
Anti-Semitism:

An Overview

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We shall never fully understand anti-Semitism. Deep-rooted, complex, endlessly persistent, constantly changing yet remaining the same, it is a phenomenon that stands at the intersection of history, sociology, economics, political science, religion, and psychology. But it is often the most elusive phenomena that are the most intriguing, and here fascination and profound historical significance merge to make this subject a central challenge to Jewish historians.

Despite its nineteenth-century context and its often inappropriate racial implications, the term *anti-Semitism* has become so deeply entrenched that resistance to its use is probably futile. The impropriety of the term, however, makes it all the more important to clarify as fully as possible the range of meanings that can legitimately be assigned to it. Essentially, anti-Semitism means either of the following: (1) hostility toward Jews as a group which results from no legitimate cause or greatly exceeds any reasonable, ethical response to genuine provocation; or (2) a pejorative perception of Jewish physical or moral traits which is either utterly groundless or a result of irrational generalization and exaggeration.

These definitions can place an atypical and sometimes unwelcome burden on historians, who must consequently make

ethical judgments a central part of historical analysis. When is a cause legitimate or a provocation genuine? At what point does a generalization become irrational or a response exceedingly unethical? Most anti-Semites have unfortunately made such evaluations very simple, but, as Shaye Cohen indicates in his contribution to this volume, these questions become particularly acute when one deals with anti-Semitism in antiquity.

The earliest references to Jews in the Hellenistic world are positive ones, and the attraction of Judaism for many pagans continued well into the Christian era. When anti-Jewish sentiment arises, it can usually be explained by causative factors of a straightforward sort: Jewish refusal to worship local gods, missionizing, revolutionary activity, dietary separatism, and marital exclusivity. Some of these, at least, can be perceived as “legitimate” grievances, although a number of the pagan reactions so violate the requirements of proportionality that they cross the threshold into anti-Semitism. In any event, we have no reason to believe that we are dealing in this case with a phenomenon that resists ordinary historical explanation. If one were to insist on defining anti-Semitism as a pathology, then its existence in the ancient world has yet to be demonstrated.

As pagan antiquity gives way to the Christian Middle Ages, we confront the first crucial transition in the history of anti-Semitism. Much has been written about the question of continuity and disjunction at this point: Did Christianity, for all its original contributions to the theory of Jew-hatred, essentially continue a pre-existing strand in classical thought and society, or did it create virtually *de novo* a virulent strain that bears but a superficial resemblance to the anti-Semitism of old? Despite the sharpness of the formulation, the alternatives posed in this question are not, in fact, mutually exclusive. It would violate common sense to deny that classical anti-Semitism provided fertile soil for the growth of the medieval variety, and despite the demise of the ancient gods and the waning of Jewish missionizing and rebelliousness, some of the older grievances retained their force.

Nevertheless, if ancient paganism had been replaced by a religion or ideology without an internal anti-Jewish dynamic, it is likely that the anti-Semitism of the classical world would have gradually faded. Instead, it was reinforced. The old, pedestrian causes of anti-Jewish animus were replaced by a new, powerful myth of extraordinary force and vitality.

Medieval Christian theology expresses a profound love-hate relationship with Judaism. Of all religions in the world, only Judaism may be tolerated under the cross, for Jews serve as unwilling, unwitting witnesses of Christian truth. This testimony arises from Jewish authentication of the Hebrew Scriptures, which in turn authenticate Christianity, but it also arises from Jewish suffering, whose severity and duration can be explained only as divine retribution for the sin of the crucifixion. Hence, the same theology that accorded Jews a unique toleration required them to undergo unique persecution.

In the early Middle Ages, it was the tolerant element in this position that predominated. With the great exception of seventh-century Visigothic Spain, persecution of Jews in pre-Crusade Europe was sporadic and desultory; the regions north and west of Italy had no indigenous anti-Semitic tradition, and Christianity had not yet struck deep enough roots in mass psychology to generate the emotional force necessary for the wreaking of vengeance on the agents of the crucifixion. Early medieval Europeans worshipped Jesus, but it is not clear that they loved him enough.

This is not to say that the course of medieval anti-Semitism is to be charted by reference to religious developments alone, although religion is almost surely the crucial guide. The deterioration of Jewish security in the high Middle Ages and beyond corresponds to transformations in economic, political, and intellectual history as well; indeed, the fact that a variety of changes that may well have affected anti-Semitism unfolded in rough synchronism makes it difficult to untangle the causal skeins but at the same time provides a richer and more satisfying explanatory network.

