

## Saint Augustine and Anti-Semitism

by Rev. Joe Dirt - Friday, February 03, 2023

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It probably says more about my naivety than anything else, but I did not discover that there was such a thing as anti-Semitism, prejudice against Jews, until I was a freshman in college. That year the entering freshman class at the University of Rhode Island was huge, and in the economy dormitories they were housing three students in rooms meant for two. In mine, besides myself, there was a Catholic young man and a Jewish young man. Truth is that we did not interact more than necessary, but I discovered very quickly that the Jewish young man had a chip on his shoulder. I came away with the feeling that this was the result of his belief that most folks held prejudices against Jews. Rhode Island has a long history of religious tolerance with Roger Williams famously founding the colony in 1636 after clashing with the Puritans about religious liberty. But who knows in 1970? But who knows what this young man's journey was?

As some of you will know, *Señora*, is Jewish. While she does not dwell on it, she has more than a few stories about racism she has encountered, or proactive measures she has taken to avoid dealing with the situation. Obviously, my marriage to her has made me more sensitive to the anti-Semitism in our society. It is not uncommon for us to be watching a TV show together, and this type of racism will pop up causing me to go ouch. It is amazing to me how prevalent anti-Semitism is in European literature of the 18th and 19th centuries spilling over into the 20th.

I have read a few books trying to understand why anti-Semitism is so endemic across the world. The latest being [Why the Jews?: The Reason for Antisemitism](#) by Dennis Prager and Joseph Telushkin. Part of me still does not understand, even with knowing the history. And no matter how much I have learned about the Holocaust, I just cannot get my mind around how almost a whole continent could participate in this atrocity, in that level of pure evil. However, watching the right-wing mania swirling around Trump has given me a bit of a clue.

In my journey from a Southern Baptist upbringing to my current agnosticism, I undertook a broad, if somewhat shallow, study of the various world religions. I dipped my toe in the tradition of Freethinkers, as well as various books on theology and philosophy. I read assorted contemporary books by religious writers ([Karen Armstrong](#) being one of my favorites), agnostics and some of the more popular atheists beating their drums. It was also at the beginning of this study that I listened to the entire Bible, King James version, on audio book.

While not religious, I find the subject immensely fascinating, as it is something that has captured the

human imagination for as long as the race has been sentient. We seem to have some innate drive for spirituality. We definitely have a drive to explain the world around us and/or to control it. The various religions across time, across the planet, have been attempts to do so. Just recall the sundry creation stories you have encountered if you have explored even a little outside your own religion. Just recall how transactional early religions were, and I would argue even now for many folks.

My latest foray into this study has been a course from [Wondrium](#), [Books That Matter: The City of God](#). If you are unfamiliar with this book it was written in the 400s by the Bishop of Hippo, who later was consecrated as St. Augustine. *The City of God* and his autobiography of his early life, *The Confessions*, are seminal works of Christian theology, and some would say of western philosophy and thought. They have been hugely influential for most of their 1600 years. I wanted to watch this offering because as I read various works on religion and philosophy St. Augustine continually pops up. Since I do not see me reading his rather dense 1000 page work, I was hoping the course would give me a good feel of what St. Augustine and his book were all about.

The course is taught by a University of Virginia professor, [Charles Mathewes](#) who has a PhD in Theology. I was a bit surprised in class 18 when he laid much of the current anti-Semitism at St. Augustine's feet. Let me attempt to explain his reasoning briefly.

Professor Mathewes gives one to believe some level of prejudice towards Jews was not new in St. Augustine's time. The Greeks and Romans generally thought of Jews as ignorant desert tribes, paying little attention to their religion.

For St. Augustine the antiquity of Jewish wisdom is even older than that of the Egyptians, and much more profound. Ancient Israelites are to be honored for this wisdom, and as the people to whom God gave his First Promise, that of his endearing love and that he would send to them a redeemer born of woman. As a result of their receiving this First Promise, they played an important role in the salvation story, in the pre-figuring of Christ the Redeemer.

However, St. Augustine saw the Jews of his day as a residual people, a mere shadow of what they had been in ancient times. By their failure to accept the teaching of Jesus, by their failure to accept him as the promised Savior, they became outside of the salvation history that started with the First Promise, was fulfilled with Christ, and now flows into the Church. These rejecting Jews, maintaining their old religion, are not properly saved.

Now add to that the concept widely believed in this period that was shared by St. Augustine of Christian Supersessionism (possibly originating with the Apostle Paul), mainly that Christianity has superseded Judaism. With this supersedure, Christians are now God's Chosen People, Christians are now God's Elect. Of course that implies that the Jews should give up their beliefs and join the Christian church. Without a doubt, this belief of supersessionism continues in our times.

The two concepts, Jews outside of salvation and Christians now the Chosen People, endorsed by St. Augustine, were used to warrant much of the violence against Jews after the fall of Rome and as the Catholic Church grew in power and size. Then somewhere around the first millennium this warranted violence morphed into anti-Semitism, the belief that Jews are an evil and wicked race. And we all know the results of that.

While I have not encountered this supposition in the books I have read on anti-Semitism, I am not going to quibble with Professor Mathewes theory of the Augustinian roots of anti-Semitism. I do think the roots of anti-Semitism are broader than St. Augustine. I also find it bit hard to believe an esoteric theologian would have such an outsized effect on a mostly illiterate population. Nevertheless, I find it very troubling that one of the seminal theologians of the Christian church and western philosophy is also one the origins of anti-Semitism. While I am fascinated by religion, I am also deeply troubled by it. This is but one more example as to why.

And so it goes.

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