Renewing Tradition: The Orthodox Christians in Dialogue with Jews Working Group and the Challenge of Anti-Judaism

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In spring 2023 the Orthodox Theological Society in America (OTSA) launched a significant new initiative aimed at addressing one of the most enduring and sensitive issues within Christian theology and liturgy: the presence of anti-Judaism in Orthodox Christian tradition.

The working group, titled *Orthodox Christians in Dialogue with Jews* (OCDJ), was formed not only to study this issue but to foster theological renewal, liturgical reflection, and interreligious understanding within the Orthodox Church. !is report presents the vision, development, and activities of OCDJ in its first two years, highlighting its potential as a model for faithful and transformative engagement with difficult theological legacies.

Foundations and Aims of the Working Group

The OCDJ initiative was born from a recognition that while occasional academic papers have touched on anti-Jewish rhetoric in Christian texts, Orthodox theology and pastoral practice have rarely undertaken the sustained attention required to address these concerns. The 2023 OTSA annual meeting resolved to form a dedicated working group to examine these issues, beginning with a focus on the often-troubling Holy Week hymnography.

Rather than narrowly targeting individual hymns or proposing superficial edits, OCDJ proposed a more comprehensive theological and pastoral framework. It quickly became clear that renewal would require engaging the entire spectrum of Orthodox teaching, liturgical history, and pastoral practice. !us, the working group articulated three goals: (1) to articulate a theological statement outlining the key principles guiding Orthodox engagement with Judaism; (2) to develop educational resources to help Orthodox Christians understand Judaism and engage with Jewish people; and (3) to create a practical guide to assist local parishes and jurisdictions in considering thoughtful liturgical renewal.

!is project, though admittedly complex and at times controversial, is grounded in the conviction that the Orthodox Church must continually reengage its theology and liturgy in light of God’s truth and love. OCDJ welcomes participation from Orthodox scholars, clergy, and educators, as well as Jewish partners and ecumenical observers.

Seminars and Theological Refiections (2023–2024)

In its initial phase, OCDJ launched a series of online seminars aimed at learning from other Christian traditions and exploring historical approaches to Jewish-Christian relations. In autumn 2023, Rev Dr Ephraim Radner introduced the Church of England’s *God’s Unfailing Word*, a landmark theological reflection on Jewish-Christian relations. The discussion highlighted the evolving Anglican approach to Judaism, particularly in rethinking the portrayal of Jews in preaching and liturgy. Later, Rev Dr Peter Pettit led a seminar on the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America’s *Preaching and Teaching “With Love and Respect for the Jewish People*.” !is guide

represents a Lutheran attempt to reckon with anti-Jewish theological tendencies and liturgical language that contributed to antisemitism in Western society. In a further webinar, Catholic theologian Dr Gavin D'Costa presented the foundational documents of Catholic-Jewish dialogue, including *Nostra Aetate* and subsequent theological reflections. These texts modelled a post-Holocaust reorientation of Christian theology toward the Jewish people.

A public seminar held in February 2024 featured presentations from OCDJ steering committee members who outlined the theological motivations, aspirations, and methods behind the working group's formation. !is event helped raise awareness and solidify support for the group's mission.

In spring 2024, the working group turned its attention to key historical figures in Jewish-Christian dialogue. Dr Norman Tobias presented the legacy of Jules Isaac, a Jewish historian whose postwar engagement with the Catholic Church was crucial to the formation of *Nostra Aetate*. Fr John Jillions led a seminar on Fr Lev Gillet, whose 1941 book *Communion in the Messiah* proposed a radical theological reimagining of Jewish-Christian relations. Dr Rivka Karplus explored the legacy of Cardinal Lustiger, a Jewish-born Catholic bishop who maintained his Jewish identity while serving in the Catholic Church.

Deeper Theological Engagement (2024–2025)

By summer 2024, OCDJ presented its work at the OTSA annual conference held at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. In that forum, steering committee members emphasised that anti-Judaism is not always explicit but often embedded subtly in Christian rhetoric – for instance, in stereotypical depictions of Pharisees or in the framing of Judaism as a spiritual relic overshadowed by Christianity.

