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COLLOQUIA

## Benjamin and us

### Christianity, its Jews, and history

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*Translated from the French by Eléonore Rimbault*

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In 2004, the author of this article published *Le christianisme et ses juifs: 1800–2000*, an essay that studied Christian anti-Semitism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, drawing insight from the connections between two histories: the microhistory of a village mystery play (Oberammergau, Bavaria) and the broad history of Christian anti-Semitism. Jeanne Favret-Saada's methodology resembles Benjamin's in the "Theses on the philosophy of history." The work's reception led the author to question Benjamin's historical and intellectual commitments: his relation to Judaism, Europe, Nazism, materialism, and the methods of history as a discipline.

Keywords: anti-Semitism, Walter Benjamin, Catholic Church, Europe, Franz Kafka, microhistory, mystery play, Oberammergau (Bavaria), Shoah

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*Le christianisme et ses juifs: 1800–2000 (Paris, Seuil), which I cowrote with Josée Contreras, was published in 2004. This work covered the history of a Catholic mystery play still performed today in Oberammergau (Bavaria), which has long been accused of anti-Semitism. In order to shed some light on the local history of this general phenomenon, our reflection intertwined the microhistory of this village's mystery and the larger history of Christian anti-Semitism in the world that had emerged from the Holy Roman Empire after 1806, with a particular focus on the kind of Catholicism that developed there.*

*In the 1980s, the Catholic Church had offered to publicly recognize its institutional responsibility concerning nineteenth and twentieth-century European anti-Semitism. Yet when the time came, the church preferred to deny this responsibility completely before the coming of the third millennium. Instead, it blamed "some of its sons" who had been misled and begged*



for their forgiveness. This sleight of hand was all the less perceived since Jewish organizations stopped protesting against it in the year 2000. Indeed, they had traded off their demands for the prospect of Christian support for Israel.

*Le christianisme et ses juifs* presents the long history of the church's involvement, as an institution, in struggles to prevent the Jews from accessing and then preserving their equal rights, up until the Second World War. Yet this book, published four years after the papacy officially denied the church's responsibility, was immediately considered to be a useless and biased work which did not even deserve to be debated. In France, indeed, the history of Catholicism belongs to Catholic scholars only.

Confronted with the failure of a ten-year research project, I reread the writings of Walter Benjamin, wondering what kind of Jew and European he had been and how one could situate his historical methodology in relation to these questions.

*Le christianisme et ses juifs: 1800–2000*, an essay I published with Josée Contreras in 2004, was born of our shared stupefaction at the Catholic Church's tour de force in 1998, by which it debarred the memory of past violence it committed against the Jews and Judaism by way of a proclamation of a *general* repentance, that is, one that was absolutely undetermined. For eleven years, John Paul II had promised the Jewish community this document, entitled "We remember: A reflection on the Shoah";<sup>1</sup> it would demonstrate that the church, as an institution, was not afraid to assume its historical responsibilities. However, this text, which also intended to prepare for the closure of the second Christian millennium, did exactly the opposite of what it had announced, for its release implied that Catholicism's reflection on the matter would now have to be this, and nothing else.

I had been working for some time on this subject, but the shock generated by the papal statement imposed the historical extension of *Le christianisme et ses juifs*. The book had to start in 1806, at the end of the Holy Roman Germanic Empire (which had safeguarded the status of the Jews for centuries). We planned on examining successively the churches' action throughout the period leading to the emancipation of the Jews in 1871; the clerical campaigns aiming at the revocation of this equality (rendered effective by Hitler, in 1933); the churches' policy during the Third Reich; and, finally, the way in which, up until the year 2000, the churches had presented this past.

In Benjaminian terms, one could say that the reading of "A reflection on the Shoah" transformed me into a "materialist historian": suddenly, the "now" of 1998 had become saturated by a two-centuries-long "what-has-been"—the political history of the Jews in Christian Europe since the French Revolution. And it was a "what-has-been" that needed to be "redeemed" with the utmost urgency, considering its contemporary significance.

