CHAPTER TEN

MUSLIM ANTI-SEMITISM: THE VIEW FROM PRISON

One of the many accusations behind the obsessive fear of Islam in France today is the idea that this religion constitutes the principal vector of the present-day return of anti-Semitism. Usually, the thesis is stated baldly, maligning in the same breath religious affiliation, sympathy for the Palestinian cause and the North African or Arab origin of the populations of immigrant descent. But what is the reality? What place does anti-Semitism occupy in the specific experience of Muslims in France?

For a clear view of this, a good post of observation is essential. Researchers often find that places of worship make excellent observatories. It is true that anti-Jewish remarks can be heard there, for example in some sermons, and that cassettes or anti-Semitic documents are sometimes in circulation there, links which ensure the ‘global’ distribution of the worldwide discourse of hatred.1 But these places are often under police surveillance and speech is to some extent controlled. Furthermore, while the ‘fieldwork’ carried out in Roubaix did begin to put us in touch with a number of Muslims, it did not allow us to deal systematically with their perception and their images of Jews. Now, it happens that in French prisons there are a considerable number of Muslim detainees, most of whom come from working-class areas. For this reason, our research team headed for the prisons, benefiting from the survey carried out by one of the researchers in our team,

1 Thus, for example, L’Humanité (17 January 2004) and Le Figaro (28 October 2004) gave an account of a cassette entitled “La Palestine, histoire d’une injustice”, distributed by the publishing house, Tawhid, in which Hassan Iquioussen, a preacher from the Union des organisations islamiques de France (UOIF), President of its youth organisation, described the Jews as ‘ungrateful’, ‘miserly and usurers’, and explained: “The Zionists connived with Hitler. The Jews in Germany and France had to be encouraged…to leave Europe for Palestine. To force them, they had to be hurt.” Hassan Iquioussen said that he regretted these remarks made two years earlier and the distributors of the cassette stated that they had withdrawn it from sale several months previously.
Farhad Khosrokhavar, who here draws lessons specifically on anti-Semitism from long interviews which he carried out with Muslim detainees.

A Varied Anti-Semitism

There is not one type of anti-Semitism alone amongst Muslims, and a good number of them could not be described as anti-Semitic: this is the first lesson to be learnt from the interviews carried out with several dozens of them in prison. Some of the detainees felt envious and resentful towards the Jews, which could be considered a form of anti-Semitism sui generis. Unlike Christian anti-Judaism, it is not a question of stigmatising the ‘deicidal people’ and unlike Nazism, it is not a question of the inferiority of the ‘Jewish race’. It involves firstly a combination of a traditional attitude of ‘impurity’ felt in respect of all non-Muslims, Christians and Jews alike (they are both said to be najiss), and of an image which only applies to the Jews today: the vision of a mythical Jewish community thriving in France and in the world, whereas ‘Muslims’ fail in the country of Voltaire, as they do elsewhere. There is also the conviction, expressed with increasing frequency, that the West is on the side of the Jews, even if France, unlike the United States, does not have a pronounced pro-Israel policy.

The Muslim detainees—who may constitute as much as 75% of the population of a penal institution—make a vague link between two types of perception, some of which are internal to French society and others which are external to it. There is said to be a united Jewish community in the world, over and beyond national borders, in direct and close liaison with Israel; there is hardly any difference between a French Jew and an Israeli Jew, as regards the Palestinians, whose situation is said to be determined by the alliance between the United States and Israel. The Jews of the whole world are therefore thought to contribute to the oppression of the Palestinians. A comparison rapidly extends this vision: the Jews in Israel behave towards the Palestinians as the ‘French’ in France do towards the ‘North Africans’ (the French of North African descent). In the atmosphere of racism and disaffiliation which characterises them, the ‘Arabs’ are therefore thought to be doubly mistreated.

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