In response, OCDJ advocates a theological method that returns to the roots of the Church's identity in Judaism. The presentations emphasised how Jesus, Paul, and the early Church must be understood within Second Temple Judaism, and not in opposition to it. Only through such a recovery can Orthodox theology remain faithful to Christ without distorting the enduring covenant between God and the Jewish people.

In the latter half of 2024, OCDJ organised several webinars focusing on pivotal figures in Christian-Jewish reconciliation. One session featured Dr Gregory Glazov presenting the legacy of Monsignor John Maria Oesterreicher, a Jewish convert and Catholic theologian instrumental in shaping post-Holocaust Catholic teaching. His evolving stance on Jewish evangelism moved from a conversionist impulse to a dialogical theology marked by shared hope and mutual recognition.

Subsequent sessions focused on two major Orthodox figures. Inga Leonova presented Fr Sergius Bulgakov's engagement with the "Jewish question" in the context of Russian religious thought and the rise of Nazism. !ough sympathetic and at times progressive, Bulgakov still viewed the Jewish people through an eschatological Christian lens that subordinated Judaism's present vitality to a future Christian fulfilment. Svetlana Panich contrasted this with the deeply incarnational and prophetic theology of Mother Maria Skobtsova. Canonised as a saint for her martyrdom in the Holocaust, Mother Maria's actions and writings reflect a theology of radical compassion, solidarity, and shared suffering. She saw the Church not as superior to the synagogue, but as its companion in divine homelessness, calling Christians to self-emptying love rather than triumphalist claims.

Commemorating the Shoah: Orthodox Responses and Reckonings

In April 2025, OCDJ partnered with *The Wheel* journal, Volos Academy for Theological Studies, and ACER-MJO to host an international online conference titled "The Orthodox Church and the Shoah." !is event marked the 80th anniversary of the liberation of Nazi death camps and offered a

multifaceted exploration of how Orthodox Christians have remembered –or failed to remember – the Holocaust.

The conference explored theological and historical dimensions of the Shoah. Rabbi Dr David Sandmel reflected on the imperative to remember. Fr Geoffrey Ready addressed the theological problem of the Holocaust in Orthodox tradition. Dr Olga Meerson offered a powerful reading of Orthodox hymnography through the lens of the Shoah. The conference also honoured Orthodox saints and righteous among the nations, including Mother Maria, Fr Cyril Argenti, and others who risked their lives to save Jews. Presentations also examined the complicity of Orthodox churches and clergy in fascist regimes – with case studies from Serbia, Romania, and Nazi-occupied Greece. A closing roundtable stressed that dialogue about the Holocaust must remain a permanent theological priority.

Educational Tools and Future Directions

In parallel with these events, OCDJ is working to develop an online educational resource titled the *Glossary of Judaism for Orthodox Christians*. !is glossary will offer short, accessible entries on key concepts in Jewish religion, culture, and history, written with Orthodox Christian readers in mind. It aims to correct widespread misconceptions and encourage respectful theological reflection.

The glossary will invite Orthodox clergy, catechists, and seminary educators to deepen their understanding of Judaism, not only as a historical antecedent of Christianity but as a living faith with theological and spiritual insights. !is resource exemplifies OCDJ's long-term goal: to make Orthodox communities more literate, empathetic, and dialogically engaged with their Jewish neighbours.

Conclusion

The work of *Orthodox Christians in Dialogue with Jews* represents a significant step toward addressing the theological, liturgical, and pastoral legacy of anti-Judaism in the Orthodox Church. Rather than erasing difficult texts or denying problematic traditions, OCDJ is committed to thoughtful engagement, theological renewal, and respectful encounter.

In doing so, it models how Orthodox fidelity to Christ can be deepened through openness to Jewish tradition and honest reckoning with Christian history. !is is not merely a reconstruction of past relationships, but the construction of a new foundation of mutual recognition, humility, and hope. The Orthodox Church's integrity in preaching the Gospel today may well depend on such acts of truth-telling and reconciliation.

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