

# Repairing the teaching of contempt: Jules Isaac's contribution to Jewish-Catholic relations

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**Abstract** This paper surveys and evaluates the contribution of Jules Isaac to the reorientation of relations between Christians and Jews. Jules Isaac, French educator, historian and bureaucrat committed his life to the repair of relations between Christians and Jews. He played a pivotal role in promoting consideration of Jews and Judaism at the Second Vatican Council. His life and career, while little known or appreciated by religious educators in the English-speaking world, reveal how an agile application of committed diplomacy, critical intellectual endeavour and cooperation across religious boundaries contributed to an increase in Christian self-understanding and a revitalised approach to interreligious relations. The work of religious educators is indebted to the life and career of Jules Isaac.

**Keywords** Jules Isaac · Jewish-Christian relations · Supersessionism · Teaching of contempt

## 1 Introduction

Noted Jewish scholar, Susannah Heschel (Minnich et al. 2012, p. 760) thinks that “rarely has any religious community engaged in as profound a theological reorientation as the Second Vatican Council in reconsidering Roman Catholic teachings regarding Jews and Judaism”. The turnaround in Catholic Church attitudes to Jews and Judaism that occurred with promulgation of the Vatican Council document *Nostra Aetate*—the declaration on the relation of the Catholic Church to non-Christian religions—has been profound and broad. For contemporary religious educators, the impact of these changes on their work is likewise deep and wide. Yet, the reasons for these changes and the key people and events in the

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chain of Christian responses to Jews and Judaism are not well known by religious educators.

This paper seeks to address this knowledge gap by focusing on the life and career of one person who played a pivotal role in the theological reorientation Heschel identifies. The contribution of French Jewish historian, Jules Isaac to the development of Catholic attitudes towards Jews and Judaism is mostly unheralded among the general population, especially in the English-speaking world. Indeed, the first major scholarly study in English of Jules Isaac was published in 2017 by Norman Tobias. Nevertheless, at critical moments in the history of the Catholic Church in the years between the end of World War II and the Second Vatican Council, Jules Isaac provided indispensable intellectual resources meshed with agile diplomacy to help to turn the tide from the Church's long history of "teaching of contempt" for the Jews—a term Jules Isaac coined. His work has placed modern Christian religious educators in an advantageous position in their efforts to explore Christian self-understanding and Christian relations with other religious communities. In the words of Susannah Heschel, the work of Jules Isaac helped "Christians to discover that they could learn something about God from a Jew, and that the theology of a Jew could make them better Christians" (Minnich et al. 2012, p. 761).

## 2 Jules Isaac: a brief biography

Jules Isaac (18 November 1877–6 September 1963) was a French school teacher, author, historian and educational administrator. He was born into "a largely assimilated Lorraine Jewish family, in which patriotism had long prevailed over religious belief" (Robberechts 2013, p. 1). His family were French patriots and members of the bourgeoisie. His grandfather served under Napoleon at the Battle of Waterloo. His father was a career French military officer. Both were awarded the Legion of Honour for their service to France. The young Jules enjoyed a privileged schooling. There he became friends with Claude Péguy, who would become the most celebrated French writer of his generation. He attended the *lycée Henri-IV* in 1896–7 where he studied under the renowned philosopher Henri Bergson. More significantly, he began his studies of Latin and Greek which would prove beneficial for his later projects. Despite his membership of the bourgeoisie—or perhaps because of it—Jules Isaac became a supporter of French Republican socialist causes. He settled into life as a teacher and text book author until those routines were interrupted by the Great War. He enlisted in 1914 at the age of 37 as an infantry soldier. He endured the trenches for almost 3 years until he was seriously wounded at Verdun.

He attained fame throughout France as the author of history textbooks widely used for many years in French schools. He became a history teacher in 1902 and in 1906 began writing and revising standard school history textbooks. He believed that good history textbooks could be an effective instrument in fostering peace between France and Germany. He aimed to create school textbooks that would "clear the tangle of jumbled historical events. He brought students into contact with the original source materials. Students could read for themselves and discover the truth" (Rice 2011, p. 3). He believed the historian was the recipient of a noble calling: to teach and write in ways using the tools of historical criticism in order to generate insight, clarify perspectives on both sides of an issue and smooth a pathway for examining the collective conscience and the required reconciliation. These sensibilities would inform his later writings on relations between Jews and Christians.

