Antisemitism

The Longest Hatred

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Within the Church, which sought to approach God through ceremonial law, had to be uprooted and the Jews themselves expelled so that they no longer contaminate Christians with their blaspheming heresies. No wonder that many Jews, who had originally welcomed Luther’s Reform as heralding a new era, came to see in the German monk a modern Haman, seeking to annihilate them by harsh measures and forced conversions.28

The German Reformation, under Luther’s guidance, therefore led in a very unfavourable direction for Jews, when compared with parallel developments in English, Dutch or Swiss Protestantism.29 The seed of hatred sown by Luther would reach its horrible climax in the Third Reich, when German Protestants showed themselves to be particularly receptive to Nazi antisemitism.30

Modern Secular Anti-Judaism

With the decline of religious faith in post-medieval European society the traditional theological hostility towards the ‘deicide’ people became less relevant, especially to intellectuals who identified with the sceptical temper of the Age of Enlightenment. At first sight, the rise of rationalist thinking in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries appeared to be a positive development for Jews, for it attacked the foundations of the Christian religion and the unified Christian state which had excluded or oppressed Jews for reasons of creed. It was partly from the rationalist assumptions of the German Enlightenment that the Habsburg Emperor Joseph II derived his Toleration edicts of the 1780s; that Moses Mendelssohn felt empowered to build a bridge between traditional Jewish and modern German cultures; that his friend Gotthold Lessing immortalised a more positive image of the Jew in his famous play, Nathan the Wise. Without the philosophy of the Enlightenment, the Prussian bureaucrat Christian Wilhelm Dönhn would never have written his tract ‘Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden’ (Concerning the Civic Amelioration of the Jews) in 1781, an indictment of the responsibility of the Christian world for the degradation of the Jews.

In France, during the same period, enlightened Gentiles like the Abbé Grégoire, Count Mirabeau and the revolutionary Maximilien Robespierre, argued along similar lines in urging the emancipation of the Jews as part of the overthrow of the ancien régime with its feudal privileges, social inequalities and injustices. The Declaration of the Rights of Man by the French
revolutionaries in 1789 and the granting of equal civic rights to the Jews two years later was indeed a triumph of the liberal rationalist credo which had been born out of the Enlightenment.

There was, however, a darker, more complex and ambivalent strand in rationalist thought about the Jews and Judaism which first surfaced in English deism of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Here, for the first time, radical thinkers who put forward the notion of ‘natural religion’ as an alternative to the ‘revealed’ truths of Christianity, critically examined Judaism from a rationalist standpoint. The paradoxical result was a denial of all religious value to Judaism, which was presented as an obscurantist prejudice hostile to human reason. The extreme language of the English deists and the French materialists of the eighteenth century in their attacks on Jews and Judaism revived the hostility towards Jews and renewed the force of the old negative stereotypes.¹ For the English deists and French materialists, the Old Testament was no less obnoxious than the Gospel, the Synagogue no less offensive to reason than the Church, and rabbis as much imposters as priests.² Indeed, those rationalists who were sworn enemies of the Church were often disposèd to see the source of its intolerance, fanaticism and superstition in the Hebrew Bible and the teachings of Judaism.