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1. The document can be accessed online: Cardinal Cassidy, Bishop P. Duprey, and Father Remi Hoeckmann, "We remember: A reflection on the Shoah," January 1998: [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc\\_pc\\_chrstuni\\_doc\\_16031998\\_shoah\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_16031998_shoah_en.html). —Trans.



I had undoubtedly somehow hoped that publication of *Le christianisme et ses juifs* would prevent this matter from simply being immediately closed. This was a serious mistake. Since the beginning of the third millennium the extent of this erasure has already become obvious: for instance, if one considers the reception of Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). The fact that a host of official representatives of Judaism may be satisfied by the Catholic declarations does not change the heart of the matter: this only goes to show that this commemoration has become a secondary question for them, the main question being the fate of the State of Israel.

This arrangement between the two parties—an unspoken one, of course, but one that can be verified every day—constitutes a new historical fact. I had certain difficulties coping with it, even though I am, as we say, a “non-Jewish Jew” and not even an occasional participant in institutional Judaism. This is true except in the framework of this research, which brought me to correspond with several American Jews who were protagonists in the conflict I was studying and who supported my project.

Confronted with this situation, I isolated myself for months to focus on an exclusive tête-à-tête with Franz Kafka and Walter Benjamin: the former's radical lack of hope (“there is plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope—but not for us,” Kafka once said) and the latter's tone of extreme emergency had suddenly turned them into my contemporaries. Kafka and Benjamin, Benjamin discussing Kafka . . . I traced Benjamin's impossible gambles, tracked the confrontation of contradictory ideas—none of which he entirely endorsed—from which his thought emerged, and followed his hope that a new energy would emerge from it, possibly even a new idea. Often, it seemed to me, his method proved efficient.

Nevertheless, I chose to examine Benjamin's work in a more responsible (and less therapeutic) way, keeping in mind the historiographical project of *Le christianisme et ses juifs*. On the one hand, this reading made clear some of the effects of his personal position concerning Jewishness and German-ness, as well as Judaism; on the other, it emphasized some of the elements of periodization in European history, which constitute major epistemological obstacles to thinking about Christianity's relations with the Jews during the last two centuries. I must therefore begin there.

### **Benjamin as a German Jew, a Jewish messianic, and a historical materialist**

Walter Benjamin committed suicide in September 1940, after failing to cross the French–Spanish border to flee to the United States. Had he survived the war, would it have altered the work plans he had devised since 1927 for his major work *The arcades project*? It seems unlikely: none of the events occurring at that time, be it the curtailment of the rights of Jewish citizens in Germany, the Jews' subsequent spoliation and mass incarceration, or the beginning of their deportation, altered his road map. For Benjamin, the fascism that arose in the 1930s was a moment in the development of capitalism, one of its strategies, its modern face in a number of European countries. He saw capitalism as the sole origin of the historical catastrophe in which Europe had been engaged since the nineteenth century. He believed that the high-speed development of technology should have been matched by a

comparable inventiveness in social relations, so that the masses might enjoy the anthropological mutation of humanity. Instead of this, Benjamin recorded an ever-growing reification of social relations, a process that rendered the working class aware of its position and its strength, and prepared its mobilization for the revolution. *The arcades project* offers an illustration of the first act of this drama, from the early industrialization of France up until the Commune in 1870, which clearly raised the question of a proletarian revolution.

According to Benjamin, anti-Semitism (which precedes the invention of the term in 1879) fits into this general conception of capitalist modernity. Walter relentlessly criticized his father's generation for being naïve enough to believe that the Germans had accepted the Jews and obscuring the numerous signs of their rejection. Nevertheless, this clear-sightedness did not prevent him from desiring what was later to be called the "Judeo-German symbiosis" and to pursue it as a personal goal up until Hitler's accession to power.

