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Contemporary Repercussions of Historical Discrimination

by Kimberly Spevack

Throughout history, Jewish and Indigenous people in Canada have faced copious amounts of discrimination, intimidation, and cruel treatment based on their racial and cultural identities. Remnants of lies and stereotypes originating back in the fourth century about Jews have persisted, playing a role in the Holocaust, as well as present-day antisemitism. Indigenous people have been consistently mistreated and considered second-class citizens by the Canadian government for years, particularly indicated by the implementation of residential schools. Consequently, trauma plagues their community to this day. Both minority groups of people are faced with the lingering consequences of the horrendous events which their ancestors were subjected to, as well as present-day racism and bigotry.

Jewish people have been subjected to antisemitism and persecution repeatedly, with many attempts made to destroy the Jews. *Why the Jews* explains the depth and consistency of antisemitism. "In most societies in which Jews have lived, they have at some time been subjected to beatings, torture, and murder solely because they were Jews" (Prager and Telushkin 2016, 26). Jews were often disliked on the basis that they upheld their own customs and traditions, which prevented them from fully integrating into whichever society they were a part of. However, in the case of early Christianity, the presence of Jews posed a different problem than non-conformity. The Jewish people rejected Jesus' claim to be the Messiah, and the Jews were G-d's chosen people, so "if Judaism remained valid, [the founders of Christianity] believed, then Christianity was invalid" (Prager and Telushkin 2016, 117). The depiction that the Jews killed Jesus is one of the accusations that came from the early church's efforts to invalidate the Jewish people, a charge that "gave legitimacy to the brutalizing of Jews for more than 1,500 years in Christian Europe" (118). The depiction of Jews as "Christ-killers" and the associations between the Jews and the Devil led to even more antisemitic libels, which prevailed and hurt Jews for centuries to come.

In the Middle Ages, to many Christians, Jews were considered the devil's children, and thus not actually human beings (Prager and Telushkin 2016, 121). This dehumanizing accusation led to absurd anti-Jewish libels, where the Jews were said to perform ritual murder, poison Christians, as well as "host desecration", which represented the death of Christ. These three libels resulted in the persecution of Jews in Europe and paved the way for antisemitism in Christianity. Though Christian antisemitism is not directly the cause of the Holocaust, it played a role in allowing it to occur. Prager and Telushkin note, "...the Christian worlds dehumanized the Jew, ultimately helping lay the groundwork for the Holocaust" (Prager and Telushkin 2016, 133). Libels and rumors concerning the Jewish people have not ceased to exist but have morphed into modern day stereotypes and conspiracy theories. A recent example is the influence of the notoriously antisemitic Louis Farrakhan, who gave a speech in which he calls the Jews "Satan", and deems Jewish people to be the "enemy of God" (Pink 2020). Many prominent athletes and entertainers attended Farrakhan's speech, and have since expressed their support for antisemitic conspiracy theories concerning the role of Jewish people in the media and banks in particular.

Antisemitic libels have changed since the Middle Ages; however, the popularity of antisemitic rhetoric remains.

Another group of people who are still dealing with the repercussions of systemic racism and negative stereotypes are the Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous people have often been portrayed as “savage” or “primitive,” along with other insulting terms used to dehumanize and demonize them. The Canadian government established residential schools with the goal of assimilating Indigenous children into Canadian society, and to “civilize” them (Miller 2012). They attempted to do so by forcefully removing children from their families, depriving them of learning about their own culture, language and traditions. In these government-funded schools, the Indigenous children faced abuse, both physical and psychological. The Indigenous youth were stripped of their identities and dehumanized, had their hair forcefully cut, were given a new English name, and had their traditional clothing taken from them (Miller 2012). The last residential school was closed in 1996 (Miller 2012); however, negative and harmful stereotypes are still prominent today, and the Indigenous Peoples in Canada face many issues as a result of their cruel treatment at the hands of the Canadian government.

Though it would seem that the Holocaust and residential schools are phenomena of the past, there still exists intergenerational trauma from years of genocide and abuse. Intergenerational trauma is what occurs “when untreated trauma-related stress experienced by survivors is passed on to second and subsequent generations” (Berube 2015). Transgenerational effects have been found to manifest not only psychologically, but also culturally, socially, neurobiologically, and genetically (DeAngelis 2019, 36). Numerous scientific studies have proved that this phenomenon is present in the descendants of Holocaust survivors, as well in the generation of Indigenous people whose parents and grandparents survived residential schools. The Jewish and Indigenous communities had similar experiences, with the same unfortunate outcomes: lost lives, discrimination, and trauma. The Nazis considered Jews subhuman, declaring their existence the “Jewish Problem”. Similarly, the residential schools established by the Canadian government was “one of the key mechanisms by which the government attempted to achieve their goals of eliminating their ‘Indian problem’” (Bombay, Matheson, and Anisman 2014, 320).

While both the Holocaust and the Canadian residential school system are both widely condemned by the general public in modern times, the hate which encouraged these horrendous events is still prevalent in our society today, in the form of intergenerational trauma, racism and discriminatory treatment. There is no shortage of racial slurs or stereotypes about Jewish or Indigenous peoples, and both groups are often treated worse because of their ethnic or religious identities. Antisemitic attacks are on the rise, with people justifying their bigotry towards Jews (Reich 2020), and many Canadians are not educated on the history of residential schools and the conditions which Indigenous communities are dealing with currently. The dehumanization and demonization of Jews and Indigenous peoples both have long histories, and have resulted in tremendous amounts of suffering in both communities.

Statement of Commitment

At the start of this course, I often found myself upset and disheartened - until this course and reading Prager and Telushkin’s *Why The Jews*, I had not realized the depth to which antisemitism and anti-Judaism have existed throughout history, nor did I understand

the complex roots of this unique bigotry. Using the content we discussed in class, as well as from Prager and Telushkin, I have already been able to challenge antisemitic remarks that I have experienced in real life. Having read the chapter on anti-Zionism, I was able to explain to an old classmate how being “anti-Zionist” is in itself antisemitic, on the basis that “Jewish nationhood is, along with God and Torah and chosenness, a pillar of Judaism” (Prager and Telushkin 2016, 218). Being in the victim role is scary and upsetting, however with the information and insight I have gathered from this course, I feel that I can effectively defend myself and other Jews.

Learning more about the long-standing history of antisemitism has allowed me to be more empathetic to other minority groups who are facing similarly motivated discrimination. Especially with the momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement, I have a much better understanding about the role I have to take on - it is not enough to not be racist, but I realize that I must be actively anti-racist, and use my position of privilege to stand up for other oppressed groups of people. Being Jewish, we have experienced the consequences of people acting as bystanders to hate in recent history, during the Holocaust. In our time of need, the Jewish people were ignored, and advocating for ourselves was not enough when facing such harsh and cruel treatment. I believe that it is our moral responsibility as Jews to take action in the face of racism, bigotry, and bullying, not only when we are victimized, but when we find ourselves witnessing these wrongdoings.

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