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A fuzzy distinction

Anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism
(An excerpt from *Le Judaïsme et ses Juifs*)

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Translated from the French by Eléonore Rimbault

Scholarly contributions on the responsibility of the churches for the extermination of the Jews during the Second World War contrast Nazi “anti-Semitism” (the aversion toward the Jews as a racial group) with Christian “anti-Judaism” (the Christian aversion toward the Jewish religion), as one would oppose the new to the old, the modern to the traditional, the political to the religious, science to theology. The author shows, using four examples (Léon Poliakov, Hannah Arendt, Colette Guillaumin, Thomas Nipperdey & Reinhard Rürup), that this distinction induces one to ignore the churches’ actions in the process that led from the invention of the word anti-Semite in 1879 to the destruction of the Jews by the Nazis.

Keywords: anti-Judaism, anti-Semitism, Léon Poliakov, Hannah Arendt, Colette Guillaumin, Thomas Nipperdey & Reinhard Rürup

The terms “anti-Judaism” (the Christian aversion toward the Jewish religion) and “anti-Semitism” (aversion toward the Jews as a *racial* group) are omnipresent in the controversies over the churches’ responsibility with regard to the extermination of the Jews, as well as in debates related to the Passion of Oberammergau. Since 1945, most of the works on “anti-Semitism” have contrasted this term with “anti-Judaism,” as one would oppose the new to the old, the modern to the traditional, the political to the religious, science to theology. The use of these words in scientific discourse raises, however, two formidable difficulties.

The first difficulty is related to the use of these words as analytical concepts in the social sciences in spite of the major disagreements over their definition. Indeed, one scholar may argue that “anti-Judaic” refers to Christian theology and to



Christian theology only, while another author holds the same adjective to apply also to the discriminatory policy of the churches from the fourth to the ninth centuries—which is a consequence of this theology. Likewise, some authors advance that eighteenth-century Catechisms were “anti-Semitic,” while others reject the use of the term before the date of its first appearance (1879), while using it simultaneously as an analytical concept. It seems to me that this confusing practice should be avoided. We should, rather, use the terms for what they are: elements of an indigenous discourse which, as such, are allowed to free-float. I will therefore write them in italics and without quotation marks.

The second difficulty concerns the antithetical placement of these two terms (the new and the old, the political and the religious . . .). This operation has proven fruitful in the exploration of anti-Jewish racism and has served as a framework for fascinating research. Yet it becomes a major epistemological obstacle as soon as it is used to describe the interaction between religious and racial issues in the nineteenth century. I will provide four examples.

Léon Poliakov, in the latest edition of his impressive *Histoire de l'antisémitisme* (1991a, 1991b),¹ erects a chronological succession from anti-Judaism to anti-Semitism: the first volume, *L'âge de la foi* (“the age of faith”) is followed by the second volume *L'âge de la science* (“the age of science”), ending with *La solution finale*. The author is too attentive to empirical history to use this opposition as more than merely a convenient way to order his narrative. Yet this edifice has a perverse effect in that it suggests that science has dissolved religion and that atheist anti-Semitism dissolved anti-Judaism. Furthermore, considerations on the actions of the churches from the nineteenth century onward are absent from the second volume, which suggests that Christians must have massively converted to science, unless they have joined the ever-growing ranks of godless reactionaries.

In *The Aryan myth* (1996), Poliakov nevertheless acknowledges that the ages of humanity do not have any daylight between them and that Christian *anti-Judaism* has not vanished as if by magic with the coming of the age of science. With the apparition of *anti-Semitism*, “the ineradicable feelings and resentments of the Christian West were to be expressed thereafter in a new vocabulary” (ibid.: 194). But why is it that the passions remained ineradicable, if not because the culture that sustained them was still in place? By this I mean the complex of representations and of Christian customs concerning the Jews, spread and transmitted for nineteen centuries through a variety of means of communication: theology, liturgy, law, predication, catechism, familial education, opinion. It is possible that there were fewer Christians going to church during the age of science, but religious representations kept shaping minds.

