

ANTISEMITISM AND ITS ROOTS IN RELIGIOUS RHETORIC

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IMPROVING THE CAMPUS CLIMATE INITIATIVE (ICCI)

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Academic
Engagement
NETWORK



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The AEN aims to promote more productive ways of addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In place of one-sided sloganeering reinforcing simple binaries, we advocate open debate acknowledging complexity. In place of aggressive, antidemocratic tactics galvanizing deep inter-group suspicions, we advocate respectful exchanges of ideas. We insist that the heckler's veto has no place in the academy – there is no free speech right that permits blocking free speech by others. We are committed as well to addressing antisemitism often found in anti-Israel narratives.

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AEN's Improving the Campus Climate Initiative (ICCI) engages senior and mid-level college and university officials to ensure that they meet their stated goal of guaranteeing a diverse and inclusive campus environment which upholds the rights of all students, including Jewish and Zionist students, to participate fully in campus life.

ICCI provides education and training to campus Equity, Diversity and Inclusion, Student Affairs, and related offices in order to build awareness about the multifaceted nature of contemporary antisemitism and how it impacts Jewish and Zionist students. Through the initiative, AEN also works with relevant administrators, staff, and faculty members to strengthen policies and practices regarding how the university protects the rights of freedom of expression and association and against discrimination and bias, and to help ensure that Jewish and Zionist students enjoy equal protection under these policies and practices.

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Antisemitism as Persuasion

The view taken here is that antisemitism functions rhetorically and that it is manifested discursively and visually, containing a collection of arguments whose objective is to persuade others of faulty and hateful charges against Jews and provide justification for attitudes and actions thereof. Antisemitism was initially enshrined in theological and mythic precepts and projected persuasively to argue the superiority of Christianity and later of Islam over Judaism. That antisemitism is experienced *exclusively* in these two religions must be understood as borne of a unique relationship to an earlier religion and the difficulty Christianity and Islam have had in according Judaism its historical place and foundational precepts. This essay delves into the early roots of antisemitism that have dictated centuries of anti-Jewish hatred. The essay then moves to the more recent incorporation of the State of Israel into the antisemitism orbit by using it as a weapon to boycott it, its citizens, its products and going as far as to question its right to exist. The essay concludes with a focus on the newest definition of antisemitism from 2016 by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) that has been embraced internationally but also prompted controversies that further point to the persistence of this centuries-old hatred.


Antisemitism has existed in different times and places for some twenty centuries and its spread and longevity are most profound. There is no other comparable hatred in human experience. The scourge of antisemitism is even more puzzling when contemplating the sheer size of the Jewish community worldwide which stands at the dawn of the twenty-first century at about 15 million, an infinitesimal portion of about 0.0002 percent of world population. Yet, the hatred of Jews and the Jewish state has covered a large terrain in news, history and literature that cannot be explained by the miniscule number of Jews worldwide. Additionally, the charges



against Jews are themselves so vicious, contradictory and unrealistic that countering them is often an act in futility.

As the historical victims of untold cruelty, Jews have been charged with the killing of Christ, as murderers of Christian children whose blood they supposedly need for the Passover ritual, as the poisoners of wells, as a plotters and seekers of world domination, of espousing radical thoughts, of being Bolsheviks, Communists, usurers, capitalists, powerful and meek, and more recently as the attackers of Muhammad. At every age and historical juncture there appears to be a “cause” and a “reason” to hate Jews, which means that there is no cause, and no reason that can justify this hatred. Yet, charges against Jews cover the range of humiliating them for being driven off their ancestral land to the so-called scientific explanation of racial antisemitism. The litany of charges and hateful statements are but rhetorical devices designed for making it easier to argue that Jews deserve all the punishments inflicted upon them throughout history; ostensibly, the eternal scapegoat for various misfortunes that befell on different communities at different times and places. When sorting out this maze of contradictory and ridiculous charges, there stands the truth, rough and bare--the Jew as the convenient victim for others’ frustrations, uncertainties, and iniquities.