Their return to the sources of classical Antiquity for inspiration, if anything reinforced this inimical disposition to Judaism. For in the writings of the French Encyclopaedists one can find clear traces of early Graeco-Roman literary antisemitism, whose ideas and phraseology passed into the mainstream of Enlightenment thinking. Thus pagan, pre-Christian antisemitism was grafted on to the stem of medieval Christian stereotypes of the Jew and would pass over into the post-Christian rationalist anti-Judaism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As the historian Arthur Hertzberg has written, ‘the vital link, the man who skipped over the Christian centuries and provided a new, international, secular, anti-Jewish rhetoric in the name of European culture rather than religion was Voltaire’.³ Instead of disappearing with the Enlightenment, anti-Semitism simply found a new guise, one which no longer blamed the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ but held them responsible for all the crimes and perversities committed in the name of monotheistic religion: the Jews were no longer guilty of rejecting Christian belief but were judged to be inherently perverse, and their ‘fossilised’ religion to be an obstacle to human progress. In the arch-sceptic Voltaire the resulting image of the Jew is one of utter scorn and contempt. The Old Testament is ridiculed and calumniated as a compendium of cannibalism, folly and error. The Jews were caricatured as ‘the most imbecile people on the face of the earth’, as ‘obstuse, cruel and absurd’, the heirs of a history that was both ‘disgusting and abominable’.⁴ In his entry ‘Juifs’, written for the Dictionnaire Philosophique, Voltaire echoes the familiar litany of insults drawn from classical pagan antisemitism. ‘In short, we find in them only an ignorant and barbarous people, who have long united the most sordid avarice with the most detestable superstition and the most invincible hatred for every person by whom they are tolerated and enriched.’⁵ Not only did Voltaire repeat the pagan canard that Jews were the ‘enemies of mankind’, but he even justified the long history of persecutions and massacres to which they had been subjected.⁶ These diatribes cannot be convincingly explained by Voltaire’s personal psychology or by disappointments that arose out of business dealings with individual Jews. For they were largely shared by other prominent thinkers of the French Enlightenment like Diderot, the atheist Baron d’Holbach (for whom the Jews were also the vilest nation on earth) and to a lesser degree by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rather, they should be seen as a philosophical expression of the crisis of religious belief, in which a war conducted against the very roots of the Christian faith led logically to an assault on its Jewish origins. Conducted in the name of progress, renewal and freedom of
thought, it paradoxically perpetuated the hostile historical image of Judaism handed down by the Christian culture on which these philosophical sceptics and radicals had been nourished.\textsuperscript{7}

In post-revolutionary France the impact of this tradition can clearly be seen in the thinking of the great French historian Jules Michelet, especially after the spiritual crisis which he underwent in the early 1840s. Henceforth, he began to level sharp criticism against the Judeo-Christian enslavement to an arbitrary, capricious God who bestowed his favours without justice or reason. Naturally, Michelet rejected completely the notion that Israel had been chosen by God as an exclusivist principle which discriminated against those who had not been chosen. More significantly, he objected to the fact that the choice had fallen on so undeserving an object as the small, scattered and weak Jewish people — whose horizons were limited and whose stubborn particularism was anathema to his own universalist credo. For Michelet, Judaism was utterly lacking in grandeur or noble ideals; it had always supported reaction and above all its historical connection with Christianity made it viscerally repugnant to him.\textsuperscript{8}

The influential French scholar Ernst Renan, though by no means an antisemite or accepting all of Michelet’s conclusions, did agree that it was Israel which had brought forth Christianity and ‘the conversion of the world to monotheism’. At the same time he decried the exclusivist tendencies and fanaticism of the Jewish intellect, character-traits which had become ‘a stumbling block in the march of humanity after having been the cause of its great progress’\textsuperscript{9}. Renan saw in this exclusivism and self-imposed isolation of the Jews, exacerbated by the teachings of the Talmud and by an ingrained complex of superiority, the ultimate cause of the detestation with which they were widely regarded. The intolerance of the Jews was a function of their monotheism but it was also, in his view, a trait of the ‘Semitic peoples’ in general, including Arabs.

In the 1850s Renan, along with the German scholar Christian Lassen, would be one of the first thinkers in Europe to popularise the racial concept of ‘Semites’ in contrast to the Indo-Europeans or ‘Aryans’, whom he placed at the top of the ladder of human civilisation.\textsuperscript{10} Renan argued that Semites lacked creative ability, a sense of discipline and the capacity for independent political organisation. The ‘Semitic’ race, so he claimed, had ‘no mythology, no epic, no science, no philosophy, no fiction, no plastic arts, no civic life; there is no complexity, nor nuance; an exclusive sense of uniformity’.\textsuperscript{11}