Colette Guillaumin shares Poliakov's point of view in her work *L'idéologie raciste: Genèse et langage actuel* ([1972] 2002), but supports it with an impressive

1. The revised version of Poliakov's work published in 1991 combines four volumes published between 1955 and 1977. This revised edition has not been translated in English, and therefore the titles that are relevant to Jeanne Favret-Saada's argument in this paragraph have been translated directly from the 1991 French edition. An English translation of the four original volumes of Poliakov's work was published in 2003 by the University of Pennsylvania Press (Poliakov 2003).—Trans.



theoretical apparatus which reinforces the opposition between the two periods, and positions them antithetically. According to the author, until the end of the eighteenth century, the Western world included the Others in the unity of the species (mankind): the churches, in particular, offered conversion to the Jews as a way of escaping divine malediction. But in the nineteenth century, with the domination of the capitalist bourgeoisie, industrial development, and colonial expansion, a radical change in mentalities was provoked. “Anti-Semitism succeeds to anti-Judaism, race succeeds to religion. A difference in race is assumed in lieu of the constata-tion of a religious difference” (ibid.: 10). The chronological succession between the two forms of aversion thus maps onto a difference in worldview: before capital-ism, people agreed upon the unity of mankind, and therefore on anyone’s potential salvation; after capitalism, the individuals who belong to the socially constructed categories “Jews” are trapped in a biological malediction that they cannot escape.

Guillaumin’s assertions are justified if one considers the most solemn state-ments of the Christian doctrine: indeed, they endorse the dogma concerning the unity of mankind and affirm the redemptive value of conversion. But one only has to examine the policies of the churches, their concrete action toward the Jews and the declarations of the clerics—during *l’âge de la foi*, but especially during the nine-teenth and twentieth centuries—to see that the matter is not at all clear-cut.

Hence, we can pose these questions, which add to those already raised by Poliakov’s work: Can Christianity be reduced to the most official statement of its doctrine? How should we handle the numerous situations where religious author-ity itself contravenes it? What is the relation between theology and the policy of an ecclesiastical institution? What is the relation between the various levels of ecclesiastical enunciation: that is, in the Catholic Church, between the decisions of the councils, the articles of canon law, the pontifical orders (among which we find many contradicting statements), the legislation of the states of the church, the popes’ interventions with secular rulers?

A third example: Hannah Arendt. In the very first lines of “On anti-Semitism” ([1951] 2004: 3), she poses *anti-Judaism* and *anti-Semitism* as entirely independ-ent phenomena: “Anti-semitism, a secular nineteenth-century ideology—which in name, though not in argument, was unknown before the 1870s—and religious Jew-hatred, inspired by the mutually hostile antagonism of two conflicting creeds, are obviously not the same; and even the extent to which the former derives its argument and emotional appeal from the latter is open to question.” Accordingly, political ideology has nothing in common with the religious doctrine, nor *anti-Semitic* passion with the Christian hatred of the Jew. It would therefore be useless to search, as Jules Isaac stubbornly did,² for the “Christian roots of anti-Semitism”—since it only appeared at the dusk of the nation-state, with the rise of imperialism and its consequence, totalitarianism. Thus Christianity is off topic from the start,

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2. Hannah Arendt does not cite him. Right after the Nazi extermination of the Jews, this re-markable historian deliberately committed an anachronism by speaking of a “Christian anti-Semitism” in the fifteenth century. He was trying to show that a social fact does not need to be named to exist: the Christian culture of “contempt” (Isaac 1964) and persecution of the Jews already carried with it what was later to be called *anti-Semitism*. Even though I agree with him on this idea, I prefer to avoid this anachronism.

deemed obsolete from the very beginning of Hannah Arendt's preface. Her general argument is problematic;³ but, furthermore, how would she qualify the relations between the Catholic Church, Judaism, and the Jews from the nineteenth century onward? Not as *anti-Judaic*—it is too late for that; nor *anti-Semitic*, since religion has nothing to do with it. And in fact, why would the author even be interested in finding the right terms, since Christianity is over?

One last example. Thomas Nipperdey and Reinhard Rürup, in a historical dictionary on German political ideas reedited several times, emphasize the cultural revolution produced by the invention of *anti-Semitism*. The two scholars assure us that they are presenting the conceptions of the historical actors of the 1880s—who, interestingly, already talk like Guillaumin and Arendt. “Anti-Semitism—as it was clear for the members of the various groups as well as for their opponents—referred to an enmity toward the Jews and Judaism that was entirely different from the traditional aversion for the Jews which existed, at the time, in Eastern Europe and South-Eastern Europe” (Nipperdey and Rürup [1972] 1992: 141–42).

Only one difference subsists, then, between the people of the nineteenth century and the theoreticians of the twentieth century: the former argued that *anti-Judaism* had disappeared from civilized regions, but that it still lived in a few inliers of credulity, in the borderlands of Christian Europe. But aside from that, the agreement is total: religious hatred toward the Jews has vanished, replaced by racial hatred.

