

The Antisemitic Imagination

Catherine Chatterley*

The scholarly study of antisemitism has been a small, specialized enterprise overshadowed and absorbed by the larger field of Holocaust Studies. In fact, many of the classic studies of antisemitism were precipitated by the rise of Hitler and can be seen as attempts to explain the Nazi culmination of this millennial hatred. Scholars such as James Parkes (writing from 1930), Cecil Roth (1938), Joshua Trachtenberg (1943), and Leon Poliakov (1955) were engaged in an investigative process of trying to comprehend how six million Jews could be annihilated in the very heartland of modern civilization. Historically, the field has interpreted antisemitism as a Western phenomenon, a product of Christendom, although one influenced by ancient anti-Jewish attitudes expressed largely by writers of the Roman Empire in the period between Nero and Hadrian (54-138 CE). With our focus shifting today to so-called “new” forms of antisemitism, especially to that of the Islamic world, it is important to re-examine our assumptions and clarify, once again, our definition of this phenomenon.

Jewish tradition explains antisemitism as natural to the structure of human existence. Quite simply, *Esau hates Jacob*. This primal hatred of the Jews exists in all places and in all times, independent of culture or religion or socio-economic circumstances. The rabbis did not contextualize antisemitism, it was not understood as a cause and effect phenomenon, but existed as an eternal aspect of existence bound up with the destiny of the Jewish People. This traditional rabbinic understanding of antisemitism rests upon a conception of Gentiles as an undifferentiated mass, whose inner core—or Esau-ness—remains consistent across time and space despite historical and cultural differences. It is also true that this conflict was perceived as a case of *mutual* hostility, rivalry, and competition rather than a simple one-sided assault against Israel. While there is much to be learned from this traditional reading of antisemitism, and one can certainly understand the perspective of the rabbis given the persistent and irrational nature of Jew-hatred, this kind of ahistorical interpretation is fundamentally inadequate.

Antisemitism is not a seven-headed hydra, popping up in different places at different times, as some kind of constant presence in human history. One of humanity’s most culturally specific and historically determined phenomena, antisemitism is the product of the rancorous separation between Judaism and the Jesus Movement of the first century. During the following four hundred years, Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity were finally and irrevocably divorced with the Church in control of the state and its legal code as the

* Director, Canadian Institute for the Study of Antisemitism (CISA). This paper is extracted from the introduction to an historical study to be titled *The History of the Antisemitic Imagination*.

new imperial religion. In this period, we know that the Church worked relentlessly to purify itself by rooting out “judaizers” — those individuals still sympathetic to Judaism — and to separate Christians and Jews to prevent them from celebrating holidays, and observing Shabbat, together. The Church’s *Theology of Separation* was seen as necessary to establish its authority over society and became the basis for European legislation regulating Jewish existence under Christendom for centuries. Natural and inevitable, the separation between Jews and Christians was not. Retrospectively, we know that the triumphant and controlling position of Christianity in the empire and eventually throughout Europe led to the systematic exclusion of Jews, as a collectivity, from mainstream Christian society, to their deep and abiding marginalization, eventual demonization, and to their peculiar positioning in Western societies as middlemen associated with the despised money occupations. What we see in the history of antisemitism is a compounding of stigmatization and hatred, which over time results in the production of a composite character that combines extremely negative characteristics associated with, and resulting from, a variety of European anti-Jewish religious and economic accusations.

By approximately 1000 CE, the continent of Europe was Christianized, albeit unevenly and idiosyncratically in many places. The period of the High Middle Ages (1000-1300 CE) was in fact the actual laboratory that created what we know as the *antisemitic imagination*, and it was during these specific centuries that antisemitism first became a popular mass phenomenon. This vivid, image-obsessed imagination was Catholic and was fed not just visually but also aurally. It had a character at its center that appeared to have the power and determination to control the world, to influence events, and to wreak utter havoc in society. That character, that figment of the European Christian imagination, is “the jew.” He is the tormentor and killer of Christ — the Savior of universal humanity, according to Christian theology — who continues until the end of time to work against the Church and its Gospel; he is the ritual murderer and host desecrator who compulsively re-enacts the crucifixion with these homicidal anti-Christian Jewish rituals; the well-poisoner and the magician, both of whom are in league with Satan against Christian society; and of course the usurer who recalled Judas Iscariot, the tax collector and archetypal traitor of the Gospels. It is this character of “the jew” that populates the antisemitic imagination; it is by the appearance of this character that we know we are in the presence of *antisemitism* and not some form of xenophobia or hostility, be they the product of culture, politics, or even personal conflict.