In 1936, pushing 60 years of age and contemplating retirement, Isaac was appointed as Inspector General of Public Education in France, the most senior government administrative appointment in education. He was dismissed from that position by the Vichy French government in 1940, due to his Jewish heritage. The Vichy collaborators adopted the antisemitism of their German overlords. The Minister for Education, Abel Bonnard claimed that “it was not acceptable for the history of France to be taught to French youth by an Isaac” (Robberechts 2013, p. 2). He took refuge in Aix-en-Provence in the French unoccupied zone in 1941.

When the Germans invaded the unoccupied zone, Isaac's wife, daughter and son-in-law were arrested on 7 October 1943 on suspicion of involvement in a resistance network. They were murdered on arrival at Auschwitz on 30 October 1943. Jules Isaac escaped capture, but only by chance: he had left his hotel room to walk to a local barber shop when the Gestapo arrived with the intention of arresting him and his wife. He moved around a series of safe-houses for the remainder of the war. He did not discover the fate of his family until after the war. The course of his life turned upon this tragic experience. He dedicated the rest of his life to “dissolving Christian anti-Semitism and the pervasive anti-Jewish theology that supported it” (Borelli 2012, p. 6).

Jules Isaac was born into a Jewish family, a bar mitzvah, married according to Jewish law, and buried according to Jewish custom. Yet, his Jewish self-identity was unconventional. He was not an observant Jew, nor was he ever a member of a Jewish congregation. He explained in a letter to his son, Daniel, dated 22 August 1954, that he never had any “Jewish religious ties”. But, he continued, “I have rekindled...my spiritual ties....Jewish spirituality has been, across the centuries, one of the most noble there is. That said, I am in no way prevented from remaining that which I was exclusively in former times: a humanist” (Tobias 2017, p. 247).

### 3 The writing life of Jules Isaac

In 1942, Jules Isaac began writing—under extreme duress and with limited resources—a book published in 1948 with the title, *Jésus et Israël*: “the work hardly of a detached historian, but a deeply emotional, often haphazard writing that was, as Isaac himself later described it, ‘meant to shock’” (Azar 2016, p. 12). Isaac read the gospels in their original Greek. He contended that Church teachings based on corrupted readings of the gospels were the basis for Christian antisemitism that had prepared the ground for what was happening in Europe under the Nazis. He argued that in order to repair this damage, history needed to be changed: to return to the text, to see Jesus in his Jewish context and to repair Christian teaching at the points where it had miscarried. He wrote in the Preface that his book “was born of persecution...It is a cry of an outraged conscience, of a broken heart. It is the conscience and the heart of man that it is addressing. I sorrow over those who refuse to hear it”.

Isaac's book contained bone-shaking claims that questioned the foundations of Christian life and belief. He showed how the four canonical gospels contained polemical material that portrayed Jewish religion in a poor light and created contempt for Jews and Judaism. He raised the challenging question of whether the Christian Church could ever separate itself from its anti-Jewish heritage. Gregory Baum, Jewish convert, Catholic priest and founding staff member of the Vatican's Secretariat for Christian Unity claimed that Isaac's *Jésus et Israël* “brought out, as no study had done before, how closely the contempt

for the Jewish people and the vilification of Jewish religion were linked to Christian preaching from the New Testament on” (Baum 1996, p. 2).

