

# How Israeli Jews' Fear of Christianity Turned Into Hatred

The life of Jesus and the religion he spawned are taught in Israeli schools in a way that's inconsistent with their influence on European culture and Western civilization, scholars lament in a new book

During the reception ceremony for the new Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, this past December, we heard the news: a religious Jew had [tried to set fire to the church at Gethsemane](#), at the foot of the Mount of Olives. Once again a religious-Zionist Israeli Jew had acted with violence against Christians in the Holy Land. This time, guards at the church caught the offender while he was in the act. Those attending the ceremony could guess the future course of events: He would be diagnosed as mentally disturbed. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases of violence against Christians in Israel, the offenders are absolved of responsibility by way of a psychiatric diagnosis.

Hasn't the time come to examine the way enmity toward Christians is inculcated and nurtured among the Jewish population in Israel?

“Jesus Was a Jew,” by Orit Ramon, Inés Gabel and Varda Wasserman, analyzes the way that Christians and Christianity are depicted in the Israeli education system, in both the regular and the religious streams. The authors, faculty members of the Open University of Israel, offer a fine description of the tragic historical situation of the Jews in Christian Europe over the past centuries, and of the State of Israel's sensitive geopolitical situation. But alongside this, they describe how Christians living in the Jewish state as a small, marginal community experience relentlessly the consequences of a majority that has received an education that emphasizes time and again negative stereotypes of Christianity.

Through the authors' examination of official curricula and textbooks, and by surveying attitudes of teachers other educators, they present the different ways in which Christianity is mediated to students. The first illuminating fact arising from their study is the meager occupation with Christianity, in a manner wholly inconsistent with its influence on the development of European culture and Western civilization. The authors see Christianity as a kind of “a present absentee,” because of the covert use that is made of it for its role in “the creation of Jewish identity.” The bulk of the study focuses on how this is done, notably in history classes, which are of course taught from a Jewish perspective and which aspire to reinforce both pupils' national-Jewish and religious identities.

The basic assumption in all state schools' curricula is that Christianity is “a powerful political, social and religious force that threatened – both physically and culturally – Jewish existence.” That is indeed part of the story, but how valid is it in contemporary Israel, where the Jews are the

majority and the sovereign, who rule over a small Christian community that lacks any real power? The fear of Christianity became genuine repulsion in contemporary Israel, the authors write, because “the [Holocaust](#) was perceived – and still is – as the inevitable peak in the bitter relationship between Jews and Christians.”

As for me, in my own reading of secular state-education textbooks published in the 1990s, I noticed a certain change for the better. The books were factual, objective and more respectful of Christianity. An example is the sixth-grade textbook “Greece, Rome and Jerusalem.” The 239-page book, which has spectacular illustrations, contains a full chapter, titled “A New Religion in the Land of Israel: Christianity,” with citations from the New Testament and from Church documents. Special emphasis is placed on the fact that Jesus’ first disciples were religiously observant Jews. It’s true that here too it is blatantly declared that “according to the Christian faith, the Jewish people is guilty of crucifying the messiah Jesus” – but the same paragraph notes the nullification of the guilty claim by decision of “the Christian Church.”

This refers of course to the Catholic Church, but as the authors of “‘Jesus Was a Jew’” point out, the way Christianity is presented in Israeli schools is focused disproportionately on the Catholic Church. They maintain that this does not reflect sheer ignorance concerning the various Christian denominations, but is rather an implicit defense of the monopoly held by Orthodox Judaism in Israel itself. That is: “The nearly exclusive addressing of Catholicism in the Israeli classroom also enables the defining of Orthodox Judaism as the sole, legitimate basis for Israeli Jewish identity.”

But the textbook mentioned above also leaves teachers a lot of latitude to present Christianity in a negative light, if only by their use of the term “Yeshu,” as the man from Nazareth is called in rabbinic tradition, instead of Yeshua (or even Yehoshua) – the correct Hebrew translation of the Greek name used in the New Testament, the name the man of Nazareth shared with Moses’s successor Joshua. The religious public in Israel is in many cases aware of the traditional interpretation of the term “Yeshu”: an acronym in Hebrew for “may his name and memory be blotted out.”

Ramon, Gabel and Wasserman note that the failure of the 1990s attempts at reform in this realm are testimony to the victory of “more closed and ethnocentric tendencies in shaping the identity of Israeli state school graduates.” In state-religious schools, which add religion-driven polemics to the typical Israeli historical revulsion vis-a-vis Christianity, the hostility toward that religion is perhaps even greater. In another sixth-grade history textbook, one intended for the religious schools (“From Generation to Generation,” Vol. 1), focusing on the Roman era and up to that empire’s destruction of Jerusalem, Jesus is mentioned only in passing. The miracles performed by Jesus, who is again referred to as “Yeshu,” are attributed to his expertise in medicinal herbs.

In any event, according to that textbook, only the simple folk believed in him, he preached against the tradition of the sages and was convicted for being an inciter and sorcerer. The description borrows heavily from rabbinic polemics. Not only is Christianity presented as a polytheistic faith, but one ostensibly lacking all logic. In that context, this past year, Karma Ben-

Johanan, a historian of religion, published “Reconciliation and Its Discontents: Unresolved Tensions in Jewish-Christian Relations” (Tel Aviv University; in Hebrew) – [a comprehensive study of the disturbing attitudes of Orthodox Judaism in Israel toward Christianity](#).

“Jesus Was a Jew” illuminates the need to alter the discourse and message that the Israeli education system is imparting to future generations. The material being taught is not preparing the pupil to become acquainted with a religious tradition that is venerated by a considerable part of the world’s population and also constitutes an important community in Israeli society. Although a negative attitude toward Christianity may be understandable in light of Jewish history, the fact is that in the State of Israel where Jews are a majority and are sovereign, it is the state’s responsibility to treat all of its citizens, including those who are Christian, with equality and with dignity.

At a time when many Christians are working sincerely and diligently to uproot every vestige of the historic doctrine of contempt vis-a-vis the Jews or Judaism, the time is ripe for those responsible for education in Israel to be on their guard against disdain and enmity on the part of Jews toward the Christians and Christianity. The important book under review here attests to the challenge facing us.

*Father David Neuhaus is the superior of Holy Land Jesuits and director of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Jerusalem.*