It is important that we acknowledge the paradox at work in the history of antisemitism. The phenomenon itself is *not* transhistorical. It is first created, and determined, by the history of Christianity and its relationship to the Jewish people, and continues to evolve in correspondence with the historical development of specific cultural and economic relationships unique to different regions of Europe. At the same time, however, the *basic characteristics of the caricature* that this history produces and releases into the world from the 12th century on are remarkably consistent across time and place. Regardless of European region, denomination, language, or nationality, the characteristics of “the jew” are consistent. In other words, *we see shifts in the articulation of perception over time in different contexts but not in the basic perception itself*.¹ This continues to be the case today with contemporary forms of antisemitism.

¹ S. Katz and S. Gilman (eds.), *Anti-Semitism in Times of Crisis* (New York: NYU Press 1991) p. 5.

So, while it is true that antisemitism is not a naturally occurring human phenomenon, the worldwide diffusion of Christianity and Western culture through European imperialism brought with it, implicitly, the character of “the jew” and therefore also introduced antisemitism to the world. Nothing else can explain the presence of this character—and the hatred for it—among indigenous peoples on several continents, sub-Saharan Africans, and the Japanese, or account for its absence in parts of the world unaffected by European imperialism or where European missionary efforts failed to have any significant effect like China and India.

Antisemitism is carried inside Western culture in the most complex ways because “the jew” is sewn into the fabric of the Christian imagination. It is crucial that we remember that until the last quarter of the 20th century, the West was a Christian civilization, and however secularized and multicultural Western societies are today, they remain saturated with Christian symbol, metaphor, and imagery. One might argue that one aspect of Christianity that has been retained after the Holocaust, despite the waning of religious belief and practice in Western societies, is a deep ambivalence and unease about the Jewish people and one’s relationship to them. Although we cannot quantify these attitudes, we know there is still suspicion, resentment, contempt, and ongoing hatred for Jews in parts of the population.

The central story of Western civilization is Christ’s Passion—understood until perhaps a generation ago as his suffering and death at the hands of the Jews or at the hands of Rome at the conspiratorial manipulation of the Jews—which is clearly accepted as fact in the four Gospels of the New Testament. For centuries, every generation of Europeans met the Jewish People through this story—through their extremely negative depiction in this text. If Europeans knew no Jews personally (and one has to realize that this *is* the reality for the vast majority of people then and now, regardless of location, due to the reality of human demography) this is the only exposure they were given to the Jewish people. In other words, “the jew” of the New Testament becomes the real existing Jew, with no accompanying awareness that this character is a creation of the Christian imagination. Over centuries of telling and retelling in Europe, the Gospels create a character who is a composite of several extremely negative figures (Caiaphas, Judas, the crowd—particularly as represented in the Book of Matthew) who retain their Jewish identity and therefore actually come to define Jewishness for Christians, while Jesus, his disciples, the Holy Family, Simon, and Veronica are freed of their Jewishness and are perceived as Christians instead. You have generations of Christians who do not know, because they are never taught, that Jesus, his mother, and the disciples are Jewish, or for that matter that his beautiful and humane teachings emanate from Judaism. Rather, the Gospels depict “the jew” as conspiratorial; vengeful; hateful; unrelentingly cruel and unforgiving; arrogant; blind to the truth; corrupted, especially by money; treasonous; criminal; and, at bottom, evil. Every one of these characteristics is recognized as fundamentally antithetical to good Christian behavior; instead, these dark qualities come to define the one tiny group in Europe that remains conspicuously outside the universal religion of humanity. This dialectical relationship between Christians and Jews, rooted in theology and characterized by a psychological splitting between good and evil, is one of the pivots of Western history and is actually the central dynamic at work in Christian identity formation. In other words, Christians are conditioned over millennia to define themselves against, and in specific opposition to, “the Jew.” To be Christian, then, is to *not be Jewish*.