Certainly, he did not wish for Germans and Jews to be united as one "people": Benjamin fiercely hated the idea of a "people" because of its exclusivist, if not racist, connotations—including when the Zionists spoke of a "Jewish people." But he called for a common contribution to a single German culture: one in which the universal and messianic spirituality of the Jews would have its place. At times, Benjamin even acted as the guardian of German culture, and defended it against its own blows, rescuing the old and disappearing forms of its literature: for, instance the critical thought of the first Romantics, or the Baroque drama of the seventeenth century. Each time, he did so by expanding the central intuitions of these German artistic forms so as to give them a transnational, transtemporal perspective.

When one reads Benjamin's correspondence closely, his relation to the Jewish religion becomes less mysterious than has been commonly understood. Gershom Scholem never dared to qualify this relation, because he would have had to admit that his friend was a "non-Jewish Jew" who nonetheless often referred to Judaism, or rather to his personal conception of what it could be. As early as the summer of 1918, Scholem noted that Benjamin, who often pronounced the word "God," was utterly disdainful of the Ten Commandments. Later, in 1934, he reproached him for portraying a nihilistic Kafka, for whom God and the Revelation did not mean anything. (Scholem, by contrast, viewed Kafka's work as the illustration of the Revelation's non-realization.) Aside from this controversy between two men, one must admit that Benjamin manifested throughout his life an encyclopedic ignorance of Judaism—"the abyss of my ignorance," as he himself said in 1933: his knowledge of Judaism was more or less limited to what he found in Scholem's work. The life of Jewish communities, throughout history and in Benjamin's own time, did not whet his curiosity; he did not take an interest in their literary production, except for Shai Agnon's work and the German translations of the Tales of the Hasidim. Finally, his two most famous inhibitions should be mentioned: all his life, he could not bring himself to learn Hebrew or to set foot in Palestine, in spite of the importance these projects took in his correspondence. To provide just one example, Benjamin met with the rector of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Paris in 1927 because he wanted to learn Hebrew, go to Palestine, and become a commentator on Hebraic literature. The candidate acted with a resolution that even surprised Scholem. Yet



one year later, Benjamin could be found in Moscow, and later on in Paris: he had become a student of Marxist thought and a habitué of the Surrealist circles.

And yet, what Benjamin called Judaism never left his conceptual apparatus. Even when he started calling himself a “dialectical materialist,” or when he called for the proletarian revolution and the future realization of a classless society, his work still contained a powerful reference to the coming of a Messiah. Of course, he did not say one should await his coming, praying for the Eternal, as an Orthodox Jew would. But he claimed that his messianism was “Jewish,” as it did not promise universal salvation and as it did not possess the theological and political inconveniences of the Christian Messiah. After the signing of the German–Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in August 1939, which shattered the last of Benjamin’s few hopes, he wrote the *Theses on the concept of history*. He did not intend to publish this work, but he presented it to his friends as the theoretical foundation for *The arcades project*. Incidentally, these *Theses* depict simultaneously two kinds of historical actors: those which we expect to find in a (secular) Marxist history—struggling social classes, the winners, the oppressed, social democracy, fascism—and those which more commonly play a part in prophetic texts—such as the Messiah, or the Angel of History.

Although it may be bold to offer a resolution of this oscillation in a single sentence, I would like to propose the following hypothesis: Benjamin’s messianism must be understood as the main thrust in his conception of history, one of the two ends of the bow he bent to shoot his arrow. This is probably the greatest among all the challenges accepted by this audacious archer. Benjamin was telling us, in short, that for a “dialectical materialist,” a Messiah-less history would be a sense-less one. But we would err if we were to conclude that this was a “religious” conviction, the product of a doctrinal profession of faith. Like Kafka, Benjamin is a postreligious Jew, unable to embrace any doctrine, and leaves to his reader the task of finding a solution to life’s great existential mysteries. Perhaps this strange blend of messianism and historical materialism was an attempt to instill in the latter an intensity and an immediacy that it lacked, as it is lacking in all rational discourse. Or maybe it was not.

