

Anti-Semitism is Christianity's original sin

Attacks on Jewish people, like attacks on African Americans, place a mirror in front of our culture and religion.

By [Jonathan Grieser](#)

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Last week saw two attacks on communities of faith. [The first, at an African American church](#), was thwarted by security measures the congregation had put in place after Charleston. Undeterred, the gunman went to a nearby town and gunned down two African Americans in a parking lot. [The second was at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh](#) where 11 worshipers, aged 54 to 97, were brutally murdered. Both assassins were white men filled with hatred.

It may be that as a culture, we are so hardened by the recurrence of acts of racist terrorism that we hardly noticed the Kentucky incident. Or perhaps it was because only two people were killed. In either case, the lives lost there and the escalating violence against African Americans, enabled by a culture of white supremacy and refusal to acknowledge our complicity in systemic racism, has not so much reopened old wounds as it has exposed how deeply racism pervades the American psyche and American culture.

The killings at Tree of Life synagogue have struck a nerve in me and throughout America. World War II and the Final Solution showed us the scale of the horror that human beings could inflict on each other and revealed the end goal of anti-Semitism. At the same time, American Jews assimilated into the mainstream. As many Jews became less observant and intermarriage between Jews and non-Jews became common, Jews seemed to be different from other Americans only in their personal or family histories, or in that they observed Hanukkah as well as Christmas.

[The massacre at Tree of Life, like the massacre at Mother Emanuel Baptist Church, places a mirror in front of us](#), revealing us to be who we are, revealing that anti-Semitism is not a historical relic but a present reality. It demands that we confront it in all of its evil, to expose all the ways our culture and our religion continue to be shaped by it.

Though Christianity began as a movement within Judaism and a movement that sought to maintain a Jewish identity at its center, its theological and institutional development was shaped by anti-Judaism. Paul's vision that "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave or free, male and female" quickly gave way to a very different perspective, such as that in the Gospel of John, where "the Jews" are depicted as Jesus' implacable opponents and responsible for his death. Not surprisingly, the Pittsburgh shooter cited a verse from John on his social media profile: "'Jews [*You, the text reads*] are the children of Satan' (*John 8:44*)."

Theologically, Jews were consistently viewed as obstinate, or stiff-necked, for their resistance to the truth of the gospel. Efforts were even made early on to expunge scripture of its Jewish content or to claim that the Old and New Testaments bore witness to two different Gods—a perspective that persists in popular ideas of the "the angry God of the Old Testament" and "the loving God of the New Testament."

I won't rehearse here the history of Christian anti-Judaism or how over time that anti-Judaism, which was based in theological categories, became broader and ultimately developed into anti-Semitism. But there are important elements that are worth noting. For example, the first victims of the medieval crusades were not Muslim or Turkish people, but Jewish people living in German towns and cities of the Rhineland. In the 16th and 17th centuries, after Jews were expelled from Spain, the Spanish Inquisition continued to pursue third and fourth generation descendants of Jewish converts to Christianity.

If racism is America's original sin, then anti-Semitism is Christianity's original sin, a symbol of our failure to embrace the full humanity and diversity of our brothers and sisters and to conceive of a God who might extend grace and love to all people without abandoning the covenant established with God's chosen people. And like our reluctance to confront the racism central to American identity, our refusal to confront the anti-Semitism that has helped to shape and define Christianity has allowed it to linger just below the surface, or to manifest itself in a myriad of subtle ways. It remains persistent and powerful enough to enter our political discourse in

[language of “globalists”](#) or profiteering, in [attacks on Jewish philanthropists](#) or humanitarian organizations, and in images in campaign mailers that draw on medieval depictions of Jewish moneylenders.

As Christians, we must do more than mourn the dead, lament the persistence of anti-Semitism, and shake our fingers at hatemongers. We must confront all the ways Christianity has contributed to the hate and evil in our culture and our history. We must do the hard work of developing resources that provide a basis for constructing a new way of being Christian in our complicated and violent world. Even as we excavate the evil in our past and in our theology, we must acknowledge all the ways that our scriptures, our theologies, and our liturgies offer life-giving alternatives, hope, and joy.

Originally posted at [Grieser's blog](#)