

Norman C. Tobias
Jewish Conscience of the Church:
Jules Isaac and the Second Vatican Council
Preface by Gregory Baum

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Jules Isaac, the French-Jewish historian of anti-Judaism, is one of the heroes in the historical development of Catholic theology about the Jews and Judaism in the twentieth century. Norman Tobias' book fills an important gap in scholarship, offering both a biography of Isaac and a history of *Nostra Aetate*.

After a brief, introductory first chapter, the second chapter is on Isaac's early life. Born in Rennes into a Judeo-Lorraine family in 1877, Isaac was raised in a staunchly Republican home as an agnostic French Jew. He came of age in France between the Dreyfus *affaire* and the rise of Catholic nationalism of the Action Française, later condemned by Pius XI in 1926. Tobias also focuses on his important friendship with the Catholic poet Charles Péguy, who died in the World War I. Following service as an intelligence officer in World War I, Isaac rose to national prominence as an historian and co-author of a very popular textbook for public schools (the *Course d'Histoire Malet-Isaac*). This book remained in use until the 1970s in subsequent editions. After writing other historiographical works (such as a study of the origins of World War I, published in 1933), between 1941 and 1942 Isaac began to study the presentation of Judaism in the Gospels: "In the autumn of 1941, Father Marie-Benoît later recalled, Judaism seemed to Isaac as something old, *dépassé*, so Isaac began to delve into Christianity" (p. 69). In June 1942 Isaac wrote an article on Jesus and the Jews with the title "Quelques constatations basées sur la lecture des Evangiles." In October 1943, during the deportations of Jews enforced by the Vichy regime, Isaac lost his entire family to the extermination camps in Germany except for his son Jean-Claude, who survived Auschwitz and a death march in January 1945. Isaac luckily escaped deportation. Until the end of the war he was in flight; a plan to reach London did not materialize. During that time he completed most of his book *Jésus et Israël*.

He also was in contact with members of the resistance and future leaders in inter-faith dialogue such as André Chouraqui, a rabbinical student at the time.

Immediately after the war, Isaac entered a debate about Christianity and anti-semitism with major Catholic figures in France (such as Henri Daniel-Rops, Henri Marrou, and Jean Daniélou). In 1947, the International Emergency Conference on Anti-Semitism at Seelisberg, Switzerland issued its "Ten Points." They had their origins in Isaac's "Eighteen Points" for the conference, which in turn were based on the twenty-one propositions in *Jésus et Israël*. (Tobias provides lists of the "Eighteen Points" drafted by Isaac and of the "Ten Points" of Seelisberg in the appendix [pp. 257-262]). His book was published in 1948, a few weeks after the establishment of the *Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne*. It focused on the Jewishness of Jesus and his Jewish context, relations between Jesus and other Jews, and allegations of Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion. Isaac aimed to rectify Christian teaching of the Old Testament, of Jews, and of relations between Jesus and other Jews.

Isaac was publicly active in supporting his ideas in 1947-48. He also had an audience with Pope Pius XII on October 16, 1949. This was a key chapter in the history of post-Shoah Catholic theological reflection on Judaism, and he may have had some influence on Pius XII's views. (See his address "Christians Separated from Rome and Jews," given on Christmas eve of 1949 [p. 167].) However, there is no question about the consequences of the meeting in 1960 between Isaac and Pope John XXIII, which helped put Jews and Judaism on the agenda of Vatican II and ultimately led to the declaration *Nostra Aetate*. At this point, the focus of the book shifts. The last sixty pages are no longer a biography of Isaac but a contribution to the history of *Nostra Aetate* and an analysis of Vatican II views on the Jews from the point of view of Isaac's work.

The book represents an important contribution to the recent scholarship on *Nostra Aetate* and the development of Catholic teaching on Judaism. It joins other major works published in the last few years, especially John Connelly's book *From Enemy to Brother* (2012). The most remarkable fact about Isaac, in light of his key contribution to the development of Catholic teaching on the Jews, is that Isaac's spirituality "is shrouded in mystery. Jewish by birth, a bar mitzvah, married according to Jewish law and buried according to Jewish ritual, he was not a practicing Jew nor was he a member of any Jewish congregation" (p. 247). One of Isaac's sons, Daniel, converted to Christianity. Jules Isaac remained more a humanist than a Jewish thinker.

Tobias' book also gives an inside account of the pre-history and history of *Nostra Aetate* thanks to his interviews with Gregory Baum and Thomas Stransky. The preface to the book (pp. vii-xi) is one of the last texts written by Baum, who died on October 18, 2017. In this sense Tobias' work honors not just the memory of Jules Isaac, but also of Baum, one of the most important bridge-builders between the Catholic Church and Judaism, in those key years between World War II and Vatican II.