Prior to the publication of his book, *Jésus et Israël*, Isaac came to public notice for his stand on Christian complicity in the Nazi Holocaust. He obtained a book in February 1946 published by French Catholic historian Henri Daniel-Rops, *Jésus en son Temps (Jesus and His Times)*. A central focus of this book was a meditation on the text recorded in Matthew 27:25 at Jesus’ trial before Pilate: “Then the people as a whole answered, ‘His blood be upon us and on our children!’” Daniel-Rops argued that the murder of millions of Jews could be considered a continuing retribution for the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. Daniel-Rops’ book stands as the first theological justification for the *shoah*. Isaac was enraged by the book and was dismayed at the positive response it had received. He wrote a letter to the magazine *Europe*, dated Easter Sunday, 21 April 1946. He expressed his outrage and outlined a design for the work that would consume the rest of his life:

The time has come to speak of Christian responsibilities, or that of pseudo-christians. The truth is that the Christian faith does not demand this inhuman doctrine, this barbaric conception of divine justice, this negation of the universal fruits of the mystery of the Cross and of Redemption. (Tobias 2017, p. 5)

For Isaac, the *shoah* would not have been possible without the consistent Christian teaching of contempt for the Jews played out over the preceding two millennia. This practice of contempt for Jews was enacted under the cover of the Christian message of love of God and neighbour. He believed the virulent antisemitism practised by the Nazis could not have occurred without this conditioning of the population by the teaching of contempt. This was so, even as the Nazis disavowed connection with the Church. He also wanted to demonstrate that Christianity was born from Judaism, and could not have existed without it.

In the immediate post-War years, Jules Isaac began to achieve broad recognition for his work. In 1947 he was invited to join a conference that would become foundational for subsequent efforts in repairing relations between Christians and Jews. The *International Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism* convened in the Swiss village of Seelisberg from 30 July to 5 August 1947. It brought together 65 participants from Roman Catholic and Reformed churches along with Jewish participants from the United States and Europe. These participants—clergy, scholars, educators, survivors, community leaders—came from 19 different countries. The aim of the conference was to address the roots of anti-semitism which was still rampant in many places despite the decline of National Socialism. The final document of the conference that came to be known as the *Ten Points of Seelisberg* focused on Christianity’s roots in Judaism and became a cornerstone in the development of Jewish and Christian dialogue in the following decades. The concise document listed “those elements of Christian belief and teaching that historically have been most directly responsible for fostering hatred of Jews: teachings about Christ’s passion, about understandings of salvation and scripture, about supersessionism, and conclusions drawn about the Jewish faith” (Barnett 2007, p. 55).

The success of the Seelisberg conference was indebted to the scholarship of Jules Isaac. He presented a study paper to the conference titled, “The Rectification Necessary in Christian Teaching: Eighteen Points”. His paper drew closely on his soon to be published book, *Jésus et Israël*, and proved decisive in shaping the outcomes of the conference: “the form and content of these points were greatly influenced by the initiative of Jules Isaac who had presented to the Conference the manuscript of his book on the roots of anti-Semitism, *Jesus and Israel*” (Rutishauser 2007, p. 43). The key points recalled that Jesus, Mary and

the first disciples were all Jews, that the small crowd calling to “Crucify him!” did not represent the entire Jewish people, that Jesus had forgiven his persecutors on the grounds they did not know what they were doing, and emphasised above all else that the fundamental command of the gospel was the love of God and neighbour, excluding no one. The Seelisberg conference opened doors for the development of relations between Jews and Christians: “the unique feature of Seelisberg is that it was the product of conversation between Christians and Jews—really a Christian reply to the Jewish challenge in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust” (Barnett 2007, p. 56).

After the pivotal Seelisberg meeting, Jules Isaac and other influential leaders established an association of Christians and Jews in 1948 called *L'Amitié judéo-crétienne de France*. The organisation included Jews, Catholics and Protestants. Its several hundred members comprised biblical scholars, historians, liturgists, catechists, clergy and philosophers. Some members such as Jacques Maritain, Henri de Lubac and Cardinal Achille Liénart as well as Jules Isaac would play significant roles in preparing the ground for the Second Vatican Council. The group conducted discussions, produced research on Jewish-Christian topics, produced a scholarly journal (*Sens*) and exercised influence on Church leaders. One decisive project involved Isaac: “*L'Amitié* compiled a memorandum of documents for the trip to Rome of its honorary president, the eighty-one-year-old Isaac. His one-to-one conversation with John XXIII on June 13, 1960, prompted the pope to mandate ‘The Jewish Question’ on the [Second Vatican] Council agenda” (Minnich et al. 2012, p. 759). This trip to Rome will be discussed at length below.