The unstated objectives of antisemitism are to reinforce, conform, and unite a given community, objectives that are activated by victimizing an “other.” The principal operative mechanism of antisemitism is the reversal of terms whereby the objective of unity is achieved via division, and the objectives of strength or self-worth are managed through the denigration and dehumanization of the “other.” The reversal of terms is most clearly apparent with the reversal of causes and effects and their analogous disease and symptom (Nazi propaganda films went a step further by highlighting the literal disease Jews carried by depicting them as vermin,



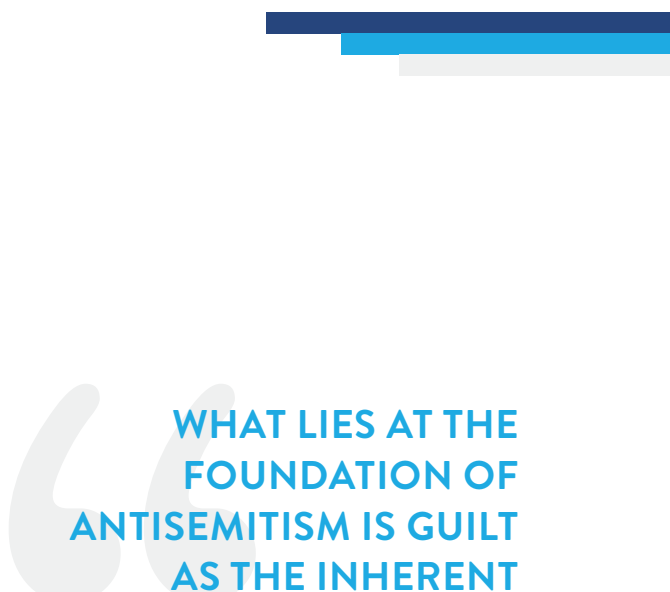
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and hence, justifying extermination as the preferred solution).

What lies at the foundation of antisemitism is guilt as the inherent motive for hating Jews, manifested in their scapegoating—an invented vessel on whose shoulders the sins of others are to be carried. But why guilt? Because Christianity and later Islam borrowed much from Judaism including the primacy of its narrative and holy places but claimed that Judaism was no longer a viable religion and that it had to remain only in a most humiliated way, as far as Church leaders advocated, or cease to exist, as far as Islam is concerned. Judaism, however, did not

accept these theological precepts and its very continued existence and organic survival would be taken as a serious challenge to both offspring religions. The resultant attacks on Jews would last some twenty centuries and would include some of the most horrible acts against Jews including burning them alive, massacres, pogroms, Inquisition and the Holocaust.

The depravity of antisemitism runs long and deep and any attempt to reduce it to an existing category of intersectionality or “social justice” is not going to bring about its end. Ostensibly, antisemitism cannot be compared to other hatreds by equating it to known categories and, hence, seeking to diminish its deep-seated roots, nor can it be considered a form of racism for the simple fact that this hatred has existed some seventeen centuries before racial theories were developed. In taking a rhetorical perspective in explaining antisemitism, I argue that antisemitism cannot be reduced to a prejudice and that a deeper understanding of this hatred is necessary before contemplating a viable solution.



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The Religious Grounding of Antisemitism in Christianity

The birth of antisemitism was of a rhetorical act needed in order to separate early Christianity from Judaism. Christianity's survival was possible only by denigrating and humiliating Judaism. As a rhetorical construct, antisemitism was designed as a weapon to spew hatred against the Jew and Judaism since all other approaches to limiting the influence of Judaism in the Roman Empire had failed. A century or so after Christ, Judaism flourished while Christianity was unable to construct a separate identity and attract the masses needed for its success. When the opportunity came due to Judean politics and failed revolts against Rome, Church leaders began a rhetorical campaign of hateful speech. But the issue is larger than that. The entire foundation of Christianity was constructed on a strong anti-Judaic stance such that one prominent scholar of Christian theology declared that "anti-Judaism is too deeply embedded in the foundation of Christianity to be rooted out entirely without destroying the whole structure."¹

As Lloyd Gaston puts it: "A Christian Church with an anti-Semitic New Testament is abominable, but a Christian Church without a New Testament is inconceivable."² French Jewish historian Jules Isaac who was influential in convincing Pope John XXII to reverse centuries of Christian antisemitism (later implemented by Pope Paul VI in the form of *Vatican II*), argued that all forms of antisemitism are derived from the root cause of Christian antisemitism and its "teaching of contempt" toward Judaism which included the eternal guilt of the Jew for crucifying Jesus, the claim that Jesus rejected the Jewish people, and the Church's rejection of Jesus' Jewish identity.³ A Jewish critic from antiquity aptly asked, "why do you take your origin

¹ Rosemary R. Ruether, *Faith and fratricide: The Theological roots of anti-Semitism* (New York, Seabury, 1974), 228.

² John G. Gager, *The Origin of anti-Semitism: Attitudes toward Judaism in pagan and Christian antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 11.