### Benjamin’s times and ours

In his youth, Benjamin was just as anticapitalist as he was antipolitical. Even though he did not pay much attention to this fact, he was living at the time of many revolutions or revolutionary attempts occurring in Russia, Hungary, Bavaria, and Berlin. When he became a “materialist historian,” the possibility of a German revolution seemed plausible to him, in the light of these recent insurrections. Today, a majority among us (including me) find it hard to imagine even the possibility of a revolution, let alone that it could foster a liberation of the oppressed classes. Therefore, we are led to interpret Benjamin’s declarations on “the revolution” as more metaphorical than he would have wished and as an event as unlikely as the coming of the Messiah. As a result, his discourse lost its force and the constant retroaction he had instigated between the revolution and a Messiah’s coming, on the one hand, and between each of us and our political responsibility, on the other, now seems merely poetical.

As early as 1931, Benjamin had understood that German culture did not plan on being rescued by German Jews. He died before the genocide was planned. For us who come “after Auschwitz,” the fact of the genocide in itself forbids us to consider Nazi anti-Semitism the way Benjamin did: that is, as a mere artifact, a bone thrown to the German masses to secure their loyalty to the Führer. Although the Jews—as Benjamin thought—made up only a small fraction of humanity, their massive extermination before the eyes of a silent Europe took on a universal significance. Ultimately, our current and detailed knowledge of the way extermination was put into practice does confirm Benjamin’s comments on *Teknik*, but it puts into question his overall scheme: to blame this genocidal fascism on a strategy of capitalist domination now seems wildly unreasonable.

Therefore, our generation must come to terms with its historical duty. *Le christianisme et ses juifs* strives to do its share by presenting the winner’s tradition “with cautious detachment,” to borrow Benjamin’s expression.

### A montage of chronicles

About a third of *Le christianisme et ses juifs* is centered on the study of a minuscule cultural object, a mystery play taking place every ten years in the Bavarian village of Oberammergau, from 1634 to the present day. Decade after decade, other events occurring in places surrounding the village, which we could map in concentric circles—Bavaria, Germany, pontifical Rome, Christian Europe—shed their lights on the local mystery. And all these events have to do with the same problematic knot: the figuration of the Jews in the evangelical Passion narratives, their representation on stage in the mystery plays, the Christian theology of Judaism, and finally its political forms of expression.

*Le christianisme et ses juifs* is built like a montage of chronicles connected by capillarity: it shows that some sets of historical significations, and certain features of the relationships between the churches and Jewish communities, can spread from a small Bavarian town to other places in Christian Europe, and vice versa. Benjamin would have recognized some of the typical elements of his historiography: the historian’s work understood as that of a “chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones” (2007: 254); his montage technique, which builds on very small elements put together with precision and clarity; his use of citations extracted from the winners’ discourse to shed light on their practices. . . . We could even say, like Benjamin did: “I needn’t say anything. Merely show” (2002: 460). In our case, the task is to show what is missing in the available histories of Christianity.

### Was the Mystery of Oberammergau anti-Judaic, or anti-Semitic?

The Passion of Oberammergau was discovered in the mid-nineteenth century by a group of pious Anglicans interested in finding new means of preaching that would attract the already industrialized masses of Great Britain. They convinced their coreligionists that the Bavarian Catholic performance was unlike all the other



forms of religious theater that the Protestants opposed. Two decades later, a host of pastors accompanied by their congregations were visiting Oberammergau, traveling from Britain and later on even from the United States, making the village famous throughout the world. Benjamin certainly would have appreciated the irony of this capitalist development.

Throughout the nineteenth century, the Mystery of Oberammergau was taken to be fine and dandy religion, nothing more. But for the first time, in 1901, an American rabbi accused the Bavarian play of anti-Semitism, and accused the Gospels on the same grounds. Later, in 1930, at the time Hitler appeared in German political life, British and American newspapers further charged this religious production with contributing to the worst political fanaticism that humanity had ever known, anti-Semitism. The controversy only increased after the war, especially in the period between 1960 and 1990. It has reached an end today for Christians, although it continues to some extent within the Jewish community.