Christian piety widened and deepened, and the spectacular outbreaks of Jew-hatred during the Crusades were surely nourished by pietistic excess. As mercantile and administrative experience spread through an increasingly literate and urbanized Christian bourgeoisie, the economic need for Jews declined precipitously; it is no accident that in the later Middle Ages Jews were welcome primarily in less-developed regions like thirteenth-century Spain and, even later, Bohemia, Austria, and Poland. To make matters worse, the remaining economic activity in which Jews came to be concentrated was a natural spawning-ground for intense hostility: Moneylending may be a necessity, but it does not generate affection. In the political sphere, the high Middle Ages saw the beginnings of a sense of national unity at least in France and England; although this fell short of genuine nationalism in the modern sense, it sharpened the perception of the Jew as the quintessential alien. Finally, despite the centrifugal effects of individual nationalisms, the concept of a monochromatic European Christendom also grew, and with it came heightened intolerance toward any form of deviation.

At a time of growing friction with ordinary Christians, Jews were obliged to look for protection to kings and churchmen. Since riots against Jews violated the law and undermined public order, appeals for royal protection were sometimes heeded. Of equal importance, kings had begun to look upon Jewish holdings—and even upon the Jews themselves—as property of the royal treasury, with the ironic result that protection might well be forthcoming to safeguard the financial interests of the king. Alternatively, however, the process of fiscal exploitation and confiscation could just as easily culminate in outright expulsion.

Appeals to the clergy produced similarly mixed results. The theoretical position of canon law concerning Jewish toleration was no longer a self-evident assumption governing the status of the Jews in a relatively tolerant society; it required constant reaffirmation in a Europe where it had frequently become not only the last line of Jewish defense but also the first. It was for this

reason alone that St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who had little affection for Jews, intervened to save Jewish lives during the second Crusade, and it is symptomatic of the new circumstances that a Jewish chronicler considers it noteworthy that he took no money for this intervention. Moreover, fissures were developing in the theory of toleration itself. The Talmud was investigated in Paris and burned at the behest of the Church; on occasion, even expulsions came to be regarded as not altogether inconsistent with a policy of toleration, since they fell short of the shedding of blood. Only the innate conservatism characteristic of any system of religious law protected the core of the position from concerted attack, so that Jews could continue to hope—ever more wistfully—for the protection of an increasingly hostile Church.

As the Middle Ages drew to a close, a new specter began haunting the Jews of Europe—the specter of demonology. The growing importance of the devil and his minions in late medieval Europe far transcends the Jewish question. Nevertheless, plague, war, and depression created an atmosphere, especially in northern lands, in which the explanation for terror and tragedy was sought in the alliance between the Jewish adversary and the Adversary himself. Jews, it was said, perpetrated ritual murder, consuming the blood—and sometimes the hearts—of their victims; Jews poisoned wells and Jewish doctors poisoned patients; consecrated hosts were stolen, pierced, and beaten; the Jewish stench and other unique illnesses and deformities underscored the alienness and dubious humanity of the lecherous vicars of Satan. It was not only the folk imagination that could depict a Jewish woman who gives birth to swine; fifteenth-century intellectuals from Spain to Bohemia could speak of Jews as the offspring of a liaison between Adam and demons or as the product not of the patriarchs' seed but of their excrement. The vulgar fulminations in the late works of Luther did not arise *ex nihilo*.

The perception of Jews as forces of darkness in the most fearsome and tangible sense was especially conducive to the expulsions and brutalities that mark late medieval Jewish history,

but the belief that Jewish alienness transcends religious differences was important in another context as well. When Jews converted to Christianity singly or in tiny groups, it was relatively easy to accept them unreservedly with the full measure of Christian love. In fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Spain, however, Christians had to deal with the new phenomenon of mass conversion. This, of course, created economic tensions that are not generated by individual conversions, but it must also have produced a psychological dilemma: It is extraordinarily difficult for a society to transform its attitude toward an entire group virtually overnight. There were, it is true, plausible arguments that the religious sincerity of these new Christians left something to be desired; nevertheless, the reluctance to accord them a full welcome into the Christian fold went beyond such considerations. Despite the absence of a prominent demonic motif, the Marranos faced at least an embryonic manifestation of racial anti-Semitism, which served as a refuge for a hostile impulse that could no longer point to palpable distinctions.

This figure of the hated new Christian adumbrates the hated acculturated Jew of later centuries and points the way toward the crucial transition to modern times. Like the passing of pagan antiquity and the emergence of Christian dominance, the waning of the Middle Ages was marked by fundamental ideological change. By the eighteenth century, Christianity began to lose its hold on important elements of the intellectual elite, and once again there seemed to be potential for the eradication or radical weakening of anti-Semitism. The transition of the eighteenth century, however, was far more complex than that of the fourth.

