**Jewish People**

From *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*   
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When I’m in a workshop on racism, and the facilitators tell everyone

to break up into a white group and a people of color group, I

immediately want to say, “Wait a minute. I’m not white.” There are

many white people in the United States and throughout Europe who

would immediately agree: “Of course you’re not white. Jewish people

are part of the contamination of the white Christian race, along with

people of color, Roma, Native Americans, and Muslims.” These attitudes

are based on the conjunction of whiteness with Christianity.

Christians have long considered Jews to be inferior and a threat

to Christians because they rejected Jesus as the son of God. In addition,

Jews have been falsely accused of killing Jesus because of

stories in the New Testament. These stories are still read for Good

Friday Easter services and considered true today by hundreds of

millions of Christians. They are also promulgated by popular media

such as on Christian broadcasting networks and in the wildly popular

Christian film The Passion.

Various anti-Jewish

stereotypes were disseminated by early

Church leaders such as St. John Chrysostom, who wrote:

The Jews are full of hatred for the rest of mankind and are

the enemies of all gentiles: they are parasites on the gentile

societies that harbor them; they are addicted to money, and

through the power of money, they aspire to be rulers of the

world.1

Early Christian leaders continually attacked Jews on theological

grounds and condoned the actions of Christians who vandalized

synagogues and killed Jews. When Christianity became the official

religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century, Jews became even

more vulnerable to violence from Christians. Jews were banned from

public office and from many occupations, and some were forced to

become tax collectors (because Christians weren’t allowed to participate

in the sinful activity of usury). Jews were subject to special taxes,

prohibited from practicing their religion and building or repairing

synagogues, not allowed to intermarry with Christians and prohibited

from holding any civil or economic position higher than any

Christian. They were subject to forced conversions and commonly

referred to as a source of religious pollution, contagion and disease,

setting the stage for later, racially based anti-Jewish

oppression.2

Large-scale

attacks on Jews by Christians occurred during the

Crusades, when Jews were seen as the European agents of the

Muslim/

Arab “infidels” who controlled the Holy Lands. Although

the goal of the church was to attack Muslims and reclaim Jerusalem,

most crusaders never left Europe. As they pillaged their way toward

Jerusalem, they rounded up and killed thousands of Jews and destroyed

their communities.

In subsequent centuries Jews were forced to convert or were banished

from such regions as England (1290), France (1306, 1322, 1394),

Hungary (1367), Strasbourg (1381), Austria (1421), and Cologne (1426).

Jews fought to defend themselves, fled, converted, or looked for protection

from secular rulers, but were generally not powerful enough

to protect themselves from Christian violence.3

On March 31, 1492, the Spanish monarchs, pressed by the Inquisition,

gave all Jews four months either to convert or to pack up

whatever they could and leave the country they had lived in for centuries.

4 Even after the Spanish expulsion, the Inquisition continued

to persecute those suspected of “idolatry.” Under the laws of purity

of blood, any person with even one drop of Jewish blood was condemned.

To prove their innocence, suspects had to display genealogical

charts proving they had no Jewish ancestry. In other words, the

Inquisition, drawing on anti-Jewish

stereotypes from early church

teachings, combined religious and biological justifications for persecution, setting the stage for the later development of biologically based theories of racism and the German genocide against Jews.

Many Jews fled from Spain to Portugal, but within a few years

were forced to flee again after being given the choice of forced baptism

or death. Subsequently they faced persecution and expulsion

from the Italian peninsula and from many German cities and principalities

in the 16th century, as well as pogroms in the Ukraine in

the mid-17th

century.5

Meanwhile many Jews who emigrated from the Khazar empire

in Central Asia when it collapsed in the 12th and 13th centuries had

moved into Poland, Hungary, and western Russia and came under

increasing attack from Christians in Eastern Europe.6

Anti-Jewish

hatred became rooted in Protestant Christianity

during the “Enlightenment” through the writings of such key figures

as Martin Luther. In 1543 Luther wrote “Against the Jews and

Their Lies” in which he accused the Jews of being not only the bloodthirsty

murderers of Christianity, but also of the German people:

We are at fault in not avenging all this innocent blood of our

Lord and Churches and the blood of the children which they

have shed since then, and which still shines forth from their

Jewish eyes and skin. We are at fault in not slaying them.7

Luther went on to suggest Germans burn the houses and synagogues

of the Jews, ban their rabbis under pain of death, withdraw Jewish

safe-conduct on the highways, prohibit usury, institute manual labor for young Jews and finally, confiscate their wealth and expel them from Germany.

Most Christians believed Jews were a nation of outcasts who

had killed Christ, rejected Christianity, used the blood of Christian

children in Passover rituals and prevented the Second Coming by

their failure to convert. Even before biological theories of race, Jews

were believed automatically to pass on these traits to each succeeding

generation regardless of where they lived, what they practiced

and even, in many cases, whether or not they converted to Christianity.

