



# Antisemitism: An Enduring Problem in Western Society

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**The many mythological layers of Jew-hatred -- 'the oldest hatred of the world.'**

## Antisemitism:

An Enduring Problem in Western Society

by Alan Davies

In 1985, Canada witnessed the trials (under different sections of the criminal code) of two resident antisemites, Ernst Zündel in Toronto, Ontario, and James Keegstra in Red Deer, Alberta. Some years later, in Moncton, New Brunswick, another vocal antisemite, Malcolm Ross, was removed from his teaching position in the local public school system, following a board of inquiry investigation. In my own university, a psychotic professor of Celtic Studies (now deceased) was suspended because of his antisemitic writings and aberrant behaviour. Obviously, antisemitism, although not rampant in Canadian society, is not dead either, despite all the lessons of history and despite the horrendous events of the 20th century. Canada, in fact, spawned antisemites in earlier eras, notably the Quebec fascist Adrien Arcand during the 1930s, and, perhaps surprisingly, the famous figure of Goldwin Smith, once the idol of the Toronto intelligentsia and the mentor of the young William Lyon Mackenzie King at the turn of the century. Our history in this regard is not as pure as most Canadians are inclined to believe. Moreover, both Anglo and French Canada have long contained nativist strains that, when the social fabric is torn by economic and political gales, soon show their dangerous side. The exclusion of Jewish refugees during the Nazi era was only one example of what even democratic nations are capable of when they feel threatened.

After World War II, there was a great revulsion in Western society against Nazi-style antisemitism, but, as the French writer Pierre Paraf has remarked, the power and complexity of the ideology of race, the dominant modern form of antisemitism, "does not allow us to hope that it was totally effaced, even in the most crushing of defeats". In such men as Zündel, Keegstra and Ross, the melody lingers on. If it lingers on in Canada, a country in which, in spite of the examples I have mentioned, antisemitism has been more the exception than the rule, it certainly lingers in countries in which it has been the rule rather than the exception, although usually beneath the surface and usually intermingled with other discordant "isms." Few would dispute this claim; there is too much evidence to support it. Synagogues still have swastikas painted on them, Jewish cemeteries are still desecrated, Jewish communities are still victimized by terrorist attacks (not only in Israel), a new generation of antisemites dedicated to Holocaust denial has arisen, and they are on the Internet.

The disputes arise when we seek to understand why what has been called the world's oldest hatred continues to endure in the twilight of the 20th century, indeed, to replant itself in the soil of a changing civilization, a civilization far more cosmopolitan than it was 50 years ago. I wish to reflect on this strange fact. One reason, I believe, has to do with the peculiar nature of antisemitism, which, contrary to popular belief, is not a prejudice or species of prejudice, but a complex negative myth that took a long time to evolve in the history of the West. As soon as one uses the word "myth," one places the subject in a new dimension. A myth is a story, sometimes a fable, either good or bad, about the great questions of human existence. Hence myths have cosmic implications; they are about life, yet are larger than life; they deal with good and evil, especially the origins of evil, and this makes them a source of perennial fascination. I have been reading recently Elaine Pagels' new book *The Origin of Satan*, which is really a study of the rise of the idea of cosmic evil in ancient sectarian Judaism and early Christianity, remembering that Christianity was one of the "Judaisms" of antiquity. The sectarians demonized their enemies and bestowed on them cosmic motivations. "Your father is the devil and you choose to carry out your father's desires" declares the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel to the "Jews" of the Fourth Gospel, whoever they are. This is a mythic definition of the Jews, and it is not without reason that John has sometimes been called the "father of antisemitism." Whether this is a fair assessment of John is a question that I will leave aside for the moment. The point is that antisemitism - real antisemitism - begins as soon as the mythic dimension raises its head, and the history of antisemitism is the history of the mythologization of the Jews.

Myths, of course, need not be religious; they can also be secular, even scientific. The great race myth of the white Europeans, the Aryan myth, a construct of the 19th century, was both a historical and a scientific myth, and all the more dangerous for that reason. The very term "antisemitism", which was coined in Germany during the 2nd German Reich, was chosen because it had a scientific ring, and the language of science in the modern age is the language of truth. As the great German Protestant theologian Paul Tillich once said, myth in the modern age is believable "only in scientific guise."<sup>1</sup> Only a few generations ago, the doctrines of race were accepted as good science, allowing the antisemites of our day to demonize the Jews far more effectively and with far more horrendous results than the antisemites of past ages. "I am an antisemite" means literally "I am against the semites." I am against the semites not merely because they are inferior but also because they are evil. So, as Jean-Paul Sartre observed long ago,<sup>2</sup> the Jew conjured up in the imagination of the antisemite is a cosmic figure, and it is this cosmic element in antisemitism that explains its perennial appeal and allows the oldest hatred to renew itself and dress itself continually in new garb. Myths are not easily destroyed. They have a way of coming back in new forms. We are both creatures of myth and myth-making creatures, and the question is not whether we will live with or without myths, but whether we will live with good myths or bad myths. Antisemitism is based on a bad myth that we have lived with too long already, but its mythic foundations help to explain its strange persistence in the post-Holocaust world.

