

**Olivier Rota**  
***Les catholiques anglais et la “question juive”:  
D’une approche politique  
à une approche spirituelle***

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This work by Olivier Rota, a scholar well-known for studies in Catholic-Jewish relations in Europe and Israel, began as his “habilitation à diriger des recherches.” He is now a professor in the Catholic University of Lille, France.

In his study, Rota examines how the English Catholic minority developed its relationship with the Jewish minority in the modern period. He begins with a background of English Catholics’ views of Jews. For a long time, British historians neglected or minimized the existence of antisemitic currents in England. However, phrases such as the “Jewish problem” or the “Jewish question,” which emerged in Germany during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, appear frequently in the period from 1917 to 1960 in political and missionary fields and then in spiritual and theological areas (10). This illustrates the trend toward a reorganization of values in society that placed Jews in a situation of symbolic exclusion. They had been integrated in European nation states but then they were reproached for preserving bonds of particular and especially extranational solidarity.

In a Catholic milieu Jews were accused of nurturing interests contrary to those of the Church (21). Emancipated in England after the Catholic emancipation in 1829, Jews were never threatened by a later reduction of their civil or political freedoms. The Jewish population in London grew from 45,000 to 135,000 between 1881-1900. The older Jewish community tried to help the migrants from Czarist Russia to assimilate. Although strongly assimilated, Jews continued in the popular imagination to be associated with negative traits that distinguished them from the rest of the national population (26). However, compared with the continent, English anti-Jewish prejudices did not take on the passionate character that was its characteristic in Europe from 1880-1950 (33). One false stereotype was that English Christians thought that few Jews volunteered to join the British army during the Boer War or World War I.

Conscious of the difficulty for the historian to explore such a multiform hatred, Rota tries to show "in what way the definition of antisemitism advanced by Hilaire Belloc, [G. K.] Chesterton and in a wider way by English Catholics subverted its habitual acceptance in England." He is thus "interested in the antisemitic theses of Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, and in the role played by Cecil Chesterton, Gilbert's brother, in the structuring of these theses" (75-76).

Rota begins by considering efforts by them and other English Catholics to discuss the "Jewish question" reasonably and to find a solution before those whom they called "the antisemites" would force an unjust and brutal solution. He considers how their "definition of antisemitism... subverted its habitual acceptance in England" (75-76). Belloc and G. K. Chesterton distinguished their position from that of promoters of hate. For these two, one should not confuse "antisemitism" (understood as hatred of Jews), on the one hand, and the legitimate examination of what people had begun to designate discreetly as the "Jewish question," on the other. But by doing this, they legitimated certain questions about Jews and an antisemitic discourse.

Belloc posited that Jews dominated in finance, information, and secret societies. In response to the "abnormal" situation of Jews, he was aware of two solutions: a liberal approach (absorption into the national body) or an antisemitic approach (exclusion, which was promoted by antisemites on the continent). Instead, Belloc, in 1911, preferred a third, which he called "privilege," which referred to segregation. One must see here a belief in Jewish ubiquity and an expression of a fear of Jewish "invisibility," a common premise in conspiracy theories. Belloc, however, did not claim there was a plot against the Crown. Though he read the far-right *Action française* assiduously, Belloc showed a certain reserve with regard to this French anti-Jewish obsession. He did not believe that it was wise to exaggerate the power of Freemasons and Jews and thought that French priests made too much of this point. His denunciation of Jewish money in British political affairs seemed above all to draw attention to a sick political system rather than a worldwide Jewish conspiracy. When in July 1914 the *New Witness* published such an allegation by Frank Hugh O'Donnell, Belloc promptly expressed his disapproval.

In December 1919 G. K. Chesterton visited Palestine, recently occupied by the British army. In "New Jerusalem" (1920) he envisaged the possibility of Jews coming to Zion, to Jerusalem or elsewhere. Behind this position was his criticism of liberal imperialism and international finance. He was preoccupied with maintaining the Christian character of England (103). His writings in the 1920s were quite diverse, defending the underdog, whether this was the Jews attacked by antisemites or the poor at the hands of Jewish plutocrats. The solution to antisemitism was for the Jews to have the dignity and status of a separate nation.

Rota devotes two chapters to Palestine between the wars and the move from "the Jewish question" to "the question of Israel." The latter includes development of a mission to the Jews by the English "Catholic Guild of Israel." These two chapters are dedicated to responses to persecutions of the Jews in the 1930s. Cardinal Arthur Hinsley and the Catholic hierarchy in England created the Catholic Committee for Refugees to help Jews fleeing from Germany and Austria.

In chapter 6, “The Second World War,” Rota includes the developing collaboration of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in spiritual resistance to Nazism. This led to the creation of the Council of Christians and Jews. In chapter 7, “The Long Fifties (1945-1965),” he discusses international initiatives against antisemitism in 1946-1947, which had little involvement of English Catholics. However, in 1954 the Sisters of Our Lady of Sion in London began to organize educational encounters between Catholics and Jews. This had a modest influence on English Catholics to engage in interreligious relations. He discusses “The Second Vatican Council and the Work toward *Nostra Aetate*” in chapter 8, focusing on the four sessions of the Council and giving detailed attention to the Catholic press in England. The Council inaugurated a silent revolution in the Catholic Church, leading to a dialogical posture that framed the relation between Catholics and Jews in a new light (as seen in his subtitle: “From a political to a spiritual approach”). In his “Conclusion,” he returns to Belloc, G. K. Chesterton, and “the Jewish question,” acknowledging the challenges that a historian faces when trying to penetrate the psychology of the period.

The adoption of a dialogical posture after Vatican II promoted much more than a new face for Catholicism. The Council fostered numerous subterranean revolutions that appeared in the Church for the following half century. Nonetheless, a “culture of dialogue” did not resolve the tensions between ecumenism and conversion, evangelization and proclamation. It remains for Catholics to respond to the question posed by Rabbi Israel Mattuck in 1939: “May Christianity consent that this other religion, this parent religion, has a valuable contribution to bring to the religious life of the nation?” As Mattuck recognized, “this implies the negation of a traditional [Christian] pretention to exclusivity” (583).

This work offers a very thorough historical discussion of Catholic-Jewish relations in England and their impact internationally, especially in Israel. It has 30 pages of texts in English where major themes are presented, plus a list of archives and other sources, a bibliography, and index of names.