These beliefs were also reflected in the official policies of the Catholic

Church and many Protestant denominations. It was only in

1965, for instance, that Vatican Council II voted to absolve contemporary

Jews of any guilt for the crucifixion of Jesus and to repudiate

the belief that God rejected the Jews because they refused to accept

Jesus as the savior.8

Jews today are part of many cultural groups on several continents.

Jewish people are not only not a race — we have seen how this is not

a meaningful concept — but they also come in many shades and

colors, from nearly black Ethiopian Jews, to dark brown Jews from

the Cochin coast of India, to light brown Jews from Argentina and

Morocco, to blond and light-skinned Jews in Denmark and England.

While this diversity is a refutation of racial stereotypes, it can make

Jews more vulnerable when another group of people is claiming

some kind of national identity, religious unity or genetic purity. The

membership application of the Invisible Empire of the Knights of

the Ku Klux Klan requires one to answer the question “Are you a

White, native-born, non-jewish [sic], American citizen?”9

When light-skinned Jews walk down the street, their skin color

is immediately visible, while their cultural practices and religious

beliefs may not be. If they can pass for white Christians and don’t

voluntarily give away that they’re Jewish, they can enjoy the same

respect and privilege given other white people in our society. Their

presence is accepted, their words are listened to and they have more

police and judicial protection. In order to pass Jews have to give up,

minimize, or downplay any visibly Jewish aspects of their life and

appearance. They can’t say or do anything that will mark them as

different. Since being Jewish, at its core, is inherently a range of

ways of being, talking and doing things that are not Christian, the

more they pass the less they are true to themselves. At any time they

might be found out and face mistrust, discrimination or outright

abuse.

In the United States, besides the threat of violence and the constant

pressure to assimilate, one of the prices all people pay to be

accepted as white is to collude in perpetuating racism. This is a price

many southern and eastern Europeans as well as assimilated white

Ashkenazi Jews have paid. Passing leads people to believe economic

improvement for themselves is different than economic justice for

everyone. Today in US society there is some privilege attached to being

white, or, we might say, accepted as white on condition you support

the racial hierarchy that keeps people of color on the bottom.

Many Jewish people have accepted this racial hierarchy in exchange

for feelings of safety and acceptance. Consequently, they

have established, in this country and in Israel, racialized hierarchies

within the Jewish community. Jewish people of color constitute

around 20% of the US Jewish population, including African, African

American, Latinx, Asian, Native American, Sephardic, Mizrahi and

mixed-race

Jews by heritage, adoption, and marriage.10 They are a

majority of Jews in Israel. Despite these facts, European-descended

Jews dominate culture and politics in the Jewish communities of

both Israel and the United States. This has rendered Jewish people

of color invisible and made it seem racism is an issue Jewish people

are separate from. Yet we carry the pain, violence, and confusion of

racism within our own bodies and in the distribution of economic

and cultural power within our Jewish communities.

Ruling classes have always used cultural differences to exploit

people and to determine the roles outside groups would play in the

economic system. Ruling classes use systems of oppression such as

anti-Jewish oppression:

• to divide people, exploiting some groups more heavily than

others

• to strengthen white cultural solidarity and chauvinism

• to make white Christian workers feel lucky they have some

privilege or status no matter how heavily exploited they are

• to divert working and middle-class

attention from the wealthy

by focusing on scapegoats “above” them (Jewish bankers) and

“below” them (African Americans, Latinx, and immigrants of

color).

There are other complex strands in anti-Jewish oppression. Stereotypes, lies, and misinformation leads many people who are fighting racism, whether they are people of color or white, to downplay the importance of anti-Jewish oppression and not respond vigorously

when Jews are attacked. Whenever the stereotypes of Jewish money or power go unchallenged, the power of the predominantly Christian ruling class is strengthened and racism continues. Colluding with anti-Jewish oppression, even through silence, contributes to

inequality and racial injustice.

With some exceptions, Jews have lived for long periods of time in Muslim controlled areas (such as medieval Spain and in the Ottoman Empire) in relative peace and respect. In Europe and the US, Jews and Moors have been categorized together as infidels, threats

to Christianity and to Western societies. Although it is beyond the scope of this book, we have much to learn about how racism operates by analyzing the ways anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism is related to anti-Jewish oppression, how European-descended white sectors of Jewish-American and Israeli society have contributed to anti-Arab and anti-Muslim

racism, and how white Christian-dominated Western societies, for instance through the work of Christian Zionists, have set up Jews and Arabs to fight each other in Israel and Palestine.

Looking in detail at how anti-Jewish oppression operates gives us further insight into the dynamics of racism. It helps us see that racism is not simply a religious, biological or cultural persecution. It rests, instead, on institutionalization of power and violence.

I’m white and I’m Jewish. Acknowledging my white privilege allows me to challenge racism both within the Jewish community and in the larger society. And when I, as a Jew, challenge anti-Jewish oppression it does not distract from the struggle to end racism; it enhances

it, making it clearer how dominant Christianity is a cornerstone of racism. I work for racial justice by drawing on my Jewish identity, Jewish values, and our collective knowledge and experience of Christian dominance, racism, institutionalized violence and economic

injustice. My greatest effectiveness as an ally to people of color comes from my history and experience as a Jew.