allowing room for some influence.

Dean Hodge and Jackson Carroll also used Glock and Starks research and conducted trails on their own. Hodge and Carroll sent out surveys similar to Glock and Stark, however, Hodge and Carroll distributed their surveys to Protestants in Atlanta and Philadelphia. Through their studies Hodge and Carroll concluded that, “Although Christian ethics stresses the brotherhood of all men, research reveals strong prejudice among Christians, even more among church members that non-church members.”[[14]](#endnote-14) Although they did get similar results to Glock and Stark, Hodge and Carroll concluded that they agreed with the findings of Middleton. They believed that it was extremely important to include other factors in the study other than just Christianity. Glock and Stark claimed that no less than a fourth of American Anti-Semitism is attached to religious forces, however Middleton accounted for only two percent and Hodge and Carroll accounted for about five percent of their data.[[15]](#endnote-15) Even though Middleton and Hodge/Carroll’s results don’t exactly agree they are in a much closer vicinity to each other than Glock and Starks twenty-five percent. Although Glock and Stark used to be the main contributors to the Christian Anti-Semitism theory, their research has now been debunked. The question remains however, if Anti-Semitism has any roots in Christianity. At this point in time it would be fair to say that Anti-Semitism does have some roots in Christianity, however, it would not be a valid statement to say that Anti-Semitism came from Christianity one hundred percent. One common thought however, is that, “No one disagrees with the fact that there is a link between Christian Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust.”[[16]](#endnote-16) On multiple occasions people get caught up in the idea that the Holocaust is the definition of Anti-Semitism. Although the Holocaust was a horrific event that came out of the mindset of Anti-Semitism, the Holocaust is not Anti-Semitism as a whole. This statement is simply saying that the roots of the Holocaust are due to religious reason, just not Anti-Semitism.

Although as of right now we cannot conclude that Christianity was the sole cause of Anti-Semitism, we can conclude with a high level of certainty that it did play a role in the feeling of Anti-Semitism. The hatred that the Christians had of Jews in biblical times has even carried over and is seen in modern times. This distrust or animosity of the Jewish people is rooted in those same issues that started back in the time of Jesus. We can see this still today when looking at many of the Christian teachings and how they portray Jewish people. It is very common to see a portrayal of the Jewish followers in a negative light. In some extreme cases some Christians even teach that it was the Jewish people who physically murdered Jesus. This is not a true statement, however, because Pontius Pilate was in fact the man who ordered Jesus to be killed and he was Roman. Although the Jews may have played a part in Jesus’ crucifixion, they did not actually order his death. Depending on the Christian, however, some people will find ways to portray the Bible in an Anti-Semitic light even going so far as to use the Jewish people as an example of what happens to you if you disobey God and how he will punish you.

Jewish people have not been the only group of people who have suffered from the hand of Anti-Semitism like forces. In history there has been a countless number of groups who have been persecuted by groups of people very similar to those who followed Anti-Semitism. In fact some KKK groups even admit to having Anti-Semitic roots. They claim that they believed that the Jewish people were promoting anti-Christian viewpoints. This just goes to show that although the Anti-Semitic viewpoints were much more pronounced during the time period of Hitler, they are still around today. This also goes to show that Anti-Semitism does have some well-defined roots in religion as seen by the KKK claiming they did not like Jews for the reason that they were promoting anti-Christian views.

The roots of Anti-Semitism are not easily defined. Many researchers and historians have tried to nail down what the causes of this immense hatred for the Jewish population however; the results are all extremely varied. Glock and Stark, although thought they had finally proved that Anti-Semitism roots were in Christianity were debunked when Middleton came along. Both sides have valid argument with strong points. One side argues that it is the duty of the Christian follower to lend out a helping hand to all of those in need, however when millions of Jewish families were being destroyed right under their noses they did nothing. Would an institution that was built on these principles turn a blind eye or something of this grandeur or would this only happen if the Christians were in fact the cause of this new hatred? However, after the findings of Middleton and Hodge and Carroll’s research studies is it valid to say that that religion is the sole cause of Anti-Semitism? Based on the information that is available to us, it is safe to conclude that although Christianity may not have been the sole cause in the feelings of Anti-Semitism, religion definitely contributed to this mindset. We can even see evidence of this mindset in today’s society, however, thankfully nothing as severe as it was back in the time of the Holocaust. One thing that everyone can agree on is whether or not Christianity started the revolution of Anti-Semitism; it was unquestionably one of the major causes of the Holocaust.

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2. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *Merriam-Webster Dictionary,* s.v. “Anti-Semitism.” [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Beatty, John, Oliver Johnson, John Reisbord, and Mita Choudhury. "Mein Kampf." In Heritage of Western Civilization, 320. 9th ed. Vol. 2. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson, 2004. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Sweetland, Gailfred. "Reviewed Work: Thy Brother's Blood: The Roots of Christian Anti-Semitism." Journal of the American Academy of Religion 45, no. 2 (1977): 249. Accessed April 17, 2015. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.longwood.edu/. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Middleton, Russell. "Do Christian Beliefs Cause Anti-Semitism?" American Sociological Review 38, no. 1 (1973): 33-52. Accessed April 16, 2015. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.longwood.edu/>. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
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8. Horst, Pieter. "The Origins of Christian Anti-Semitism: Interview with Pieter Van Der Horst." Jerusalem Center For Public Affairs. May 5, 2009. Accessed April 17, 2015. http://jcpa.org/article/the-origins-of-christian-anti-semitism/. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. John 10:33 (New Living Translation) [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Matthew 27:25 (New Living Translation) [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Middleton [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Hodge [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Baranowski, Shelley. "The Origins of the Holocaust: Christian Anti-Semitism." The Journal of Religion 68, no. 1 (1988): 138-39. Accessed April 17, 2015. http://www.jstor.org.proxy.longwood.edu/.

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