Chapter 5: 
Antisemitism from a Judeocentric Perspective 

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Although it might seem that our mimetic nature makes identity a dubious concept, each individual’s and nation’s desires being mediated by others, defining identity in this manner eliminates from one’s anthropological model humanity’s most essential trait, which is that of historical singularity. Regardless of where or around what humanity emerged, the first sign designated some specific thing, and every subsequent human event is only such because it leaves traces of its specificity. Thus one might explain why there should be a scapegoat nation and even what some of its characteristics might be, but, in order to explain just why it is the Jews, one must invoke the historical particularity that is the touchstone of all human universals and therefore of all authentic anthropology.

This criterion is not always fulfilled. There is a line of thought that focuses on the scapegoating behavior and refuses to pinpoint any particular Jewish traits that might provoke it, claiming that antisemitism is a problem for the antisemite, not for the Jew. At the radical limit of this position we find Sartre’s Réflexions sur la question juive, where “the Jew” is defined simply as someone others see as a Jew. At the other pole is thought so impregnated with Jewish identity that it views antisemitism as not merely evil but fundamentally unmotivated. Cynthia Ozick, in an eloquent article pointed out to me by Sandy Goodhart, “The Modern ‘Hep! Hep! Hep!’” (Ozick 2004), tells an old joke:

– The Jews and the bicyclists are at the bottom of all the world’s ills. 
– Why the bicyclists? 
– Why the Jews?
... Ah, but it is never the bicyclists, and it is always the Jews. There are innumerable social, economic, and political speculations as to cause: scapegoatism; envy; exclusionary practices; the temptation of a demographic majority to subjugate a demographic minority; the attempt by corrupt rulers to deflect attention from the failings of their tyrannical regimes; and more. But any of these can burst out in any society against any people—so why always the Jews? A metaphysical explanation is proffered: the forceful popular resistance to what Jewish civilization represents—the standard of ethical monotheism and its demands on personal and social conscience. Or else it is proposed, in Freudian terms, that Christianity and Islam, each in its turn, sought to undo the parent religion, which was seen as an authoritative rival it was needful to surpass and displace.

And a couple of paragraphs later, she notes, “But if one cannot account for the tenacity of antisemitism, one can readily identify it.” Ultimately Ozick rejoins Sartre; in either case, the specificity of the Jew is unrelated to the hatred he inspires.

For us, in contrast, antisemitism can be understood in very simple terms. The defining singularity of the Jews is their invention/discovery of monotheism. The one God is not a “Jewish God,” but once the world has been apprised of his existence, no unique deity can be revealed without reference to his original revelation to the Jews. This is the original source of the anti-Jewish resentment we call antisemitism.

In “What Kind of Religion is Islam?” in the May 2004 issue of Commentary, the distinguished French historian Alain Besançon offers an illuminating description of the difference between Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Besançon has a thorough knowledge of the three religions, but his discussion is wholly based on their respective theologies and neither order of appearance nor social context figures substantively in his exposition. To my mind, such a discussion cannot lead to an explanation of antisemitism, nor can it even explain the differences among the theologies it compares. Why does Christianity have a “New Testament” whereas Islam has an “uncreated Koran”? Because after the New Testament, a “newer” testament would hardly do. The Book of Mormon is such a “newer testament,” but Mormons are Christians, and Mohammed certainly did not want to create a new Christian sect. The only thing that trumps historical supersession is eternal uncreatedness. Mind you, this does not mean that Islam is somehow less valid than Judaism or Christianity; perhaps the notion of a historical covenant, by the very fact that it is subject to supersession, is not the definitive way to establish the relationship between God and humanity. Relative validity is measurable only by historical success; meanwhile, the resentment engendered by historical priority is the point of departure for each new revelation, successful or not. This resentment alone can account for the phenomenon of antisemitism. If Christianity and Islam are so