Nor surprisingly after this catalogue of negative qualities, Renan could only conclude that Semites ‘represented an inferior combination of human nature’.\textsuperscript{12} Renan attributed all of these ‘Semitic’ faults to the ancient Hebrews as well, who were of a narrow horizon, essentially primitive, and whose limited creativity was ultimately confined to their simple, religious conceptions. His view of contemporary Jews was a little more nuanced but still riddled with antisemitic clichés emphasizing their egoism, classlessness, worship of Mammon and their leading role in modern revolutionary movements. Yet in spite of his racist outlook, Renan never drew the practical conclusions from his theories that French and German antisemites were wont to do, clearly opposing any political manipulation of the racial principle towards the end of his life. He openly admitted that his concept of a ‘Semitic’ race was basically erroneous, that it could not be meaningfully applied to modern assimilated Jews and that national identity was based on voluntary choice, not on racial determinism.\textsuperscript{13}

But Renan’s antithesis between ‘Aryans’ and ‘Semites’ found a ready echo in nineteenth-century France, where it was adopted by a number of leading socialist writers who used it to bolster their radical antipathy to Jews and Judaism. This was most obviously apparent in the Blanquist movement, a militantly atheist, anticlerical and ‘patriotic’ wing of French socialism whose rallying-cry was ‘NI Dieu, NI Maître’.\textsuperscript{14} From Renan and the Count de Gobineau they adapted the notion of
From the Cross to the Swastika

'Semitism' as intrinsically inferior to the 'Aryan' genius of Greece and Rome, which alone had created the foundations of modern civilisation. The Semitic Deity of the Old Testament was depicted in the spirit of Voltaire as a murderous, hypocritical and exploiting Moloch-God who devoured his children and encouraged the cult of human sacrifice. This blood-lust, which biblical Judaism had transmitted to Christianity, found its culmination in the wage-slavery of modern capitalism which had reduced the masses to a state of helotry. The mercantile 'Semitic' spirit of exploitation had triumphed under capitalism over the 'Aryan' love of nature, respect for the family, and the pagan ideals of beauty, harmony, liberty and fraternity.

According to the Blanquist revolutionary, Gustave Tridon, in his Du Molochisme Juif (1844) the 'Semites' represented the negative pole of humanity; they were the 'evil genius of the world', the 'shadow in the picture of civilisation', the enemies of 'Aryan' humanity. Since intolerance was 'the Semitic legacy to our world' it was 'the aim of the Indo-Aryan race' and a revolutionary duty 'to fight the Semitic spirit' in modern society. Similar ideas were disseminated in the leading journal of the French Left, La Revue Socialiste, during the 1880s by respected socialists like Albert Regnard and Benoît Malon. Hence it is not surprising that the high priest of modern French antisemitism, Edouard Drumont, should write in 1889: 'Of all the revolutionaries, only the Blanquists have had the courage to refer to the Aryan race and to proclaim that race's superiority.' He paid a similar compliment to other French socialist forerunners like Charles Fourier, Alphonse Tousenel and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, whose visceral antisemitism drew on diverse and often contradictory strands of anti-capitalism, Enlightenment anticlericalism and Catholic anti-modernism.

In Germany the secular, anti-Christian strand of Judeophobia emerged over half a century later than in France, reflecting the more backward social and political development of the fragmented German states. It was first manifest in the late 1830s among the free-thinking, radical Young Hegelians, whose critique of Judaism owed more to Voltaire and the French materialists than it did to the philosophy of Hegel on which they claimed to draw. The Young Hegelians saw themselves as engaged in an assault on the religious foundations of the authoritarian Christian state in Prussia - one which Karl Marx, himself a product of this school of thought, praised as 'the greatest achievement of German philosophy'. At the same time, their abstract philosophising on Jews and Judaism was part of an ongoing debate in German society over Jewish emancipation which would not be resolved for several decades.