³ David Brog, *Standing with Israel: Why Christians support the Jewish State* (Lake Mary, Florida, Front Line, 2006), 1-2.

from our religion, and then, as if you are progressing in knowledge, despise these things, although you cannot name any other origin for you[r] doctrine than our law?”⁴

With religious interpretation and theological dogmas of the early Church, the charge of Jews as Christ killers would become the established theology and with it, the most horrifying formula that considers Christ’s crucifixion a timeless charge Jews should bare for eternity. Based on this theology, every Jew at any time was and forever is guilty of this crime, even those not yet born. This foundational and eternal charge has allowed other charges to pile up against Jews, eventually identifying them as society’s permanent pariahs to be ostracized, attacked and killed.


Judaism as the religion from whence Christianity and Islam have sprung is the primary cause for the long-standing hostility between the mother religion and its offspring. Ostensibly, Christianity would claim its formation as a replacement of Judaism and maintain that God no longer favored the latter. Yet, Jews did not accept this theology nor were they willing to relinquish Judaism. Subsequently, the early Church considered the existence of Judaism an affront and a threat to Christianity. Jews could not accept Christianity for several reasons, critically for the very conception of the Messiah and the theology of the trinity as anathema to the conception of God as invisible. In addition, the edict against constructing images of God or the notion that God had a son are all foreign to Jewish theology.

The struggle of the early Church to establish itself as a separate religion from Judaism in the



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⁴ Gager, *The Origin of anti-Semitism*, 113.



Roman era necessitated a clearer distinction between the two religions and hence a theology that communicated such a separation. This separation, however, took on the form of intense hostility whereby Judaism was scorned and humiliated, and with this developed a strategy for ‘alienation by hierarchy’ whereby Christianity was argued to be the superior religion. Further statements by early Church leaders such as the sermons of St. Chrysostom (ca. 304-407 CE) spewed much venom against Judaism and against Christians who still clung to Jewish practices and symbols. For example, St. Chrysostom considered the synagogue a place of sin for rejecting Christ, describing Jews as blasphemous, the “enemies of the truth,” and “more dangerous than wolves.” Jews, he declared, worship demons while their synagogue was a brothel and a den of robbers and wild beasts.⁵ St. Chrysostom’s venom was clearly the result of continued respect early Christians held toward Judaism such as preferring to give testimonies in a synagogue where God was more feared or joining Jews during their holiday celebrations. The closeness of Judaism and Christianity, even as late as the Fourth Century CE, was a source of frustration to Church leaders, hence necessitating the advocacy of a hostile separation between the two religions. It is at this stage that the Jesus’ crucifixion becomes a major charge leveled against Jews. That it took hateful rhetoric to achieve this objective is significant because it would guide the future approach of the Christian Church toward Judaism; that of serious charges, resentment, and humiliation.⁶

The Council of Nicaea (325 CE) officially broke with Judaism, declaring that from here on Christians should have nothing to do with this “odious people.”⁷ St. Augustine (c. 354-430 CE) added a significant foundational thesis to antisemitism whereby Judaism ought

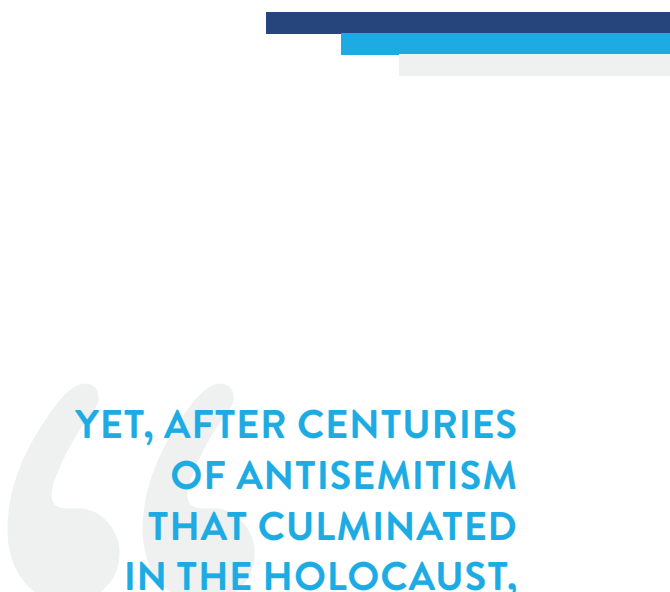
⁵ *Saint John Chrysostom, Homilies Adversus Judeaus*. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/chrysostom-jews6.html> (accessed December 28, 2017).