The reception of this mystery play over a hundred and fifty years raises two issues. On the one hand, why was its anti-Judaism completely ignored in the nineteenth century? On the other hand, why did all opponents of the performance without exception speak of its anti-Semitism after 1930? The text of the Bavarian Passion, as is widely known, precedes the coining of the word anti-Semitism; it is also true that Christians shocked by the anti-Jewish bias of certain figurations of Christ's last days are apt to speak of it as anti-Judaic.

### Christian Europe's nineteenth century

Finding an answer to these questions is not easy, and this is further complicated by the present state of research on anti-Jewish racism, which strangely reproduces the Christian division between anti-Semitism and anti-Judaism. Hannah Arendt and Léon Poliakov, among other irreproachable miscreants and antiracist thinkers, claimed that the nineteenth century witnessed a change in Christian Europe's attitude toward Judaism and the Jews (see my other paper in this volume). Previously oriented toward the Jewish religion (anti-Judaism), its aversion was now directed toward the Jews, taken as a race (anti-Semitism). These scholars construed this change according to classical oppositions: the modern and the traditional, the political and the religious, science and theology . . . Yet although this informs us as to their representation of history—akin to Benjamin's, incidentally—it does not shed light on what actually happened in the nineteenth century between the church and Jews, at this particular moment in the transition to modernity.

If we want to know what really happened, we must put into question this secular reading of the politico-religious history of the nineteenth century. It is often reported that in that century, the modernization of the economy and of society caused the churches to lose a large number of their followers. This is false: some followers lost faith, but others found it. Indeed, clerical institutions managed to adapt their means of preaching to the masses of the industrial era (in fact, the Passion of Oberammergau is a splendid illustration of religious modernity). Those whose faith remained intact and those who had newly found it were more attached to it than the Christians under obligation of the previous centuries: hence, despite some

losses among the crowds of parishioners (this phenomenon was marked among the working class and certain urban areas in particular), the nineteenth century was also a time of religious renewal.

Likewise, it is often taken for granted that the spread of the liberal—i.e., religiously neutral—state shattered the influence of the churches: this is just as false. The churches had to change the strategies and tactics of power and influence that had worked so well during the many years of the Christian state, but around 1880, they succeeded in finding effective ones. They substituted political influence for direct intervention with secular rulers, resorting to the democratic institutions they nonetheless abhorred: indeed, Pius IX's *Syllabus* (1864), which denounced the Republic as an "error," continued to be applied up until the death of Pius XII (1958). First, the churches organized their followers in countless voluntary associations that spread the Christian conception of social and political life; thus, new elites were trained and emerged. Second, the churches promoted participation in parliamentary life and encouraged their elected members to join governmental coalitions—mostly conservative, but also some liberal ones. Finally, they invented mass-distributed Christian media (thanks to the development of the penny press), produced pedagogical journals for the managers of associations and for political elites, and published numerous textbooks in theology and politics.

As for the Jews, doctrinal anti-Judaism was flourishing (it would not be questioned before the Second Vatican Council, in 1963–65). This brand of anti-Judaism was accompanied by an anti-Jewish policy that grew ever more racist as the end of the Christian state drew near and, as a consequence, Jews gained access to equal rights (this change occurred in 1871 in Germanic countries).

The word "anti-Semitism" appeared in 1879. Its main advantage was its lack of precision: to proclaim yourself anti-Semitic meant to inform your interlocutor of a general aversion toward the Jews, without having to refer to the specific reasons why. At that time, a Christian could be anti-Semitic for religious reasons, a socialist for political or economic reasons, and a fanatic of Nordic origins for questions of national pride. The reference to *Semitism* could easily convey that this aversion had a scholarly justification. Thus, *anti-Semitism* served as a rallying flag meant to gather ideologically and politically all those who opposed the Jews' then recent access to equal rights.

By 1881, anti-Jewish Catholics (except for the popes, who more or less remained silent on the matter) started claiming that they too were anti-Semitic. From then on and up until the years 1938–39, they published a host of texts (books authorized by the *imprimatur*, articles in clerical journals) in which they celebrated anti-Semitism. Christian anti-Semitism, of course, was said to have a double advantage over its other forms: it was a "good" anti-Semitism (i.e., in favor of a "good" punishment for the Jews, not their extermination pure and simple) and a "moderate" one, in compliance with previously existing laws. However, this moderate anti-Semitism concurred with a "purer" brand (the kind without a good religious reason) or a more "excessive" one (the kind of anti-Semitism that resorts to illegal means, such as murder or pogroms) in its main objective: to obtain from governments the cancellation of Jews' equal civil rights.

