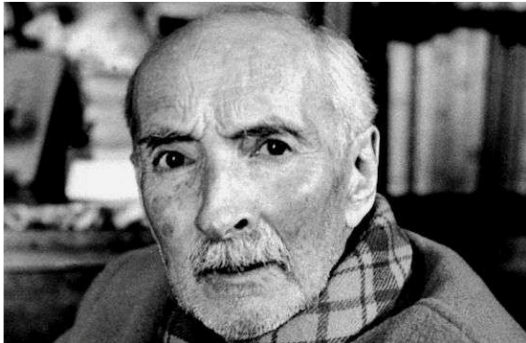


## **Pope hails Jules Isaac's contribution to Christian-Jewish relations**

Francis says the writings and advocacy work of the late Jewish French historian following World War II helped pave the way for the Vatican II text "Nostra Aetate"



*Jules Isaac (1877-1963), the French historian. (Photo: AFP)*

**Félicien Rondel, *La Croix International*, 13 December 2022**

Pope Francis has hailed the late Jewish French historian Jules Isaac (1877-1963) and his ground breaking work in promoting Christian-Jewish relations and dialogue in the aftermath of the Second World War.

"In particular, he participated in the famed Seelisberg Conference, which concluded its work with the famous "Ten Points of Seelisberg", some of which were adopted in the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*...

When he was received in audience by Popes Pius XII and John XXIII, Jules Isaac advocated for the drafting of that prophetic text," the pope said Monday during a meeting with members of "Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne", the organization Isaac founded in France in 1948.

Francis said the historian "played a leading role in the rapprochement between Jews and Christians after the tragedy" of World War II.

### **"Jesus and Israel"**

One of Isaac's early contributions to that effort was his 1948 book *Jesus and Israel*. Eventually issued in English in 1971, its subtitle was "a call for the necessary correction of Christian teaching on the Jews".

The members of "Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne" gave Pope Francis an audio version of the work during their meeting this week. In fact, the one who presented it to him was the person who voiced the book, Guila Clara Kessous. The 44-year-old Jewish French academic and artist is best known for her work in promoting human rights through theater.

In this interview with *La Croix*'s Félicien Rondel just before meeting the pope, she spoke of Jules Isaac's legacy and the importance of Jewish-Christian relations.

**La Croix: The author of *Jesus and Israel*, Jules Isaac, also created "Amitié Judéo-Chrétienne de France" (AJCF). How do you work for friendship between Jews and Christians, especially in France?**

**Guila Clara Kessous:** Through initiatives such as those of Paray-le-Monial, which enables a Christian public to be more aware of Jewish traditions and thus to de-demonize everything related to Jewish worship.

In particular, Paray-le-Monial organizes programs of discovery of Judaism, with experts who come to present different Jewish cultural domains. During these weekends, we meet with Christians and Jews to spend a Sabbath. Singing, eating and celebrating together brings us together in a way that is worth all the intellectual texts.

When we shared this Sabbath, I was absolutely astonished to see Christians coming up to me and saying, "We thought you didn't want to share your customs." Yet, I think that Judaism has this thirst and willingness to share. Rather than continuing to "hide" behind the texts, we must above all dare to meet the other.

**You are going to give the audio version of the book *Jesus and Israel*, for which you have lent your voice, to Pope Francis. What relevance does this text have today?**

The relevance is profound, because it is thanks to the meeting of Jules Isaac and Pope John XXIII that terrible phrases in terms of anti-Semitism, sometimes within Christian prayers, were able to be put aside. This meeting made it possible to de-demonize the Jewish people in the Christian collective unconscious.

Thanks to Jules Isaac, and in particular to his book *Jesus and Israel*, we have been able to understand that it was not the Jews who crucified Jesus. He also reminds us that the first Church was created by Jews who did not want any friction with Judaism.

His book is also an update of the value Christianity holds for Judaism, which allows us to understand that Jesus' message was above all a message of benevolence towards the Jewish people. It was not directed against a "deicidal" people. In fact, since the meeting with Pope John XXIII, the word "deicide" has been removed from all Christian texts.

**On a personal level, what elements of this book have struck you?**

The fact that Jules Isaac, who says he is not a believer, chooses to do the work of a historian to show how, in the Gospels and the New Testament, traces of anti-Semitism have no place. It is overwhelming. And in particular the address he makes at the end of his book to his mother and sister, deported to Auschwitz and killed because they bore the name Isaac.

**As a UNESCO artist for peace, how do you think the arts can help change mentalities?**

I originally came from the theater, and for me, public speaking has its full role to play. For example, if you want to understand Judaism, you have to come closer to one of the main prayers of Judaism, which is: "Listen, Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one".

This notion of listening is fundamental: rather than having something that strikes the eyes, we try to find, inside, a way to understand, by listening. And that is why we recorded this book: suddenly, through voice, someone will explain to us the Judeo-Christian friendship.