⁶ *Some scholars believe that virulent antisemitism began with St. Chrysostom’s sermons. His saintly name means “golden mouth.”*

⁷ *James Carroll, Constantine sword: The Church and the Jews (Boston: A Mariner Book, 2002), 55.*


to survive but only for the sake of Christianity's triumph. The justification for this theology was based on the Old Testament's prophecies that the early Church declared to have grounded the credibility of Christianity by prophesying Christ. In other words, while the Hebrew Bible grounds Christ as Messiah, hence necessitating the existence of Judaism, it is also negated, and its people scorned for not recognizing Christ as the Messiah. With this twisted logic, Jews were constructed rhetorically as the super antagonists while their religion was viewed as grounding the origin and foundation of Christianity. As Rosemary Ruether would devastatingly opine; antisemitism is the Church's "left hand of its Christological hermeneutic."⁸

Yet, after centuries of antisemitism that culminated in the Holocaust, the very Church that instilled this Jew-hatred in the first place came around in 1965, seeking under the auspices of Vatican II Council to change the theology and the dogma that grounded antisemitism. In its encyclical *Nostra Aetate* ("In Our Time"), the Church repudiated the charge of the eternal guilt of the Jew. Intent on bringing an end to antisemitism and admitting its responsibility in promoting it since antiquity, the Church correctly identified the charge of eternal guilt of the Jew for Christ's death as a major cause of antisemitism and stated its rejection of the faulty reasoning associated with this charge. It now negated the illogical precepts of eternal guilt and pointed out that not only should Jews of Jesus' time be exonerated of the charge of killing Christ but that all Jews since cannot be held responsible



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⁸ *Ruether, Faith and fratricide: The Theological roots of anti-Semitism, 121.*



for an act committed centuries earlier. The eternal guilt of the Jew would no longer be part of the Church's theology and with it came the hope that antisemitism, singularly premised on this charge, would be eliminated altogether. The Catholic Church was not alone in confronting antisemitism in the post-World War II era as several Protestant denominations, too, rejected their longstanding hatred of Jews. Yet, the case of Protestantism, especially in the United States, is different than that of the Catholic Church and was prompted primarily by the establishment of the State of Israel. This development was taken as part of the theology that considered the return of the Jewish people to their Holy Land as a sign of Christ's return.

Antisemitism in Islam


Though Islam has several disparaging statements about Jews in the Quran, hatred of Jews in the Islamic world never reached the proportion or intensity of Christian antisemitism. Non-Muslims, Jews among them, were considered *dhimmi*, a second-class, but protected group with limited rights. Although it is often argued that Islamic antisemitism is directly related to the immigration of Jews into Palestine and subsequently, to the establishment of the State of Israel, it is worth noting that antisemitism entered the Near East in the first half of the nineteenth century. One of the most prominent case of attacks on Jews was a blood libel that took place in Damascus in 1840, more than a century before Israel was established and fifty years before Jewish immigration to the Near East began. In the second half of the nineteenth century antisemitism spread further in the region with the dissemination of European antisemitism tracts, mostly by French clergy.

Much of today's antisemitism in the Middle East region, however, can be linked directly to Nazi propaganda of the 1930s. The Nazi's virulent anti-Jewish radio broadcasts coupled with newer writing and interpretation of Quranic references began to resemble Middle-Ages antisemitic tropes. Long-standing European antisemitism became embedded in post-Quranic writings to assert a Jew-hatred that was not present in these texts in the first place and was

largely instrumental; that is, calculated as the best approach to confronting the growing immigration of Jews into Palestine. The Islamic charge of the early twentieth century resembled that of early Christianity, charging Jews with committing acts against the prophet Muhammad and seeking to kill him. This ultimate offense was argued as an affront to Islam and hence justified a hatred of Jews. While Christianity invented antisemitism in antiquity in order to forge distance and separation from Judaism so that Christianity could stand alone and triumph, Muslim antisemitism is primarily post-hoc and a much later development whereby political events and developments in the Near East after World War I brought Islamic thinkers to search back into the religion's theological foundations for reasons to hate Jews. In both cases, however, Christianity and Islam formed discursive and narrative objectives to drive a religious justification for hating Jews. The grounding of antisemitism in religious edicts guaranteed the strongest justification and acquiescence for such hatred for the simple reason that a non-religious grounding would not be as effective.