These ideas are presented ad nauseam in the doctrinal political journal of the papacy, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, which provided impressive conceptual work starting



in 1881 to accommodate its kind of political anti-Semitism with the theological principle of the unity of mankind. In just a few years, Judaism became “the criminal religion of a criminal race” (an expression commonly found in the journal), and the collaboration of the church with a-religious or antireligious anti-Semitic parties found a justification. Furthermore, the church’s long and abundant anti-Judaic tradition provided essential ideas for European anti-Semitism: for instance, it fed the myth of a Jewish ritual crime, commanded by the Talmud, which endangers Christian children during Passover—a collection of fantasies that the Nazis were quick to exploit.

### What about Benjamin’s nineteenth century?

Many of Benjamin’s writings are focused on the nineteenth century—from the birth of capitalism to the First World War. He had a real genius for showing that the rapid acceleration of technical progress, a corollary of the capitalist mode of production, shattered our frames of experience and altered our modes of perception, our forms of sensibility, our experience of wars, the position of art, of memory, and so on. Benjamin saw the nineteenth century as a moment of rupture, of full anthropological mutation. And this affirmation is fully justified, as long as we consider it in relation to his intellectual project, which was to study the bounded effects of capitalism and *Teknik*. However, in the perspective adopted in *Le christianisme et ses juifs*, the nineteenth century appears to be just as much, and legitimately so in my opinion, the moment when the churches provided the anti-Semitic movements with the wealth of their anti-Jewish tradition. And of course, the new possibilities offered by the technique and economy of capitalism heavily contributed to this transfer of intellectual technology.

### Christian anti-Semitism in the twentieth century

It was only in 1929, when Nazism appeared as a political force, that the churches felt the necessity to differentiate themselves from its totalitarian ideology. Yet, up until 1945, Christians opposed Hitlerian totalitarianism but not its anti-Semitism: that is precisely what the 1998 document “We remember: Reflections on the Shoah” actively and energetically ignores.

National Socialist ideology had two main planks. On the one hand, it established race as its ultimate principle: the source of all authority became the Führer, the party, the state. Not God, Christ, or the churches. The churches therefore denounced—cautiously, and in a disorderly way—the new religion of race as a doctrinal error, without acknowledging anti-Semitism as an inevitable consequence of racism. On the other hand, Nazi ideologists attacked the “Judaic” character of Christian Scriptures. The churches answered by showing their anti-Judaism (the use of the term dates from 1930–35). Their argumentation was that although Christianity had assembled some elements of the Jewish Scriptures in the Old Testament, their religion had interpreted them as God’s active preparation of a Jewish people reluctant over the coming of its Messiah. And this Old Testament only became fully

meaningful thanks to the New Testament, which relates Christ's coming, the unbelief of the Jews in his Messiahship, and the transfer of the divine election from the Jewish people to the church, "the new people of God," "Verus Israel."

Hitler's rise to power and the revocation of the equality of Jewish citizens in 1933 did not trouble the Christian churches: these laws appeared to them, as they do to all anti-Jewish partisans, as the beginning of the realization of what they had asked for over fifty years. Christians were shocked, of course, by the ransacking of the Jewish community's possessions and the way Jewish people were assaulted on the street, but these aggressions only confirmed the merits of a "moderate," legal anti-Semitism.

In short, from 1920 (the year when the program of the National Socialist Party was first published) up until the end of 1938, the Christian churches held three inconsistent positions: the first was the defense of Christian Scriptures as "non-Jewish"; the second was the doctrinal objection to a pagan ideology of race; the third was the religious and political approval of a "moderate" anti-Semitism (which did not aim at murder).