Jules Isaac also attended a less than satisfactory meeting with Pope Pius XII in 1949 where he asked the pope to review the prayer of intercession for the conversion of the “perfidious” Jews prayed by Catholics on Good Friday. Pius XII agreed to offer a less pejorative meaning for the word *perfidious*, “but he did not go so far as to accede to Isaac’s request that the word be struck out of the prayer altogether” (Wesnowsky 2012, p. 66). This unsuccessful foray into the Vatican political establishment showed that this Jewish school teacher was undaunted by speaking truth to Catholic power.

#### 4 Jules Isaac, the teaching of contempt and supersessionism

Jules Isaac had introduced the notion of the “teaching of contempt” (*l'enseignement du mépris*) in his book, *Jésus et Israël*. Towards the end of his life, he re-visited this theme in an eponymously named, book-length manuscript that argued the contempt in which Jewish people are held by large numbers of people and the persecutions they experienced over nineteen hundred years can be traced to a Christian source—the charge that Jewish people are a “decide” people—the claim formulated by Bishop Melito of Sardis (died c. 180) that the entire people of Israel were responsible for crucifying Jesus: in other words, all Jews are “Christ-killers” (Cohen 2007, pp. 59–70). Isaac (1964, pp. 17–18) set out in the Foreword his intentions for this book:

We are all familiar with the words of Jesus from the Fourth Gospel, “In my Father’s house are many mansions” (John 14:2). I fear that in Satan’s house there are even more—if only to accommodate the thousand varieties of anti-Semitism whose most virulent form in our day would seem to be Hitler’s racial anti-Semitism. Need I apologize, then, for carrying on my struggle to expose—and, if possible, to extirpate—the Christian roots of anti-Semitism? No, for in my opinion they are the deepest of all.

Norman Solomon amplified Isaac's understanding of the teaching of contempt in this way: "It was the church that sewed into the fabric of western culture the images and stereotypes of the Jew that allowed so many of its faithful sons to accept without demur the alienation and vilification of the Jew preached by Hitler" (Solomon 1991, p. 28).

In discussions of relations between Jews and Christians, a closely related concept to the teaching of contempt is the notion of supersessionism. As Matthew Tapie (2017, p. 9) observes, "prior to the Second World War the claim that Christ superseded Judaism was universally regarded as self-evident and unproblematic". Since the end of the War, the concept of supersessionism has undergone a thorough revision. This idea of supersessionism and its revision in Church discussions has been explained in the Vatican's most recent statement on the relations between Jews and Christians published in 2015, titled *Gifts and Calling*:

On the part of many of the Church Fathers the so-called replacement theory or supersessionism steadily gained favor until in the Middle Ages it represented the standard theological foundation of the relationship with Judaism: the promises and commitments of God would no longer apply to Israel because it had not recognized Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, but had been transferred to the Church of Jesus Christ which was now the true 'new Israel,' the new chosen people of God. Arising from the same soil, Judaism and Christianity in the centuries after their separation became involved in a theological antagonism which was only to be defused at the Second Vatican Council. (Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews 2015, paragraph 17).

The idea that Christianity had replaced or superseded Judaism was a faulty tradition within Christianity that has numerous deleterious features. It proposed that the religion of Israel was replaced by Christianity; its former divine promises were now fulfilled in the Church. As a consequence, the Torah was abrogated, the Jews were struck with blindness and whatever remained of the election of Israel as a chosen people rests as a burden on them, not a blessing. These faulty teachings informed Church theologians and scripture scholars who attempted to portray the gospel Jesus as intent on the work of replacing a moribund Jewish religion and abrogating Torah: Jewish law had done an effective job in pointing the way to Jesus as the Messiah, but was now obsolete and could be safely abandoned, ignored and suppressed.