But why are the roots of antisemitism to be found in religious arguments? Because both Christianity and Islam sprung from Judaism and coopted its narrative, its religious figures, and its holy sites. When a newer religion seeks to co-opt an older one, the earlier faith must be diminished or cease to exist in order for the newer one to claim its grounding and

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hence its legitimation. But through the ages Jews refused to relinquish their theology and its critical connection to the sites of the Jewish people's origins. Thus, insofar as Jews would not allow Judaism to vanish, the newer religions could not claim uniqueness or originality. This is the essence of the rhetorical process whereby an internal doubt—guilt—cannot simply be eliminated without a victim to bare its weight. Put differently, any effort to explain the connections between, and even reliance of, these two religions on Judaism had to acknowledge earlier theological precepts and this was a responsibility both Christianity and Islam were not willing to carry. Hatred of Judaism was an easier move.


While Christianity eventually came around to acknowledge its Jewish origins and ceased an official repudiation of Judaism after some twenty centuries, there are continued efforts in the Muslim world to de-connect Jews and Judaism to the Holy Land and to specific holy sites, especially Jerusalem. Putting this claim within the Arab-Israeli conflict, the disassociation between Israel, Judaism and the holy sites is supposed to negate the religious legitimacy of Israel's existence as well as the Jewish people's claim of returning to their ancient land. But return they did, and this is not how the religious narrative should have turned, at least not as far as the likes of St. Chrysostom or St. Augustus and other early Church leaders are concerned. The Catholic Church took note of the drastic change in Jewish experience and made the correct edict in Vatican II. The Arab and much of the Muslim world, however, would turn in the opposite direction. In the face of Jews re-populating Palestine, several Arab nations opted to side with Hitler's Germany and adopted Nazi propaganda symbols that would extend antisemitism and turn it into a weapon against Israel, even to this day.⁹ In recent decades, the far left in the West would also turn against Israel and deny the new state its right to exist. After centuries of devastating antisemitism culminating in the Holocaust, enlightened and self-identified progressive groups in the West wished Jews to "return" to where they came

⁹ *Matthias Kuntzell, Jihad and Jew-hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the roots of 9/11. Translated from German (Telos Press Publishing, 2007), especially 25-37.*


from, namely the Europe of the Holocaust and thus depriving them of the land they always held as sacred. Clearly the Palestinian-Israeli conflict would be the linchpin for this hostile view, yet at the foundation of this advocacy is the objective of denying Jews their religious grounding, even while recognizing full well that the connection of Judaism to Judea is sacrosanct. The logic of St. Augustine has remained even among secular people—to keep Jews alive but humiliated for abandoning God. But since the return of Jews to the land of Israel has disproved this premise, the more the reason to undo this link, once again.

Misunderstanding Jews and Judaism

Antisemitism was initially grounded on religious hatred and despite the secularization of this hatred, especially since the nineteenth century, it has remained inherently about religion and its foundational grounding. Antisemitism is the result of a naïve assumption that once Christianity and Islam were established respectively, Jews would abandon their religion and adopt a newer one. But Jews refused to abandon their faith (which is much more than just a set of religious laws and practices, a conceptualization of Judaism that is often poorly understood). A more fitting description would be to consider Judaism a faith that tightly connects religious laws and practices to specific sites from whence they derive origin and symbolism. Judaism is an organic faith that found ways to adopt and adjust to changing circumstances and locations in



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order to persevere and survive without losing its core tenants. A fully fleshed out understanding of Judaism would consider it a combination of religion, language, history, tradition and its connection to the biblical heartland. The concept of “peoplehood” is a more appropriate term for Judaism since it connotes a community and the connections to each other and to a cherished past. The very word Jew or Jewish is a variation on the Hebrew name Judah, one of Jacob’s twelve sons and in whose tribal land stands the city of Jerusalem. The word Jew then carries a clear reference to a land with a rich history including foundational religious locations and narratives that have withstood the test of time.¹⁰

The connection to the land, and to an ancient (and later revived in the late nineteenth century) Hebrew language and to holidays, long-standing rituals and life-cycle customs integrally linked to the Land of Israel, have done much to sustain Judaism despite centuries of exile and devastations. If anything, antisemitism has forced Jews to turn inward and seek ways to preserve and sustain their communities. Such measures included the development of liturgy and traditions that kept intact the hope and aspiration for a return to the Holy Land and to religious sites. In place of the Temple in Jerusalem as the central focal point of prayers and spirituality, the Synagogue was constructed as the community center whose objective was to sustain Judaism and ensure its continuation despite the challenges of diaspora and estrangement. Zionism as the nineteenth century version of nationalism would become a semi-secular movement based on centuries of aspiration to return to Zion—a synonym for Jerusalem and a metaphor for the land of Israel. Judaism is not just an idea-based religion, but an idea-based people devoted to a deity in a specific land of origin—the ancient as well as the modern land of Israel—as the source of its faith. The land of Israel cannot be taken away from Judaism and although physical expulsions separated Jews from their land for centuries, the connection remained symbolically tight—in prayers, in rituals, and in yearning.