It is unlikely, in my opinion, that Europeans of the nineteenth century, even if secularized, would have uttered such statements. Of course, they could have witnessed the traditional *anti-Judaism* of Catholic publications (which would survive effortlessly until the Second Vatican Council), but the clerical discourse of the 1880s did not limit itself to this. At that time, one could very well identify as a Christian *and* as an *anti-Semite*: this raises a doctrinal problem, but it is possible to avoid confronting it. Nipperdey and Rürup exclude this possibility:

Not only did the term [“anti-Semitism”] provide a new definition to an old enemy: it identified a new enemy. First, it designated a secularized form of the aversion toward the Jews and its ideology. It did not direct its aversion toward their religion, and it did not rely upon the Christians' aversion: the religious question and the theological justification became secondary. (Nipperdey and Rürup [1972] 1992: 141–42)

It seems to me that the authors have superimposed on the nineteenth century their own convictions concerning the chronological and conceptual impermeability between the two justifications of hatred toward the Jews. It is very likely that this conflation was unintended, given how common this idea is in the social sciences. In text after text, we have seen it taking shape and reinforce itself: to the empirical succession of “eras” (Poliakov), a radical dissemblance in principles was added (Guillaumin and Arendt); finally, Nipperdey and Rürup insisted on the change of target (we are no longer talking about the same Jew). The unique historical actor of *anti-Semitism* is, hence, the capitalist bourgeoisie: not the churches, the Christians,

3. In that regard, the reader can refer to the remarkable critical reading of Claude Lefort (1985) in his intervention at the EHESS colloquium.



or religions, which belong to a premodern past, that is, a precapitalistic past of Europe.

After 1945, the desire to understand *anti-Semitism* stemmed from the moral panic caused by the destruction of European Jews by the Nazis:⁴ no one could escape this impetus, whether it was acknowledged or not. Some thinkers, like Poliakov or Arendt, started their research right after its revelation; Guillaumin, and Nipperdey and Rürup, did so in the course of the 1960s. Relentlessly determined to discover the succession of events (whether it be historical or logical) that led to *anti-Semitism* and genocide, they were prevented from perceiving the churches' actions in that process owing to their theoretical paradigm.⁵

Three kinds of reasons can explain their indifference in relation to the question with which I am concerned. First, they were focusing on the outcome, the National Socialist ideology. This ideology was, from the start, anti-religious; and if its *anti-Semitism* borrowed numerous elements from Christian *anti-Judaism*, it was to inscribe them in a very different framework, a totalitarian one. Second, the social sciences from the 1950s to the 1970s held as an almost undisputed certainty that the decay of religions was as a result of the advent of *modernity*, in spite of the strong movement of religious awakening that occurred in the nineteenth century. Finally, the real object of these authors was not Christian *anti-Judaism*, since for them it simply played the role of a bump that could support their theoretical construction of *anti-Semitism*.

In fact, the model offered to account for *anti-Semitism* only erred because the social scientists who developed it felt obliged to bury religion. Ignoring the avatars of the term *anti-Judaism* in Christian thought, they unknowingly adopted a distinction already loaded with apologetic presuppositions.

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4. To use the expression established by the title of Raul Hilberg's monumental work (1967).

5. This lack does not undermine the usefulness of their works. Colette Guillaumin ([1972] 2002, 1992) offers a yet unrivaled analysis of the mechanisms of "racization" and of the uses of the idea of Nature. As to the contribution of Léon Poliakov, it remains an important tool, in spite of the numerous works published since then on particular aspects of the history of *anti-Semitism*.

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La distinction qui embrouille: Antijudaïsme et antisémitisme

Résumé : Les travaux sur la responsabilité des Églises dans l'extermination des juifs pendant la Deuxième guerre mondiale opposent "l'antisémitisme" nazi (l'aversion envers le groupe *racial* juif) à "l'antijudaïsme" chrétien (l'aversion chrétienne envers la religion juive) comme le nouveau à l'ancien, le moderne au traditionnel, le politique au religieux, la science à la théologie. L'auteur montre, à partir de quatre exemples (Léon Poliakov, Hannah Arendt, Colette Guillaumin Thomas Nipperdey & Reinhardt Rürup), que cette distinction conduit à ignorer l'action des Eglises dans le processus qui a conduit de l'invention du mot *antisémite* en 1879 à la destruction des juifs par les nazis.

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