The first person to use the term "supersessionism" in relation to Jews and Christians and point out its deficiencies was Jules Isaac. He spoke about the meaning of the concept in this way:

This contention has its source in the earliest Judeo-Christian controversies over the Torah—the Law of Moses—and its observances. The Christian apologists maintained that with the coming of Christ, the Law had been fulfilled and superseded. They taught that the Jews were attached to the letter and not the spirit of the law because they were "carnal" beings, blinded by Satan, incapable of understanding the real meaning of their own Scriptures. (Isaac 1964, p. 75)

Isaac worked tirelessly to find and assert a viable language that could be used to analyse and evaluate the past, present and future of Jewish-Christian relations. The terms supersessionism and teaching of contempt are now standard concepts in discussions about this relationship and provide a marker of the success of Isaac's quest.

## 5 Pope John XXIII, Jules Isaac and *Nostra Aetate*

In his preparations for the Second Vatican Council (1965), Pope John XXIII announced the creation of a Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity on 5 June 1960. He appointed German Jesuit Cardinal Augustin Bea as the president of the Secretariat. Bea was retired from his role as Rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome when he was given his new appointment. The broad brief of this new body was the unity of Christians—other religious communities were not considered to be implicated in this quest for unity. According to a written memo by Monsignor Louis Capovilla, the pope's private secretary and confidant, "it never entered Pope John XXIII's mind that the Council ought to be occupied also with the Jewish question and with anti-Semitism" (Stransky 1988, p. 53). It should be acknowledged that the bishops from the lands of the *shoah* were silent on the matter when Pope John XXIII called for agenda items (*vota*): "in over 800 pages of notes sent from Dutch, Belgian, French, English, German, and Polish bishops, not a single suggestion was made to consider Christian-Jewish relations at the Council" (Connelly 2012a, p. 182). The pope's mind on this issue changed decisively one week later when he met Jules Isaac.

On 13 June 1960, Jules Isaac held a 30-min private conversation with Pope John XXIII. The official request for a meeting with the pope was facilitated by the French ambassador to the Vatican at the direction of French President Vincent Auriol. Shortly after the meeting, Jules Isaac made comprehensive notes on the course of their conversation. The encounter began amiably with the two men sitting in armchairs. Isaac contrasted the familiarity of his encounter with the architectural grandeur he had experienced on the way to the meeting: "I am beside the Pope, simplicity itself, a striking contrast with the pomp of the decor and preceding ceremony" (Isaac 1960). The pope expressed his abiding interest in the Jewish scriptures. Isaac, sensing the brevity of the time he had been granted, determined to cut to the chase aware of the complexity of the material he wished to present to the pope:

Then I try to bring out my request concerning the teaching, and first of all its historical base. But how to make someone understand, in a few minutes, what this spiritual ghetto has been in which the Church has progressively enclosed the old Israel—at the same time as the physical ghetto? (Isaac 1960)

Isaac had entered the meeting with a perception of a steep division in the consciousness of Catholics in their attitudes towards Jews. He thought there was evident in the Church "a purifying counter-current which grows stronger every day" (Isaac 1960). Many positive signs of reconciliation were apparent. But a sense of animosity and negativity by Catholics towards Jews remained. He considered this continuing division required that "there be raised a voice from the highest possible level, from the 'summit'—the voice of the head of the Church—to point out the right direction to everyone, and solemnly condemn 'the teaching of contempt' in its anti-Christian essence" (Isaac 1960).

As the meeting drew towards its conclusion, Isaac requested action from the pope. He suggested a sub-committee be established to study the issues. His suggestion was greeted enthusiastically: "The Pope immediately responds, 'Since the beginning of our conversation I've thought of that'" (Isaac 1960). Isaac asked the pope if he could carry away from their meeting "a bit of hope". The pope's response was effusive, though conveyed with a full sense of the realities of Church politics: "'You have a right to more than hope!' Smiling, he adds, 'I'm the chief, but I must also consult, have the offices study the



questions raised. It isn't an absolute monarchy here.'" (Isaac 1960). Plausibly, the pope predicted that raising the "Jewish question" would be met with resistance. He would need a politically skilled and trustworthy friend to navigate the likely bumps.