The history of antisemitism is a process of *reconfiguration*, the basic template of which is Christian. The characteristics of “the jew,” of this figment created by Christianity, remain consistent despite their secularization in the West during the 18th and 19th centuries, their Islamization from the middle of the 20th century, and their globalization via the Internet and satellite television since 2001. Ironically, these later reconfigurations of Christian antisemitism have their own bible of sorts: *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion*. Today, again, we have a world that meets the Jewish people through a libelous text, sold around the world in a record number of editions, promoted by certain governments and religious leaders, educators, and academics as an “historical text.” The book is again used today to explain the workings of international economics and politics and now also the ongoing war between Israel and the Palestinians, very much like it was used by Hitler to explain the supposed war between Germany and “the jews” and to illustrate “Jewish machinations” across the planet. This Czarist forgery *reinforces* all the same New Testament characteristics of “the jew” — he is conspiratorial, cruel, powerful, hateful, dishonest, immoral, selfish, arrogant, and most significantly — he is a victimizer — once again *engaged in his own particularistic assault on universal humanity*. In the antisemitic imagination, now as in the past, “the jew” is a nihilistic creature, obsessed only with himself, whose selfish Jewish interests make him an enemy of humanity and of any universal religion or movement for the broader interests of the world’s peoples. This is the classic and consistent dynamic of antisemitism, which is in essence a hatred of Jewish particularity. Historically, Jewish religion and nationalism have both been perceived as dangerously exclusive and hopelessly particularistic, and therefore hostile to humanity. One can see how any movement that sees itself as universal — be it Christianity, Islam, Marxism, or the contemporary international campaign for Human Rights — will have difficulty (to say the least) with Judaism and Zionism as they are (mis)understood by most people.

Whether in the West or the Middle East, be it termed old or new, classic or contemporary, we are dealing with a vicious, dehumanizing, and libelous phenomenon. Post-Christian forms of antisemitism all have at their core a caricature that far too many people believe corresponds to actually existing Jews. We take the word caricature from the Italian verb *caricare*, which means to exaggerate, but also *tellingly* to attack and to rouse. One of the truly frightening and dangerous aspects of antisemitism remains the provocative and threatening nature of the character at its centre — “the jew.” This character, by his very nature, provokes resistance in the form of attack from those who believe he exists. The violence, be it physical or rhetorical, that one perpetrates against “the jew” is always justified because it is conceived by its very nature as a protective act of self-defense. All antisemites, regardless of time and place, see themselves as *victims* of “the jew.”

In general, the world remains ignorant about the religion of Judaism, the modern political movement of Zionism, and the trajectory of Jewish history, and this is part of the problem. If the only information people have about Jews is based upon the caricature produced by the antisemitic imagination then Jews will continue to face real hostility and aggression in the world. One thinks of Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s admission that she thought Jews were demons, as her grandmother had taught her and her siblings in Somalia, until a friend in Amsterdam told her they were sitting in a Jewish neighborhood and she realized that Jews were actually human beings. This, of course, is precisely why the brutal antisemitic lies about Jews peddled by the media today throughout the Islamic

world are so dangerous. These lies have a direct impact on the hearts and minds of their audience—particularly children—just as they did, again, for 12 years under Hitler. Much of the content we see in Middle Eastern media is indistinguishable from Nazi propaganda, except that today's sophisticated technology is that much more manipulative. Ignoring this reality, as so many critics of Israel in the West do, is not only fundamentally irresponsible but also irrational. In a post-Holocaust world, we know where these libelous ideas about Jews can lead. Given this ongoing failure of comprehension, one must reasonably conclude that despite the Holocaust, the West has learned nothing about the nature of antisemitism and our responsibility for it.

I would like to conclude by discussing the possible reasons for the persistent appeal of this character, especially outside its original theological context. One thing we can say with certainty now is that antisemitism is no longer strictly a Western phenomenon. It no longer requires Christian theology or culture, however secularized, to function or to resonate with the masses. This is a new development for the study of the history of antisemitism and it is worrying. As ugly as Christian antisemitism is, we could at least take comfort in the fact that it only made sense in a Christian, or post-Christian, context and could therefore be contained.

Antisemitism, unfortunately, is not only a function of religious theology or of culture, but is a phenomenon that taps into our nature as human beings. As a species, we have a general reluctance to examine ourselves critically and to admit our own faults, limitations, and mistakes. We have great difficulty taking responsibility for our own negative circumstances, our own suffering, and for our own role in, at least, partially creating these conditions. It is far easier and soothing to the ego to conceive of oneself *solely* as a victim, as someone who has been mistreated and exploited, through no fault of one's own. This operates on an individual basis but also collectively, and the dynamic increasingly affects all forms of contemporary political culture. In an increasingly complex global economic environment, in an ever-changing bewildering world, it is simply convenient—and therefore appealing—to blame a very well established and precedential "Jewish Conspiracy" for the fate of the world and for one's misfortune however conceived. This is far easier than engaging in the hard work of investigating the complex social, political, economic, and historical relationships that surround us, and that we ourselves influence.

Nietzsche had a name for this process, where human beings attach blame for their own failures and frustrations onto others: *ressentiment*. While this dynamic has always helped fuel antisemitism, it seems to be ever more central to contemporary reconfigurations of the phenomenon.