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Leadership Talk by the Chief Rabbi of Vienna, Austria (2016 – 2019)

The title of the conference “An End to Antisemitism!” invited, on purpose, a mixture of unbridled optimism, disbelief, and introspection, which was duly noted by several speakers at the gala opening on the evening before the conference.

The hopes were very high, for some of the best, most creative, most perceptive, and most systematic academics had assembled there, and hopes were that some magic solutions—yes, solutions in the plural, because no one is so naïve as to still believe that there can be a single silver bullet that will remove the scourge of antisemitism on its own—would be advanced, which within the medium term will, if not eliminate antisemitism, at least vanquish it and forever push it back in the dark corner out of which it dare not come out again.

The endeavor is very worthwhile, but, for all the high esteem in which I hold science and humanities, as well as its teachers and researchers, in my opinion, the stated goal of the conference was obviously doomed for failure. This patently does not mean that the conference was not worthwhile or its recommendations not worth implementing; quite the contrary.

As the French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy showed in his address at the gala opening of the conference, antisemitism is old, very old,¹ and as the academic organizer of the conference, Armin Lange showed in his paper, it is multifaceted and extremely diverse.² An almost endless list of people and events that expressed antisemitism in particularly ugly and murderous manners was brought to our attention. The list only ended somewhere because it had to, for an exhaustive list would have kept us hungry and tired for many more hours, as the speaker would rattle off the leading figures of the bottomless pit of hatred that is antisemitism in all its forms.

Hatred of Jews has been justified because they are poor and because they are rich; because they are powerful and because they are weak; because they are healthy and because they are ill; because they are geniuses and because they are devoid of wisdom; because they are pious and because they are godless; because they hew to high morals and because they are degenerate. In short, Jews have been hated simply because they are.

1 Cf. Bernard-Henri Lévy's contribution to this volume, xx.

2 Cf. Armin Lange's contribution to this volume, xx.

Let me illustrate this with one historical curiosity that repeated itself in our days. Robin Judd, in her study of the circumcision debates of nineteenth-century Germany,³ describes how in the 1840s and again in the 1890s and the 1910s, medical debates raged as to whether to prohibit the Jewish practice of circumcision. This debate was known as the *Circumcisionsfrage*, to be distinguished from the *Beschneidungsfrage*—“Beschneidung” is synonymous with circumcision in German, but in this historical context the *Beschneidungsfrage* relates to the controversy of Jewish fathers refusing to circumcise their sons and yet demanding that they be registered as Jews in the Jewish community, a fascinating but very different issue. Judd writes:

The *Circumcisionsfrage* also debated the effects of circumcision on male sexuality. Some physicians asserted that circumcision dulled the sensory organ, thus robbing Jewish boys of their manliness. This claim appeared frequently not only in the antisemitic press, but also in the established medical literature as well. As Freud’s writings began to have an influence, some physicians evoked images of castration in claiming that the removal of the foreskin caused Jewish men to experience severe sexual frustration. Such frustration allegedly would result either in abstention from any type of sexual contact or, on the contrary, in excessively passionate behavior and sexual deviance. Similarly, masturbation also supposedly had its origins in the circumcised penis, a particularly awesome charge since nineteenth and twentieth century medicine and science considered masturbation antisocial—the cause of homosexuality, deviant sexual behavior, insanity, even death. Impossibly categorizing the Jewish man as both undersexed and supersexual and his penis as both unresponsive and hyperactive, medical writings suggested that there was indeed something abnormal about the Jewish man.⁴

During the most recent German circumcision debate of 2012–2013, following a court decision of a regional supreme court in Cologne, echoes of the very same arguments were heard.⁵ Plus que ça change...

3 Cf. R. Judd, “Circumcision and Modern Jewish Life: A German Case Study 1843–1914,” in *The Covenant of Circumcision: New Perspectives on an Ancient Jewish Rite*, ed. E. W. Mark (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 2003), 142–55.