Without doubt, Isaac had a willing and attentive conversation partner in Pope John XXIII in June 1960. Isaac noted that "several times during my brief talk he had shown his understanding and sympathy" (Isaac 1960). While the mind of the pope was not focused on the relationship between Catholics and Jews when he called his Council, this should not be taken as a sign of hostility or even a lack of interest. To the contrary, Nobel Prize-winning author, Elie Wiesel (1976) considered that Pope John XXIII's life experiences had conditioned him to be receptive to the messages conveyed by Jules Isaac:

The pope had understood the guilt of the church—and of Christianity in general. The mass killings had taken place in a Christian setting. Protestant leaders applauded Hitler—as did their Catholic counterparts. Those who killed—particularly those of the infamous *Einsatzkommandos*—felt no tension, no conflict between their Christian faith and their criminal deeds. Twenty-two percent of the SS remained loyal to the church even while murdering Jewish men, women, and children. As for Hitler, he was never excommunicated. (Wiesel 1976, p. 261)

The pope acted with purpose and vigour after the meeting with Jules Isaac. The meeting had affected him profoundly. His confidant, Monsignor Capovilla recorded his recollections of the meeting in a letter to Cardinal Bea's private secretary on 14 March 1966. Capovilla remembered well that the pope "remained extremely impressed by the meeting and he talked about it with me for a long time....He told me that he had directed Isaac to Card. Bea, 'in whom he trusted and had confidence'" (Tobias 2017, p. 250).

The pope took the brief of study materials given to him by Isaac and passed them on to Cardinal Augustin Bea. He requested that Bea's Secretariat use the materials in drafting working papers to be used by commissions working on other Council topics. The pope did not, in the first instance, instruct Bea to write a draft for a separate Council document on the Jewish question. That would come later. Bea "consulted extensively, both with Jews and with Christians, many of them converts from Judaism" (Langer 2017, p. 2). Hope and progress met resistance and denial; the road to *Nostra Aetate* was rocky and uncertain. The course of the debates at the Council on the document that would become *Nostra Aetate* is well told in a number of places (Barrens 2015; Connelly 2012a; Borelli 2012).

The main interest in *Nostra Aetate* for Jewish-Catholic relations occurs in paragraph four—a mere 15 Latin sentences that represented a radical departure from previous official views on Jews and Judaism. Paragraph four recognised Judaism as a religion in its own right—Catholics were encouraged to engage in dialogue and cooperation with Jews. Preachers and teachers were directed to eliminate misguided myths about Jews and Judaism, especially the myth that they were "repudiated or cursed by God": the Jews continue to be God's chosen people. And, Jews and Christians share a common hope and faith in God's ultimate victory over evil. Karla Suomala (2015) summarises the main thrust of *Nostra Aetate* in this way:

In one very short paragraph, the document revoked the ancient charge of deicide, indicating that the death of Jesus can no longer be 'charged against all the Jews, without distinction, then alive, nor against the Jews of today.' The same paragraph also said that in teaching and preaching throughout the Church 'the Jews should not be presented as rejected or accursed by God' and it called an end to all 'hatred,



persecutions, [and] displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by any-one.' (Suomala 2015, p. 2)

The document echoed the concerns that Jules Isaac had first explored when in hiding from the Nazis. Other fingerprints are on the document as well. With the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate*, "the Catholic Church began its quest for a new understanding of its Sacred Scriptures and the Jewish people who wrote them" (Fisher 2015, p. 529).

## 6 Evaluating the contribution of Jules Isaac to Jewish-Catholic relations

Commentators have recognised the significance of Jules Isaac to the progress of relations between Catholics and Jews. But success, as some have aptly claimed, has many parents; failure is an orphan. Those seeking to claim credit for *Nostra Aetate* are numerous. Alberto Melloni says that "almost all individuals who had a significant role at the Council believed that they played the most important one. They did find their own ideas in the phrasing of *Nostra Aetate* and felt that they had avoided great clashes or disasters" (Minnich et al. 2012, p. 763). So, how to locate and appraise the unique contribution of Jules Isaac to the cause of repair of relations between Catholics and Jews? A consistent perspective has been offered by commentators.

