

The Church Fathers on the Jews*

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As I know something about history I can tell you what attitude Orthodox thought has developed towards Judaism and the Jewish nation. It is in fact twofold.

If we are talking about the Orthodox attitude to Judaism, then obviously since the very birth of Christianity we have these two religious systems which have been opposed to one another and have lived for two thousand years in a state of mutual hostility, so even committees at supreme court level would have difficulties sorting things out.

As regards the Orthodox attitude towards the Jews as a people, then two strains of thought can be found within those texts which the Orthodox Church takes as having spiritual authority. One of these is expressed most clearly in St John Chrysostom's famous *Shest' slov protiv iudeyev* (*Six Words Against the Jews*) in which he declares that it is our duty to despise the Jews, the synagogue and everything else of theirs. The other argument is put forward quite clearly by St Makari the Great, who said that anyone who accepts the fullness of God's love is like an innocent child and shows love equally to everyone, monks and laity, sinners and righteous, Greeks and Jews. So sometimes we find a harsh conception of one's relationship to one's opponents, but sometimes the question becomes a moral one and in the writings of the Holy Fathers it is the general principle of love for all mankind that emerges triumphant. You see, even if we regard the Jews as the enemies of Christianity, the direct commandment of our Lord is still to love our enemies – both those we regard as our enemies and those who consider themselves our enemies. As the remarkable church historian Vasili Bolotov has put it,

If I see that the various Church Fathers have different opinions on a particular church issue, then no one can force me to agree with any judgment by any particular Father which I personally do not consider to be well enough grounded in, and corresponding to, the spirit of the Gospel. In exactly the same way, if an opinion held by a Church Father has not been officially condemned by a church council, and if it attracts me by the force of argument, by its beauty and by its spiritual power, then no one can forbid me to hold the same opinion.

A study of the source material relating to the medieval Orthodox heritage thus

*These are excerpts from an interview with Andrei Kurayev by the journalist Nataliya Babasyan, first published in *Khristiansky vestnik*, no. 6, 1993, pp. 21–2.

reveals two kinds of text. Which ones we are going to revive and preach today depends on our own moral stance and the choice we make.

(Translated from the Russian by Emma Watkins.)