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## *An ‘Outsider’ who Shaped the Council*

In Scripture, the ‘outsider’ has an important role to play for the ‘insiders.’ The story of salvation hinges on a people, Israel, elected to bear witness to God’s loving design for the world; yet it is repeatedly punctuated by the contribution of individuals who don’t belong to that chosen group. Think of the pagan priest Jethro who exerts formative influence over his son-in-law, Moses (Exodus 18). Or Ruth, a woman from the Moabite tribe, who becomes the great-grandmother of King David (Ruth 4). Or Rahab, a prostitute in Jericho, who emerges as a heroine in the Book of Joshua (Ch 2). Each time, someone from ‘outside’ acts as a catalyst for transformation of life on the ‘inside.’

The pattern continues into the Gospels where Jesus himself is confronted by the faith and proactive involvement of the ‘outsider’—such as the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28—as he goes about his mission to the house of Israel. It is a pattern that continues in various forms and intensities in our own day.

In what follows I wish to draw attention, ever so briefly, to the input of one particular ‘outsider’ who contributed to the unfolding of the Second Vatican Council: the French-Jewish historian Jules Isaac (1877-1963). In using the term ‘outsider’ I here refer simply to the fact that Jules Isaac was not a baptised Christian, not a member of the Catholic Church, and that, as a Jew, he had

experienced first-hand rejection from Christian European society.<sup>1</sup>

In the mid-1930s Jules Isaac was a respected French Jewish scholar with a government appointment as Inspector General of Education for the whole of France. As Hitler came to power and the war intensified across Europe, he found himself stripped of his post, his published work destroyed, and forced into hiding to escape arrest by the Nazis. Tragically, there would be no escape for his wife, Laure, and their youngest son, daughter and son-in-law. They were rounded up one day while Isaac was away from their lodgings. All but their youngest son, Jean-Claude, perished in the Nazi-driven genocide.

Against this backdrop, one could have well understood if this husband, father and scholar had retreated into a world of bitterness and despair. Instead, marshalling his intellectual energies and a conciliatory spirit, Isaac chose to address Jewish suffering by contributing to the healing and reform of the church. Why the church? Through experience and study he had come to understand that while Nazism was not an expression or direct outgrowth of Christianity, it nonetheless utilized and manipulated anti-Jewish thought patterns that had been deeply embedded in Christian catechesis and culture for centuries.

From 1940 Isaac had begun researching the phenomenon of anti-Judaism as it appeared in

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<sup>1</sup> For a scholarly work on Jules Isaac’s life and contributions see Norman Tobias, *Jewish Conscience of the Church: Jules Isaac and the Second Vatican Council* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017). Isaac, a highly principled truth-seeker, did not consider himself an observant religious Jew in the traditional sense. According to the testimony of their son

Jean-Claude, when his parents, Jules and Laure, married “she and he, united by the same goal, established a household animated by this sole religion: ‘faith in the divine virtue of creative realization.’” Quoted in Tobias, *Jewish Conscience*, 29-30.

Christian bible commentaries, sermons and catechisms. Describing it as the “teaching of contempt,” he systematically demonstrated how it contradicted the fundamental tenets of Christian belief and was fed by historical errors and stereotypes of Jews that had no basis in real Judaism. Let’s be clear: in his critique Isaac was not denouncing Christianity but rather its toxic distortions, and he did so forthrightly but without animosity.

After the war, Isaac’s publications and interfaith networking, including meetings with Catholic officials, were influential.<sup>2</sup> In 1960, with preparations for the Second Vatican Council well underway, Isaac met with Pope John XXIII and also Cardinal Bea. There he tabled a list of eighteen points of Jewish-Christian contention and urged the formation of a sub-commission in the council that would investigate the “teaching of contempt.” According to a number of converging accounts, it was this meeting that moved the Pope to include the Jewish-Christian relationship in the council agenda, which until this point had been absent.<sup>3</sup>

As events unfolded, Vatican II proved to be a decisive turning point in Jewish-Catholic relations. *Nostra Aetate*, the council’s Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, devoted paragraph four to Catholic relations with the Jewish people. Despite its brevity, it was a powerful summons. Reaching back to a key testimony of St Paul, the council embraced Christianity’s Jewish roots and affirmed God’s irrevocable love for the Jewish

people (cf. Rom 11:28-29). It rejected the ingrained Christian accusation of Jews as “Christ-killers” and made clear that antisemitism is the antithesis of the gospel.

*Aetate* officially inaugurated a process of reconciliation that was centuries overdue, arresting and reversing Christian speech and behavior patterns that had done untold harm to the Jewish people and to the credibility of Christianity itself. Among the pre-conciliar efforts of individuals and groups whose dedicated work in Jewish-Christian dialogue paved the way to *Nostra Aetate*, Isaac’s voice made an outstanding contribution.

Isaac’s wife, Laure—herself an active supporter of his work—was murdered along with millions of innocents at the hands of Hitler’s regime, and Jules himself only narrowly escaped capture. Neither lived to see *Nostra Aetate* promulgated, yet their achievements live on in the fruits and ongoing developments of Jewish-Christian reconciliation in our own time. I like to think that with every step by which we Catholics embrace the vision of *Nostra Aetate* and open ourselves to a deeper understanding of the Jewish-Christian relationship, we honor the memory of Jules Isaac—and that of Laure, whose last letter to her husband, dispatched from a transit camp en route to Auschwitz, read: “Save yourself for your work; the world is waiting for it.”<sup>4</sup> •

View a lecture by Norman Tobias at:  
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<sup>2</sup> Isaac’s works on this theme include *Jésus et Israël* (1947), *Genèse de l’antisémitisme* (1956), and *L’Enseignement du Mépris* (1962), the latter which was written at the age of 85 and published in English as *The Teaching of Contempt* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

<sup>3</sup> Tobias, *Jewish Conscience*, 249-251.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Claire Huchet Bishop in her biographic introduction to Jules Isaac, *The Teaching of Contempt*, 9. Cf. Tobias, *Jewish Conscience*, 83.