4 Ibid., 149.

5 The verdict of Cologne considering religious circumcision in a case from 2010 ruled circumcision as a form of bodily mutilation which can neither be justified by religious motives nor by the child’s parents’ wish for circumcision. Following this court decision, the largest discussion on religious circumcision both from Muslim and Jewish authorities started and has continued up to this very day. Cf. “Beschneidung von Jungen aus religiösen Gründen ist strafbar,” *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 26, 2012, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/panorama/urteil-des-landgerichts-koeln-beschneidung-von-jungen-aus-religioesen-gruenden-ist-strafbar-1.1393536>. In December 2012, the verdict of Cologne was later severely limited by a new law revoking the ban on religious circumcision as long as it is carried out “according to the rules of medical art.” Cf. “Bundestag er-

In their paper “Bible, Christianity and Antisemitism, Jews and Judaism Between Bedevilment, and Source of Salvation: Christianity as a Cause of an a Cure against Antisemitism,” Maxine Grossman and Armin Lange show that Christian antisemitism is unfortunately deeply rooted in Christian theology and epistemology.⁶ Let me illustrate this with the following experience I had. In the wake of the most recent German circumcision brouhaha, I was invited to give a lecture at the Catholic academy of the Diocese of Rottenburg-Stuttgart on May 5, 2013, to defend the practice of circumcision. In the audience was a Catholic religious leader, member of an order of monks, who listened attentively, and then interjected that as far as he is concerned, children should not be circumcised. They could, of course, be circumcised after puberty, when they could express their own agreement, but until then, let them suffice with what was, in his opinion, the true meaning of circumcision, namely *circumcision of the heart*.

The concept of *circumcision of the heart* is found in the Torah, in Deuteronomy 10:16. The monk’s interpretation fits neatly into Christian theology and exegesis, which, in the wake of the Pauline doctrine of the Abrogation of the Law, interprets almost all commandments symbolically. Jews, on the other hand, have consistently understood the commandments and injunctions of the Torah to be law, which is to be applied in real life. It is telling that in his comments, the monk wrapped two Christian anti-Jewish prejudices into one: seeing and projecting only his own exegesis while ignoring the validity of the alternative Jewish approach, a fallacy that was only possible because in his heart of hearts, it is quite clear that he considered Christian teachings to supersede Jewish teachings. Despite the then almost five decades since the Second Vatican Council ratified *Nostra Aetate* no. 4 and repudiated the doctrine of “*verus Israel*,”⁷ that doctrine was alive and well in the understandings of that religious leader.

Like other expressions of prejudice against Jews, the manifold arguments against the Jewish practice of ritual circumcision, though often cloaked in scientific argumentations, are so contradictory and so factually inconclusive but philosophically strident, that we must conclude that these are not rational arguments, after all, but rather manifestations of a deep-seated—probably subconscious—prejudice, seeking to delegitimize Jews no matter what.

laubt Beschneidung von Jungen,” *Zeit Online*, December 12, 2012, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/deutschland/2012-12/beschneidung-urteil-bundestag>.

⁶ Cf. the contribution of Maxine Grossman and Armin Lange to this volume, xx.

⁷ According to the doctrine of “*verus Israel*,” Christianity has defined itself as the “new” chosen people thus superseding the Jewish people in its divine choice.

A case in point is the well-documented phenomenon whereby people who bend over backwards to recognize prejudice against any and all groups, repeatedly fail, whether by ignorance or on purpose, to recognize manifestations of antisemitism.⁸ There is a particular unwillingness to recognize antisemitism when committed by disadvantaged minorities, and there is also an unwillingness to recognize the modern mutations of antisemitism, particularly anti-Zionism.⁹ This phenomenon has been richly documented by other authors, so I will not delve further into this, sufficing with some footnotes. However, I do believe that I am making an original contribution in highlighting a particular aspect of the contemporary mutations of antisemitism, in the last paragraph of this article.

Let me illustrate the breadth and depth of antisemitism by citing two studies that were published in the wake of our conference. In December 2018, the European Agency for Fundamental Rights published its second report on antisemitism.¹⁰ During the six years since the first report had been published in 2012, the concerns about antisemitism have massively grown. For the latest report, 16,395 people were interviewed in twelve EU countries. For 89 percent of respondents, antisemitism has increased. One third of European Jews have considered leaving. For 80 percent, it is the greatest problem society is facing nowadays; it is not just a problem for Jews, but for society as a whole, even as society does not always understand this.¹¹

In March 2019, the lower house of the Austrian parliament published a major study on antisemitism, which has some good but also plenty of bad news. It is based on 2,400 interviews, of which 300 were specifically with Turkish and Arabic speaking people. The report reveals some good news—78 percent of Austrians

⁸ Cf. e.g., J. Kirchick, “How Dare Chelsea Clinton Defend the Jews?” *Tablet Magazine*, March 19, 2019, <https://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/282106/how-dare-chelsea-clinton-defend-the-jews>.

