

Conférence des évêques de France
Service national pour les relations avec le judaïsme
Déconstruire l'antijudaïsme chrétien

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One of the concrete fruits of roughly 75 years of modern Jewish-Christian dialogue has been a proliferation of official documents by various Jewish and Christian bodies and groups, on the international, national, and regional levels, and in a variety of languages. Although many of these documents are today available on websites like the Council of Centers on Jewish-Christian Relations' (CCJR) authoritative Dialogika archive, these documents are so numerous (and sometimes so dense) that delving into them can be an intimidating prospect.

Historically, when faced with large numbers of official statements, Christians (and especially Catholics) have developed the tradition of the *enchiridion*, a “handbook” which organizes and presents key excerpts from important sources in a way that makes them more easily accessible. In Catholic circles, the best-known example of this is probably the *Enchiridion symbolorum, definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (*Handbook of Creeds, Definitions and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*), a collection of official church statements originally compiled in the mid-1800s. It was traditionally referred to as “Denzinger,” after its original compiler and publisher, Heinrich J. Denzinger. Its 37th edition was published in 1991, and an updated version by Jacques Dupuis and Josef Neuner is titled *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*.

It is one of the sad realities of modern interfaith dialogue that many of its most important documents seldom reach the grassroots level where they can influence non-specialists. The French Catholic bishops' conference has attempted to remedy this situation by providing a new *enchiridion* (in French) of modern Catholic teachings about Judaism. It contains many significant statements, which are provided in a readable and digestible form, typically excerpts along with commentary. In less than 130 pages, their new paperback, which would be titled *Deconstructing Christian Anti-Judaism* in English, tackles many long-held but mistaken Christian views about Jews and Judaism. It distills down nearly 60 years of documentation into a readable form that is inviting for non-scholars (and would be helpful for scholars too). The bishops of France are uniquely well-situated to offer such a resource.

Jules Isaac, whose writings and advocacy made him the “godfather” of modern Jewish-Christian dialogue, was French. Also, in 1973 the French national bishops’ conference was one of the first conferences to issue its own guidelines on Jewish-Christian relations after *Nostra Aetate*. Over the years, they have published a number of ground-breaking documents that continue to contribute greatly to this dialogue.

The book’s preface was written by France’s Chief Rabbi Haïm Korsia, who expresses both his gratitude and his respect for the book’s ambitious purpose: “This book is ... a step of faith, and of startling hope: seeking, by means of twenty chapters of argumentation, to shift lines that twenty centuries have been unable to modify” (9). Korsia highlights how efforts toward respect and understanding seem more necessary now than ever, when “old prejudices and incredibly pernicious myths are reappearing” (10). Modern French civilization, he argues, risks leaning dangerously toward hyper-individualism and indifference. “It is not just about getting people to coexist or, at the very minimum, juxtaposing communities ... Rather, it is about constructing a destiny in common” (11). Our task, he says, is “to give renewed meaning to *Nostra Aetate* every day, and to strengthen our sense of fraternity” (13).

The book is structured according to twenty chapters, each of which addresses a question or issue commonly raised by Christians regarding their relationship with Jews, Judaism, and the Old Testament. They include such provocative topics questions as: “Is God violent in the Old Testament and loving in the New Testament?”; “Did Jesus come to abolish the law? To move beyond it? To live it out fully? To bring it to completion?”; “Could the Incarnation of Jesus have occurred among a people other than the Jewish people?”; “Did Christian hostility to Jews contribute to the Shoah?” and “Is it essential for Christians to know about Judaism?” The chapters are short (many are only four or five pages), but each of them provides an entry-point and an orientation—brief but accurate—to the topic being discussed. Chapters are devoted to the interpretation of the Bible, antisemitism, and what Christian reconciliation with Jews should look like. The volume concludes with several interesting and helpful appendices, which address subjects such as the theological weight to be attributed to various types of Catholic teaching; the relationship of anti-Judaism, antisemitism, and anti-Zionism; some touch-points for recognizing Christian anti-Judaism; liturgical changes implemented in Catholic life since Vatican II; and the Catholic Church and the modern State of Israel. These appendices are short, but they provide a helpful introduction to these topics for newcomers to this field.

The beauty and value of this book lie in the way it condenses a range of essential sources, drawing from documents issued at Vatican II; papal speeches and writings; statements of the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, the Pontifical Biblical Commission, and the French bishops themselves. A reader interested in these sources is spared from having to seek them out individually. *Deconstructing Christian Antisemitism* conveniently organizes key sections of those documents in a way that is intuitive and that corresponds to many of the questions Christians actually ask. It compiles these disparate but related sources in

a way that demonstrates the sheer number and breadth of these statements, makes it possible to chart the evolution of Church thinking on key topics, and enables them to be in “conversation” with each other. Someone who has read this book could never suggest that Christian-Jewish dialogue is in any sense a marginal topic in Catholic ecclesial and theological life. Just the contrary: it attests to the centrality and vitality of the dialogue over the last 60+ years. This volume provides a wonderful guided tour through some of the most significant but often little-known theological guideposts in modern Catholic history.

The book’s strength lies in the thoughtful, knowledgeable, and useful way it is structured, as well as in the judicious choice of texts. It invites without overwhelming, and it encourages further exploration and learning. To adopt an image dear to French culture: it feels very much like a wine-tasting, in which readers are being allowed to sample a variety of excellent vintages, in the hope that they may wish to purchase a bottle or two for further degustation.

Those who are seeking an exhaustive intellectual history of modern Catholic-Jewish relations will find this book unsatisfyingly thin, but they are not its target audience. This book’s ambitions are admittedly humbler: it seeks to offer an overview and an entry-point to a rich and vital field that still remains largely unfamiliar to many. It seeks to be academically credible without being so overwhelming and thorough as to scare off possible readers. As a small paperback, it does a remarkable job of gathering together a wealth of modern Catholic teaching in a helpful way that invites curiosity and learning, and it points the way to that other, vaster ocean of documentation from which these excerpts are carefully drawn. Hopefully, *Deconstructing Christian Antisemitism* will serve as a helpful primer for those in the francophone world who are eager to explore the contours of Catholic-Jewish (and Christian-Jewish) relations and to appreciate the hopefulness, richness, and challenge of that dialogue.

The French bishops and their Jewish-Christian dialogue staff are to be congratulated on this initiative, and it would certainly be desirable to have a similarly simple, easy-to-access *enchiridion* in English. While large portions of this volume could be easily reproduced and translated, it also contains extracts from several documents on Catholicism in France which might be of less interest to the average anglophone reader. Those documents, however (such as the French bishops’ 1997 document on how to read the Old Testament, their Drancy declaration of repentance, and their 2021 statement against antisemitism) remain absolutely essential reading for those active in this dialogue, whatever their native tongue, and certainly deserve to be better known. The specifically Catholic focus of this book should also not obscure the fact that Protestants, Jews, and ecumenical groups in France have published their own declarations and guidelines; the classic collection, *Les Églises devant le judaïsme: Documents officiels, 1948-1978*, was published in 1980 by Marie Thérèse Hoch and Bernard Dupuy and, 45 years later, is now badly in need of an update that reflects the progress of the last four decades.

France is, in many ways, a birthplace of modern Jewish-Christian friendship. Works like *Deconstructing Christian Antisemitism* remind us that French religious leaders and thinkers continue to point the way forward in this dialogue and enrich

it with resources for both scholarly reflection and a more general readership. “Merci” to our French colleagues; perhaps the model they have helpfully offered can inspire a similar resource for an English-speaking audience in the foreseeable future.