First of all, the old ideology did not disappear. There were areas of Europe, most notably in the east, where the commitment to traditional forms of Christianity retained its full force into the nineteenth century and beyond. Even in the west, large sectors of the early modern population remained immune to the impact of Enlightenment and secularization, so that old-style hostility to Jews could continue to flourish. A second complicating factor is

that this time there are periods and places in which anti-Semitism *did* wane, and analysis of its modern manifestations must balance explanations for persistence against reasons for decline. Finally, the stated reasons for modern Jew-hatred are more varied and mutable than their medieval equivalents. In the Middle Ages, whatever the role of economic and political factors, the religious basis for anti-Semitism was a constant throughout the period, forming a permanent foundation that served as both underlying reason and stated rationale. In the modern era, on the other hand, we are presented with a shifting, dizzying kaleidoscope of often contradictory explanations: The Jews are Rothschilds and paupers, capitalists and communists, nationalists and deracinated cosmopolitans, religious separatists and dangerous free thinkers, evil geniuses and the possessors of superficial, third-rate minds.

We must beware of easy psychological reductionism, which excuses the historian from a careful examination of the complexities of modern anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, this list of grievances against Jews suggests that by the modern period anti-Semitism had reached the level of a deeply rooted pathology. It is precisely because Jews were the only significant minority in medieval Christian Europe that the fear and hatred of the alien became fixed upon them; a fixation that develops over a millennium is not uprooted merely by the slow weakening of its major cause. Hence, the arguments proposed by modern anti-Semites—and by historians who try to understand them—reflect a complex interweaving of reason and rationalization, of genuine cause and shifting, often elusive excuse.

With the passing of Christian dominance, anti-Semitism in the modern West came to be associated with other ideological issues that in large measure replaced Christianity as the focus of European concerns. The first of these was nationalism. At first glance, the egalitarian spirit of the French Revolution appears utterly incompatible with the persistence of Jewish disabilities, and the emancipation of the Jews was, in fact, achieved. But the increasing power of the national state—and its increasing

demands—provided ammunition for a new, exceptionally powerful argument against such emancipation. The eighteenth-century state demanded not only its residents' toil and sweat but also their hearts and souls: full loyalty, total identification, fervent patriotism. Moreover, the breakdown of the old regime's corporate structure required the citizen to engage in an unmediated relationship with the centralized state. Jews, it was said, failed these tests. In descent and behavior, in communal structure and emotional ties, Jews were an alien nation, a state within a state, no more deserving of citizenship than Frenchmen in Germany or Germans in France. Since the nature of the state had changed so much that retention of medieval status was hardly a realistic option, this analysis posed no small threat to Jewish security.

The only viable response, it seemed, was the denial of Jewish nationhood. So Jews denied it—and they denied it sincerely. There is at least faint irony in Jews' declaring that they are not a nation while anti-Semites vigorously affirm that they are, but the gradual spread of Jewish emancipation through much of nineteenth-century Europe awakened feelings of genuine, profound patriotism that led to the defining of Judaism in the narrowest confessional terms. Until late in the century, this sacrifice—which most western Jews considered no sacrifice at all—appeared to have achieved its goal. Barriers crumbled, discrimination eased, redemption-in-exile appeared at hand.

Nevertheless, like so many earlier, more traditional instances of messianic aspirations, this one too was doomed to disappointment. The more Jews behaved like Christians, the stranger it seemed that they would not become Christians, and even in a more secularized age, conversion remained the symbol and *sine qua non* of full entry into Gentile society. On occasion, an act of acculturation and rapprochement would paradoxically lead to increased tensions. Reform Judaism, for example, de-emphasized ritual while stressing ethics, much as liberal Protestantism had elevated ethics and downgraded dogma. However, in the absence of conversion of Reform Jews, this agreement on content led to

an acrimonious dispute over which religion had the legitimate claim to the ethical message preached by both sides, and Christian denigration of Jewish ethics became a theme that bordered on anti-Semitism. In a broader context, even Christian supporters of Jewish emancipation had generally expected it to bring about the gradual disappearance of the Jews, and the failure of most Jews to cooperate left a sense of disquiet and frustration. Additionally, as Todd Endelman stresses in this volume, the resurgence of anti-Semitism in the late nineteenth century was part of a general rebellion against the liberalism and modernity that were responsible for emancipating the Jews.

In a world of acculturated Jews, how was this new anti-Semitism to be expressed? Many of the anti-Semitic political parties pressed economic and religious grievances of a quite traditional sort, but there were difficulties in arguing that the Jews of France and Germany were so different from Christians that they posed a genuine, alien threat. There was, however, a more promising approach—explosive, sinister, closer to the psychic wellsprings of popular anti-Semitism, and immune to the argument that Jews were, after all, “improving.” Racial categories were prominent and universal in nineteenth-century European thought; to some degree, they had been used against Jews from the earliest days of emancipation, and Jews themselves evinced no hesitation in assigning special characteristics—sometimes even physical ones—to the Jewish “race.” For anti-Semites—and it is in this context that the term was coined—the “polluted” racial character of the Jews served, as it had in the Marrano period, as a basis for hating people whose distinctiveness could not readily be discerned. The unacculturated Jew was a visible enemy; the acculturated one—despite caricatures of Jewish physical traits—was insidious, camouflaged, coiled to strike at European society from within. Jewish acculturation was no longer a promise; it was a threat.