¹⁰ *Amos Kiewe, The Rhetoric of Antisemitism: From the Origins of Christianity and Islam to the Present (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Press, 2021), 141-143.*


It is the continued existence of Jews that is at the heart of antisemitism and its real cause. That Jews have existed despite exile from their homeland and horrific oppressions brought a real story full circle in the late nineteenth century, culminating in 1948 in the establishment of the State of Israel. The story of expulsion, suffering, separation and return to the land of origin is the material of a unique narrative. It repeats the first return of the Israelites from Egypt to a newly formed political entity in ancient Israel and the transformation from slavery to freedom. It was repeated later after the expulsion of Judeans to Babylon and their return under Koresh, the Persian King. These narratives have been repeated on a grand scale after two thousand years in foreign lands following the Roman expulsion, all the way to the founding of a new Israel but with untold persecution, the Holocaust, and much suffering in between.



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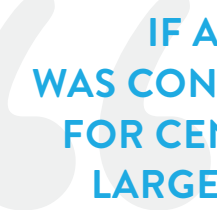
Anti-Zionism and Anti-Israelism

The establishment of the State of Israel would indeed commence a significant change to antisemitism and with it a major shift in transforming this hatred. Denying Jews their right to live securely, denying their right to pursue their commercial and professional endeavors, denying their life (The Holocaust), and then denying that their life was taken by a purposeful design (Holocaust deniers), and lastly, denying that Jews have a right to their own state, all have happened in the course of about one century. It is noteworthy that during period of 1860-1930 Jews and Arabs experienced quite favorable relationships. Jews became members of the




Egyptian Parliament, the Arab press welcomed Jews settling in the Near East, and Arab leaders in the 1920s welcomed Jews as necessary for the revival of the region.¹¹ Early encounters between Jews immigrating to Palestine were also positive as can be gleaned from supportive statements issued by local Arab leaders, joint sports competitions, mutual visits of Jewish and Arab delegations, and even the participation of an Egyptian cabinet minister at the opening of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1925. This phase, however, would come to an end in the 1930s, with the introduction of Nazi ideology and influence in the Middle East and as noted earlier, coupled with post-Qur’anic writings, a hostility that was not present before would introduce a new strain of antisemitism.

With the establishment of the State of Israel, the hostility toward Jews would be transformed to target their national entity. If antisemitism was conspiratorial for centuries and largely based on faulty reasoning and outright lies, with a Jewish Homeland and later Israel as state, antisemitism had a material substance readily available for criticism. Indeed, the focus on Israel has become a significant feature of recent and contemporary antisemitism, especially but not exclusively, on the left. The reasons for this new feature of antisemitism are rather obvious: first, the establishment of Israel was disruptive to centuries of antisemitism that held that Jews deserve their lot for losing their land over the rejection of Christ; and second, it rather conveniently became a shield against the charge of antisemitism. Anti-Semites could employ anti-Zionist and anti-Israel expression to disguise their hatred of Jews.



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¹¹ *Kuntzell, Jihad and Jew-hatred: Islamism, Nazism and the roots of 9/11*, 5-6.



That very definition of antisemitism would become a controversial matter precisely because it has turned anti-Israel and anti-Zionist, and that ought to indicate that another objective is being pursued under the new antisemitism. Indeed, the intensity of antisemitism of recent years brought pressure to have greater clarity over the definition of antisemitism. Now adopted by dozens of countries, cities and municipalities, civil society organizations and universities, the 2016 International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition is considered by many as a gold standard.¹² Yet, strong opposition to the IHRA definition from various quarters, including from within the Jewish community and academic circles, has also increased in recent years--especially surrounding the sections that include references to antisemitic forms of anti-Israel expression.¹³ Those opposing the IHRA definition appear to be mostly concerned by the limitation put on antisemitic expressions long taken with impunity. The new definition of antisemitism includes several examples such as harming Jews verbally and physically in the name of a radical ideology, making allegations to “the power of Jews controlling media, economy, government or other societal institutions,” blaming all Jews for the actions of one, or denying the history of the genocide of the Jewish people. As for antisemitic expression related to the State of Israel, the definition considers antisemitic charging Israeli Jews of inventing or exaggerating the Holocaust, accusing Jews of being loyal to Israel at the expense of their own country (the dual loyalty change), or holding Jews in the diaspora responsible for the actions of the State of Israel. Clearly, the inclusion of antisemitic forms of anti-Israel expression in the IHRA definition is an effort to address recent campaigns opposed to the very existence of the State of Israel, especially since the Durban Conference (2001), and the tendency of