Although the Young Hegelians were atheistic radicals who spoke in the name of freedom and progress, they abandoned the historical premises of Hegel and the German Enlightenment which had still granted Judaism a respectable position on the ladder of human development. Ignoring the actual evolution of Germans and Jews since the eighteenth century and the effects which Christian persecution had exercised on Jewish society, they traced all the flaws in Judaism to an allegedly immutable essence. This was most obviously apparent in the polemical tract of Bruno Bauer, 'Die Judenfrage' ('The Jewish Question'), written in 1843 from a radical anti-Christian standpoint which nonetheless opposed Jewish emancipation. Like Voltaire before him, Bauer depicted Judaism as a fossilised religion, based on superstition and obscurantism, whose diety was cruel, vengeful, stubborn and egotistical. He had been created in the image of his own 'chosen people', reflecting the egotistic national spirit of the Jews, their exclusivism and hatred of all other peoples. Insulated behind the walls of their Torah (religious law), the Jewish people had pursued their ahistorical, 'clerical' existence, indifferent to the development of modern civilisation. As a result of their fanatical separatism and stubborn particularism, they had contributed nothing to the German
From the Cross to the Swastika

struggle for liberation and had not even begun the radical critique of Judaism which would have been the indispensable first step to their emancipation. As long as the Jews remained enclosed in their narrow-minded 'Jewish essence' there could be no question of granting them civic equality. Nor could the Christian state in Prussia, which by its very essence was based on religious prejudice, exclusivism and privilege, be expected to emancipate German Jewry. 25

Bruno Bauer's radical critique of Judaism was largely accepted by his Young Hegelian contemporaries, including the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach and the founder of 'scientific socialism', Karl Marx. Like Bauer, Feuerbach linked monotheism with Jewish 'goisim', unfavourably contrasting its practical utilitarianism with pagan curiosity and openness towards nature. Judaism was reduced in his analysis to a theoretically narrow, ethnocentric and positivist religion based on the satisfaction of private needs and devoid of any ethical content. Another German radical, Georg Friedrich Daumer, was more vitriolic, writing to Feuerbach in 1842 about 'the cannibalism in the Talmud', human blood being drunk on Purim and the 'bloody mysteries of the Rabbanites [sic] and Talmudists, the Sabbatarians who border on Christianity, and the Hasidic sects who are so numerous in Slavic lands'. 23 He promised Feuerbach 'unbelievable' information about the ritual murder practised by fanatical Jewish sects, to which, he suggested, Jesus Christ himself had belonged. Daumer, whose main target was Christianity, described 'the idea of the human victim sacrificed to God' as its central notion and argued that its whole history from the Crucifixion to the Inquisition was one long chain of ritual murders. Daumer's study, Die Geheimnisse des christlichen Altertums (1847), was hailed by Karl Marx as 'the last blow to Christianity' and as a sign that 'the old society is approaching its end and that the structure of falsehood and prejudice is collapsing'.

Like his Young Hegelian contemporaries, Karl Marx's critique of Judaism was part of a wider assault on organised religion and the foundations of Christian society. For him, as for Feuerbach, Judaism was a purely worldly religion which embodied 'actual contempt for and practical degradation of nature', not to speak of its 'contempt for art, for history, for man as an end in himself'. 24 In the Marxian myth of the worldly Jew, money was 'the jealous god of Israel before whom no other god may stand'. In Christian bourgeois society, 'the god of the Jews has been secularised and become the god of the world. Exchange is the true god of the Jew. His god is nothing more than illusory exchange.' 25 Thus Marx linked together 'the practical spirit of Judaism' with both Christianity and the economic structure of bourgeois society, which was constantly producing 'empirical Jews' from within its bowels. Though himself born a Jew (his family had converted to Lutheranism when he was six) and in favour of Jewish emancipation as a tactical weapon to undermine the semi-absolutist Prussian Christian state, Marx never disguised his repugnance towards Jews and Judaism. 26