⁹ For an analysis of a particularly egregious case of modern institutional antisemitism, cf. the following article on the British Labour Party: J. Frazer, “Report Charts 130 Cases of Labour Antisemitism and Denial,” *Jewish News*, March 21, 2019, <https://jewishnews.timesofisrael.com/report-charts-130-cases-of-labour-antisemitism-and-denial/>; and S. Knight, “Jeremy Corbyn’s Anti-Semitism Crisis,” *The New Yorker*, August 12, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/news/letter-from-the-uk/jeremy-corbyns-anti-semitism-crisis>.

¹⁰ Cf. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, *Experiences and Perceptions of Antisemitism: Second Survey on Discrimination and Hate Crime against Jews in the EU* (Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2018).

¹¹ Cf. “Antisemitismus-Bericht der EU: Jeder dritte Jude überlegt auszuwandern,” *Der Standard*, December 10, 2018, <https://derstandard.at/2000093590684/EU-Bericht-zu-Antisemitismus-Jeder-dritte-Jude-ueberlegt-auszuwandern>.

not only recognize the basic facts about the Holocaust, but accept that its culpability gives rise to a special responsibility to protect Jews. However, the report also reveals that about 10 percent of Austrians are hardcore antisemites, and about another 20 percent are at risk, being convinced of the veracity of some antisemitic canards.¹²

Among Turkish and Arabic speaking Austrians—note, I am not talking about refugees here, who, as a group, seem to be less antisemitic, mind you, but about Austrian-born Muslims—among them, antisemitic prejudices are extremely high. Over 60 percent believe that Jews control the world economy. Very large percentages believe that Jews kind of deserved the Holocaust, that were Israel to cease to exist, there would be peace in the Middle East, that Jews exaggerate the extent of the Holocaust, that upon meeting someone, they would know within minutes whether they are dealing with a Jew, and other such dangerous nonsense.¹³ It should be noted that while the interviews with the general Austrian population were conducted with a statistically representative sample of the population, the 300 interviews with the Turkish and Arabic speaking Austrians were not statistically representative; obviously more studies are needed, but the results so far are cause for great concern.

There is some good news, too. Presidents, chancellors, and prime ministers are at least paying lip service to the need to take antisemitism very seriously, and in some cases, governments are taking steps to better combat antisemitism. In March 2019, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Austria announced that they will no longer support blatantly one-sided UN resolutions against Israel, particularly at the UN Human Rights Council.¹⁴

Also, despite the ascent of the far right in Austria and Germany, those countries have so far done a better job keeping antisemitism lower than in France and Belgium. Make no mistake about it, the far right parties are a haven for many real and unapologetic antisemites, but as a whole it surely seems that the countries that bear the greatest guilt for the Holocaust find their culpability inescapable and their shame is still great.

¹² Cf. E. Zeglovits, P. Unterhuber, F. Sommer, “Antisemitismus in Österreich 2018: Analysebericht,” accessed April 8, 2019, https://www.antisemitismus2018.at/wp-content/uploads/Antisemitismus-in-%C3%96sterreich-2018_Analysebericht.pdf.

¹³ Cf. “Massives antisemitisches Potenzial,” *Die Presse*, March 15, 2019, <https://diepresse.com/home/innenpolitik/5596607/Massives-antisemitisches-Potenzial?from=suche.intern.portal>.

¹⁴ Cf. “In Major Breakthrough, Britain, Denmark Announce Opposition to Anti-Israel Resolutions at UNHRC,” *The Tower Magazine*, March 21, 2019, <http://www.thetower.org/7369-in-major-breakthrough-britain-austria-announce-opposition-to-anti-israel-resolutions-at-unhrc/>.

I noted earlier that the stated goal of the conference, to end antisemitism, is, in my opinion, doomed to failure. It is indeed my conviction that we cannot expect to really end antisemitism. Let me explain this: antisemitism is very old, very diverse, is not taken aback by self-contradictions, and can thus not be rationally justified. Sure, we can rationally explain how one manifestation or another of anti-Jewish prejudice was triggered or spread, but considering the vast diversity and consistent hardness of antisemitism must perforce lead us to the recognition that it defies rational explanation.

