

An ‘Outsider’ who Shaped the Council

In Scripture, the ‘outsider’ has an important role to play for the ‘insiders.’ The story of salvation hinges on a people, Israel, elected to bear witness to God’s loving design for the world; yet it is repeatedly punctuated by the contribution of individuals who don’t belong to that chosen group. Think of the pagan priest Jethro who exerts formative influence over his son-in-law, Moses (Exodus 18). Or Ruth, a woman from the Moabite tribe, who becomes the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4). Or Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho, who emerges as a heroine in the Book of Joshua (Ch 2). Each time, someone from ‘outside’ acts as a catalyst for transformation of life on the ‘inside.’

The pattern continues into the Gospels where Jesus himself is confronted by the faith and proactive involvement of the ‘outsider’—such as the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28—as he goes about his mission to the house of Israel. It is a pattern that continues in various forms and intensities in our own day.

In what follows I wish to draw attention, ever so briefly, to the input of one particular ‘outsider’ who contributed to the unfolding of the Second Vatican Council: the French-Jewish historian Jules Isaac (1877-1963). In using the term ‘outsider’ I here refer simply to the fact that Jules Isaac was not a baptised Christian, not a member of the Catholic Church, and that, as a Jew, he had experienced first hand rejection from Christian European society.[1]

In the mid-1930s Jules Isaac was a respected scholar with a government appointment as Inspector General of Education for the whole of

France. With the onset of German occupation he found himself stripped of his post, his published work destroyed, and forced into hiding to escape arrest. Tragically, there would be no escape for his wife, daughter, son-in-law and other family members. They were rounded up one day while Isaac was away from home and perished in the Nazi-driven genocide.

Against this backdrop, one could well understand if this husband, father and scholar had retreated into a world of bitterness and despair. Instead, marshalling his intellectual energies and a conciliatory spirit, he chose to address Jewish suffering by contributing to the healing and reform of the Church. Why the Church? Because through experience and study he had come to realize that while Nazism was not an expression of Christianity, it nonetheless utilized antisemitic images and thought-patterns deeply embedded in Christian catechesis and culture.

From 1940 Isaac had begun researching the phenomenon of antisemitism as it appeared in Christian bible commentaries, sermons and catechisms. Describing it as the “teaching of contempt,” he systematically demonstrated that such a teaching contradicted the fundamental tenets of Christian belief and was fed by Jewish stereotypes which had no basis in real Judaism. Let’s be clear: in his critique Isaac was not denouncing Christianity but rather its toxic distortions, and he did so boldly but without animosity.

After the war Isaac’s publications and interfaith networking, including meetings with

Catholic officials, were influential.[2] In 1949 he had a private audience with Pope Pius XII where he raised his concerns about the inadequacy of the prayer of the Good Friday liturgy that referred to ‘perfidious’ or ‘unfaithful’ Jews. In 1960, with preparations for Vatican II underway, Isaac met with Pope John XXIII and also Cardinal Bea. There he tabled a list of eighteen points of Jewish-Christian contention and urged the formation of a sub-commission in the Council that would investigate the ‘teaching of contempt.’

As events unfolded, Vatican II proved to be a decisive turning point in Jewish-Christian relations. *Nostra Aetate*, the Council’s *Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*, devoted paragraph four to the Church’s relationship with the Jewish people. Despite its brevity, it was a powerful statement. For the first time since St Paul, the Church clearly embraced its Jewish roots and affirmed God’s enduring love relationship with the Jewish people (Romans 11:28-29). It rejected the pervading stereotype of Jews as ‘Christ-killers’ and made clear that antisemitism is the antithesis of the gospel.

Nostra Aetate officially inaugurated a process of reconciliation that was centuries overdue, arresting and reversing Christian speech and behaviour patterns which had done untold damage to the Jewish people and to the credibility of Christianity itself. Among the pre-conciliar efforts of individuals and groups whose vision and dedicated work in Jewish-Christian dialogue paved the way to *Nostra Aetate*, Isaac’s voice was one that made an outstanding contribution.

As mentioned, Jules Isaac’s wife—herself a collaborator in his work—was murdered along

with millions of innocents at the hands of Hitler’s regime, and Isaac himself only narrowly escaped capture. He did not live to see *Nostra Aetate* promulgated, yet his achievements live on in the fruits and ongoing developments of Jewish-Christian reconciliation in our own time. I like to think that with every step by which we Christians embrace the vision of *Nostra Aetate* and open ourselves to a deeper understanding of the Jewish-Christian relationship, we honor the memory of Jules Isaac—and that of his wife, whose last note to her husband before being sent to the death camp read: “Save yourself for your work; the world is waiting for it.” [3] •

1. As a Jew, he was of course—from both Jewish and Christian religious perspectives—an ‘insider’ to God’s chosen people in a covenant “never revoked by God” (John Paul II, Mainz, 1980).
2. Isaac’s works on this theme include *Jésus et Israël* (1947), *Genèse de l’antisémitisme* (1956), and *L’Enseignement du Mépris* (1962), the latter which was written at the age of 85 and published in English as *The Teaching of Contempt* (1964).
3. Quoted in Claire Huchet Bishop’s biographic introduction to: Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt: Christian Roots of Anti-Semitism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 9.

Recommended reading: Tobias, Norman. *Jewish Conscience of the Church: Jules Isaac and the Second Vatican Council*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International, 2017.

View lecture by Norman Tobias at:

<https://www.ratisbonne.org/il/bk/category/lectures/>

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