History of Anti-Semitism in America

You may not know that April is Genocide Awareness Month in the United States. But you are most likely aware that Anti-Semitism was at the root of the genocide of millions of European Jews in Germany, Poland and other Eastern European Countries before and during World War 2. This month, the Anti-racism Task Force would like to bring to the forefront the issue of Anti-Semitism in America.

Anti-Semitism has been a constant presence throughout American Jewish history. America's founders imagined a country free from religious persecution, guaranteed in the religious freedoms promised by the Bill of Rights upon its approval in 1791. States’ rights would trump this vision of religious freedom, however, as limitations were imposed against religious minorities, including Jews. From the moment they first arrived at the colony of New Amsterdam (New York), Dutch governor Peter Stuyvesant petitioned to have them removed, but the financial benefits of Jewish mercantile networks prevailed. They were publicly denied worship unless they embraced Christianity and the church; however, as synagogues began to spring up, out of economic necessity, Judaism was quietly tolerated.

Despite their early success in the Americas, Jewish people continued to live as outsiders, religiously condemned by Christians, and became the target of racial tropes that persist even today. During the Civil War conflict, anti-Jewish intolerance was rampant among the both sides in the conflict, with accusations that Jewish people were helping the opposing side of the conflict as well as selling military supplies at inflated prices.

Despite the undercurrent of anti-Semitism that persisted in American life, Jewish communities flourished. Two million Jews entered the country between 1881 and 1914, escaping poverty and numerous Pogroms in Europe that proved to be financially and personally devastating. A pogrom is a violent riot incited with the aim of massacring or expelling an ethnic or religious group, particularly Jews. Upon their arrival, they were often met with fear and resentment, for their mannerisms, customs, way of life, and perceived successes as they rose both personally and professionally. So, naturally, during economic downturns conspiracy theories surfaced of financial markets and government exploitation by Jews, who were believed to be corrupt international financiers.

These tensions continued to grow, resulting in very public displays of American anti-Semitism, as declarations of Aryan superiority grew louder. Mob violence escalated during World War I as Americans feared the influence of foreign nations and the spread of Bolshevism, attributing these negative influences on Jewish citizens. American anti-Semitism post-World War I inspired quotas restricting Jewish students from attending institutions of higher learning, despite their qualifications, and also led to their exclusion from certain universities, neighborhoods, hotels, and clubs.

Prominent figures also came forward. Henry Ford, known for his anti-Semitism, published a newspaper in the 1920s in Dearborn, Michigan called *The Dearborn*that was riddled with anti-Semitic tropes and propaganda. In the 1930s the attacks increased, as neo-Nazis were allowed to openly speak hatred over radio airwaves, justifying and inspiring physical assaults against Jewish citizens both in the United States and abroad.

Today, complex social change, including anxiety about globalization, economic inequality, the COVID-19 pandemic, and changing demographics, has inspired a resurgence of bigotry, scapegoating, and mistrust. For some, the Jewish community once again became the “globalists” responsible for complex social change.

In the past few years, the FBI reports that 60 percent of religious-motivated hate crimes have been against less than 2 percent of the American population—*the Jewish people*. There are, on average, ten antisemitic attacks against Jewish people per day globally right now.

Please, sincerely ask yourself: as a Christian, do I care about the Jewish people? Most of you will immediately answer yes! As believers in the Jewish Messiah, Jesus, how could we not care about His family today? The Apostle Paul paints an example of this in Romans 9:1-3:

“With Christ as my witness, I speak with utter truthfulness. My conscience and the Holy Spirit confirm it. My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief for my people, my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed—cut off from Christ!—if that would save them. They are the people of Israel, chosen to be God’s adopted children.”

Most Christians do not realize that one of the main reasons Paul wrote the letter to the Roman church was because the predominantly Gentile Roman fellowships of believers were developing an anti-Jewish sentiment towards their fellow Jewish followers of Jesus. In one raw and vulnerable statement, Paul models how deeply Christians should love Jewish people—even those who have not yet put their faith in Jesus. Paul fully understood the unbreakable love God has for the Jewish people, and allowed his heart to be filled with that love.

Today, antisemitism is growing almost under the radar of broader culture. But the cancer of antisemitism thrives when it is ignored, minimized, or overlooked. If Christians will not speak out against these hateful beliefs or behaviors, who will?