As a religious leader, I have no problem recognizing that antisemitism must have metaphysical origins. As the philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy then said, we believe antisemitism to be a necessary manifestation of the Revelation of the Word of G“d to the People of Israel at Sinai and it being charged with living the Word of G“d and passively allowing it to spread.¹⁵ Religiously, we would explain it as follows: Whether because of envy, hatred of truth, antipathy to the messengers of morality and holiness, or simply as a result of misunderstanding and ignorance, there have always been people, too many people, way too many people, who have hated Jews and their values. Academics acting in the name of religiously neutral research may be wary of confirming such metaphysical reasoning, but I do not think that we can deny that antisemitism defies ordinary explanation. If we want to end antisemitism now, in an unredeemed, pre-Messianic world, we will fail.

However, even if it be G“d’s will that antisemitism exists in a still unredeemed, pre-Messianic world, that does not mean we ought to allow it to flourish. Most surely, identifying sources of instances of antisemitism and seeking remedies against those manifestations will help us keep antisemitism in check and that may be a fruitful endeavor. I dare claim that from a Jewish religious perspective, fighting antisemitism may be part of a process of human redemption leading to redemption of humanity as a whole.

Those who are not of the Jewish faith may obviously understand the persistence of antisemitism in different metaphysical terms. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Catholic Church and many major Protestant denominations have firmly rejected their erstwhile anti-Judaism and no longer find it morally acceptable to justify antisemitism on account of Jews’ rejection of Jesus. It is likewise morally incumbent on each and every one of us to recognize how much evil antisemitism has perpetuated and how much pain and suffering it has inflicted. It then becomes morally incumbent on each and every one of us to undergird in

15 Cf. B.-H. Lévy, *The Genius of Judaism* (New York: Random House, 2017).

our respective metaphysical thought systems the just cause of fighting antisemitism and the wrongness of blaming the victims in any form.

In their paper, Lange and Grossman present ways in which Christian antisemitism may be successfully attenuated. Well, indeed.

I was most fortunate to be entrusted with leading an international rabbinic committee, whose task it was to craft a rabbinic response to *Nostra Aetate* no. 4, which had just celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The committee was constituted of members of the Conference of European Rabbis, the Rabbinical Council of America, and representatives of the Chief Rabbinate of the State of Israel; Prof. David Berger, who is part of the present conference, was an invaluable member of that committee. On August 31, 2017, we presented our declaration to Pope Francis.¹⁶

Through the process of leading the committee and writing its declaration *Between Jerusalem and Rome*,¹⁷ I gained much insight into the effect that *Nostra Aetate* had on the Church. Beginning with the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church embarked on a long road, and though it has not yet reached the destination of eliminating Catholic antisemitism altogether, it has succeeded in largely eliminating antisemitism from its official doctrine and within its top leadership. The trickle down effect will require many more years of consistent work, and there have been setbacks, such as the lifting of the excommunication of the Society of Saint Pius X, but generally, *Nostra Aetate* no. 4 and the establishment of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews have been extraordinarily successful in removing Jew-hatred from official Church doctrine and combating it among mainstream Catholics.¹⁸

Nostra Aetate no. 4 most significantly abolished the “teachings of contempt,” as *Nostra Aetate* finally absolved from the charge of deicide all Jews of later generations, as well as Jews of Jesus’ time who were not involved in his crucifixion. Furthermore, *Nostra Aetate* Nr. 4 abandoned the supersessionist doctrine of “verus Israel.” Though the Church quite obviously sees itself as hav-

16 Cf. N. Marans, “From Regret to Acclaim: A Jewish Reaction to *Nostra Aetate*,” *AJC Global Voice*, May 20, 2015, <https://www.ajc.org/news/from-regret-to-acclaim-a-jewish-reaction-to-nos-tra-aetate>; “Rabbis Present Pope Francis with Official Response to *Nostra Aetate*,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, September 3, 2017, <https://www.thejc.com/news/world/rabbis-present-pope-francis-with-official-response-to-nos-tra-aetate-1.443679>.

17 *Nostra Aetate* Response Committee, “Between Jerusalem and Rome: Reflections on 50 Years of *Nostra Aetate*,” issued August 31, 2017, accessed February 28, 2019, <https://rabbisecr.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Between-Jerusalem-Rome-Reflections-on-50-Years-of-Nostra-Aetate.pdf>.