At that point, the old pope Pius XI finally understood that racism and anti-Semitism had to be condemned at once. As we know, he ordered the secret writing of an encyclical entitled "On the unity of the human race" (whose text is in fact absolutely anti-Judaic), but he died without having been able to read it, and his successor, Pius XII, immediately hid it away. The word anti-Semitism nonetheless disappeared from clerical journals. And *La Civiltà Cattolica* fixed its political theology of Judaism: the religion of this Jewish "people" sufficed to make it the supreme danger threatening Christian Europe. This discourse spread throughout the pages of the journal up until 1943, after which it became silent.

We now see how the problem of the churches' responsibility for the extermination of Jews can be posed. They certainly did not call for it: for two thousand years, the Jews, in an infamy skillfully staged by Christian authority, constituted the living proof of Christianity's triumph. Besides, those, like Daniel Jonah Goldhagen (1996), who grant the churches a desire to physically liquidate the Jews do not seem to realize that if that were the case, Europe would have been *Judenrein* well before 1945. However, the churches did help, like many other social actors, in facilitating the Judeocide. They did not denounce it. Ordinary Christians participated in the mass murder or its numerous preliminaries—deprivation of rights, ghettoization, spoliation, and deportations. And many more Christians were witnesses to these acts: they often approved them, and they always remained silent.

### The impatient rag picker

*Le christianisme et ses juifs* does not question a particular conception of history, but rather questions the fact that historians, be they secular or clerical, and for different reasons, have ignored Christianity's contribution to the anti-Jewish politics of the last two centuries. Our book accounts for past facts that did not find the place they should have had in general or specialized histories: the history of Christianity (in which these facts are entirely absent), the history of anti-Semitism (where they



disappeared in the nineteenth century), and the history of Nazism (in which the churches' policy constitutes a distinct subdiscipline).

We looked for these facts in the local histories of particular Jewish communities: Bavaria, Hungary, Italy. . . . And we stitched them back into the general history of Europe. Therefore our historiography resembles the practice of the “chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones” (Benjamin 2007: 254). Perhaps I will be able to share Benjamin’s faith in the fact that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history” (ibid.). But surely not his infinite patience: “To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. Each moment it has lived becomes a citation à l’ordre du jour—and that is Judgment Day” (ibid.).

I probably lack something to truly become a materialist.

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## Benjamin et nous: Le Christianisme, ses Juifs, et l’histoire

Resumé : L’auteur a publié en 2004 *Le Christianisme et ses juifs : 1800–2000*, qui étudie l’antisémitisme chrétien des XIXe et XXe siècles à partir de deux histoires croisées : la micro-histoire d’un Mystère de la Passion villageois (Oberammergau, Bavière) et la grande histoire de l’antisémitisme de l’Eglise catholique. La méthodologie de Jeanne Favret-Saada est très proche de celle de Walter Benjamin dans les *Thèses sur le concept d’histoire*. La réception de son livre provoque chez l’auteur une confrontation avec l’engagement historique et intellectuel de Benjamin : son rapport avec la judéité, l’Europe, le nazisme, le matérialisme, et la méthode de l’histoire.

Jeanne FAVRET-SAADA is an anthropologist and author of *Les mots, la mort, les sorts: La sorcellerie dans le Bocage* (Gallimard, 1977; English translation: *Deadly words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*, translated by Catherine Cullen, Cambridge University Press, 1980) and *Corps pour corps: Enquête sur la sorcellerie dans le Bocage* (Gallimard, 1981, coauthored with Josée Contreras). She has since published numerous other works, including *Le Christianisme et ses Juifs: 1800–2000* (Le Seuil, 2004), once more in collaboration with Josée Contreras; *Algérie 1962–1964: Essais*

*d'anthropologie politique* (Bouchene, 2005), *Désorceler* (Éditions de L'Olivier, 2009; English translation: *The anti-witch*, translated by Matthew Carey, HAU Books, 2015); and *Jeux d'ombres sur la scène de l'ONU: Droits humains et laïcité* (Éditions de L'Olivier, 2010).

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