Jewish Lives Matter

by Michael Curtis

Now all the truth is out, be secret and take defeat from any brazen throat. Be secret and exult, because of all things known, that is most difficult.

Antisemitism, remarked Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury on September 26, 2016, is an insidious evil. It is a virus that has mutated throughout history and within societies, entrenched in thought and culture. Belatedly, there is increasing recognition that the virus infected the Church of England which should have offered an antidote, but which compounded the spread of the disease. It is appropriate that the Church not only show repentance for the sins of the past, but also challenge existing attitudes and stereotypes.

England has had a sad history of persecution of Jews, pogroms, murders, blood libel accusations, the first Catholic country to make Jews wear distinctive badges, discriminatory taxation, and expulsion. The Church of England, at a meeting on July 12, 2021, of its General Synod, the legislative body for the Church of England, has decided to apologize for the expulsion

of Jews in the 13th century. The act of repentance will take place in 2022 on the 800th anniversary of the Synod of Oxford in 1222, held at Osney Abbey, a little-known meeting which was responsible for the introduction of a number of antisemitic laws in England. The decision of the Church is surprising in many ways, but especially because the Church of England was not founded until 1534 when by the Act of Supremacy it became the Established Church. The decision indicates repentance for the historic antisemitism in the country, but also symbolizes the concern of the Church over the present increasing antisemitism.

The Church of England's Faith and Order Commission had already in February 2019 issued a report, an authoritative statement, on Christian antisemitism. It acknowledged that Christian theology played a part in the stereotyping and persecution of Jewish people which ultimately led to the Holocaust. Those negative stereotypes of Jewish people have contributed to grave suffering and injustice.

The decision of the Church provides the opportunity to review the early history of antisemitism in England. Jews, few in number, had lived in England since Roman and Anglo-Saxon times. They became an organized community after arriving in England with William the Conqueror in 1066, and were under the protection of the crown but did not have the same legal status as other English people. They came from Northern France. Some became doctors and goldsmiths, but the primary source of income was money lending. Many Jews were employed as money lenders, since usury was forbidden for Christians, until 1275 when usury was banned. They were taxed heavily. They were not allowed to own land or join guilds, but worked as tradesmen or farmers. Jews did not enjoy any of the guarantees of Magna Carta 1215, and had a different legal status from non-Jews. They were declared to be direct subjects of the king, doing the king's service, according to a declaration of 1253, and thus were subject to the caprice of the rulers. This caprice

was evident under Henry III who demanded one-third of all Jewish property, and who in 1245 prohibited Jews from residing in most towns of the country.

At times Jews were protected as during the reign of King Henry II, 1152-89, but then antisemitism grew for two main reasons: partly because of false accusations against Jews; and partly because of violence associated with the Crusades that began on 1096.

The false accusations were aroused by the "Blood libel," allegations that Jews abducted and murdered Christian children for their rituals before Passover so they could use their blood to make the unleavened matzah. An early prominent case of accusations was that concerning William of Norwich in 1144, a boy who had run away from home, but Jews were falsely accused of his murder. A century later, in 1255, Jews were accused of the murder of a nine year-old boy, Hugh of Lincoln. Both William and Hugh were canonized as saints.

Some of the Crusaders, intent on reclaiming the Holy Land, saw Jews as Christ-killers against whom violence was legitimate, who were regarded as "enemies of the state." and lived in unsafe conditions. As a result of both factors, Jewish homes were stormed and pillaged, with mob violence against the Jewish community in London in 1264, where 500 Jews died, and in other towns such as Worcester and Canterbury, and massacre of the community, over 100, in York. Jews were declared to be direct subjects of the king and were thus subject to the caprice of the individual ruler. Under Henry III, in 1245, Jews were prohibited from residing in most towns of the country.

Jews were exploited by local elites, as well as by the king. But Jews were needed to provide loans in order top up businesses and to generate capital. Canon law forbad the lending of money for profit, but it was not considered applicable to Jews. In general, Jews were free to move around

the country if they got a permit from the king. However, since Jews were the king's direct subjects their assets could be appropriated in the form of special higher taxes that varied, depending on the king's need for money. One estimate is that Jews, less than 1% of the population, contributed about a tenth of the annual royal revenue.

The attitude of the Church began changing, from tolerance of Jews to increasing hostility.

In 1218, King Henty III proclaimed the Edict of the Badge, which was reinforced in 1253. This edict and other laws required Jews to wear badges shaped like the two tablets of the ten commandments, to distinguish them from Christians, banning them from working in certain professions. In 1275 the Statute of the Jewry outlawed all lending at interest rates.

in 1287 King Edward, residing in the duchy of Gascony, ordered the local Jews expelled, and all their property was seized by the crown. When he returned to England, King Edward, heavily in debt, decide to impose a heavy tax. To make this more acceptable to his knights he offered to expel all Jews, perhaps 2,000-3,000 in number. This was done on July 18, 1290 by the Edict of Expulsion, the first European country to expel Jews, 200 years before Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews from Spain. The Edict was popular, and expulsion was quick.

Jews were not officially allowed in the country until they returned in 1656 at the invitation of Oliver Cromwell, after consultation with Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel of Amsterdam, although a number of Jews entered after being expelled from Spain in 1492 and Portugal in 1497. The most well-known of these is Rodrigo Lopez physician to Queen Elizabeth I.

In one of life's ironic events, the students at Simon de Montfort University in Leicester called for his name to be removed because of his links to antisemitism, and because his

name is “not reflective of our core values and beliefs. This is not a name we should be promoting.”

Simon de Montfort, a French nobleman who married the king’s sister, was indeed an antisemite. As Earl of Leicester he expelled all Jews from his town, though there were few; in 1231 he ruled that “no Jew or Jewess shall inhabit or remain in Leicester.”

He imposed penalties on money lenders, and encouraged massacres. As British ruler in all but name, he annulled debts the land owners owed Jews.

Paradoxically, de Montfort, was the founder of parliament, presided over the first elected parliament, and is regarded as one of the progenitors of parliamentary democracy. So far, he has not been “toppled.” His chain-mail effigy in the clock tower of Leicester remains.

This heritage of antisemitism has remained through the ages, up to the present, causing discrimination, suffering and injustice. Anthony Julius in his *Trials of the Diaspora*, has shown the negative portraits of Jews that have been present in British society and literature throughout British history, including the anonymous medieval ballad Sir Hugh or the king’s daughter, referring to the blood libel accusation of 1255. Those negative portraits remain in modern literature, as witness with Edith Wharton, T.S. Eliot, Roald Dahl, and Alice Walker, among others.

The Church of England decision comes at a time when the British government is responding to the rise in antisemitic incidents. The Community Security Trust headed by Dave Rich has recorded the highest number of antisemitic incidents in Britain since records began. These included physical beating, vandalism, threats at rallies, at schools and universities, social media abuse, and the particular problem of cars driving through Jewish neighborhoods, waving Palestinian flags, and

shouting intimidating slogans.

At its meeting next year, the Church of England should express its horror at the continuation, and increase, of incidents of antisemitism, and endeavor to see they do not grow and fester.