Rabbi Abraham Peck, a long term participant in Jewish-Christian dialogue in the United States, thought Jules Isaac's meeting with John XXIII was history-making and unprecedented: "in 1960, Jules Isaac was granted a private audience with Pope John XXIII....As a result of their lengthy, earnest and friendly conversation, history was made. For the first time in nearly twenty centuries the Church actually heard the pleas of a Jew" (Peck 1988, p. 179). Father Thomas Stransky was a founding staff member of the Vatican's Secretariat for Christian Unity by Pope John XXIII. He participated in all phases of the creation of *Nostra Aetate*. He offers a biblical image for understanding the role of Jules Isaac:

In recalling my personal experience of *Nostra Aetate*'s six-year journey, I favor the biblical image once used by Cardinal Bea: the tiny mustard seed of Jules Isaac's half-hour conversation with Good Pope John grew into the large tree that warmly hosts in its branches so many men and women of "non-Christian religions." (Stransky 2005, p. 12)

John Pawlikowski (2017, p. 9) has acknowledged that "the original impulse for the document was the result of the historic meeting between the French Jewish historian Jules Isaac". But other voices influenced the final shape and content of *Nostra Aetate*: "there were influential groups of bishops and experts who had been involved with a positive re-evaluation of Islam along the lines of the French Catholic scholar Louis Massignon. In the end, they proved an important force in expanding the document beyond the borders of the Christian-Jewish relationship" (Pawlikowski 2017, p. 9). This assessment accords with common perceptions of Church politics. If the conversations with Jules Isaac and other influential Jewish thinkers in the post-war years "opened Christian minds to new ideas, they did not necessitate their acceptance. The ideas had to be tested for theological soundness" (Connelly 2012a, p. 178).

Any estimation of Jules Isaac's contribution to improved relations between Catholics and Jews needs to take into account the dampening influence of opponents to the shift in relations. These Catholic opponents pointed to a "Jewish lobby" they claimed had exerted undue influence on the production of *Nostra Aetate*. This opposition, in turn, evoked a tendency among expert commentators "to play down the extent to which the Council agenda and

processes were influenced by Jewish identities such as Jules Isaac and Abraham Heschel” (Madigan 2015, p. 182). In response to these revisionist efforts to downplay the Jewish influence on Catholic teaching, Connelly (2012b, p. 108) poses a rhetorical rebuttal: “there were many interest groups in Rome; why should Jews not have attempted to represent their interests?...It seems unlikely that the Jewish scholars’ intervention was without effect”.

Regrettably, Jules Isaac died in 1963 without witnessing the culmination of his crucial intervention in the course of Catholic history that occurred with the promulgation of *Nostra Aetate* on 28 October 1965. As Baum has noted, despite his rage towards the miscarriages of Christian tradition based on misreading of the gospels, “it is remarkable that Isaac did not become hostile towards the Church” (Baum 2015, p. 526). Isaac believed the Church could rectify its teaching and learn to respect Jews and Judaism, since Jesus had preached the love of neighbour without exception. Marco Morselli (2007, p. 27) considers that *Nostra Aetate* indicates that “Isaac’s mission was largely realized”. Crane and Moore (2013, p. 18) pay tribute to the significance of the meeting between John XXIII and Jules Isaac, but place Isaac’s work in a larger frame: “This compelling work involved more than a dramatic papal audience at a key moment, and it helped shape a reappraisal of Christian-Jewish relations that continues to this day.” In a similar estimation, Edward Flannery (1972, p. 83) considered “Jules Isaac’s role in the destruction of the monstrous charge [of deicide] is unparalleled in our history”.

## 7 Conclusion

The contribution of Jules Isaac to relations between Catholics and Jews is becoming better known in the English-speaking world. Religious educators who study his life and career are afforded an insight into the value of intellectual resources in the service of justice, inter-religious dialogue and repair of the fractured relations between siblings. His story also alerts us to the essential contribution of “outsiders” to Christian self-understanding. His influence on the creation of *Nostra Aetate* was pivotal, even indispensable. That document allows Catholics to look upon the plurality of religious traditions not “as fault lines of history to be overcome by the victory of the all-embracing Catholic Church. We now accept religious pluralism as the work of God’s providence and are grateful for it” (Baum 2015, pp. 527–8). For his significant part in the workings of God’s providence, Christian religious educators can acknowledge and pay respect to Jules Isaac.

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