Another reason for the durability of antisemitism, not unrelated to the first, has to do with its many-layered character. Technically, antisemitism is a product of modernity because it presupposes modern racial science; in fact, it is like a great snowball that has been rolled from antiquity to the present day. The snowball has its beginnings in the pre-Christian Hellenistic world. Ancient Egyptian xenophobia, rekindled by the Roman conquest of the Greek kingdoms of the eastern Mediterranean, started the trouble. The new rulers showed some favouritism toward the local Jewish population in Alexandria, causing resentment on the part of the local Greeks, which in turn churned the waves of violence and bred a line of literary Jew-haters. The names of Posidonius, Apollonius Molon and Apion (a contemporary of Jesus) are associated with the new genre. The Jews, according to Apion, whom we know through Josephus, the Jewish historian of antiquity, kidnapped hapless Greeks, fattened them secretly in their temple in Jerusalem, and sacrificed them while swearing an oath over their entrails of perpetual enmity with the rest of the human race. Apion also accused the Jews of atheism, sedition, parasitism and the worship of gold. These charges infected the Roman upper classes, colouring Latin poetry and prose with anti-Judaism

before and after the birth of Christianity. Later, when the church baptized the Graeco-Roman world after the 4th century, it also baptized pagan animosity, creating a permanent deposit in the subterranean memory of the West. That was the first layer. Jews were perceived as haters of humanity.

Because Christianity was a strain of Judaism that emerged prior to the disastrous war with Rome (66-70 CE), the New Testament, which is largely a collection of Jewish writings, contains the marks of intra-Jewish religious conflict both before and after, but especially after the Roman war. For example, the Matthaean image of the Pharisees as legalistic, hypocritical, thieving, impious, fanatical and murderous (Matt. 23) - an image much exploited by later antisemites - obviously reflects the angry state of Jewish-Christian relations in the post-war era when the Pharisees (the apparent ancestors of rabbinic Judaism) and the (Jewish) Christians confronted each other following the national disaster. Similarly, the Johannine image of the Jews as the children of the devil (John 8:44f) - also much exploited by later antisemites - reflects the final stage in the deterioration of these relations, as well as the rivalries of the diaspora and a nasty local situation in Ephesus, the probable site of the gospel. However, the anti-Judaism of the New Testament is still, for the most part (Luke-Acts is the important exception), a Jewish anti-Judaism, i.e., a sectarian rhetoric rooted in the polemical battles of antiquity, and in the identity-crisis of the apostolic church.

Unfortunately, the residue of these battles became the foundation of what historians call the *Adversus Judaeos* tradition of the post-New Testament church: Christian theological anti-Judaism. It was the second layer of the snowball. When ex-pagans rather than Jews began to write Christian theology, they changed the intra-Jewish argument into a gentile-Jewish one. This was not a change for the better. The ethnocentric pride of the gentiles, infused into the new religion, had an alienating effect: what Jules Isaac called a teaching of contempt developed, the result of which was the famous image of the deicidal, carnal and accursed Jew, so familiar in Western folklore. Each subsequent age added more layers. I cannot review the history of antisemitism in a single lecture, but I will summarize some of its highlights.

During the Middle Ages, a burgeoning commercial economy forced the Jews into unpopular roles - huckster, middleman and money-lender. Already perceived as Cain, the murderer, the Jew, in the minds of insolvent Christians, also became Judas, the traitor who sold Christ for 30 pieces of silver: a dangerous fusion of religious and economic symbols. Recruitment campaigns for the crusades stirred religious fanaticism and slaughter in Christendom, although the popes did what they could to stem the violence. Discriminatory legislation followed the 4th Lateran Council (1215), including the yellow badge (adapted, incidentally, from the Muslim world). The Talmud was attacked, and, on one occasion, actually burned in Paris (1242), beginning a new tradition. Jewish converts often instigated these attacks, seeking to eradicate their former religion by destroying its sacred texts, which, in their eyes, prevented Jews from turning to Christ. To this day, anti-Talmudism remains a persistent motif in the literature of antisemitism - read the transcripts to the various Keegstra trials! The strange charges of ritual murder and host desecration arose in northern Europe: the deicidal Jews, not content with having tortured and crucified Christ once, torture and crucify him again and again in the form of a Christian child or the sacred wafer. When the disasters of plague and famine swept the 14th century, the Jews found themselves vilified as well-poisoners and sorcerers, as well as conspirators against Christendom in league with the devil. The devil was a Christian addition, but the conspiracy charge had pre-Christian roots.