It is no accident that the worst manifestation of Jew-hatred in history was built upon this foundation. Nazi anti-Semitism

achieved such virulent, unrestrained consequences precisely because it stripped away the semi-civilized rationales that had been given in the past for persecuting Jews and liberated the deepest psychic impulses that had been partly nurtured but partly suppressed by those rationales. Although the Nazis used the standard political, economic, and sometimes even religious arguments for persecution, their central message was that Jews were alien, demonic creatures, subhuman and superhuman at the same time, who threatened "Aryans" with racial corruption and with profound, almost inexpressible terror. Such feelings were probably a part of the anti-Semitic psyche for centuries, and I have already argued that the deeply rooted fear and hatred of the alien had become fixed upon the Jews; nevertheless, these feelings had not been given free reign. The persecution of political enemies, economic exploiters, and religious deviants must still be governed by a modicum of civilized restraint; although this restraint must have seemed invisible to the victims of the Crusades, it reappears, however dimly, when seen through the prism of the Holocaust. On the other hand, malevolent demons, racial aliens, and malignant vermin can be extirpated with single-minded, ruthless ferocity.*

One of the most significant reactions to the new anti-Semitism was the rise of Jewish nationalism. To many observers—including many Jews—this was an abrogation of the original, unwritten contract granting Jews emancipation; nevertheless, the Zionist movement did not play a major role in the upsurge of European anti-Semitism in the decades before the Holocaust. Its impact on anti-Semitism came in different, quite unexpected ways: in the grafting of western Jew-hatred onto the traditional patterns of discrimination in the Muslim world, and in providing a new outlet and a new camouflage for the anti-Semitic impulse.

*Much of the language in this paragraph is borrowed from my "Jewish-Christian Relations: A Jewish Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 20 (1983): 23.

Pre-modern Jews had flourished and suffered under Islam, but anti-Jewish sentiment rarely reached the heights that it attained in the Christian world. This was partly because Jews were never the only minority in the Muslim orbit, but it was also because Judaism did not play the crucial role in Islam that it did in Christianity. The frequent Christian obsession with Jews was nourished in large measure by resentment toward a parent with whom intimate contact could not be avoided; Islam's relationship with Judaism lacked that intimacy and hence failed to generate the sort of tensions that explode into violence. Persecutions of Jews in the Muslim world should not be minimized, but they are not of the same order of magnitude as anti-Jewish outbreaks in the Christian West.

However persuasive the claim of the Jewish people may be to its ancestral homeland, the failure of Arabs to embrace the Zionist immigrants was hardly unexpected and is not in itself grounds for a charge of anti-Semitism. But offended nationalist sentiments and old-style denigration of Jews combined to make the Arab world receptive to anti-Semitic propaganda ranging from *Mein Kampf* to *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. (The assertion that Arabs, as Semites, cannot be anti-Semitic is, of course, an overliteral and usually disingenuous argument.) Moreover, extreme forms of anti-Zionism outside the Arab world serve as a vehicle for anti-Semitic sentiments that are no longer respectable in their unalloyed, naked form. Here again there are genuine problems of definition, but "anti-Zionist" literature in the Soviet Union and the widespread application to Israel of an egregious double standard make it difficult to deny that anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism are not infrequently synonymous. The positions of the emancipation period have been reversed: Jews now lay claim to a nationhood that their enemies deny.

Anti-Semitism is no longer an acknowledged pillar of western thought and society. The distinguished medievalist R. W. Southern, in evaluating the normalcy or eccentricity of a major

medieval churchman, correctly classified his “deep hostility toward the Jews” among the arguments for normalcy; had the subject of his evaluation been a contemporary western figure, such a classification would have been more than dubious. Despite the unspeakable agonies of twentieth-century European Jewry, anti-Semitism has not been wholly intractable.

At the same time, the nineteenth-century mixture of hope and expectation that Jew-hatred would fade away has proved to be a fantasy, and few indeed continue to indulge such dreams—surely not the Jew at a recent conference who confided his fears of the aftermath of nuclear war. He does not fear radiation, or climatic change, or wounds crying vainly for treatment; he worries instead that the war will be blamed on Einstein, Oppenheimer, and Teller.

Macabre Jewish humor, no doubt, or simple paranoia.

And yet . . .

History *and* Hate

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