¹² *On August 8, 2019, the US State Department amended its own definition to include a line omitted in 2016 and included among the IHRA’s examples: “Drawing comparisons of contemporary Israeli policy to that of the Nazis.”*

¹³ *“Progressive Jewish Groups Oppose Codification of IHRA antisemitism definition,” See <http://www.jpost.com/judaism/progressive-jewish-groups-oppose-codification-of-ihra-antisemitism-definition-655293>, accessed January 21, 2021.*

contemporary hostile attitudes toward Israel to often appear in the form of recycled Nazi propaganda (for example, images that depict Israel and Israelis in Nazi uniforms and baring the swastika, as well as images that depict Jewish Israelis with hooked noses and grotesque body features, while at the same time denying the Holocaust ever existed).¹⁴

Conclusion


Antisemitism has survived the ages because not only does it spread falsehood disguised as facts, but it overwhelmingly spreads falsehoods disguised as values (that is, meant to be taken as beliefs that guide or motivate action). To call a Jew the Devil, or a Christ killer, or the poisoner of wells, and recently, an instigator of September 11, 2001, or the culprit of COVID-19, is to go beyond facts. It is a means of instilling fear. To claim that the International Jew desired to exterminate Germany (a central feature of Nazi propaganda) is not a statement about facts but is meant to spread the fear of Jews seeking world domination (as in the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which is also not about facts but about terrorizing people). Cartoons depicting the ugly fat and rich Jew with a swastika attached to his garb, still much in use in the Islamist press, is meant to instill both fear and repulsion. Though many will take these displays as factual, they are likely unaware that the primary objective is to accept a value, be it fear or repulsion, and that in so doing, they have, by default, also accepted the motives to action.

That the rhetorical is an important perspective in understanding antisemitism can be gleaned




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AS FACTS, BUT IT
OVERWHELMINGLY
SPREADS FALSEHOODS
DISGUISED AS VALUES.**

¹⁴ *Behind the Mask: The Antisemitic Nature of BDS Exposed*, ” <https://4il.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/MSA-report-Behind-the-Mask.pdf>, accessed January 21, 2021.



from the victimhood competition that animates the discourse of those who would deny the severity of the Holocaust or its existence altogether. The Holocaust as the term designated to refer to the systematic Nazi plan to annihilate European Jewry has been appropriated to describe other cases of mass killing. This very appropriation of the term not only seeks to deny Jews an experience that stands on its own, but it also chips at the very enormity of the calamity. Arguments about whether to use an upper- or lower-case “h” in referencing the Holocaust, a topic which generated considerable debate during the Durban Conference (2001), has become symbolic of this public sphere competition whereby the Holocaust as unique to Jewish experience is replaced with holocausts, the experience of other groups. This linguistic game falls within the larger history of antisemitism whereby Jews have been deprived of their historical victimhood. Ultimately, this denial of victimhood is but a rejection of guilt and responsibility for committing the crime in the first place. Christians have practiced this device for ages and lately it has been much in use in the Muslim world. The Durban conference was such an exemplar and so is the rhetoric coming from Israel’s enemies, such as Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas. Their antisemitism is but a classical rhetorical projection device whereby key terms are switched such that opposite constructs of events and realities are presented as truthful and therefore, a justification for hatred. This very rhetorical device, also in use by Holocaust deniers and Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) supporters, has had a devastating effect on Jews throughout history as it has allowed a rather simple reversal of the victim-victimizer ratio. It has allowed lies to be accepted as self-evidenced truth and, in whose name, endless atrocities and various crimes have been committed.

At the roots of antisemitism, I argue here, is the co-opting of Judaism by Christianity and Islam while also transforming the very conception of the deity that is foreign to Judaism—a deity that has remained idea-rich yet person-less. While Christianity and Islam rely heavily on foundational Jewish-Hebraic precepts, the borrowing and co-opting cannot survive without the guilt associated with it. Ultimately, the issue at hand is the level of confidence and comfort both religions have about their theological grounding and teaching, and their ability and willingness



to assess them against the prompting of hatred toward Jews. As long as Judaism is denigrated, the implication has to be that Christianity and Islam continue to harbor some doubt about their theological precepts and that its Judaic grounding is a source of discomfort. Putting the entire matter in a most succinct way, the question a Christian and a Muslim should ask is this: Is the guilt of the Jew necessary for the survival of Christianity or Islam? If the answer is in the affirmative, then the realization that one's religion is based solely on the destructive charge of another ought to raise great concern. If the answer is negative, then antisemitism ought to ultimately cease. This foundational question ought to be asked of all believers and not be left in the hands of few who set the theological agenda for all.