Humanistic strains in the 17th century - the "prelude to the Enlightenment" - modified traditional Christian images to some extent, and the great Protestant artist Rembrandt employed young Jews from the Amsterdam ghetto as models for his drawings of Jesus. Despite these hopeful trends, the end of the century saw the publication of one of the classics of modern antisemitism, Johann Eisenmenger's *Entdecktes Judentum* (Judaism Unmasked),<sup>3</sup> a savage parody of rabbinic ideas much exploited by later antisemites. Paradoxically, the Age of Reason, that second renaissance of European culture, not only did not abolish Jew hatred, but, through its glorification of pagan

antiquity, actually managed to revive it. To see the Jews through pagan eyes was to see them as haters of humanity and a people innately flawed. The ex-Christian philosophers of the Enlightenment despised Christianity partly because of its Jewish connections. They saw the Christian as only a corrupted pagan, but they saw the Jew as beyond redemption: in their eyes, Jewish nature and Jewish religion were one and the same. Obviously, a more sinister form of anti-Judaism was incubating. Racial fires had been stoked since the dawn of the modern era, partly as a result of the great Age of Discovery and the European encounter with large numbers of non-Europeans. The birth of the life sciences and the Enlightenment passion for the classification of data led to radical new theories about human origins and human nature. It required the 19th century, however, to turn these theories into a full-blown ideology of race, or the conviction that race explains everything. This is the proper sense of the word "racism," and the newly invented term "antisemitism" assumed this principle.

On the strength of these ideas, anti-Jewish demagogues, obsessed with Jewish emancipation in post-feudal Europe, lashed out at Christendom's traditional enemies. Intermingling religious and racial images, they tried to force the Jews back into the ghetto. They also tried to turn back the hands of the clock by associating Judaism with everything else they disliked about the modern age, for example, capitalism and political democracy. In Germany, the great composer Richard Wagner wove nationalistic and racial themes into his operas, while prophesizing the birth of a new order and a new Siegfried-type of German "Prometheus." Modern music, he believed, was a "corpse devoured by (Jewish) worms".<sup>4</sup> The voices of the left were fully as virulent as the voices of the right. Following the example of Karl Marx, they railed against Semitic capitalism in the name of Aryan socialism. The Jews became convenient symbols of a world disoriented by economic, social and political upheavals of every description. They were blamed for everything. Layer upon layer was added to the snowball. This capacity to add new twists to an old theme is an important reason for the strange durability of antisemitism.

Today, after the Holocaust, a brand new layer has been added, that of Holocaust denial. A new generation of antisemites, building on anstrata, has sought to rehabilitate Nazi Germany by denying the best attested crime of modern history. No effort has been spared by the post-Auschwitz antisemites to deconstruct and reconstruct the past 60 years, and their fanatical labours continue. At the moment, in Canada, according to a recently issued report on world antisemitism,<sup>5</sup> antisemitic activity is only marginal, appearing mostly on the social fringe. Canadian antisemitism, however, has not disappeared; it remains below the surface, ready to reappear if a major crisis should supply the occasion. The fires of nationalism currently burning in Quebec probably represent the greatest danger, but the elastic quality of antisemitism and its capacity to attach itself to any public discontent should never be underestimated. In other countries, the situation varies, but even in countries with relatively clean records a hard-core element remains. Certain warning signs are constant, for example, a tendency to minimize the Holocaust rather than deny it outright (a particular danger in contemporary German historiography); the legitimization of exclusivist forms of nationalism (ultimately, in fact, all nationalism has an exclusivist quality - for this reason, I have never liked to call myself a Canadian nationalist); the general coarsening of public discourse in much of Western society; the strange revival in places of racial and quasi-racial language, sometimes direct, sometimes indirect (certain so-called anti-racist groups seem contaminated with racism themselves); the legitimization of violence on the part of anti-racist vigilantes and other ideologues. A puerile example of this tendency occurred on the Queen's University campus in 1994 when the anti-racist editor of a student paper suggested that whites should be savaged with insults, profanity and even demands for their death because only in this way can racial minorities lay effective siege to the bastions of racial privilege and power in a white-dominated society<sup>6</sup>. One sociology professor evidently supported this position, saying that violent language attracts attention and is therefore beneficial; moreover, she added, excluded and subordinated groups have rights that dominant groups lack!

In my opinion, this is a dangerous thesis, not only because of its obvious self-righteousness.

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Violent language begets violence, and thus undermines the basic foundations of social tolerance in a democratic nation. This is part of what is meant by the coarsening of public discourse. It is not only not the way to defeat racism, it is the way to promote racism in a new key. And such coarsening is definitely the way to stoke the embers of any incipient antisemitism that may still be smouldering in the social undergrowth. The means we choose in order to combat social evils such as racism and antisemitism require as much attention as the evils themselves. If we are not careful, we may fall into booby-traps of our own making.

1. The Socialist Decision
2. Anti-Semite and Jew
3. 1700
4. Judaism and Musik
5. Antisemitism; World Report 1996
6. Toronto Globe and Mail (March 11, 1994)

\* Address given at the Christian-Jewish Dialogue,

Beth Tzedec Synagogue, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

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