His polemical answer to Bruno Bauer, 'Zur Judenfrage' ('On the Jewish Question') published in 1844, for all its anti-Christian rhetoric, faithfully reproduces the deeply rooted anti-Jewish mythology of that bourgeois Christian society he was seeking to overthrow. Like Bruno Bauer, he argued that, despite their lack of political rights, the German Jews had already emancipated themselves 'in a Jewish manner' through their control of high finance. Like other radicals and socialists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, he singled out the Rothschilds and other Jewish banking houses for particular odium. The economic power of the House of Rothschild, citizens of five different countries, prominent everywhere and in close collaboration with different governments, would become one of the most potent symbols for the fantasy of a shadowy Jewish world government and an obsession with antisemites of the Right and Left for generations. 27
Marx himself stopped short of full-fledged antisemitism but in his own way reinforced the negative stereotype of the Jew as the personification of modern capitalism, which would later be adapted by the Nazis and their imitators. In 1844 he could write that 'the practical dominance of Judaism over the Christian world has reached its unambiguous normal expression in North America', while in Europe 'the practical spirit of the Jews has become the practical spirit of the Christian peoples'.

Judaism for the young Marx was 'a universal and contemporary anti-social element which has reached its present peak through a historical development in whose harmful aspects the Jews eagerly collaborated, a peak at which it will inevitably disintegrate'. Since huckstering was for Marx the cold, egotistic heart of the Jewish religion and the symbol of human self-alienation, it was only logical that 'emancipation from haggling and money, from practical, real Judaism would be the self-emancipation of our time'. Marx's messianic solution to the 'Jewish question', which already pointed to his imminent conversion to Communism, involved the complete overthrow of a society based on the cash-nexus. In the new society, where money no longer played any role, the Jews and Judaism, based as they were on the 'chimerical nationality of the merchant', would automatically disappear. 'As soon as society succeeds in destroying the empirical essence of Judaism — buying and selling, and its presuppositions — the Jew will become impossible, because his consciousness will no longer have an object. . . . The social emancipation of Jewry is the emancipation of society from Judaism."

Whatever the interpretation one gives to these words, the implementation of Marx's vision of Communism in the USSR in the name of 'human emancipation' would cause untold suffering, not only to Jews and other national or religious minorities but also to millions of ordinary Russians. Although Marx never opposed Jewish emancipation as such (unlike Bruno Bauer, who later became a virulent racist antissemitic and Prussian conservative) his writings on religion were used in the Soviet Union to legitimise fanatical atheistic campaigns, and in the post-war period to justify the most vulgar antisemitic propaganda. At the same time, the fact that the founder of Communism was himself born a Jew made him the arch-sympathiser of Jewish revolutionary subversion for the conservative and radical Right all over the world. Modern antisemitism seized on the prominent role which 'non-Jewish Jews' like Marx played in Socialist, Communist and other radical movements to construct a new myth of the Jew as the 'rootless cosmopolitan' enemy of all national values, religious traditions, social cohesion and bourgeois morality. In post-1918 Germany, in particular, the high visibility of Jews in the revolutionary movement was a key element in the revival of antisemitism on the Right, and a similar backlash occurred elsewhere in Europe which has not yet played itself out. Even the Holocaust itself can be seen on one level as a macabre consummation within National Socialist demonology of the myth of 'Jewish' Communism that begins with Marx.

Paradoxically, therefore, it might be said that the criticism and radical protest directed against modern society, which began with a fierce critique of its Christian foundations, in the long run reinforced and even intensified hostility towards Jews. Antisemitism, far from being weakened by the decline of Christian belief, revived in an age of secularisation, of modernisation and rapid social change. New ideologies rose up, which adopted their own brand of secularised anti-Judaism and antisemitism to suit the new age. Liberals and free-thinkers attacked the intolerance and ahistorical rigidity of Judaism or the isolationist particularism of the Jews; Socialists condemned Jews as the embodiment of the 'capitalist spirit'; nationalists and racists decribed the 'alien' origins and allegedly 'Semitic' character of their Jewish minorities; while conservatives pointed to Jews as a source of permanent unrest and revolutionary subversion in European society.