Antisemitism is about the Big Lie whereby Jews have been blamed throughout history for committing major crimes against humanity, whether it is the killing of Christ, seeking to kill the Prophet Muhammad, or seeking world domination, including controlling banks, national government and media outlets. Such charges have rarely been scrutinized for critical assessment, instead, no accusation has been beyond the pale and is often based on the most exaggerated and illogical arguments as well as the manipulation of proof and evidence. Antisemitism, then, is based on immoral and unjustified arguments whereby the wrong cause and the wrong culprit are charged--and often with great prominence. As Jean Paul Sartre has noted, the Jew "is a pretext," and "anti-Semitism, in a word, is fear of man's fate," and "fear of one's self," and adding that as an ideology, antisemitism is a "scurrilous yellow myth" wherein the anti-Semite project[s] his criminal intention on an innocent victim by charging the victim with having organized a conspiracy which is, in fact, his own.¹⁵

Most scholarship about antisemitism assumes that the way to counter this scourge is to show that facts claimed by anti-Semites are wrong and mistaken and that those seeking to fight antisemitism ought to counter it with more accurate facts. Though an intuitive step, this is a


¹⁵ Cited in Carey McWilliams, *A Mask of Privilege: Anti-Semitism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1948), 268-269.

limited approach if not altogether a recipe for failure. Facts alone cannot counter antisemitism because the operative rhetoric is that of values that can trigger a specific reasoning process that results in repulsion, anger, disgust, fear and worse. Put differently, antisemitism is sold as emotive facts that cannot be challenged by empirical facts. The counter measures to antisemitism must include the same rhetorical approach of projecting values already operative in the community and that function as central anchors. Here, the teaching of Jewish values is essential for countering antisemitism precisely because such values can never sustain such vile charges. That this is an arduous process is given, but it must begin by delving into foundational precepts, discussing early religious edicts, and making a case for the key tenants of Judaism. Such a value-based approach would thus present the so-called “facts” of anti-Semites as baseless.

The corrective to antisemitism ought to show how along the lengthy road of hatred, Jews were made into scapegoats, and perhaps *the* historical scapegoat *par excellence*. It must show how religious narratives of hatred piled on accusations against Jews such that their cumulative effect was that they began to “function” as a scapegoat, used for any societal ill or setback. This transformation of a strategic evil counteragent into a historical scapegoat and a pariah is the strategy Islamists have adopted in recent decades, seeking to unify the Islamic world around one cohesive narrative that was supposedly founded at the birth of Islam. When the *ur-text* of Christianity and Islam has the Jew as the ultimate enemy, any narrative thereof is vested with so much persuasive power, symbolism, and legitimating theology, that the possibility of separating truth from myth and fiction is nearly impossible. One needs only to realize that it



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took Christianity almost two thousand years to see its foundation more accurately and, in that process, it came to terms with its responsibility for antisemitism. One can only hope that the same reflection in Islam will yield a more accurate account of its origin and its relationship with Jews and Judaism. More specifically, Islam needs a more expansive view of Judaism that is not constrained by its stance on Israel or the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Arab-Israeli conflict is only about a century old while Islam's relationship with Judaism covers some thirteen centuries, including an initial productive relationship during the Prophet Muhammad's time and later in Spain (from the eight to the fourteenth century), and even at the turn of twentieth century Palestine. With such a corrective, recently seen in statements coming from Gulf states, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, for example, Muslim antisemitism can subside, and perhaps with a more objective view of Judaism, the Arab-Israeli conflict will subside as well.

What, then, are the prospects of continued antisemitism? Is antisemitism here to stay for another millennia, or two? Or forever? This question has been asked time and again, in antiquity, during the Middle-Ages, when nineteenth century Enlightenment was in full force, and after Holocaust. The fact that this question has already been repeatedly asked means that antisemitism will likely continue. Such an assessment is not surprising but is quite depressing. Yet, the exploration of the rhetorical causes of antisemitism, if understood correctly, may lead to a way out of this millennia-old hatred--by understanding the role of guilt and its transference to a substitute in order to constitute the perfect enemy. If the recognition of this tendency is realized, if guilt is not to be transferred to an innocent and remote agent, perhaps theological precepts would be understood for their rhetorical practices and their consequences would be assessed accordingly.

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