18 Pope Paul VI, “*Nostra Aetate*: Declaration On The Relation Of The Church To Non-Christian Religions,” issued October 28, 1965. Accessed July 17, 2018. .

ing a special covenant with G^d, it no longer claims that its purported later covenant replaces the earlier covenant with Israel. Instead, as a 2015 publication of the Pontifical Committee on Religious Relations with the Jews strongly emphasized, the Church believes that the covenant with Israel is eternal,¹⁹ and quite obviously, the Church now sees itself as having a parallel covenant instead of a supersessionist one, even as it continues to hew to a theology which only allows for a single path to salvation.²⁰ Thus, presciently, the Church implemented Lange's and Grossman's major suggestions for combating Christian antisemitism, and that was long before Lange and Grossman presented their paper. Would it be that other Christian denominations now follow suit.

Fortunately, I can report that the highest echelons on the Catholic Church are very supportive of Jews and Judaism. In summer 2018, Pope emeritus Benedict XVI published a paper that was widely seen as reawakening some Christian anti-Jewish prejudices, and thus setting back Jewish-Christian dialogue.²¹ After writing a rebuttal, Benedict wrote to me a personal letter, which showed him to actually be quite sensitive to Jewish concerns, and he aptly explained his position in a way that opened the door for more respect and appreciation. Our correspondence was published internationally,²² and it culminated in a personal visit to the Vatican, where a couple of colleagues and I voiced our concerns to

19 Cf. Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, "'The Gifts and Calling of God are Irrevocable' (Rom 11:29)," §36–§39, issued December 10, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/relations-jews-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20151210_ebraismo-nostra-aetate_en.html .

20 The proclamation of the pontifical committee should indeed not be misunderstood as an acceptance of so called Dual Theology that would recognize Judaism as a valid path to salvation. The Church continues to maintain that salvation requires belief in Jesus (just as Jews continue to maintain that for a Jew to believe in Jesus would be a grave sin—and yet, the two faith communities recognize their differences and celebrate their brotherhood). For more on this topic, Cf. A. Folger, "Eine unwahrscheinliche Reise," in the forthcoming volume of *Dialog – Du siach, christlich-jüdische Informationen* (2019).

21 J. Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, "Gnade und Berufung ohne Reue: Anmerkungen zum Traktat 'De Iudaeis'," *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 47 (2018): 387–406.

22 In the German language edition of *Communio*, 2018, in the French edition of *Communio*, 2018, in the Slovenian edition of *Communio*, 2019, and in a forthcoming Italian volume. The press also widely reported on our correspondence. Cf. e.g., L. Palmieri-Billig, "The Pope and the Rabbi," *La Stampa*, September 12, 2018, <https://www.lastampa.it/2018/09/12/vaticaninsider/the-pope-and-the-rabbi-cJZDNmnykAFRRJySMftHL/pagina.html>; "Benedikt XVI. korrespondiert mit Wiener Oberrabbiner." *KathPress*, September 19, 2018, <https://www.katholisches.at/aktuelles/123030/judentum-benedikt-xvi.-korrespondiert-mit-wiener-oberrabbiner>; J. Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, "Nicht Mission, sondern Dialog," *Herder Korrespondenz* 12 (2018): 13–14.

Kurt Cardinal Koch, the chairman of the Papal Committee for Religious Relations with the Jews. Cardinal Koch went out of his way to assure us in word and deed that our concerns are taken very seriously, and ended with a long personal visit with Benedict, during which he expressed his moral support to fight all delegitimizations of Jews and Judaism, and with the support of the present church administration committed to be more deeply engaged in this fight.

And yet, despite the good news emanating from the Catholic Church, I posit that Christian antisemitism has so profoundly embedded itself into Western culture that it continues to inspire terrible prejudice among many Westerners even when they no longer associate with any church. How else but as a manifestation of the doctrine of “*verus Israel*” can we explain that otherwise enlightened, tolerant and generous people who support all ethnicities’ right for self-determination, question Israel’s right to exist or otherwise apply a double standard when evaluating policies and actions of the Jewish state. How else do we explain respect for the cultures and religions of many minorities but insist on explaining to Jews that their religious laws, including such practices as ritual circumcision and ritual slaughtering without stunning are “really” the product of earlier, primitive ages, and that continued practice thereof is not befitting modern man? Unfortunately, those old prejudices are not finished rearing their ugly heads.

Arie Folger was born in Antwerpen and trained as a Rabbi in Belgium, the UK, Jerusalem and New York. He has served as Rabbi at the Jewish Community in Basel and Munich, was member of the Frankfurt Rabbinate and Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Karlsruhe. Since 2015, he has been serving as Chief Rabbi of Vienna. In 2017, Folger served as a representative of the rabbinic delegation to the Vatican, contributing to Between Rome and Jerusalem, a milestone document on Christian-Jewish relations.

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